

## Ācārya Sushil Kumar

ĀCĀRYA Sushil Kumar (1926-94) is one of the most revered Jain monks of the twentieth century. He was a pioneer Jain monk who traveled outside of India to globally promote Jain philosophy and its message of peace and brotherhood. He was the architect of a systematic endeavor to establish the Jain tradition outside of India – especially in North America. In doing so, he worked with religious and non-religious leaders from around the world to educate them of the rich heritage of Jain Dharma.

Fondly addressed as Gurujī by his followers, Ācārya Sushil Kumar was born on 15 June 1926 in a small village called Shikhopur (now known as Sushil Garh) in Haryana, India. His parents, Pandit Sunehara Singh and Bharati Devi, who were Hindu brahmins, named him Sardar Singh. From the age of seven, he started living with his father’s sister and her husband. From there, he eventually traveled to Jagraon – a small town in Punjab – to visit and seek blessings from a Jain monk, Muni Chhote Lal. Young Sardar Singh was so mesmerized by the inspirational discourses on Jain Dharma by Muni Chhote Lal that he decided, and got his uncle’s consent, to remain with the monk.

Before his eighth birthday, Sardar Singh started living like an ascetic under the guidance of his *guru*, Muni Chhote Lal. He immersed himself in the study of Jain Dharma, mastering Ardhamāgadhī, Prākṛt, and Sanskrit – the languages in which Jain scriptures are written – and began memorizing all the major Jain scriptures with astounding comprehension. Sardar Singh studied and developed a thorough understanding of the *namokāra mahāmantra* at an early age. He learned the science and spirituality behind the *mantra*’s formulation and the immense powers associated with its chanting. He mastered the art of awakening those powers and continued to have an uncompromising faith in *namokāra mahāmantra*. Gurujī practiced it till his last breath.

Once, during meditation Sardar Singh envisioned another Jain monk, Muni Roop Chand – a profoundly spiritual mendicant who had lived several decades earlier and whose memorial (*samādhi*) was located in Jagraon, the town where Guruji had the first inspiration to become an ascetic. Thereafter, he started experiencing frequent appearances of Muni Roop Chand and would receive exquisite teachings and expositions on Jain philosophy. Soon, Sardar Singh began to venerate Muni Roop Chand as his spiritual *guru*. In one such appearance, Muni Roop Chand prompted him to get ordained as a Jain monk and Sardar Singh decided to pursue the suggested path of austerity. He sought and obtained consent from his parents for the same. With the blessings of his worldly *guru*, Muni Chhote Lal, young Sardar Singh was formally initiated as a Jain monk on 20 April 1942, at the age of fifteen years. For this auspicious event, he chose Jagraon, the very city where Muni Roop Chand had first appeared to him. From now on, Sardar Singh would be known as Muni Sushil Kumar.

As a monk, Guruji started spending all of his time in personal spiritual growth. In addition to learning Jain scriptures, he underwent intense yogic training and self-practices to master meditation, *yoga*, and *samādhi* (deep state of meditation). He mastered the science of astrology, *mantras*, breathing (*prāṇāyāma*), and chanting. In conjunction with this rigorous practice, he earned various advanced Indian academic degrees in religion, literature, and history. Along with all this, he developed extraordinary oratory skills to eloquently deliver Lord Mahāvīra’s message.

By the mid-1950s, well before the age of thirty years, Guruji had become one of the foremost religious figures of India and was recognized as an effective purveyor of the fundamental truth (*tattva*) and wisdom. He traveled all across India on foot, as required by the vows of Jain monkhood. It is estimated that he walked over sixty thousand miles before starting to use mechanized vehicles in 1975. Guruji’s discourses were routinely attended by thousands of people from all walks of life. In particular, the young and educated people were attracted to him because of his rational and highly logical explanations. He was rapidly becoming a force of progressive change for wider proliferation of Jain Dharma, especially among the young Jains. He undertook several initiatives for the benefit of the Jain community, which

included promoting the use of harmless technologies (such as microphones and electric lights) by the ascetics, engaging youth in spiritual activities, promoting the Jain way of life, women's education, and facilitating the unification of the tradition-splintered monk groups.

Guruji's charismatic personality and spiritual acumen were winning admiration from all the religious, cultural, and social circles, including the prime minister, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, and president, Dr. Rajendra Prasad of India. His influence had extended beyond the borders of India. In November 1957, at the age of just thirty-one years, he organized the first World Religions Conference in New Delhi, where people of all faiths from around the world participated. Over 100,000 people attended the opening session. Guruji organized six more successful World Religions Conferences in the subsequent twenty years.

Guruji firmly believed in the profound impact of spirituality on the cultural, social, and political fabric of the society. He had unwavering belief that only genuine *ahimsā* (non-violence) and peaceful means could provide lasting solutions for human disputes. He emphasized *ahimsā* in all walks of life and worked tirelessly to foster the sense of universal brotherhood. Guruji was revered by the followers of all faiths. They trusted his objective and impartial judgments and regularly sought his guidance in amicably resolving their inter-faith conflicts.

Guruji's global reach and popularity were rising but he was continually distressed by the escalating violence and conflicts around the world. He was convinced that the world needed to hear Lord Mahāvīra's message of *ahimsā* more than ever before. One day, during meditation, Manidhāri Jinchandra Suri Dādā Guru, a legendary twelfth-century Jain monk reverently called Dādā Guru by his devotees, appeared and implored him to travel outside of India to bring Lord Mahāvīra's teachings to the world stage. This was Guruji's calling. He decided to travel abroad as a messenger of peace to stimulate Jains residing in foreign lands to organize and raise the awareness of Jain teachings. But before that, he had to make a significant decision – to travel using mechanized means forbidden for Jain monks (despite the growing evidence that Jain monks had used means such as boats during Lord Pārśvanātha and Lord Mahāvīra's times). He made this bold decision, keeping in mind the larger good of humanity.

Guruji received blessings and tacit support from Jain and non-Jain monks and *ācāryas* for success in this remarkable endeavor. He picked the second day after his forty-ninth birthday as the day to embark on this mission.

On the historic day of 17 June 1975, Muni Sushil Kumar boarded an airplane bound for the United States. He was about to go on the mission of his lifetime – to promote Lord Mahāvīra’s message where it was needed the most – for which he had become a monk in the first place. This was such a momentous day that a special session of India’s parliament was convened to give him a warm send-off. At the time of his departure, large crowds had gathered on the route and at the airport to show their admiration and enthusiasm for the mission he was undertaking.

Thereafter, Guruji embarked upon non-stop travel to all the large and small cities, towns, and villages around the world. He motivated Jain communities to practice Jain Dharma and educate people around them to promote the philosophy. Very soon, with his inspiration, there were over fifty Jain institutions and temples in North America, and more in other parts of the world. In doing so, he steadfastly remained focused on the fundamentals of Jain doctrine without indulging in any sectarian or ritualistic nuances. Education was always in the forefront of Guruji’s thinking, and to that end, he worked with several universities of the world to start offering courses on Jain philosophy. In addition, he helped secure a permanent representation of Jains on the global platform at the United Nations.

All along, Guruji maintained vigilance to the furtherance of his efforts in India as well. Over the years, with his inspiration, several institutions had been established in India. He regularly visited India and stayed connected with those institutions. In 1980, with the blessings from the supreme Jain Ācārya, Guruji was conferred the esteemed religious title of Jain Ācārya by the revered Ācārya Amar Muni (Kaviji) in a function attended by several renowned religious dignitaries. Thereafter, Guruji founded Arhat Jain Sangha, an order of ascetics from all Jain traditions and sects, which was honorably felicitated in March 1987 by the president of India, Giani Zail Singh, in a gathering of many prominent Jain and other scholars and religious leaders.

Guruji had always envisaged the creation of a profound and everlasting center of pilgrimage (*tīrtha*) outside of India, where all Jains and like-minded

people would visit to spiritually reinvigorate themselves and stay connected with the Jain heritage. The historic moment came in 1983 when Gurujī inspired the founding of Siddhachalam in New Jersey (United States). He had pictured Siddhachalam to be the center of spirituality, education, and culture to promote the rich heritage of Jain Dharma. Over the years, Siddhachalam has flourished into a true spiritual abode. With over 121 acres of wooded land, sprinkled with temples and chambers for spiritual, religious, meditation, and *yoga* practices, Siddhachalam provides a perfectly natural environment of peace and tranquility.

Ācārya Sushil Kumar’s influence was soaring along with his continuing success in his mission. His followers believed he would continue on this path for many more years, but destiny had something different in store. On 22 April 1994, while at his ashram in New Delhi, Gurujī delivered his normal discourse and chanted in the morning. Thereafter, in the afternoon, to everyone’s overwhelming shock, his soul left his body for its next heavenly journey. Gurujī bid his final farewell blissfully at the age of sixty-seven years in a meditative state sitting in a lotus posture – considered to be a truly auspicious state.

Interestingly, the week of 20 April was of great significance in Gurujī’s life: 20 April 1942 was the day of his initiation into monkhood, and 22 April 1994 was the day his soul departed for its heavenly abode.

To summarize, Ācārya Sushil Kumar comprehended Jain Dharma and genuinely personified it at the most fundamental level. As the young Sardar Singh, he immersed himself in the profound teachings of Lord Mahāvīra. He persevered to learn all aspects of monastic life and modeled his life to be a true Jain. As Muni Sushil Kumar, he reached the summit of his popularity at a very young age but did not allow it to affect his reverence and stalwart commitment to Jain Dharma, its originators, and the *gurus* from whom he learnt it. The highest-ranking individuals from all walks of life regularly visited and bowed in front of him, but he remained humble without letting his ego get in the way. He was revered by hundreds of thousands of people in India, but happily gave all that up and came to America so he could propound the values of *ahimsā* and peace in a global forum – sometimes to only a handful of people at a time. As a monk, and then as an *ācārya*, he inspired the founding of a

multitude of great spiritual institutions, but never let his name precede the institutions. He had no attachments to, or personal expectations from, those institutions. He never put himself ahead of Jain Dharma, the *tīrthaṅkaras*, or his *gurus*. Ācārya Sushil Kumar possessed profound wisdom and the clearest understanding of the fundamental truth (*tattva*), yet he considered himself to be a dutiful disciple of the great teachers. He considered his life to be a journey of learning and self-improvement, and he lived it exactly that way.

The writings and discourses by a profoundly wise thinker, spiritual practitioner, and apostle of peace like Gurujī serve as a great source for learning about Jain Dharma. This perception became the motivating force behind the creation of this book. It has been prepared with inspiration from his lifelong work and the thoughtful interpretation of his teachings.