# CHAPTER XIV

COLLAPSE

G andhi emerged from the year of silence with views un¬

changed. His programme was still Hindu-Moslem unity,

the removal of untouchability and the promotion of home-

spun. Indeed, Gandhi’s programme in its simplest terms remained

the same for decades. The vision of the future of India which he

outlined in 1909 in his booklet Indian Home-Rule guided him to the

end of his days. In 1921, at the height of the non-co-operation

movement, he had sent Andrews to tell the Viceroy that if the

Government would help promote home spinning and weaving in

the villages and suppress alcohol and opium he would drop non-

co-operation. The Government did not reply. He would have

settled for khadi and prohibition at any time in his career. But

khadi struck at British trade and prohibition at government

revenue.

Leaving Sabarmati Ashram in December 1926, Gandhi worked

his way from meeting to meeting till he reached Gauhati, in north¬

east India, in the province of Assam, to attend the annual session

of Congress. En route, he received word of a tragedy which horri¬

fied India. A young Moslem named Abdul Rashid had called on

Swami Shraddhanand, a well-known Hindu nationalist, and said

he wished to discuss religious problems with him. The Swami, or

priest, was ill in bed; his doctor had ordered complete repose.

When the Swami heard the altercation outside his room between his

servant and the insistent visitor he ordered the man to be admitted.

Inside, the Swami told Abdul Rashid that he would be glad to

talk with him as soon as he felt stronger. The Moslem asked for

water. When the servant left to fetch him a drink, Abdul Rashid

pulled out a revolver and fired several bullets into the Swami’s

breast, killing him.

The Moslem press had been attacking the Swami as a pro¬

ponent of Hindu domination of India. In an address to Congress,

Gandhi assured the Moslems that the Swami had not been their

enemy. He said Abdul Rashid was not guilty. The guilty ones

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were ‘those who excited feelings of hatred against one another’.

He referred to the assassin repeatedly as his ‘brother’.

The British too were brothers. Extreme nationalists at the Con¬

gress session moved a resolution in favour of independence and

the severance of all ties with England. Gandhi opposed it. ‘They

betray want of faith in human nature and therefore in themselves,’

he said. ‘Why do they think there can never be a change of heart

in those who are guiding the British Empire?’ If India were

dignified and strong, England would change.

Gandhi accordingly continued his efforts to strengthen the

nation from within; otherwise, resolutions in favour of indepen¬

dence were empty words and vain gestures.

Again, therefore, Gandhi toured the country. At meetings

where he saw a sector of the grounds set apart for untouchables

he squatted among them and challenged Brahmans and other

caste Hindus to come and do likewise. The Mahatma on active

service for India could not be disobeyed.

During some speeches, he would lift his left hand and open up

the five fingers. Taking the first finger between two fingers of his

right hand he would shake it and say, ‘This is equality for un¬

touchables,’ and even those who could not hear him would ask

for and get an explanation later on from those who had. Then

the second finger: ‘This is spinning.’ The third finger was

sobriety; no alcohol, no opium. The fourth was Hindu-Moslem

friendship. The fifth was equality for women. The hand was

bound to the body by the wrist. The wrist was non-violence.

The five virtues, through non-violence, would free the body of

each one of them and, hence, India.

Sometimes, if he was too tired or the crowd too noisy, he would

sit on the platform in silence till the audience, which often num¬

bered two hundred thousand, became quiet. He then continued

to sit in silence, and the men and women sat in silence, and he

touched his palms together to bless them, and smiled, and de¬

parted. This was communication without words, and the mass

silence was an exercise in self-control and self-searching, a step

therefore towards self-rule.

Thousands of townspeople came to meetings wearing khadi.

In one locality, the laundry men, the indispensable men of India,

refused to wash anything but homespun. A primitive tribe gave

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up alcohol when they heard it was the Mahatma’s wish. His

attacks on child marriage met with wider acceptance. Women

mixed with men at meetings.

But the Hindu-Moslem problem defied Gandhi’s efforts. ‘I

am helpless,’ he admitted. ‘I have now washed my hands. But

I am a believer in God . . . Something within tells me that Hindu-

Moslem unity will come sooner than we might care to hope, that

God will one day force it on us, ih spite of ourselves. That is why

I said that it has passed into the hands of God.’ This formula

comforted him, but it did not relax the tension. Hindus and Mos¬

lems were kidnapping one another’s womenfolk and children and

forcibly converting them.

From Calcutta, Gandhi moved down through Bihar to the

country of the Marathas, Tilak’s country. At Poona, the students

demanded that he should speak English; their language was

Marathi which Gandhi did not command. He started in English

and then switched to Hindustani, which he wanted to have

accepted as the national language. Some students were friendly;

one sold his gold medal for khadi. Some students were hostile.

In Bombay, however, the people overwhelmed him with kindness

and money. It was his own Gujarat region. Thence he returned

to Poona to take the train for Bangalore and a tour of the Carnatic,

in south-east India.

At the Poona station, Gandhi felt so weak he had to be carried

into the Bangalore train. His vision was blurred and he could

scarcely scribble an urgent note. Sleep that night refreshed him,

and the next day, at Kolhapur, in the Deccan princely states, he

addressed seven meetings: the untouchables insisted on their own

meetings and dragged Gandhi to their school. The women had a

special affair; the children too; the non-Brahmans; the Christians;

the khadi workers; the students. At the close of the final meeting,

Gandhi collapsed.

Yet he went on. The next day, he felt too ill to make speeches,

but he sat on the porch of his host’s house while multitudes passed.

Then he drove to a meeting to receive a purse of 8457 rupees for

khadi. At Belgaum, over a hundred miles from Kolhapur, he also

attended a meeting, but did not speak. Finally, a doctor per¬

suaded him that his condition was serious and he had to rest. He

was taken to a hill town swept by sea breezes.

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Under pressure from his friend and physician, Dr. Jivraj Mehta,

and others, Gandhi agreed to rest for two months. But why

couldn’t he go home to Sabarmati where his upkeep would cost

less money? He was told that the altitude and salubrious climate

would help him recover more quickly. He said he did not wish ‘to

vegetate’. Well, he could continue working on his autobiography

and do light reading.

‘What is light reading?’ Gandhi asked.

‘You must not spin,’ the doctor continued. ‘Your blood pressure

is too high.’ This raised a fierce protest.

‘Take my blood pressure before and after spinning,’ Gandhi

urged. ‘Besides, what a glorious death to die spinning.’ fie did

spin. But he agreed not to answer correspondence, not to work.

‘Well, my cart has stuck in the mire,’ he wrote the women of

Sabarmati Ashram. ‘Tomorrow it might break down beyond

hope of repair. What then? Gitaji [the Bhagavad Gita ] proclaims

that everyone that is born must die, and everyone that dies must

be born again. Everyone comes, repays part of his obligation,

and goes his way.’

The sale of khadi was medicine to Gandhi. The chief of the

native state and his wife came for a visit and bought some home-

spun. Devadas and Mahadev Desai went out to peddle khadi and

came back with purses full.

Soon Ghandi commenced to write articles for his two maga¬

zines. His blood pressure was down, he reported, ‘from 180 to

155, and from 155 to 150 which is normal for my age. I have

been walking for the last three days over one mile per day in two

periods...’ He suggested a fast; that would cure him. The doctors

dissuaded him with difficulty. They suggested recreation instead.

‘Like backgammon, or whist or bridge, or pingpong?’ Gandhi

laughed.

They could propose nothing definite.

‘So your proposal has ended in smoke,’ he teased. ‘It cannot be

otherwise. What can you suggest where all work is play . . .?’ He

had a proposition. ‘Get me a carpenter’s box of tools and broken

spinning wheels and I shall repair them, or crooked spindles and

I shall make them straight.’

During April 1927, he remained in the native state of Mysore,

recuperating. The prime minister of the state appeared for a visit,

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and in the course of the conversation he assured Gandhi that he

had no objection to the wearing of homespun by Mysore officials.

Gandhi went to inspect the Methodist Mission School for girls at

Bangalore, capital of Mysore. He told the teachers that E. Stanley

Jones, the American missionary, had promised him to introduce

spinning in the Methodist mission schools. He joked with the

pupils and asked them to wear khadi.

Dr. B. G. Roy, Gandhi’s physician in later years, and Dr.

Manchershah Gilder, an Indian who practised medicine in Bom¬

bay and London, have stated that Gandhi had a ‘slight stroke’ at

Kolhapur in March 1927. Neither found any physical after-effects.

Dr. Gilder, who was Gandhi’s heart specialist after 1932, said that

the Mahatma’s heart was stronger than in an average man his age.

He never knew Gandhi’s blood pressure to rise except when an

important decision was in the making. On one occasion, Gandhi

went to bed with high blood pressure; in the morning it was

normal, because, during the night, he had made up his mind on

a crucial question. The presence of irritating persons, or public

attacks on him, or concern about his work, Dr. Gilder declared,

never affected Gandhi’s blood pressure; only the self-wrangling

that preceded a decision brought on a rise.

The ‘slight stroke’ of 1927, accompanied by high blood pressure,

may have been due to overwork at a time when the political situa¬

tion did not permit Gandhi to reach a decision in favour of a new

civil disobedience campaign. From the moment he came out of

jail in 1924, Gandhi watched for an opportunity to renew non-

co-operation. This was his goal. Everything else was preparation

for it. More than ever, co-operation with the British, or even

obstruction to the British in the legislative assemblies, appeared

to him a waste of time.

Most co-operators were loyal to Gandhi. Vithalbhai Patel,

president of the national Legislative Assembly at New Delhi,

brother of Vallabhbhai Patel, Gandhi’s close associate, had been

sending more than half his handsome British salary to Gandhi

by cheque every month for constructive work. Others did like¬

wise. Civil disobedience, Gandhi felt, would unite co-operators

and non-co-operators. Only civil disobedience would impel the

British to yield real power; under dyarchy they yielded the

semblance of power.

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But ‘the present look of things’ between Hindus and Moslems,

Gandhi wrote in Young India of June 16th, 1927, was ‘ugly’. He

yearned to do something, perhaps to fast, in order to ‘melt and

change the stony hearts of Hindus and Moslems. But I have no

sign from God within to undertake the penance’.

Hindu-Moslem dissension, Gandhi said, proved that Indians

could not regulate their own affairs. Then what claim had they

on the British for more power? It was not enough to reply that

Britain made use of their division or even created it. Why did

Indians give England this advantage?

Gandhi put his faith in God; when all seemed lost perhaps the

British would help. They did.

Lord Irwin, the new Viceroy, had arrived in India in April

1926, at the age of forty-five, to relieve Reading. From his grand¬

father, the first Viscount Halifax, who had served in India and as

Secretary of State for India in Whitehall, he inherited a bond

with India. From his father he acquired an attachment to the

Church of England and High Church views. In fact, on his arrival,

on Good Friday, in Bombay, he postponed the ceremonies that

accompany the advent of a new Viceroy and went to church.

The choice of a religious man as Viceroy was regarded in some

quarters as auspicious for his five-year reign over a religious

country in which a Mahatma led the opposition.

But for nineteen months, Irwin sent no invitation to Gandhi nor

indicated any desire to discuss the Indian situation with the most

influential Indian. On October 26th, 1927, while filling speaker

engagements at Mangalore, on the west coast, a message reached

Gandhi that the Viceroy wished to see him on November 5th.

The Mahatma immediately broke off his tour and travelled the

1250 miles — a two-day train journey — to New Delhi. At the

appointed hour he was ushered into the presence of Lord Irwin.

He did not enter alone. The Viceroy had also asked Vithalbai

Patel, the president of the national Legislative Assembly, S.

Srinivasa Iyengar, the president of the Congress party for 1927,

and Dr. M. A. Ansari, the president-elect of Congress for 1928.

When the Indians had been seated, Irwin handed them a paper

announcing the impending arrival of an official British commission,

led by Sir John Simon, to report on Indian conditions and make

recommendations for political reforms.

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Having read the text, Gandhi looked up and waited. The

Viceroy said nothing.

Ts this the only business of our meeting?’ Gandhi asked.

‘Yes,’ replied the Viceroy.

That was the end of the interview. Silently, Gandhi returned to

southern India and from there went on to Ceylon to collect

money for khadi.

In the days following Irwin’s confrontation with Gandhi, other

Indian leaders were informed, in similar fashion, of the forth¬

coming visit of the Simon Commission. In no case was there any

discussion or elaboration. The Viceroy simply said that under

Section 84a of the Government of India Act of 1919, which pro¬

vided for ten-year surveys, a Statutory Commission consisting of

Sir John Simon and six other members of the British House of

Commons and House of Lords would soon arrive in India to

investigate and to suggest changes, if any were necessary, in the

Indian political system. Irwin expected Indians to testify before

the commission and submit proposals to it.

Irwin’s biographer, Alan Campbell Johnson, describes this

episode as ‘a deplorable lack of tact in the handling of the Indian

leaders’. The blame was shared by Irwin and Lord Birkenhead,

the Secretary of State for India in the British government. Birken¬

head, a brilliant lawyer, made Indian policy in Whitehall. In

doing so he was guided by an attitude epitomized in his pro¬

nouncement in the House of Lords in 1929. ‘What man in this

House’, Birkenhead asked rhetorically, ‘can say that he can see

in a generation, in two generations, in a hundred years, any pro¬

spect that the people of India will be in a position to assume con¬

trol of the Army, the Navy, the Civil Service, and to have a Gover¬

nor-General who will be responsible to the Indian government

and not to any authority in this country?’ The legal mind had no

eyes; yet he, with Irwin, ruled India.

The Simon Commission was the premature child of Birken¬

head’s brain. Under the Act of 1919, the commission might have

been created a year or two later, but a national election was

imminent in Britain, and Birkenhead feared that his Tory party

might be defeated by Labour, as indeed it was, in 1929. This

being the case, the Indians were all the more disappointed that

the Labour party should have lent itself to Birkenhead’s manoeuvre

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by allowing Major Clement R. Attlee, then a less-known M.P., to

serve with Simon.

The news of the Simon Commission astounded India. The

Commission would determine the fate of India, but it had no

Indian member. The British explained that it was a commission

of Parliament and must therefore consist of peers or M.P.s. But

there was an Indian peer, Lord Sinha. No, India did not accept

the explanation. Indians were being treated as ‘natives’; the

whites would come, look around, and decide the fate of the dumb,

brown Asiatics. Are these the fruits of co-operation, the Gandhian

non-co-operators scoffed.

Spontaneously, a movement sprang up throughout India not

to help the Simon Commission in its studies, nor to lay plans before

it. Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, a great Indian constitutional lawyer,

former member of the Viceroy’s Advisory Council, persuaded the

Liberal party of India to vote for boycott. The Hindu Mahasabha

wavered for a moment and then followed the lead of Pandit

Madan Malaviya into the boycott camp. Congress was of course

unanimous for boycott, and needed no promptings from Gandhi.

Mr. Jinnah, of the revived Moslem League, also seemed inclined

to join the boycott. Irwin, according to his biographer, ‘did his

utmost to bring Jinnah back into the fold and made a substantial

offer to him’. But a rude speech by Birkenhead challenging

Indians to produce ‘an agreed scheme’ of future government con¬

vinced Jinnah that the British were playing on Indian religious

divisions and caused him to spurn the Viceroy’s ‘substantial

offer’. One touch of Birkenhead made all Indians non-co-

operate.

Upon its arrival in Bombay on February 3rd, 1928, the Simon

Commission was greeted with black flags and processions shouting,

‘Go back, Simon.’ This slogan, chanted by Indians who some¬

times knew no other English words, rang in the commissioners’

ears throughout their stay in India. The boycott was political

and social. The commission was isolated.

Simon tried his hand at compromise. Irwin tempted and

cajoled. A few bitter or ambitious untouchables and a handful

of very minor politicians were induced to come before the

Simonites. But no representative Indian would see them. They

toiled honestly, and produced an intelligently edited compendium

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of valuable facts and statistics. It was a learned epitaph on British

rule.

The first Gandhi-Irwin interview of November 5th, 1927, stood

for inequality; the composition of the Simon Commission stood

for exclusion. Both principles angered Gandhi and the Indian

people.

By 1930, however, Gandhi had changed the relationship be¬

tween India and England to one of negotiation between hard

bargainers. By 1930, automatic Indian obedience to British fiat

was a thing of the past. Imperceptibly, in 1928, 1929 and 1930,

unknown even to themselves, and scarcely noticed by outsiders,

Indians became free men. The body still wore shackles; but the

spirit had escaped from prison. Gandhi had turned the key. No

general directing armies against an enemy ever moved with more

consummate skill than the saint armed with righteousness as his

shield and a moral cause as his spear. All of Gandhi’s years in

South Africa were preparation for the 1928-30 struggle; all his

work in India since 1915 prepared the Indian people for it. He

did not plan it that way. But in perspective his activities make a

delicate design.

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