# CHAPTER XV

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S muts precipitated the final contest by announcing in the

House of Assembly that the Europeans of Natal, who were the

original employers of Indian contract labour, would not

permit the lifting of the three-pound annual tax on ex-serfs. That

was the signal for the renewal of civil disobedience. Indentured

labourers and former indentured labourers considered this a

breach of the promise given to Professor Gokhale; they volun¬

teered en masse for Satyagraha.

Gandhi closed Tolstoy Farm. Kasturbai, Gandhi, the Gandhi

children and several others moved to Phoenix Farm. Adults

prepared to go to prison.

There were two issues: the tax and the ban on Asiatic immi¬

grants. Presently, a third was added. On March 14th, 1913, a

Justice of the Cape Colony Supreme Court ruled that only

Christian marriages were legal in South Africa. This invalidated

Hindu, Moslem, or Parsi marriages and turned all Indian wives

into concubines without rights.

For the first time, large numbers of women joined the resisters.

Kasturbai also joined.

As the opening move in the new campaign, a group of women

volunteers were to cross from the Transvaal into Natal and thereby

court arrest. If the border police ignored them, they would pro¬

ceed to the Natal coal field at Newcastle and urge the indentured

miners to go on strike. Simultaneously, a chosen handful of Natal

‘sisters 5 , as Gandhi called them, would invite arrest by entering

the Transvaal without permission.

The Natal ‘sisters’ were arrested and imprisoned. Indignation

flared and brought new recruits. The Transvaal ‘sisters’ were not

arrested. They went to Newcastle and-persuaded the Indian

workers to put down their tools. Then the Government arrested

these women, too, and lodged them in jail for three months.

As a result, the miners’ strike spread.

Gandhi hurried from Phoenix Farm to Newcastle.

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The miners lived in company houses. The company turned off

their light and water.

Gandhi believed the strike would last and therefore counselled

the indentured labourers to leave their compounds, taking their

blankets and some clothes, and pitch camp outside the home of

Mr. and Mrs. D. M. Lazarus, a Christian couple from India, who

had invited Gandhi to stay with them despite the risks such

hospitality entailed.

The strikers slept under the sky. Newcastle Indian merchants

contributed food and cooking and eating utensils. Before long,

five thousand strikers had assembled within sight of the Lazarus

house.

Gandhi was astonished and baffled. What could he do with

this multitude? They might be on his hands for months. He

decided to ‘see them safely deposited in jail’ in the Transvaal. He

informed them of this prospect, described prison at its blackest

and urged waverers to return to the mines. None did. It was then

agreed that on a fixed day they would all march the thirty-six

miles from Newcastle to Charlestown, on the Natal-Transvaal

border, walk into the Transvaal and thereby earn jail sentences.

A few women with children, and disabled men were to travel by

rail towards the same goal.

While plans were being made, more strikers arrived. Again

Gandhi attempted, without success, to dissuade them from fol¬

lowing him. Accordingly, October 13th was set as the day of

departure from Newcastle. He was able to furnish each ‘soldier’

with a pound and a half of bread and an ounce of sugar. Instruc¬

tions were: Conduct yourselves morally, hygienically and pacific¬

ally. Submit to police flogging and abuse. Do not resist arrest.

Charlestown was reached without incident. Preparations to

receive the Gandhi army had been made in advance by Kallen-

bach and others. The Indian merchants of Charlestown (normal

population one thousand) contributed rice, vegetables, kitchen

equipment, etc. Gandhi was chef and head waiter. Complaints

about inadequate portions were met with an infectious smile and

a report on the total amount of food available and the amount of

each person’s equal ration.

Women and children were accommodated in houses; the men

slept in the grounds of the local mosque.

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Before moving on, Gandhi communicated his intentions to the

Government. He and his people were coming into the Transvaal

to demonstrate against the breach of the Botha-Smuts pledge and

to assert their self-respect: T cannot conceive a greater loss to a

man that the loss of his self-respect. 5 Of course, he added, the

Natal government could arrest them in Charlestown and thus

spare them further treks. On the other hand, if the Government

annulled the three-pound tax the strikers would resume the mining

of coal.

The Government did not oblige by arresting them at Charles¬

town, nor did it eliminate the three-pound levy. In fact, Gandhi

suspected that the authorities might not stop the ‘army 5 even if it

penetrated into the Transvaal. In that case, he contemplated

advancing on Tolstoy Farm by eight day-marches of twenty miles

each.

How would he feed his peace troops on the road for eight days?

A European baker at Volksrust, the Transvaal border town,

undertook to supply them in Volksrust and then to ship the

necessary quantity of bread by rail each day to an appointed spot

en route to the farm.

Gandhi counted his forces. There were 2037 men, 127 women

and 57 children. At 6.30 on the morning of November 6th, 1913,

Gandhi recalls, ‘we offered prayers and commenced the march

in the name of God 5 .

From Charlestown on the Natal side to Volksrust is one mile.

A large detachment of Transvaal mounted border guards was on

emergency duty. Two days earlier the Volksrust whites had held

a meeting at which several speakers declared they personally

would shoot any Indian who attempted to enter the Transvaal.

Kallenbach, who attended to defend the Indians, was challenged

to a duel. He was a pupil of the great Sandow, and an accom¬

plished pugilist and wrestler, but the Gandhian German arose and

said, ‘As I have accepted the religion of peace I may not accept

the challenge .. . The Indians do not want what you imagine

. . . The Indians are not out to challenge your position as rulers.

They do not wish to fight with you or to fill the country . . . They

propose to enter the Transvaal not with a view to settle there, but

only as an effective demonstration against the unjust tax which is

levied upon them. They are brave men. They will not injure

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you in person or in property, they will not fight with you, but

enter the Transvaal they will, even in the face of your gunfire.

They are not the men to beat a retreat from the fear of your bullets

or spears. They propose to melt and I know they will melt, your

hearts by self-suffering.’

Nobody shot anybody; perhaps Kallenbach’s speech turned

away the white wrath. Perhaps the police reinforcements at the

border sobered the hotheads. The guards let the Indians pass.

The first halt was made at Palmford, eight miles beyond Volks-

rust. The marchers ate a meagre meal and stretched out on the

earth for sleep. Gandhi had surveyed his slumbering resisters

and was about to lie down when he heard steps and a moment

later saw a policeman approaching, lantern in hand.

T have a warrant to arrest you,’ the officer said politely to

Gandhi. T want to arrest you. 5

‘When?’ Gandhi asked.

‘Now,’ the policeman replied.

‘Where will you take me?’

‘To the adjoining station first,’ the officer explained democratic¬

ally, ‘and to Volksrust when there is a train.’

Gandhi woke Mr. P. K. Naidoo, a faithful lieutenant, and gave

him instructions for continuing the march to Tolstoy Farm.

Gandhi was transported to Volksrust and arraigned in court.

The prosecutor demanded imprisonment, but the judge released

Gandhi on bail furnished by Kallenbach. Gandhi had asked for

release on bail because of his responsibilities to the marchers.

Kallenbach, stationed in Volksrust to send on stragglers and new

recruits, had a car ready and quickly drove Gandhi back to the

Indian ‘army’.

The next day the Indians halted at Standerton. Gandhi was

handing out bread and marmalade when a magistrate stepped

up and said to Gandhi, ‘You are my prisoner.’

‘It seems I have been promoted,’ Gandhi commented with a

laugh, ‘since magistrates take the trouble to arrest me instead of

mere police officials.’

Again Gandhi was freed on bail. Five co-workers were Im¬

prisoned.

Two days later, November 9th, as Gandhi and Polak were

walking at the head of the long column, a cart came up and the

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officer in it ordered Gandhi to go with him. Gandhi passed the

command to Polak. The officer permitted Gandhi to inform the

marchers of his arrest, but when the little ‘general’ began to

exhort the Indians to remain peaceful, the officer exclaimed, ‘You

are now a prisoner and cannot make any speeches.’

In four days, Gandhi had been arrested three times.

The march continued without the leader.

On the morning of the ioth, on reaching Balfour, the Indians

saw three special trains drawn up at the station to deport them

from the Transvaal to Natal. At first they refused to submit to

arrest, and it was only through the co-operation of Polak, Ahmed

Kachhalia and others that the police were able to herd the

marchers into the trains.

Polak was thanked for his services and arrested and confined in

Volksrust jail. There he found Kallenbach.

On November 14th, Gandhi was brought to trial in Volksrust.

He pleaded guilty. The court, however, ‘would not convict a

prisoner’, Gandhi wrote, ‘merely upon his pleading guilty’. It

therefore requested him to supply the witnesses against himself

and Gandhi did so. Kallenbach and Polak testified against him.

Twenty-four hours later, Gandhi appeared as a witness against

Kallenbach and two days after that, Gandhi and Kallenbach

testified against Polak. Judge Theodore Jooste reluctantly gave

each of them three months’ hard labour in the Volksrust prison.

Fresh prisoners kept Gandhi informed on Satyagraha develop¬

ments outside. The arrest of the leaders and marchers had stirred

new enthusiasm and the number of resisters throughout South

Africa mounted fast. Occasionally, Gandhi could send messages

to followers still at liberty. Meanwhile Gandhi rejoiced in con¬

genial company. This was too much of a good thing and the

Government shifted him to Bloemfontein where he was with

Europeans and Negroes, but no Indians.

The striking miners met a worse fate. Trains carried them

back to the mines, where they were forced into wire-enclosed

stockades and placed under company employees who had been

sworn in as special constables. Despite whips, sticks and kicks,

they refused to descend to the coal face.

News of these events was cabled to India and England. India

seethed with resentment; the authorities grew alarmed. Lord

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Hardinge, the British Viceroy, was impelled to deliver a strong

speech at Madras in which, breaking precedent, he trenchantly

criticized the South African government and demanded a com¬

mission of inquiry.

Meanwhile, more indentured labourers left their work in

sympathy with the rebellious Newcastle miners. The State re¬

garded such labourers as slaves without the right to strike, and

sent soldiers to suppress them. In one place some were killed

and several wounded.

The tide of resistance rose higher. Approximately fifty thousand

indentured labourers were on strike; several thousand free Indians

were in prison. From India came a stream of gold. At a meeting

in Lahore, in the Punjab, a Christian missionary named Charles F.

Andrews gave all the money he had to the South African move¬

ment. Others made similar sacrifices.

By arrangement, several leading Indians and Albert West, who

edited Indian Opinion , and Sonya Schlesin, Gandhi’s secretary,

avoided arrest to conduct propaganda, handle finances and

communicate with India and England. The Government never¬

theless arrested Mr. West. Thereupon, Gokhale sent Andrews

from India to replace him. He came with W. W. Pearson, another

high-minded Englishman.

Cables between the Viceroy’s office and London and between

London and South Africa hummed with voluminous official

messages.

Unexpectedly, the Government liberated Gandhi, Kallenbach

and Polak on December 18th, 1913. ‘All three of us’, Gandhi

writes, ‘were disappointed upon our release.’ Civil disobedience,

properly launched and inspired, needed no leaders.

If Gandhi wanted to be free he need not have gone to jail at all;

he could have refrained from opposing the Government. Going

into and coming out of prison had to advance the cause and this

time coming out did not. Under pressure from the Viceroy and

the British authorities in Whitehall, a commission had been

appointed to investigate the grievances of the Indians in South

Africa and it was hoped that the release of Gandhi and his

colleagues would testify to the bona fides of Botha and Smuts in

appointing it.

But upon regaining his liberty Gandhi asserted in a public

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statement that the commission ‘is a packed body and intended to

hoodwink the government and the public opinion both of England

and of India’. He did not doubt the ‘integrity and impartiality’

of the chairman, Sir William Solomon, but Mr. Ewald Esselen, he

said, was prejudiced. With regard to the third member, he

had, in January 1897, ‘led a mob to demonstrate against the

landing of Indians who had arrived at Durban in two vessels,

advocated at a public meeting the sinking of two ships with all

Indians on board and commending a remark made by another

speaker that he would willingly put down a month’s pay for one

shot at the Indians . . . He has consistently been our enemy all

these years’. Gandhi was injured in that 1897 assault.

Three days after leaving prison, Gandhi appeared at a mass

meeting in Durban. He was no longer dressed in shirt and dun¬

garee trousers. He wore a knee-length white smock, a white

wrapping around his legs (an elongated loincloth) and sandals.

He had abandoned Western clothing. He did so, he told the

meeting, to mourn comrades killed during the miners’ strike.

Reviewing the situation, Gandhi advised ‘still greater purifying

suffering until at last the Government may order the military to

riddle us also with bullets.

‘My friends,’ he exclaimed, ‘are you prepared for this?’

‘Yes, yes,’ the audience shouted.

‘Are you prepared to share the fate of those of our countrymen

whom the cold stone is resting upon today?’

‘Yes, yes,’ they shouted.

‘I hope,’ Gandhi proceeded, ‘that every man, woman and

grown-up child will. . . not consider their salaries, trades, or even

families, or their own bodies. . . .’

The struggle, he emphasized, is ‘a struggle for human liberty

and therefore a struggle for religion’.

After the meeting Gandhi wrote to Smuts condemning the

choice of two members of the commission. ‘Man’, he philosophized,

‘cannot change his temperament all at once. It is against the laws

of nature to suppose that these gentlemen will suddenly become

different. . . .’

Smuts replied three days later, rejecting Gandhi’s proposal to

add Indians or pro-Indians to the commission.

Gandhi accordingly announced that on January 1st, 1914, he

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and a group of Indians would march from Durban, Natal, to

court arrest. They would not agitate for free immigration into

the Union, nor for political franchise in the near future, he de¬

clared. They merely wished to regain lost rights.

While this embarrassing threat of an Indian mass march hung

over the Government’s head, the white employees of all the South

African railways went on strike. Gandhi immediately called off

his march. It was not part of the tactics of Satyagraha, he

explained, to destroy, hurt, humble, or embitter the adversary,

or to win a victory by weakening him. Civil resisters hope, by

sincerity, chivalry and self-suffering, to convince the opponent’s

brain and conquer his heart. They never take advantage of the

Government’s difficulty or form unnatural alliances.

Congratulations poured in on Gandhi; Lord Amp thill wired

from England, so did others; messages of appreciation came from

India and many points in South Africa.

Smuts, busy with the railway strike (martial law had been

declared), nevertheless summoned Gandhi to a talk. The first

talk led to another. The Government had accepted the principle

of negotiation. Gandhi’s friends warned him against deferring the

march again. They recalled Smuts’s broken pledge in 1908.

‘Forgiveness,’ Gandhi replied, quoting the Sanskrit, ‘is the

ornament of the brave.’

Gandhi’s knightly forbearance in cancelling the march created

an atmosphere favourable to a settlement. Gandhi’s hand, more¬

over, was strengthened by the arrival, on a fast, special steamer, of

Sir Benjamin Robertson, extraordinary envoy of the Viceroy

who was worried about hostile reactions in India to South African

persecutions.

Gandhi postponed the march a second time.

‘Gandhi,’ Smuts said at one of their interviews, ‘this time we

want no misunderstanding, we want no mental or other reserva¬

tions, let all the cards be on the table and I want you to tell me

wherever you think that a particular passage or word does not

read in accordance with your own reading.’

This spirit, recognized as friendly by Gandhi, conduced to

steady if slow progress in the talks. ; You can’t put twenty thou¬

sand Indians into jail,’ Smuts declared in defence of his new,

conciliatory attitude.

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Smuts and Gandhi placed their cards and texts on the table.

Memoranda passed from one side to the other. For weeks, each

word was weighed, each sentence sharpened for precision. On

June 30th, 1914, the two subtle negotiators finally exchanged

letters confirming the terms of a complete agreement.

This document was then translated into the Indian Relief Bill

and submitted to the Union Parliament in Gape Town. Smuts

pleaded with Members to approach the problem fin a non-

controversial spirit\*. The bill became South African law in July.

The terms were:

1. Hindu, Moslem and Parsi marriages are valid.

2. The three-pound annual tax on indentured labourers who

wish to remain in Natal is abolished; arrears are cancelled.

3. Indentured labour will cease coming from India by 1920.

4. Indians could not move freely from one province of the

Union to another, but Indians born in South Africa might enter

Cape Colony.

Smuts promised publicly that the law would be administered

fin a just manner and with due regard to vested rights’ of Indians.

The settlement was a compromise which pleased both sides.

Gandhi noted that Indians would still be ‘cooped up’ in their

provinces, they could not buy gold, they could not hold land in

the Transvaal, and they had difficulty in obtaining trade licences.

But he regarded the agreement as the ‘Magna Charta’ of South

African Indians. The gain, he told a farewell banquet in Johan¬

nesburg — he was feted at a dozen dinners — was not ‘the intrinsic

things’ in the law but the vindication of the abstract principle of

racial equality and the removal of the ‘racial taint’.

The victory, moreover, was a vindication of civil resistance.

‘It is a force which,’ Gandhi wrote in Indian Opinion , ‘if it became

universal, would revolutionize social ideals and do away with

despotisms and the ever-growing militarism under which the

nations of the West are groaning and are being almost crushed to

death, and which fairly promises to overwhelm even the nations

of the East.’

Having won the battle, Gandhi, accompanied by Mrs. Gandhi

and Mr. Kallenbach, sailed for England on July 18th, 1914.

Gandhi was in European clothes and looked gentle, thoughtful

and tired. Kasturbai wore a white sari with a gay flower design

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and showed signs of suffering as well as beauty. Like her husband,

she was forty-five.

Just before leaving South Africa for ever, Gandhi gave Miss

Schlesin and Polak a pair of sandals he had made in prison and

asked that they be delivered to General Smuts as a gift. Smuts

wore them every summer at his own Doornkloof farm at Irene,

near Pretoria. In 1939, on Gandhi’s seventieth birthday, he

returned them to Gandhi in a gesture of friendship. Invited to

contribute to a Gandhi memorial volume on that occasion, Smuts,

by then a world-famous statesman and war leader, complied and,

graciously calling himself ‘an opponent of Gandhi a generation

ago’, declared that men like the Mahatma ‘redeem us from a

sense of commonplace and futility and are an inspiration to us not

to weary in well-doing. . . .

‘The story of our clash in the early days of the Union of South

Africa’, Smuts wrote, ‘has been told by Gandhi himself and is

well known. It was my fate to be the antagonist of a man for

whom even then I had the highest respect. . . He never forgot the

human background of the situation, never lost his temper or

succumbed to hate, and preserved his gentle humour even in the

most trying situations. His manner and spirit even then, as well

as later, contrasted markedly with the ruthless and brutal force¬

fulness which is the vogue in our day. . . .

‘I must frankly admit’, Smuts continued, ‘that his activities at

that time were very trying to me . . . Gandhi . . . showed a new

technique . . . His method was deliberately to break the law and

to organize his followers into a mass movement... In both

provinces a wild and disconcerting commotion was created, large

numbers of Indians had to be imprisoned for lawless behaviour

and Gandhi himself received — what no doubt he desired — a

period of rest and quiet in jail. For him everything went accord¬

ing to plan. For me — the defender of law and order — there was

the usual trying situation, the odium of carrying out a law which

had not strong public support, and finally the discomfiture when

the law was repealed.’

Speaking of Gandhi’s present, Smuts remarked, ‘I have worn

these sandals for many a summer since then, even though I may

feel that I am not worthy to stand in the shoes of so great a man.’

Such humour and generosity proved him worthy of Gandhi’s mettle.

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Part of Gandhi’s effectiveness lay in evoking the best Gandhian

impulses of his adversary.

The purity of Gandhi’s methods made it difficult for Smuts to

oppose him. Victory came to Gandhi not when Smuts had no

more strength to fight him but when he had no more heart to

fight him.

Professor Gilbert Murray wrote: ‘Be careful in dealing with

a man who cares nothing for sensual pleasures, nothing for

comfort or praise or promotion, but is simply determined to do

what he believes to be right. He is a dangerous and uncomfort¬

able enemy because his body which you can always conquer gives

you so little purchase over his soul.’

That was Gandhi, the leader.

Gandhi once recited these verses 1 of Shelley to a Christian

gathering in India:

Stand ye calm and resolute,

Like a forest close and mute,

With folded arms and looks which are

Weapons in unvanquished war.

And if then the tyrants dare,

Let them ride among you there,

Slash, and stab, and maim, and hew —

What they like, that let them do.

With folded arms and steady eyes,

And little fear, and less surprise,

Look upon them as they slay

Till their rage has died away.

Then they will return with shame

To the place from which they came,

And the blood thus shed will speak

In hot blushes on their cheek.

Rise like lions after slumber

In unvanquishable number —

Shake your chains to earth like dew

Which in sleep has fallen on you —

Ye are many, they are few.

1 Taken from The Mask of Anarchy.

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Those were the followers, the Indian civil resisters in South

Africa.

In 1949, the Indian population of South Africa was a quarter of

a million, of whom two hundred thousand lived in the province

of Natal. Though they had multiplied and prospered, they still

did not have the franchise or guaranteed civil rights. They were

subject to white and Zulu violence. Their condition was precar¬

ious. Manilal Gandhi’s Indian Opinion of February 25th, 1949,

noted that in 1914 passive resistance was ‘only suspended’ and

‘may have to be reintroduced’. Every generation re-enacts the

battle for ita rights — or it loses them. But while individuals in

several continents have practised passive resistance, nobody

except Mohandas K. Gandhi has ever led a successful, non-violent,

mass, civil disobedience campaign. He possessed the personal

qualities which aroused the necessary qualities in the community.

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