# CHAPTER V

FIRST FAST

G andhi would have remained to assist the sharecroppers

of Champaran in getting schools, health service, etc.,

but unrest among textile workers brought him back to

Ahmedabad.

The millhands of Ahmedabad were underpaid and overworked.

They wanted more money and better conditions. Their case,

Gandhi said, ‘was strong’.

Gandhi was a close friend of Ambalal Sarabhai, the biggest

textile manufacturer of Ahmedabad. Sarabhai was the leader of

the millowners.

Having studied the problem, Gandhi urged the factory owners

to arbitrate the dispute. They rejected arbitration.

Gandhi accordingly advised the workmen to go on strike.

They followed his advice. Gandhi directed the strike. He was

helped actively by Anasuya, sister of Ambalal Sarabhai.

Gandhi had exacted a solemn pledge from the workmen not

to return to work until the employers accepted labour’s demands

or agreed to arbitration. Every day Gandhi met the strikers under

a spreading banyan tree by the banks of the Sabarmati. Thou¬

sands came to hear him. He exhorted them to be peaceful and

to abide by the pledge. From these meetings, they marched off

into town carrying banners which read, ek tek (keep the

pledge) .

Meanwhile, Gandhi remained in touch with the employers.

Would they submit to arbitration? They again refused.

The strike dragged on. The strikers began to weaken. Atten¬

dance at meetings dropped, and when Gandhi asked them, as

he did each day, to reaffirm the pledge, their reply sounded less

resolute. Scabs had been working in some of the mills. Gandhi

feared violence. He was also afraid that, pledges notwithstanding,

the workers might return to the mills.

To Gandhi it was ‘inconceivable’ that they should return. ‘Was

it pride,’ he asked, ‘or was it my love of the labourers and my

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passionate regard for truth that was at the back of this feeling —

who can say?’

Whatever the feeling, it overpowered Gandhi, and one morning,

at the regular strikers’ open-air assembly under the banyan

branches, he declared that if they did not continue the strike until

they won T will not touch any food’.

He had not intended announcing the fast. The words just came

to him spontaneously without previous thought. He was as sur¬

prised as his listeners. Many of them cried. Anasuya Sarabhai

was beside herself with grief.

‘We will fast with you,’ some workers exclaimed. No, said

Gandhi, they need merely stay out on strike. As for himself, he

would eat nothing until the strike was settled.

Gandhi had fasted before for religious and personal reasons.

This was his first fast in a public cause.

On the first day of the fast, Anasuya and several strike leaders

fasted too. But Gandhi persuaded them to desist and look after

the workmen. With the assistance of Vallabhbhai Patel, a

prosperous Ahmedabad lawyer, and others, temporary employ¬

ment was found for some workers. A number of them helped to

erect new buildings at Gandhi’s Sabarmati Ashram.

Gandhi saw the dilemma in which the fast placed him. The

fast was designed to keep the workers loyal to their pledge. But

it constituted pressure on the millowners. Ambalal Sarabhai was

a devoted follower of the Mahatma and so was Ambalal’s wife,

Sarladevi. She, Gandhi wrote, ‘was attached to me with the

affection of a blood-sister’.

Gandhi told the millowners who called on him that they must

not be influenced by his fast; it was not directed against them. He

said he was a striker and strikers’ representative and should be

treated as such. But to them he was Mahatma Gandhi. Three

days after the fast commenced, the millowners accepted arbitra¬

tion, and the strike, which had lasted twenty-one days, was

called off.

Gandhi thought he fasted to steady the strikers. The failure of

the strike would cow these and other workers, and he disliked

cowards. His sympathies were with the poor and downtrodden

in whom he wished to arouse a dignified, peaceful protest. Yet

he probably would have fasted against the workers had they

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opposed arbitration. The principle of arbitration is essential to

Gandhi’s philosophy; it eliminates violence and the compulsion

which may be present even in peaceful struggles.^ It teaches

people tolerance and conciliation. Gandhi fasted not for anybody

or against anybody, but for a creative idea.

‘Fasting for the sake of personal gain is nothing short of intimi¬

dation,’ Gandhi affirmed. Gandhi obviously had nothing personal

to gain from the Ahmedabad fast. The employers knew that. Yet

they were probably intimidated by it. They did not want to be

the cause of Gandhi’s death. But if it had been the Governor of

Bombay who was fasting they might have said, ‘Let him die’. ‘I

fasted to reform those who loved me,’ Gandhi said on a subse¬

quent occasion, and he added, ‘You cannot fast against a tyrant.’

The millowners were intimidated because they had a deep affec¬

tion for Gandhi, and when they saw his selfless sacrifice they may

have felt ashamed of their own selfishness. A fast for personal

benefit would not arouse such emotions.

T can fast against my father to cure him of a vice,’ Gandhi ex¬

plained, ‘but I may not in order to get from him an inheritance.’

Gandhi fasted not so much to raise wages as to cure the employers

of their unwarranted objection to a system of arbitration which

would promote peace in the textile industry.

The fast, in fact, brought into being a system of arbitration

which survives to this day; on a visit to Ahmedabad in 1948, I

found capitalists and trade unions convinced of its efficacy.

Gandhi had participated in its work as permanent member of the

panel of arbitrators.

In September 1936, for instance, the Millowners Association of

Ahmedabad asked the Textile Labour Association to accept a 20

per cent cut in wages. Labour refused, and the case went to

arbitration. The employers appointed an owner named Kastur-

bhai Lajbhai as their representative and labour appointed

Mahatma Gandhi; the impartial umpire chairman was Sir

Govindrao Madgavkar.

The millowners submitted that their plants, employing approxi¬

mately 80,000 hands, were suffering from foreign competition and

the world economic depression and could not afford to pay existing

rates.

Having studied the industry’s books and other pertinent data,

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Gandhi affirmed that ‘no cut should be made till the mills have

ceased to make any profit and are obliged to fall back upon their

capital for continuing the industry. There should be no cut till

the wages have reached the level adequate for maintenance. It

is possible to conceive a time when the workmen have begun to

regard the industry as if it were their own property and they

would then be prepared to help it out of a crisis by taking the barest

maintenance consisting of a dry crust and working night and day.

That would be a voluntary arrangement. Such cases are irrelevant

to the present consideration 5 .

Moreover, Gandhi wrote, ‘It is vital to the well-being of the

industry that workmen should be regarded as equals with the

shareholders and that they have therefore every right to possess

an accurate knowledge of the transactions of the mills. 5

Finally, Gandhi suggested a register of all millhands ‘acceptable

to both parties 5 , after which ‘the eustom of taking labour through

any agency other than the Textile Labour Association should be

stopped 5 . This approximates to the modern, Western concept of

the ‘closed shop 5 .

The impartial chairman agreed with Gandhi and ruled against

the wage reduction which, accordingly, was not allowed.

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