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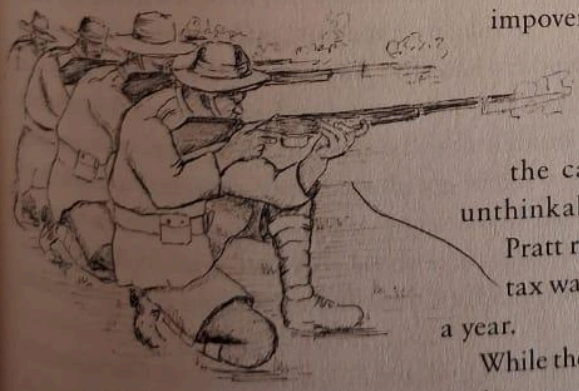
THE PEOPLE'S CHAMPION

Other victories followed, all in a sense minor, but all adding to Gandhi's prestige. He was fast becoming the people's champion, the first court of appeal for the oppressed and ill-used in India's grass roots. At the end of 1917, the peasants of the Kheda district in Gujarat, who had just seen their crops ruined for the third successive year by torrential rains, asked Gandhi to help them win a suspension of the land tax levied by the British.

Warned by Frederick Pratt, the British Commissioner, that the land tax was the very basis of the Raj's rule, as it had been in the time of the Mughals, and that amending it was therefore unthinkable, Gandhi nonetheless urged the peasants to pledge not to pay it. He then persuaded Patel, who by now frequently ate with him at the Sabarmati ashram and whose own father was himself an impoverished peasant proprietor in the same district, to lead the campaign. The unthinkable happened. Pratt relented and the tax was suspended for a year.



GURKHA SOLDIERS

While the Kheda dispute was going on, Gandhi had

involved himself in a very different kind of satyagraha in the city of Ahmedabad. Here, friendship and a passion for justice clashed uncomfortably. The city's underpaid textile workers were campaigning for a long-overdue increase in their wages, and turned to Gandhi for his counsel.

They had claimed 35 per cent. The mill owners, of whom Ambalal Sarabhai was the largest, refused to pay more than 20 per cent. Gandhi examined the workers' case, judged their demands to be justified and advised them to strike, but only if they agreed to abide by rules of behaviour which he laid down: no violence and no attacks on workers who chose to go on working. The employers responded by announcing a lockout.

Gandhi had clearly put at risk his friendship with Ambalal Sarabhai, and the rift was made worse by the fact that he was being advised by Ambalal's radical sister, Anasuyabehn, who sometimes gave him a lift in her car. As the weeks went by, some of the strikers took umbrage at a sense that their mentors were happy to indulge in what seemed to them like a plutocratic lifestyle while they were close to starvation. When the employers lifted the lockout and offered strikers who went back to work a 25 per cent increase, a number did so.

Gandhi, sensing the danger of disillusion and defeat, called a mass meeting and played what turned out to be his trump card. He would promise not to ride in a car again, and would not eat another meal until the workers had won their 35 per cent if they agreed to continue the strike. Ambalal complained, quite justifiably, that this was moral blackmail, but it did the trick. The employers accepted arbitration, the workers got their 35 per cent and a permanent arbitration machinery was set up. It says a great deal for the Sarabhai family, who are still a force to be reckoned with in Ahmedabad, that they remained, and still remain, ardent supporters of Gandhi and his ideas.

That was all well and good. Yet these years after Gandhi's return to India were marked by grievous misjudgements as well as