

Acharya Tulsi and His Contribution to Inter-faith Harmony

'Like some men at various other places, here is an Indian, lean, thin and short—statured but with shining eyes, who is very much worried at the present state of the world. He is Tulsi, aged 36, the preceptor of the Jain Terapanth which is a religious organization having -faith in nonviolence. Acharya Tulsi -founded the Anuvrati Sangh in 1949. When he has succeeded in making all Indians undertake the vows, he will try to convert the rest of the world to the ' *L i f e o f a v r a t i* ', wrote The Time published from New York in its issue of 15 May 1950 under the caption. Atom Bomb'. This editorial comment was prompted by an unusual happening that had taken place on the last day of April within the sprawling precincts of the Municipal Corporation in Chandni Chowk — the busiest centre of old Delhi. The occasion was the first All India Conference of the Anuvrati Sangh organized after one year of its inception. Seated on the dais was the Acharya, young and extremely handsome. His face radiated an aura of divinity. His disciples, wearing traditional dresses characteristic of their profession, had gathered to listen to his special message on this historic occasion. The young Acharya declared that he had resolved to launch a crusade -against immorality in social life and dedicate his entire life to the cause of nonviolence and unity of all human beings. He threw off the yoke of sectarian dogmas and exhorted his disciples to volunteer for the disciplined life of an Anuvrati. He says,

If an atom has in it the monstrous power to destroy the world, amply demonstrated in the unprecedented holocaust at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, I want to tell the world that we have its counterpart in anuvrat - a small or vow — which alone has the power to ward off and counter the threat of an atom bomb. '

The appeal had a magical effect on the audience. What astounded the people was that more than six hundred of his disciples, mostly businessmen, stood up, as if they had all been propelled by the force of a divine power, and accepted anuvrat 5 (small or atomic vows) pledging themselves never to resort to black marketing, bribery, exploitation, communalism, adulteration and violence.

It was no small event. No wonder the Acharya 's voice evoked favourable comments in all leading newspapers of the world. Whenever Acharya Tulsi reminisces about the unforgettable moment in the course of his discourses, his face is lit up with unspeakable spiritual joy.

The Anuvrat Movement has since grown into a mighty banyan tree with its branches spreading in all directions. It has shown light to thousands of people all over the country. More and more people are looking upon the Acharya as a beacon to light their path to a bright tomorrow, with peace and love reigning everywhere.

Born on October 20, 1914 at Ladnun, a small town in Rajasthan, Tulsi was a precocious child and showed early promise o-f extraordinary qualities CH leadership. His

spiritual bent resulted in his religious initiation and renunciation of normal worldly life at the unbelievably young age of eleven.

Acharya Tulsi's most radical step was the launching of the Anuvrat Movement in 1949. He saw the predominance of violent forces all around. Apart from the individual moral lapses that vitiated the atmosphere in the country, what worried the Acharya most was the mad race for manufacturing arms going on unabated among the super powers. He foresaw a bleak future for humanity. His conviction is that small beginnings can make a tremendous difference. The people found something novel in his technique to call upon the people to submit to the discipline of anuvrats -small vows. The people were aware of the movements launched by some people to get their demands accepted but the Anuvrat Movement sounded strange to them, for it only exhorted them to gift away their evil habits. Almost all sections of society welcomed it and its voice reached both huts and palaces. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, a celebrated philosopher and former President of India, was so impressed by Acharya Tulsi's work that he considered him one of the greatest men of India living with a purpose. Acharya Tulsi figures as an important personality in his book entitled Living with a Purpose.

His monks and nuns undertook long barefoot marches and took the message of Anuvrat from one village to another. In a few years the whole country was virtually swept away by the wave of Anuvrat. Acharyashree's marches throughout the country lent, further strength to it.

Anuvrat Movement passed through many stages of its progress. It underwent changes in the context of social problems. Sectarian narrowness lay at the root of India's partition. Everyone suffered due to religious fanaticism. Political wranglers were fanning communalism for their own narrow selfish ends. In such circumstances Anuvrat Movement put forward the following secret before the people

- Dharma occupies the first place, sect comes next.
- There may be many sects but dharma belongs to all.
- Dharma is quite distinct from politics. It must not be subjected to political interferences-

The message had a great impact on the outlook of the people. It encouraged them to know the truth about religion and sectarianism.

A devotee of dharma is unlikely to be morally debased. But the conviction about religion was bound up with the hereafter. Hence religion was being used as an instrument of achieving happiness in the other world and fulfilling selfish ends in the present life. The religious leaders were wallowing in the mud and labouring under the misconception that they would be rid of sin by means of some ritualistic practices. Against the backdrop of this social and religious environment, Anuvrat Movement raised its voice in the following words:

- * Dharma is not merely an instrument of ensuring happiness in the hereafter but it is also a means to bring happiness to the present life.

- * He who -fails to make his present life better is unlikely to achieve happiness in the hereafter.
- * The primary aim of dharma is to purify character. Its ritualistic practices are secondary.

This ideology aroused a new sense of awareness in the people. It dawned on the atheists that theism was not necessarily what they had taken it to be. The theists felt something atheistic in their way of living. Speaking at a seminar the eminent journalist Akshaya Kumar Jain said, "Acharyashree ! the way you have defined religion has emboldened me to tell my friends that I am religious." The religion based on ritualistic practices has a fascination for all. Anuvrat Movement does not attach any importance to rituals. It only calls upon people to lead a moral life. It, therefore, does not have much fascination. Despite this, the movement has attracted quite a sizable number of intellectuals. The people who looked on religion with apprehension found an emotional affinity in this new religion devoid of epithets. It spontaneously emerged as a forum for human religion.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the then President of India, said, "Acharyashree, Anuvrat Movement is very useful for our country. You must speak to our Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, about it. He will not only appreciate it but will also be helpful in its progress."

Acharyashree : What you say is right but we are not acquainted with him.
 President : I shall let him know about you by writing a letter. This will facilitate your meeting with him.

The President wrote to the Prime Minister:

Dear Prime Minister,

I feel that your meeting Acharya Tulsi will be in the interest of our country. He is in Delhi now. Please give thought to it if possible.

The Prime Minister sent, the -following reply:

Dear President,

I shall be glad to meet Acharya Tulsi, I am very busy these days. It would be very kind of him if he could undertake the trouble of coming to my residence.

The President conveyed the Prime Minister's message to Acharyashree. He went to the Prime Minister's residence. A small plank had already been laid in the corridor. Acharyashree seated himself on it while Pandit Nehru sat on a square piece o-f mat placed just in front of him. It was the first ever meeting between the two.

Panditji said, "Acharyaji, now let me know what you want me to do for you." Acharyashree replied, "I do not want you to do anything for me." - The talk between the

two came to an abrupt end even before it got off. For a moment or two there was complete silence. Panditji continued to look at Acharyashree. How could the talks proceed when there was not any demand? Breaking the silence Acharyashree said, "We haven't come here with a particular demand. Instead we have come to offer you something. Today the country is passing through an unprecedented moral crisis. It needs a constructive programme for moral development. We have started some work in this direction. We want you to observe it, evaluate it and make use of it." The Prime Minister gave him a patient hearing. He promised to help him in that work. This is how the first meeting between Acharya Tulsi and Pandit Nehru came to an end.

Gradually Pt. Nehru's relationship with the Movement grew intimate. He evaluated it in the following words:

If we wish to build the edifice of our nation, its foundation must be laid deep. If we lay the foundation on sand the whole structure will collapse the moment it comes into contact with water. The edifice erected on the foundation of character is always strong. We have to undertake many important projects in this country. For carrying out this great responsibility we must have a strong heart, a good brain, and a great deal of power to control ourselves. We have to learn these things. They are all embedded in character. What a good piece of work is being done within the Anuvrat Movement ! I think the more this work progresses, the better it is. I wish it all success.

Dr. Rajendra Prasad made great a contribution to the noble cause o-f the Movement. It was identical with his temperament and ideas. Speaking on the occasion o-f the -friendship day he remarked, "I have supported the Movement since its inception. I-f you want me to hold any office in its organizational set-up, I would like it to be that of an Anuvrat supporter." Commenting on the President's offer Acharvashree said, "We would like you to hold the office of an Anuvrati. We wish that the President of this great country should be an Anuvrati. He should be a symbol of moral uplift."

In the course of Acharvashree's marches, widespread mass contact, propagation of Anuvrat-oriented life and abstinence from alcoholic drinks went on.

Acharyashree also enjoined his monks and nuns to undertake long marches. This step widened the area of their movements and took them to the remote areas of the country, including Tamilnadu, Karnataka. Andhara, Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Sikkim and Tripura. Some of them visited Nepal and Bhutan also. This dedicated band of monks and nuns has carried the message of Anvurat to multitudes of people.

The celebrated journalist Satyadev Vidyalkar has rightly observed, "In Delhi the people feel that after Mahatma Gandhi the other Mahatma who has won their hearts is Acharya Tulsi- In simple language he talks about the need of purity in social life with remarkable candour and utmost sincerity. His mellifluous voice, which has in it a natural fascination for all, leaves a magical effect on his audience. He is doing everything far his own spiritual uplift, nevertheless, what he has been able to do for the people is impossible

to be achieved by those who say that their life is solely dedicated to the well-being of the people,"

Not only did his marches grow in size but he also grew into a colossus of a man. He visited small villages. There too crowds swell beyond our expectation. Many a time I have observed closely how people throng to have his glimpse. They are drawn towards him, as it were, by a magnetic pull. They leave him with great difficulty even when it is time for him to have his meal. Very often Acharyashree says, 'I have now become a part of the masses.' Acharyashree did not want religion or a monk to be bound by any restrictions. He became generous and the outlook of the people around him also underwent a change. Now all sections of society, irrespective of their caste, class, religion and party, look on him as their own saint. In his eyes there is nobody who is not his own. Once when Acharyashree was speaking at a huge assembly, a man stood up and asked, "Are you a Hindu or a Muslim?" Acharyashree replied, "Brother, I am not a Hindu because I do not have a choti (a lock of hair) on my head, nor am I a muslim since I was not born in a Muslim -family." He asked him again, "What are you, then ?" Acharyashree replied, "I am a human being by birth. I am also a Jain because I am trying to conquer myself." At an assembly of scholars in Poona, a Sanskrit, scholar asked him whether he considered the Jains Hindus. Acharyashree replied that the Jains could be considered Hindus in case the word 'Hindu' meant someone belonging to India. -I-f it meant someone following the Vedic religion, the Jains were not Hindus.

In Acharyashree's view a man should only be a man (human being) before he becomes a Jain or a Vedic follower or a Muslim or a Buddhist.

Acharyashree thinks that the greatest shrine on earth is man himself and that all shrines are the creations of his inner power. He undertook long marches for developing man's inwardness. Hence, in a way, they are pilgrimages in themselves. In the course of his long barefoot journeys he also visited some of the shrines. Viewed from that standpoint too, his marches are veritable pilgrimages i.e. Mai than, Mayurakh Dam, Jhumari Talaiya Dam, etc. Besides, he has also been to some old shrines. He went to see the well-known Vedic shrine Devghar Prayag. He visited the Buddhist shrines at Bodh Gay a, Sarnath, Nalanda, etc. He spent many days at the Jain shrines like Rajgrih, Sammed Shikhar, Abu Ranakpur, etc.

Acharyashree always went on a pilgrimage to new shrines- He went to see the prestigious educational institutions like Banaras Hindu University, Shantiniketan, Baroda Sanskrit University, Bhandarkar Research Institute, Poona, etc. His life is a living example of anekant philosophy. He visits all places and meets all people.

He rejects the one-sided view that stresses complete agreement or disagreement.

In the course of his padyatra (travelling on foot) Acharyashree reached Bombay. Sarvodaya leader Jaiprakash Narayan was staying in Bombay at that time. For an exchange of views a meeting was arranged between him and Acharyashree. The talks lasted for three days. Jaiprakash Narayan has recorded the impression his meeting with Acharyashree left on his mind in these wards:

Both the Anuvrat and Sarvodaya Movements are complementary. Almost all the leaders of this country and some leaders of the other countries have by now become familiar with the aim of this Movement. Acharya Tulsi has in fact set forth a magnificent ideal in order to march towards the accomplishment of our own ideal. Both Vinoba and Acharya Tulsi belong to all castes and all classes. Both of them desire the good of all. I was able to get a glimpse of Acharya Tulsi's lofty aims in the course of my discussion with him in Bombay. He is of the view that if all the violent forces of the world can join hands -for destruction why can't the forces of nonviolence follow suit? The unity of the nonviolent forces in the world will surely pave the way for the fulfillment of the ultimate dream of ushering in a nonviolent society. Both the Movement for Sampati Dan (giving away property) and the Anuvrat Movement cherish the common aspiration. One inspires, advises or even compels society to let its weaker sections share in its resources. The other lays emphasis on the renunciation of one's lust for acquisition. It doesn't call upon people to gift away what they have in excess but simply exhorts them to leave it for use by society. Anuvrat regards possession in all its forms as the root of sin. It is the main cause of violence. When there is a desire for acquisition, exploitation and violence are bound to follow as its natural corollaries.

Dr. Sampurnanand was a statesman. More than that he was a profound scholar. During Acharyashree's visit to Uttar Pradesh he stayed at his residence. It afforded him an opportunity to exchange views with him on many subjects. Later, when he was Governor of Rajasthan, he held long discussions with Acharyashree at Jaipur. He observed Acharyashree's life very closely. Hence he has portrayed it authoritatively in the following words.

Acharya Tulsi, the sponsor of the Anuvrat Movement, is far away from the sphere of politics. He has nothing to do with any particular group or party. He does not subscribe to any 'ism' and yet, despite his being miles away from all these ways of earning fame, he is one of those who have more or less influenced the lives of millions. He is called Acharya since he is the head of a particular Jain sect. It is natural for anyone to expect that he should impart the knowledge of the basic canons of Jainism and those of his own sect to the disciples, monks and nuns of his order and yet no one has ever heard him or his followers say such things as may lacerate the feelings of others.

Acharyashree's padyatra gives him ample opportunity of wide contact with the people, interesting talks with individuals, theoretical discussions, spiritual experiments and solutions of individual problems. What has been reproduced here is a mere glimpse of the pageant of Acharyashree's varied life. We have no knowledge of one such individual in the past as might have undertaken so extensive and endless a padvatra (bare-foot journey).

Acharya Tulsi's first meeting with Vinoba Bhave took place at Rajghat (a sacred place where Gandhiji's cremation took place). Vinobaji said, "The shramans (Jain ascetics) tradition of padyatra dates -from the ancient days. I have also adopted your way o-f living in my life." Acharyashree said, "It augurs -well. At least we two have become padyatris. The people o-f India live in villages. Padyatra is a powerful medium for being in touch with them."

Vinobaji : How many miles do you walk a day ?

Acharyashree : Ten to twelve miles.

Vinobaji : Approximately I also cover the same distance in a day.

Anuvrat and Bhoodan yatra (Vinobaji's travelling on foot with the specific purpose of asking the people to gift away their excess land) once again revealed the significance of padyatra to the people of India.

It is believed that religion is something that has to do with an individual. But in reality it also concerns society. It may be practised individually but it leaves its effect on society. Acharyashree realized the universal nature of religion and made it a tool to solve social, national and international problems.

'A Message of Peace to a World Full of Unrest' is Acharyashree's first message. It received a warm welcome from the world dazed by the ghastly holocaust of the Second World War. It evoked a favourable response both at home and abroad. Mahatma Gandhi wrote notes at various places in the margin of a copy of the message. The message was given on June 22, 1945 but was published much later. The delayed publication of the message led Gandhiji to write in the margin of the preface, "What made such a message come out so late ?" Samyaktva (right faith or knowing things as they are) has been mentioned as one of the ways of bringing about perennial peace in the world. Gandhiji wrote about it on the eleventh page of the booklet : "Was this Samyaktva propagated ?" On the 21st page of the booklet a nine-point programme consisting of nine universally recognised basic principles has been suggested as the surest way to bring about a lasting peace in the world. Commenting on it Gandhiji wrote, "I wish all the people of the world could follow the path shown by this great man."

Dr. Raymonds F. Piperne of Syracuse University, New York wrote in a letter that he had included the important extracts from Acharya Tulsi's message of peace in the syllabus for his students for a comparative study.