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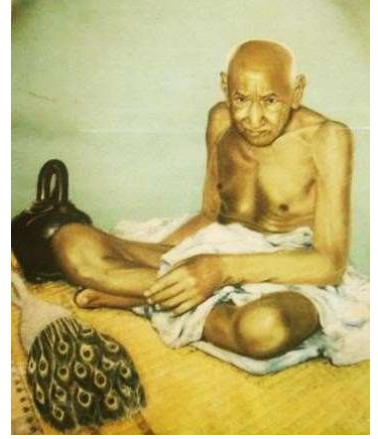
Speak Up

PUJYA GANESH PRASAD VARNI: A PIONEER OF JAIN EDUCATION

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The great Digambar Jain spiritual saint Ganesh Prasad Varni Ji stands as a towering figure in the 20th century for the revival of Jain education in India. His unwavering dedication and tireless efforts played a pivotal role in ensuring the dissemination of Jain philosophy and traditions to future generations. He was a great son of Bundelkhand. He established many institutions on this land, which helped in the birth of great scholarly gems one after the other. It is not possible to evaluate in words the unforgettable contribution he made to the upliftment of Jainism and Jain society.



Varni Ji was born in a Vaishnav family in 1874 in Hasera, Lalitpur, Uttar Pradesh. Although he was not born into a Jain family, yet he found himself interested in Jainism at the young age of ten when he was influenced by the discourses of Raviṣeṇa's *Padma Purāṇa* and he formally accepted Jainism by abandoning eating after sunset. He was also influenced by *Ṇamokāra Mantra*. In order to get acquainted with Jain literature, he spent most of his time in religious discussions with scholars and monks. His mother Chironja Bai inspired him to study in various major educational centers like Jaipur, Khurja, Navadwip, Varanasi, etc. to quench his thirst for knowledge of Jainism and Sanskrit.

He recognized that the true strength of any nation lies in its educated populace and that its greatest heritage is the ancient scriptures penned by the monks. These texts, rich in philosophy and

spirituality, were at risk of being forgotten amidst the wave of modernity. Understanding the importance of imparting traditional classical knowledge to future generations, he established numerous educational institutions across the country. Particularly in Bundelkhand, he founded Gurukuls, Mahavidyalayas, and various Vidya Mandirs, thereby expanding the avenues for education.

Great Saint, Patriot, Admirable and Exemplary Personality

He gradually adopted a life of renunciation. He accepted the vow of celibacy (the 7th, *brahmacarya pratimā*) in Kundalpur from Baba Gokuladas, and thus came to be known as *varṇī*. He accepted the 10th *pratimā* (model stage) in 1944 and became a *ksullaka* in 1947. He traveled extensively across the country, spreading religious and ethical teachings. Beyond being a religious figure, he was a great patriot who served the nation selflessly. In a public meeting, he once donated his entire wealth to support the soldiers of the Azad Hind Fauj. Notably, in 1945 at Jabalpur, he donated his only piece of clothing, a cotton shawl (*cādara*), which was immediately auctioned for Rs. 3000 to raise funds for the army. He consistently shunned the limelight and stayed away from the world of publicity.

Vinoba Bhave held him in high regard and admiration. Ma Anandamayi, the revered spiritual guru and saint from Bengal, was also deeply impressed by him. She met with him multiple times at her ashram in Varanasi, where she expressed her profound respect for his spiritual and moral stature. President Dr. Rajendra Prasad also had the opportunity to meet him once and conveyed his deep respect for him.

Establishment of Institutions

He embarked on extensive journeys on foot throughout the country, enlightening a society mired in ignorance and darkness. He opposed the practice of spending societal wealth on *gajarathas* (grand processions on elephants) during *Pañca Kalyāṇaka Mahotsava* (temple installation ceremonies) and other social events, advocating instead for directing those funds towards printing scriptures and establishing schools. His belief was that our ancient Indian traditions should be preserved and that education should be accessible to all scholars.

Recognizing the challenges in accessing higher oriental education, Varni Ji embarked on a remarkable mission. He saw the need to establish a Jain educational institution in Varanasi to provide advanced education, particularly in the subtle and logical philosophies like Jain philosophy. Starting with a donation of one rupee, he used it to purchase sixty-four postcards, which he distributed to potential Jain benefactors. With the generous support of influential Jain philanthropists such as Babu Devkumar from Arrah, Seth Manek Chand J.P. from Bombay, and Sir Seth Hukamchand from Indore, he successfully established the renowned Syadvad Mahavidyalaya in Varanasi in 1905 and became its first student. It was unprecedented for the founder of an educational institution to also be its first student. His name also remains recorded as the first student in the register of Syadvad Mahavidyalaya. Hundreds of students have taken education there and have become top scholars, and great monks and *bhattachāras*.

Varni Ji's influence wasn't limited to Varanasi. He played a key role in the establishment of the Satark Sudha Tarangini Jain Pathshala, which later transformed into the well-known Ganesh Digambar Jain Sanskrit Vidyalaya at Sagar. With the intention of comprehensive study and teaching of various subjects like Sanskrit literature, grammar, nyaya, philosophy, religion, etc. in the entire Jain society, he established educational centers in many places like Varanasi, Aaharji, Papauraji, Baruasagar, Lalitpur, Khatauli, Sagar, Jabalpur, Drongiri, etc.

Varni Ji's vision extended beyond establishing institutions. He actively advocated for the inclusion of Jain studies in the mainstream academic arena. Through his great effort and with the help of Pt. Motilal Nehru, Jainology found a place in the curriculum of the prestigious Banaras Hindu University. This marked a significant step towards legitimizing Jain studies and fostering a wider appreciation for Jain thought. This exemplifies his commitment to spreading Jain education across different regions of India. Some prominent institutions established by Jain Society under his leadership are as follows:

1. Syadvad Mahavidyalaya in Varanasi, 1905
2. Satark Sudha Tarangini Jain Pathshala in Sagar, Samvat 2435, now known as Ganesh Digambar Jain Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya
3. Mahavir Jain Sanskrit Uchcharat Madhyamik Vidyalaya, Lalitpur, 1917

4. Jain Pathshala during the Viman Festival in Madhavrao Mahavir Digambar Jain Sanskrit Vidyalaya, Sadhumal (Madhavra), UP
5. Parshwanath Jain Sanskrit Vidyalaya in Baruasagar
6. Jain Vidyalaya Dronagiri on Vaishakh Krishna Saptami, Vira Nirvana Samvat 2485
7. Jain Gurukul Madhia Ji in Jabalpur at Shiksha Mandir
8. Shantinath Jain Vidyalaya in Ahar Ji
9. Jain Vidyalaya in Shahpur
10. Shri Kundkund Jain (PG) College, Khatauli, 1926
11. Shri Parshvanath Brahmacharya Ashram, Jain Gurukul, Khurai, 1944
12. Kanya Vidyalaya, Katni
13. Shri Ganesh Prasad Varni Snatak Mahavidyalaya, Ghuwara
14. Sanskrit Vidyalaya in Etawah
15. Varni Jain Inter College, Lalitpur
16. Vari Jain Gurukul, Madhiyaji, Jabalpur
17. Udaseen Ashram, Isari

Apart from these, there are many other institutions to which Varni Ji contributed wholeheartedly in their establishment and consolidation. He fulfilled his vision and because of him, many scholars are working responsibly in leading positions of education and administration, and are gaining fame across the world. Notably, the hallmark of Varni Ji's approach was his selflessness. Once institutions were established, he readily handed administrative responsibilities to local volunteers.

Symbol of Spirituality

Varni Ji was also a symbol of spirituality. His deep contemplation and continuous study of Kundakunda's timeless text *Samayasāra* were especially praiseworthy. He not only uplifted society and the nation through his teachings but also imbibed these teachings and principles in his life. Understanding the essence of the scriptures, Varni Ji widely applied the philosophy of *anekāntavāda* in his life. He made important decisions related to his life under deep contemplation and thoughts derived from extensive study of the principles of reality. His principle of *anekāntavāda* was not limited to words only but was visible at every step of his life journey.

At the age of 87, sensing his imminent end, he moved to Isari Udasin Ashram near SammedShikhar, which he himself had helped establish. He also got initiated as a Digambar Jain monk and was called Ganeshkirti. He adopted the path of *sallekhanā* (voluntary death) in Isari towards the end.

Literary Contribution

His autobiography *Merī Jīvana Gāthā*, in two volumes, published by Shri Ganesh Varni Digambar Jain Sansthan, Varanasi is a major source of information on the Jain society of his time. The institute also published the Hindi explanation of Samayasāra by Varni Ji in 1969.

Varni Ji's entire life was a manifestation of his ideals. He lived in the world but beyond worldly desires, he delved deep into the profound study of humanity and humaneness beyond superficial appearances. His utterances resonate with relevance, depth, and accuracy even in today's era. In his frail and emaciated body resided boundless spiritual strength, which became the inspiration for his determination. He was a great visionary who, while living in the physical world, remained untouched by it, constantly embodying lofty aspirations of serving humanity, thereby illuminating the entire era.

Today, the Government of India has taken the initiative to promote the study and teaching of oriental languages and knowledge mentioned in National Education Policy 2020. Behind this is the long struggle done by Varni Ji. His exemplary contribution to the preservation and promotion of oriental languages like Sanskrit, Prakrit, and Apabhramsa will always be inscribed in golden letters in history. Today, there is a need to follow in his footsteps and preserve and promote the institutions established by him.

Devoting his life to the dissemination of education and societal improvement, his illustrious contributions to the field of education deserve recognition. His unblemished personality merits an indelible place in India's educational and social history. The Jain community, the Jain academia, and the society at large honor his legacy on his 151st birth anniversary on September 29, 2024, by walking the path he illuminated, benefiting others through his teachings, and expressing our gratitude and genuine homage to this great soul for his numerous contributions to education, dissemination of knowledge of Jainism, and societal betterment.