

05. DharmVeer Shree Veerchand Raghavji Gandhi

Dr. Kumarpal Desai

The wheel of time fail to wipe out certain events and personalities. These footsteps laid on the sea-sand of time do not disappear in spite of repeated tempests.

The new world of America heard for the first time the determined and brilliant voice of Indian culture and Indian scriptures in the World Religion Conference held at Chicago in America 92 years ago. The two representatives of India attending this Conference awakened the world towards the spiritual heritage of their mother country. One of these, two personalities was Swamy Vivekanand whose success at the Conference has been on the lips of every Indian even today, but even more successful was the representative of Jain religion, Shri Veerchandbhai Raghavji Gandhi. Indians are habituated to forget to light the lamps of their own houses! so Shri Veerchandbhai is least remembered by us to day. The people who forget their spiritual personalities who are like the books of enlightenment do not come out of their narrow-mindedness.

Let us remove the curtain of time covering this glorious event of World Religion Conference at Chicago in America held before 92 years ago. There were more than 3,000 representatives from different countries believing in different religions attending this Conference and more than one thousand essays were read at it. The audience was of about 10,000. The Conference was opened on September 11, 1893 AD and highly learned personalities like Veerchand Gandhi, Swamy Vivekanand and P.C. Majmudar went from India to take part in this Conference. The main purpose of the Conference was to impart knowledge of different religions of the world, to create brotherhood among the followers of various religions and thereby establish peace in the world.

The speech of 29 year old Shri Veerchand Gandhi impressed everyone very deeply. Shri Veerchand had a turban with golden lace on his head in the style of Kathiawar, a long loose gown on his body; a white woolen blanket on his shoulders and country-shoes with pointed ends on his feet. His dress, thus, revealed Indian culture. The Conference was set aback with the deep knowledge, detailed studies, impartiality and pointed speech. One American newspaper wrote, "Among the learned personalities of East, the lecture on Jainism and character-building delivered by a Jain Youth was heard by the audience with so much deep interest as no other lecture of any Eastern scholar was heard." Veerchandbhai presented the principles of Jainism with so much knowledge that some newspapers published it word-to-word. He had the skill of explaining the terms of Jainism very effectively in simple language. He could strengthen his views with logic and philosophy. He explained the Jainism on one side and expressed his own interpretation on other side. It is not enough to study Sanskrit and Prakrit to understand Bharatiya Darshan-Indian Scriptures but one has to be well studied of very old culture also. Veerchandbhai had these merits and that is because he appears to be a Jain at one place and other than Jain at another place but, certainly, he is Indian everywhere.

His speech was not invested with simply book learning. His deep study of various spiritual views was evident throughout his lecture. There were feelings with pleadings. The thinking of Vivekanand and Veerchandbhai reveals broad-mindedness in Indian spiritual philosophy. They

have not spoken only on Jainism in America but they have covered also Sankhya Darshan, Yoga Darshan, Nyaya Darshan, Vedant Darshan and Buddha Darshan-various spiritual lines of thinking in Indian scriptures. Swamy Vivekanand was more tended towards Hindu religion. He has strongly criticized Buddhism and yet both the learned personalities met together to establish the greatness of Indian views on religion in foreign countries.

Fearlessness in Telling the Truth:

Veerchandbhai always said the truth. He was openhearted, honest; sincere in his behavior and so he was very effective. Reverend George F. Pentecost, a representative from London had ridiculed Hinduism by criticizing the system of Devdasi and a woman marrying with god and then held by many. It was only Veerchand Gandhi who defended Indian view against this criticism. He said that-I feel pleasure that nobody had the courage to criticize my religion but I will have to reply on the criticism on our society. Veerchandbhai challenged that-this was that Hindu religion for which Greek historians have noted that no Hindu is even known to be telling a lie and no Hindu woman is ever known to be unholy.

It is a notable fact that Veerchand Gandhi had deep friendship with many Christians of England and America and yet he seriously criticized the defilement activities of Christian missionaries in India. He has expressed mild reaction towards Americans in his articles, titled "India's Message to America" and "Impressions of America" but he has strongly opposed the defilement activities of Christian priests and missionaries in his article, "Have Christian Missions to India been Successful?" He said-you must have heard from your missionaries that the people of India were dirty, characterless and deceitful but did not hear the stories cruelty being inflicted upon these Indians by these missionaries who were said to be delivering the message of love for all human beings. The government had not taxed the goods of Liverpool and Manchester coming to India so as to get there a big market but they taxed the salt in India with a view to get money to conduct their Government at high expenses. The salt is of daily use and it is essential item of everyone. The tax on this item is not at ordinary rate but it is at the rate of two hundred percent. Have you told this face to these missionaries? After this, Veerchandbhai further proceeded with criticism? "If they have not, whose messengers you will call these people who always side with tyranny, who throw their cloak of hypocritical religion over murders and all sorts of criminals who happen to belong to their religion or to their country?"

In this Conference of Chicago, Veerchandbhai presented Jainism briefly but effectively. He explained Jainism in two parts: One-Jain Philosophy and two-Jain policy, nine elements, six types of souls, Syadvad, detailed thinking about substance and non-substance in Jainism etc. Everyone heard the philosophy very attentively and it impressed them very well. He explained the special aspects of Jain behavior. He discussed Jain policy. He made comparative study about the existence of the universe and Jainism with other religions. He established that Jainism is older than Buddhism and thereby tried to convince all the audience that Jainism is based on logic, evidence and philosophy. They got a new understanding and expressing his pleasure on American gave his opinion about Veerchandbhai like this: In this Conference of Religions, many philosophers, religious preaches and learned personalities came from India and they presented new vision one way or the other. They went on adding elements after elements in religions so that everyone would feel that their religion is comparable with many of

the world religions. Moreover, their speech and religious feelings made special effects. If was full of heavy learning, deep scholarship, thinking and convalescence. But among all these, one young gentleman of Jain religion gave an altogether new line of thinking and philosophy. The young man is from an ordinary family, he was not a monk or mendicant, he was not a religious teacher or preacher. If he were able to present his religions aspects so effectively, how great his teachers would be? He was a simple but determined philosophy of religious life. It was definitely worth knowing and understanding."

There is a special aspect about the lectures of Veerchandbhai Gandhi on Jainism that he never criticized other religions. His thinking to adopt non-violence in life and to remain free and neutral on non-secular pressures and prejudices. This is quite befitting to a true Jain who maintains his attitudes to see everything in one thing and one thing in everything. He spoke correct English language, natural but effective presentation and deep study of all related matters, these three aspects matched in his speeches. His studious lectures went deep into the hearts of Americans. He gave us books like The Yoga Philosophy, The Jain Philosophy. But his main contribution came in The Karma Philosophy. In this book, he elaborated the theory of deeds and it revealed his deep knowledge of the subject with active attachment for Jainism.

A Great Patriot:

Shri Veerchand Raghavji Gandhi was not merely a philosophical thinker but also an ardent patriot. It was believed in America that India was a country of "Tigers, serpents and kings". The Christian propagandists gave an ugly picture of India. Shri Veerchandbhai tried to present India in her correct perspective. Swamy Vivekanand did the same. He explained the greatness of Indian cultures to the foreigners and said, "It is surprising that foreigners have continuously invaded India and facing all these calamities, India is still alive with all her might and right. India's religion and behavior are unchanged and the whole world has to see towards India. The cultural heritage, agriculture, craftsmanship, literature, character, behavior, sources of science and knowledge, respect for guests, worship of woman, love for all living beings and natural sympathy are the special and notable aspects of Indian life. If this culture could have been bought, the Britishe might have already bought it and took it over to England. But this could not happen and can never happen."

Very late in 1893 AD Veerchandbhai talked of economic and political independence of India. Once he said to Americans that India was crushed under the feet of the British. India was free only in religion but when India would be politically free, she would never launch violent attach on any other country. In 1893 AD, Gandhiji was merely a barrister and Veerchandbhai had made this statement in those days. His thinking of 1893 AD has fully come to be true to day!

Veerchandbhai was deeply religious. He could foresee many things. He could see beyond tomorrow. When there was not even a ray of hope for India is independence, Veerchandbhai said that if India became independent she would peacefully co-exist with other countries. Before five decades of Indian independence, Veerchandbhai 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

forever maintain peaceful relations with all the nations of the world." Honors in foreign countries and work of religious propaganda. Shri Veerchandbhai had been so much impressive that the conveners and scholars of this World Religion Conference had awarded silver medal to him. After this, on August 8, 1894, the residents of Kasadoya City had awarded gold medal to Veerchandbhai. He delivered lecture on "Some Mistakes Corrected" in this city. When the lecture was over, he was requested to deliver yet another lecture- as noted by the newspaper named Beffellow Corriyar. Veerchandbhai established two institutions named "The Gandhi Philosophical Society" and "The School of Oriental Philosophy" in America. In Chicago, he established, "Society for Education of Women of India". Shrimati Harvard was the secretary of this institution and she had adopted strict Jainism with total vegetarian food under the inspiration of Veerchandbhai. As Bhagini Nivedita was the disciple of Swamy Vivekanand, so Lady Harvard happened to be the follower of Shri Veerchandbhai. She was performing Samayik also in the same way as other Jains.

After this, Veerchandbhai Gandhi came to England and fulfilled his desire to be a Barrister, but he did not use his learning to earn money.

The Jain community in England asked him to start a teaching class for the study of Jainism; and after some years, Veerchandbhai established "Jain Literature Society" in London. One devotee Herbert Warren stopped taking non-vege food and adopted Jainism. He noted down the lectures of Veerchandbhai and wrote a book in English on Jainism. Mr. Charles B. Bonny, President of the World Religion Conference was also very much impressed by the lectures of Veerchandbhai. When there was severe draught in India in 1896-97, Mr. Bonny was the president of Draught Relief Samiti established in America. This Samiti atonce sent Rs. 40,000 and one steamer full of grains. Veerchandbhai had delivered about 535 lectures during this tour of America. He had total control over 14 languages including Gujarati, Hindi, Bengali, English, Sanskrit and French.

Thus, a youth of only 29 going to foreign countries displeasing his relatives in India, deliver an impressive lecture in World Religion Conference, visit foreign countries for three times, establish several institutions and propagate not only the Jainism but almost all Indian scriptures, is really a very surprising matter.

Service to Religion inIndia:

Veerchandbhai did not live long, but his life was full of several awards and rewards. He was the first Jain student getting through B.A Examination with honors in 1884. His father expired in 1890 and he had not allowed any body to cry or beat breast, as was the prevailing practice in those days. This was not an ordinary achievement. At the age of 21, he was secretary of "Shri Jain Association of India" and he successfully worked for the removal of hair-removing tax being taken from the pilgrims coming to Palitana for pilgrimage. The firm Anandji Kalyanji filed a case against the ruler of Palitana against difficulties and hardships caused to the pilgrims, but the political agent had good relations with Sursinghji, ruler of Palitana and favorable orders could not be obtained from him. Shri Veerchandbhai took this matter in his hand. It was like committing suicide to be against rulers in those days but Veerchandbhai made several trips on horse between Mahuva and Palitana. He created an atmosphere for co-operative dialogue. At

last, he met Lord Ray, the Governor of Bombay and Political Agent Col. Worson and made effective presentation. MundakaVero-i.e. Tax on hair-removing rite was abolished.

One British officer set up a factory for removing the skins of pigs near SametShikhar. Veerchandbhai went to Calcutta to get this factory removed from this important place of pilgrimage of Jains. He studied Bengali language so as to understand the documents by staying at Calcutta for six months. At last he could obtain orders-SametShikhar is a place of pilgrimage for Jains and no one else has the right to enter there-and thus, the factory had to be removed from there. Similarly, he brought a good solution of the dispute on Kavi Derasar i.e. Jain Temple at Kavi.

He attended at International Trade Conference as a representative of the whole of Asia. He, then, attended the conference of Indian National Congress at Puna in 1895 as a representative of Bombay. He was a strong supporter of Rastriya Mahasabha-i.e. National Conference. He had made several experiments on food and dieting with Mahatma Gandhi. It appears that he had been in good touch of Mahatma Gandhi because in a letter written to the son of Veerchandbhai, Mahatma Gandhi asked him with aashirvad-blessings "Have you preserved anything from the ideals of your father?" wrote Gandhiji.

Shri Veerchandbhai Raghavji Gandhi expired in Bombay in 1901 AD at the age of only 37. His achievements in such a short life are certainly surprising. I have no words to pay befitting tribute to such a great personality but I quote a stanza from the National Poet Iqbal: (An attractive eye is compared with the flower of Nargis. This flower cries over thousands of years for its not being seen by a gentleman say its lover and when such a lover appears after a long time, the flower expands itself with joy.

Shri Veerchand Raghavji Gandhi was such a man in such a beautiful garden!