# CHAPTER VI

GOAT’S MILK

‘h“T~1 here can be no partnership between the brav.e and the

effeminate. We are regarded as a cowardly people. If we

JL want to become free from that reproach, we should learn

the use of arms.’

Mahatma Gandhi spoke those words in July 1918, while

recruiting Indians for the British Army during the first World

War. ‘We should become partners of the Empire,’ he added; ‘a

dominion like Canada, South Africa and Australia. To bring

about such a thing,’ he declared, ‘we should have the ability to

defend ourselves, that is, the ability to bear arms and to use

them ... If we want to learn the use of arms with the greatest

possible dispatch, it is our duty to enlist ourselves in the Army.’

Gandhi delivered this speech in Kheda district of his native

Gujarat region in western India. In March, he had led a Satya-

graha movement in Kheda for the remission of taxes on peasants

who had suffered a crop failure. The civil disobedience campaign

was partly successful: the well-to-do farmers paid taxes but the

poor did not.

The peasants had followed him in civil resistance and fed him

and given him their carts for transportation. But now, when he

came to recruit, they would not even let him hire a cart and they

refused to feed him and his small party.

Gandhi records their heckling: ‘You are a votary of non¬

violence, how can you ask us to take up arms?’ ‘What good has

the Government done for India?’

‘Partnership in the Empire is our definite goal,’ he replied.

‘We should suffer to the utmost of our ability and even lay down

our lives to defend the Empire. If the Empire perishes, with it

perishes our cherished aspirations.’

His audiences said India would fight in return for new free¬

doms. No, Gandhi insisted, it was evil to take advantage of Bri¬

tain’s war-time predicament. He trusted England.

The district had six hundred villages which averaged one

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thousand inhabitants each. If every village gave twenty recruits,

Gandhi computed, that would make 12,000. ‘If they fall on the

battlefield,’ he exclaimed, ‘they will immortalize themselves,

their villages and their country.’ In the same recruiting-sergeant

language, Gandhi asked the women to encourage the men.

His efforts failed and he only succeeded in making himself

seriously ill. He had been living on peanut butter and lemons.

This slim diet and the exertion, plus, no doubt, the frustration of

failure, gave him dysentery.

He fasted. He refused medicine. He refused an injection. ‘My

ignorance of injections was in those days quite ridiculous,’ he

said. He thought they were serums.

This was the first important illness in his life. His body was

wasting away. His nerves gave way; he felt sure he would die. A

medical practitioner (‘a crank like myself’, Gandhi called him)

suggested the ice treatment. Anything, as long as it was outside,

Gandhi said.

The ice helped. Appetite returned. The ‘crank’ suggested

sterilized eggs with no life in them. Gandhi remained obdurate;

no eggs. Doctors advised milk. But the cruel manner of milking

cows and buffaloes had impelled Gandhi to abjure milk for ever.

‘No,’ he answered. ‘I have taken a vow never to drink milk.’

Here Kasturbai put in a stern word. ‘But surely,’ she said, ‘you

cannot have any objection to goat’s milk.’

Gandhi wanted to live. He was not immune, he confessed, to

that ‘subtlest of temptations, the desire to serve’. Had he been up

to par physically his will might have been strong enough to

reject Kasturbai’s suggestion. But the very fact that he could not

resist the suggestion showed how badly he needed the milk.

Taking milk, he wrote later, was ‘a breach of pledge’. It

always bothered him; it revealed a weakness. Nevertheless, he

continued to be a goat-milk drinker to his last supper.

Kasturbai’s insistence is the likely key to Gandhi’s willingness to

break the vow. Gandhi feared neither man nor government,

neither prison nor poverty nor death. But he did fear his wife.

Perhaps it was fear mixed with guilt; he did not want to hurt her;

he had hurt her enough.

G. Ramchandran, a devoted Gandhian, has written a ‘sheaf

of anecdotes’ about the master for which G. Rajagopalachari,

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father of Devadas Gandhi’s wife and first Governor-General of

independent India, vouches as ‘true’. Ramchandran, who lived

in Sabarmati Ashram for a year, recalls that one day, when

Kasturbai had cleaned up the kitchen after lunch and gone into

the adjoining room for a nap, Gandhi came to the kitchen and,

beckoning to a young male assistant of Ba, or mother, as Kasturbai

was called, told him in a whisper that some guests were arriving

in an hour and would have to be fed. Putting a finger to his lips

as he glanced towards Ba’s room, Gandhi told the young man what

to do and added, ‘Do not disturb her . . . Send for Ba only when

she is needed. And mind you, don’t irritate her. You will deserve

a prize if she does not go for me.’

Gandhi, writes Ramchandran, ‘was a little nervous lest Ba

should wake up suddenly and burst upon him’. So the husband

left the kitchen as quickly as he could, no doubt feeling a husband’s

relief at getting beyond fury’s reach. But Gandhi’s hope of escap¬

ing from his kitchen crime without detection crashed when a

brass platter fell to the floor. After prayers that evening, Ba,

arms akimbo, confronted the Mahatma; she had a fierce temper:

Why hadn’t he awakened her?

‘Ba,’ Gandhi apologized, ‘I am afraid of you on such occasions.’

She laughed incredulously. ‘You afraid of me?’

‘And yet that was the truth,’ Ramchandran comments.

In his debilitated state during the dysentery, he was less than

ever inclined to oppose her. Thereafter, for thirty years, Gandhi

drank goat’s milk.

Gandhi’s readiness to recruit for the British army was another

weakness. I asked him about it in 1942. ‘I had just returned from

South Africa,’ he explained. ‘I hadn’t yet found my feet. I was

not sure of my ground.’ He had come to the unbridgeable gulf

between nationalism and pacifism and did not know what to do.

He might have taken the easy course and refused to support the

war. Most Indian nationalists did that. They said, India is not

free, therefore we will not fight. But this was naked nationalism

hiding behind the transparent skirt of pacifism; it meant, if India

had self-government we would enlist to kill the enemy.

The issue Gandhi faced in 1918 was universal and eternal:

What does a citizen do when his country is invaded? For his

conscience’ sake, a pacifist may discommode his body and go to

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jail, or he may bravely attack conscription and other military

measures. This can be a valuable educational demonstration.

Suppose, however, the entire nation emulated his example and

refused to fight? (Suppose the British had refused to fight in

1940?)

For Indians in 1918, two positions were possible.

A 100 per cent Indian pacifist would have abstained from the

war and preferred perpetual colonial status, for as a colony

India could deny war-time help to the enslaving motherland,

whereas India as a nation would have to prepare for war or face

destruction.

Gandhi could not take this position because he wanted a free

Indian nation.

A 100 per cent Indian nationalist would have abstained from

the first World War, saying it was Britain’s war, but would have

prepared to make war on Britain for the liberation of India.

Gandhi could not take this position because he still hoped for a

non-violent settlement with Britain about the future of India.

In 1918, therefore, Gandhi compromised his nationalism by

accepting the Empire and hoping to attain freedom gradually and

peacefully; having done that, his compelling honesty forced him

to compromise his pacifism and recruit for the war.

The political Gandhi was thus caught in the ineradicable con¬

flict between nationalism and pacifism. The religious Gandhi

tried to resolve it by preaching and practising non-violence and

the universal brotherhood of man.

In this dichotomy lay the tragedies of Gandhi’s life.

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