

# The Life of Virchand Gandhi

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Mahuva in Saurashtra is known as the land of the great. Javadsha of Pauranic time lived there. It was the native place of Shasan Samrat Nemisuri Maharaj. Virchand Gandhi, our spokesman at the first Parliament of the World Religions, also was born there on August 25 1864.

He took his primary education at Mahuva and secondary education in Alfred High School at Bhavnagar. He completed the High School study at the age of 16 and passed the Matriculation examination of Bombay University in 1880. Thereafter he went to Bombay for higher education and joined the Elphinstone College there. He earned the B.A. degree in 1884. This was unique in those days, because very few people completed the High School courses and fewer went for the college education. He deserves the honor of being the first graduate of the Jain community.

That time efforts were being made to set up the Jain Association of India with a view to bring together the Jains belonging to various sects. Virchand Gandhi was selected as its first Secretary. In that capacity he was actively involved in Jain social and religious aspects. That time Palitana State had introduced a toll tax on pilgrimage of Shatrunjay Hill. The representation against that filed by Anandji Kalyanji to the Political Agent at Rajkot was not being seriously attended to, particularly because the ruler of Palitana as in good books with the Political Agent. Virchand Gandhi had by that time joined as an articled clerk in the solicitor's firm of Little Smith Friar and Nicolson. He took up the matter with Lord Ray, the Governor of Bombay and secured his orders for instituting inquiry in the case. By virtue of his pursuance the toll tax was removed .in 1886

Thereafter he took on hand the problems of Makshi Tirth and Kavi temple and brought the disputes to happy endings..

An Englishman had set up a tallow a factory on Sametshikhar hill for manufacturing tallow out of Pigs' fat. That involved the large scale slaughter of pigs, which was a clear affront to the nonviolent concept of Jain community. The suit filed for the purpose in the Trial court was dismissed and an appeal was made to the Calcutta High Court. For that purpose Virchand Gandhi went to Calcutta. Since the original documents were mostly in Bengali language, he studied that language and vigorously pursued the cause. Ultimately he succeeded in getting the following verdict: `Sametshikhar is a place of Jain pilgrimage and nobody else has any right to interfere there' The factory had to be closed down in 1891.

Then arose the opportunity, which raised him to the pinnacle of being a great exponent of Jainism to the western world. The arrangements were being made to hold a Parliament of all religions at Chicago in 1893. H.H. Atmārāmji, who was the most well-known Jain monk, was invited to attend. But as a Jain monk he could not go abroad. He, however, did not want Jainism to remain unrepresented on that occasion. He was

therefore looking for a right man to undertake the task. He found in Virchand Gandhi a capable man for the purpose and decided to send him to represent Jainism in the Parliament. The arrangements were then made to give him necessary instructions for the purpose.

It would perhaps be not be easy for the present generation to make out how hard it was in those days to go abroad from India. Air flights were not heard of and the people had to travel by steamers, which took very long to reach the destination. Moreover, there were strict religious strictures against undertaking such journeys. The rigidity of communal structure would not permit that. Since Virchand Gandhi had made up his mind, the leaders of the Jain community decided to excommunicate him. Incidentally Mahatma Gandhi also had met the same fate, when he proceeded to England in 1888. Like him Virchand Gandhi also remained undeterred and embarked upon the journey by steamer 'Assam'. He arrived in U.S.' in August 1893 and capably presented Jainism to the august body of the first World Parliament held at Chicago from September 11 to 27. There he turned out to be an eminent speaker about Indian philosophy and culture along with Swami Vivekanand. P.C. Majmudar and other scholars from India were with him at that time..

Like Swami Vivekanand, Virchand Gandhi was highly applauded for his effective presentation.

His scholarship, unprejudiced mind and eloquence impressed the delegates. The organizers of the Parliament awarded a silver medal to him in token of their appreciation. One American paper reported: 'Of all Eastern scholars, it was this youth, whose lecture on Jain faith and conduct was listened to with the interest engaging the greatest attention.' The Rochester Herald wrote: 'His lecture was a most scholarly production, both in manner and form, and showed a thorough grasp of oriental philosophy.' E.B. Sherman of U.S. Circuit Court said: 'It had rarely, if ever, been my good fortune to meet a man, whose reading and culture have been so wide and varied.'

Impressed by his discourses, many eminent persons were attracted towards him and he was invited to give talks at various places. For that purpose he stayed in U.S. for more than a year. During that time he delivered a series of lectures at Chicago, Boston, New York, Washington DC and other places. During that time he also founded 'Gandhi Philosophical Society' and 'School of Oriental Philosophy'. In 1895 he went to England and gave several talks there and then returned to India.

In 1896 he again went to U.S. on a lecture tour along with his wife. During that tour he divided his time between U.S. and UK There was an acute famine in India that time. For that purpose he set up a famine relief committee in U.S. and arranged to send a steamer load of grains to India. He also kept terms for qualifying as barrister and secured his cherished goal. But he did not practice and preferred to stay as a barrister of Jainism.

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Since the ruler of Palitana had again created the problem for pilgrims of Shatrunjay, an appeal was filed, which was to be heard by Privy Council in UK Virchand Gandhi went

there in 1898 and successfully brought the case to an end. For that he had stayed there for about three years. But meanwhile his health took an adverse turn and he had to come back in 1901. Unfortunately his condition continued to deteriorate and he died on August 7 1901 at the young age of 37.