# CHAPTER XIX

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ever was deck passenger accorded such a regal welcome;

‘judging from the warmth, cordiality and affection displayed

i at the reception, one would think that the Mahatma had re¬

turned with Swaraj in the hollow of his hand’, Subhas ChandraBose

remarked caustically. He had returned with his integrity; he had

not stepped down from the role of half-naked fakir who parleyed

as an equal with the mighty British Empire. This was the next

best thing to freedom, for it reflected the liberation of India’s

spirit. Since the Salt March, and especially since the Irwin-

Gandhi Pact, India felt free. Gandhi fed that feeling, and Indians

were grateful. Moreover, their Mahatma had come back safely

from the cold world across the sea.

India’s partial liberation was achieved in 1930-31, thanks to

Gandhi, Irwin and the British Labour government. But Irwin

was gone; and in October 1931, Ramsay MacDonald’s Labour

government had been supplanted by a Cabinet, headed by Mac¬

Donald, in which Conservatives predominated. Sir Samuel

Hoare, ‘an honest and frank-hearted Englishman’, according to

Gandhi, and an honest and frank Conservative, was Secretary of

State for India.

The new British government proceeded to attack India’s new

sense of freedom.

A full report was poured into Gandhi’s ear from the moment

he set foot on the Bombay quay on December 28th. By evening

he had a detailed picture of the ugly situation and conveyed it to

the two hundred thousand listeners whom he addressed, with the

aid of loudspeakers, on the vast Azad Maidan.

Jawaharlal Nehru and Tasadduq Sherwani, Moslem president

of the Congress organization of the United Provinces, had been

arrested two days earlier while travelling to Bombay to greet

Gandhi. Emergency Powers Ordinances had been promulgated

early in December in the United Provinces and in the North-west

Frontier Province and Bengal to deal with a widespread no-rent

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movement; they authorized the military to seize buildings, im¬

pound bank balances, confiscate wealth} arrest suspects without a

warrant, suspend court trials, deny bail and habeas corpus, with¬

draw mailing privileges from the press, disband political organiza¬

tions, and prohibit picketing and boycotting. ‘We are not playing

a game with artificial rules/ Sir Harry Haig, Home Member

(Minister of Interior) of the government of India, said in the

Assembly. ‘The question is whether the Congress is going to

impose its will on the whole country.’

‘All this,’ Gandhi told his Bombay audience, ‘I learned after

my landing here. I take it these are all Christmas gifts from Lord

Willingdon, our Christian Viceroy. For is it not a custom during

Christmas to exchange greetings and gifts? Something had to be

given me and this is what I have got.’ (He had not yet unwrapped

all the packages.)

The same evening he spoke to the Welfare of India League in

the Hotel Majestic. ‘I am not conscious of a single experience

throughout my three months’ stay in England and Europe’, he

asserted, ‘that made me feel that after all East is East and West is

West. On the contrary, I have been convinced more than ever

that human nature is much the same, no matter under what clime

it flourishes, and that if you approached people with trust and

affection you would have ten-fold trust and thousand-fold

affection returned to you.’

The members of the British government were friendly to him;

‘we parted as the best of friends . . . But when I come here I find

a different order of things altogether . . .’ He summarized the

extraordinary ordinances. ‘The Congress is charged with trying

to run a parallel government ... I assure you that I shall strain

every nerve to see if I would not tender co-operation on honour¬

able lines to induce the Government to withdraw or revise these

ordinances.’

The Government had no intention of letting Gandhi offer any¬

thing.

The day after his arrival, Gandhi telegraphed the Viceroy

deploring the ordinances and arrests and suggesting an interview.

The Viceroy’s secretary replied on the last day of the year; the

ordinances were justified by the activities of Congress against the

Government. The Viceroy would be ‘willing to see you and to

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give you his views as to the way in which you can best exert your

influence’, the secretary said. ‘But His Excellency feels bound to

emphasize that he will not be prepared to discuss with you mea¬

sures which the Government of India, with the full approval of

His Majesty’s Government, have found it necessary to adopt in

Bengal, the United Provinces and the N.W.F.P.’

The British raj would no longer parley with the rebel.

Gandhi’s rejoinder defended Congress and intimated that he

might have to start a civil disobedience campaign. The Viceroy’s

secretary answered sharply on January 2nd, 1932. ‘His Excel¬

lency and the government’, he wrote, ‘can hardly believe that

you or the Working Committee [Executive Committee of Con¬

gress] contemplate that His Excellency can invite you, with the

hope of any advantage, to an interview held under the threat of

the resumption of civil disobedience . . . nor can the Government

of India accept the position implied in your telegram that its

policy should be dependent on the judgment of yourself as to the

necessity of measures which the government has taken. . . .’

Willingdon was right. No autocracy can permit a private

citizen or organization to question its acts.

Gandhi replied on the same day. He had not threatened; he

had expressed an opinion. Moreover, he had negotiated with

Irwin, prior to the Delhi Pact, while civil disobedience was

actually in progress. He never thought the Government had to

depend on his judgment, ‘But I do submit,’ Gandhi wired, ‘that

any popular and constitutional government would always wel¬

come and consider sympathetically suggestions made by public

bodies and their representatives. . . .’

The Government ‘has banged the door in my face’, Gandhi

informed the. nation on January 3rd. The next day, the Govern¬

ment banged an iron door in his face: he was arrested — again,

as after the Salt March, under Regulation XXXV of 1827; again

he was His Majesty’s guest in Yeravda Jail. A few weeks earlier he

had been the guest of His and Her Majesty in Buckingham Palace.

The Government attack on Congress was fierce. Congress

organizations were closed and almost all leaders imprisoned; in

January, 14,800 persons were jailed for political reasons; in

February, 17,800. Winston Churchill declared that the repressive

measures were more drastic than any since the 1857 Mutiny.

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Mahatma Gandhi enjoyed a special regime in prison. In 1930,

in the same Yeravda Jail, the chief warden came to him and

asked how many letters he needed to receive from the outside

each week.

‘I do not need to receive a single letter,’ Gandhi replied.

‘How many letters do you wish to write?’ the warden inquired.

‘Not one,’ Gandhi said.

He was given unlimited privileges to write and receive corre¬

spondence.

Major Martin, the prison governor, bought furniture, crockery

and other utensils for Gandhi. ‘For whom have you bought all

this,’ Gandhi protested. ‘Take it away, please.’

Major Martin said he had permission from the central authori¬

ties to spend a minimum of three hundred rupees a month on such

an honoured guest. ‘That is all very well,’ Gandhi declared, ‘but

this money comes from the Indian treasury, and I do not want to

increase the burdens of my country. I hope that my boarding

expenses will not exceed thirty-five rupees a month.\* The special

equipment was removed.

At Yeravda an official named Quinn asked Gandhi to teach

him Gujarati and he used to come every day for his lesson. One

morning, Quinn failed to appear, and on inquiry Gandhi was

told that the official was busy at a hanging in the prison. ‘I feel

as though I am going to be sick,’ Gandhi said.

Vallabhbhai Patel too was arrested and lodged at Yeravda. In

March, Mahadev Desai was transferred from another jail to

Yeravda: Gandhi had asked for his companionship. When Maha¬

dev arrived he laid his head on Gandhi’s feet, and Gandhi patted

his head and shoulders affectionately. The three enjoyed numer¬

ous conversations together in which other prisoners and British

wardens and physicians sometimes joined.

Gandhi read the newspapers more carefully than he did out¬

side, washed his own clothes, spun, studied the stars at night,

and read many books; he liked Upton Sinclair’s The Wet Parade ,

Goethe s Faust , Kingsley’s Westward Ho! and others. He also put

the finishing touches on a tiny book most of which he had written

in Yeravda in 1930 in the form of letters to Sabarmati Ashram.

He entitled it From Yeravda Mandir; ‘mandir’ is a temple; the

prison was a temple for he worshipped God in it. The booklet,

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supplemented by occasional articles and pronouncements at other

times, furnishes a key to Gandhi’s thinking on the nature of God

and the ideal conduct of a man.

‘God is,’ Gandhi said.

The word satya means ‘truth’, and it derives from sat which

means ‘to be’. Sat also denotes God. Therefore, God is that which

is. ‘And since’, according to Gandhi, ‘nothing else I see merely

through the senses can or will persist, He alone is.’ Everything

else is illusion. God is the only truth.

Over the years Gandhi tried many times to prove the existence

of God. ‘There is an indefinable mysterious Power’, he wrote,

‘which pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It

is this unseen Power which makes itself felt and yet defies all proof,

because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses. It

transcends the senses.

‘But’, he added optimistically, ‘it is possible to reason out the

existence of God to a limited extent. . . There is an orderliness in

the Universe, there is an unalterable law governing everything

and every being that exists or lives. It is not a blind law, for no

blind law can govern the conduct of human beings . . . That law

then which governs all life is God ... I do dimly perceive that

whilst everything around me is ever changing, ever dying, there

is underlying all that change a living Power that is changeless,

that holds all together, that creates, dissolves, and recreates. That

informing Power or spirit is God ... In the midst of death life

persists, in the midst of untruth truth persists, in the midst of

darkness light persists. Hence I gather that God is Life, Truth,

and Love. He is Love. He is the supreme Good.’

After this valiant rational effort, Gandhi says, ‘But He is no

God who merely satisfies the intellect, if He ever does. God to

be God must rule the heart and transform it. He must express

Himself in every smallest act of His votary. This can only be

done through a definite realization more real than the five senses

can ever produce. Sense perceptions can be, often are, false and

deceptive, however real they may appear to us. Where there is

realization outside the senses it is infallible. It is proved not by

extraneous evidence but in the transformed conduct and character

of those who have felt the real presence of God within.’

That was another attempt at proof, this time not by logic but

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by the palpable testimony of human behaviour. But ‘faith tran¬

scends reason’, he confessed; consequently, ‘the safest course is to

believe in the moral government of the world and therefore in the

supremacy of the moral law, the law of truth and love ... If we

could solve all the mysteries of the Universe, we would be co-equal

with God. Every drop of ocean shares its glory but is not the

ocean’. Every human being, in other words, partakes of the

nature of God but is not God and cannot know what He is. Even

the greatest Hindu sage, Sankara, did not know more than that

God is ‘Not this’ and ‘Not that’.

Except as a youth, Gandhi never doubted the existence of God

as Jains and Buddhists may. ‘I literally believe,’ he said, ‘that not

a blade of grass grows or moves without His will . . . God is nearer

to us than fingernails to the flesh ... I can tell you this, that I am

surer of His existence than of the fact that you and I are sitting in

this room ... You may pluck out my eyes, but that cannot kill

me. You may chop off my nose, but that will not kill me. But

blast my belief in God, and I am dead.’

Gandhi, moreover, was convinced of the large and intimate role

which God played in his work. ‘Whatever striking things I have

done in life,’ he declared, ‘I have not done prompted by reason

but prompted by instinct — I would say God. Take the Dandi

Salt March of 1930. I had not the ghost of a suspicion how the

breach of the Salt Law would work itself out. Pandit Motilalji

and other friends were fretting and did not know what I would

do, and I could tell them nothing as I myself knew nothing about

it. But like a flash it came, and as you know it was enough to

shake the country from one end to the other.’

‘Do you feel a sense of freedom in your communion with God?’

someone asked.

‘I do,’ Gandhi replied. ‘I have imbibed through and through

the teaching of the Gita that man is the maker of his own destiny

in the sense that he has freedom of choice as to the manner in

which he uses that freedom. But he is no controller of results.

The moment he thinks he is, he comes to grief.

‘I have no special revelation of God’s will,’ Gandhi explained.

‘My firm belief is that He reveals Himself daily to every human

being, but we shut our ears to the “still small voice” . . . God

never appears to you in person but in action.’

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How did Gandhi worship God? He believed in the efficacy of

prayer. ‘Prayer is the key of the morning and the bolt of the

evening ... As food is necessary for the body, prayer is necessary

for the soul . . . No act of mine is done without prayer ... I am

not a man of learning, but I humbly claim to be a man of prayer.

I am indifferent to the form. Every man is a law unto himself

in that respect.’ But ‘it is better in prayer to have a heart without

words than words without a heart’. One can pray in the silence

that has banished words.

Nevertheless, the highway to God was through action. For ten

days Gandhi and E. Stanley Jones, an American missionary,

discussed a variety of topics, chiefly religion. One day Gandhi

said, ‘If one is to find salvation, he must have as much patience

as a man who sits by the seaside and with a straw picks up a single

drop of water, transfers it and thus empties the ocean.’ Salvation,

according to Gandhi, comes — as Dr. Jones understood it —

‘through one’s strict, disciplined efforts, a rigid self-mastery’.

‘But I,’ E. Stanley Jones declares, ‘look on salvation, not as an

attainment through one’s efforts, but as an obtainment through

grace. I came to God morally and spiritually bankrupt with

nothing to offer except my bankruptcy. To my astonishment He

took me, forgave me, and sent my soul singing its way down the

years. By grace was I saved through faith, and that not of myself;

it was the gift of God . . . It was at this poiht that the Christians

and the Mahatma never got together.

‘I know,’ Dr. Jones adds, ‘that salvation by grace seems too

cheap and easy, but it is not cheap; for when you take the gift,

you belong for ever to the Giver.’

Gandhi took the hard road. His doctrine was: By their works

shall ye know them. His God required him to live for humanity.

‘If I could persuade myself’, Gandhi wrote, ‘that I should find

Him in a Himalayan cave I would proceed there immediately.

But I know I cannot find him apart from humanity ... I claim to

know my millions. All the hours of the day I am with them. They

are my first care and last because I recognize no God except that

God that is to be found in the hearts of the dumb millions.’

Gandhi’s relation with God was part of a triangle which

included his fellow man. On this triangle he based his system of

ethics and moralitv.

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The first duty of the God-worshipper is truth: for truth is God.

This Gandhi repeated thousands of times: ‘Truth is God.’

> ‘There should be Truth in thought, Truth in speech and Truth

in action,’ Gandhi wrote in From Teravda Mandir. ‘Devotion to

Truth is the sole justification of our existence.’ This Truth is

honesty, and also something else: ‘It is impossible for us to realize

perfect Truth so long as we are imprisoned in this mortal frame

... if we shatter the chains of egotism, and melt into the ocean of

humanity, we share its dignity. To feel that we are something is

to set up a barrier between God and ourselves; to cease feeling

that we are something is to become one with God. A drop in the

ocean partakes of the greatness of its parent, although it is un¬

conscious of it. But it is dried up as soon as it enters upon an

existence independent of the ocean.’

Truth is identification with God and humanity. From Truth,

non-violence is born. Truth appears different to different indi¬

viduals. ‘There is nothing wrong in every man following Truth

according to his lights,’ says From Teravda Mandir. Each person

must be true to his own truth. But if the seeker after Truth

began to destroy those who saw Truth in their way he would

recede from the Truth. How can one realize God by killing or

hurting? Non-violence, however, is more than peacefulness or

pacifism; it is love, and excludes evil thought, undue haste, lies,

or hatred.

First, Truth; second, non-violence or Love; and third, chastity.

‘If a man gives his love to one woman, or a woman to a man, what

is there left for all the world besides? It simply means, “We two

first, and the devil take the rest of them.” . . . Such persons cannot

rise to the height of Universal Love.’

Then are married people lost for ever? No, ‘if the married

couple can think of each other as brother and sister, they are

freed for universal service’. This is the maximum programme

for the monks and nuns of the ashram. For the rank and file of

humanity ‘Sex urge is a fine and noble thing. There is nothing

to be ashamed of in it. But it is meant only for the act of creation.

Any other use of it is a sin against God and humanity . . . Indul¬

gence interfered with my work.’

The next injunction to the ashramites is ‘Non-stealing’ which

implies non-possession. ‘Civilization, in the real sense of the term,

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consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and volun¬

tary reduction of wants. . . .

‘Anxiety about the future,’ Gandhi said to a friend, ‘is sheer

atheism. Why should we fear that our children will be less efficient

or successful than we are? To save money for the sake of children

is to show lack of faith in them,’ and in God. Attachment to

money or possessions is the product of fear. Violence is the result

of fear. Dishonesty is fear. Fearlessness is the key to Truth, to

God, to Love; it is the king of virtues.

The remaining virtues are: the removal of untouchability which

‘means love for, and service of, the whole world’; ‘bread-labour’

or regular productive manual work; tolerance of all religions;

humility; and, finally, spinning and the encouragement of

domestic national economy without ‘ill-will towards the foreigner’.

Few inside or outside the ashram ever lived up to Gandhi’s

austere code; only he approached his ideal.

While Gandhi was editing these simple epistles on God and

ethics in his prison-‘temple’, India moved towards its tensest

fortnight in modern history.

It centred around saving Gandhi’s life.

‘To find a parallel for the anguish of September 1932’, wrote

Rajagopalachari, ‘we have to go back to Athens twenty-three

centuries ago when the friends of Socrates surrounded him in

prison and importuned him to escape from death. Plato has

recorded the questions and answers. Socrates smiled at the

suggestion . . . and preached the immortality of the soul.’

The ‘Anguish of September 1932’ began for Gandhi early that

year. He had gathered from the newspapers that the proposed

new British constitution for India would grant separate electorates

not only to Hindus and Moslems as in the past but to untouchables,

or ‘Depressed Classes’. He accordingly wrote a letter on March

1 ith, 1932, to Sir Samuel Hoare, the Secretary of State for India.

‘A separate electorate for the Depressed Glasses’, Gandhi wrote,

‘is harmful for them and for Hinduism ... So far as Hinduism is

concerned, separate electorates would simply vivisect and disrupt

it . . . The political aspect, important though it is, dwindles into

insignificance compared to the moral and religious issue.’ If

therefore the Government decided to create a separate electorate

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for untouchables, ‘I must fast unto death’. That, he knew, would

embarrass the authorities whose prisoner he was, but ‘for me the

contemplated step is not a method, it is part of my being’.

The minister replied to the prisoner on April 13th, saying that

no decision had yet been taken and that his views would be con¬

sidered before it was taken.

No new developments occurred until August 17th, 1932, when

Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald announced Britain’s decision

in favour of separate electorates.

‘I have to resist your decision with my life,’ Gandhi wrote to

Ramsay MacDonald the next day. ‘The only way I can do it is

by declaring a perpetual fast unto death from food of any kind save

water with or without salt and soda.’ The fast would commence

at noon, September 20th.

In a very long reply, dated 10 Downing Street, September 8th,

1932, Prime Minister MacDonald said he had received Gandhi’s

communication ‘with much surprise and, let me add, with very

sincere regret’. Gandhi had misunderstood; they had con¬

sidered his known friendship for the untouchables and his letter

to Sir Samuel Hoare. ‘We felt it our duty to safeguard what we

believed to be the right of the Depressed Classes to a fair propor¬

tion of representation in the legislatures’ and ‘we were equally

careful to do nothing that would split off their community from

the Hindu world.’

Then MacDonald cogently defended the Government’s decision:

‘Under the government scheme the Depressed Classes will remain

part of the Hindu community and will vote with the Hindu

electorate on an equal footing.’ That is what Gandhi wanted.

‘But for the first twenty years, while still remaining part of the

Hindu community, they will receive through a limited number

of special constituencies, means of safeguarding their rights and

interests. . . .’

In other words, MacDonald emphasized, the untouchables

would have one vote in the Hindu electorate, and many of them

would have a second vote in their special untouchable electorate.

They will ‘have two votes’, he wrote. Surely Gandhi, their

champion, could not object.

The alternative method, ‘reservation of seats’, MacDonald

declared, had been rejected because, though it would reserve a

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number of seats for untouchable legislators within the larger

block of Hindu seats, ‘in practically all cases, such members would

be elected by a majority consisting of higher caste Hindus’. That

being the case, the Prime Minister implied, they might be stooges

of caste Hindus: they would have to keep in the good graces of

caste Hindus, and might not be ‘in a position to speak for them¬

selves 5 .

So, MacDonald reasoned, ‘you propose to adopt the extreme

course of starving yourself to death not in order to secure that

the Depressed Classes should have joint electorates with other

Hindus, because that is already provided, nor to maintain the

unity of Hindus, which is also provided, but solely to prevent the

Depressed Classes, who admittedly suffer from terrible disabilities

today, from being able to secure a limited number of representa¬

tives of their own choosing to speak on their behalf on the legisla¬

tures . . .’ Therefore, MacDonald could only think that Gandhi’s

proposal to fast was based on a misapprehension. The Govern¬

ment’s decision would stand.

Gandhi’s letter of September 9th, from Yeravda Central Prison

to 10 Downing Street, was typical.

Without arguing, I affirm that to me this matter is one of pure

religion. The mere fact of the Depressed Classes having double

votes does not protect them or Hindu society in general from being

disrupted. You will please permit me to say that no matter how

sympathetic you may be, you cannot come to a correct decision

on a matter of vital and religious importance to the parties con¬

cerned.

I should not be against even over-representation of the De¬

pressed Classes. What I am against is their statutory separation,

even in a limited form, from the Hindu fold, so long as they choose

to belong to it. Do you realize that if your decision stands and the

constitution comes into being, you arrest the marvellous growth

of the work of Hindu reformers who have dedicated themselves

to their suppressed brethren in every walk of life?

Gandhi added that he was also opposed to the other separate

electorates ‘only I do not consider them to be any warrant for

calling from me such self-immolation as my conscience has

prompted me in the matter of the Depressed Classes’.

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That ended Gandhi’s correspondence with London.

MacDonald was not alone in his bewilderment. Many Indians,

some Hindus, were perplexed. Jawaharlal Nehru was in prison

when he heard Gandhi would fast. T felt angry with him’, he

writes in his autobiography, c at his religious and sentimental

approach to a political issue, and his frequent references to God

in connection with it.’ Nehru ‘felt annoyed with him for choosing

a side issue for his final sacrifice’. Untouchability was a side issue,

independence the central issue. For two days, Nehru ‘was in

darkness’. He thought with sorrow of never seeing Bapu any

more.

‘Then a strange thing happened to me,’ Nehru continues. ‘I

had quite an emotional crisis, and at the end of it I felt calmer,

and the future seemed not so dark. Bapu had a curious knack of

doing the right thing at the psychological moment, and it might

be that his action — impossible as it was from my point of view —

would lead to great results not only in the narrow field in which

it was confined, but in the wider aspects of our national struggle

. . . Then came the news of the tremendous upheaval all over the

country . . . What a magician, I thought, was this little man sitting

in Yeravda Prison, and how well he knew how to pull the strings

that move people’s hearts.’

Even Nehru had underestimated Gandhi’s magic and Gandhi’s

political sagacity.

The Government’s fierce repressions against the civil resisters

were breaking the. back of the movement; it was petering out into

pessimism. Gandhi’s fast rescued nationalist India from the politi¬

cal doldrums. But compared with the big result, this was a minor

by-product.

All Gandhi’s adult life he had fought against the ‘bar sinister’

between caste Hindus and Harijans; even as a boy he laughed at

his mother’s idea that the touch of an untouchable defiles. Now

the British Empire was erecting a political reservation for Hari¬

jans. With his congenital impulse to assume the best motives, he

was ready to believe that MacDonald and Hoare were acting in

the interest, as they saw it, of the Depressed Classes. But he knew

India better. Legalisms do not make life; Hindus and Harijans

might form a joint electorate, but the Harijans’ additional

separate electorate would blot out the good psychological effect of

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the joint electorate. Given a separate electorate, Harijan candi¬

dates and elected representatives would stress what divided them

from the caste Hindus. A political machine would a'rise with a

vested interest in perpetuating the rift between Harijans and caste

Hindus; its political capital would be Hindu injustice. Gandhi

felt passionately that untouchability was a perversion which would

kill the soul of Hinduism and, in turn, poison the soul of the

Harijans. The MacDonald award threatened to give long life to

India’s worst sin.

Harmony in diversity, love despite differences, was Gandhi’s

way of eliminating violence in thought and action. To divide is

to invite war. Gandhi had fasted for Hindu-Moslem unity; he

did not want two Indias. Now he was. faced with the prospect of

three Indias. He regarded Hindu-Moslem enmity as politically

disastrous. The Hindu-Harijan division was politically disastrous

and religiously suicidal. Gandhi could not countenance the

widening of the Hindu-Harijan gulf.

The fast, Gandhi said, ‘is aimed at a statutory separate elec¬

torate, in any shape or form, for the Depressed Glasses. Imme¬

diately that threat is removed once for all, my fast will end’.

He was not fasting against the British, for the Government had

stated that if Hindus and Harijans agreed on a different and

mutually satisfactory voting arrangement it would be accepted.

The fast, Gandhi declared, ‘is intended to sting Hindu conscience

into right religious action’.

On September 13th Gandhi announced that he would com¬

mence his fast unto death on the 20th. India now witnessed

something the world had never seen.

On the 13th, political and religious leaders went into action.

Mr. M. C. Rajah, an untouchable spokesman in the Legislative

Assembly, identified himself with Gandhi’s position; Sir Tej

Bahadur Sapru, the great constitutional leader, petitioned the

Government to release Gandhi; Yakub Husain, a Moslem leader

in Madras, urged the Harijans to renounce the separate electorate;

Rajendra Prasad suggested that Hindus save Gandhi by giving

Harijans access to their temples, wells, schools and the public

roads; Pandit Malaviya convoked a conference of leaders for the

19th; Rajagopalachari asked the country to pray and fast on

the 2Qth.

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Several deputations asked to see Gandhi in jail. The Govern¬

ment opened the gates and allowed full consultations with him.

Devadas Gandhi arrived to act as intermediary with negotiators.

Journalists also enjoyed unobstructed access to Gandhi.

Meanwhile Gandhi wrote copious letters to many friends in

India and abroad. ‘There was no escape from it,’ he said in a

letter to Miss Slade. ‘It is both a privilege and a duty. It comes

rarely to someone in a generation or generations.’ He had been

observing the cat family in the prison, he told Miss Slade in the

same communication. ‘We have an addition to the family, did I

tell you? There was a human touch about the mother whilst she

was in pain and two or three days after delivery. She would caress

us and insist on being caressed. It was a pathetic sight. The care

she bestows on the “baby? is very wonderful. Love from us all

to you all, Bapu.’

On the 20th, Gandhi awoke at 2.30 a.m. and wrote a letter to

Tagore whose approval he craved. ‘This is early morning, 3

o’clock of Tuesday,’ the Mahatma began. ‘I enter the fiery gates

at noon. If you can bless the effort I want it. You have been a

true friend because you have been a candid friend often speaking

your thoughts aloud . . . Though it can now only be during my

fast, I will yet prize your criticism, if your heart condemns my

action. I am not too proud to make an open confession of my

blunder, whatever the cost of the confession, if I find myself in

error. If your heart approves of the action I want your blessing.

It will sustain me. . . .’

Just as Gandhi posted this letter he received a telegram from

Tagore: ‘It is worth sacrificing precious life’, it read, ‘for the sake

of India’s unity and her social integrity ... I fervently hope that

we will not callously allow such national tragedy to reach its ex¬

treme length stop our sorrowing hearts will follow your sublime

penance with reverence and love.’

Gandhi thanked Tagore for ‘your loving and magnificent wire.

It will sustain me in the midst of the storm I am about to enter’.

At 11.30 the same morning, Gandhi took his last meal; it con¬

sisted of lemon juice and honey with hot water. Millions of

Indians fasted for twenty-four hours. Throughout the country

prayers were sung.

That day, Rabindranath Tagore, whom India and Gandhi

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affectionately called ‘The Poet’, addressed his school at Shantini-

ketan and said, ‘A shadow is darkening today over India like a

shadow cast by an eclipsed sun. The people of a whole country is

suffering from a poignant pain of anxiety, the universality of

which carries in it a great dignity of consolation.' Mahatmaji,

who through his life of dedication has made India his own in

truth, has commenced his vow of extreme self-sacrifice. \*

Tagore explained the Mahatma’s fast:

‘Each country has its own inner geography where her spirit

dwells and where physical force can never conquer even art inch

of ground. Those rulers who come from the outside remain out¬

side the gate . . . But the great soul . . . continues his dominion

even when he is physically no longer present . . . The penance

which Mahatmaji has taken upon himself is not a ritual but a

message to all India and to the world . . . Let us try to understand

the meaning of his message . . . No civilized society can thrive

upqn victims whose humanity has been permanently mutilated

. . . Those whom we keep down inevitably drag us down ... we

insult our own humanity by insulting man where he is helpless

and where he is not of our own kin . . . Mahatmaji has repeatedly

pointed out the danger of those divisions in our country . . .

Against that deep-seated moral weakness in our society Mahatmaji

has pronounced his ultimatum . . . We have observed that the

English people are puzzled at the step that Mahatmaji has been

compelled to take. They confess that they fail to understand it. I

believe that the reason of their failure is mainly owing to the fact

that the language of Mahatmaji is fundamentally different from

their own ... I ask them to remember the terrible days of atrocities

that reddened in blood at their door when dismemberment was

being forced between Ireland and the rest of Great Britain. Those

Englishmen, who imagined it to be disastrous to the integrity of

their empire, did not scruple to kill and be killed, even to tear

into shreds the decency of civilized codes of honour.’

The British, Tagore explained, were ready to indulge in the

‘Black and Tan’ blood bath in Ireland to prevent dismember¬

ment of the Empire. Gandhi was immolating one person,

himself, to prevent dismemberment of Indian society. This was

the language of non-violence. Is that why the West could not

decipher it?

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Tagore saw the possibility of losing Gandhi in the fast. The

very thought sent a shiver through the spine of the nation. If

nothing were done to save him, every Hindu would be Mahatmaji’s

murderer.

Gandhi lay on a white iron cot in the shade of a low mango tree

in the quiet prison yard. Patel and Mahadev Desai sat near him.

Mrs. Naidu had been transferred from the women’s ward of

Yeravda Jail to nurse and guard him from excessive exertion. On

a stool were some books, writing paper, bottles of water, salt and

soda bicarbonate.

Outside, the negotiators in conference were racing with death.

Hindu leaders gathered in Birla House in Bombay on September

20th. There were Sapru, Sir Chunilal Mehta, Rajagopalachari,

the president of Congress for that year, G. D. Birla, a very wealthy

industrialist and friend of Gandhi, Rajendra Prasad, Jayakar,

Sir Purshottamdas Thakurdas, a millionaire patron of schools,

and others. The untouchable delegates were Dr. Solanki and Dr.

Ambedkar.

Ambedkar, a distinguished lawyer with international experience

who had played a big part at the Round Table Conferences in

London, owned a powerfully built body and strong, stubborn,

superior intellect. His father and grandfather saw service in the

British Army. The accumulated bitterness against Hindus that

rankled for centuries in millions of Harijan breasts found expres¬

sion in Ambedkar’s Himalayan hatred. He preferred British raj

to Hindu raj; he preferred Moslems to Hindus and once thought

of leading the untouchable community, as a body, into the

Mohammedan Church. Age-long Hindu cruelty to his unhappy

brethren filled him with anger, spite and vindictiveness. If any¬

body in India could have contemplated with equanimity the

death of Gandhi, Ambedkar was the man. He called the fast ‘a

political stunt’. At the conference, he faced the great Hindu

minds, and he must have derived sweet pleasure watching them

court him in order to save their beloved Mahatma.

Gandhi had always wanted one electorate for Hindus and Hari-

jans, which would jointly elect a solid block of Hindu and Harijan

members of the legislative councils. He even opposed reserving

a fixed number of seats in that block for Harijans because it would

accentuate the cleavage between the two communities. But on

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the 19th Gandhi told a deputation — much to its relief — that he

had become reconciled to reserved seats.

Ambedkar, however, demurred: the Harijans who would

occupy the reserved seats in the legislatures would be elected

jointly by Hindus and Harijans and would, therefore, feel con¬

siderable restraint in airing Harijan grievances against Hindus.

If a Harijan denounced Hindus too fiercely the Hindus might

defeat him in the next election and elect a more docile un¬

touchable.

To meet this legitimate objection, Sapru had evolved an in¬

genious plan which he presented to the conference on September

20th: all Hindu and Harijan members of the legislatures would

be elected jointly by Hindu and Harijan voters. A number of the

Hindu-Harijan seats would be earmarked in advance for Harijans.

The candidates for a portion of these reserved Harijan seats would

be nominated in private consultations between Hindus and Hari¬

jans. But for the remainder of the reserved seats, Sapru introduced

something new: primaries in which only Harijans would vote. In

those primary elections, a panel of three Harijan candidates

would be chosen for each reserved seat. Then in the final or

secondary elections, Harijans and Hindus would vote jointly for

one of those three Harijan candidates. The Hindus would have

no choice but to vote for one of them. That would enable the

Harijans to place their bravest and best champions in the legis¬

latures while retaining the system of joint electorates.

Anxiously, the Hindus waited for Ambedkar’s views on the

scheme. He examined it minutely. He sought the advice of

friends. Hours drifted by. Finally he accepted, but stated that

he would draft his own formula to incorporate his own ideas plus

the Sapru plan.

Encouraged, but still not quite sure of Ambedkar, the Hindu

leaders now wondered about Gandhi; would he sanction the

Sapru innovation? Sapru, Jayakar, Rajagopalachari, Devadas,

Birla and Prasad took the midnight train and were in Poona the

next morning. At 7 a.m. they were taken into the prison office.

Gandhi, already weak after less than twenty-four hours without

food, came into the office with a laugh, and taking a place at the

centre of the table, announced cheerfully, T preside’.

Sapru explained the plan of the primaries. Others amplified.

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Gandhi asked some questions. He was non-committal. Half an

hour passed. Finally Gandhi said, ‘I am prepared to consider

your plan favourably . . . But I should like to have the whole

picture before me in writing.’ In addition, he asked to see Ambed-

kar and Rajah.

Urgent invitations were sent to Ambedkar and Rajah. A

memorandum on the Sapru plan was prepared. Rajah, repre¬

senting Gandhi’s untouchables following, accepted it. Ambedkar

promised to come.

A troubled night passed. The morning of the 22nd Gandhi

expressed displeasure with the scheme: Why should only some

candidates for the reserved Harijan seats be elected in the Harijan

primaries? Why not all? Why create two sets of Harijan candi¬

dates, one chosen by Harijans in the primaries, the other selected

by Hindus and Harijans? He wanted no distinctions between

Harijans. Nor did he want Harijan legislators to be under any

political debt to Hindus.

The negotiators were overjoyed. Gandhi was offering Ambed¬

kar more than Ambedkar had already accepted.

Ambedkar appeared at Gandhi’s cot late that afternoon; he

did most of the talking. He was ready to help to save the Mahat¬

ma’s life, he said. But T want my compensation’.

Gandhi had already commenced to sink. In previous fasts he

had taken water regularly, on the hour. Now he was listless and

drank it irregularly. In previous fasts, massage moderated his

aches. This time he refused massage. Sharp pains racked his

wasting body. He had to be moved to the bath on a stretcher.

The least movement, sometimes even speaking, gave him

nausea.

When Ambedkar said, T want my compensation,’ Gandhi

propped himself up painfully and spoke for many minutes. He

mentioned his devotion to the Harijans. He discussed the Sapru

scheme point by point. He did not like it, he said. All Harijans

should be nominated by Harijans and not just some of them,

Gandhi declared. Weakened by the effort, the Mahatma subsided

to his pillow.

Ambedkar had expected to be put under pressure in the pre¬

sence of the dying Mahatma to recede from his position. But now

Gandhi out-Harijaned the Harijan Ambedkar.

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Ambedkar welcomed Gandhi’s amendment.

That day, Mrs. Gandhi arrived; she had been transferred from

Sabarmati Prison to Yeravda. As she slowly moved towards her

husband, she shook her head from side to side reprovingly and

said, ‘Again, the same story!’ He smiled. Her presence cheered

him. He submitted to massage by her, and by a professional,

more for her sake than because he wanted it.

Friday, September 23rd, the fourth day of the fast, Dr. Gilder,

Gandhi’s heart specialist, and Dr. Patel came from Bombay, and

in consultation with prison physicians diagnosed the prisoner’s

condition as dangerous. Blood pressure was alarmingly high.

Death was possible at any moment.

The same day, Ambedkar conferred at length with the Hindu

leaders and presented his new demands for compensation: Mac¬

Donald’s award had given the Depressed Classes 71 seats in the

provincial legislatures. Ambedkar asked for 197. Sapru had

suggested a panel of three Harijan candidates. Gandhi suggested

five; Ambedkar suggested two. There was also the question of a

referendum of Harijan voters to decide when the reserved seats

should be abolished and the political distinction thus wiped out

between Hindus and Harijans; that would be a step towards the

merger of the two communities in life. Gandhi wanted the

primaries abolished after five years. Ambedkar held out for fif¬

teen. Ambedkar did not believe that untouchability would be

destroyed in five years.

Later in the day, Ambedkar came to Gandhi. It was a hot

sultry day and not a mango leaf stirred in the prison yard.

Gandhi’s blood pressure was rising. He could hardly speak above

a whisper. Ambedkar bargained hard. The outcome was

indecisive.

Saturday, September 24th, the fifth day, Ambedkar renewed

his talks with the Hindu leaders. After a morning’s wrangling,

he visited Gandhi at noon. It had been agreed between Ambed¬

kar and the Hindus that the Depressed Classes would have 147

reserved seats instead of the 197 Ambedkar had demanded and

the 71 MacDonald ordered. Gandhi accepted the compromise.

Ambedkar was now ready to abolish the separate primaries after

ten years. Gandhi insisted on five. ‘Five years or my life,’ Gandhi

said. Ambedkar refused.

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Ambedkar returned to his Harijan colleagues. Later, he

informed the Hindu leaders that he would not accept the abolition

of primaries in five years: nothing less than ten.

Rajagopalachari now did something which probably saved

Gandhi’s life. Without consulting Gandhi, he and Ambedkar

agreed that the time of the abolition of the primaries would be

determined in further discussion. This might make a referendum

superfluous.

Rajagopalachari rushed to the jail and explained the new

arrangement to Gandhi.

‘Will you repeat it?’

Rajagopalachari repeated it.

‘Excellent,’ Gandhi murmured; he may not have understood

precisely what Rajagopalachari was saying; he was faint. But he

had acquiesced.

That Saturday, the Yeravda Pact, as Indian history knows it,

was drafted and signed by all the chief Hindu and Harijan

negotiators except Gandhi.

On Sunday it was ratified in Bombay at a full conference of the

negotiators and others.

But the pact was no pact and Gandhi would not abandon his

fast unless the British government consented to substitute it for

the MacDonald Award. Its verbatim text had been telegraphed

to London where Charles Andrews, Polak and other friends of

Gandhi laboured to get quick action from the Government. It

was Sunday and ministers had left town, and Ramsay Mac¬

Donald was in Sussex attending a funeral.

On hearing of the agreement in Poona, MacDonald hurried

back to io Downing Street; so did Sir Samuel Hoare and Lord

Lothian who had helped to formulate the MacDonald Award.

They pored over the text until midnight on Sunday.

Gandhi’s life was fast ebbing away. He told Kasturbai who

should get the few personal belongings that lay around his cot.

Early Monday, Tagore arrived from Calcutta and sang a selection

of his own songs to the Mahatma. They soothed Gandhi. Friends

from Poona were admitted to play on musical instruments and

chant devotional hymns. He thanked them with a nod and a

faint smile. He could not speak.

A few hours later, the British government announced simul-

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taneously in London and New Delhi that it had approved the

Yeravda Pact. Gandhi could break his fast.

At 5.15 on Monday afternoon, in the presence of Tagore, Patel,

Mahadev Desai, Mrs. Naidu, the negotiators and journalists,

Gandhi accepted a glass of orange juice from Kasturbai and broke

his fast. Tagore sang Bengali hymns. Many eyes were wet.

Dr. Ambedkar made an interesting speech at the Bombay con¬

ference on Sunday, September 25th, which ratified the Yeravda

Pact or Poona Agreement. Praising Gandhi’s conciliatory atti¬

tude, Ambedkar said, T must confess that I was surprised,

immensely surprised, when I met him, that there was so much

in common between him and me. In fact whenever any disputes

were carried to him — and Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru has told you

that the disputes that were carried to him were of a very crucial

character — I was astounded to see that the man who held such

divergent views from mine at the Round Table Conference came

immediately to my rescue and not to the rescue of the other side.

I am very grateful to Mahatmaji for having extricated me from

what might have been a very difficult situation.’

This was not only a polite tribute at a moment of relaxation

after hectic days, but also a correct description of Gandhi’s atti¬

tude. Gandhi did favour the Harijan position over the Hindu

position. Indeed, Gandhi had gone so far in his desire to meet

the Harijans 100 per cent of the way, that he reversed himself on

the key issue of reserved seats. ‘My only regret is, 5 Dr. Ambedkar

stated in that same speech, ‘why did not Mahatmaji take this

attitude at the Round Table Conference? If he had shown the

same consideration for my point of view then, it would not have

been necessary for him to go through this ordeal. However, 5 he

added generously, ‘these are things of the past. I am glad that I

am here now to support this resolution 5 of ratification.

At the Round Table Conference in September-December 1931,

Gandhi had opposed Harijan reserved seats in the Hindu block

because it divided the two communities. But on September 13th,

1932, and again on the 19th, Gandhi had accepted the idea of

reserved seats as an unavoidable and, he hoped, passing evil.

He accepted the reservation of seats as something infinitely

preferable to the segregation that would arise out of the separate

electorate which MacDonald wanted to introduce. But if Gandhi

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had done so at the Round Table Conference or months before

the fast he might not have carried the orthodox Hindus with him.

One of the negotiators of the Poona Agreement subsequently told

me that he had always opposed Gandhi’s policies, but Gandhi

was God descended to earth and ‘the gates of Heaven were waiting

to receive him’. The threat of the Mahatma’s death won over

the Hindu leaders for Gandhi’s policies.

Suppose, however, that the Hindu leaders had adopted reserva¬

tion of seats before the fast. Would the fast have been superfluous?

Was the Mahatma’s torment unnecessary?

The answer to this question is crucial to an understanding of

Gandhi’s role in India’s history. By the criterion of cold logic and

arid legalisms, Gandhi need not have fasted to reach an agreement

with Ambedkar. But Gandhi’s relationship with the Indian

people was not based on logic and legalism. It was a highly

emotional relationship. For the Hindus, Gandhi was Mahatma,

The Great Soul, a piece of God. Were they going to kill him? The

moment the fast began, texts, constitutions, awards, elections,

etc., lost their significance. Gandhi’s life had to be saved.

From September 13th, when the fast was announced, to the

afternoon of September 26th, when Gandhi drank his first orange

juice, every change in Gandhi’s physical condition, every word

pronounced by anyone who had seen him, every journey of the

least of the negotiators was broadcast to every corner of the

country. A mother hovering over the crib of a tender child during

a high-temperature crisis could be no more anxious than the India

that watched the white cot of the sinking Mahatma. No mystic

himself, Gandhi affected others mystically. They became one

with him, as one as mother and babe. Reason withdrew; pas¬

sionately, frantically, because the end might have come at any

instant, Hindus were reacting to a single throbbing wish: The

Mahatma must not die.

Gandhi had made each Hindu personally responsible for his

life. On September 15th, in a statement widely disseminated,

Gandhi said, ‘No patched-up agreement between Caste Hindus

and rival Depressed Class leaders will answer the purpose. The

agreement to be valid has to be real. If the Hindu mass mind is

not yet prepared to banish untouchability root and branch it must

sacrifice me without the slightest hesitation.’

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While the negotiators parleyed, therefore, the Hindu com¬

munity — close to a quarter of a billion persons — experienced a

religious-emotional upheaval. At the very beginning of the fast

week, the famous Kalighat Temple of Calcutta and the Ram

Mandir of Benares, citadel of Hindu orthodoxy, were thrown

open to untouchables. In Delhi, Caste Hindus and Harijans

demonstratively fraternized in streets and temples. In Bombay,

a nationalist women’s organization organized a poll in front of

seven big temples. Ballot boxes, watched by volunteers, were

placed outside the gates, and worshippers were asked to cast their

votes on the admission of untouchables. The tally was 24,797

for, 445 against. As a result, temples in which no Harijan foot

had ever trod were opened to all.

The day before the fast started, twelve temples in Allahabad

were made accessible to Harijans for the first time; on the first

day of the fast, some of the most sacred temples throughout the

country opened their doors to untouchables. Every subsequent

day, until September 26th, and then every day from the 27th to

October 2nd, Gandhi’s birthday, which was Anti-Untouchability

Week, scores of holy places lowered the bars against Harijans.

All temples in the native states of Baroda, Kashmir, Bhor and

Kolhapur cancelled temple discrimination. The newspapers

printed the names of the hundreds of temples that lifted the ban

under the impact of Gandhi’s fast.

Mrs. Swarup Rani Nehru, Jawaharlal’s very orthodox mother,

let it be known that she had accepted food from the hand of an

untouchable. Thousands of prominent Hindu women followed

her example. At the strictly Hindu Benares University, Principal

Dhruva, with numerous Brahmans, dined publicly with street

cleaners, cobblers and scavengers. Similar meals were arranged

in hundreds of other places.

In villages, small towns and big cities, congregations, organiza¬

tions, citizens’ unions, etc., adopted resolutions promising to stop

discriminating against untouchables; copies of these resolutions

formed a man-high heap in Gandhi’s prison yard.

Villages and small towns allowed untouchables to use water

wells. Hindu pupils shared benches formerly reserved for un¬

touchables. Roads and streets, from which they were previously

excluded, were opened to Harijans.

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A spirit of reform, penance and self-purification swept the land.

During the six fast days, most Hindus refrained from going to

cinemas, theatres, or restaurants. Weddings were postponed.

A cold political agreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar,

without a fast, would have had no such effect on the nation; it

might have redressed a legal Harijan grievance, but it would have

remained a dead letter as far as the Hindu’s personal treatment of

untouchables was concerned. Most Hindus would never have

heard of it. The political pact was important only after the

emotional churning which Gandhi’s fast gave the country.

The fast could not kill the curse of untouchability, which was

more than three thousand years old. Access to a temple is not

access to a good job. The Harijans remained the dregs of Indian

society. Nor did segregation end when Gandhi slowly drank his

orange juice.

But after the fast, untouchability forfeited its public approval;

the belief in it was destroyed. A practice deeply imbedded in a

complicated religion full of mystic overtones and undercurrents

was recognized as morally illegitimate. A taboo hallowed by

custom, tradition and ritual lost its potency. It had been socially

improper to consort with Harijans; in many circles now it became

socially improper not to consort with them. To practise un¬

touchability branded one a bigot, a reactionary. Before long,

marriages were taking place between Harijans and Hindus;

Gandhi made a point of attending some.

Gandhi’s ‘Epic Fast’ snapped a long chain that stretched back

into antiquity and had enslaved tens of millions. Some links of

the chain remained. Many wounds from the chain remained.

But nobody would forge new links, nobody would link the links

together again. The future promised freedom.

The Yeravda Pact said, ‘No one shall be regarded as untouch¬

able by reason of his birth . . Orthodox Hindus, with large

religious followings, signed that statement. It marked a religious

reformation, a psychological revolution. Hinduism was purging

itself of a millennial sickness. The mass purified itself in practice.

It was good for India’s moral health. The perpetuation of un¬

touchability would have poisoned India’s soul just as the retention

of its economic remnants must hamper India’s progress.

If Gandhi had done nothing else in his life but shatter the struc-

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ture of untouchability he would have been a great social reformer.

In retrospect, the wrestling with Ambedkar over seats, primaries

and referendums seems like that year’s melted snow on the

Himalayas. The real reform was religious and social, not political.

Five days after the end of the fast Gandhi’s weight had gone up

to ninety-nine and three-quarter pounds, and he was spinning

and working for many hours. ‘The fast was really nothing com¬

pared with the miseries that the outcasts have undergone for

ages,’ he wrote to Miss Slade. ‘And so’, he added, ‘I continue

to hum “God is great and merciful”.’

He remained in prison.

Gandhi’s fast touched Hindu India’s heart. Gandhi had a com¬

pelling need to communicate with the hearts of men; he had an

artist’s genius for reaching the heart strings of the inner man.

But how does one communicate with a hundred or two hundred

or three hundred million persons most of whom are illiterate and

only five thousand of whom have radios? Gandhi’s fasts were

means of communication. The news of the fast was printed in all

papers. Those who read told those who did not read that ‘The

Mahatma is fasting’. The cities knew, and peasants marketing

in the cities knew, and they carried the report to the villages, and

travellers did likewise.

‘Why is the Mahatma fasting?’

‘So that we Hindus open our temples to the untouchables and

treat the untouchables better.’

India’s ear was listening for more news.

‘The Mahatma is sinking.’ ‘The Mahatma is dying.’ ‘We must

hurry.’

Gandhi’s agony gave vicarious pain to his adorers who knew

they must not kill God’s messenger on earth. It was evil to pro¬

long his suffering. It was blessed to save him by being good to

those whom he had called ‘The Children of God’.

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