

The Late Mr. Virchand R. Gandhi

A Brief Sketch of his Short But Useful Career.

By: Bhagu F. Karabhari.

"Give me the making of a nation's ballad and, I will leave its history to anybody." These are pregnant words. Fortunately India requires no more ballads today. They are necessary for a country that is passing through the first, the crude process of "self-building." India requires no ballads. She has the oldest, grandest and greatest epics in the world - epics immortal. Her relics and other monumental religious works are the only key, which has so far opened to the moderns the secrets almost of the infancy of the world.

But my strange law of contrariety a country that was once rich in history and lyrical biography has become today a pauper in that department by the absolute absence of authentic and instructive biographies of men of today, men who have stood. Sponsors, in a thousand ways at the cradle of Young India. True, some of these have merely been "comets of a season," men cut off in the prime of life just as their genius was budding into blossom. But even then they had their day. They were active influences, living forces in the various communities they belonged to. Can a community or a country be said to be doing its duty if it elbows the memory of such men to be wasted away like letters written on sand? Any country or community that is guilty of such a crime need never expect to win the race in the terrible struggle for existence which modern conditions have made more terrible more strenuous than it need have been.

A generation that loses the foot prints of its great and good man does injustice not only to the memory of these individuals, but may be said literally to be cutting the ground from underneath its own feet in as much as it does not leave to its successors the "Presentiment" of the men that played an important part in molding its character and destiny. In this respect India has been unpardonably guilty since the advent of the British in India and since this country went under the direct control of its present Rulers.

Many men in various parts of this hoary land have lived "their day" and illumined the whole land with the glory of their genius and achievements. And, yet, how many of them have had their Boswells? Unfortunately, the supreme importance of national biographies has yet not been thoroughly grasped by the people of this land. It is a pity but it is true. All around us we hear cries of the new awakening, the forces that are said to be about to make their stupendous influence felt. There is also the question of education of national lines. Yet, most of us have lost sight of one of the most potential channels of National education that of national biography. Apart from what may be called All India biographies, even single communities neglect the sacred duty of rising biographic monuments to the memory of men who have exercised not a little influence over their affairs in their lifetime.

The writing of the life stories of such men is a duty, indeed! But more important still is the duty of preserving it in a permanent form from the grains of gold, the noble thoughts they gave utterance to, the achievements of their pen, that mighty instrument of little men. The smaller, the community, the less excuse there is for its leaders to allow the memory and thoughts of such men to lapse, it is almost a moral and a communal crime. No community in India has been guiltier of this crime than the Jain community. Writing as a Jain, I am simply sorry for my inability to give expression to the indignation. I feel, on account of my community's deplorable neglect in the matter of writing the biographies and preserving the writings of very few men that have upheld its intellectual and religious prestige, who have tried to vivify their interneers and to prove that though small, they are yet not a negligible quantity in this ancient land. One of such men was the late Mr. Virchand Gandhi. (I have undertaken the publication, in a handy form, of his speeches and writings as a pure labor of love, and take this opportunity of placing before the members of my community a brief sketch of his short but useful career.)

Mr. Gandhi was born of poor but gentle parents on the 25th of August 1864 in a small village named Mahuwa near Bhavnagar, in Kthiawar. Raghvji his father, was jeweler by profession and had earned for himself a fair competency. He was a very orthodox Jaina and fully subscribed to all the varied tenets of

Jaina religion. Though without any education, as the word is understood now-a-days, he had an enlightened mind which instinctively revolted against anything which he thought to be irrational, unwholesome or incongruous in the social life of his co-religionists. Only one instance will suffice to illustrate this noble trait in his character. It was Virchand's father who put a stop to the cruel customs of weeping and beating the breast on the death of a relative, which prevailed in his community. It required great moral courage to tackle such a delicate social question, but he did it manfully and successfully. The love of reform of young Virchand may thus be said to have inherited from his father.

He went through the usual vernacular course of primary education in a small village under an old fashioned pedagogue and was then taken by his parents to Bhavnagar as they desired to give him an English education. Young Virchand was uniformly diligent and industrious during his school career and passed the matriculation examination of the Bombay university in 1880. With a view to complete his son's education, Raghavji migrated to Bombay and Virchand had the satisfaction of seeing his name enrolled as a student of the premier college of the Presidency, i.e. Elphinstone.

His work there was characterized more by seriousness than brilliancy and he graduated in the year 1884, when just twenty-one. The leading members of his community had followed his progress with great interest and had come to have great confidence in him. He had barely taken leave of his Alma Mater when he was called upon to undertake the duties of Secretary to the Jain Associations of India. It was a great responsibility to be placed upon such young shoulders but the leading Jains had full confidence in Virchand and his subsequent career proved that the confidence was not misplaced.

He began his apprenticeship to, public life with earnest enthusiasm and soon put a new complexion upon the affairs of the Association. His activity, considering his youth and inexperience, was extraordinary and the Association soon came to be looked upon as a very important useful institution by Jains all over India. His first great achievement was the bringing about a reconciliation between the Jain community and Sursinghji, the late Thakor Saheb of Palitana, who had picked up a quarrel upon the imprisonment of some of the clerks of the firm of Anandjee Kalyanjee, an institution for looking after the interests of the Jains of India.

The Thakor Saheb used to levy from every pilgrim to Shatrunjaya Hill the sum of Rs. 2 as a Mundka (a kind of Tax) for the upkeep of the Hill. This tax was a great hardship on poor Jains who were deprived of the satisfaction of paying their homage to the sacred shrine. Mr. Virchand felt deeply the cruel injustice of the tax and at once took up the matter in hand. He managed to have interviews with Col. Watson the P. A. M. K. and Lord the then enlightened Governor of Bombay. He convinced them of the injustice at the tax and through their powerful influence obliged the Thakor Saheb to come to an amicable arrangement on the question. The chief was to be paid Rs. 15,000 annually as Rakhopa (up-keep) and he was to do away with tax. The arrangement was hailed with grateful satisfaction by thousands of poor Jains who had hitherto been denied the pleasure of a pilgrimage to the great shrine.

It was time now for the young man to think of some permanent settlement in life and he thought of Law.

With the object of qualifying himself for the profession of a solicitor he signed articles in 1885 with Messrs Little & Co. the Government Solicitors. His work as secretary of the Jain Association was so well appreciated that many of his leading co-religionists in Bombay and Ahmedabad voluntarily offered him financial aid for the successful prosecution of his legal studies. Although thus seriously engaged in equipping himself for what he intended to be his profession, his active interest in the affairs of the Jain community never slackened and he was as ready as ever to lead every forlorn Jain cause.

For example, in 1891 an European named Mr. Bedam opened a slaughter House on the hill of Somet Shekhar, in Bengal, for the preparation of tallow. How deeply the religious feelings of the Jains have been aggrieved at this can well be imagined. A suit against the European gentleman was at once filed in one of the subordinate courts of Calcutta but it was not successful. Upon this Mr. Virchand himself went to Calcutta and lodged an appeal in the High Court. It was an intricate case several important legal and religious issues being involved. But nothing could daunt the young man's ardor. He remained in the City of Palaces for several months, learnt the Bengali language and himself translated into English all the

Vernacular documents pertaining to the case. With wonderful industry and patience he collected a large amount of evidence and with the help of a number of rock inscriptions coins etc.. and other evidence convinced the Judges of the justice of the plea put forth by his community. The High Court reversed the decision of the Lower Court and Mr. Virchand thus achieved his second great triumph in the cause of his community.

It is needless to say that the whole Jain community felt grateful to their young and enthusiastic co-religionist. Mr. Virchand returned to his desk and murky legal folios in BOMBAY, but soon felt that his vocation lay in another direction. While his mind was thus vacillating between law and the service of his community, His Holiness Munee Shri Atmaramjee, the well-known Jain Priest received an invitation from the President of the Religious Congress, which was proposed to be held at Chicago to represent Jainism. His Holiness, however, could not personally respond to the invitation on account of the many objections of Jain monks to cross the Kala Pani and so he refereed the question to the Jain Association of INDIA. As was to be expected, everybody thought of Mr. Virchand, who was ultimately elected as a delegate to represent Jainism at the great Parliament of the World's Religions to be held in America.

After his election the young man spent some time at the feet of His Holiness Munee Shri Atmaramjee in order to have the benefit of that learned man's erudition and philosophical learning before starting for the land of Washington. Soon afterwards he sailed for Chicago. For a young man it was a stupendous task, which Mr. Gandhi had undertaken. The Congress he was going to attend was not a political meeting where hackneyed platitudes or well-balanced periods were to be delivered. It was a religious congress and the keenest and most philosophical brains from all parts of the world were to take part in it. To face such an intellectual audience and to uphold before it the dignity, the grandeur, the sublimity of his own beloved Jain religion was no ordinary undertaking for so young a man and would have taxed the abilities even of a veteran.

How well young Virchand acquitted himself of his responsible duty the following extract taken from the writings of an eminent American will show. Says thus American: "A number of distinguished Hindu scholars, philosophers and religious teachers attended and addressed the parliament; some of them taking rank with the highest of any race for learning, eloquence and piety. But it is safe to say that no one of the oriental scholars was listened to with greater interest than was this young layman of the Jain Community, as he declared the Ethics and philosophy of his people."

The young man made such a deep impression upon the organizers of the Congress that they presented him with a silver medal. What was more significant, however, was the impression he made upon the general public, some idea of which can be formed from the fact that the people of Casadaga presented him with a Gold Medal.

Mr. Virchand's mission to America did not conclude with the sitting of the Congress. At the desire as well as at expense of some of the leading Jain merchants of Bombay, he remained in that continent for three years for diffusing among the Americans some knowledge of the philosophy of Jainism. He delivered a series of illuminating lectures in important centers like Chicago, Boston, New York and Washington. He was cordially received every where and his speeches left a very happy impression upon the minds of the American public about the sublimity of the Jain religion. He established there the Gandhi philosophical Society and afterwards left for England.

Here also he delivered a number of discourses on the fundamental principles of Jainism under the presidency of that distinguished educationist Lord Reay, with whom he had come into contact when the former was Governor of Bombay. In England, too, Mr. Gandhi made a great impression and several eminent gentlemen requested him to prolong his stay there and to initiate them into the philosophy of his ancient religion. Circumstances, however, made any prolonged stay in the Land of our Rulers impossible and so after travelling through some of the leading Continental countries he returned to his beloved motherland in June 1895.

He was accorded a cordial reception on his arrival in Bombay by his co-religionists. After his return he further devoted himself to the study of Jaina philosophy in particular and generally to that of the other

great religions of the world. He also started in Bombay a new institution under the name of Hechandracharya Class before which he gave a course of lectures on such diverse subjects as the Doctrine of Karma, Re-incarnation, Matter and spirit, and Ultimate Principles. He also delivered many other discourses under the auspices of institutions like the Theosophical Society. While thus conducting a vigorous Campaign in the interests of Jainism he was several times earnestly requested by many of his American friends to pay them another visit. He accepted the invitation and started I second time for America in 1896.

On this occasion he divided his time between England and the United States lecturing and holding classes in the latter country for six months, and keeping terms for six Months at one of the Inns of Court in England in order to qualify himself for the Bar. From these varied activities he was again called back to India by his co-religionists. An appeal had to be made to the Secretary of state in several matters affecting the interests of the Jain community and it was felt my all that Mr. Virchand was the only man to undertake the work. This time, however his stay in India was very short about three weeks only. But even in that short time his phenomenal energy enabled him to collect all the necessary information and material to substantiate his case before the Secretary of State, and shortly afterwards he again went to England this time accompanied by his son Mohanlal. He did the needful in the matter of the Appeal and was called to the Bar in 1901. Soon afterwards he returned to his native land with a heart full of hope and a determination to devote all his life to the service of his co-religionists and country. But, truly, Man proposes and God disposes. Little did the comparatively young man dream that INDIA at the news of Mr. Gandhi's tragically premature his pilgrimage on earth had almost come to an end.

"Quiet." says the poet, to quick bosoms is a Hell.

The same was the case wit Mr. Gandhi. His spirit was too volcanic to allow him ever to think of rest. From his youth upwards his brain and mind were always working at high pressure and the frail body proved too work to long sustain the phenomenal activity of the man. He returned to India but a mere shadow of his former self, a total physical wreck. Only two weeks after he landed at Bombay the end came on the 7th of August, 1901; he had returned to his native country only to die. A thrill almost of horror passed through the Jain community all over demise.

But of what avail are such vain regrets. He had played hi short but eventful part on the stage of this world, tried to fulfil what he thought to be his mission, and left for that aboard from which no traveler returns, leaving behind him for his community and his countrymen in general the noble example of a useful and unblemished life, of what amount of enduring work can be concentrated within the brief span of 37 years.

May his soul rest in eternal peace and continue to inspire his co-religionists and country men with high ideals is the only prayer of the humble writer of this brief notice of the life of a man who may truly be said to have fulfilled the noblest ideals of citizenship and manhood.