

A Brief Summary of Life and Mission of Shri Virchand Raghavji Gandhi

(August 25, 1864 to August 7, 1901)

It was the memorable day of September 11, 1893. The Columbus Hall of Art Institute of Chicago was overflowing with more than 3000 delegates of different nations and religions. It was the opening day of the Parliament of World Religions Conference, the first such conference ever organized in the history of mankind. The aim of the conference was to impart to the world, the knowledge of different religions, and to promote a feeling of fraternity between followers of diverse religious persuasions, and also to pave the way for world peace. The conference lasted for 17 days.

Two young men among them, with their Indian costumes and turbans drew, special attention of the public - one was the world famous Swami Vivekananda, who represented Hinduism and the other was Shri Virchand Raghavji Gandhi who represented Jainism. They made such an impact at the Parliament of Religions with their impressive speeches and personality that both of them were requested to prolong their stay in the USA and continued to give speeches at different cities after the conference was over.

Shri 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. The impartiality of outlook and the oratorical skill of this man fascinated the delegates at the conference. An American newspaper wrote, "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."

Shri Virchand R. Gandhi was born on August 25, 1864 in Mahuva, near Bhavnagar, Gujarat, India. After primary and secondary education at Bhavnagar, he joined Elphinstone College in Bombay. He graduated and obtained a B.A. Degree with honors from the University of Bombay in 1884. He was probably the first graduate amongst the Jains at that time. He was also a student of Buddhism and Vedanta Philosophy and also had knowledge of Yoga and Occultism. He had acquired knowledge of Christianity and Western philosophy. He also had made a comparative study of various philosophies, which equipped him for talks on various subjects with confidence. He had the command of fourteen languages including Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, English, Prakrit, Sanskrit, and French.

Shri Gandhi became the first honorary secretary of the Jain Association of India in 1885 at the age of 21. As a secretary he worked very hard for the abolition of poll tax levied on pilgrims to Mount Satrunjay, the most sacred place of Jain religion at Palitana, Gujarat, India. In those days to protest against the ruler was to invite severe punishment and even death. He prepared a case to compromise. He met Lord Ray, the governor of Bombay, and Colonel Watson, the political agent, and made a strong representation eventually abolishing the poll tax in place of a fixed payment of Rs 15,000 per year to the ruler for looking after the safety of the pilgrims and the holy place.

In 1891 Mr. Boddam, an Englishman set up a factory for slaughtering pigs and making tallow out of them at Mount Sametshikhar, another holy place of Jain pilgrimage near Calcutta, in state of Bihar, India. Shri Virchand Gandhi went all the way to Calcutta to stop the killing of pigs at the holy place. He stayed there for six months, learned Bengali, prepared his case against the factory, and ultimately got this verdict issued: "Sametshikhar is a place of Jain pilgrimage and nobody else has any right to interfere there." He got the factory to close.

Shri Virchand Gandhi was a great social reformer at a very young age. He wrote a 37 pages long essay "Radva Kutvani Hanikarak Chal" against social evils at a very young age of 22. When his father died in 1890, he did not allow the primitive practices of wailing and breast-beating during mourning. He continuously fought against social evils and was successful in eradicating some.

Shri Virchand Gandhi sailed to the USA along with Swami Vivekanand to attend the Parliament of World Religion Conference in 1893. He stayed in the USA for about two years after the conference and lectured in cities such as Chicago, Boston, New York, and Washington. He also visited England, France, Germany and other places in Europe. In foreign countries he wore a long and loose kurta, a white shawl on his shoulder, a golden bordered Kathiwadi turban on his head, and country shoes. This external appearance bore the imprint of India. He delivered more than 535 lectures on Jainism, Yoga, Indian systems of philosophy, Indian culture, occultism, and spiritualism. He qualified as a Barrister in London at one of the Inns of the Court but did not use this qualification for monetary gain.

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 difficult terminology of Jainism. He had an extraordinary ability to clarify his statements in a consistent and logical manner. At the conference, he made a brief but striking presentation on the fundamentals of the Jain religion. He expounded the Jain religion in its main aspects namely: Jain philosophy, Jain way of life, and Jain code of conduct.

Another special characteristic of Shri Virchand 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 non-violence (Ahimsa) in life and multiplicity of views (Anekanta) in thoughts. His discourses convinced the elite of America of the fact that the Jain religion has an authentic and rational religious tradition. His speeches received extensive publication in several leading newspapers.

One American gave his opinion of 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 element so as to convince that their religion ranks high with other 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

householder and not a monk or religious preacher, he can expound so well. Who must then be his Guru? His simple but striking philosophy of life is worth knowing, worth understanding."

Shri V.R. Gandhi's lectures demonstrated the fact that the study of Sanskrit and Prakrit languages alone is not enough for a proper understanding and exposition of Indian philosophy. It is absolutely necessary to assimilate and to understand India's past culture in its proper context.

Shri Virchand Gandhi was a great exponent of Indian culture and religion, besides being a brilliant scholar of Jainism. His speeches at the parliament echoed the true spirit and culture of India. There prevailed in America the belief that India was a country of tigers, serpents, magicians, and kings. Christian missionaries also presented a distorted picture of the people of India. Shri Virchand Gandhi made a great effort as Swami Vivekananda 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 in the face of all those 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." He also added that "cultural distinctions, agriculture, art, artistic skill, literature, good conduct, means of knowledge, 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 and adopted it. But it has not happened, it cannot happen."

Shri Virchand Gandhi was not a dogmatic person. He spoke as a Jain but he forcefully defended Hinduism from the attack of Westerners at the Parliament. Above all, he was first Indian then Jain. He was accorded a warm reception and shown highest appreciation from clubs, literary and church societies, philosophical branches, and spiritual associations in the USA and other countries. His lectures also served to educate the Western society regarding the salient features of Indian culture.

Five decades before the independence of India, Virchand Gandhi had a prophetic vision. He said in one of his lectures, "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 for ever maintain peaceful relations with all the nations of the world."

Virchand Gandhi was not only a philosophical thinker but he also had the welfare of the nation at heart. He collected a shipload of grain and about Rs. 40,000 (\$10,000) cash for famine relief in India in 1896 while he was in the USA.

In America Virchand Gandhi founded various societies, such as:

- The Gandhi Philosophical Society
- The School of Oriental Philosophy
- The Society for the Education of Women of India

The secretary of the later institution was Mrs. Howard who had adopted pure vegetarianism, practiced Samayik daily, and other codes of conduct of Jainism. In England he founded the Jain Literature Society and taught Jainism there. Mr. Herbert Warren, a religious enthusiast, abandoned non-vegetarianism and adopted the Jain religion. He summarized Virchand Gandhi's lectures and published a book known as 'Herbert Warren's Jainism.'

The following literature was published by Shri Virchand R. Gandhi or compiled from his speeches:

Title	Year Published	Language	Pages	
Essay - Radva Kutvani Hanikarak Chal	1886	Gujarati	37	
The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ	1894	English	128	
Savirya Dhyan	1902/1989	Gujarati	158	
Jaina Philosophy	1907	English	375	
Karma Philosophy	1913	English	221	
Yoga Philosophy	1912/1993	English	309	
The Systems of Indian Philosophy	1970/1993	English	188	
Selected speeches of V. R. Gandhi	1963	English	85	Note-1
Religion and Philosophy of Jainas	1993	English	264	Note-2
Herbert Warren's Jainism	1961/1983	English	164	Note-3

Note-1 This book compiled by Dr. K.K. Dixit from his speeches that were delivered in USA

Note-2 This book combines the two books; Jaina Philosophy and Karma Philosophy

Note-3 This book written by Herbert Warren based on VRG's teaching

Shri Virchand Gandhi received the following medals:

- Silver medal as a 'Token of Esteem and Unity - The Occident to the Orient' by the spiritualist of Cassadaga Camp, USA on August 25, 1894.
- Gold medal as a 'Starter of Jainism' by Kutchhi Dasha Oswal Jain Community, Bombay, on August 19, 1896

While he was in England, his health suddenly took a turn for the worse. He returned to India, but a few weeks later Shri Virchand Gandhi passed away at the very young age of 37 in Bombay on August 7, 1901. He rendered an excellent service to India and Jainism by interpreting Indian culture and religion in its true spirit to the western world. He was a brilliant promising young

man, full of hopes and aspirations of service to his religion and community. His name will continue to be remembered as a great champion of Jain religion and of Indian culture.

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Shri Virchand R. Gandhi's Published Literature

Title	Pages	Year	Language
1. Jaina Philosophy -	(16+359)	1907	English
2. Karma Philosophy -	(30+191)	1913	English
3. Yoga Philosophy -	(29+280)	1912	English
Speeches and Writings of Virchand R. Gandhi Collected by Bhagu F. Karbhari Publisher - Shri Agamodaya Samiti Bombay			
4. The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ	128	1894	English
Publisher - Shri Virchand R. Gandhi from an ancient manuscript. This book was published while he was in Chicago.			
5. Essay - Radva Kutvani Hanikarak Chal	(37)	1886	Gujarati
Author and Publisher - Shri Virchand R. Gandhi			
6. The Systems of Indian Philosophy	(44+148)	1970	English
Speeches and Writings of Shri Virchand R. Gandhi Editor - Dr. K. K. Dixit Publisher - Shri Mahavir Jain Vidyalaya Bombay			
7. Savirya-Dhyan	first published	1902	Gujarati
	second edition	(24+134) 1989	Gujarati
Author - Acharya Shri Shubhachandradev Translator - Shri Virchand R. Gandhi Commentary - Anandnandan Lalan Compiled - Shri Pannalal R. Shah Publisher - The Jain Association of India Bombay			
8. Selected speeches of V. R. Gandhi		1964	English
Selected speeches taken from books 1, 2, and 3. Publisher - Vallabh Smarak Nidhi, Bombay			

Awards received by Virchand R. Gandhi

1. Silver Medal

A token of Esteem and Unity "The Occident to the Orient" from the spiritualist of Cassadaga Camp. (USA)

Awarded to - Virchand R. Gandhi.

August 25, 1894

2. Gold Medal

Awarded by - Kutchhi Dasha Oswal Jain Community, Bombay

Awarded to - Virchand Raghavji Gandhi, B.A. MRAS

Starter of Jainism

August 19, 1896.