

THE VISIONARY Shri M.P. Shah



Meghjbhai was born on 15th September 1904 in Dabasang village, 18 miles from Jamnagar. His parents, Ranibai and Pethrajibhai, were not rich monetarily, but had very rich values of life. They were religious, yet broad minded, and had a good reputation in society.

Meghjbhai studied up to fifth standard in the village school and was offered the job of a teacher with a starting pay of Rs. 8/- per month. While teaching the names of international cities, a dream to do business in foreign countries was visualized by him.

At the age of 14 Meghjbhai decided to leave for East Africa; his parents borrowed money to buy his tickets. At Bombay port, when the ship was ready to sail to Mombasa, Kenya, Meghjbhai's belongings were stolen. People, instead of helping, laughed and passed sarcastic remarks about the loss of his passport, money and clothes. Without losing courage, he learnt a lesson to be careful at all time. An ordinary man submits to circumstances but an extra-ordinary man rises above them. He came back home and his mother, Ranibai, gave her ornaments as security for money to buy another ticket and Meghjbhai landed in Mombasa in 1919.

He joined as an accountant in a well known firm and toiled day in and day out. Through hard work, he mastered the art of writing account books within 2-3 morithb. His starting salary was a mere Rs. 250/- per annum. Satisfied with his work, without Meghjbhai requesting an increase, the employer raised the salary to Rs. 1,500/- per annum.

Yet, the young man, standing at life's crossroads, decided on an independent business path. In 1922, Meghjbhai, with his two brothers, started a retail business with Rs. 185 borrowed from well wishers. They moved from village to village to sell home products viz. hair oil and vaseline. Shortly, shops were opened in Nairobi and Mbale. In the early 1930s, an aluminum factory was established and the business of extracting tannin from the skin of wattle trees was developed on the bank of River Thika, Within 31 years, 55 limited companies were set up in East Africa and India and he was very successful.

After Meghjbhai's first wife expired, Meghjbhai married Maniben, who took a deep interest in charitable activities. He was also supported by the Collector of Jamnagar, Mr. J. K. Gohel, and Mr. C.U. Shah in his charitable activities.

In 1948, heavy turbulence on a flight to Bombay brought a turning point in his life. Meghjbhai decided to retire, which he did in 1953, and, thereafter, he devoted his time, energy and money to charitable and social work. Meghjbhai's donations in East Africa were generous indeed; there was hardly a publicly-funded school or hospital in Kenya to which he had not given a donation. In addition, he was a donor and the President of the committee established in East Africa to help the drought victims in Bengal in 1943. He was Jain by religion, but secular by nature. For his Oshwal community he established a boarding institution in Jamnagar, a girls' school in Nairobi and a lecture hall in Thika. Meghjbhai's views on Jainism and its benefit to mankind were appreciated at the 20th Jain Svetambar Conference held in Mumbai in 1957.

In 1954, after retirement from business, a large wave of charity began for education and medical relief. He preferred to give large donations for new institutions which be handed over to the government for its proper administration.

Almost daily, there was news of the laying of a foundation stone for primary schools, health centres and hostels for backward classes in Saurashtra. Within an hour, he agreed with the then C.M. of Saurashtra, Shri Dhebarbhai, to donate Rupees 60 lakhs to start a medical college in Jamnagar and other institutions in Saurashtra. When the P.M., Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, visited Meghji bhai's Jamnagar residence, he donated a cheque for starting the Kamala Nehru Hospital.

He was very quick in taking farsighted decisions. He agreed to make donations for a Cancer Hospital, Town Hall, Law College, Commerce College, Arts College, Women's Development Institute, T.B. Hospital, Leprosy Hospital, Libraries, Orphanage, Old people Home, Jain Temple, Blind School and Sanatoriums etc. in various towns and villages of Gujarat. The donation for social work in 1954 was more than one crore rupees in Gujarat and more than 1.5 crore rupees in India and Africa. The total of Meghji bhai's donations in today's values would be about 100 crore rupees.

In Africa, he started primary schools and gave scholarships. He helped create the Gandhi Memorial Academy in Kenya. He started a large hospital in Nairobi open to all races. His family has donated in the U.K. for the Jain Centre, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Hammersmith Hospital, Vegetarian Home, Geological Museum, Oshwal Association of the U.K. and Sangam.

Meghji bhai donated humbly as part of his duty to society. He symbolized the feeling of "trusteeship" advised by Gandhiji, and "aparigraha" of Jainism.

Meghji bhai passed away on 30th July, 1964. But the torch of his good deeds has been carried forward by his wife, five daughters, and two sons, Vipin and Anant, who follow the path shown by this Visionary.

----Meghraj Charitable Foundation