# CHAPTER I

HOME IN INDIA

D o I contradict myself?’ Gandhi asked. ‘Consistency is a

hobgoblin.’ No ism held him rigid in its grip. No theory

guided his thoughts or actions. He strove to keep his mind

open. He reserved the right to differ with himself.

His life, Gandhi said, was an unending experiment. He

experimented even in his seventies. There was nothing set

about him. He was not a conforming Hindu nor a conforming

nationalist nor a conforming pacifist.

Gandhi was independent, unfettered, unpredictable, hence

exciting and difficult. A conversation with him was a voyage of

discovery: he dared to go anywhere without a chart.

Under attack, he rarely defended himself. Happily adjusted in

India, he never condemned anyone. Humble and simple, he did

not have to pretend dignity. Thus relieved of uncreative mental

tasks, he was free to be creative.

Nor did he say or do anything merely to gain popularity or win

or mollify followers. He upset the applecart frequently. His

inner need to perform a given act took precedence over its

possible effects on his supporters.

Two days before Gandhi, Mrs. Gandhi and Kallenbach

reached England from South Africa, the first World War broke

out. Gandhi felt that Indians ought to do their bit for Britain.

He accordingly volunteered to raise an ambulance corps headed

by himself. Eighty Indians, most of them university students in

the United Kingdom, volunteered. Gandhi had no delusions:

‘Those who confine themselves to attending to the wounded in

battle cannot be absolved from the guilt of war.’

Then how, Gandhi’s friends protested, could he, the man of non¬

violence, participate in a war?

Gandhi answered in effect: I accept the benefits and protection

of the British Empire; I have not tried to destroy it; why should I

allow it to be destroyed?

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A modern nation is only quantitatively less violent in peace-time

than in war-time and unless one non-collaborates in peace-time one

is merely salving one’s conscience by non-collaborating in war¬

time. Why pay taxes to make the arms which kill? Why obey

the kind of officials who will make a war? Unless you surrender

citizenship or go to jail before the war, you belong in the army

during the war.

Gandhi’s support of the war was personally painful and politic¬

ally harmful. But he preferred truth to comfort.

While the minor tempest over his pro-war attitude raged

around Gandhi’s head, his pleurisy, aggravated by too much

fasting, took a serious turn and the doctor ordered him home to

India. He arrived in Bombay with Kasturbai on January 9th,

1915. Kallenbach, being a German, was not permitted to travel

to India and returned to South Africa.

Except in his native Gujarat region, in the cities of Bombay and

Calcutta and in f the Madras area, home of the many Tamil

indentured labourers in South Africa, Gandhi’s support of the

war made little impression. He was not well known in India.

Nor did he know India.

Professor Gokhale accordingly ‘commanded’ Gandhi to spend

the first year in India with ‘his ears open but his mouth shut’.

What he learned in those twelve months about the past and

present, Gandhi matched against the hopes for the future which

he had formulated as early as 1909 in his first book, Hind Swaraj

or Indian Home Rule. He wrote this brief volume in Gujarati, using

right and left hands to do so, while returning from England to

South Africa, and had it published in instalments in Indian Opinion

and then printed as a book in Gujarati and English. He allowed

it to be republished in India in 1921 without change and, in an

introduction to still another edition in 1938, he said, ‘I have seen

nothing to make me alter the views expanded in it.’ The seventy-

six-page pamphlet, therefore, stands as his social credo.

Indian Home Rule records discussions Gandhi had with Indians

in London, one of them an anarchist, some of them terrorists. ‘If

we act justly,’ Gandhi said to them, ‘India will be free sooner.

You will see, too, that if we shun every Englishman as an enemy,

Home Rule will be delayed. But if we are just to them, we shall

receive their support. . .’ This was prophetic.

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Gandhi asked his interlocutors, whom he groups as ‘Reader’,

how they see the future independence of India. ‘As is Japan,’

Reader replies, ‘so must India be. We must own our own navy,

our army and we must have our own splendour and then will

India’s voice ring through the world.’

In other words, Gandhi comments, you want ‘English rule

without the Englishman. You want the tiger’s nature without the

tiger . . . You would make India English . . . This is not the

Swaraj I want.’

Gokhale told Gandhi in South Africa that the booklet was

‘crude and hastily conceived’. Some parts, notably those on

British domestic politics, are. On the other hand, Count Leo

Tolstoy praised its philosophy. It has abiding interest for Gandhi’s

definition of Swaraj or home-rule. ‘Some Englishmen’, Gandhi

wrote, ‘state that they took and hold India by the sword. Both

statements are wrong. The sword is entirely useless for holding

India. We alone keep them . . . We like their commerce; they

please us by their subtle methods and get what they want from

us . . . We further strengthen their hold by quarrelling amongst

ourselves . . . India is being ground down not under the British

heel but under that of modern civilization.’ Then he inveighed

against India’s use of railways and machinery.

Foreigners, and Indians, frequently challenged Gandhi on his

hostility to the modern machine. The several editions of Hind

Swaraj report some of these discussions. In 1924, for instance,

Gandhi was asked whether he objected to all machinery.

‘How can I,’ he replied, ‘when I know that even this body

is a most delicate piece of machinery? The spinning wheel is a

machine; a little toothpick is a machine. What I object to is the

craze for machinery, not machinery as such.

‘Today,’ Gandhi continued, ‘machinery merely helps a few to

ride on the back of the millions . . . The machine should not tend

to atrophy the limbs of man. For instance, I would make intellig¬

ent exceptions. Take the case of the Singer sewing machine. It

is one of the few useful things ever invented and there is a romance

about the device itself.’ He had learned to sew on it.

And would you not need big factories to produce little devices

like Singers?

‘Yes,’ Gandhi agreed.

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Then, since he liked to close the circle of every argument and

come back to his starting-point, Gandhi said, ‘Ideally, I would

rule out all machinery, even as I would reject this very body,

which is not helpful to salvation and seek the absolute liberation

of the soul. From that point of view I would reject all machinery,

but machines would remain because, like the body, they are

inevitable.’ Thus he upheld the. principle yet admitted the

contention.

Gandhi was not anti-machine. He merely realized earlier than

many others the dangers and horrors of a civilization in which

the individual is somewhat in the position of a savage who makes

an idol and then makes sacrifices to appease it. The faster

machines move the faster man lives and the greater his nervous

tensions and his cultural and social tributes to speed. Gandhi

would have had less objection to machinery if it merely served the

body; he did not want it to invade the mind and maim the spirit.

He believed that India’s mission was to ‘elevate the moral being’.

Therefore, ‘if the English become Indianized we can accom¬

modate them’.

Such a thing has never happened, Reader objected.

‘To believe that what has not occurred in history will not occur

at all,’ Gandhi replied, ‘is to argue disbelief in the dignity of man.’

He had the soul of an Eastern prophet and the spirit of a Western

pioneer.

Reader scorned Gandhi’s moral preoccupations. He wanted

India liberated from the British as Mazzini and Garibaldi had

liberated Italy from Austria. The analogy enabled Gandhi to

drive home the central thesis that guided him to greatness before

and especially after India’s independence:

‘If you believe that because Italians rule Italy the Italian nation

is happy you are groping in darkness . . . According to Mazzini

[freedom] meant the whole of the Italian people, that is, its

agriculturists. The Italy of Mazzini still remains in a state of

slavery. . . .

‘It would be folly to assume,’ Gandhi added, ‘that an Indian

Rockefeller would be better than an American Rockefeller.’

Gandhi saw the flaws in Western culture, but he took much

from it. His defence of the individual against the community

and of man against the machine is in tune with Ruskin, Thoreau,

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Mazzini and the Utopian (not Marxist) socialists. Ideologically,

Gandhi stood with one foot in the deep individualistic current of

the first half of Europe’s nineteenth century and the other in the

turbulent nationalistic current of the second half of that century;

the two streams merged in him and he endeavoured to achieve

the same synthesis in the Indian independence movement.

Gandhi asked England to quit India, but he did not want India

to quit England. He cultivated cultural and other ties with

Britain. In 1936, for instance, he gave an Indian student named

Kamalnayan Bajaj a letter of introduction to Henry Polak in

London in which he said, ‘However much we may fight Great

Britain, London is increasingly our Mecca ... I have advised

him to take up a course in the London School of Economics.’ His

nationalism lacked the usual concomitants of nationalism:

exclusiveness and hostility towards other countries. ‘My patriot¬

ism,’ Gandhi declared, ‘is subservient to my religion.’ He was too

religious to serve one land, one race, one caste, one family, one

person, or even one religion. His religion was humanity.

Gandhi planted these ideas as he moved up and down India

during that probationary first year Gokhale had enjoined upon

him; he studied and learned, but contrary to orders he talked.

He talked at banquets celebrating his South African exploits. He

attended them with the silent Kasturbai whom he lauded as his

helpful partner.

At a dinner in April 1915, in Madras, he defended his recruiting

campaign for the British army; this speech was pro-West. ‘I

discovered,’ he said, ‘that the British Empire had certain ideals

with which I have fallen in love and one of those ideals is that

every subject of the British Empire has the freest scope possible

for his energy and honour and whatever he thinks is due to his

conscience. I think that is true of the British government as it is

true of no other government... I have more than once said that

that government is best which governs least. I have found that it

is possible for me to be governed least under the British Empire.

Hence my loyalty to the British Empire.’

He took the unpopular side.

Gandhi’s speeches were delivered in a weak, unimpressive,

conversational tone. He had been heralded as the hero of Natal

and the Transvaal, the person who defeated Smuts. The Indian

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nationalists had expected a new giant, a lion of a man who might

lead them to independence. (Gokhale died in 1915.) They were

disappointed. Instead of a likely candidate for the succession, they

saw a thin little figure dressed in a ridiculously large turban and

flapping loincloth who could scarcely make himself heard (there

were no loudspeakers) and neither thrilled nor stimulated his

audience.

Yet Gandhi would soon remake the entire nationalist movement

of India.

Simultaneously with Gandhi’s departure from Phoenix Farm,

his own family, with other families, also left South Africa for

India. As the best place for the temporary sojourn of the boys in

this group Gandhi chose Shantiniketan, a school in Bengal,

eastern India, maintained by Rabindranath Tagore, India’s

great novelist and poet laureate who won the Nobel Prize for

Literature in 1913.

Gandhi and Tagore were contemporaries and closely linked as

chief agents of India’s twentieth-century regeneration. But

Gandhi was the wheat field and Tagore the rose garden, Gandhi

was the working arm, Tagore the singing voice, Gandhi the

general, Tagore the herald, Gandhi the emaciated ascetic with

shaven head and face, Tagore the large, white-maned, white-

bearded aristocrat-intellectual with a face of classic, patriarchal

beauty. Gandhi exemplified stark renunciation; Tagore felt ‘the

embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight’. Yet both

were united by their love of India and mankind. Tagore wept

at seeing his India ‘the eternal ragpicker at other people’s dust¬

bins’ and prayed for ‘the magnificent harmony of all human races’.

Tagore believed, with Gandhi, that India’s shackles were self-

made:

Prisoner, tell me who was it that wrought this unbreakable

chain?

It was I, said the prisoner, who forged this chain very carefully.

Tagore and Gandhi, the greatest Indians of the first half of the

twentieth century, revered one another. It was Tagore, appar¬

ently, who conferred on Gandhi the title of Mahatma; ‘The Great

Soul in beggar’s garb,’ Tagore Said. Gandhi called Tagore ‘The

Great Sentinel’. Sentimentally inseparable, soulmates to the end,

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they waged verbal battles, for they were different. Gandhi faced

the past and out of it made future history; religion, caste, Hindu

mythology were deeply ingrained in him. Tagore accepted the

present, with its machines, its Western culture and, despite it,

made Eastern poetry. Perhaps, since provincial origins are so

important in India, it was the difference between isolated Gujarat

and cosmopolitan Bengal. Gandhi was frugal. Tagore was

prodigal. ‘The suffering millions’, Gandhi wrote to Tagore, ‘ask

for one poem, invigorating food.’ Tagore gave them music. At

Shantiniketan, Tagore’s pupils sang and danced, wove garlands

and made life sweet and beautiful. When Gandhi arrived there,

shortly after his return to India, to see how his Phoenix Farm boys

were faring, he turned the place upside down. With the help of

Charles Freer Andrews and William W. Pearson, his friends in

South Africa, Gandhi persuaded the entire community of 125

boys and their teachers to run the kitchen, handle the garbage,

clean the latrines, sweep the grounds and, in general, forsake the

muse for the monk. Tagore acquiesced tolerantly and said, ‘The

experiment contains the key to Swaraj’ or home-rule. But austerity

was uncongenial and, when Gandhi left to attend Gokhale’s

funeral, the experiment collapsed.

Gandhi, however, sought his own hermitage or ashram where

he, his family and friends and nearest co-workers would make their

permanent home in an atmosphere of renunciation and service.

Gandhi’s life now had no room for private law practice or private

relations with wife and sons. A foreigner once said to Gandhi,

‘How is your family?’

‘All of India is my family,’ Gandhi replied.

Thus dedicated, Gandhi founded the Satyagraha Ashram first

at Kochrab and then, permanently, at Sabarmati, across the

Sabarmati River from the city of Ahmedabad. There, rooted in

the soil and sand and people of India, Gandhi grew to full stature

as the leader of his nation.

Ahmedabad’s textile magnates and Bombay’s shipping barons

supported financially the inmates of Gandhi’s ashram. The

Sabarmati Ashram consists of a group of low, whitewashed

huts in a grove of spreading trees. A mile away stands the

Sabarmati prison where fighters for India’s freedom were later

incarcerated. Below the ashram compound is the river in which

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women wash their laundry, and cows and buffaloes wade. All

around, the scene is gently pastoral, but not too distant are the

closely packed houses of Ahmedabad hedged in by ugly factory

smokestacks.

Gandhi’s room is about the size of a cell; its one window has

iron bars. The room opens on to a small terrace where Gandhi

slept even in the coldest nights and worked during the day. Except

for intervals in prison, Gandhi occupied that cell for sixteen years.

On the high bank which slopes down sharply to the river,

Gandhi held his daily prayer meetings. Near by is the grave of

Maganlal Gandhi, the Mahatma’s second cousin, who managed

the ashram and died in 1928. ‘His death has widowed me. M. K.

Gandhi’, reads the inscription on the stone.

With the years, new houses were erected to accommodate the

Indians who wished to be Gandhi’s disciples. Some of the most

active leaders of the independence movement began their political

careers at the feet of the Mahatma in Sabarmati. The population

of the settlement fluctuated from 30 at the start to a maximum of

230. They tended the fruit trees, planted grain, spun, wove,

studied and taught in surrounding villages.

In ancient India, ashrams and religious retreats for monks

were well-known phenomena. Pilgrimages to four ashrams in

different parts of the land signified that one’s legs had proved the

unity of India. Ashramites resigned from the world and, con¬

templating themselves inside and out, waited for the end while

torturing the body to hasten it. Gandhi and his ashram, however,

remained in closest contact with the world. The ashram, in fact,

became the navel of India. Contemplating the ashram, Indians

attached themselves to its first citizen. Nor did Gandhi ever

purposely hurt his body. He had it massaged; he slept adequately;

he walked for strength; all his dietetic aberrations, queer to many

Westerners and even to many Indians, were designed to make him

a biologically perfect instrument for the attainment of spiritual

goals. Though he drastically reduced his food consumption he did

not want to be famished, and in South Africa he always carried

chocolate-coated almonds to still sudden hunger. He remained,

until he was killed, a healthy specimen. Who but a very

healthy man could have fasted as often and as long as he did yet

reach the age of seventy-eight?

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A photograph taken shortly after his return to India shows him

seated on a platform, legs crossed, nude but for a short loincloth,

making a speech while around him stand Indian politicians in

European clothes. He soon told them to shed those garments.

How could persons in Bond Street suits or Bombay coats and

trousers win peasant support?

Peasants? Politicians had nothing to do with peasants. They

were hoping to persuade the British to withdraw or, at least, to

ameliorate the imperial regime; to achieve this end you either had

to shoot well or appear in striped trousers to deliver petitions in

impeccable English to English bureaucrats. India’s Independence

Hall, they thought, would be papered with petitions and

memorials addressed to a most gracious sovereign or the sovereign’s

satrap.

But Gandhi told them to get out among the people. To do so

they would have to drop English and use the native languages of

India: Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannarese,

Bengali, Punjabi, etc., each spoken by many millions who had

had no benefit of Western education or perhaps any education.

Village uplift was Gandhi’s First Freedom. Over 80 per cent of

India lived in villages. India’s liberation from England would be

vain, he held, without peasant liberation from poverty, ignorance

and idleness. The British might go, but would that help the fifty

to sixty million outcast untouchables, victims of cruel Hindu

discrimination? Independence must mean more than Indian

office-holders in the places and palaces of British office-holders.

Gandhi wanted a new Indian today, not just a new India

tomorrow.

Gandhi’s message touched India with a magic wand. Gradu¬

ally, a new vision opened. The Indian’s heart aches for the lost

glory of his country. Gandhi brought it balm. Gandhi in loin¬

cloth, imperturbable, prayerful, seated amid trees, not aping the

British gentleman but resembling a saint of antiquity, reminded

the nation that India had seen many conquerors and conquered

them all by remaining true to itself. Gandhi kindled India’s

pride and faith. His magic wand became a ramrod.

Gandhi’s message stood the Indian National Congress party on

its head.

The Congress, as Indians call it, was born in Bombay on Decern-

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ber 28th, 1885. Its father and first general secretary was an

Englishman, Allan Octavian Hume, who had the blessing of

Lord Dufferin, the British Viceroy. Hume at first proposed that

Indian politicians should meet regularly, under the chairmanship

of British governors, as a grievance court, but the Viceroy

thought that Indians would speak more freely if one of their

number presided. Hume placed both proposals before prominent

Indians and they chose the Viceroy’s variant. This was the origin

of the Congress. Hume remained secretary, sometimes alone,

sometimes with Indian colleagues, until 1907. The Congress

president for 1888 was George Yule, an Englishman; for 1894,

Alfred Webb, an Irish member of the British Parliament; for

1904, Sir Henry Cotton, a retired Indian Civil Service official;

and for 1910, Sir William Wedderburn, former Secretary to the

Government of Bombay. Gandhi praised Hume and Wedderburn

for their devotion to India. They and all the Congressmen of this

early period saw India’s welfare through constitutional reforms

and administrative measures.

The Congress was organized to channel popular protest into

legal moderation. But into the channel flowed the fresh waters of

national revivalism, spurred, in the second half of the nineteenth

century, by the Tagore family, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vive-

kananda, a dynamic, eloquent disciple of the mystic Ramakrishna,

Dadabhai Naoroji and Raja Rammohan Roy, the first translator

of the Upanishads into English. The world theosophist movement,

which paid permanent tribute to the ancient religious and cultural

wealth of India, likewise fed that pride in the past which consti¬

tuted the foundation of the movement for national regeneration.

Thanks in part to the unification and orderly administration

of the country by the British, Indian industrialists, Hindus and

Parsis in particular, grew rich and began to buy out their British

partners. The emergence of Indian capitalism and of a new

Indian middle class gave a powerful impetus to the urge for self-

government.

Under these multiple influences, the Congress slowly outgrew

its collaborationist boyhood and became a demanding youth.

The ‘prayers’ to British governors were couched in firmer terms,

though as late as 1921, Tagore complained of their ‘correct

grammatical whine’. Polite irritations supplanted polite invita-

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tions to high imperial officials to attend Congress functions.

Some speeches and resolutions pressed for ultimate home-rule.

But only a few ‘extremists’ dreamt of converting the Congress

into an active agent that would win Indian independence by

mass action.

Gandhi too was a collaborationist when he returned to India

in 1915. Yet there was a revolutionary, anti-collaborationist

potential in his yearning for an India that was Indian instead of a

replica of the West in clothing, language, mores and politics.

Gandhi craved for his country a cultural regeneration and spiritual

renaissance which would give it inner freedom and hence, inevit¬

ably, outer freedom, for if the people acquired individual and

collective dignity they would insist on their rights and then

nobody could hold them in bondage.

The national metamorphosis Gandhi envisaged could not be

the achievement of a small upper class or the gift of a foreign

power. This made him conscious and critical of the shortcomings

of the Congress. Before Gandhi sat securely in the saddle of the

Congress he was the burr under the saddle, and it got him into

trouble.

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