

Virchand Gandhi, a Gandhi before Gandhi

Bipin Doshi & Pankaz Hingarh*

Virchand Raghavji Gandhi, a contemporary of Swami Vivekananda, too was a great exponent of Indian culture. Although a legend during his time, not much records are available on his invaluable contributions. He, alongside of the Swamiji at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in 1893 corrected the false and perverse impression of India as created by the Christian missionaries.

Referring to the glory of his motherland's cultural traditions, he also said, on the other hand, "If that (Indian) culture was purchasable, England would have purchased it, adopted it. But it has not happened, it cannot happen."

When we speak about Hindu philosophy one eminent name emerges in front of us, that is of Swami Vivekananda and we all know that Swami Vivekananda

received his recognition primarily for his speech in the first ever World Parliament of Religions in 1893, where he represented Hinduism. But we hardly know that one more Indian legend at the same event boldly expressed his patriotism by defending Indian culture and Hinduism and represented Jainism - he was the charismatic and captivating Virchand Raghavji Gandhi. His captivating speech received rounds of applause. A true patriot is someone who feels or voices expressions of patriotism, love, devotion to one's country. VRG displayed his patriotism, love and devotion for mother India and its spiritual heritage. His speech echoed the true spirit and culture of India. He received equal attention as did Swami Vivekananda. Bhagubhai Karbhari, a renowned scholar who was editor of Prajabandhu, Patriot and Samlochak newspapers, wrote in 1910 that Virchand Gandhi was felicitated with a silver medal at the parliament. VRG delivered 535 lectures in the USA and Europe and was nation-

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ally and internationally felicitated with many medals.

VRG was admired by personalities such as Mahatma Gandhi, Lokmanya Tilak, Mark Twain, Governor Lord Reay, Col. Watson, Herbert Warren, Mrs. Charles Howard, Dr. Paul Carus, Alexander Fullerton, Miss Lilian Whiting, Annie Beasant, H.S. Olcott, Swami Vivekananda, Chief Justice Govind Ranade, High Court Justice Sir Narayan Ganesh Chandavarkar, William Pipe, George Francis Train, V. Gasenapp, and many others. The Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 in Mumbai. VRG, Ranade and Chandavarkar were key members of the party.

Virchand Gandhi was a visionary too. He talked about economic and political freedom five decades before India became independent. In one of his speeches to the American public he declared: "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 were a nation in all that that word 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 for ever maintain peaceful relations with all nations of the world." Today this statement appears as a prophecy that Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948) proved in attaining India's freedom with peaceful means.

The Indian Postal Department recently issued a stamp and brochure to commemorate him. A coffee table book compiled by Dr Bipin Doshi and Priti Shah, titled *Gandhi before Gandhi*, of selected speeches of VRG in the USA and Europe, has also been released by

Narendra Modi, Chief Minister of Gujarat.

Virchand Raghavji Gandhi (August 25, 1864 - August 7, 1901) was born in an

upper middle class merchant family of Mahuva, Gujarat. His mother had had a series of auspicious dreams before his birth. His parents were very pious by nature. VRG graduated with honours from Elphinstone College in 1884. During his preparation for solicitors' examination, VRG and MK Gandhi were in intimate contacts. From *My Experiments with Truth*, Mahatma Gandhi's autobiography, we learn that VRG and Mahatma Gandhi were together for their experiments in dietetics. VRG used to

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give assistance to MK Gandhi by telling him different stories about barristers. He tried his best to get briefs for MK Gandhi. VRG was a great exponent of Indian culture, religions, and a polyglot knowing 14 languages, and was scholar in Jainism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Western philosophies, Yoga, Indian economics, international trade, etc. It is noteworthy that at the age of 21 VRG became the first Hon. Secretary of the Jain Association of India in 1885.

For the 1893 Parliament of World Religions, distinguished personalities were

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invited as representatives of various religions on a common platform for the first time. Param Puja Acharya Vijayandsuri (Muni Atmaramji) was a world famous Jain saint who could see ages ahead of his time. He was born in 1821 CE in a Kapoor Khatri family. Being a versatile, far-sighted Jain saint-scholar, and author of several learned treatises, he was invited to participate in the first ever parliament held in Chicago, USA. But the principles of right conduct for a Jain monk prevented

him from going abroad. One of the vows of a Jain saint is not to travel across water as it is tantamount to violence against sea creatures. Since he wanted Jainism to be represented at this conference, he trained and deputed 29-year old, charismatic Virchand Raghavji Gandhi.

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ipating. The conference lasted 17 days. It was dominated by English-speaking Christian representatives,

who delivered 153 of 194 speeches. Opportunity for the leaders from other religious traditions was limited, although significant. Twelve speakers represented Buddhism, 11 Judaism, 8 Hinduism, 2 Islam, 2 Parsi, 2 Shintoism, 2 Confucianism, 1 Taoism and 1 Jainism. Christianity dominated. Many Christian leaders declared theirs as the best religion and that one can't have entry in the kingdom of heaven unless one is a Christian. Faith in one God and the sacrifice of Jesus to wash the sins of

Life is really simple, but we insist on making it complicated.

- Confucius

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man was highlighted often. To this extent it was fine but many speakers in an over-enthusiasm attacked the beliefs and traditions of other religions.

However, there were many Christian speakers like Prof. Robert, Wolivunski, Henry Infield, George Hood Don Boardman who appreciated the oriental religions and also the depth to which they have reached. The organizers had even expressed a desire to hold the next parliament at Varanasi in India. Rev. Chepin admitted, "We want to learn, sitting at the feet of

those gentlemen, full of wisdom, who come from the East". The chief of the parliament, Barrows, said in his welcome speech,

"Motherland of religions, pure water of rivers of India, disciples of Prince Siddhartha Buddha, those who are enlightening Asia, we welcome you." Eminent Methodist Church speaker Rev BW Ornate clarified, "Lots of misunderstandings by Christians are dispelled by orient scholars. They have realized that 'goodness' does not come with colour." President Bonney, in his concluding speech, remarked, "This was a conference of friendship and not a ground for battle, even if any one from

the West has mistakenly instigated war, we praise our friends from the East who pray to God saying, 'O God, forgive them as they do not know what they are doing.'"

Many representatives from India were not allowed to speak until towards the close of the session, with a view to holding the audience till the end. Prof. Chakravarthi, Annie Beasant, H Dharampala, Virchand Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda were among them.

VRG told the parliament, "This spectacle of learned leaders of thought and religion meeting together on a common platform and throwing light on religious problems has been a dream of Muni

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Atmaramji. He has commissioned me to say to you that he offers his most cordial congratulations on his own behalf, and on behalf of the Jaina community, for your having achieved the consummation of that grand idea, of convening a Parliament of Religions. I wish that the duty of addressing you on the history and the tenets of the Jaina faith had fallen on that able person than on me. The inclemency of the climate, and the distant voyage which one has to undertake before one can come here, have

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prevented that able Jaina from attending this grand assembly and personally presenting to you the religious convictions of the Jainas. You will, therefore, look upon me as simply the mouthpiece of Muni Atmaramji, the learned high priest of the Jainas in India, who has devoted his whole life to the study of that ancient faith."

He said, "I represent Jainism, a faith older than Buddhism, similar to it in its ethics, but different from it in its psychology, and professed by a million and a half of India's most peaceful and law-abiding citizens". He expounded to

them what this universe is; whether there is God as the creator of this universe; what is the ultimate purpose of life and several such other things. He explained to them Navatatva, Shathdravya, Chagati, Panchavratva, Moksha, Nyayavad, Anekantvad etc.

Unjust and Inhospitable Criticism

On the 25th September 1893, Virchand Gandhi was to further discuss

on Jainism, but abusive comments on Hinduism and Indian culture was intolerable to him. His expression was echoed in the parliament, which not only displayed his patriotic love for India and its religions but also established him as a known name in the USA. Thereafter, he was termed as the lion of the season. Let's take a look at his speech:

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platform is not a place for mutual recriminations, and I am heartily sorry that from time to time the most un-Christian

spirit is allowed freely here, but I know how to take these recriminations at their proper value. I am glad that no one has dared to attack the religion I represent. It is well that they should not. But every attack has been directed to the abuses existing in our society. And I repeat now what I repeat every day, that these abuses are not from religion, but in spite of religion, as in every other country.

"Some men in their over-ambition,

We shall require a substantially new manner of thinking if mankind is to survive.

- Albert Einstein

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think that they are Pauls, and what they think they believe. These new Pauls go to vent their platitudes upon India. They go to India to convert the heathens in a mass, but when they find their dreams melting away, as dreams always do, they return and pass a whole life in abusing the Hindus. Abuses are not arguments against any religion, nor self-adulation, the proof of the truth of one's own. For such I have greatest pity.

"If the present abuses in India have been produced by the Hindu religion, the same religion had the strength of producing a society which made the Greek historian say: 'No Hindu was ever known to tell an untruth, no Hindu woman ever known to be unchaste'. And ever in the present day where is there a chaster woman or a milder man than in India? The oriental bubbles may be pricked, but the very hysterical shocks sent forth from this platform from time to time show to the world that sometimes bubbles may be heavier than the bloated balloons of vanity and self-conceit.

"It has become an article of faith with most of the orthodox Christians that the Hindus are liars. All sorts of abuses are heaped on the people of India from the

Himalayas to Ceylon, and, without exception all these calumnies proceed either from the missionaries or the English officers. We accord them their rights as we do even to the tiniest animalcule the right to live and be happy in their own way, if they let us alone, but when we find that these little creatures are annoying us, we have to brush them aside. The statements of these missionaries made about the Hindus, their religions and life, are never an admirable illustration of their methods and zeal.

When I first came to know in this country, from missionary sources, that in India women threw their babies into the Ganges and that people threw themselves under the car of Jagganath, I doubted whether in the blackest and most intolerant days of the Christian Church, any villainous priest ever invented more bare-faced falsehoods or malicious slanders like these."

He corrected the false and perverse impression of India as being the land of maharajahs, tigers and cobras. He narrated an incident from King Akbar's life and praised him for respecting all other religions. He spoke as an Indian first but kept Jainism at his heart. When one con-

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sciously suppresses individuality by proper physical, mental, moral, and spiritual development, one becomes part and parcel of the immutable course of nature, environment, and ecology and never suffers, said VRG on Jain yoga philosophy.

Gandhi said, "It is an astonishing fact that foreigners have been constantly attacking India and in the face of all this aggression the soul of India has stood vital and watchful.

Her conduct and religion are safe and the whole world looks at India with a steady gaze." He added, "Cultural distinctions, agriculture,

art, artistic skill, literature, good conduct, means of knowledge, science, hospitality, feminism, love and respect - all these are found in India in quite a different form. If that culture was purchasable, England would have purchased it, adopted it. But it has not happened, it cannot happen."

Today India is a democratic and independent country. Still can we imagine of

expressing our views in the USA against their systems, and their attacks and missions in India. No, honestly we will try to be diplomatic. But it was VRG who as a true patriot at the parliament retaliated to every attack on India, Indian culture and specially cleared the false myth created by fanatic Christian missionaries. His captivating speeches were on the fundamentals of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Indian culture.

He was the first to tell the Western people about the unknown life of Christ in India. By his scholastic research, he tried to prove that at his young age Jesus Christ came to India and learnt a lot from Indian religions and its philosophy of compassion and justice.

He also spoke on a plethora of subjects like Indian international trade system, Indian economic and industrial outlook, ancient history of Indian civilization,

science of eating, yoga, concentration, hypnotism, astral vision and astral body, occultism and vegetarianism.

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Is man's civilization only a wrappage, through which the savage nature of him can still burst, infernal as ever?

- Thomas Carlyle

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VRG's forceful speeches and his fearless yet courteous expressions created a deep brilliant image that the American people were magnetically attracted towards him and at their request VRG prolonged his stay for two years and was invited twice later in 1897 and 1899. VRG made his mission to educate the Western layman about India and its religions since Christian missionaries under British rule had misrepresented Indian culture. He delivered as many as 535 lectures mainly in Chicago, Boston, New York, Washington in the USA, and England, France, Germany and other European countries. At all these places he was well listened, felicitated and presented with medals. After the parliament he became famous in the USA but at the same time many Christian fanatics began seeing in VRG a future threat. The people in the West began admiring VRG and were eager to learn more about the oriental philosophy.

Christian periodicals were flooded with analyses on the speeches of VRG and his attack on Christian missionaries in India (The Review of Reviews, The Monist etc). Some seemed positive and some were negative. Some fanatics tar-

geted VRG, as if their religion and Christian mission was challenged. VRG made it clear that his remarks were not against Christianity but were against fanatic Christian missionaries who were presenting wrong picture of India and its religions.

The Literary World, Volume 51 (Page 60, 1895) wrote, "Virchand Raghavji Gandhi, BA, attacks missionaries in India, charging them with misrepresentation both in regard to the religion and the lives of the natives, and in regard to their own alleged self-sacrificing life."

Rev. Addison Parker commended, "He impressed me as one the brainiest and most stirring of the representatives of the Far East. I know of no one except him from whom I would prefer to hear facts concerning the life and thought of the great people he represents."

A Boston Transcript report said, "He is an earnest and serious speaker, carving deep into the philosophies of India, of which he is one of the most able exponents that has ever visited America." The New York Times described the personality of VRG as "wearing a turban of yellow, signifying knowledge, and a robe of purple, portraying purity and activity, Virchand Gandhi." Buffalo Evening Times said, VRG "preaches the universal brotherhood of man. He is much farther advanced in esoteric philosophy than the Western theosophists, and gives far more lucid explanations of the orient teachings. The Hindu is decidedly the

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Rev. Addison Parker commended, “He impressed me as one the brainiest and most stirring of the representatives of the Far East. I know of no one except him from whom I would prefer to hear facts concerning the life and thought of the great people he represents.” “He was the most important delegate from India to the parliament of religions,” Miss Lilian Whiting, a renowned writer of Boston, said of VRG.

VRG’s immense success was covered by the leading newspapers and periodicals of the USA: New York Times, St. Joseph Gazette, The Jamestown New York, Editors Bureau, Chicago Daily Sun, Chicago Herald, Chicago Suburban Star, Light of Truth, Cincinnati, Buffalo Times, The Illustrated Buffalo Express, Morning Star, Buffalo Evening Times, Buffalo Express, Buffalo Courier, The Evangelist, Evening Post, Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, The Rochester Herald, Rev. R. A. White, Chicago, Addison Parker Pastor of leading Baptist Church.

VRG wrote many articles and books in Gujarati as well as in English. He

wrote on topics of social and cultural reforms like education for women and custom of repenting. VRG translated many publications, including *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ* in English from French in 1894 from an ancient manuscript found in Tibet. And one should possess a copy of his scholarly translation.

In those days, sea voyage was considered unholy and VRG had to face unjust criticism. At the same time, his vegetarianism in the American cold surprised

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S w a m i Vivekananda, who wrote from 541, Dearborn Avenue, Chicago, to the Diwan of Junagadh in 1894, “Now here is Virchand Gandhi, the Jain whom you knew

well in Bombay. This man never takes anything but mere vegetables even in this terribly cold climate and tooth and nail tries to defend his countrymen and the religion. The people of this country like him very well. But what are they doing who sent him over? They are trying to outcast him.”

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on Jainism. V. Glasenapp, a well-known German scholar, wrote his doctoral dissertation on the *Jaina Doctrine of Karma* and acknowledged VRG's influence. Hon. E. B. Sherman Master in the Chancery of the United States, Circuit Court, wrote on VRG, "It has rarely, if ever, been my good fortune to meet a man whose reading and culture have been so wide and varied, and who, withal, has so sweet, sincere and teachable a spirit as Mr. Gandhi". E. Allen Richardson in "*Strangers in This Land*"

mentioned about the parliament and VRG's interview with the New York Times. VRG had eventually attained bar at law in both India and Britain. He had won the Piggery

case and got the slaughter house removed from the sacred shrine of Jains called Samet Shikhar. He also resolved the Shatrunajay Tirth pilgrimage tax issue and got it abolished.

VRG's death today also remains a mystery. From a 1902 letter of Mrs. Howard in Open Court we learn that VRG's demise was due to haemorrhage of lungs. However, we learn from VRG's descendants and local folks in Mahuva that he was given slow poison

as he was seen as a future threat by a few fanatic people. Whatever may be the truth, the untimely demise of two heroes - VRG and Swami Vivekananda - proved tremendous loss for the nation. Otherwise both must have contributed much more and Mahatma Gandhi's mission would have accelerated and we would have been independent much early. VRG wanted to continue his activities for a long time and to accomplish much more but unfortunately he could not, as this bril-

One of the US periodicals wrote while paying tributes to both of them when VRG and Swamiji died in 1901 and 1902, respectively, "The influence of Vivekananda's philosophy has been kept alive by his disciples by founding organizations whereas, it is a matter of great pity that no attempt has been made to keep alive VRG's memory!"

liant and promising young man, full of hopes and aspirations, died at a very young age of 37, on August 7, 1901. Today whatever is available about VRG is possibly

just 10% of his contributions to the country and the religion.

Swami Vivekananda and Virchand Gandhi had their own huge fan following. Swami Vivekananda's work became well-known but unfortunately not much of VRG's! One of the US periodicals wrote while paying tributes to both of them when VRG and Swamiji died in 1901 and 1902, respectively, "The influence of Vivekananda's philosophy has been

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kept alive by his disciples by founding organizations whereas, it is a matter of great pity that no attempt has been made to keep alive VRG's memory!" Today only 10% of VRG details are available due to a gap of 100 years. In India nobody maintained a detailed history of VRG and his contribution to India and the Indian society."

As a reformer in the Western countries he established the Gandhi Philosophical Society and the Society for the Education of Women in India (SEWI) under whose banner several Indian women went to the USA for higher studies, the School of Oriental Philosophy, and the Jain Literature Society in London. He sent Rs 40,000 and a shipload of grains from the USA to India during the worst famine of 1896-97.

As a national figure he attended the Indian National Congress session held in Pune as the representative of the then Bombay province in 1895 and was an early leader of the Congress along

with his friends Chief Justice Mahadev Ranade and Sr. Narayan Chandavarkar. Ex-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi (Congress president) with top Congress politician Vadilal Chitrabhuji Gandhi visited VRG's house and met Dhiraj Mohanlal Gandhi, the grandson of VRG (a key person of Hindu Mahasabha, Mumbai) and paid homage to VRG.

Virchand Gandhi lectured on the political and industrial outlook in India in Large Hall of William Science building on December 19, 1898. His another international participation as all-India sole delegate was at the international conference of commerce in 1899 where he lectured on the trade relations between the USA and India.

Modern research about VRG reveals that at several instances Mahatma Gandhi was misunderstood as V R Gandhi.

In a June 13, 1931 letter, Mahatma Gandhi clarifies to Miss Emelia Mac Bean of Chicago when she mistook him

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Every civilization is, among other things, an arrangement for domesticating the passions and setting them to do useful work.

- Aldous Huxley

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as VRG, “Madam, I have your letter for which I thank you. You are giving me credit of which I am wholly undeserving. You are thinking of another Mr. Gandhi my name-sake but in no way related to me. He and I were, however, friends and lived together for some time. You will be sorry to hear that he died many years ago, leaving an only son. It was he who visited America and made many friends. I have never had the privilege of visiting your continent.”

Mark Twain, father of American literature, was too impressed by Virchand Gandhi and his philosophy. His newspaper Buffalo Express had widely covered VRG when Mark Twain visited India. VRG displayed his hospitality and accompanied him to Byculla, Mumbai Jain temples on 25 January, 1896. In his ‘Mark Twain on Biblical and Hindu Miracles’, GB Singh states that Virchand Gandhi had met Mark Twain on his visit to India but somehow ‘Inventing Mark Twain: The Lives of Samuel Langhorne Clemens’ by Andrew Hoffman mistook Virchand Gandhi as Mahatma Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi, at this stage of Mark Twain’s travel, was living in South Africa.

HS Olcott was lawyer and the co-founder and first president of the Theosophical Society. Pyarelal in his book ‘Mahatma Gandhi’ also brings to our notice that it was Virchand Gandhi

who lectured at Blavasty Lodge, where HS Olcott presided over the function (Old Diary Leaves - Henry S Olcott) and they interacted with each other and in his diary he mentioned VRG as a “distinguished Jain”, but Josephine Ransom seems to have mixed up MK Gandhi with Virchand Gandhi and wrongly mentioned that Olcott was introduced to MK Gandhi and this time also MK Gandhi was in South Africa.

Old Diary Leaves by HS Olcott mentions, “A profound impression was created by the discourses of Professor GN Chakravarti and Mrs Besant, who is said to have risen to unusual heights of eloquence, so exhilarating were the influences of the gathering.” Besides those who represented our society and religions, especially Vivekananda, VR Gandhi, Dharmapala, captivated the public, who had only heard of Indian people through the malicious reports of interested missionaries, and were now astounded to see before them and hear men who represented the ideal of spirituality and human perfectibility as taught in their respective sacred writings.

Said one Chicago editor: ‘We have been for years spending millions of dollars in sending missionaries to convert these men, and have had very little success; they have sent over a few men, and have converted everybody.’ ■