# CHAPTER IX

GANDHI ENTERS POLITICS

M ahatma Gandhi always resisted politics. He

regarded his South African work as moral and social,

therefore religious. After his return to India in 1915 he

attended annual sessions of the Congress, but his public activity

at such assemblies was usually limited to moving a resolution in

support of the Indians in South Africa. Moreover, he regarded

the Congress as the unofficial parliament of India in which all

political trends and parties were, or could be, represented.

To join one party dedicated to a political goal meant a separa¬

tion from other parties, and Gandhi disliked anything divisive.

He had strong beliefs but no dogmas.

Gandhi’s ‘readiness to take up the cudgels on behalf of any

individual or class whom he regarded as being oppressed’, reads a

discerning remark in a 1919 British government publication, ‘has

endeared him to the masses of the country’. He preferred the

warm bond of human affection to the cold tongue of a party

programme.

Yet in 1920 Gandhi joined the All-India Home Rule League

and became its president.

Politics can probably be defined as competition for power. It

implies an effort to weaken, destroy, or assume the power of those

in power. Gandhi did not wish to weaken, destroy, or supplant

Smuts in South Africa. But by becoming leader of the All-India

Home Rule League, Gandhi did accept the goal of Indian self-

government instead of government by England. The Congress

did not yet advocate independence.

Gandhi’s early steps in politics were uncertain. Indeed, he

remained politically unpredictable throughout life because his

mind was a battlefield on which caution contended with passion.

Ready to die fighting for a principle, -he preferred to arbitrate and

compromise. He was a natural fighter and a born peacemaker.

Gandhi’s criteria were not the usual criteria of politics. His

leadership did not depend on victories. He did not have to save

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‘face’. In the autobiography, Gandhi tells of incidents that could

not have been known but for him, how he visited a brothel, ate

meat in stealth, maltreated his wife, etc. Truth had to be the whole

truth or it wasn’t true. Indians, whom suffering has made sus¬

picious, could not suspect Gandhi because he told them every¬

thing; he hated secrets; he was his own harshest critic. He could

admit blunders, ‘Himalayan 5 and less, because he did not claim

infallibility or superiority.

Gandhi’s critics complained that he would withdraw from a

political battle before all his forces had been brought to bear on

the enemy and, sometimes, when success appeared imminent.

But what success? His standards of success were moral and

religious. They gave his politics the only consistency and con¬

tinuity they had.

The road by which Gandhi arrived at the centre of the Indian

political world was tortuous. It started at Jallianwalla Bagh; no

matter where he went the echo of General Dyer’s fusillade pursued

him. Following the massacre, Gandhi asked permission to visit

the Punjab. He was rebuffed. He pressed his case. Finally, the

Viceroy telegraphed him that he could go after October 17th,

1919. The Mahatma’s reception at Lahore and other cities was

unprecedented in size and warmth. ‘The seething mass of

humanity’, he wrote, ‘was delirious with joy.’ He had become a

symbol of national resistance to the foreign evil.

In the Punjab, Gandhi assisted Indian leaders, among them

Motilal Nehru, a veteran Congressman and father of Jawaharlal,

in the conduct of an independent inquiry into the Jallianwalla

Bagh massacre. He drafted the report; his colleagues felt he would

be without bias.

While thus engaged, Gandhi received an invitation to attend

a Moslem conference in Delhi. He arrived there November 24th,

1919. The Armistice which ended the first World War had been

signed on November 1 ith, 1918. It sealed the defeat of Turkey, a

Moslem country, and of the Turkish Sultan, who, in addition to

being a temporal ruler, was the Caliph or religious head of all

Islam.

Pan-Islamism has never been a mass movement in India or

elsewhere. The fate of the Caliph nevertheless agitated the

Moslems in India. The Moslem leaders, notably Mohamed and

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Shaukat Ali, the brothers who were interned by the British during

the war, Jinnah, Asaf Ali and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad had

hoped that Indian interest in the Caliph would at least induce

England to moderate the peace terms imposed on Turkey. But

when it became obvious that the Turks would be shorn of their

imperial possessions, and that the Sultan himself would be deposed,

concern for the Caliph, added to distaste for the British, produced

a powerful Caliphate or, as it is always known in India, Khilafat

movement.

The Moslem conference in Delhi, in November 1919, which

Gandhi attended, was a Khilafat meeting. Many Hindus were

present. This period was the honeymoon of Hindu-Moslem politi¬

cal friendship. The letter of invitation, which reached Gandhi in

Lahore, said cow protection as well as the Caliph would be dis¬

cussed. Gandhi demurred. He told the conference that if, in

deference to Hindu regard for the cow as a sacred animal,

Mohammedans wanted to desist from slaughtering it, they should

do so irrespective of the Hindu attitude towards the Khilafat

question. Similarly, if Hindus believed they ought to support

Moslems on behalf of the Caliph they should, but not in the

expectation of a bargain on cow protection. The cow, therefore,

was removed from the agenda.

The conference debated what to do; resolutions condemning

British harshness towards Turkey were not enough. A boycott

of British textiles was suggested. But how could buyers distinguish

British from other foreign textiles, and might not British goods be

sold as Japanese or Italian or Belgian? Perhaps all imported

cloth should be boycotted. Could India produce sufficient

textiles to supply the domestic market?

Gandhi sat on the platform searching his mind for a plan of

action. He was looking for a programme and then for a word that

would be alike a slogan and a perfect summary of that programme.

Finally, he found it, and when he was called on to speak he said,

‘Non-co-operation.’ Indians could not simultaneously oppose the

Government and work with it. To boycott British exports was

inadequate; they must boycott British schools, British courts,

British jobs, British honours; they must non-co-operate.

‘Non-co-operation’ became the name of an epoch in the life of

India and of Gandhi. Non-co-operation was negative enough to

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be peaceful but positive enough to be effective. It entailed denial,

renunciation and self-discipline. It was training for self-rule.

Gandhi’s advice to the Moslem conference was contingent on

the final peace terms dictated to Turkey. If they were as onerous

as expected and destroyed the status of the Caliph, then India

would non-co-operate. Thus Gandhi left a loophole for a modifica¬

tion of British policy vis-a-vis the Turks.

The annual session of Congress took place in the last week of

that year, 1919 — at Amritsar. The fact that the Government

allowed it to meet near Jallianwalla Bagh and that the Ali brothers

were released on the eve of the session so that they could come

straight to it from jail, fed Gandhi’s congenital optimism.

By design or coincidence, the King-Emperor announced the

much-heralded Montagu-Chelmsford reforms (‘A new era is

opening,’ the King declared) the day before Congress met.

The announcement, Gandhi asserted, ‘was not wholly satisfactory

even to me and was unsatisfactory to everyone else’; nevertheless,

he favoured acceptance. In November, in Delhi, he urged non-

co-operation. In December, in Amritsar, he favoured co¬

operation.

The Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, approved by the British

House of Commons as ‘The Government of India Act of 1919’

became the new Constitution of India on February 9th, 1921.

The British called the new system ‘Dyarchy’; mon-archy, the

rule of one — Great Britain — became dy-archy, the rule of two —

Great Britain and India. Indians, however, had no power in the

federal government and none was contemplated. In the provinces,

Indian ministers would administer agriculture, industries, educa¬

tion, health, excise, roads, buildings, etc., but the British governor

retained complete control of finance and police and he could over¬

ride any decision of the Indian ministers and of the Indian legis¬

lature. Indian participation in the Civil Service was increased

and promises of further increases were made. But Indians decided

that, on the whole, dyarchy was still the British monarchy.

Nevertheless, Gandhi took kindly to the King’s proclamation of

the impending constitutional changes and wanted the 1919

Amritsar Congress to accept them. He trusted Britain’s good

intentions. ‘To trust is a virtue,’ he said. ‘It is weakness that

begets distrust.’ But when he heard that C. R. Das, the famous

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Bengal nationalist, Jinnah and Tilak were opposed, he shrank

from opposing such well-tried and universally revered leaders. ‘I

tried to run away from the Congress, 5 Gandhi reveals in his

autobiography.

Gandhi was prevailed upon to stay, for he had become the rock

on which Congress rested. The session was attended by 7031

delegates, an unprecedented number, and many hailed from farms

and city shops. Gandhi was their idol. They felt closer to him

than to the renowned lawyers. Only Tilak could still question

Gandhi’s sway.

Tilak advocated acceptance of the Montagu-Chelmsford

reforms with a view to proving their inadequacy.

This was not the Gandhian way. If you accepted something,

you had to do so without mental reservations and give it a fair

trial. If you did not want it, you had to fight it no matter who

else wanted it.

The delegates supported Gandhi. But he disliked defeating

Tilak. In a dramatic moment, Gandhi turned to Tilak who was

sitting on the platform. Gandhi was wearing a small cap of white

homespun that resembled an aviator’s cap; it later became known

as the ‘Gandhi Cap 5 of Indian nationalists. Gandhi dropped his

cap on the ground as a gesture of obeisance and pleaded with

Tilak to approve a compromise. Tilak succumbed.

The compromise thanked Montagu for his part in the reforms

and undertook to co-operate with the new dyarchy scheme in

such a manner as to expand it into full parliamentary govern¬

ment, but Lord Chelmsford, who had exonerated General Dyer,

was condemned for mismanaging Indian affairs and his recall was

demanded. Another resolution denounced British and Indian

violence in the Punjab. A third asked for the repeal of the

Rowlatt acts.

However, the youth and the new elements activized by Gandhi

had expected much faster post-war progress towards self-govern¬

ment; delicately balanced Congress resolutions disappointed them.

High post-war prices were pressing additional millions down to

starvation level. The Moslems now knew that there would be no

amelioration of Turkey’s fate; Montagu had sincerely tried, hence

the Amritsar Congress tribute to him, but the British Cabinet said

no. In England, moreover, Dyer had found many friends; some

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collected a large purse for him. Gandhi did not want Dyer

punished but he resented the fact that Dyer kept his pension.

The Hunter Report fully demonstrated Dyer’s guilt yet recom¬

mended no measures against the Dyerism of British rulers in India,

Three months after Gandhi had approved the Montagu-

Chelmsford dyarchy reforms at the Amritsar Congress session,

these developments turned him against them.

The Amritsar session was merely a temporary triumph of

Gandhian caution. The unmistakable trend of the country was

towards non-co-operation. Events moved fast. In April 1920,

Gandhi was elected president of the Home Rule League. On

June 30th, guided by Gandhi, the Khilafat movement sanctioned

the policy of non-co-operation. Gandhi thereupon wrote to the

Viceroy, T have advised my Moslem friends to withdraw their

support from Your Excellency’s Government and advised the

Hindus to join them.’ The Viceroy replied that non-co-operation

was ‘the most foolish of all foolish schemes’. All Chelmsford’s

power, however, did not suffice to check it. Gandhi announced

that non-co-operation would commence on August 1st, 1920, to

be preceded by fasting and prayer on July 31st. That day Tilak

died.

With Tilak gone, Gandhi was the undisputed leader of Congress.

A special session of Congress, which met at Calcutta between

September 4th and 9th, 1920, approved the non-co-operation

movement. The annual convention at Nagpur, central India, in

December, unanimously confirmed this approval; Gandhi then

offered a resolution making the goal of Congress Swaraj, or self-

rule, within the British Empire if possible or outside it if necessary.

Mr. Jinnah, and others, preferred home-rule within the Empire.

They lost. Jinnah lost interest in Congress. Gandhi politics were

Congress politics.

The Nagpur session adopted a new Congress constitution

drafted by Gandhi. Congress had been a golden dome without

underpinnings. Gandhi converted it into a democratic mass

organization with village units, city district units, provincial

sections, an All-India Congress Committee (A.I.C.C.) of 350

members which made policy, and a Working, or Executive,

Committee of fifteen.

Twenty thousand people attended the Nagpur session; it passed

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resolutions for the removal of untouchability, the revival of hand¬

spinning and hand-weaving, and the collection of a crore (or ten

million) of rupees as a Tilak Memorial Fund.

European clothes were less in evidence at Calcutta and Nagpur

than at any previous Congress meeting. Less English was spoken,

and more Hindustani. Middle-class delegates predominated.

India’s poor were there too. The men with great reputations and

great fortunes no longer monopolized the limelight. Some drifted

away from Congress, but Gandhi’s magnetism held many of them;

they realized that he had a power over the people to which they

never even aspired.

Gandhi was middle caste and middle class. He entered politics

just as large numbers of awakened middle-class Indians began to

yearn for national freedom. He and they entered politics together.

Everything in Gandhi’s personality and record helped the

people to identify themselves with him and venerate him. Even

sceptics were captivated by his courage, indestructible vitality,

good humour, near-toothless smile, selflessness, self-confidence

and unlimited faith in people.

In a nation that was powerless, Gandhi became a symbol of

strength. In a nation of slaves, he behaved like a free man. Finally,

he was a man of God.

His idea of non-co-operation had an instantaneous, mighty

appeal because it was so simple: You must not reinforce the walls

of the prison that encloses you, you must not forge the fetters that

will bind you. He had promised at the Nagpur Congress session

in December 1920, that if India non-co-operated non-violently,

self-government would come within twelve months. He carried

this message to the country. He made non-co-operation so per¬

sonal as to give each individual the impression that unless he non-

co-operated he would delay Swaraj. Gandhi himself returned to

the Viceroy his two South African war medals and his Kaiser-i-

Hind gold medal for humanitarian work in South Africa. In the

accompanying letter, Gandhi said, T can retain neither respect

nor affection for a government which has been moving from

wrong to wrong in order to defend its immorality.’ Many Indians

renounced their British titles and their decorations. Motilal

Nehru abandoned his lucrative law practice, discontinued the use

of alcohol and became a total non-co-operator. His son Jawahar-

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lal, C. R. Das, the leader of the Calcutta bar, Vallabhbhai Patel,

and thousands of others likewise left the British courts for ever.

Thousands of students dropped their professional studies. The

Tilak Memorial Fund benefited from the frenzy of self-sacrifice

that seized rich and poor; it was soon oversubscribed. Money was

available for the establishment of a chain of permanent Indian

institutions of higher learning.

Students, teachers and professional men and women left the

cities to go into the villages and teach literacy and non-co-opera¬

tion. For the peasant, non-co-operation meant non-payment of

taxes and no use of intoxicating liquors from which the govern¬

ment derived a large revenue.

Gandhi toured the country incessantly, indefatigably, in torrid,

humid weather, addressing mammoth mass meetings of a hundred

thousand and more persons who, in those pre-microphone days,

could only hope to be reached by his spirit. For seven months he

travelled in hot, uncomfortable trains which were besieged at all

day and night stops by clamouring multitudes who demanded a

view of the Mahatma. The inhabitants of one backwoods area

sent word that if Gandhi’s train did not halt at their tiny station

they would lie down on the tracks and be run over by it. The train

did stop there at midnight, and when Gandhi, aroused from deep

sleep, appeared, the crowd, until then boisterous, sank to their

knees on the railway platform and wept.

During those seven strenuous months the Mahatma took three

meals a day; each consisted of sixteen ounces of goat’s milk, three

slices of toast or bread, two oranges, and a score of grapes or raisins.

In the provinces of Assam, Bengal and Madras, Gandhi and

Mohamed Ali, the younger of the Ali brothers, travelled together

and addressed meetings together. They told every meeting that

if they wanted India to rule herself they had to give up foreign

clothing. The audience would burst into applause. At that

moment, Gandhi would ask the people to take off the foreign

clothing they were wearing and put it on a heap which he would

presently set on fire. In some places, men stripped themselves

naked. The apparel would be passed to a spot near the dais, and

when all the hats, coats, shirts, trousers, underwear, socks and

shoes had been heaped high, Gandhi set a match to them.

As the flames ate their way through the imported goods, Gandhi

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would tell his audiences that they must not substitute Indian mill

products for foreign manufactures; they must learn to spin and

weave. Gandhi took to spinning half an hour a day, usually before

the midday meal, and required all his associates to do likewise.

Before long, few Indians dared to come into his presence wearing

anything but homespun.

Daily spinning, Gandhi said, was a ‘sacrament’ and would turn

the spinner’s mind ‘Godward’. Gandhi had a rosary but he never

used it except perhaps at night when he watched the stars in

moments of sleeplessness. He found rhythm, instead, in the regular

hum of the charka and in the steady chanting of ‘Rama, Rama,

Rama, Rama, Rama (God)’.

Gandhi’s long propaganda circuit for non-co-operation had all

the attributes of religious revivalism. Yet wherever he went he

talked quietly to small groups about the launching of branch Con¬

gress organizations. He designed a Congress flag with a charka

or spinning wheel in the centre. He recruited for the Volunteers

whose teen-age members, dressed in civilian uniform, kept order

at meetings. And he regularly wrote several articles for each issue

of Young India , an English-language weekly, and Navajivan , a

Gujarati weekly. Founded in 1919, they were Gandhi’s personal

organs; neither took advertisements; both were published in

Ahmedabad.

The year was nearing its close. Gandhi had promised the nation

Swaraj in 1921. But self-rule was nowhere in sight.

One afternoon in September, Gandhi and Mohammed Ali were

walking to a meeting. Two British officers and some soldiers

stepped up and arrested Mohamed Ali. Shortly thereafter,

Mohamed’s older brother Shaukat was arrested. Both were sen¬

tenced to two years’ imprisonment for trying to dissuade Moslems

from serving in the British Army. Before his arrest, Mohamed Ali

had made plans to proceed to the Malabar coast in west India

where the Moplahs, a Moslem community, had rebelled against

the Government; the affair had provoked Hindu-Moslem riots.

Mohamed Ali’s arrest and the outburst of intercommunity

violence in Malabar upset Gandhi deeply. In his concept, the

achievement of Swaraj depended primarily on Hindu-Moslem

friendship.

His Mohammedan partner gone, Gandhi strained all the more

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for results. Spinning became an obsession. He urged it with

mounting persistence. In September 1921, he emphasized his

devotion to homespun cotton and to simplicity by discarding, for

all time, the cap he had worn, the sleeveless jacket or waistcoat,

and the flowing dhoti or loose trousers, and adopted the loincloth

as his sole garment. In addition, he carried a homespun bag for

writing equipment, the rosary and a few necessities, possibly some

nuts or dried fruit. This was his ‘mendicant’s garb’.

Thus attired, to the dismay and amusement of some of his

associates, he arrived in Bombay for decisive consultations with

the political leaders of the country. On October 5th, the Congress

Working Committee resolved that ‘it is the duty of every Indian

solider and civilian to sever his connections with the Government

and find some other means of livelihood’. This was a summons to

desertion from the army. Congress thus reiterated the seditious

statement for which the Ali brothers had been incarcerated.

Congress leaders were instructed to return to their districts and

practise individual civil disobedience against the Government.

Into this tense situation Britain thrust the Prince of Wales,

subsequently King Edward VIII and the Duke of Windsor.

India was in no mood for glamour or demonstrations of loyalty.

Congress boycotted his tour. He moved through deserted city

streets and amidst signs of hostility. In Bombay, those who came

out to welcome the Prince were attacked, and bloody riots ensued.

Gandhi undertook a fast till the disturbances ended. He fasted

five days.

The Government now began to round up political leaders and

their followers. C. R. Das, Motilal Nehru, Lajpat Rai and hundreds

of other leading Congressmen were arrested. When the annual

session of Congress convened in Ahmedabad, in December 1921,

twenty thousand Indians had been jailed for civil disobedience

and sedition. The session elected Gandhi ‘the sole executive

authority of the Congress’.

During December 1921 and January 1922, ten thousand more

Indians were thrown into prison for political offences. In several

provinces the peasants spontaneously began no-tax movements.

Indians in government offices left their jobs.

The Government responded with increased severity. Citing in¬

stances of official action, Gandhi called it ‘worse than martial law’

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and characterized the repression as ‘savage, because it is wooden,

wild, uncultivated, cruel’. Flogging in prison and out was a daily

occurrence.

The year 1921 had passed, but no Swaraj. Gandhi was living

at his ashram in Sabarmati, no doubt wondering what to do.

He rarely laid long-range plans; he submitted to sudden inspira¬

tions. There was dissension in Congress ranks; many ridiculed the

Mahatma’s emphasis on temperance, homespun and verbal

defiance of the State. They demanded action.

Some nationalists yearned for rebellion. But Gandhi believed

in peace even at the price of defeat, though not at the price of

cowardice. ‘Where there is only a choice between cowardice and

violence,’ he had written in Young India of August nth, 1920, ‘I

would advise violence.’ But there was no cowardice. Non¬

violence required more bravery than violence, and ‘forgiveness is

more manly than punishment’. Indians ‘have better work to do,

a better mission to deliver to the world’ than the punishment of

the Dyers. ‘Non-violence,’ he said, ‘is the law of our species as

violence is the law of the brute.

‘If India takes up the doctrine of the sword,’ he declared, ‘she

may gain momentary victory, but then India will cease to be the

pride of my heart . . . My religion has no geographical limits. If

I have a living faith in it, it will transcend my love for India her¬

self.’ He was not an uncritical my-country-right-or-wrong-my-

country nationalist.

Lord Reading, the new Viceroy, had arrived in India on

April 2nd, 1921. He had absolute power over the police and the

army. Congress had made Gandhi its dictator. One word from

the Mahatma would have started a conflagration compared with

which the 1857 Mutiny would have seemed like a minor affair.

Reading was a Jew who, after a remarkable career at the

Bar, became in turn Cabinet Minister, Lord Chief Justice of

England, Ambassador to Washington, and now Viceroy. Shortly

after his installation at New Delhi, he indicated a desire to

talk with Gandhi. ‘Rather exciting days lately,’ Reading wrote

to his son. ‘... Intermediaries have stepped in and seen me with

a view to bringing about a meeting with Gandhi.’

‘He certainly is a wonderful person,’ Reading said of the rebel

he had never met.

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Gandhi accepted the Viceroy’s invitation. Many Indians ob¬

jected: Had he become a co-operator, they asked. ‘We may attack

measures and systems,’ Gandhi replied. ‘We may not, we must

not attack men. Imperfect ourselves, we must be tender towards

others and be slow to impute motives. I therefore gladly seized

the opportunity of waiting upon His Excellency. . . .’

Reading’s eager anticipation to see Gandhi was amply rewarded.

In the latter part of May, he wrote to his son, he had six talks with

the Mahatma, ‘the first of four hours and a half, the second of

three hours, the third of an hour and a half, the fourth of an hour

and a half, the fifth of an hour and a half, and the sixth of three-

quarters of an hour; I have had many opportunities of judging

him. 5

What did Reading think of Gandhi after thirteen hours of con¬

versation? ‘There is nothing striking about his appearance,’ he

informed his son. ‘He came ... in a white dhoti [loincloth] and

cap woven on a spinning wheel, with bare feet and legs, and my

first impression on seeing him ushered into the room was that

there was nothing to arrest attention in his appearance, and that

I should have passed him by in the street without a second look

at him. When he talks, the impression is different. He is direct,

and expresses himself well in excellent English with a fine appre¬

ciation of the value of the words he uses. There is no hesitation

about him and there is a ring of sincerity in all that he utters, save

when discussing some political questions. His religious views are,

I believe, genuinely held, and he is convinced to a point almost

bordering on fanaticism that non-violence and love will give India

its independence and enable it to withstand the British govern¬

ment. His religious and moral views are admirable and indeed

are on a remarkably high altitude, though I must confess that I

find it difficult to understand his practice of them in politics . . .

Our conversations were of the frankest; he was supremely cour¬

teous with manners of distinction . . . He held in every way to his

word in the various discussions we had.’

It is not surprising that Reading failed to understand Gandhi’s

politics. The Mahatma explained to the Viceroy how he expected

to defeat Great Britain. ‘Ours’, he said he told Reading, ‘is a

religious movement designed to purge Indian political life of cor¬

ruption, deceit, terrorism and the incubus of white supremacy.’

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The major task was to purify India; England’s expulsion would

come as a by-product. Therefore Indians would non-co-operate

non-violently. Reading disapproved.

Many Indians disapproved. To Indians, however, the Mahatma

was indispensable, and because he was adamant ‘to a point almost

bordering on fanaticism’, even the Indian champions of violence

acquiesced in his non-violence. But why not, they demanded,

launch non-violent civil disobedience campaigns simultaneously

throughout India? A resolution in support of this measure was

actually adopted by the All-India Congress Committee meeting

in Delhi on November 4th, 1921, but Gandhi exacted a promise

from all leaders not to move without his consent.

Gandhi preferred to try mass civil disobedience in one area,

and he chose the county of Bardoli, population 87,000, near

Bombay, where he could personally supervise the experiment.

On February 1st, 1922, Gandhi informed Reading of this plan.

Why did the Mahatma seek to paralyse the British administra¬

tion in only one limited territory of 137 tiny villages, thus making

himself an easy target for repression, when he might have done the

same thing in all provinces and added to the discomfiture of the

Government or perhaps even brought it to terms?

Gandhi did not believe that civil disobedience, properly con¬

ducted, could be defeated. What did it matter whether the

Government was coping with a hundred thousand civil resisters or a

hundred million? Could it kill the hundred thousand, or jail them?

Gandhi, moreover, was not contemplating a fight to the finish

with the British Empire. He knew that such a struggle would be

violent and prolonged, and on both sides it might lift into com¬

manding posts men with the least scruples and the greatest

capacity for hatred, cruelty, dishonesty and dictatorship. No

matter who won the contest, both countries and the world would

have lost.

At the Ahmedabad Congress session in December 1921,

Gandhi had appealed to the British government ‘in all humility 5 :

‘No matter what you do,’ he said, ‘no matter how you repress us,

we shall one day wring reluctant repentance from you; and we

ask you to think betimes, and take care what you are doing, and

see that you do not make the three hundred millions of India your

eternal enemies. 5

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It was because of this spirit that Gandhi chose to work in the

Bardoli test tube. A united, unrestrained, self-disciplined Bardoli,

peaceful but not co-operating with British administration, would

impress on the people of Great Britain the unpardonable horror

of government by massacre, and might induce them to grant India

a fuller measure of independence than they now thought Indians

deserved or could wisely use. Gandhi always endeavoured to win,

convert and convince the adversary, not wrestle with him in a

pool of blood. Bardoli was ready for civil disobedience.

But on February 5th something happened in the United Pro¬

vinces, in Chauri Chaura, eight hundred miles from Bardoli. In

that small town, an Indian mob committed murder. There had

been a legal procession, Gandhi reported in Young India of Febru¬

ary 16th, 1921. ‘But when the procession had passed, the stragglers

were interfered with and abused by the constables. The former

cried out for help. The mob returned. The constables opened fire.

The little ammunition they had was exhausted and they retired

to the Thana [city hall] for safety. The mob, my informant tells

me, therefore set fire to the Thana. The self-imprisoned con¬

stables had to come out for dear life and as they did so they were

hacked to pieces and the mangled remains were thrown into the

raging flames.’

The news of this atrocity reached Gandhi in Bardoli on Febru¬

ary 8th, and it made him sick and sad. Violence upset him

physically and psychologically. ‘No provocation,’ he exclaimed,

‘can possibly justify brutal murder of men who had been rendered

defenceless and who had virtually thrown themselves on the mercy

of the mob.’

It was a ‘bad augury’.

‘Suppose,’ he asked, ‘the non-violent disobedience of Bardoli

was permitted by God to succeed and the Government had abdi¬

cated in favour of the victors of Bardoli, who would control the

unruly elements that must be expected to perpetuate inhumanity

upon due provocation?’ He was not sure that he could.

He accordingly suspended the campaign in Bardoli and can¬

celled any defiance of the Government anywhere in India. ‘Let

the opponent glory in our humiliation or so-called defeat,’ he

exclaimed. ‘It is better to be charged with cowardice and weak¬

ness than to be guilty of denial of our oath and to sin against God.

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It is a million times better to appear untrue before the world than

to be untrue to ourselves. 5

Some members of the Congress Working Committee disagreed

with Gandhi’s move. He saw the justice of their point of view. ‘The

drastic reversal of practically the whole of the aggressive pro¬

gramme may be politically unsound and unwise, 5 he affirmed,

‘but there is no doubt that it is religiously sound. 5 And when

Gandhi took a religious stand nobody could shake him. Chauri

Chaura, he said, ‘shows the way India may easily go, if drastic

precautions be not taken 5 . Congress would have to educate itself

and educate the people. As for himself, ‘I must undergo personal

cleansing. I must become a fitter instrument able to register the

slightest variation in the moral atmosphere about me. 5 He fasted

for five days.

Meanwhile a sharp struggle was taking place behind the British

scenes. It is described by Lord Reading’s son and biographer who

had at his disposal his father’s private letters and unpublished

state papers. Official demands had been made for Gandhi’s

arrest. ‘The Viceroy 5 , the biography reads, ‘was indeed far from

dismissing as unfounded the opinion held by many competent

observers, notably Sir George [later Lord] Lloyd [Governor of

Bombay], that Mr. Gandhi’s preaching of non-violence was no

more than a cloak for plans aimed at an ultimate revolution by

violence. Sir George would have had Mr. Gandhi arrested at

once, but Lord Reading, as always, opposed arrest for mere

speech-making, dangerous as the speeches might be, and awaited

some definite act. “I am quite prepared to face the consequences

of Gandhi’s arrest if he takes action”, Reading declared.’

After an interval, the Secretary of State, Edwin ‘Montagu’,

the biography continues, ‘instructed Lord Reading to arrest the

principal leaders of the non-co-operation movement, including

Mr. Gandhi’. Reading, however, resisted this order. His son, in

the biography of his father, writes: ‘Lord Reading still preferred to

wait for some definite move by Mr. Gandhi... It looked as though

the occasion for the arrest would come soon enough, for Mr.

Gandhi had announced that he was about to start active civil

disobedience in the Bardoli tehsil [county] of the Surat district in

Bombay Presidency, and on January 24th the Government of

India telegraphed to Sir George Lloyd specifically enjoining him

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to wait until Mr. Gandhi openly embarked on the Bardoli

campaign. . . .’

The biography then relates the events in Chauri Chaura and

records Gandhi’s cancellation of the Bardoli campaign on Febru¬

ary 8th, before it had actually started. However, he continues,

‘opinion in England was restive over Mr. Gandhi’s continued

freedom, and Mr. Montagu telegraphed early in February saying

that he was “puzzled” at the delay in making the arrest. A debate

was due to take place in Parliament on the 14th, and both Lord

Reading and Mr. Montagu were naturally anxious that, as the

arrest had to be made, it should be made in time for Parliament to

be informed of it as a fait accompli. But at this point the Indian

members of the Viceroy’s Council made the strongest possible

representations in favour of delay, and Lord Reading, after careful

thought, decided that the risks of a little delay were on the whole

less than those of immediate action which would easily be open to

misrepresentation both in India and abroad.’

Reading ‘postponed the arrest’, the biography says, ‘but asked

the three Presidency Governors, Sir George Lloyd, Lord Willing-

don of Madras and Lord Ronaldshay of Bengal to come to Delhi

and talk the matter over with him . . .’ Ronaldshay could not

leave Calcutta, but ‘Lord Willingdon was only less disturbed than

Sir George by the apparent intention of the Government of India

not to proceed at all against Mr. Gandhi. . . .’

On March 1st, following these talks with the two most important

British conservative administrators in India, Reading ordered the

arrest of Gandhi, and it took place on Friday, March 10th, 1922,

at 10.30 in the evening. A police officer stopped his car on the

road, eighty yards from Gandhi’s hut in Sabarmati Ashram, and

sent polite word by one of his men that the Mahatma should

consider himself under arrest and come as soon as he was ready.

Standing surrounded by a dozen or more ashramites, Gandhi

offered up a prayer and joined in the singing of a hymn. Then,

in a gay mood, he walked to the car and was taken to Sabarmati

prison. The next morning, Kasturbai sent clothes, goat’s milk and

grapes to her husband.

Lord Reading had at one time asserted that he would arrest

Gandhi only after some overt act. Gandhi had taken none. The

Parliamentary debate had come and gone; it did not make the

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arrest necessary. Reading knew very well what Gandhi had been

saying in speeches and articles; they did not convince him of the

wisdom of arresting the Mahatma. How then did Sir George

Lloyd and Lord Willingdon persuade Reading to act?

‘I have had no trouble so far arising from Gandhi’s arrest,’ the

Viceroy wrote in April in a private letter to his son, the biographer.

Reading was obviously relieved that Gandhi’s arrest had caused

no public commotion. The provincial governors could have

predicted this.

Hard-boiled considerations of ‘law and order’ prevailed over the

Viceroy’s scruples. Gandhi had disarmed himself by suspending

the Bardoli civil disobedience; therefore he could be arrested with

impunity. Reading’s April letter to his son confirms this. Gandhi,

he wrote, ‘had pretty well run himself into the last ditch as a poli¬

tician by his extraordinary manifestations in the last month or six

weeks before his arrest, when he ran the gamut of open defiance

of Government with a challenge of all authority fixed for a certain

day, and when the day arrived he went to the opposite extreme

and counselled suspension of. the most acute activities.

‘This of course caused dissension among his followers. . . .’

So Gandhi was ‘in the last ditch as a politician . . .’ Gandhi’s

politicial career was finished. The measure of misunderstanding is

filled by a remark of the biographer-son: ‘The mere fact that Mr.

Gandhi had been taken into custody and kept in jail like any other

ordinary mortal who had run counter to the Law was\* in itself a

real setback to his prestige. . . .’

Gandhi had expected arrest and published an article in the

March 9th issue of Young India entitled ‘If I Am Arrested’. ‘Rivers

of blood shed by the Government cannot frighten me,’ he wrote,

‘but I should be deeply pained even if the people did so much as

abuse the Government for my sake or in my name. It would be

disgracing me if the people lost their equilibrium on my arrest.’

There were no disorders.

At the preliminary hearings the day after his arrest, Gandhi

gave his age as fifty-three and his profession ‘farmer and weaver’

and pleaded guilty. The charge was writing three seditious

articles in Young India. Mr. S. G. Banker, the printer of the maga¬

zine, was arraigned at the same time. Gandhi was kept in

prison for trial.

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The first of the seditious articles appeared in Young India on

September 19th, 1921, entitled ‘Tampering with Loyalty’. ‘I

have no hesitation in saying’, Gandhi wrote, ‘that it is sinful for

anyone, either soldier or civilian, to serve this government . . .

sedition has become the creed of Congress . . . Non-co-operation,

though a religious and strictly moral movement, deliberately aims

at the overthrow of the government, and is therefore legally

seditious . . .We ask for no quarter; we expect none from the

government.’

These words made the Government case easy. If there was

doubt, Gandhi made it even more explicit in a second article, ‘A

Puzzle and Its Solution’, in Young India of December 15th, 1921.

‘Lord Reading’, he wrote, ‘must understand that Non-co-opera-

tors are at war with the government. They have declared

rebellion against it . . . Lord Reading is entitled therefore to put

them out of harm’s way.’

The third seditious article, ‘Shaking the Manes’, in Young India

of February 23rd, 1922, cried out in the opening sentence, ‘How

can there be any compromise whilst the British lion continues to

shake his gory claws in our faces?’ Then sarcastically he informed

the British that ‘the rice-eating, puny millions of India seem to

have resolved upon achieving their own destiny without any

further tutelage and without arms’. Adding that ‘No empire

intoxicated with the red wine of power and plunder of weaker

races has yet lived long in the world’, Gandhi said. ‘The fight

that was commenced in 1920 is a fight to the finish, whether it

lasts one month or one year or many months or many years. . . .’

Gandhi’s only surprise was that he had not been arrested after

the first or second of these articles.

‘The Great Trial’, as it came to be known, was held in Govern¬

ment Circuit House at Ahmedabad on March 18th, 1922, before

Mr. Justice C. N. Broomfield, District and Sessions judge. Sir

J. T. Strangman, Advocate-General of Bombay, prosecuted.

Gandhi and Mr. Banker had no lawyers. Heavy military patrols

guarded the building and nearby streets. The little courtroom

was crowded. Admission passes were marked: ‘Sessions Case No.

45 of 1922. Imperator vs (1) Mr. M. K. Gandhi. (2) Mr. S. C.

Banker.’

After the indictment was read and the Advocate-General had

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stated the case against Gandhi, the judge asked the Mahatma

whether he wished to make a statement. Gandhi had a written

statement ready. He introduced it with some oral, extemporan¬

eous remarks. The Advocate-General, Gandhi said, ‘was entirely

fair ... It is very true and I have no desire whatsoever to conceal

from this court the fact that to preach disaffection towards the

existing system of government has become almost a passion with

me’. Indeed, he had preached sedition long before the prosecution

said he had. T do not ask for mercy. I do not plead any extenuat¬

ing act. I am here, therefore, to invite and cheerfully submit to

the highest penalty that can be inflicted upon me for what in law

is a deliberate crime and what appears to me to be the highest

duty of a citizen. The only course open to you, the Judge, is, as

I am going to say in my statement, either to resign your post, or

inflict on me the severest penalty if you believe that the system

and the law you administer are good for the people. I do not

expect that kind of conversion, but by the time I have finished

with my statement you will perhaps have a glimpse of what is

raging within my breast to run this maddest risk that a man can

run.’

Gandhi then read his prepared statement to ‘explain why, from

a staunch loyalist and co-operator, I have become an uncom¬

promising disaffectionist and non-co-operator’. In South Africa,

he began, his contacts with the British were not happy; ‘I dis¬

covered that I had no rights as a man because I was an Indian.’

But he thought this ‘was an excrescence upon a system that was

intrinsically and mainly good’. So, he criticized the Government

but supported it, and joined in two wars which it fought. In

India, too, he recruited for the British Army. ‘In all these efforts

at service,’ he explained, ‘I was actuated by the belief that it was

possible by such services to gain a status of full equality in the

Empire for my countrymen.’

In 1919, the shocks commenced: The Rowlatt acts, Jallianwalla

Bagh, the crawling order, the floggings, the injustice to the

Turkish Caliph. Nevertheless, the Mahatma recalled, ‘I fought

for co-operation and working the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms’;

he still hoped. ‘But all that hope was shattered.’

‘I came reluctantly to the conclusion,’ he told the court, ‘that

the British connection had made India more helpless than she

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ever was before, politically and economically . . . She has become

so that she has little power of resisting famines. Before the British

advent, India spun and wove in her millions of cottages just the

supplement she needed for adding to her meagre agricultural

resources. This cottage industry, so vital for India’s existence,

has been ruined by incredibly heartless and inhuman processes

as described by English witnesses. Little do town-dwellers know

how the semi-starved masses of India are slowly sinking to lifeless¬

ness . . . No sophistry, no jugglery in figures can explain away the

evidence that the skeletons in many villages present to the naked

eye. I have no doubt that both England and the town-dwellers

of India will have to answer, if there is a God above, for this crime

against humanity which is perhaps unequalled in history.’

Continuing his indictment of the accuser, the prisoner said, T

am satisfied that many Englishmen and Indian officials honestly

believe that they are administering one of the best systems devised

in the world and that India is making steady though slow progress.

They do not know that a subtle but effective system of terrorism

and an organized display of force on the one hand, and the de¬

privation of all powers of retaliation and self-defence on the other,

have emasculated the people and induced in them the habit of

simulation. This awful habit has added to the ignorance and self-

deception of the administrators. . . .

T have no personal ill-will against any administrator, 5 Gandhi

assured the judge, ‘much less have I disaffection towards the

King’s person. But I hold it an honour to be disaffected towards

a government which in its totality has done more harm to India

than any previous system. India is less manly under the British

rule than she ever was before ... it has been a precious privilege

for me to be able to write what I have in the various articles

tendered in evidence against me ... In my opinion, non-co-

operation with evil is as much a duty as is co-operation with good.’

In conclusion, Gandhi again asked for the ‘severest penalty’.

When Gandhi sat down, Mr. Justice Broomfield bowed to the

prisoner, and pronounced sentence. ‘The determination of a just

sentence,’ the judge declared, ‘is perhaps as difficult a proposi¬

tion as a judge in this country could have to face. The law is no

respecter of persons. Nevertheless, it will be impossible to ignore

the fact that you are in a different category from any person I

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have ever tried or am likely to have to try. It would be impossible

to ignore the fact that, in the eyes of millions of your countrymen,

you are a great patriot and a great leader. Even those who differ

from you in politics look upon you as a man of high ideals and of

noble and even saintly life. 5

The judge then announced that Gandhi must undergo im¬

prisonment for six years, and added that if the Government later

saw fit to reduce the term ‘no one would be better pleased than I\

Mr. Banker received one year in jail and a fine of one thousand

rupees.

On hearing the sentence, the Mahatma rose and said that the

sentence ‘is as mild as any judge could inflict on me, and so far

as the entire proceedings are concerned, I must say that I could

not have expected greater courtesy’.

When the court was adjourned, most of the spectators in the

room fell at Gandhi’s feet. Many wept. Gandhi wore a benign

smile as he was led away to jail.

Gandhi had no grievance. He knew when he entered Indian

politics that it involved going to prison. It meant this for him

and for others. Whenever he heard of a friend or colleague who

had been arrested he telegraphed congratulations. Going to

prison was a basic part of his doctrine of non-co-operation. ‘We

must widen the prison gates,’ he said, ‘and we must enter them as

a bridegroom enters the bride’s chamber. Freedom is to be wooed

only inside prison walls and sometimes on gallows, never in the

council chambers, courts, or the schoolroom.’ Going to prison

was essential to arousing the nation for liberation.

The British obliged and sent him to prison often. But this was

the last time they tried him.

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