Shri Virchand Raghavji Gandhi’s contribution to Jainism

By Dr. Kumarpal Desai

Certain personalities leave indelible footprints on the sands of time their legacy is not affected by the constantly revolving wheel of time.

At the World Religions Conference held in Chicago, U. S. A., almost a century ago, America, and the west, for the first time, heard the determined, spirited, resonant voice of ancient India, and the message of Indian philosophy and culture. Two Indian delegates participating at this conference awakened the western world to the spiritual heritage of India. One of these was Swami Vivekanand whose success in the World Religions Conference of Chicago is fresh in everyone’s memory today. But the contribution of another Indian delegate to the same Conference, Shri Virchand Raghavji Gandhi, the representative of the Jain religion, has a claim to equal attention by virtue of the success he achieved at the Conference and also by his work as a religious thinker.

Hundred years ago in 1893, more than three thousand delegates of different nations and religions had assembled at the conference. The conference was inaugurated of 11th September, 1893, and Virchand Gandhi, Swami Vivekanand, P. C. Majumdar and other eminent scholars from India were present as distinguished participants. The aim of this religious conference was to impart to the world the knowledge of different religions, and to promote a feeling of fraternity between followers of diverse religious persuasion, and so to pave the way for world peace.

Virchand Gandhi, a young man of twenty-nine, impressed the delegates not only by his eloquence, but also by the sheer weight of his scholarship. He wore a long and loose kurta, a white shawl on his shoulder, a golden-bordered Kathiawadi turban on his head, and country shoes. This external appearance bore the imprint of India. The scholarship, the impartiality of outlook and the oratorical skill of this man fascinated the delegates at the conference of World Religions. An American newspaper wrote, “of all Eastern scholars it was this youth whose lecture of Jain faith and conduct was listened to with the interest engaging the greatest attention.”

Virchand Gandhi talked about the doctrines of Jainism in such a coherent manner that some newspapers published the text of his lecture in full. He had a most effective way of handling the otherwise abstruse terminology of Jainism. He had an extraordinary ability to clarify his statements in a consistent and logical manner. As he expounded his views, he would give his own interpretations of some of the most difficult points. His lectures demonstrated the fact that the study of Sanskrit and Prakrit alone was not enough for a proper understanding and exposition of Indian philosophy; it was also necessary to assimilate and to realise India’s past culture in its proper context. Virchand Gandhi had realised the cultural context and that is why he was never dogmatic; he spoke as a Jain and yet he often took sides with Hindus but above all, he always spoke as an Indian.

At the conference Virchand Gandhi made a brief but striking presentation on the fundamentals of the Jain religion. He expounded the Jain religion in two of its main aspects, namely, Jain philosophy and the Jain way of life. He elucidated the nine elements, the six types of Jivas, the subtle strands of thought in Jain philosophy regarding Dravyarthik and Paryayarthish-kanaya, the Syadvad and other philosophical aspects which fascinated all. He illustrated the specific Jain code of conduct, the Jain way of life and explained the cardinal principles of Jain cosmology, comparing it with Buddhism and other religions. He also established the fact that Jainism is older than Buddhism. His discourses convinced the elite of America of the fact that the Jain religion has an authentic and rational religious
tradition. Expressing his joy about this new knowledge, an American gentlemen gave his opinion about Virchand Gandhi in these words:

“In this religious gathering a number of philosophers, preachers and scholars came from India and delivered lectures and each one of them presented a new perspective and presented a new element so as to convince that their religion ranks high with great religions of the world, moreover, their oratory and devotion presented distinct types and were full of wisdom and contemplation. Among them was an outstanding young man of Jain religion who gave new ideas about morality and philosophy. Though he is only a house-holder and not a monk or religious preacher, he can expound so well. Who must then be his gurus? His simple but striking philosophy of life is worth knowing, worth understanding.”

Another special characteristic of Virchand Raghavji Gandhi’s lectures on the Jain religion was that they did not deal in criticism of other religions. Free from sectarian preferences and prejudices, his impartial ideology is an apt expression of the Jain who practices Ahimsa in life and Anekanta in thoughts. His lectures were marked by a fusion of natural sentiments, profound study, and genuine enthusiasm. The lectures served to educate the American society regarding the salient features of Indian culture. Virchand Raghavji Gandhi is the author of The ‘Yoga Philosophy’, ‘The Jain Philosophy’ and other books of which ‘The Karma Philosophy’ may be regarded as his best contribution. In discussing the Jain doctrine of Karma in the book, the author reveals his profound devotion to studies and his awakened and discerning religious sentiments.

Virchand Gandhi was not only a philosophical thinker but he also had the welfare of the nation at heart. There prevailed in America the belief that India was a country of tigers, serpents, magicians and the Kings. Chirstian missionaries also presented to foreign countries a missionaries also presented to foreign countries a distorted picture of the people in India. Virchand Gandhi made as great an effort as Vivekanand did to give to the people abroad the true perspective on India. Explaining the importance of Indian culture to foreigners, he said, “It is an astonishing fact that foreigners have been constantly attacking India and face that foreigners have been constantly attacking India and in the face of all these aggressions the soul of India has stood vital and watchful. Her conduct and religion are safe and the whole world looks at India with a steady gaze.”

“Cultural distinctions, agriculture, art, artistic skill, literature, good conduct, means of knowledge and science, hospitality, feminism, love and respect – all these are found in India in quite a different form. If that culture was purchasable, England could have purchased it, adopted it. But it has not happened, it cannot happen.”

As early as in the year 1893 Virchand Gandhi talked of the economic and political freedom of India. He said to the American people:

“India is at present under the foreign hell. She is independent in the field of religion but when India will be free, she will not invade any country in a violent manner.”

Virchand Gandhi had a rare ability to see beyond the immediately visible world. He could see beyond this world, he could know the future. Even before the dawn of political independence, Virchand Gandhi had foreseen the proper role of India.

“If India becomes free, she will live in political co-operation with all countries.” Five decades before the independence of India, Virchand Gandhi had the prophetic sense; he said in his lecture of ‘The Jain Philosophy’ – “You know my brothers and sisters, that we are not an independent nation. We are subjects of Her Gracious Majesty Queen Victoria” the “defender of the faith”, but if we are a nation in all that name implies with our own government and our own rulers, with our laws and institutions
controlled by us free and independent, I affirm that we should seek to establish and forever maintain peaceful relations with all the nations of the world.”

Virchand Gandhi made such a great impact that the conveners and scholars of the conference of world religions awarded a silver medal to him. Subsequently on 8th August 1894 the citizens of Kasadova awarded a gold medal to him. In this city he delivered a lecture on 'Some mistakes corrected.' The newspaper, 'Buffalo Courier', records the immense success of the lecture. In America Virchand Gandhi founded two institutions namely, ‘The Gandhi Philosophical Society’ and ‘The School of Oriental Philosophy’. In Chicago he founded an institution namely ‘Society for the Education of Women of India.’ The secretary of this institution was Mrs. Howard who had adopted pure vegetarianism and other codes of conduct of Jainism under the influence of Virchand Gandhi. As sister Nivedita became Swami Vivekananda’s disciple, so Mrs. Howard became Virchand Gandhi’s disciple and like Jain she practised Samayika.

Later, Virchand Gandhi went to England, where he fulfilled his desire to be a barrister but he did not use this training for monetary gain. Considering the curiosity for Jainism in England, he started a coaching class. Later he founded the ‘Jain Literature Society’ in London. Herbert Warren, a religious enthusiast, abandoned non-vegetarianism and adopted the Jain religion. He took notes of Virchand Gandhi’s lectures and wrote in English a book on the Jain religion. Moreover, Charles C. Bonny, the President of the Conference of world religions, was impressed by him. At the time of the famine of 1896-97 in India, Mr. Bonny was the president of the Famine Relief Committee founded in America by Virchand Gandhi. This committee immediately sent to India forty thousand Rupees and a steamer full of corn. During this travel Virchand Gandhi delivered as many as 535 lectures. He had the command of fourteen languages including Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, English, Sanskrit and French.

Thus a young man of twenty-nine, preached religion in foreign countries in the face of opposition from his own community who objected to travel abroad. He toured abroad trice to spread the message of Jain Philosophy and he was equally a spokesman of Indian Philosophy.

The short life span of Virchand Raghavji Gandhi is full of multifarious achievements. He was the first graduate of the Jain society to get his BA with Hons. in 1884. When his father died in 1890, he did not allow the primitive practices of wailing and breast-beating during mourning. At the age of twenty-one, as the secretary of ‘Shri Jain Association of India’, he worked for the abolition of poll-tax levied on pilgrims to Palitana.

Annoyed by poll-tax and other forms of harassment, the Anandji Kalyanjji firm had filed a suit against the rule of Palitana. But Sursinghji, the ruler (Thakor) of Palitana, was a right-hand man of the Political Agent. The Political Agent did not give fair justice. Virchand Gandhi took up the problem. In those days to protest against the dictates of the ruler was to invite severe punishment and even death. He often went up from Mahuva to Palitana and prepared the ground for compromise. He met Lord Ray, the governor of Bombay, and Colonel Watson, the Political Agent and made a strong representation and eventually forced the abolition of the poll-tax. An English man set up at Mt. Sametshikhar, a place of pilgrimage in Bihar, a factory for extracting pig’s fat on order. Virchand Gandhi went all the way of Calcutta to have the work on the project stopped. He stayed in Calcutta for six months studying the papers regarding the case and learnt the Bengali language and ultimately got this verdict issued.

“Sametshikhar is a place of Jain pilgrimage and nobody else has any right to interfere there.” He did not give up his fight until he achieved his objectives and got the factory closed down. He brought the dispute regarding the temple at Kavi to a happy resolution. He attended the international Commerce Conference as an all-Asia delegate. As a delegate from Bombay, he attended the Indian National Congress held at Pune in 1895. He was a strong advocate of Rashtriya Mahasabha or the congress.
He seems to have come in intimate contact with Mahatma Gandhi. In a letter written to Vrichand Gandhi’s son, Gandhiji sends his blessing and asks:

‘Have you adopted any ideals of your father?’

Vrichand Gandhi passed away in 1901 when he was only thirty seven. He rendered yeoman service to India and Jainism by interpreting Indian culture and religion in its true spirit to the western worlds. In this respect he enjoys the pride of place in the galaxy of Indian thinkers and philosophers and his name will continue to be remembered as a great champion of Jain religion.