TWO HEROS OF PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS

- Swami Nikhtleshwarananda

It was the memorable day of 11th September, 1893. The Columbus Hall of Art Institute of Chicago was overflowing with about 7000 people and on the platform were seated the learned leaders of the leading religions of the world who had come to participate in the parliament of religions. Two young men among them with their Indian costume and turban drew special attention of the public - one was the world-famous Swami Vivekananda who represented Hinduism and another - Shri Virchand Gandhi who represented Jainism. They made such an impact at the Parliament of Religions with their impressive speeches and personality that both of them had to continue to give speeches in America everafter the Parliament of religions was over.

Shri Virchand Gandhi also remained in America for some more time after the Parliament of Religions was over and again visited America in 1896 and 1899 and delivered about 650 lectures on Jainism.

Shri Virchand Gandhi took birth at Mahuva (Gujarat) on the 25th August, 1964. Both of them were wonderful Karmayogis. They sacrificed their lives for the good of mankind and passed away at an early age in the harness of work. Shri Virchand Gandhi passed away at Bombay on the 7th August, 1901 at the age of 37 years.

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 on 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 shear weight of his scholarship. 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. 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 scholar's it was this youth whose lecture on Jain faith and conduct was listened to with the interest engaging the greatest attention."

VIRCHAND RAGHAVJI GANDHI (VRG) was born at Mahuva, near Bhavnagar. After primary and secondary education at Bhavnagar he joined Elphinstone College in Bombay and graduated with honors. He mastered fourteen languages and at the age of 21 he became the first honorary secretary of the Jain Association of India.

VRG was a great exponent of Indian culture and religion, besides being a brilliant scholar of Jainism. His speeches at the parliament of World Religions at Chicago in 1893 echoed the true spirit and culture of
India. He was accorded a warm reception and shown highest appreciation from clubs, literary and church societies, philosophical branches and spiritual associations in USA. He impressed the American public about the Jain religion as a rational religion and speeches received extensive publications in several leading newspapers in USA. He corrected the false, twisted and perverse impression of India as being the land of Maharajahs, tigers and cobras.

VRG stayed in USA for about two years and visited several cities. He returned to USA twice and in 1896 organized a ship load of grain and about Rs. 40,000 cash for famine relief in India. He also visited England, France, Germany and other places in Europe. Herbert Warren studied Jainism under VRG. He qualified as Barrister in London at one of the Inns of the Court.

Virchand Raghavji Gandhi was one of the extraordinary Indians of his time. He represented Jainism at the Parliament of Religions held at Chicago in 1893, and delivered lectures before the American and the English, not only on Jainism, but also on the other systems of Indian philosophy. He made them realize the sublimity of Indian culture through his objective stance.

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 realize India's past culture in its proper context. Virchand Gandhi had realized 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 Jives, the subtle strands of thought in Jain philosophy regarding DRAVYARTHIK and PARYAYARTHIKANAYA, 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, and 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. Christian 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 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.

"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 heel. 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 on '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 for ever 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 the 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 Jains she practiced 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 Warrent, 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 lecture. He had the command of fourteen languages including Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, English, Sanskrit, and French.

Thus a young man of twenty-nine, he 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 Kalyanji 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 Virchand Gandhi's son, Gandhiji sends his blessing and asks:

"Have you adopted any ideals of your father?"

Virchand 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.

TWO HEROES OF PARLIAMENT OF RELIGIONS

Both of them had compassionate heart. Shri Virchand Gandhi had also a compassionate heart. When he heard the news of severe drought of India in 1896 while he was in America, he at once established a Relief Committee under the Presidentship of Mr. C.C. Boney the President of Parliament of Religions, himself being the secretary. He sent a shipload of foodgrains and Rs. 40,000 as cash as a relief measure for the suffering people in India.

Shri Virchand Gandhi also tried hard to spread higher education particularly in Jain Community. With his efforts 'International Society for the Education of Women in India' was established in America.

Indian Society was under the clutches of tyranny of priestcraft and superstitions, when these two heroes of India sailed for America. Sea voyage was considered unholy and both had to face stiff opposition from their own countrymen before going to America as well as after returning from there.

Similarly when Shri Virchand Gandhi was in difficulties while his own people were trying to outcast him, Swami Vivekananda tried to defend him and sympathize with him. Swami Vivekananda wrote in November 1894 to Shri Haridas Viharidas Desai, the Diwan of Junagadh for whom Swami Vivekananda cherished great love and respect and who was already known to Shri Virchand Gandhi. " Now here is Virchand Gandhi, the Jain whom you knew well in Bombay. This man never takes anything but mere vegetables even in this terribly cold climate and tooth and nail tries to defend his countrymen and religion.
The people of this country like him very well. But what are they doing who sent him over? They are trying to outcast him."

At this juncture while the World is celebrating the Centenary of Chicago Parliament of Religions, let us pay our special homage to those two great and worthy sons of Mother India - Two Heros of Parliament of Religions.

VRG’s Literature

His lectures on Jaina philosophy have been published in a book-form under the title ‘The Jaina Philosophy’ in 1910 and 1924. In these lectures he made the Jaina positions comprehensible to a non-Jain and non-Indian audience. For his approach was the most non-sectarian and rational.

His lectures on the Jaina theory of Karma have also been published under the title ‘The Karma Philosophy’ in 1913 and 1924.

Indian systems of philosophy agree with the conception that each action entails its fruit or its result; none can escape the consequences of one’s own actions. This fundamental idea on which the doctrine of Karma is based holds crucial importance in the development of ethical thoughts of ancient Indians. The Jaina version of it is illuminating in more ways than one.

V. Glasenapp, a well known German scholar on Jainism, wrote his doctoral dissertation on the Jaina doctrine of Karma; and acknowledged Gandhi’s lectures as his sole influence. Even today, these lectures remain unsurpassed and serve as an independent source of enlightenment on the subject. Gandhi’s exposition is so lucid and brilliant that no serious student of Indian philosophy in general, and Jaina philosophy in particular, can afford to ignore it.

His lectures on the systems of Indian philosophy have been published under the title ‘The Systems of Indian Philosophy’ by Shri Mahavira Jaina Vidyalaya, Bombay in 1970. The systems dealt with are the Sankhya philosophy, the Yoga philosophy, the Nyaya (Vaisesika) philosophy, the Mimamsa, the Vedanta philosophy, Buddhism and Jainism. In his lecture on the Vedanta philosophy Gandhi expounds the two main schools of Vedanta - the Kevaladvaita of Shankara and the Vishistadvaita of Ramanuja. In these lectures, we have an exposition of the non-Jaina systems of Indian philosophy by a liberal but convinced Jaina. But Gandhi's own ideological affiliation does not prevent him from making maximum honest efforts to get at the heart of the various non-Jaina systems of Indian philosophy. He regards four questions as basic to all philosophical investigation:

These lectures bear testimony of his powers of comprehension, his philosophical acumen and his profound learning.

To understand Indian philosophical thought, one should first acquaint oneself with the spirit of Indian culture. His love for this culture is represented in his speeches for he speaks with the zeal of a missionary and the reason of an honest scholar.

In ‘The Jaina Philosophy’ he gives an account of Indian culture, yet draws no distinction between Brahmanic, Jaina or Buddhist texts, for him basic Indian culture is neither Brahmanic, nor Jaina nor Buddhist. By giving an impressive account of Indian life, he draws a true picture of the social and moral status of ancient Indians. He is particularly conscious of the fact that the true strength of India lies in what is moral and spiritual in Indians. He says, “The wonder is that notwithstanding these foreign attacks, India and her people have survived; that notwithstanding the demoralizing influences of foreigners, India still leads in spirituality and morality.

His exposition of Yoga philosophy and its technique of eight-fold yoga to achieve the suppression of the manifestations of mind entailing the unagitated pure state of mind, is brilliant. He aptly discusses the interesting topic of miraculous powers which a yogi acquires by reason of performing highest torn of concentration on the required event, aspect or thing. At this juncture his answer to those Western
scholars who denigrate them as mere superstitions or hallucinations is note-worthy, He says, “without caring much what the foreigners have to say in reference to the religions and philosophies of India we will come to our own subject. We have said before that yoga is the suppression of the manifestations of mind.

The source of the positive power, therefore, lies in the soul. In the very wording of the definition of yoga is involved the supposition of the existence of a power which can control and suppress the manifestations of the mind. The power is the power of the soul - otherwise familiar to us as freedom if the will. So long as the soul is subject to the mind it is tossed this way or that in obedience to the mental changes. Instead of the soul being tossed by the mental changes, the mind should vibrate in obedience to the soul-vibrations. When once the soul becomes the master of the mind, it can produce any manifestations it likes. The ancient Chaldeons and the modern monks of India, Japan and China teach the same doctrine. It was by the aid of this yoga science that the ancients made many discoveries in Chemistry and Medicine”. “The true yogi does not attach himself to these occult powers.”

It can be said that Gandhi was a formidable champion of Jaina philosophy, a brilliant exponent of the systems of Indian philosophy and a fervent lover of Indian culture. He was a most astounding scholar with a versatile personality combining with a catholicity of outlook.

SOME OF THE EXTRACTS OF COMMENTS FROM NEWSPAPERS AND INDIVIDUALS IN USA :

1. ‘Now here is VRG, the Jain, whom you well know in Bombay. This man never takes anything but pure vegetables even in this terribly cold climate and tooth and nail tries to defend his countrymen and religion. The people of this country like him very well.

Letter written by Vivekanandji to Shri Diwanji - November 1894

2. These lectures are instructive to both, old and young, and should be seen and heard all over America. The Rochester Herald - October 3, 1893

3. His lecture was a most scholarly production both in matter and form, and showed a thorough grasp of oriental philosophy. Rev. R.A. White, Chicago

4. It was rarely, if ever, been my good fortune to meet a man whose reading and culture have been so wide and varied, and who, withal, has so sweet, sincere and teachable a spirit as Mr. Gandhi. Hon. E.B. Sherman, U.S. Circuit Court

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A BRILLIANT EXPONENT OF INDIAN PHILOSOPHY -By Dr. Nagin J Shah

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3. Ibid, Vol. 1, P. 103
