# CHAPTER II

‘SIT DOWN, GANDHI’

U nder the impact of the first World War, the tide of

protest rose higher in India and even moderate Congress¬

men began to ask for home-rule. In September 1915, Mrs.

Annie Besant, a remarkable Englishwoman who has written her

name permanently into the history of modern India, announced

the formation of a Home-Rule League and persuaded the veteran

Dadabhai to become its president.

Mrs. Besant was then approaching seventy. Born in 1847, she

had lived a stormy life as atheist, socialist, women’s rights advocate

and theosophist. She regarded herself as a reincarnation ofHypathia

of Alexandria and Giordano Bruno, both of whom met violent

deaths, and in her autobiography she says she longed to be the

‘bride of Christ’. Though a foreigner, she was an accepted and

respected leader of India. An eloquent speaker, trenchant writer

and brave politician, she edited Indian publications and made

India her home. She died in 1933.

In 1892, Mrs. Besant started a school at Benares, the holy city

on the Ganges, and in 1916 this institution, guided by Pandit

Malaviya, was expanded into the Hindu University Central

College. An illustrious gathering of notables attended the three-

day opening ceremonies in February 1916. The Viceroy was

there and so were numerous bejewelled maharajas, maharanis,

rajas and high officials in all their dazzling panoply.

On February 4th Gandhi addressed the meeting. It broke up

before he could finish.

India had never heard such a forthright, unvarnished speech.

Gandhi spared no one, least of all those present. ‘His Highness,

the Maharaja, who presided yesterday over our deliberations,’

Gandhi said, ‘spoke about the poverty of India. Other speakers

laid great stress upon it. But what did we witness in the great

pandal in which the foundation ceremony was performed by the

Viceroy [Lord Hardinge]? Certainly a most gorgeous show, an

exhibition of jewellery which made a splendid feast for the eyes of

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the greatest jeweller who chose to come from Paris. I compare

with the richly bedecked noblemen the millions of the poor. And

I feel like saying to those noblemen: “There is no salvation for

India unless you strip yourselves of this jewellery and hold it in

trust for your countrymen in India.” ’

‘Hear, hear,’ students in the audience exclaimed. Many

dissented. Several princes walked out.

Gandhi was not deterred. ‘Whenever I hear of a great palace

rising in any great city of India,’ he went on, ‘be it in British

India or be it in the India ruled by our great chiefs, I become

jealous at once and say, “Oh, it is the money that has come from

the agriculturists” ... There cannot be much spirit of self-govern¬

ment about us,’ he exclaimed, ‘if we take away or allow others to

take away from the peasants almost the whole of the results of

their labour. Our salvation can only come through the farmer.

Neither the lawyers, nor the doctors, nor the rich landlords are

going to secure it.’ Congress beware!

Gandhi\* was unfurling his flag before the mighty ones of India.

It was the flag of the lowly.

‘If you of the student world to which my remarks are supposed

to be addressed this evening,’ Gandhi declared, ‘consider for one

moment that the spiritual life, for which this country is noted and

for which this country has no rival, can be. transmitted through

the lip, pray believe me you are wrong. You will never be able

merely through the lip to give the message that India, I hope, will

one day deliver to the world ... I venture to suggest t° you that

we have now reached almost the end of our resources in speech¬

making and it is not enough that our ears be feasted, that our

eyes be feasted, but it is necessary that our hearts have got

to be touched and that our hands and feet have got to be

moved.

‘It is a matter of deep humiliation and shame for us,’ Gandhi

continued, ‘that I am compelled this evening under the shadow

of this great college, and in this sacred city, to address my country¬

men in a language that is foreign to me.

‘Suppose,’ Gandhi mused, ‘that we had been receiving educa¬

tion during the past fifty years through our vernaculars, what

should we be today? We should have today a free India, we should

have our educated men not as if they were foreigners in their own

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land, but speaking to the heart of the nation; they would be

working amongst the poorest of the poor, and whatsoever they

would have gained during the past fifty years would be a heritage

of the nation.’

This sentiment provoked scattered applause.

Turning to the essence of his philosophy, Gandhi, using words

that shocked the assembled aristocrats, said, ‘No paper contribu¬

tion will ever give us self-government. No amount of speeches

will ever make us fit for self-government. It is only our conduct

that will fit us for it. And how are we trying to govern ourselves?

. . . If you find me this evening speaking without reserve, pray

consider that you are only sharing the thoughts of a man who

allows himself to think audibly, and if you think that I seem to

transgress the limits that courtesy imposes upon me, pardon me

for the liberty I may be taking. I visited the Viswanath Temple

last evening and as I was walking through those lanes these were

the thoughts that touched me ... I speak feelingly as a Hindu.

Is it right that the lanes of our sacred temple should be as dirty as

they are? The houses round about are built anyhow. The lanes

are narrow and tortuous. If even our temples are not models of

roominess and cleanliness what can our self-government be? Shall

our temples be abodes of holiness, cleanliness and peace as soon

as the British have retired from India . . .?’

Gandhi stayed close to earth; even the most delicate ears should

hear the facts of life. ‘It is not comforting to think,’ he said, ‘that

people walk about the streets of Indian Bombay under the

perpetual fear of dwellers in the storeyed buildings spitting upon

them.’ Many Indian eyebrows were lifted. Was it right for an

Indian to say this with Englishmen present? And what had spit¬

ting to do with the Benares University or independence?

Gandhi sensed the audience’s antagonism, yet he was relentless.

He travelled a good deal in third-class railway carriages, he said.

Conditions were not altogether the fault of the management.

Indians spat where others had to sleep. Students misbehave in

the trains. ‘They can speak English,’ he commented sarcastically,

‘and they have worn Norfolk jackets and therefore claim the right

to force their way in and command seating accommodation ... I

am setting my heart bare. Surely we must set these things right

in our progress towards self-government.’

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The day’s ration of unpalatable thoughts was still incomplete.

There remained the unmentionable. ‘It is my bounden duty,’

Gandhi asserted, ‘to refer to what agitated our minds these last

two or three days. All of us have had many anxious moments

while the Viceroy was going through the streets of Benares.

There were detectives stationed in many places.’ A movement

went through the invited guests. This was not to be talked about

in public. It was for Gandhi. ‘We were horrified/ he revealed.

‘We asked ourselves, “Why this distrust? Is it not better that

even Lord Hardinge should die than live a living death?” But a

representative of the mighty Sovereign may not. He might find it

necessary even to live a living death. But why was it necessary to

impose these detectives on us?’

Gandhi not only asked the unpalatable question. He gave the

more unpalatable reply. ‘We may foam, we may fret,’ Gandhi

said about the Indian reaction to the detectives, ‘we may resent,

but let us not forget that the Jndia of today in her impatience has

produced an army of anarchists. I am myself an anarchist, but

of another type . . . Their anarchism ... is a sign of fear. If we

trust and fear God, we shall have to fear no one, not Maharajas,

not Viceroys, not the detectives, not even’King George.’

The audience was growing unruly and arguments broke out in

various parts of the assembly. Gandhi uttered a few more

sentences when Mrs. Besant, who presided, called out to him:

‘Please stop it.’

Gandhi turned around to her and said, ‘I await your orders. If

you consider that, by my speaking as I am, I am not serving the

country and the empire I shall certainly stop.’

Mrs. Besant, coldly: ‘Please explain your object.’

Gandhi: ‘I am explaining my object. I simply . . . ’ He could

not be heard above the din.

‘Go on,’ some shouted.

‘Sit down, Gandhi,’ others shouted.

Decorum restored, Gandhi defended Mrs. Besant. It is because

‘she loves India so well and she considers that I am erring in

thinking audibly before you young men’. But he preferred to

speak frankly. ‘I am turning the searchlight towards ourselves . . .

It is well to take the blame sometimes.’

At this moment, many dignitaries left the platform, the commo¬

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tion mounted, and Gandhi had to stop. Mrs. Besant adjourned

the meeting.

From Benares Gandhi went home to Sabarmati.

Distances are great in India and communications bad; few

people can read and fewer possess radios. Therefore the ear of

India is big and sensitive. In 1916, the ear began to catch the

voice of a man who was courageous and indiscreet, a little man

who lived like a poor man and defended the poor to the face of

the rich, a holy man in an ashram.

Gandhi was not yet a national figure. The hundreds of millions

did not know him. But the fame of the new Mahatma was spread¬

ing. India stands in awe of power and wealth. But it,loves the

humble servant of the poor. Possessions, elephants, jewels, armies,

palaces win India’s obedience. Sacrifice and renunciation win

its heart.

Matthew Arnold wrote:

The East bowed low before the blast

In patient, deep disdain.

And it bowed low, with the same disdain, before the East that

coveted riches and might.

The Indian, therefore, understands as well as' appreciates re¬

nunciation. India has many monks and ascetics. But Gandhi’s

renunciation caused a larger echo because he opposed renuncia¬

tion ‘for the mere sake of renunciation’. ‘A mother’, he observed

in a letter, ‘would never by choice sleep in a wet bed but she would

gladly do so in order to spare the dry bed for her child.’

Gandhi renounced in order to serve.

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