

13. Saint Shree Ganeshprasadji Varni

Introduction:

There are many few personalities who become exceptionally great and respectable for all by their good behavior and good deeds. Saint Shri Ganesh-prasadji was one such personality of the present age. He has contributed very much for the expansion of Jain culture and Jain ideals. He was born in a non-Jain family and yet he worked for Jainism. He was deeply attracted by the principles of Jain religion and he preached Jainism for the whole of his life. He established many Jain educational institutions and promoted Jain way of life in thoughts and conduct as well. He was learned and yet very simple. He was kind towards all living being. He was broad-hearted and sympathetic. He was a sea of all virtues and hence he was unideal soul for the whole of humanity.

Birth and Childhood:

The region of Bundelkhand has given rise to several warriors. The people of this region are highly turned to religion. We know the stories warrior king Chhatrasal who was an exceptionally brave king of his time. There are many holy places like Drongiri, Nainagiri, Sonagiri, Aharji, Deogarh, Khajuaoh, and Papauraji in this region and Saint Ganesh Prasadji was born on this land. He was born in 1875 at village Hansera of Lalitpur District. Shri Hiralal and Smt. Ujjariben were his parents. His father was believer of Vaishnav sect of Hindu religion and yet he had deep respect for and faith in Navkar Mantra from his childhood. He was from Asaqti Vaishya community. His was a middle class but self-satisfied family. The father Hiralal advised the child Ganesh also to repeat and remember the Navkar Mantra of Jain religion. Shri Hiralal shifted to Madavara village as there was no school as Hansera village and he hoped to earn better at this place. At this time, the child Ganesh was of six years of age. Ganesh got admission at the school of this village at the age of 7 and he passed the middle-school examination at the age of 14. There were 11 Jain temples with high shikhar at the top and one Vaishnav temple in this village. One of the Jain temples was just opposite the house of Ganeshprasad and therefore he used to go there because of normal curiosity, but he saw the religious rites very carefully and heard the preaching attentively. As if he had Jain impressions from his previous birth, and these impressions are working now, Ganeshprasad was learning towards Jainism slowly but firmly. He discarded the false beliefs and traditions of the society prevailing then. The child Ganesh now stopped taking food at night. He did not drink unfiltered water and adopted certain practices of Jainism. He thought that the principles of Jainism were quite logical and philosophical. His future life thus, laid its seeds by now.

Ganesh-prasad completed his learning at the school at Madavara at the age of 14 and he passed further four years in playing and reading. He was married at the age of 18. His father gave him the following message at the time of his death: My son, nobody is for anybody in this world. Know this very firmly. Always keep Navkar Mantra (A Jain stanza of utmost importance) in mind at it will save you from all troubles. The religion, which includes this stanza, is very great and if you want salvation, always try to know and follow this religion with determination.

When Ganesh-prasad's father died, his grandfather of the age of one hundred and ten years also died on the same day. The burden of the whole family was now on Ganeshji. He was not moved even the least. He accepted the service as a teacher at Madanpur. He took training in teaching at Agra after four months and again served as a teacher at one or two places. His wife and his mother were pressing him to stay in their original religion of Vaishnavism in Hinduism instead of turning to Jainism but their pressure could not act on Ganeshji. Since Ganeshji did not sit for dinner in a row the caste-fellows threatened him to boycott but he did not mind to it. He was now working as a teacher in the school at Jatara. Here he came into contact with Kadorelal Bhaiji who was very well studied in

religion and philosophy. During their talks, Ganeshji informed Kadorelal that he had left his wife and mother saying them that until they adopt Jainism, he will not keep any relations with them and will not eat any food prepared by them. Kadorelal Bhaiji persuaded Ganeshji saying that nobody can be forced to adopt Jainism. So he should not make haste in this matter. He advised Ganeshji to understand the essence of Jainism and proceed on the path of Jainism step by step.

Meeting with Mother Chironjabai:

One day Shri Kadorelal asked Ganeshji to approach Chironjabai at Simara as she was well studied in Jainism. Ganeshji could see one Kshullakji also at Simara and after the religious-lecture was over, Chironjabai invited Ganeshji and Kadorelal for lunch. Ganeshji was reserve and shy by nature. Chironjabai made a comment seeing that child (i.e. Ganeshji) she begins to love him like her own child. Later Chironjabai said, "My son! I feel that you are my son of my previous life. I give over all my property to you from to day. You stay here freely without any hesitation. If you want to study further, I can make all arrangements for your study at Jaipur."

Ganeshji avoided six tastes in his meal for one month, then Chironjabai preached him: First acquire knowledge and then only adopt vows. Do not make haste. Do all your work with feelings of piety. Do not perform any work, which makes you unhappy.

Travelling to Earn Knowledge:

Ganeshji started to go to Jaipur for further study but his kits and baggages were stolen on the way thus he had to turn back. He did not inform Chironjabai of these circumstances. He visited holy places in Bundelkhand and moved from place to place with a view to earn knowledge. At last, with help of a rich man, he came to Mumbai and here he could meet Baba Gurudayaldasji, resident of Khuraja, Pandit Pannalalji Bakliwal and Guru Gopaldasji Baraiya. Ganeshji began to study Ratnakarand-Shravakachar, Katantra Grammar and other books on Jainism under their guidance. He passed the examination started by Sheth Manikchand Parikshalaya in the same year and obtained the prize of Rs. 25/- which was a good amount those days. The atmosphere of Bombay did not suit his health and he came to Jaipur via Kekadi. He began study of Tattvarth Sutra, Sarvarth Siddhi, Katantra Grammar etc with Shastri Vireshwar. After this, he appeared at the examination at Bombay. When he was writing his paper of Katantra Grammar, he received a letter informing him of the death of his wife. Ganeshji thought that he was now free from family bondages. He informed Chironjabai also of this news and said that hereafter he will be able to study with free mind. He then received a letter from Pandit Gopaldasji Baraiya and Ganeshji, therefore went to Mathura for advanced studies and left Jaipur. He studied there for two years. He, then, went to Khurja and passed the first and second examinations in Nyaya (i.e. philosophical Logic) from Benaras.

From Mathura, he started to go on the pilgrimage of SametShikhar in the scorching heat of the month of Jyeshtha (i.e. May). While doing a Parikrama, going round of the high hills of SametShikhar, he lost his way and suffered severe thirst. His mind was, yet, at peace. He remembered Lord Parshvanath and he had before his eyes a pond full of clean and sweet water in that forest. He drank the water and became free from thirst. This was really a surprising event. After this pilgrimage, Ganeshji studied difficult books on philosophical logic, Vyadhiakaran, Panch Laxani and Muktavali under the famous and highly learned man Dularjha. After this, he studied under Pandit Thakurdasji. From here he started towards the famous city of Sanskrit learning Varanasi in 1903. He was 28 years of age at this time. He had been wandering places to places for study since the last 12 years.

Establishment of Syadvad Jain Vidyalaya:

When Ganeshji reached Varanasi, Shri Jiwanath Mishra was the main scholar of Nyaya (Philosophic logic) the subject of Nyaya. When pandit Mishra asked him about his family line, Ganeshji said that

he was not a Brahmin but he was ardent Jain. Hearing this Shri Mishra was very angry. He said that he is never teaching any Jain and he also pushed away Ganeshji. Seeing this grave insult of Jainism, Ganeshji was deeply pained. He thought to make arrangements for the study of Jainism and related philosophy at Varanasi City, which is the birthplace of two Tirthankaras Suparshvanath and Parshvanath, and known seat of learning from ancient period. He had a dream at that night in which he was instructed to take help of Baba Bhagirathji. Ganeshji studied for sometime with Shri Shastri Ambadas who was teaching at Shwetambar Vidyalaya. During this time Ganeshji called up Baba Bhagirathji by a letter. Both of them now began to think to establish a Jain Vidyalaya at Varanasi. At this time Shri Chamanlal, resident of Kama gave one rupee to Ganeshji by which 64 postcards were purchased and written to 64 places. Many people appreciated this gesture of Ganeshji and very good help could be secured. As a result, Syadvad Vidyalaya was inaugurated at a temple on Bhadaini Ghat with the holy hands of great charity maker Sheth Shri Manikchandji in 1905. Traditionally this day is celebrated as Shrut Panchmi. Ganeshji himself became a student of this Vidyalaya and Baba Bhagirathji managed it with all interest. Shri Ambadas Shastri and two other professors were appointed at this Vidyalaya with the advice of Ganeshji. This Vidyalaya is considered the highest school of Jainism in Jain community and it has given out learned personalities like late Pandit Bansidharji, late Pandit Devkinandanji, late Pandit Manikchandji, Kailashchandraj, Phoolchandraj, and many others.

After sometime an university known as "Hindu Vishwa-Vidyalaya" was established at Varanasi with the efforts of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. Many Prachya Darshanas (Old scriptures) were included in various curriculii of the university. A detailed curriculum of Jain Darshan was also included in these curriculii with serious efforts of Pandit Ambadas Shastri and Ganesh Prasadji. Various examinations were also arranged for these studies. This was a very great achievement on the part of GaneshPrasadji. Famous advocate Pandit Motilal Nehru, the father of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru was of great help in this achievement.

Establishment of Sattark Sudha Tarangini Pathshala at Sagar:

This Pathshala (religious school) was inaugurated on the third day of bright half of the month of Vaishakh in 1912 with further efforts of Shri Ganeshji. This day is celebrated as Akshya Trutiya. This school is now famous with the name of Ganesh Digambar Jain Sanskrit Maha Vidyalaya. The school developed much with continuous efforts of Shri Ganeshji and thousands of students have taken its benefit. Shri Ganeshji and religious mother Chironjabai frequently resided at this Vidyalaya.

On the Way to Restraint:

Ganeshji was now famous as GaneshPrasadji or "Bade pandit" at Sagar. He adopted the vow of celibacy at Kundalpur at the hands of Baba Gokuldasji, the father of Pandit Jaganmohanlalji. After this, he was known as Varni and he kept one Dhoti and one shoulder cloth only with him thereafter.

Removal of Unfruitful Activities and Beliefs:

There were many unthoughtful beliefs in practice in common Jains at Bundelkhand in the days of GaneshPrasadji Varni. People were being removed from their caste as a punishment for petty reasons. Poor persons were undergoing many hardships. Varniji and his followers went village to village and stopped many of such practices. They established educational institutions at Nainagiri, Sonagiri, Papauraji, Aharji and a number of other places so that education would expand. Bundelkhand is considered to be a fort of learned personalities because of serious and long-term efforts of Shri Varniji. The educational institutions established by him are giving high quality of learned persons even today.

Devotion to Teacher and Holy Love:

Varniji was fully devoted to his teacher. When he completed the study of Ashta-Sahasri under Pandit Ambadas Shastri, he gave a diamond ring to him as a present from a student with deep feelings and reverence. Not only to Pandit Ambadas Shastri, but he was sincerely devoted to all the learned persons under whom he studied. Varniji also loved and duly respected all those who were his disciples and followers. He was always very much careful that every learned person is properly respected and honored in the society.

An Incarnation of Charity:

He was surprisingly charitable. He gave away things, which were offered to him only with deep love and affection. Once Varniji was coming to Sagar with a basket full of good mangoes. He saw on one railway station that some poor children were sucking the fruit-stones of the mangoes thrown away by the passengers of the train. He atonce stepped down and asked the children to stand in a queue. He distributed all the mangoes to these children. When he reached Sagar, Chironjabai asked him, "Brother, did not you bring good quality mangoes from Varanasi?" Varniji answered, "Baiji, I did bring mangoes but distributed to the poor children at the railway station". Baiji was very much pleased to hear this. This is the striking illustration of the sympathetic nature of Varniji.

Kindness of Varniji:

Varniji was very kind. He could not see any living being suffering pains. He always ran to help the needy. If he saw any one trembling in cold, he would atonce give him his own cloth from over his body. Once he was returning to Sagar from a village, he was taking-out drinking water from a well for himself and his colleagues. He saw a poor untouchable class woman was very thirsty and was asking some water. His colleagues were objecting saying that if water is offered to an untouchable woman, our water pot and rope shall become untouchable and remain of no use for us. Varniji not only gave her water but also gave the water jug to the woman. He gave her his shoulder-cloth and Dhoti also. That evening he had to enter the city with a narrow strip covering him. Varniji, thus, did not mind to be ashamed of for the sake of kindness to others.

Varniji could know the heart of others very effectively. He called on the most mischievous boys and taught them by sitting with them. There are many examples of such boys who later became highly learned personalities.

Varniji was a very good orator. The audience maintained pin-drop silence to hear him. One would feel that he was showering nectar when he spoke. He could explain difficult and serious subjects of religion and philosophy in a very simple way. He used to give effective illustrations to explain complicated issues. He could speak on national problems also very well while talking of religious matters. He could impress upon his audience very deeply. His dialect had the impressions of Bundelkhandi surge, which is a very sweet dialect of a Hindi language.

A Successful Writer:

Respected Varniji has written much in his natural language. His art of writing daily diary was exceptional. He noted stanzas and phrases coming out of his heart expressing his feeling along with the narration of the events. He wrote many letters on the saints and mendicants took "Sallekhana" and that sat in meditation unto death. Several of these letters have been published also. These letters included essence of several religions and philosophical issues. Four parts of a big book Varnivani are published on the basis of these diaries. He has written large commentary on Samayasara of Acharya Kundkunda in the form of lectures which is very much famous.

He wrote his autobiography "Meri Jivangatha" and it has been much popular. Every devotee and mendicant needs to read it. The style of expression in this book is very simple but instructive. It preaches the reader in many ways. He has included many events of his life so effectively in this autobiography that it is read with interest by all and everybody. He began to write comments on Shlok-vartik very nicely but it could not be completed. His speeches are deeply meaningful and inspiring. These are useful for every mendicant and devotee.

Varniji advised the prominent persons of the society to make donations for educational and religious institutions. He believed that the local persons should administer and maintain such institutions. The people will do a great service to society by such donations. He inspired rich persons to donate in very large sum of rupees. He has, yet, never taken money in his own hand. He always left the collection, security and use of money to the managers of the institutions.

A Man of Determination:

Varniji always maintained self-respect. Once Varniji was going from Drongiri to Sagar by public bus. He was on the front seat but after sometime a police officer came and wanted to sit on the front seat in the place of Varniji. Varniji was asked to move to back seat by the bus conductor. He observed that one becomes slave to these vehicles, thus he gave-up use of any vehicles for good. He stopped traveling by such vehicles after that incident and travelled by foot only. Varniji, thus, wanted that everyone must maintain his own personality, status, and respect.

When Varniji came to Sagar from Isari in 1944, he had himself adopted the vows of tenth status. He had moved at several places around Sagar and created deep attraction and attachment for religious education.

While travelling on foot from Sagar, Varniji reached Baruasagar at a time when big religious celebrations were going on. Here he adopted minor Dixa on the seventh day of bright half of the month of Falgun in V.S. 2007 before the idol of Jain god and became "kshullaka". He traveled in Uttar Pradesh and Delhi in this condition itself. His diamond jubilee was celebrated with great pomp and enthusiasm at Firozabad on his return journey from Delhi region.

Shanti-Niketan, Isari (Parasnath):

Varniji reached Sagar by travelling on foot after his diamond jubilee celebrations at Firozabad. He spent his four months of rainy season here. His preaching-lectures in these days were like the drops of nectar. He desired to be steady in holy and peaceful atmosphere in his advanced age. He wanted to live restrained life full of meditations, deep thinking and high reading. He started for the pilgrimage of Samet-shikhar after that monsoon with these thoughts in mind. On his way, he spent the monsoon of 1953 at Gaya and after that he turned to Isari. He mostly stayed here till the end of his life. He deeply desired that he must lay his life at the foot of Lord Parshvanath in Isari and after his almost continuous stays at Isari, there was very good development. Many inns, Upashrayas-hall for meditation, worship and religious study, residences for Jain nuns, a Jain temple and a big lecture-hall were built up. Isari, thus, became an important place of pilgrimage for Jains with Varniji residing there. Many saints and mendicants stayed here for months and lived penanceful life. Many mendicants stayed here even after Varniji's death. Celibate Surendra-nathji was conducting self-study and other religious rites here. Number of celibates live here even today. Shravakas-Jain family-holders that go to the pilgrimage of Samet-shikhar drop here for a day or two to respect Varniji and have Darshan (seeing) of saints and mendicants and for worship. Many religious souls like Baba Bhagirathji, Acharya Nemisagarji, celibate Nandlalji have adopted meditation unto death on this holy land and this place has become a place of worship for devotees and disciples of Jainism. People get peace of mind and inspiration to do good deeds with the Darshan of this place.

Last Practices in Meditation:

Varniji was not able to move freely in these days because of his old age of about 87 years. He could not observe several vows. He, therefore, decided in his mind to begin with Sallekhana Vrata (fast unto death) but to avoid rush of people for his seeing, he did not declare his decision. But he arranged his daily life in line with this decision. He stopped speaking and moving much and reduced his eating almost to nil. He was performing rites of Sannllekhana and its regulation as per the guidance of Pandit Bansidharji. Varniji kept laid down on his bed almost for the whole day in deep thinking and total peace of mind. He was hearing Barah-bhavna, Chhah-dhala, Bhaktamar-stotra, and Samaysar Kalash-all religious hymns and stanzas very carefully. He sank into deep thinking at times.

On September 1, 1961, he stopped taking even fruit-juice and on September 5, 1991 he left even water and all the clothes, thereby adopting complete Digambar condition-i.e. naked position-as was at the time of his birth. He was named as Shree 108 Muni Shri Ganeshkirti Maharaj at the time of his Sallekhana. During the last 18 hours, he remained away from all touches, desires and attachments. Even though there were various irregularities and pains in his body, which was extremely weak, the internal awareness of Varniji was very good. He left his body on the 11th day that is on September 5, 1961 at 1-20 hour's night quite peacefully.

Hearing the news of Varniji's demise, thousands of people poured into the Ashram at Isari and Varniji was cremated in the premises of this Ashram itself. Many meetings at various places were held to pay respect to this holy saint and many people spoke of Varniji. Many newspapers published special issues to pay homage to Varniji. A marble-memorial was also established at the place of cremation at Udasin-ashram Isari.

With the demise of Varniji, the Jain community and Jain culture lost a great prop and patronage. Varniji had passed his life for others. He always thought of doing well to the society. He was eager for expansion of education and knowledge. He himself was highly studied. He inspired many by his own life. He obliged the Indian culture by his services in the field of education and religions teaching and preaching.

Many persons were attracted to him by his simplicity, love for education, thirst for knowledge, highest character, love for everyone, spiritual outlook, deep study, faith in religious rites, longing for eternal peace, insistence for non-violence, truth, celibacy and detachment with worldly affairs. There is a large group of such persons which include thousands of Shravaks (Jain family holders) of Northern and Eastern India, prominent rich merchants and business men, learned persons, professors, large number of intellegensia and Jain followers. Many mendicants and detached personalities were also attached and attracted towards Varniji. Here is a brief list of such persons who were given Dixia by Varniji and others who were graced by him. Devotee Manoharlalji Varni- he was known as Sahajanand Varni among the people. He has created a large bunch of literature on Jainism. He died at Muzaffarnagar in 1979 AD. In addition to this, Shri PoornaSagarji, ShriSwarupanandji, Shri Chdanandji, Shri Deepchandji Varni, Bhagat Shri Pyarelalji, celibate mother Chandabaiji, celibate mother Krushnabaiji and celibate Shri Surendra-nathji, Ratanchandra Mukhtar, Dr. Narendra Vidyarthi, and Niraj Jain are the main personalities inspired by Shri Varniji.

Educational Institutions Established By Shri Varniji:

With his continuous efforts and longing for knowledge, he inspired people of Bundelkhand and surrounding area to give liberal donations for establishing schools, Pathshalas etc. Thousands of students, scholars, learned personalities, detached persons, mendicants and research scholars have taken great advantage of these institutions. Some of these institutions can be listed as under: 1. Syadvad Vidyalaya at Benaras (U.P.), 2. Ganesh Maha Vidyalaya, Sagar (M.P.), 3. Mahilashram,

Sagar, 4. Barua Sagar Vidyalaya, 5. Shahpur Vidyalaya, 6. Drongiri Vidyalaya, 7. Khurai Gurukul, 8. Jabalpur Gurukul, 9. Lalitpur Inter college, 10. Itava Pathshala and 11. Khatauli Vidyalaya. In addition to this, he has established Pathshalas and schools for advancement of religious knowledge at fifteen other places. These institutions are ever-remembrance of Varniji.

There are many known and famous learned personalities in present Digambar Jain community who became a bridge connecting old and new generations. If there are any persons to encourage and inspire these great men for deep and all round study in Jainism, they are respected GaneshPrasadji Varni after Guru Gopaldasji and in that way Varniji can be said to be the first and foremost inspirer of studies in Jainism in the present age.