# CHAPTER X

SEPTEMBER i ith, 1906

N early three thousand persons filled the Imperial Theatre

in Johannesburg. The big hall throbbed with the din of

voices which spoke the Tamil and Telugu languages of

southern India, Gujarati and Hindi. The few women wore saris.

The men wore European and Indian clothes; some had Hindu

turbans and caps, some Moslem headgear. Among them were rich

merchants, miners, lawyers, indentured labourers, waiters, rick¬

shaw boys, domestic servants, hucksters and poor shopkeepers.

Many were delegates representing the eighteen thousand Indians

of the Transvaal, now a British colony; they were meeting to

decide what to do about pending discriminatory enactments

against Indians. Abdul Gani, chairman of the Transvaal British-

Indian Association and the manager of a big business firm, pre¬

sided. Sheth Haji Habib delivered the main address. Mohandas

K. Gandhi sat on the platform.

Gandhi had convened the meeting. On returning from service

to the Zulus, and after acquainting Kasturbai with his celibacy

vow, he had rushed off to Johannesburg in answer to a summons

from the Indian community. The Transvaal Government Gazette of

August 22nd, 1906, had printed the draft of an ordinance to be

submitted to the legislature. If adopted, Gandhi decided, it would

spell ‘absolute ruin for the Indians of South Africa . . . Better die

than submit to such a law’.

‘But how are we to die?’ Gandhi wondered. He had no idea

what to do. He only knew that the ordinance must be resisted;

nowhere in the world, he believed, had free men been subjected

to such humiliating, restrictive legislation.

The proposed ordinance required all Indian men and women,

and children over eight, to register with the authorities, submit to

finger-printing and accept a certificate which they were to carry

with them at all times. A person who failed to register and leave

his fingerprints lost his right of residence and could be imprisoned,

fined, or deported from the Transvaal. An Indian apprehended

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on the street or anywhere without certificate could likewise be

imprisoned, fined or deported even though he owned valuable

property or engaged in important commercial transactions.

The Indians were incensed. This act was directed specifically

against Indians and was therefore an affront to them and to India.

If passed it would be the beginning of similar laws in other parts

of South Africa; in the end, no Indian could remain in South

Africa. Moreover, the ordinance would permit a police officer to

accost an Indian woman on the street or enter her home and ask

for her registration document. In view of the complete or partial

aloofness in which Indian women lived, this feature of the measure

was highly offensive both to Moslems and Hindus. ‘If anyone

came forward to demand a certificate from my wife,’ exclaimed an

irate Indian at a preliminary committee meeting attended by

Gandhi, T would shoot him on the spot and take the

consequences.’

That was the mood of the mass meeting in the Imperial Theatre.

Orchestra, balcony and gallery were crowded long before the

chairman opened the proceedings. Angry speeches in four

languages stirred the volatile audience to a high emotional pitch

and then Sheth Haji Habib read a resolution, which Gandhi had

helped to prepare, demanding non-compliance with the registra¬

tion provisions. Haji Habib called on the assembly to adopt it,

but not in the usual manner. They must vote, he urged, ‘with

God as their witness’.

Gandhi started. A sensitive ear and a keen intuition quickly

told him that this was an extraordinary event. An action with

God as witness was a religious vow which could not be broken.

It was not the ordinary motion passed by a show of hands ai a

public function and immediately forgotten.

Gandhi then spoke. He begged them to consider coolly what

they were doing. ‘Notwithstanding the differences of nomencla¬

ture in Hinduism and Islam,’ he declared, ‘we all believe in one

and the same God. To pledge ourselves or to take an oath in

the name of God or with Him as a witness is not something to

be trifled with. If having taken such an oath we violate our pledge

we are guilty before God and man. Personally, I hold that a man

who deliberately and knowingly takes a pledge and breaks it

forfeits his manhood ... A man who lightly pledges his word and

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then breaks it becomes a man of straw and fits himself for punish¬

ment here as well as hereafter.’

Having warned them, he tried to stir them. If ever a crisis in

community affairs warranted a vow, now was the time. Caution

had its place but also its limits. ‘The government has taken leave

of all sense of decency. We will be revealing our unworthiness

and cowardice if we cannot stake our all in the face of the con¬

flagration that envelops us. . .

The purpose of the resolution was not to impress the outside

world. A vote in favour constituted a personal vow and each one

of them had to decide whether he possessed the inner strength to

keep it. In consequence of the vow, they might be jailed; in

prison they might be beaten and insulted. They might go hungry

and be exposed to heat and cold. They might lose their jobs, their

wealth. They might be deported. The struggle might last a long

time, years. ‘But I can boldly declare and with certainty,’

Gandhi exclaimed, ‘that so long as there is even a handful of men

true to their pledge, there can be only one end to the struggle —

and that is victory.’

The audience applauded. He lowered his voice. Many in the

hall, moved by the enthusiasm and indignation which dominated

the meeting, might pledge themselves that evening and repent the

next morning or the next month. Perhaps only a handful would

be left to face the final contest with the powerful government. To

him it would make no difference. ‘There is only one course open

to me,’ Gandhi asserted, ‘to die but not to submit to the law. Even

if the unlikely happened and everyone else flinched, leaving me to

face the music alone, I am confident that I will never violate my

pledge. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not saying this

out of vanity. But I wish to put you and especially the leaders on

the platform, on your guard ... If you have not the will or the

ability to stand firm even when you are perfectly isolated you

must not only not take the pledge but you must declare your

opposition before the resolution is put. . . Although we are going

to take the pledge in a body, no one may imagine that default on

the part of one or of many can absolve the rest from their obliga¬

tion. Every one must be true to his pledge even unto death, no

matter what others do.’

Gandhi sat down. The chairman added his sobering words.

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Then the vote was taken. Everyone present rose, raised his hand

and swore to God not to obey the proposed anti-Indian ordinance

if it became law.

The next day, September 12 th, the Imperial Theatre was

completely destroyed by fire. Many Indians regarded it as an

omen that the ordinance would meet a similar fate. To Gandhi

it was a coincidence. He did not believe in such omens. Fate did

not beckon to Gandhi with mute signs. The future spoke in him

through that awesome, Himalayan self-assurance which he dis¬

played at the meeting. He knew he could stand alone.

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