# CHAPTER XV

PROLOGUE

G andhi moved into battle very slowly. Unlike most rebels he

did not get ammunition from his adversary. The British

merely provided him with an opportunity to use his special,

self-made weapons: civil disobedience.

The savage massacre of policemen in Chauri Ghaura in Febru¬

ary 1922, by a Congress mob, had induced Gandhi to suspend

civil disobedience in the county of Bardoli. But he did not forget.

He waited six years, and on February 12th, 1928, he gave the

signal for Satygraha in the same place: Bardoli.

Gandhi did not conduct it himself. He watched from afar,

wrote lengthy articles about it, and supplied xhe general direction

and inspiration. The actual leader was Vallabhbhai Patel,

assisted by a Moslem named Abbas Tyebji.

In 1915, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, a prosperous Ahmedabad

lawyer, was playing bridge in his club when Gandhi entered.

Patel looked at the visitor with a side glance of his heavy-lidded

eyes, smiled under his thick moustache at the little man with the

big, bulbous, loose turban and the long Kathiawar coat with the

sleeves rolled up, and turned back to his cards. He had heard of

Gandhi’s South African exploits but was not impressed by this

first view.

A week later, however, he dropped in at a conference on peasant

taxation convened by Gandhi and stayed to admire the new¬

comer’s logic. Patel had a precise, scientific, steel-trap mind. In

later years, his clean-shaven pouchy face, his round, nut-brown

bald head, and his broad body wrapped down to the knees in

white khadi gave him the appearance of a classic Roman senator.

If he had any sentiments, he hid them successfully. He became

the ‘Jim Farley’, as Americans called him, of the Congress party,

the machine ‘box’ who remembered everybody’s name and navi¬

gated with supreme confidence among the numerous jutting reefs

of Indian politics.

Gandhi won Patel’s loyalty by the common sense of his position:

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to win freedom you needed peasant backing, for India was more

than 80 per cent peasant. To win peasant backing you had to

speak the peasant’s language, dress like him, and know his economic

needs.

In 1928 Patel was mayor of Ahmedabad. At Gandhi’s sugges¬

tion, he left the post and went to Bardoli, in Bombay province,

to guide the 87,000 peasants in a peaceful revolt against a 22 per

cent increase in taxes decreed by the British government.

The villagers, responding to Patel’s leadership, refused to pay

taxes. The collector seized their water buffaloes which worked

and gave milk. Cultivators were driven off their farms. Kitchens

were invaded and pots and pans confiscated for delinquency.

Carts and horses were also taken. The peasants remained non¬

violent.

‘At the rate the forfeitures are being served,’ Gandhi observed

in Young India , ‘practically the whole of the county of Bardoli

should soon be in the government’s possession, and they can pay

themselves a thousand times over for their precious assessments.

The people of Bardoli, if they are brave, will be none the worse

for dispossession. They will have lost their possessions but kept

what must be the dearest of all to good men and women — their

honour. Those who have stout hearts and hands need never fear

loss of belongings.’

Apparently, the Mahatma thought every hungry peasant was a

Gandhi. Strangely enough, the judgment did not err. A spark of

Gandhism lifted the peasantry into a mood of sacrifice.

Months passed. Bardoli stood its ground. Hundreds were

arrested. The Government was accused of‘lawlessness’; no one

called it terror, for no one was terrorized.

India began to take notice. Voluntary contributions flowed in

for the maintenance of the struggle.

Government officials drove through the countryside in motor¬

cars. ‘Why not barricade the roads,’ some peasants whispered

to Sardar Patel, ‘or place spikes on them to burst the tyres of the

officials’ cars and give a “non-violent” shake-up to some fellow

who has made himself a veritable nightmare to the people?’

‘No,’ Patel admonished, ‘your fight is not for a few' hundred

thousand rupees, but for a principle ... You are fighting for self-

respect which ultimately leads to Swaraj.’

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The Government undertook to denude whole villages of movable

property. The peasants barricaded themselves in their huts with

their animals. The collectors then made off with carts. Tull your

carts to pieces,’ the Sardar ordered. ‘Keep the body in one place

and the wheels in another. Bury the shaft.’

The Government stated in a public announcement that some

seized land had been sold to new occupants and that all farms in

Bardoli would be auctioned if taxes remained unpaid. Vallabh-

bhai Patel’s elder brother Vithalbhai, president of the national

Legislative Assembly, wrote to the Viceroy with the charge that

‘the measures adopted have crossed in several instances the bounds

of law, order and decency’. Gandhi hailed the letter as breaking

‘that unhealthy and slavish tradition’ of neutrality when the

people defied the Government.

At the instance of Gandhi, India celebrated a hartal, or cessa¬

tion of work and business, on June 12th, in honour of Bardoli.

Huge sums were thrust upon Sardar Patel by Indians at home

and abroad.

Gandhi went on a brief visit to Bardoli. Processions greeted him

everywhere.

Indians of national importance, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, the

great constitutional lawyer, K. M. Munshi, a member of the

Legislative Council of Bombay, and others expressed sympathy

with the Bardoli resisters and demanded that justice be done by

the Government. On July 13th, with the Satyagraha movement

at its height, the Governor of the province of Bombay went to

Simla to consult Lord Irwin. He returned five days later and

summoned Vallabhbhai Patel, Abbas Tyebji and four other lead¬

ing Satyagrahis to a conference. Negotiation is always welcome

to the civil resister; it may lead to compromise. No compromise on

Bardoli was possible, however, and on July 23rd, Sir Leslie Wilson,

opening the session of the Bombay Legislative Council, declared

the issue was ‘whether the writ of his Majesty the King-Emperor

is to run in a portion of His Majesty’s dominions’.

The press in England awoke to the Bardoli revolt. Questions

were asked in the House of Commons where Lord Winterton was

firmly in favour of ‘enforcing compliance with law and crushing

the movement. . .’ The Satyagrahis and Patel ignored this ‘sabre

rattling’.

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From all over India, Gandhi was urged to start civil disobedi¬

ence in other provinces. He counselled patience. ‘The time has

not yet come for even limited sympathetic Satyagraha. Bardoli

has still to prove its mettle. If it can stand the last heat and if

the Government go to the farthest limit, nothing I or Vallabhbhai

can do will stop the spread of Satyagraha or limit the issue . . .

The limit: will then be prescribed by the capacity of India as a

whole for self-sacrifice and self-suffering.’ Meanwhile, the people

of Bardoli ‘are safe in God’s hands’.

The arrest of Patel was expected hourly. On August 2nd,

accordingly, Gandhi moved to Bardoli. On August 6th, the

Government capitulated. It promised to release all prisoners,

return all confiscated land, return the confiscated animals or their

equivalent, and, the essence, to cancel the rise in taxes. Patel

promised that the peasants would pay their taxes at the old rates.

Both sides kept the agreement.

Gandhi had shown Irwin and India that the weapon worked.

Would he use it on a vaster scale?

India was in turmoil. From February 3rd, 1928, when the

Simon Commission landed at Bombay, India boycotted it.

Gandhi’s boycott was so complete that he never mentioned the

commission. For him, it did not exist. But others demonstrated

against it. At a huge anti-Simon meeting in Lahore, Lajpat Rai,

the chief political figure of the Punjab, a man of sixty-four whom

Gandhi called the ‘Lion of the Punjab’, was struck with a lathi

or four-foot wooden staff swung by the policeman in a charge,

and died soon afterwards. About the same time, Jawaharlal

Nehru was beaten with lathis during an anti-Simon protest meet¬

ing in Lucknow. In December 1928, several weeks after Lajpat

Rai’s death, Assistant Police Superintendent Saunders of Lahore

was assassinated. Gandhi branded the assassination ‘a dastardly

act’. Bhagat Singh, the suspected assassin, eluded arrest and

quickly achieved the status of hero.

During the autumn of 1928, the Government moved against the

growing labour organizations of India. Trade union leaders, and

Socialists and Communists, were arrested en masse. Labour was

unhappy and anti-British for nationalist as well as class reasons.

In Bengal, always the hearth of turbulence and of opposition

to the Government as well as to the Congress leadership, Subhas

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Chandra Bose, a stormy petrel whose philosophy was, ‘Give me

blood and I promise you freedom’, had won great popularity and

a big, restive following.

Gandhi sensed the crisis atmosphere. The existing British system

was, he said, ‘an unmitigated evil’. One word from him and a

thousand Bardolis would spring into action throughout India.

But as a good field-commander, Gandhi was always careful to

choose the right time and place for battle. He knew India’s

strength; he also knew its weakness, and the weaknesses of Con¬

gress. Perhaps, if he was patient, the battle could be avoided;

even a non-violent contest should not be undertaken before every

possibility of averting it had been exhausted.

In this mood of uncertainty, Gandhi approached the annual

Congress session which met in Calcutta in December 1928. En

route to the meeting, friends put some searching and significant

questions to him when the train stopped at Nagpur.

‘What would be your attitude towards a political war of inde¬

pendence?’ they asked.

‘I would decline to take part in it,’ Gandhi answered.

‘Then you would not support a national militia?’

‘I would support the formation of a national militia under

Swaraj,’ Gandhi said, ‘if only because I realize that people cannot

be made non-violent by compulsion. Today I am teaching the

people how to meet a national crisis by non-violent means.’

The Congress session demanded action. But Gandhi had an

eye for organization and a nose for reality. Congress talked war.

Was it an effective army? Gandhi wanted Congress ‘overhauled’.

‘The delegates to the Congress’, he wrote, ‘are mostly self-

appointed ... As at present constituted, the Congress is unable

to put forth real united and unbreakable resistance.’

The Congress, however, would not be gainsaid. Caution was

not on its agenda. Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru,

leading the young men, wanted a declaration of immediate inde¬

pendence to be followed, implicitly, by a war of independence.

Gandhi suggested a two years’ warning to the British. Under

pressure, he finally cut it down to one year. If by December 31st,

1929, India had not achieved freedom under Dominion Status,

‘I must declare myself an Independence-walla.

‘I have burnt my boats,’ Gandhi announced.

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The year 1929 would be crucial and decisive.

As preparation for 1930, Gandhi toured India in 1929. He no

longer allowed himself to be cooped up in first or second class,

however. He travelled third again and found that the passengers

were just as slovenly about personal sanitation as they were five

years before.

While touring in the west-of-India province of Sindh, in Febru¬

ary, Gandhi was summoned to New Delhi to accept the chairman¬

ship of the Congress Committee for the Boycott of Foreign Cloth.

He did not believe in boycotting British books or surgical instru¬

ments, etc. Nor would he countenance a boycott of British cloth

only. Imported textiles from any country must be boycotted in

favour, not of Indian mill products, but of khadi. He regarded

the universal use of khadi as a prime requisite for the battle of

1930. Indians would go into that struggle wearing uniforms of

homespun.

During his days in Delhi, Gandhi went to a tea party, and it

became the subject of much rumour. The party was given by

Speaker Patel of the Legislative Assembly, and among the guests

were Gandhi, Lord Irwin, Jinnah, Motilal Nehru, Pandit Mala-

viya, the Maharaja of Bikaner and the Maharaja of Kashmir.

Surely, press and politicians speculated, the tea party was arranged

to initiate conversations between Indians and Englishmen with a

view to avoiding the 1930 clash. Speculation became so lush that

Gandhi honoured the afternoon party with an inimitable para¬

graph in Young India. Gandhi admitted that Patel, a partisan of

Swaraj, staged the tea party ‘to break the ice as it were. But there

cannot be much breaking of ice at a private, informal tea party.

And in my opinion it cannot lead to any real advance or action

unless both are ready. We know that we are not yet ready.

England will never make any advance so as to satisfy India’s

aspirations till she is forced to it. British rule is no philanthropic

job, it is a terribly earnest business proposition worked out from

day to day with deadly precision. The coating of benevolence that

is periodically given to it merely prolongs the agony. Such

occasional parties are therefore good only to the extent of showing

that the bringing together of parties will be easy enough when

both are ready for business. Meanwhile let the reader rest satisfied

with the assurance that no political significance attaches to

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the event. The party was one of Speaker Patel’s creditable

freaks.’

During the first four months of 1929, while Gandhi was lighting

bonfires of foreign textiles in Calcutta and keeping longstanding

speaking engagements in Burma, no longer a part of India, Irwin,

according to his biographer, ‘was largely absorbed with finding

administrative remedies to meet the perils of political terrorism

and industrial strife’. Alas, the remedy did not lie in administrative

measures. It required statesmanship.

On April 8th, Bhagat Singh, the Sikh who killed Assistant Police

Superintendent Saunders in Lahore in December 1928, walked

into the Legislative Assembly in New Delhi while the chamber

was filled with its British and Indian members, tossed two bombs

into their midst, and then began firing from an automatic pistol.

The bombs exploded with a mighty impact but burst into large

fragments instead of small splinters, and only one legislator was

seriously wounded. Sir John Simon saw the outrage from the

gallery. It was his last big impression of India; that month the

commission went home.

In May 1929, national elections in Britain gave Labour a

minority in the House of Commons, but as the largest party it

took office and Ramsay Macdonald became Prime Minister. In

June, Irwin sailed for England to consult the new government

and especially the new Secretary of State for India, Mr. Wedg¬

wood Benn. Gandhi, who had said, ‘You know, there is one thing

in me, and that is that I love to see the bright side of things and

not the seamy side,’ hoped for a change that would obviate the

expected showdown in I930-

But though he looked for the silver lining, his head was never

in the clouds; he kept his bare feet on the earth of India. In an

unconditional condemnation of terrorist acts, Gandhi reiterated

that the Government could stop them by ‘conceding the national

demand gracefully and in time. But that is hoping against hope.

For the Government to do so would be a change of heart, not

merely of policy. And there is nothing on the horizon to warrant

the hope that any such change is imminent’.

He feared a bloody clash. ‘If India attains what will be to me

so-called freedom by violent means she will cease to be the country

of my pride,’ he wrote in Young India of May 9th, 1929. Pro-

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phetically, he pictured the ideal: freedom should come non-

violently ‘through a gentlemanly understanding with Great

Britain. But then/ he added, ‘it will not be an imperialistic

haughty Britain manoeuvring for world supremacy but a Britain

humbly trying to serve the common end of humanity’.

That day was not yet.

With the fateful test of strength only a few months away,

Gandhi continued to concern himself with the things that normally

concerned him. In a leading article entitled ‘A National Defect’,

the Mahatma returned to the question of cleanliness. He was

travelling by car through the country and crossed the Krishna

River. ‘The car’, he wrote, ‘practically passed by hundreds of

men and women evacuating themselves not many yards from the

river bank. It is the stream in which people bathe and from

which they drink. Here there was a breach of the code of decency

and a criminal disregard of the most elementary laws of health.

Add to this the economic waste of the precious manure, which

they would save if these evacuations were made in a field and

buried in the living surface of the earth and well mixed with

loosened soil . . . Here is work for the municipalities.’

He worried about the expenses of his party while on tour. He

asked for an accounting and found that ‘these expenses do not

amount to more than 5 per cent of the collections . . . Having said

this in defence of the expense, I must confess that even though the

sums collected may be large, we cannot afford to fly from place

to place and pay high motor charges’. (He never flew in his life.

‘Fly’ meant move fast in cars.)

Editorial offices and homes were being searched, presumably

for seditious material. Individuals sent Gandhi reports of such

measures. ‘Let us thank the police,’ he commented, ‘that they

were courteous.’ The purpose of the raids, he declared, was ‘to

overawe and humiliate a whole people. This studied humiliation

is one of the chosen methods which the ruling race consider

necessary in order that they — though less than one hundred

thousand — may rule three hundred million people. It is a state

of things we must strain every nerve to remedy. To command

respect is the first step to Swaraj’.

This was Gandhi’s refrain: dignity, discipline and restraint would

bring Indians self-respect, therefore respect, therefore freedom.

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January ist,~ 1930, was not far off.

Irwin returned to India in October after conferences lasting

several months with members of the Labour government, his

predecessor Lord Reading, Lloyd George, Churchill, Stanley

Baldwin, Sir John Simon and many others. The Viceroy found

the situation in India ‘bordering on a state of alarm’. Everything

was ready for the great challenge of 1930.

On the last day of October 1929\* accordingly, Irwin made

‘his momentous statement’ envisaging a Round Table Conference

in which British government representatives would sit with dele¬

gates from British India and from the native states. (The idea of

such a conference with Indian participants had been broached

before the Simon Commission was appointed, but Irwin would

not listen to it.) The statement declared that ‘the natural issue of

India’s constitutional progress ... is tlm attainment of Dominion

Status’.

By thus anticipating the recommendations of the Simon Com¬

mission, Irwin suggested in effect that its labours were vain and

its life ended. Indians, to whom it had become a red flag, were

expected to appreciate this aspect of the Viceroy’s move.

A few days later, in Delhi, Gandhi met Dr. Ansari, Mrs.

Annie Besant, Motilal Nehru, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, Pandit

Malaviya, Srinivasa Sastri and others, and issued a ‘Leaders’

Manifesto’. Their response to the Viceroy’s announcement was

favourable, but, they said, steps should be taken to induce ‘a

calmer atmosphere’, political prisoners should be released and

the Indian National Congress should have the largest representa¬

tion at the forthcoming Round Table Conference. They added

a gloss: they understood the Viceroy to have said that the purpose

of the conference was not to determine whether or when Dominion

Status would be introduced but rather to draft a constitution for

the Dominion.

The conciliatory attitude of Gandhi and the elder statesmen

precipitated a storm of protest, especially from Jawaharlal Nehru,

president-elect of the Congress party for 1930, and Subhas Chan¬

dra Bose. Undeterred, confident that a peaceful agreement with

the British would be accepted by the nation, Gandhi and his

colleagues continued their probings. They made an appointment

with Lord Irwin for the afternoon of December 23rd.

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That morning, Irwin returned by train from a tour of south

India. At 7.40 a.m. the white cars of the Viceroy’s train appeared

out of the mist and approached New Delhi station. Three miles

from the terminus, where the track is single, a bomb exploded

under the train. Only one person was hurt, and Irwin did not

know what happened until informed by his aide-de-camp.

A far deadlier bomb had been prepared for the Viceroy in

Westminster. Lord Reading led the attack in the House of

Lords, and the Tories and Liberals combined in the House of

Commons to condemn Irwin’s promise of a Round Table Con¬

ference and Dominion Status. Wedgwood Benn and other

Labourites defended the Viceroy, but the result of the debate

was to bring majority parliamentary pressure to bear against any

commitment in favour of Dominion Status.

When Jinnah, Gandhi, Sapru, Motilal Nehru and Vithalbhai

Patel entered the Viceroy’s office on the afternoon of December

23rd, Gandhi congratulated the Viceroy on his escape and then

proceeded to detonate the long-fuse torpedo made in Parliament.

The audience lasted for two and a half hours; Irwin and Gandhi

did most of the talking.

Could his Excellency, Gandhi demanded, promise a Round

Table Conference which would draft a constitution giving India

full and immediate Dominion Status including the right to secede

from the Empire?

Reflecting the Parliamentary debate, Irwin replied, in the

words of his biographer, ‘that he was unable to prejudge or com¬

mit the [Round Table] Conference at all to any particular line...

These events formed the overture to the historic annual Con¬

gress party convention which met, late in December, in Lahore,

under the presidency of Jawaharlal Nehru who had celebrated his

fortieth birthday the month before.

At the second of time when the year 1929 ended and 1930 was

born, the Congress, with Gandhi as stage director, unfurled the

flag of freedom and acclaimed a resolution in favour of unabridged

independence and secession. ‘Swaraj,’ Gandhi declared, ‘is now

to mean complete independence.’ The Congress convention in¬

structed its members and friends to withdraw from all legislatures,

and sanctioned civil disobedience including the non-payment of

taxes. The All-India Congress Committee was authorized to

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decide when Satyagraha would commence but, as Gandhi said,

4 I know that it is a duty devolving primarily on me.’ Everyone

realized that Gandhi would have to be the brain, heart and direct¬

ing hand of any civil disobedience movement, and it was therefore

left to him to choose the hour, the place and the precise issue.

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