# CHAPTER XX

WITHOUT POLITICS

T he ‘Epic Fast’ enabled Gandhi to break through a thick,

high wall into the immense neglected field of social reform.

Many of his friends were unhappy because he allowed him¬

self to be ‘sidetracked’ into welfare work for Harijans and peasants.

Politicians wanted him to be political. But to Gandhi vitamins for

villages were the best politics and Harijan happiness the highroad

to independence.

Social reform was ever his favoured activity. ‘I have always

held’, he declared on January 25th, 1942, in Harijan , ‘that a parlia¬

mentary programme at all times is the least of a nation’s activity.

The most important and permanent work is done outside.’ He

wanted the individual to do more so that the State would do less.

The more work at the bottom, the less dictation from the top.

Gandhi’s revulsion against government was indeed so strong

that he promised in the April 27th, 1940, Harijan not to partici¬

pate in the government of free India. He would do his share, he

said, ‘outside the official world’. He was too religious to identify

himself with any government.

This being Gandhi’s philosophy, he depended for the success of

his social reform work on special-purpose voluntary organizations

with many active members.

In February 1933, Gandhi, still in prison, had started the

Harijan Sevak Sangh, a society to help Harijans, and Harijan , a

new weekly which replaced Young India , suspended by the Govern¬

ment. On May 8th, he undertook a three weeks’ fast for self¬

purification and to impress the ashram with the importance of

service rather than indulgence; the presence of an attractive

American woman visitor had caused some backsliding. The first

day of the fast the Government released him. It seemed certain,

after the physical agony of the seven days of the ‘Epic Fast’, that

twenty-one days without food would kill him. And Britain did

not want a dead Gandhi within prison walls.

He survived.

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Why was the short fast almost fatal and the other, three times

as long, easy to endure? During the former, he negotiated inces¬

santly and was consumed by a desire to remove the taint of

untouchability; his body burned simultaneously. In the twenty-

one-day fast, spirit and mind were relaxed. His little body was

the creature of a powerful will.

As a gesture of friendship to the Government for his release,

Gandhi suspended for six weeks the civil disobedience campaign

which had commenced in January 1933. On July 15th he asked

Willingdon for an interview. The Viceroy declined. On August

1 st, Gandhi proposed to march from Yeravda, where he had been

residing, to the village of Ras. That night, he was arrested with

thirty-four ashramites, but released three days later and ordered

to remain in the city of Poona. Half an hour later, he disobeyed

the order, and was arrested again and sentenced to a year’s im¬

prisonment. He commenced to fast August 16th, was removed to

hospital in a precarious condition on August 20th, and uncondi¬

tionally released on the 23rd. He nevertheless regarded himself

as serving the year’s sentence and announced he would not resume

civil disobedience before August 3rd, 1934.

Until 1939, except for a month’s silence to catch up with his

work and several long periods of physical breakdown, Gandhi was

completely at the disposal of the organizations he had founded

for mass welfare and education. He gave Sabarmati Ashram to

a Harijan group and established headquarters in Wardha, a small

town in the Central Provinces. From there, on November 7th,

1933, he commenced a ten-month tour for Harijan welfare; he

visited every province in India without once going home to relax

or rest.

On January 15th, 1934, a large section of Bihar province

suffered a severe earthquake. Gandhi interrupted his tour and

visited the stricken area in March; he walked barefoot from

village to village, comforting, teaching and preaching. The earth¬

quake, he told the public, ‘is a chastisement for your sins’, chiefly

‘the sin of untouchability’. Such superstition angered Tagore and

other enlightened Indians; the poet denounced the Mahatma.

‘. . . physical catastrophes’, Tagore declared in a statement to

the press which he first sent to Gandhi, ‘have\* their inevitable and

exclusive origin in certain combinations of physical facts ... If

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we associate ethical principles with cosmic phenomena then we

shall have to admit that human nature is morally superior to the

Providence that preaches lessons in good behaviour in orgies of

the worst behaviour possible ... As for us, we feel perfectly secure

in the faith that our sins and errors, however enormous, have not

enough force to drag down the structure of creation to ruins . . .

We who are immensely grateful to Mahatmaji for inducing by

his wonder-working inspiration a freedom from fear and feebleness

in the minds of his countrymen, feel profoundly hurt when any

words from his mouth may emphasize the elements of unreason

in those very minds. . . .’

Gandhi was not shaken. ‘There is an indissoluble marriage’,

he replied, ‘between matter and spirit.. . The connection between

cosmic phenomena and human behaviour is a living faith and

draws me nearer to God.’ The moment Gandhi invoked God

there was no arguing with him. In effect, the overzealous

Mahatma was harnessing God to his propaganda chariot; he was

Aijuna using Krishna as charioteer to fight for the common people.

Gandhi’s paramount compulsion was to help the poor, and

since Gandhi and Gandhi’s God were partners, the Mahatma

enlisted the Almighty in the task. ‘To a people famishing and

idle’, he wrote, ‘the only acceptable form in which God can dare

appear is work and promise of food and wages.’

‘India lives in her villages, not in her cities,’ he wrote in Harijan

on August 26th, 1936; and several issues later, ‘When I succeed in

ridding the villages of their poverty, I have won Swaraj . . .’ The

idea that Gandhi favoured poverty is fiction; he merely urged

select idealists to serve the people through self-abnegation. For

the nation as a whole, ‘No one has ever suggested that grinding

pauperism can lead to anything else than moral degradation,’

which is the last thing he wanted. Gandhi insisted that ‘If we do

not waste our wealth and energy, the climate and natural re¬

sources of our country are such that we can become the happiest

people in the world,’ which is what he did want.

Gandhi decried the extreme of pauperism and the extreme of

wealth.

Between 1933 and 1939, Gandhi allowed few matters to deflect

him from welfare work. It was not smooth sailing. On June 25th,

1935, at Poona, in the heart of the late Tilak’s Maratha country,

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a Hindu suspected of opposing equality for Harijans threw a

bomb into a car thinking mistakenly that the Mahatma was in

it. Shortly thereafter, a Gandhi supporter belaboured an anti-

Harijan with a lathi. Gandhi fasted seven days in July 1934 to

do penance for both.

On October 26th, 1934, the All-India Village Industries Asso¬

ciation was launched with Gandhi as patron and Gandhi’s

millionaire industrialist friends as backers.

At village meetings and in Harijan , Gandhi was now giving the

farming population rudimentary instruction about food. ‘Milk

and banana make a perfect meal, 5 he wrote. Harijan of February

15th, 1935, contained an article by Gandhi entitled ‘Green Leaves

and their Food Value’ in which he reported, ‘For nearly five

months I have been living on uncooked foods. The addition of

green leaves to their meals will enable villagers to avoid many

diseases from which they are now suffering.’ He devoted another

article to the debate on ‘Cow’s Milk versus Buffalo’s’, and still a

third to the supreme Indian problem: rice. In his booklet, Key to

Health , and elsewhere, Gandhi gave warning against machine-

polished rice. Polishing removes an overcoat rich in vitamins,

especially B 1? he explained; lacking those vitamins, Indians, for

most of whom rice is the chief staple food, are subject to numerous

debilitating diseases, notably beriberi which means ‘I cannot’.

Hand-pounded rice, Gandhi explained, retains the vitamin-rich

coating.

At other times, Gandhi expatiated on the nutritional value of

the mango kernel and the groundnut or peanut. Peanuts were

politics to him, as political as primaries. Repeatedly, too, he gave

detailed information on how to prepare animal manures and how

to cure snake bites and malaria.

Gandhi knew that the improvement of seed, the proper use of

fertilizer and the proper care of cattle could solve basic political

problems. Many a civil war in Asia might have been prevented

by an additional daily bowl of rice per person.

Gandhi also paid attention to non-agrarian aspects of village

life. ‘We have to concentrate on the village being self-contained,

manufacturing mainly for use,’ he wrote in Harijan on August 29th,

1936. ‘Provided this character of village industry is maintained,

there would be no objection to villagers using even the modern

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machines and tools that they can make and afford to use. Only

they should not be used as a means of exploiting of others.’

In Harijan of July 26th, 1942, Gandhi described the ideal

Indian village: Tt is a complete republic, independent of its

neighbours for its vital wants, and yet interdependent for many

other wants in which dependence is a necessity. Thus every

village’s first concern will be to grow its own food crops and cotton

for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle, recreation and

playground for adults and children. Then if there is more land

available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding . . .

tobacco, opium and the like. The village will maintain a village

theatre, school and public hall. It will have its own water works

ensuring clean supply. This can be done through controlled wells

and tanks [reservoirs]. Education will be compulsory up to the

final basic course. As far as possible, every activity will be con¬

ducted on a co-operative basis . . .’ To this modest blueprint,

which, however, seemed like a sketch of Heaven to India’s per¬

manently underfed farmers, Gandhi added another wild dream:

electricity in every village home.

Did Gandhi advocate a land reform for India which would

give landless or land-poor peasants the redistributed estates of the

big landlords?

In the January 2nd, 1937, issue of Harijan , Gandhi wrote, ‘Land

and all property is his who will work it’; but he admitted the land¬

lords into that category though he knew that the landlord class

included a large percentage of absentee owners, intermediaries,

agents, moneylenders and other unproductive elements.

‘I cannot picture to myself a time when no man shall be richer

than another,’ Gandhi said. ‘Even in the most perfect world, we

shall fail to avoid inequalities, but we can and must avoid strife

and bitterness. There are numerous examples extant of the rich

and the poor living in perfect friendliness. We have but to

multiply such instances.’

Gandhi would have done it by ‘trusteeship’.

In Bengal once, Gandhi was the guest of a landlord who served

him milk in a gold bowl and fruit on gold plates.

‘Where did he get these golden plates from?’ Gandhi said to

himself.

‘From the substance of the peasants,’ Gandhi answered. ‘Where

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their life is one long-drawn-out agony, how dare he have these

luxuries?’

Gandhi spared his host, but he shared these thoughts with a

meeting of landlords in 1931 and added, ‘Landlords would do

well to take time by the forelock. Let them cease to be mere rent

collectors. They should become trustees and trusted friends of

their tenants . . . They should give the peasants fixity of tenure,

take a lively interest in their welfare, provide well-managed

schools for their children, night schools for adults, hospitals and

dispensaries for the sick, look after the sanitation of the villages,

and in a variety of ways make them feel that they, the landlords,

are their true friends taking only a fixed commission for their

manifold services.’

‘Exploitation of the poor can be extinguished,’ Gandhi wrote in

Harijan on July 28th, 1940, ‘not by effecting the destruction of a

few millionaires, but by removing the ignorance of the poor and

teaching them to non-co-operate with their exploiters. That will

convert the exploiters also.’

Gandhi reminded the peasants and workers of their power.

‘There is in English a very potent word, and you have it in French

also,’ he said. ‘All the languages of the world have it — it is “No”

. . . Immediately Labour comes to recognize that it has got the

choice of saying “Yes” when it wants to say “Yes”, and “No”

when it wants to say “No”, Labour is free of Capital, and Capital

must woo Labour.’ The worker can strike; the peasant can refuse

rent.

Nevertheless, he declared in Young India of October 7th, 1926,

‘capital and labour need not be antagonistic to each other’.

But the passage of time and all Gandhi’s persuasiveness pro¬

duced few trustees. No report of‘voluntary abdication’ by a land¬

lord or millowner reached Gandhi before the day of his death.

No one answered his 1929 appeal to the ‘model landlord’ to

‘reduce himself to poverty in order that the peasant may have the

necessities of life’.

Gradually, therefore, Gandhi’s economic views changed. He

continued to advocate class collaboration. But as he moved nearer

the end of his life and further from the nineteenth century, he

sought new means of removing poverty. He became reconciled

to more state participation in economic affairs. He wanted the

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law to help in the levelling process. Equality grew more attractive.

In Harijan of July 31st, 1937, Gandhi noted that British income

surtaxes amounted to 70 per cent. ‘There is no reason why India

should not go to a much higher figure. 5 And, he added, ‘Why

should there not be death duties?’ In an article published April

13th, 1938, he went still further: ‘A trustee has no heir but the

public.’ The millionaire’s wealth should go to the community,

not to his son who would only lose morally by inheriting material

riches, Gandhi declared.

One of the first acts of a free India would be to give grants to

the untouchables, he said, out of the pockets of ‘the moneyed

classes’. And if the rich complain, ‘I shall sympathize with them,

but I will not be able to help them, even if I could possibly do so,

because I would seek their assistance in that process, and without

their assistance it would not be possible to raise these people out

of the mire.’

In 1941, and again in 1945 in his Constructive Programme , Gandhi

warned the Indian capitalists. ‘A non-violent system of govern¬

ment’, he wrote, ‘is clearly an impossibility so long as the wide

gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persists. The con¬

trast between the palaces of New Delhi and the miserable hovels

of the poor labouring class nearby cannot last one day in a free

India in which the poor will enjoy the same power as the richest

in the land. A violent and bloody revolution is a certainty one

day unless there is a voluntary abdication of riches and the power

that riches give, and sharing them for the common good.’

The response was nil.

‘The power that riches give’ troubled him. He began to search

for means of diffusing it. ‘Key industries, industries which the

state needs’, he wrote on June 28th, 1939, ‘may be centralized.’

He was opposed, however, to concentration of economic power in

the hands of the Government. He therefore added, ‘But supposing

the state controlled paper-making and centralized it, I would

expect it to protect all the paper that villages can make.’ Power

houses, he wrote, should be owned ‘by village communities or the

state’, preferably by the villages.

‘What would happen in a free India?’ I asked Gandhi in 1942.

‘What is your programme for the improvement of the lot of the

peasantry?’

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‘The peasants would take the land,’ he replied. ‘We would not

have to tell them to take it. They would take it.’

‘Would the landlords be compensated?’ I asked.

‘No,’ Gandhi'said. ‘That would be fiscally impossible.’

An interviewer told Gandhi that the number of textile mills was

increasing. ‘That is a misfortune,’ he remarked. Better that

textiles be made in the homes of the millions of partially employed

peasants.

‘God forbid’, Gandhi exclaimed in Harijan on January 28th,

1939, ‘that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner

of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island

kingdom [England] is today keeping the world in chains. If an

entire nation of three hundred millions took to similar economic

exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts.’

Nor did Gandhi regard the mere multiplication of material

wants and of objects to gratify them as the highroad to happiness

or godliness. He drew no line between economics and ethics.

‘An economics’, he said in Harijan of October 9th, 1937, ‘that

inculcates Mammon worship, that enables the strong to amass

wealth at the expense of the weak, is a false and dismal science.

It spells death. True economics . . . stands for social justice’ and

moral values. Gandhi knew that people with full refrigerators,

crowded clothes closets, cars in every garage and radios in every

room may still be psychologically insecure and unhappy. ‘Rome,’

he said, ‘suffered a moral fall when it attained high material

affluence.’ ‘What shall it avail a man if he gain the whole world

and lose his soul?’ Gandhi quoted. ‘In modern terms,’ he con¬

tinued, ‘it is beneath human dignity to lose one’s individuality

and become a mere cog in the machine. I want every indivi¬

dual to become a full-blooded, fully developed member of

society.’ Next to God, Gandhi’s supreme being was man the

individual. He accordingly regarded himself as ‘the born

democrat’.

‘No society can possibly be built on a denial of individual free¬

dom. It is contrary to the very nature of man,’ Gandhi wrote. ‘Just

as man will not grow horns or a tail so he will not exist as a man

if he has no mind of his own.’ Therefore, ‘democracy is not a

state in which people act like sheep’.

Gandhi disliked the word ‘tolerance’ but he found no substitute.

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‘For me,\* he said, ‘every ruler is alien who defies public opinion .. .

Intolerance betrays want of faith in one’s cause . . . We shut the

door of reason when we refuse to listen to our opponents or, having

listened, make fun of them.

‘Always keep an open mind,’ he admonished.

There could, however, be no democracy without discipline. ‘I

value individual freedom,’ he wrote, ‘but you must not forget that

man is essentially a social being. He has risen to his present

status by learning to adjust his individualism to the requirements

of social progress. Unrestricted individualism is the law of the

beast of the jungle. We must learn to strike a mean between

individual freedom and social restraint.’ It could be done by

self-discipline. If the individual did not discipline himself the

state would try to discipline the individual, and too much official

discipline kills democracy.

‘We cannot learn discipline by compulsion,’ Gandhi affirmed.

A dictatorship can exact obedience; it can implant the habit of

robot compliance; it can, by fear, convert man into a cringing,

kowtowing pigmy. None of that is discipline.

Gandhi discouraged the notion that democracy meant economic

freedom at the expense of personal liberty, or political freedom

without economic freedom. ‘My conception of freedom is no

narrow conception,’ he declared in Harijan of June 7th, 1942. ‘It

is coextensive with the freedom of man in all his majesty.

‘If the individual ceases to count, what is left of society?’ he

asked. To those who argued that dictatorships reduce illiteracy,

he replied, ‘Where a choice has to be made between liberty and

learning, who will not say that the former has to be preferred a

thousand times to the latter?\*

Democracy means majority rule, Gandhi agreed. But, ‘In

matters of conscience,’ he said, ‘the law of majority has no place;

... it is slavery to be amenable to the majority no matter what its

decisions are.’

Nor was freedom Gandhi’s highest law. ‘Not even for the free¬

dom of India would I resort to an untruth,’ he said. ‘We do not

seek our independence out of Britain’s ruin.’

Gandhi’s hostility to violence and untruth, his objection to the

omnipotent State which embodies both, and his economic ideas

made him anti-Communist.

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‘India does not want Communism, 5 Gandhi said as early as

November 24th, 1921.

‘All Communists are not bad, as all Congressmen are not angels, 5

Gandhi declared on January 26th, 1941. ‘I have, therefore, no

prejudice against Communists as such. Their philosophy, as they

have declared it to me, I cannot subscribe to. 5

The Communists sent spokesmen to convert him. But his in¬

stincts led him to reject their teachings.

‘I am yet ignorant of what exactly Bolshevism is, 5 he wrote on

December 1 ith, 1924. ‘I have not been able to study it. I do not

know whether it is for the good of Russia in the long run. But I

do know that in so far as it is based on violence and denial of

God, it repels me ... I am an uncompromising opponent of

violent methods even to serve the noblest of causes. 5

In 1926, he received some enlightenment and declared, ‘Let

no one think that the people in Russia, Italy and other countries

are happy or are independent. 5

In 1927, Shapuri Saklatwala, an Indian Communist who was a

member of the British House of Commons, appealed to Gandhi

to forsake his mistaken ways and join the Communists. Gandhi

replied to the ‘impatient comrade 5 in Young India of March 17th,

1927. ‘In spite of my desire to offer hearty co-operation, 5 the

Mahatma said, ‘I find myself against a blind wall. His facts are

fiction and his deductions based upon fiction are necessarily

baseless ... I am sorry, but we stand at opposite poles. 5

Communists accused him of consorting with capitalists and

taking their money. He did not reply that Communists were

tarred with the same brush. He said he took money from the rich

to help the poor. He consorted with capitalists to convert them.

He consorted with Communists as often as they wished to come.

‘You claim to be Communists, 5 he said to one group of Com¬

munists, ‘but you do not seem to live the life of Communism. 5

Then he berated them for their discourtesy in debate. On another

occasion, he attacked their lack of scruples. ‘I have it from some

of the literature that passes under the name of Communist litera¬

ture, 5 he wrote in Harijan on December 10th, 1930, ‘that secrecy,

camouflage, and the like are enjoined as necessary for the accom¬

plishment of the Communist. 5 This repelled him.

Was Gandhi a Socialist?

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The Communists call themselves Socialists. The full name of

Hitler’s Nazi party was National Socialist Workers’ Party, and

Mussolini spoke of his regime as ‘proletarian’. The French Radical

Socialists are mild and middle class. Socialism is an overworked

word.

Gandhi read Karl Marx’s Capital in prison and remarked, ‘I

think I could have written it better, assuming, of course, that I

had the leisure for the study he has put in.’ If Gandhi meant the

style he was certainly right. But Gandhi was no Marxist; he did

not believe in class war.

Minoo Masani, Indian author and India’s first Ambassador to

Brazil, asked Gandhi’s opinion of the programme of the Indian

Socialist Party. Gandhi replied in a letter dated June 14th, 1934.

‘I welcome the rise of the Socialist Party in the Congress,’ the

Mahatma wrote. ‘But I can’t say I like the programme as it

appears in the printed pamphlet. It seems to me to ignore Indian

conditions and I do not like the assumption underlying many of

its propositions which go to show that there is necessarily antagon¬

ism between the classes and the masses or between the labourers

and capitalists, such that they can never work for mutual good.

My own experience covering a fairly long period is to the contrary.

What is necessary is that labourers or workers should know their

rights and should also know how to assert them. And since there

never has been any right without a corresponding duty, in my

opinion, a manifesto is incomplete without emphasizing the

necessity of performance of duty and showing what duty is.’ He

invited Masani and friends for a discussion.

Gandhi opposed the Socialists for their class-war doctrine, and

he condemned them when they used violence. Yet as he observed

disturbing trends, he became more pro-Socialist and more favour¬

ably disposed to equality. ‘Today’, Gandhi wrote in the June isf,

1947, Harijan , ‘there is gross economic inequality. The basis of

socialism is economic equality. There can be no rule of God in

the present state of iniquitous inequalities in which a few roll in

riches and the masses do not get enough to eat. I accepted the

theory of Socialism even while I was in South Africa.’ His,

however, was a moral Socialism.

If India were to carry out most of Gandhi’s numerous economic

prescriptions the result, two or three decades after his death,

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might be an economy pivoting on a fully employed, self-governing

village enjoying maximum self-sufficiency and minimum mechan¬

ization; a city where capitalists and municipal, provincial and

federal governments shared industry and trade; strong trade

unions and co-operatives; and one-generation capitalists whose

wealth, since they could not bequeath it, would revert to the

community.

Gandhi’s loyalty to truth exceeded his loyalty to political dogma

or party. He allowed truth to lead him without a map. If it took

him into an area where he had to discard some intellectual baggage

or walk alone without past associates, he went. He never impeded

his mind with stop signs. Many groups have claimed him. But

he was the private property of none, not even of Congress. He

was its leader for years, yet at the Congress convention in Bombay

in December 1934, having immersed himself in Harijan and

peasant uplift work, he ceased to be a dues-paying member, let

alone an officer, of the Congress party. ‘I need complete detach¬

ment and absolute freedom of action,’ he said.

Gandhi’s individualism meant maximum freedom from outward

circumstances and maximum development of inner qualities. His

antagonism to British rule was part of a larger antagonism to

fetters of all kinds. His goal was Gita detachment, in politics as in

religion.

Gandhi’s intellectual receptivity and flexibility are characteris¬

tics of the Hindu mind. There is a Hindu orthodoxy but it is not

characteristic of Hinduism. In Hinduism it is the intensity and

quality of the religious zeal, not so much its object, which con¬

stitutes religion.

In 1942, when I was Gandhi’s house guest for a week, there was

only one decoration on the mud walls of his hut: a black and

white print of Jesus Christ with the inscription, ‘He Is Our Peace.’

I asked Gandhi about it. ‘I am a Christian,’ he replied. ‘I am a

Christian, and a Hindu, and a Moslem, and a Jew.’

‘All faiths’, Gandhi wrote in From Teravda Mandir in an un¬

intended definition of religious tolerance, ‘constitute a revelation

of Truth, but all are imperfect, and liable to error. Reverence for

other faiths need not blind us to their faults. We must be keenly

alive to the defects of our own faith also, yet not leave it on that

account, but try to overcome those defects. Looking at all

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religions with an equal eye, we would not only not hesitate, but

would think it our duty to blend into our faith every acceptable

feature of other faiths. 5

That paragraph is a portrait of the Gandhi mind: he was the

conservative who would not change his religion, the reformer who

tried to alter it, and the tolerant believer who regarded all faiths

as aspects of the divine. He was loyal yet critical, partisan yet

open-minded, devout yet not doctrinaire, inside yet outside,

attached yet detached, Hindu yet Christian, yet Moslem, yet Jew.

Next to Hinduism he was most attracted by Christianity. He

loved Jesus. Hindu bigots even accused him of being a secret

Christian. He considered this ‘both a libel and a compliment — a

libel because there are men who believe me to be capable of being

secretly anything ... a compliment in that it is a reluctant acknow¬

ledgment of my capacity for appreciating the beauties of Chris¬

tianity. Let me own this. If I could call myself, say, a Christian

or a Moslem, with my own interpretation of the Bible or the

Koran , I could not hesitate to call myself either. For then Hindu,

Christian and Moslem would be synonymous terms. I do believe

that in the other world there are neither Hindus, nor Christians

or Moslems. 5

Gandhi was more specific, however, in an address at the

Y.M.C.A. in Colombo, Ceylon, in 1927. ‘If then, 5 he said, ‘I

had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own inter¬

pretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, “Oh, yes, I am a

Christian. 55 . . . But negatively I can tell you that much of what

passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount.

And please mark my words. I am not at the present moment

speaking of the Christian conduct. I am speaking of the Christian

belief, of Christianity as it is understood in the West. 5

Many Christian missionaries came to Gandhi often, and he had

long friendly talks with Dr. John R. Mott, Bishop Fisher who lived

in India for years, and others. But Gandhi frowned on proselytiz¬

ing, whether by Christians, Hindus, or Moslems. He said, ‘I do

not believe in people telling others of their faith, especially with a

view to conversion . . . Faith does not permit of telling. It has to

be lived and then it is self-propagating. 5

S. K. George, a Syrian Christian of India and lecturer at

Bishop’s College, Calcutta, wrote a book entitled, Gandhi's Chal -

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lenge to Christianity and dedicated it ‘To Mahatma Gandhi who

made Jesus and His Message real to Me’. The Reverend K.

Mathew Simon, of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Malabar,

India, writes of Gandhi, ‘It was his life that proved to me more

than anything else that Christianity is a practicable religion even

in the twentieth century.’ This suggests how relevant Gandhi is

to the problems of our times.

Gandhi presented a perplexing problem to Christians in India:

he was the world’s most Christ-like person yet not a Christian.

‘And so,’ exclaims E. Stanley Jones, ‘one of the most Christlike

men in history was not called a Christian at all.’ Missionaries

frequently tried to convert him to Christianity. (He, speaking

softly, tried to do the same for them.) But why enrol a saint in

a church?

Gandhi protested that the missionaries fed the starving and

healed the sick in order to convert them to Christianity. ‘Make us

better Hindus,’ he pleaded. That would be more Christian.

Christianity has had a good effect on Hinduism. ‘The indirect

influence of Christianity has been to quicken Hinduism into life,’

Gandhi asserted. The fact that the missionaries’ richest recruiting

field was the embittered Harijan community may have awakened

some Hindus to the necessity of supporting Gandhi’s Harijan

work. And Gandhi probably had a good effect on Christianity.

Dr. E. Stanley Jones says, ‘God uses many instruments, and he

may have used Mahatma Gandhi to help Christianize unchristian

Christianity.’

Gandhi never tried to convert Christians to Hinduism.

Although Gandhi was a Hindu reformer and welcomed the

play of outside influences on Hinduism, he departed from Hindu

customs and beliefs with reluctance. In 1927, Devadas fell in love

with Lakshmi, the daughter of Rajagopalachari, and wanted to

marry her. But Rajagopalachari was a Brahman and Gandhi a

Vaisya, and members of different castes should not marry. Nor

should young folks choose their mates; marriages are arranged by

parents. But the man and maid persisted, and finally the illus¬

trious fathers agreed to sanction the union if the couple still

wanted one another after five years of separation. So Devadas,

who was born in 1900, and Lakshmi waited five painful years

and married with pomp in Poona on June 16th, 1933, in the

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presence of both happy fathers. Gandhi’s wedding gift was a

hymn book and garland of yarn which he had spun.

The conservative traditionalist and the radical iconoclast

merged in Gandhi into a tantalizing unpredictable mixture. The

Mahatma’s successful assault on untouchability produced the

most revolutionary change in Hinduism’s millennial existence. It

would seem that the corollary of the abolition of untouchability

was the abolition of caste, for if one mingled with outcasts surely

the barriers between the higher castes should crumble. Yet for

many years Gandhi defended caste restrictions.

Defending the four Hindu castes, Gandhi said in 1920, T con¬

sider the four divisions to be fundamental, natural and essential.’

‘Hinduism’, he wrote in Young India of October 6th, 1921, ‘does

most emphatically discourage interdining and intermarriage be¬

tween divisions . . . Prohibition against intermarriage and inter¬

dining is essential for the rapid evolution of the soul.’

The same man said, ‘Restriction on intercaste dining and inter¬

caste marriage is no part of the Hindu religion. It crept into

Hinduism when perhaps it was in its decline, and was then prob¬

ably meant to be a temporary protection against the disin¬

tegration of Hindu society. Today those two prohibitions are

weakening Hindu society.’ This was on November 4th, 1932.

In 1921, the prohibition of intermarriage and interdining was

‘essential’ to the soul; in 1932, it was ‘weakening Hindu society’.

Even this, however, was not Gandhi’s final position. Having

broken with the orthodox tradition, he characteristically continued

to travel further and further away from it, and on January 5th,

1946, he declared, in the Hindustan Standard , ‘I therefore tell all

boys and girls who want to marry that they cannot be married at

Sevagram Ashram unless one of the parties is a Harijan.’ Earlier,

lie had refused to attend a wedding unless it was an intercaste

marriage.

From 1921 to 1946 Gandhi had gone full circle: from utter dis¬

approval of intercaste marriages to approval of only intercaste

marriages.

He had opposed marriages between religions. But he came to

favour those too. He congratulated Dr. Humayun Kabir, a

Moslem writer, on taking a Hindu wife, and approved of B. K.

Nehru’s marrying a Hungarian Jewess.

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Caste is as deeply ingrained in India as the family is in the

Western world. Yet Gandhi could change his views on it. In

later years, his ideas on celibacy also moderated. In 1935, Pro¬

fessor J. B. Kripalani, a disciple of Gandhi who had first met the

Mahatma at Shantiniketan in 1915 and again in Ghamparan in

1917, fell in love with a Bengali girl and wanted to marry her.

Gandhi summoned the girl, Sucheta, and tried to dissuade her.

‘Marriage will ruin him, 5 he said. It would weaken his concentra¬

tion on social problems. Gandhi advised her to marry somebody

else.

A year later, however, Gandhi called Sucheta and gave his

approval to the marriage. ‘I shall pray for both of you, 5 he said.

Subsequently, he treated her as a daughter.

In the ashram, too, Gandhi became more tolerant of marriage

and stopped insisting that marriages be sexless.

As a crusader, Gandhi had to be positive about his opinions.

As a devotee of the truth, he had to be able to change them. He

sometimes defended his position with a persistence that seemed

immodest; yet he also altered it, when necessary, with a complete¬

ness that embarrassed his followers but never him. Though he

usually tried to prove his consistency, he admitted his inconsis¬

tencies. He could be adamant and softly yielding. He dictated to

Congress in one period and left it to its fate and follies in another.

Tremendous power was at his command but it often remained

unused; in very crucial issues he bowed to the wishes of opponents

whom he could have broken with a crook of a finger. He had the

might of a dictator and the mind of a democrat. Power gave him

no pleasure; he had no distorted psychology to feed. The result

was a relaxed man. The problem of maintaining an impression

of omniscience, infallibility, omnipotence and dignity never

occupied him.

Part of every leader’s equipment is a wall. It may be high and

made of brick and a battalion of guards or it may consist of an

unanswered question and an enigmatic smile. Its purpose is to

lend distance and awe and to obscure frailties and secrets. There

was no wall around Gandhi. ‘I say without the least hesitation,’

he once declared, ‘that I have never had recourse to cunning in all

his life.’ His mind and emotions were even more exposed than

my body.

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‘My darkest hour’, Gandhi wrote in Harijan of December 26th,

1936, at the age of sixty-seven, ‘was when I was in Bombay a few

months ago. It was the hour of my temptation. Whilst I was

asleep I suddenly felt as though I wanted to see a woman. Well

a man who had tried to rise superior to the instinct for nearly

forty years was bound to be intensely pained when he had this

frightful experience. I ultimately conquered the feeling, but I

was face to face with the blackest moment of my life and if I had

succumbed to it, it would have meant my absolute undoing.’

Most people are incapable of such nudity and many would think

it unnecessary. But it is the supreme manifestation of life without

a wall. He wanted the world to know him, all of him; less than

that would not have been the truth. And he told the truth about

his inner struggles and outer contacts so that others might learn

from them. ‘As I have all along believed that what is possible for

one is possible for all, my experiments have not been conducted

in the closet, but in the open,’ Gandhi asserted. To say this

sounds somewhat boastful; not to say it would have meant sup¬

pressing an inspiring message.

Gandhi was the eternal teacher. He accordingly made himself

accessible to all. The accessibility was not only complete, it was

creative.

In the 1930s, a young Indian named Atulananda Ghakrabarti

wrote a pamphlet on the increasingly envenomed Hindu-Moslem

problem. He of course sent a copy to the Mahatma. Usually a

prominent person in any country limits his exertion in such cases

to the sending of a formal, polite acknowledgment. Gandhi read

the brochure and wrote the unknown author a detailed criticism

of its ideas and proposals. He also referred to minor matters. For

instance, ‘At page 151, you say India is “thousands of miles wide”.

Is it? As a matter of fact not more than 1500. Then you have

not given the dates to your quotations in the appendix except in

one case . . . And think of the spelling mistakes. Unpardonable!

But the book should serve a useful purpose in spite of the defects,

if you have adhered to the truth.’

Encouraged by this unexpected attention, Atulananda asked

whether he could come and live in the ashram for a while. Gandhi

invited him and he stayed for several weeks. They became friends

and corresponded regularly thereafter. Atulananda kept sending

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his articles to Gandhi for comments; he suggested a culture league

to bring Hindus and Moslems together. In one reply, dated

August 3rd, 1937, Gandhi wrote:

Dear Atulananda, I hope your daughter is well and wholly out ot

danger. I have gone through your articles carefully. I still do

not see light. It seems to me that no culture league will answer

the purpose you and I have in view. It has got to be done by indi¬

viduals who have a living faith and who would work with mis¬

sionary zeal. Try again, if I have not seen what you see in your

proposal. I shall be patient and attentive. I want to help if I can

see my way clear.

Yours sincerely,

M. K. Gandhi

The letter was written by hand in ink on a small sheet of hand¬

made paper.

Atulananda continued to concentrate on the Hindu-Moslem

tension and suggested a book about it. Replying by postcard on

June 17th, 1939, the Mahatma said, ‘The disease has gone too

deep for books to help. Some big action is necessary. What I do

not know as yet, Sincerely, M. K. Gandhi.’

Gandhi was in correspondence with many thousands of persons

in India and elsewhere. In most cases, a letter became the seed

of a prolonged personal relationship; he remembered members

of the correspondent’s family and mentioned them by name.

Originally approached on a general political or religious question

he would soon be asked for advice on private matters. He was a

motherly father to multitudes.

In August 1947 Gandhi was in Calcutta coping with one of

the ugliest crises in Indian history. City streets were running with

Hindu and Moslem blood. One morning, Amiya Chakravarty

came to see him. Amiya had been the literary secretary of Tagore.

A cousin who was very dear to him had just died of an illness, and

for comfort he wanted to share his sorrow with the Mahatma. He

stood close to the wall in a corner of Gandhi’s room; Gandhi was

writing. When he lifted his head, Amiya stepped forward and

told him of his cousin’s passing. Gandhi made a friendly remark

and invited him to the prayer meeting that evening. When Amiya

arrived in the evening, Gandhi handed him a slip of paper and

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whispered, ‘It came straight from the heart so it may have some

value.’ The note read:

Dear Amiya, I am sorry for your loss which in reality is no loss.

‘Death is but a sleep and a forgetting.’ This is such a sweet sleep

that the body has not to wake again and the dead load of memory

is thrown overboard. So far as I know, happily there is no meeting

in the beyond as we have it today. When the isolated drops melt,

they share the majesty of the ocean to which they belong. In

isolation they die but to meet the ocean again. I do not know

whether I have been clear enough to give you any comfort. Love,

Bapu.

'■'N

The fact that he cared would have been comfort enough. He

cared for one little person in the midst of his cares for the whole

nation. He was convinced that politics is worth less than zero un¬

less it is an integral part of the everyday life of human beings.

Gandhi’s unwalled existence was directed to the welfare of man¬

kind through concern for green vegetables in village diet, the

aching heart of a bereaved relative, the choice of a girl’s husband,

a mud pack for a sick peasant and an author’s spelling. Nobody

rises above such little things; they constitute life; nobody lives in

the rarefied air of isms and theological principles.

Over a long period of years, Gandhi’s daily post averaged a

hundred letters, often with enclosures. He answered about ten

of them himself by hand, dictated the replies to some, and in¬

structed his secretaries how to answer others. No communication

remained without a response. In numerous instances, where the

correspondent did not object, Gandhi replied in Harijan. His

weekly contributions to that magazine invariably took him two

days of solid work. These too he wrote by hand; very rarely he

dictated them.

All the remainder of his long day he gave himself to visitors.

Ashram members had their personal and general problems;

workers in the organizations which Gandhi had established for

Harijan and peasant welfare, the popularization of khadi, the

development of a nationwide language, and for Indian-sponsored

education wanted guidance; journalists wanted interviews;

foreigners asked his views on every variety of subject; and, always,

whether he was in politics or, as in the 1933 to 1939 period,

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officially withdrawn from politics, the great and small leaders of

the Indian national movement sought his advice, approval and

support. A few times in his life he spoke on the telephone.

Usually, his conversations were face-to-face. It was not difficult

to obtain an appointment with him. Except with a few important

Indians or Englishmen, an interview might be attended by ten

or more persons, but active participation was limited to Gandhi

and the interviewer. Mrs. Margaret Sanger, birth-control advo¬

cate, visited Gandhi in December 1935; Yone Noguchi, the

Japanese author, in January 1936; Lord Lothian, the British

statesman, spent three days in Gandhi’s village in January 1938.

The list of the Mahatma’s non-Indian guests looked like an inter¬

national Who’s Who. Outsiders felt that their sojourn in India

was incomplete without a visit to Gandhi.

They were right; he came as near being India as one person

could be. He called himself a Harijan, Moslem, Christian, Hindu,

farmer, weaver. He wove himself into the texture of India. He

had the gift of identification with large masses and with many

individuals. He aimed to free India the hard but lasting way: by

freeing the human beings of India. This would be more difficult

than political liberation from England. How could it be done?

T can indicate no royal road for bringing about the social revolu¬

tion,’ he wrote in 1945, ‘except that we should represent it in

every detail of our lives.’ Gandhi’s battlefield, therefore, was the

hearts of men. There he made his home. He knew better than

anybody how little of the battle had been fought and won. Yet

without the social revolution in man’s daily conduct, he said, ‘we

will not be able to leave India happier than when we were born\*.

The social revolution could not produce a new man. A new type

of man would make the social revolution.

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