# CHAPTER XIII

THE ‘SILENT’ YEAR

I n the silent year there were fifty-two silent Mondays when

Gandhi did not speak. On those days, he would listen to an

interviewer and occasionally tear off a corner of a piece of

paper and pencil a few words in reply. Since this was not the best

way to conduct a conversation, the weekly day of silence gave him

some privacy.

In 1942, I inquired of Gandhi what lay behind his day of

silence.

‘It happened when I was being torn to pieces,’ he explained.

‘I was working very hard, travelling in hot trains, incessantly

speaking at many meetings and being approached in trains and

elsewhere by thousands of people who asked questions, made

pleas and wished to pray with me. I wanted to rest for one day a

week. So I instituted the day of silence. Later of course I clothed

it with all kinds of virtues and gave it a spiritual cloak. But the

motivation was really nothing more than that I wanted to have

a day off.’

He liked to laugh at himself. Questioned further, he would have

agreed, however, that silence offered an opportunity for spiritual

exercise.

Apart from the fifty-two Mondays, the ‘silent’ year was in no

sense silent. He did not travel, he addressed no mass meetings;

but he talked, wrote, received visitors and maintained a corres¬

pondence with thousands of persons in India and other countries.

On April 1st, 1926, Lord Irwin (who later became Lord

Halifax, Foreign Secretary of the United Kingdom and British

Ambassador to Washington) arrived in India to succeed Lord

Reading as Viceroy. But the fateful change was not mentioned in

Young India , nor did Gandhi seem to have noted it in any other

way. He was still a non-co-operator working on the masses instead

of on the Viceroy. His motto was Swaraj from within.

One extremely important change, however, was noticeable in

Gandhi’s attitude: he began to suspect that Britain’s policy

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militated against Hindu-Moslem friendship. ‘The government of

India’, he wrote on August 12th, 1926, ‘is based on distrust. Dis¬

trust involves favouritism and favouritism must breed division. 5

The Government appeared to prefer Moslems.

Gandhi had thought that Hindu-Moslem amity would bring

self-rule to India. Now he felt that Hindu-Moslem amity was

almost impossible while the British, ‘the third party 5 , were there.

Thus religious peace, the pre-requisite of independence, could

only follow independence.

This dilemma notwithstanding, Gandhi remained hopeful:

‘The unity will come in spite of ourselves . . . Where man’s effort

may fail God’s will succeed and His government is not based

upon “divide and rule” policy. 5 Meanwhile, there had been

bloody fighting between the two religious communities in several

parts of India.

Gandhi’s prescription was better treatment, of the Moslem

minority by the Hindu majority and non-violence by both.

Hindus violently accused him of being pro-Moslem.

But the year’s fiercest controversy involved dogs. For months,

the storm raged about the Mahatma’s head.

Ambalal Sarabhai, the big textile millowner of Ahmedabad,

rounded up sixty stray dogs that frequented his large industrial

properties and had them destroyed.

Having destroyed the dogs, Sarabhai was disturbed and shared

his anguish with the Mahatma. ‘What else could be done?’ said

Gandhi.

The Ahmedabad Humanitarian Society learned of this conver¬

sation and turned on Gandhi. ‘Is that true?’ it demanded in a

letter sent to the ashram. Did he say, ‘What else could be done?

. . . And if so, what does it mean? ...

‘When Hinduism forbids the taking of the life of any living

being,’ the letter fumed, ‘when it declares it to be a sin, do you

think it right to kill rabid dogs for the reason that they would

bite human beings and by biting other dogs make them also rabid?’

Gandhi published the letter in Young India under the caption ‘Is

This Humanity?’ The letter and his reply filled the entire first

page and half the second page. Yes, it was true. He had said,

‘What else could be done?’ and having thought it over, ‘I . . . feel

that my reply was quite proper. . . .

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‘Imperfect, erring mortals as we are/ he declared in explana¬

tion, ‘there is no course open to us but the destruction of rabid

dogs. At times we may be faced with the unavoidable duty of

killing a man who is found in the act of killing people. 5

The next issue of Young India gave its front page to the same

question under the same caption, ‘Is This Humanity? 5 The first

article had brought a deluge of ‘angry letters 5 . Worse, people

came to Gandhi to insult him. ‘At an hour 5 , he wrote, ‘when

after a hard day’s work I was about to retire to bed, three friends

invaded me, infringed the religion of non-violence in the name of

humanity and engaged me in a discussion on it. 5 Gandhi used the

word ‘friends’ only because he considered everybody a friend.

One of the ‘friends’ was a Jain and he ‘betrayed anger, bitterness

and arrogance 5 .

Gandhi had grown up under the influence of the absolute non¬

violence of Jainism. ‘Many take me to be a Jain, 5 Gandhi

declared. But Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, ‘was an incarna¬

tion of compassion, of non-violence. How I wish his votaries were

votaries also of non-violence 5 .

Gandhi stuck to his guns. ‘The multiplication of dogs is 5 , he

wrote, ‘unnecessary. A roving dog without an owner is a danger

to society and a swarm of them is a menace to its very existence. 5

If people were really religious, dogs would have owners. ‘There

is a regular science of dog-keeping in the West. . . We should

learn it. 5

The dog mail continued to come; ‘some of the hostile critics

have transgressed the limits of deco'rum 5 , Gandhi asserted in the

next Young India which devoted almost three pages to the matter.

One man had demanded an interview and then, without permis¬

sion, published the substance of it in a leaflet which he was

hawking in the streets. ‘Does he seek to teach me in this manner? 5

Gandhi wondered. He who is angry is guilty of violence. How

can such a man teach me non-violence?

‘Even so, 5 Gandhi continued, ‘the hostile critics are doing me a

service. They teach me to examine myself. They afford me an

opportunity to see if I am free from the reaction of anger. And

when I go to the root of their anger I find nothing but love. 5 How

did he arrive at that strange conclusion? Because, he said, ‘They

had attributed to me non-violence as they understand it. Now

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they find me acting in a contrary manner and are angry with me.

' T do not mind their outburst of anger, 5 he asserted I appreciate

the motive behind it. I must try to reason with them patiently...

He reasoned thus: It is a sin to feed stray dogs. ‘It is a false

sense of compassion. It is an insult to a starving dog to throw a

crumb at him. Roving dogs do not indicate the civilization or

compassion of the society, they betray on the contrary the ignor¬

ance and lethargy of its members. The lower animals are our

brethren. I include among them the lion and the tiger. We do

not know how to live with these carnivorous beasts and poisonous

reptiles because of our ignorance. When man learns better he

will learn to befriend even these. Today he does not even know

how to befriend a man of a different religion or from a different

country. 5

Gandhi probably suspected that some of the dog-lovers would

howl less if sixty Moslems or Englishmen had been killed.

The humane man, Gandhi wrote, would finance a society to

keep the stray dogs; or he would harbour some himself. But if the

State did not care for them and if householders would not keep

them, the dogs had to be destroyed. ‘The dogs in India 5 , Gandhi

mourned, ‘are today in as bad a plight as the decrepit animals

and men in the land. 5

(Then why not kill the decrepit cows?)

‘Taking life may be a duty, 5 Gandhi proceeded. ‘Suppose a

man runs amok and goes furiously about, sword in hand and

killing any one who comes his way and no one dares to capture

him alive. Any one who dispatched this lunatiq will earn the

gratitude of the community. . . .’

Many correspondents demanded personal replies and threat¬

ened to attack him if they got none. He said he could not answer

the mountain of letters that had reached him on this subject, but

he would continue to deal with them in his magazines. Four

more issues of Young India gave several columns each to the dog

problem. In one Ahmedabad hospital, Gandhi reported, 1117

cases of hydrophobia had been treated in 1925 and 990 in 1926.

Again he urged India to follow the West in this matter; ‘If any

one thinks that the people in the West are innocent of humanity he

is sadly mistaken. 5 And then comes a sting: ‘The ideal of humanity

m the West is perhaps lower, but their practice of it is very much

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more thorough than ours. We rest content with a lofty ideal and

are slow or lazy in its practice. We are wrapped in deep darkness,

as is evident from our paupers, cattle and other animals. They are

eloquent of our irreligion rather than of religion.’

His pro-dog attitude showed he was under Western influence,

correspondents charged. Patiently he reasoned with the furious.

He condemned some features of Western civilization and had

learned from others, he told them. Moreover, opinions should be

judged by content not by their source.

‘Letters on this subject are still pouring in,’ Gandhi announced

in the third month of the controversy, but since their only con¬

tribution was venom he ignored them.

The dog fight established the record for heat in the ‘silent year’.

But a little calf also precipitated a storm. A young heifer in the

ashram fell ill. Gandhi tended it and watched it suffer and decided

it ought to be put to death. Kasturbai objected strenuously.

Then she must go and nurse the animal, Gandhi suggested. She

did and the animal’s torment convinced her. In Gandhi’s

presence, a doctor administered an injection which killed the

heifer. The protest mail was heavy and fierce. Gandhi insisted

he had done right.

Frank sex discussions filled many Letters to the Editor. ‘My

correspondence with young men on their private conduct’,

Gandhi wrote, ‘is increasing.’ They asked his advice.

Taking advantage of relative leisure in the ‘silent year’, Gandhi

read Havelock Ellis, Forel, Paul Bureau’s Toward Moral Bank¬

ruptcy and other European authorities on family and sex. His

interest in the sex life of Indians always remained high. He

believed that early and frequent sexual intercourse had a debilitat¬

ing effect on Indians; he understood the implications of the rapid

increase in his country’s population. (In the 1940s, the popula¬

tion of India was increasing five million each year.) He wrapped

this problem too in a spiritual cloak and, taking a leaf out of

sacred Hindu books, advocated chastity for religious reasons.

But the biological and economic aspects of the situation did not

escape him.

In many articles that came from his pen, or pencil, in ‘silent’

1926 and often thereafter, Gandhi consistently opposed the use of

contraceptives; they were a Western vice. But he did not oppose

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birth control. He always advocated birth control. The birth

control he favoured, however, was through self-control, through

the power of the mind over the body. ‘Self-control’, he wrote, ‘is

the surest and only method of regulating the birth rate.’ Without

such discipline, he contended, man was no better than a brute.

He maintained that abstinence for ever or for long periods was

neither physically nor psychologically harmful. Gandhi and his

closest ashram associates practised Brahmacharya, complete

continence; people in general, he said, might indulge in sex for

purposes of procreation, but not to gratify animal passion. He

denied ‘that sexual indulgence for its own sake is a human

necessity’.

A correspondent wrote: ‘In my case, three weeks seem to be the

utmost period of beneficial abstention. At the end of that period I

usually feel a heaviness of body, a restlessness both of body and

mind, leading to bad temper. Relief is obtained either by normal

coitus or nature herself coming to the rescue by an involuntary

discharge. Far from feeling weak or nervous, I become the next

morning calm and light and am able to proceed to my work

with added gusto.’ Many similar cases were brought to Gandhi’s

notice.

Dipping into his personal experience, Gandhi said in reply,

‘Ability to retain and assimilate the vital liquid is a matter of

long training.’ Once achieved, it strengthens body and mind.

The vital liquid, ‘capable of producing such a wonderful being as

man, cannot but, when properly conserved, be transmuted into

matchless energy and strength’.

Realistically, in Harijan magazine of September 14th, 1935,

Gandhi wrote, ‘Assuming that birth control by artificial aids is

justifiable under certain conditions, it seems to be utterly im¬

practicable of application among the millions.’ India was poor

and ignorant because she was too poor and ignorant to apply

birth control by contraceptives. Therefore, Gandhi urged other

means of reducing the population. Contraceptives led to over-

indulgence with the result that a ‘society that has already become

enervated through a variety of causes will become still further

enervated by the adoption of artificial methods’.

Gandhi endeavoured to delay the marriage of his own sons.

Times without number, he attacked the institution of child marri-

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age: ‘Early marriages are a fruitful source of life, adding to the

population . . He conceded, of course, that the earth should

produce enough to support all who are born on it, but, as a reli¬

gious man with a strong practical sense, he saw the necessity of

population limitation. ‘If’, he wrote to Charles Freer Andrews,

‘I could find a way of stopping procreation in a civil and voluntary

manner whilst India remains in the present miserable state I

would do so today.’ The only manner he countenanced was

mental discipline. To the strong and saintly he proposed lifelong

Bramacharya; to the mass, he proposed late marriage, in the mid¬

twenties if possible and self-control thereafter. In the ashram, the

minimum marriage age for girls was twenty-one. He recognized

human frailties but insisted that unspiced food, the right kind of

clothes, the right kind of work, walking, gymnastics, unspiced

literature, prayer, pure films (Indian films to this day prohibit

kissing on the screen) and devotion to God would relieve the

tension in modern life and conduce to the sexual self-control

which most persons unthinkingly consider unnatural. Gandhi’s

writings on these matters, though they appeared in his small-

circulation Young India and Gujarat Navajivan , were, like almost

everything he said, reprinted in the entire Indian press.

A cognate question attracted Gandhi’s special attention during

the ‘silent’ year: child widows. According to the official British

census for 1921, which he cited, there were in India 11,892

widows less than five years old; 85,037 widows between the ages

of five and ten; and 232,147 widows between ten and fifteen;

together 329,076 widows under sixteen.

‘The existence of girl widows’, Gandhi exclaimed, ‘is a blot

upon Hinduism.’ Parents would marry their baby daughters to

baby sons of other families, or even to old men and if the husband

died, either in infancy or of senility, the widow could not, under

Hindu law, remarry. Defiantly, Gandhi declared, ‘I consider

remarriage of virgin widows not only desirable but the bounden

duty of all parents who happen to have such widowed daughters.’

Some of these youthful widows were no longer virgins but pros¬

titutes. ‘The remedy in anticipation,’ he wrote, ‘is to prevent early

marriages.’ To those bigoted Hindus who, loyal to every immoral

custom, defended the proscription against second marriage of

child widows, Gandhi retorted, ‘They were never married at alt.’

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The wedding of a child is a sacrilege, not a sacred rite. His deepest

feeling about child widows was expressed in one sweet sentence,

‘They are strangers to love.’ Chastity had to be the deliberate and

voluntary act of a mature person, not the imposition of cruel

parents on children. Gandhi wanted all human beings to know

love. But a widow, or widower, who had married as an adult

should not remarry, he said; they had tasted love. This proscrip¬

tion constituted another birth-control technique.

Protection of the cow, protection of Indians in South Africa

where race hate was again rampant, prohibition and world peace

also excited Gandhi’s reforming zeal during his Sabbatical year.

Occasionally, some proverbs dropped from his pen: ‘Any

secrecy hinders the real spirit of democracy’; ‘If we could erase

the “Fs” and “Mine’s” from religion, politics, economics, etc.,

we should be free and bring heaven on earth.’ Occasionally, too,

he made brief excursions into religion, but there was remarkably

little discussion in print about God, metaphysics and kindred

topics. One thought he did leave with his readers: ‘Rationalists

are admirable beings,’ he wrote in an article on the efficacy of

prayer; ‘rationalism is a hideous monster when it claims for itself

omnipotence. Attribution of omnipotence to reason is as bad a

piece of idolatry as is worship of stick and stone believing it to

be God ... I do not know a single rationalist who has never done

anything in simple faith . . . But we all know millions of human

beings living their more or less orderly lives because of their child¬

like faith in the Maker of us all. That very faith is a prayer ... I

plead not for the suppression of reason, but for due recognition

of that in us which sanctions reason itself.’

‘Mankind cannot live by logic alone, but also needs poetry,’ he

once wrote. Gandhi frequently left the field of sensory perception

and rational mental processes for that middle zone of faith, in¬

stinct, intuition and love, but he never wandered away from it

into the rarefied realm of mystic messages, miracles, hallucinations,

prophecy and other unaccountable manifestations of mind and

body. ‘Whilst he did not rule out the authenticity of supra-

sensuous phenomena,’ says one of his closest disciples, ‘he very

strongly disapproved of pursuing them.’ He judged men and

events by the criteria of cold facts and invited others to judge him

rationally. He did not wish to influence people by mystic radia-

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tion. His estimate of himself was severely sober. His work was

practical and its goal was practical success. He told Muriel Lester,

an Englishwoman, that he ‘never heard a voice, saw a vision, or

had some recognized experience of God’. No mystic experience

had been vouchsafed to him. His guide was reason on the wing

of faith.

Gandhi’s reputation abroad was spreading. Romain Rolland,

the French author, wrote a book about him. Many invitations

reached him, especially from America, to come on a visit. He

rejected them. ‘My reason is simple,’ he explained, ‘I have not

enough self-confidence to warrant my going to America. I have

no doubt that the movement for non-violence has come to stay.

I have no doubt whatsoever about its final success. But I cannot

give an ocular demonstration of the efficacy of non-violence.

Till then, I feel I must continue to preach from the narrower

Indian platform.’

Two American women, Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Langeloth, re¬

presenting the Fellowship of Faith, the League of Neighbours and

the Union of East and West, actually came to Sabarmati to

invite the Mahatma. First they cross-examined him: ‘Is it true

that you object to railways, steamships and other means of speedy

locomotion?’

‘It is and it is not,’ Gandhi replied patiently, for the thousandth

time, and urged them to read his Indian Home-Rule. More conversa¬

tion of the same kind followed. He was afraid, in the end, that

they did not understand his attitude to the machine and speed,

because they had to catch a train and left early.

Gandhi was in no hurry either personally or politically, and sat

still for a year. He seemed to enjoy his 1926 moratorium from

politics. It gave his body time to rest and his spirit a chance to

roam. He played more with the children. He participated in an

ashram spinning contest. He and Kasturbai, the oldest members

of the community, were beaten by the youngest, their grand¬

daughter. The announcement evoked great hilarity.

He cultivated his friends, Rajagopalachari, the lawyer with the

razor-edge brain; Mahadev Desai, who was a secretary and an

apostle; and ‘Charlie’ Andrews, two years Gandhi’s junior, whom

Gandhi called ‘The Good Samaritan’. He ‘is more than a blood

brother to me’, Gandhi said. ‘I do not think that I can claim a

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deeper attachment to anyone than to Mr. Andrews.’ The Hindu

saint had found no better saint than Andrews. The Christian

missionary had found no better Christian than Gandhi. Perhaps

the Indian and Englishman were brothers because they were truly

religious. Perhaps religion brought them together because

nationality did not separate them. ‘Each country’, Andrews said,

speaking of England and India, ‘has become equally dear to me.’

Gandhi declared, ‘I would not hurt England or Germany to serve

India.’ In a letter to Andrews dated Calcutta, December 27th,

1928, Gandhi wrote, ‘The most forward nationalists in India have

not been haters of the West or of England or in any other way

narrow . . . but they have been internationalists under the guise

of nationalism.’

Where nationalism does not divide, religion can make men

brothers.

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