

## **THE VALIANT JAIN PATRIOT-VIRCHAND RAGHAVJI GANDHI**

*who unfurled and glorified the Jain Religion beyond the motherland*

----- **RAKSHA SHAH**

“ Ladies and gentlemen, you have heard all your lives from your missionaries, who claim to be the messengers of God, “how ugly, wretched, immoral and vile the heathen Indians are... but did you ever hear from these missionaries – the messengers of love to all mankind – of the tyrannies that are perpetuated over the Hindus in India?”

These were the words of a fearless and frank patriot – the proud son of India – the late Shri Virchand Raghavji Gandhi, a renowned Barrister-At-Law, a great exponent of the Indian culture, a philosopher, reformer, a great Jain scholar, born at Mahua in Gujarat on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August 1864. His father Raghavji Gandhi was a well-to-do gentleman of the town, known for his honesty, integrity and religious mindedness. The seeds of service to the society were sown by his father, who himself was a reformer, a man very practical in approach who fought against social evils and succeeded in eradicating them.

As a child Shri Virchand received his primary education at the town school and was sent to Bhavnagar for further studies. At the age of sixteen, he passed his matriculation examination from Bhavanagar, and secured the 1<sup>st</sup> position, which entitled him to receive the ‘Shri Jaswant Singhji’ scholarship. The urge for knowledge made him take up further studies. He graduated from the Elphinstone College in Bombay in 1884, where he received his degree of B.A. with honors.

He was gifted with a fine and charming personality. He had a fairly tall, stately, well-built figure with well-proportionate features and a fine, brilliant and lustrous face. For his American sojourn, he had selected a dress, which added charm to his personality, a royal purple robe, and a gold colored turban. He had round his waist; a white sash with a knot on the right and two ends hanging to his knees. He wore oriental shoes. This make-up created an oriental and hallowed atmosphere around him. He looked like a priest, sober, serene and peaceful, eager to achieve his objective.

He was a polyglot who had mastered as many as fourteen languages. Apart from academics, he regularly attended the Jain Pathshala. The religious knowledge that he acquired at the Pathshala proved fruitful at the 'Dharma Mahotsava' held in Ajmer in 1895, where he was awarded a Gold Medal. He was a student of Buddhism and the Vedanta Philosophy who had also acquired knowledge of Christianity and Western Philosophy, mastered Yoga and Occultism and made comparative study of various philosophies, which equipped him for talks on various subjects with confidence.

He also happened to be the first Jain Barrister from London, who was, at the growing age of 20, appointed as the honorary secretary of the Jain Association of India.

## **HIS ACHIEVEMENTS:**

- 1) It was he who fought in the Calcutta High court for a pious cause – to close down the slaughterhouses at Sametshikhar and toiled hard to convince and prove that Sametshikhar belonged to the Jains and Jains alone.
- 2) With strenuous efforts, he succeeded in abolishing the poll tax that was levied on Jain pilgrims at Shatrunjaya Tirth by the Thakore Saheb of Palitana.
- 3) The compassionate laity sent Rs. 40,000 and loads of grains to India from U.S.A. when a grave famine broke out in India in 1897.
- 4) In all, he, in his very short span of life, delivered 535 speeches on Jainism and other religions, stressing upon the ethical, spiritual, social and cultural life of India. Due to his clear vision, unbiased approach, clarity in explanation, people were enthralled by his speeches.
- 5) At another instance the true laity not only preached the Jain principles of Ahimsa and Anekant, but also put them into practice. An Englishman Boddam slaughtered pigs and made tallow on a portion of the sacred Hills of Sametshikhar. The violation of the principles of Ahimsa on the very sacred hills where 20 Tirthankaras had achieved Nirvana caused great resentment in the Jain community. After the launched case had failed in the

subordinate court, Shri Virchand was entrusted with this difficult task. He took pains, learnt the Bengali language to understand the case to its core, translated the documents of the known 'Piggery Case' and succeeded in closing down the factory from the Hills.

- 6) His remarkable, painstaking erudition reached its ecstasy at the Congress of World Religions held at Chicago in 1893. His eloquent exposition of Indian culture is to date remembered both in U.S.A. & U.K. Here, Pujya Shri Vijayanandsuri or Atmaramji Maharaj, a great scholar, saint and author of 'Chicago Prasnotari' and other learned treatise, deputed him.

The Congress, also known as the Parliament of Religions lasted for 17 long days from the 11<sup>th</sup> of September to the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1893, where representatives of various religions presented and expounded the principles and philosophy of their religions. It was a unique gathering of leaders of world religions, all intelligent, devout, eager, learned and anxious to express and expound the principles of philosophy and religion. It provided a great opportunity for comparative study of different religions. Amongst the other delegates who sailed to America with Virchand Raghavji Gandhi, were Swami Vivekananda, representing Hinduism, Shri Nagarkar – of the Brahma Samaj, Shri Dharmapal from Ceylon representing Buddhism, Professor Gyanendranath Chakravarty of Allahabad and Miss Sorabji of Pune. Needless to say, Shri Virchandji represented Jainism

. In his remarkable speech, he tried to communicate and convey to the scholarly, eager listeners the essence of Jainism and its contribution, philosophically, ethically, historically, culturally and socially. This erudite speaker, who had mastered the Western as well as all other systems of Indian Philosophy gave lectures at the Congress on the various Indian Philosophical systems which enthralled the audience and made them realize the sublimity of Indian culture, at a time when the innocent Indians were considered to be barbarians and illiterates.

His speeches laid a great impact on the listeners. Amongst the many, Mr. Herbert Warren, the Honorary Secretary of the Jain Literature Society of London was so impressed that he arranged a series of talks and lectures by Virchandji and invited him to London. He later, published his speeches in the form of a book

entitled ‘Jainism in Western Garb as a Solution to Life’s Great Problems’ in Sept. 1912. Till date various editions of this book have been printed. Shri Vallabhsuri Smarak Nidhi felt the void and reprinted the work in May, 1968. This arduous task was done by the esteemed scholar Dr. Nagindas J. Shah, the then Deputy Director of the renowned L.D. Institute of Indology, Ahmedabad.

The book deals with topics such as the origin of the Universe, the existence of God, the causes of suffering, happiness and misery in the world, the ultimate purpose of life and ethics.

Shri Virchand Gandhi, himself has written books like,

- 1) Jain Philosophy
- 2) Karma Philosophy
- 3) Yoga Philosophy
- 4) The Six Systems Of Indian Philosophy
- 5) An Unknown Life Of Jesus Christ-Translated from the French edition

.The appreciation of his speeches was shown by periodicals and newspapers, which at times printed the entire speech, word for word. An eminent contemporary also wrote about Shri Virchand Raghavji in eloquent terms: “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 Jains as he declared the Ethics and Philosophy of his People.” Priests, public men and the press spoke in eulogistic and glowing terms and paid tribute to his scholarship, learning, intelligence and culture.

At one instance, he went furious when, at the Parliament of Religions, Rev. Pentecost, a delegate from London, used abusive language describing women in the Hindu Religion. He behaved like a patriotic Indian and sought to dispel false beliefs about the social and religious practices in the country. The American press was unanimous in declaring the remarks of Rev. Pentecost as

derogatory to the dignity of the Parliament. They not only took note of Virchandji's dignified and broad-minded reply but also printed the whole lecture verbatim.

On his second tour to the Western countries, he divided his time between America and England and delivered lectures, conducted study classes for six months each at both the places. He had also traveled to France, Germany and other European countries and delivered discourses on Jain Religion, which were very much appreciated. In 1899, he attended the International Commerce Conference representing Asia. He founded an organization for women called, 'The Society for the Education of Women of India', whose secretary was Mrs. Howard.

While in England, his health suddenly took a turn for the worse. He had to leave England abruptly - though luckily he had successfully finished his work of appeal. He returned to India but within only a few weeks of his return on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1901, Shri Virchandji at an early age of 37 passed away. This valiant patriot was the first Jain who unfurled the Principles of Jainism and glorified them. This religious man will ever be remembered as a brilliant promising young man, full of hopes and aspirations who served the society, the community and his motherland.

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