

34. The Charity Saint Shri Meghjbhai Pethraj

Childhood:

The child climbed on the tree to fly kite because of his child-like activities, but he lost his balance and fell down. Such a fall was bound to bring the end of his life but destiny was otherwise. The child was saved. The child must have thought. I should never climb on the tree, but no, it was Meghji and he thought, I must rise up, even more than this, but keep the circumstances well in mind. This was the first lesson that Meghji learnt in the beginning of his life.

He was born in 1905 corresponding to the 15th September, at Dabsang, some 18 miles away from Jamnagar. The Jain Oshwal Shri Pethrajbhai and Ranibai were his parents. Shri Pethrajbhai had the eldest child, daughter Laxmi and then three sons, Raychand, Meghji and Vaghji. The economic condition of the family was not so good but their prestige was very high. Pethrajbhai was broad minded and the whole family was deeply religious minded. Meghji studied in a village school. He was very clever and passed the fifth standard very easily. Seeing his outstanding career as a student, he was appointed in his own school as a teacher and was granted monthly salary of Rs.8/-. Teachers were highly respected in those days. But Meghji was not to take this to be all. He was teaching names of London, Berlin, New York, Mombassa etc. to the students in the class. He himself wanted to see these places and earn a lot of money to save his family, society and the motherland. How can he be satisfied with this service of Rs.8/- a month?

He was acquainted with prestigious families because of his service as a teacher and he decided to go to Africa on the basis of one of such relation. His parents granted their consent after much hesitation but pressed him to go after his marriage. As such Meghjbhai was married to Monghibai at the age of 14 as desired by his parents. The parents borrowed money on credit for the ticket of Meghjbhai and then Meghjbhai resigned from the service of a teacher.

At the age of 15, Meghji came to Mumbai to go to Africa. He was coming out of Saurashtra for the first time and was aspiring to see the whole world. He was quite simple, totally unaware of the complications of worldly life. He completed the procedure for boarding the ship but when he returned he saw that his trunk of kits and goods was missing. He was extremely pained. The steamer was about to start. He asked everyone there because his passport, money, clothes were in the trunk. Instead of helping this boy, the persons laughed at him saying, "if you cannot look after your trunk, you should not have come out of your home and wished to go abroad". Meghjbhai felt this very much. So much pain and punishment for such a little error of oversightedness? He met the police. He ran everywhere to find out the trunk, but the steamer started and the dream of Meghji's going to foreign remained unfulfilled. Meghji thought that he would not be able to go abroad at anytime hereafter. His parents had collected money for his ticket with much trouble and they hoped that Meghji would earn much. But now, how to go to parents? What face will he show to them? He had lost his service of a teacher also. Should he go back or stay at Mumbai itself? Meghji was not a boy to lose courage by one failure. He must go abroad under any circumstances. He took a lesson to be careful at all moments of life. Ordinary man submits to circumstances but extra-ordinary man rules over the circumstances. He decided to return to home and try again. He has not done any evil work that he cannot show his face to anyone. He will now suffer his carelessness and try to come out of it once again. He returned home. All were surprised. Meghji told them the whole story. He said, I was being tested by his fate and if he lost courage, he should be working as a teacher for the whole of his life. If he remained idle, he should not get such opportunity hereafter.

The parents could follow the ambition of Meghjbhai. They also did not like that his career may come to an end here. But what was the way out of? The mother could not sleep at night. She was after all a mother. Ranibai, next morning proposed to make use of her ornaments in these circumstances and

Pethrajibhai submitted to this proposal with heavy heart. They arranged for the ticket of Meghajibhai by giving Ranibai's ornaments as security for money taken. At last, Meghajibhai put his feet on the land of Mombassa on July 18, 1919.

Meghajibhai joined a well-known firm as an accountant. The firm was very big and the work was troublesome. Meghajibhai had not seen without earning name, fame and money. Account books are the key records of any business and Meghajibhai knew it well. He learnt writing of the books of accounts with one of his friends and mastered the art of writing books within 2-3 months. He used to work in the firm from morning to late at night. He knew that happiness and wealth is not possible without hard work and discipline, and money earned without hard work does not help but do some harm. It was difficult to earn money, but it was more difficult to preserve it.

He was to receive yearly salary of Rs.250 for the first year and 350 for the next year. Meghji started working with all his efforts and knew all the complications of business with his inborn skill and courage. Two years were now over and his master one-day called him. He thought, he must have committed error some where? The master said, "many staff ask for increase in salary within 2-4 months of their service while you have been working silently for all this time" Meghajibhai replied, "Salary was granted after seeing that the man actually deserves it". The master said, "that is why we have decided to increase your salary to Rs.1500 for this year". Meghajibhai was very much surprised. He became a person of discussion in the whole firm. He informed his parents in India and they were all extremely pleased. Meghajibhai was friend of everyone. He loved all and he also was loved by all.

The greatness hidden in this youth of 18 years began to move. "Shall I work as a servant of the whole of my life? Have I left my native only for this reason?" He wanted to do independent business. His heart was at severe unrest in service. But the love and affection of his masters and colleagues did not allow him to separate from them. There was risk in independent business but there was security in service. He was completing two and a half years in service. He had called on his brothers with them from India and with their co-operation, family duties and self-intuitional force, this young man standing at crossroads dashed for independent business.

He collected Rs.185 from well wishers and the three brothers started with independent business in the firm established under the name "Raychand Brothers". They purchased goods at sale rates and sold at retail rates. They were also preparing Vaseline and hair oils at home and sold it by moving village to village.

Honest labor does pay much. Very shortly they opened a shop at Nairobi and after some days at Malol. They put up a factory "Aluminum and Industrial works" in 1930. After few more years, they developed a business of extracting tenin from the skin of wotal trees at the bank of Thitha River, not much far from Nairobi. They also developed these trees in that area. They, thus, started various business activities and within the activities of 31 years, they established, and 55 limited companies in East Africa as well as in India.

They had now wealth in crores but they were never slave of money. He always kept simple dress; he behaved sympathetically with everyone. As a result, all the members of his staff, including officers, respected him as their elder member of family. They were all totally faithful to him. He always cared for the pains and pleasures of every member of the staff even the lowest.

Towards Renunciation:

Once travelling in a plane, there were heavy jerks and this put he to deep thinking. How to use so much wealth? He decided at once. He had entrusted all the responsibilities of his total business at Africa to a British Mr. Gray. The responsibility of Mumbai office was given to Shri C.V. Shah. Mr. Shah was looking after all the affairs of Shri Meghajibhai in India. Meghajibhai loved him like his own son.

Shri Meghijibhai many times told, the wealth became of no value if it was kept in safes, it reduced itself. Even the piety of the man who collected it became exhausted. He believed that by charity, man does not become entitled to piety. He must take active part in the works of service to the people. Meghijibhai now left his world of business activities and turned towards the good deeds of charity.

He started helping in social services regularly in 1936. There was severe draught in Saurashtra and a committee was established in Africa to render help to draught-victims. Shri Meghijibhai was the president of this committee, which collected a large fund.

Meghijibhai was Jain by religion but he was secular by nature. He wanted that all sects of Jains should meet together and strengthen their unity but he could not accomplish this task. He established for Oshwal community of Jains, One boarding house at Jamnagar, a Girls' school at Nairobi, and a lecture hall at Thika. In these acts, he was much, attached to Religion rather the caste and creed. He said, "The mankind needs the preachings of non-violence and detachment of Jainism, and it needs it most in these days". He said that Jainism was capable of being world religion and he sincerely believed in it. He presented his thoughts at the twentieth Jain Shwetambar Conference held at Mumbai in 1957.

A large wave of his charity began in 1944 when he retired from business. He had made many donations even before this. He believed that he should not spend his energy in making small donations. He was more interested in creating a new institute or new management by granting large donation under a well-prepared plan. He did not believe in making charity to earn honors or fame. He never made charity in such a way that the person or institution receiving charity might feel it insulting or embarrassing. He was interested in making charity to the people with whom he lived and where he was brought up. He was inclined to make donations for educational purposes and medical reliefs. He wanted to see Saurashtra educational purposes and medical reliefs. He wanted to see Saurashtra came out of its backwardness after we got independence in 1947. He did not like to give direct donations in Government plans. He first saw that the plan was duly implemented and then he would donate for its proper working. He also preferred to create institutions as per his own plans and then hand them over to the Government for its proper administration. Where there was contribution of both the Government and the people, he would donate very freely. He used to decide on great donations very shortly and yet after deep thinking.

He used to come to his native village very often.

He had good acquaintance with Shri Dhebarbhai, chief minister of Saurashtra in those days. He had agreed to give donation of rupees sixty lacs for establishing medical college at Jamnagar within a short discussion of one hour.

There was not a single day in the years around 1954 on which the news of laying foundation stone in one or the other village of Saurashtra for same new institution with the help of Shri Meghijibhai's donation did not appear in the news. He gave good donations for starting primary schools, for preparing buildings for schools, for establishing technical schools and boarding houses for the students of backward class, for maternity homes, hospitals, town halls, women development institutions, children homes, leprosy hospital, reading rooms, nursing training college, orphanage, sanatorium, blind school, old men's' homes, Jain temples, Derasar (places of worship and meditation) boarding house, colleges for arts and science, law and commerce colleges, technical colleges, TB Hospital etc. Once Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru came to his house. Meghijibhai gave him a cover. Panditji thought that there would be a memorandum of complaints or a proposal. When he opened the cover, he saw that it contained a Cheque of rupees one lac for establishing Kamla Nehru Memorial Hospital.

In his first visit with the Government at Ahmedabad, Meghji bhai expressed his desire to donate seven and a half lacs of rupees for establishing a Cancer Hospital after a short discussion of half an hour.

The donations for social service work in Gujarat and Saurashtra total to be more than a crore. Similarly, donations in India and Africa amount to be more than one and a half crores. In additions, the income from the trusts established for these works was also used for regular donations.

At the time of talks with Jivraj Mehta, then High Commissioner of India in London, he offered donation of one lac and ten thousand sterling pound for creating Medical College at Vallabh Vidyanagar but the administrators at Vallabh Vidyanagar could not accept this money for some reasons.

Meghji bhai never made a plan, which may be beyond his capacity. It may then be a business Venture or a charitable plan.

He started primary schools even in Africa. He opened Libraries, he helped many children to pay their fees and purchase books. Thus, the people at Africa were also benefited with the donations of Shri Meghji bhai.

There was serious draught in Bengal in 1943. The Indians residing in Africa victims. The contribution of Meghji bhai was very large in this amount. He moved to many places to collect this fund when he suffered several instances of insult and disrespect. He always started collecting fund with his own donation and when he would write a large amount, others would also donate very freely.

He contributed with mind, body and money for creating Gandhi Memorial Academy in Africa.

There was hardly any public school or hospital in which there was no contribution from Shri Meghji bhai. He helped the students of Africa for going to foreign countries to receive higher education. He helped them by giving scholarships also. He spent about four lacs shillings for such scholarships.

Himself has expressed his feelings at the time of making donations. Here are his words:

"I am coming from a small village. I had been abroad before many years to earn my livelihood and I have been successful with the grace of God. I believe that my earnings are not only of mine but the brothers and sisters of my motherland as well as the people of the countries in which I have done my business and other activities have also a share in it and I, in face, pay their share by helping in the works of social necessities according to my ability. In doing so, I do not oblige anybody but I do my duty". By exhibiting so much nobility and broad-mindedness, Shri Meghji bhai has tried to idolize the feeling of trusteeship advised by Mahatma Gandhi. The act of charity is described like this in the seventh chapter of Tattvarth Sootra: Giving away money earned justifiably in quite an ordinary and natural behavior in such a way that it would do good both of the giver as well as receiver. Shri Meghji bhai followed this ideal knowingly or unknowingly in making charity.

Personal Life and Journey to Heaven:

The contribution of the members of family of Shri Meghji bhai in the making and development of his life was not small. Shri Pethrajbhai, the father of Meghji bhai used to invite relatives and friends to his home for dinner occasionally on the days of festivals and he was pleased to welcome and serve them. His first wife, Monghibai was also much serviceable. She gave birth to a daughter in 1924 and her name was kept as Sushila the one with all virtues. Monghibai was, however, not keeping well and in spite of several medicines, she expired in 1930. This was a painful blow on Meghji bhai of 26. Now, Sushila of six years needed a motherly person in home, and a gold home-woman was also required. As such, Meghji bhai married to Maniben in 1932. Maniben took deep interest in the works of Meghji bhai and always stood by his encouraging him for good works. Meghji bhai had four daughters

and two sons and their names were Minal, Jaya, Sumita, Usha, Bipin and Anant in the order of their age.

In spite of so much progress in business, Meghijibhai attended towards his family very well. He took deep interest in the study of his children. All the children had good education and they were married in good families. He believed that daughters should be educated to the same extent as sons. He hardly took any interest in business affairs after coming home.

He did not stop only at the thinking for providing work and bread to the poor. He knew that these ignorant will misuse money put into their hands and hence he tried to provide for their education and good living habits.

He passed about four years in India after retirement from business. In these years, he had been a member of our Rajyasabha. He did not mean retirement as withdrawal from all activities. He worked for the people instead of for the self in this period. He administered very well the trusts created by his donations. He was for absolute punctuality at work. He was always simple in his dress and did not care for his status very much. He used to go to office by underground train in London even though he had his own car.

He had mild humorous nature also and could make serious circumstances very light at times. He could get very efficient colleagues like Mr. Gohel and Mr. C.V. Shah.

Last Days:

Meghijibhai remained physically very well but as if he could foresee his end he said, "I am keeping well now, but how can it be said as to what will happen after 60 years". And it so also happened. On Thursday, the 30-7-1964, he awoke early as usual. He prepared tea by himself and drank it with beloved wife Maniben. He had some pains at about 10.00 hours. Doctor examined him and gave some medicine. He took coffee at 11.00 hours, but his health suddenly worsened. It was heart attack. Before some more treatment can be given, he breathed last at 11.45 hours.

He went, but left great fragrance behind him. Maniben maintained courage and turned to carry on and complete the works left half way by Meghijibhai. She did not allow creating any memorial after Meghijibhai because the works done and started by Meghijibhai were themselves his true memorials. It was declared on behalf of Meghijibhai Foundation to donate one lac pounds to the Government of Kenya for increasing medical and educational centers.

The great men become immortal by their deeds and Meghijibhai was such a great, charitable, self-supporting, industrious and serviceable personality.