

## 10. Maha Tapasvi Acharya Shri ShantiSagarji Maharaj

### Introduction:

India is a land of Saints, highly learned persons, mendicants, monks and exceptionally intelligent individuals. The spiritual heritage of India is world-famous. In our heritage, a great person was born before 115 years ago who had extraordinary power of character. He up-held Jain Darshan (outlook) by various good deeds. He also worked for establishing the views expressed in Jain scriptures. The traditions of Digambar Jains were being wiped out very quickly since many years and there was hardly a saint or mendicant to work and speak for Lord Mahavir and Kundkund. Shri ShantiSagar was born in this age in a small village of south India. He adopted Mooni-Dixa and contributed very much to uphold, strengthen and establish the traditions of Digambar traditions. He revived the character and some beliefs of Digambar Jain sect and that is why he is remembered and respected as the great saints of old age.

### Birth and Childhood:

He was born in the family of warriors in (1871 AD) at Belgul village, some four miles away from Bhojgaon. Shrimati Satyavati (Satyabhama), the wife of Shri Bhimgonda was his mother. The child was born at the home of his maternal-father. His name was kept as Satgonda. Bhattarak Jinsen and many other great men were born in this caste and at present it was the fourth Jain generation wherein the child Satgonda was born. Belgul village is in Belgaum District of South India. Shri Satgonda was one of the five children in the family two elder brothers, two younger brothers and one sister. The whole family was well cultured.

Young Satgonda was healthy and brave from his childhood. No one could defeat him in hand-to hand fighting. He could easily carry a bag full of one quintal of rice. He was clever and intelligent and therefore loved by all. By nature, he was peace loving. He never quarreled with any one. He spoke little but sweet. From the very childhood, he was reserved detached from homely affairs and took active part in religious celebrations and rites. He used to go to temple with his mother everyday. He was much interested in meditation and study of scriptures. He used to wear simple clothes of Khadi (hand-woven cotton clothes.) Mother always advised him and taught good things. He was, thus, invested with all virtues from his childhood. The family was happy, prosperous and will all things of worldly pleasures. Every member of the family was devoted to Lord Jinendra. The child Satgonda had extra-ordinary power of memory and many people knew it. The father gave him the virtues of being serious and determined. The child revealed the qualities of great man from the very beginning and it was hoped that in future, he would be a great man. He could attract all people because of his loving behavior. Just as Mahatma Gandhi and Chhatrapati Shivaji were given high virtues by their parents, so was Satgonda invested with outstanding virtues by his parents.

He studied as he could in his village Bhojgaon and then turned to attain spiritual knowledge of detached great men and saints. He was in constant efforts to learn as much as possible from his own experiences of life because this knowledge is really true and piercing. Ordinarily, great men learn from their own experiences and mould their life in their own and independent way. Satgonda could get good knowledge from the company of saints and self-study.

### Detachment, Life-Long Celibacy and Study of Scriptures:

According to prevailing custom of those days, Satgonda was married at the age of only nine years with a girl of six years of age but as it might have been destined, the girl died within six months of marriage. He was then pressed for second marriage when he was of the matured age of 18 but he clearly declined and observed complete, clear and holy celibacy for the whole of his life. He wanted

to adopt Dixā at the age of 17 but he could not do so because his parents did not consent. Thus, he was totally detached with worldly life right from his age of understanding. He used to sit at the cloth-shop of his father but dealt with total honesty and maintaining absolutely truthful behavior with all. He was careful not to be at lapses of integrity at any stage. Even while working at the shop he kept his mind in the service of the Lord, his prayers, self-study, company of saints and high thoughts.

Since he was intending to adopt Dixā, his parents allowed him to observe certain vows, rules and non-eating but directed that he should not leave the house until they were alive. He used to sit at the shop more time but continued to think of eternal element. He was holding the total charge of the shop when elder brother was away for business purposes. He allowed customers to measure by themselves after fixing the price and put the cost-money by his side or write it in the account-book. He was, thus, not much attached with business. He turned the shop as a self-study Centre for himself. Some 15-20 persons used to meet together at the shop at noon and he delivered an impressive lecture to them.

## **Young Age and Dixā:**

At the age of 32, he went to the great pilgrimage of SametShikhar. His longing for pilgrimage was very deep. In the memory of this pilgrimage he took vows not to eat ghee and edible oil for the whole of his life. He, thus, started his steps on the way of future mendicantship. On return from pilgrimage he took a vow of only one time dining in a day. His father also took water and meals only for once in a day for 16 years. One day, the father called all his sons and handed them over the burden of house and business. He accepted meditation-death and left the mortal body while muttering the name of Lord Arihant. Satgonda was of 37 at this time. His mother also passed away after three years by adopting meditation-death. She died within twelve hours of sitting for meditation. Satgonda was now free from the bondages of parents.

After this he stayed in house for some years and prepared himself for permanent Dixā. When Digambar Mooniraj Shri Devapa Swamy (Devendra Kirtiji Maharaj) came to Uttoor Village, Satgonda requested before him for Dixā. The learned saint explained him that it was a difficult path to be Nirgranth Dixā-holder (Possessionless mendicant) and by sincere adoption of this Dixā, there is no fear for the soul to turn back to worldly affairs. Then after, as per the advice and guidance of Gurudev Devapa Swamy, Shri Satgonda took dixā in 1915 AD at the age of 43 in Uttoor village. He left everything after keeping only two clothes to wear and on begging bowl to ask for alms and to eat. He accepted the position of a minor mendicant. Satgonda was now free from the attachments of house and family. He was now worthless man named ShantiSagar. He kept away his attachments with the region of Bhoj Bhoomi and accepted the whole earth as his own nature place. He was now a spiritual person free from all worldly bondages. He was invested with natural detachment. He now started moving on earth seeking eternal freedom for him and for others. He suffered several large and minor troubles for long time and then he was steady in the quite sea of peace. He, on his way of moving from place to place came to the mountain Girnar that was holy with the footprints of Lord Maharaj Tirthankar Neminath. In this Holy Land invested with the memories of Lord Tirthankar Neminath, Shri ShantiSagarji Maharaj adopted Elak Dixā as he was very much increased in his feelings of non-attachment. In collecting the material to be a major-vows holder, Maharaj ShantiSagar greatly increased his spiritual ability.

While moving in routine course, Maharaj came over to Parnal village where the celebrations of Panch Kalyan Pratishtha Mahotsava of Lord Jinendra-a big religious rite) were going on Digambar mendicant Shri Devendra Kirti Maharaj was also there. Shri ShantiSagarji Maharaj requested for Nirgranth Dixā-Possessionless mendicantship-by placing his head on his feet. The great teacher mendicant Devendra Kirti Maharaj explained him that this was as painful as walking on the edge of a sword, but ShantiSagarji Maharaj said that he had sufficient power of restraint, celibacy, sympathy, tolerance and

truth and therefore, Devendra Kirti Maharaj invested him with the title of Mooni ShantiSagar by granting him higher stage of Dixa in the presence of thousands of followers and disciples on the holy day of Dixa-Kalyanak of Panch Kalyan Pratishtha Mahotsava, Maharaj ShantiSagar was of the age of 45 at this time. His detachment with the world was indescribable. He was extremely pleased to be invested with this high position of Digambar Jain mendicantship and thousands of men and women said JayJaykar-praises of him. While stressing on the need of observing difficult vows, Maharaj ShantiSagarji said that there was no cause of worry. He said that if he does not get proper material for observing his vows, he would stay in forest and adopt meditation-death without turning back from the vows.

While maintaining his vows very strictly, he moved towards the south and expanded religion at all places through which he passed. He advised people to shun evil practices. By time, he became famous. He granted Dixa and vows to several Shravaks (Jain family-holders). In 1834, he regularly established Shraman Sangh at the time of Mooni Dixa of Shri Nemisagarji. The Jain community gave him the title of Acharya at his age of 52; and after 26 years in 1951 at the holy celebrations of Panch Kalyanak Pratishtha Mahotsava at Gajpantha in Maharashtra, Acharya Shri ShantiSagarji was given further award of Charitra Chakravarti. Hundreds and thousands of ghee-lamps were being lighted at all villages and towns when AcharyaShri arrived with his followers and activities of high level discussions of scriptures, philosophical lectures and discourses, prayers, devotional songs and repetition of religious phrases were being undertaken.

In 1928, AcharyaShri started for the pilgrimage of SametShikhar alongwith his disciples and followers. This was the first occasion after many centuries that a large group of possessionless mendicants were moving in north India and there was a sharp wave of religious fervor in this region. He was honored at all places and Panch. Kalyanak Celebrations were also held at SametShikhar. Lacs of devotees arrived there for this celebration from the whole of India. Acharya walked about 35,000 miles in seven years and lacs of devotees had taken advantage of his spiritual knowledge. Maharaj Shri had cleared the way of Mooni-Vihar (movement of mendicants) The number of Acharyas, Moonis, small persons, women and celibates who had taken Dixa at the hands of AcharyaShri was about 3 to 400.

## **Shrutoddhar and Its Expansion:**

Once AcharyaShri came to know that a big volume of religious teachings collected from the preachings heard from time to time and completed by Swamy BhootBali was written on one thousand years old leaves and trees. It was then very old and was about to be destroyed by insects. He felt importance of preserving it and hence he proposed to get the whole book re-written on copper sheets so that it can remain totally secured for thousands of years. He requested the rich Jains to bear the costs and expenses for this task. Thus, AcharyaShri ShantiSagarji got these Agam books re-written on copper sheets and this was his most important work of his life. It will be noted by golden writings in the history of Shrutoddhar of invaluable books of Jainism-i.e. re-writing of books, which were written, on leaves of trees by hearing the preachings of Jain saints and mendicants.

Acharya had to face many difficulties in his life and he faced all the adverse circumstances with fearlessness, patience and tolerance. He has, thus, established his highest character and we are confirmed of his greatness. AcharyaShri was famous as charitra-chakravarti only because of his achievements and accomplishments for the up-life of Jainism.

When AcharyaShri was on his way of Vihar (moving from place to place) one angry Brahmin named Chhindha attacked on him and his disciples with about 500 armed men. At this time, police arrested the Brahmin. When AcharyaShri came to know this, he requested the police Superintendent to

release him and said that he would go on fast if he is not freed from jail. The Brahmin was atonce, set free. What a surprising forgiveness and non-violence on the part of AcharyaShri ShantiSagarji!

Once AcharyaShri was performing Samayik (religious rite) in a cave. At this time, thousands and crores of red ants came up on his body and began to suck his blood by severely painful biting. AcharyaShri did not move for about two hours and went on suffering this pain. Afterwards, some Shravakas saw this and they removed the ants by throwing sugar nearby. Maharaj Shri opened his lips only after all the ants were gone away from him.

AcharyaShri was performing noon-Samayik in the cave named Kagnoli. At this time a dangerous black snake came over his body and wrapped him. The snake was for more than 20 minutes in this position pressing the body of Acharyaji. Acharyaji, however, maintained Mauna- (non-speaking) and meditation. There have been many such instances in the life of Acharyaji wherein he has been proved to be victorious over rigorous physical pains and mental worries.

AcharyaShri had created deep impressions on common people by religious preachings and restrained life. Rulers of Sangli, Faltan, Kolhapur, Pratapgadh, Idar, Dholpur and other states used to come to see him. Even several European officers were also attracted towards Acharyaji. His preachings were highly philosophical; his thinking was of the highest level. He considered people of all religious equally. His disciples had also created very good impressions on the people.

### **Demise in Meditation:**

AcharyaShri ShantiSagarji adopted ultimate vow of Yam-Sannllekhana fast unto death at the closing years of his life. He accepted death bravely. His welcome death was as good as putting up a golden pot on the top of temples. He had adopted 12 year vow of Parmotkrushta-Bhakta-Pratyakhyan named Sannllekhana in the presence of Lord Jinendra in the Gajpantha region and he had stopped taking food since then. Sweets, ghee and salt were discarded right since he had adopted Mooni-Dixa and after some years, he had stopped taking even fruits and vegetables.

When his eye sight began to weaken in 1955 AD, he thought that it was then different for him to observe several vows like kindness to animals and several rules of daily routine life. He had, therefore, started preparations to adopt Sannllekhana Vow-fast unto death. In the first eight days, he took only two bits of food every day. Thenafter he took only juice from black grapes for another eight days and after that he used to take water only. He took water at an interval of four days and sometimes after five and six days. This continued for about two months. When he was absolutely weak and unable even to stand without help from someone, he adopted Yama-Sannllekhana called IngitiMaran-Sanyas. He, thus, stopped taking water till the end of his life. He did not take services from others even in his total weakness and continued to be in meditation of soul-salvation and muttering religion phrases and hymns.

People were coming for his Darshan-viewing from all corners of India. In these days he was at Kunthalgiri holy place in Sangli District of Maharashtra. More than one lac of people took his Darshan within two months. People considered them to have been purified with his Darshan and held that their lives were fulfilled. AcharyaShri ShantiSagarji Maharaj breathed his last. It was September 18, 1955 AD. He had touched JinendraMurti with his hand just before five minutes of his passing away and had moved his head towards his feet. He was muttering "Namah Siddhebhya: -"-respects to the Absolute when he breathed last.

AcharyaShri ShantiSagar was an ideal mendicant. This clear from the facts of his life. He had observed rigorous vows and restrained life with total celibacy for about forty years. He had won over his senses and had captured anger, greed, attachments, sensuality, pride desires with six enemies. He remained in peace at all moments of his life. He was in absolute peaceful state even after 55 days

of Sannllekhana vow during which he had not taken any food or water. His life was a lamppost for all mendicants, disciples and followers.

He re-incarnated the Digambar traditions in the hard days when people were ignorant and Jainism and were reluctant to hear the word Digambar clothless conditions. In his big group of disciples there were Shri VeerSagar, Shri ChandraSagar and Shri NemiSagar who were known for their penanceful lives, great mendicants like Shri KunthuSagar and SamantBhadra, many nuns and Possessionless persons. He has made his permanent place among the foremost Digambar Jain Saints.