# CHAPTER VIII

MURDER

G andhi’s hartal idea spread throughout India. It united

vast multitudes in common action; it gave the people a

sense of power. They loved Gandhi for it. The hartal

paralysed economic life; the dead cities and towns were tangible

proof that Indians could be effective. What the Indian people

needed most and lacked most, was faith in themselves. Gandhi

gave it to them.

Six hundred men and women in Bombay signed the Satyagraha

pledge. Gandhi was happy. He had won with fewer numbers in

South Africa. Vows were being taken in other cities, and in many

villages. ‘Even such a mighty government as the Government of

India, 5 Gandhi declared at Bombay, ‘will have to yield if we are

true to our pledge. For the pledge is no small thing. It means a

change of heart. It is an attempt to introduce the religious spirit

into politics. We may no longer believe in the doctrine of “tit for

tat 55 ; we may not meet hatred with hatred, violence with violence,

evil with evil; but we have to make a continuous and persistent

effort to return good for evil. . . Nothing is impossible. 5

Sceptics mocked. ‘I have no desire to argue, 5 Gandhi replied.

‘As the British proverb says, “The proof of the pudding lies in the

eating 5 5 5 . The movement had been launched; it would surely

spread and surely triumph.

In a further appeal to the Viceroy, the Mahatma put the whole

question on a high, universal level. The Satyagraha campaign, he

told the Viceroy, ‘constitutes an attempt to revolutionize politics

and restore moral force to its original station 5 . He quoted a

statement of President Woodrow Wilson at Paris to the effect that

if the moral force behind the League of Nations Covenant did not

suffice, physical force would. ‘We 5 Gandhi wrote, ‘hope to

reverse the process and by our action show that physical force is

nothing compared to moral force and that moral force never fails. 5

Somebody protested that Gandhi’s Satyagraha campaign

would abet Bolshevism. (The Bolshevik Revolution had taken

198

MURDER

place on November 7th, 1917, and made a deep impression on the

East.) No, Gandhi said in a speech at Madras on March 30th,

1919, s if anything can possibly prevent this calamity descending

upon our country, it is Satyagraha. Bolshevism is the necessary

result of modern materialistic civilization. Its insensate worship

of matter has given rise to a school which has been brought up to

look upon materialistic advancement as the goal and which has

lost all touch with the final things in life ... I prophesy that if we

disobey the law of the final supremacy of spirit over matter, of

liberty and love over brute force, in a few years’ time we

shall have Bolshevism rampant in this land which was once so

holy’.

The hartal, a prelude to Satyagraha, was observed in Delhi

on March 30th and in Bombay and other cities and villages on

April 6th; ‘Needless to say,’ Gandhi reported, ‘the hartal in

Bombay was a complete success.’ The nationwide hartal, he

said, ‘was a most wonderful spectacle’.

In Delhi, however, the hartal provoked violence. The Punjab,

home of millions of Moslems and Hindus and of five million

bearded, turbaned, stoutly built Sikhs whose religion was an off¬

shoot of Hinduism, echoed to riots and shootings. Leaders asked

Gandhi to come quickly to Delhi and the Punjab. The British

stopped him at the borders of the province on April 9th and

escorted him back to Bombay, where he was released. En route

to and from Bombay, Gandhi sent messages that he was safe and

free; reports of his arrest had inflamed the already heated passions

of the people; riots occurred in Bombay and Ahmedabad.

On April nth, Gandhi admonished his followers in Bombay.

‘We have been throwing stones,’ he said. ‘We have obstructed

tramcars by putting obstacles in the way. This is not Satyagraha.

We have demanded the release of about fifty men who had been

arrested for deeds of violence. But our duty is chiefly to get our¬

selves arrested. It is a breach of religious duty to endeavour to

secure the release of those who have committed deeds of violence

... If we cannot conduct this movement without the slightest

violence from our side,’ Gandhi warned, ‘the movement might

have to be abandoned ... It may be necessary to go even further.

The time may come for me to offer Satyagraha against ourselves

... I have just heard that some English gentlemen have been

i99

GANDHI IN INDIA

injured. Some may even have died from such injuries. If so, it

would be a great blot on Satyagraha. For me, Englishmen too

are our brethren.’

From Bombay, Gandhi went to his ashram at Sabarmati,

where on April 14th he addressed a huge multitude. Ahmedabad

citizens too had committed acts of violence of which Gandhi was

ashamed; ‘a rapier run through my body could hardly have pained

me more’. Scathingly he denounced them: ‘We have burnt down

buildings, forcibly captured weapons, extorted money, stopped

trains, cut off telegraph wires, killed innocent people and plun¬

dered shops and private houses.’ As penance, he announced that

he had undertaken a seventy-two-hour fast. He asked the people

to fast twenty-four.

Immediately after the Sabarmati meeting, Gandhi left for

Nadiad, a town in the Kheda district, twenty-nine miles from

Ahmedabad, where he had recruited for the war. There he

discovered that violence had spread to small towns as well.

Depressed, Gandhi told the people of Nadiad that the entire

Satyagraha campaign was ‘a Himalayan miscalculation’ on his

part. On April 18th he called off the movement.

Many scoffed; the Mahatma, they taunted, had made ‘a

Himalayan miscalculation’. But Gandhi never regretted a con¬

fession of error. ‘I have always held’, he wrote in his auto¬

biography, ‘that it is only when one sees one’s own mistakes with a

convex lens and does just the reverse in the case of others, that

one is able to arrive at a just relative estimate of the two.’ What

politician would say that?

His miscalculation, Gandhi explained, was in overlooking the

fact that a person must be trained in civil obedience before civil

disobedience against some laws could succeed. ‘I am sorry,’

Gandhi said in cancelling the Satyagraha campaign, ‘that when I

embarked upon a mass movement I underrated the forces of evil

and I must now pause and consider how best to meet the situation.’

Nobody forsook his leadership because he did not immediately

announce a clever new plan to divert attention from the one

that failed.

Meanwhile, the Punjab province boiled. Events there cul¬

minated in the occurrence in the sacred Sikh city of Amritsar on

April 13th, 1919, which Sir Valentine Ghirol called ‘that black

200

MURDER

day in the annals of British India’. For Gandhi it was a turning

point. Indians never forgot it.

An official commission of inquiry, appointed by the government

of India and consisting of seven members, four British and three

Indian, with Lord Hunter, Senator of the College of Justice of

Scotland, as chairman, investigated the Punjab disturbances for

many months and then published its report. It found that in

Amritsar ‘the Hartal on the thirtieth [of March] was successful

beyond expectation and stopped the whole business of the city.

There was no collision with the police and no resort to violence’.

On April 6th, Amritsar, a city of 150,000 inhabitants, observed

another hartal. ‘This second time also the Hartal passed off

successfully,’ the official Hunter Report affirms, ‘and Europeans

could and did walk unmolested amongst the crowds.’

On April 9th, the Punjab government issued an order for the

deportation from the province of the two Congress party leaders,

Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew, a Moslem, and Dr. Satyapal, a Hindu.

It was the day of the Hindu festival Ram Naumi in which,

according to the Report, Moslems also joined, shouting ‘Mahatma

Gandhi ki jai (Long Live Mahatma Gandhi)’ and ‘Hindu-

Mussalman ki jai (Long Live Hindu-Moslem unity)’, and ‘drink¬

ing out of the same cups publicly by way of demonstration’. The

police expected that the demonstrators would try to liberate the

two leaders and precautions were taken, but ‘there was no

attempt at rescue’.

The banishing of the leaders removed from Amritsar the two

men who might have restrained the populace. ‘Starting in anger

at the action of the government in deporting the two local

politicians,’ reads the Hunter Report, a mob raged through the

streets. At the National Bank, Mr. Stewart, the manager, and

Mr. Scott, the assistant manager, were beaten to death and at the

Alliance Bank, Mr. G. M. Thomson, the manager, ‘who attempted

to defend himself with a revolver, was cruelly murdered’. Other

English people were assaulted.

Two days later, Brigadier-General Reginald Edward Harry

Dyer arrived at Amritsar. Dyer, born in Simla, India, in 1864,

was educated at Middleton College, County Cork, Ireland, and

entered the British Army in 1885. He fought on the north-west

frontier, in the Burma war and in the first World War. April

201

GANDHI IN INDIA

1919 found him commanding a brigade at Jullunder, in the

Punjab. Ordered to Amritsar on the 1 ith, he issued a proclama¬

tion on the 12th prohibiting processions and meetings. ‘The issue

of the proclamation which was formally signed by the Brigade-

Major on General Dyer’s behalf/ says the Hunter Report, ‘was

left to the police; it does not appear what steps were taken to

ensure its publication.’

During the morning of the next day, April 13th, Dyer went

through the city reading the proclamation to the people. ‘From

an examination of the map, showing the different places where

the proclamation was read,’ the Hunter Report asserts, ‘it is

evident that in many parts of the city the proclamation was not

read.’

The Hunter Report then tells the story of the massacre of

April 13th. ‘About one o’clock’, it reads, ‘General Dyer heard

that the people intended to hold a big meeting about four-

thirty p.m. On being asked why he did not take measures to

prevent its being held, he replied: “I went there as soon as I

could. I had to think the matter out.” ’

The meeting took place at Jallianwalla Bagh. Bagh means

garden. ‘Jallianwalla Bagh’, the Report says, ‘is not in any sense

a garden as its name would suggest. It is a rectangular piece of

unused ground, covered to some extent by building material and

debris. It is almost entirely surrounded by walls of buildings.

The entrances and exits to it are few and imperfect. It seems to

be frequently used to accommodate large gatherings of people.

At the end at which General Dyer entered there is a raised ground

on each side of the entrance. A large crowd had gathered at the

opposite end of the Bagh and were being addressed by a man on

a raised platform about 150 yards from where General Dyer

stationed his troops.’ The Report estimates that there were be¬

tween ten and twenty thousand persons in the Bagh.

Dyer went to the garden with twenty-five Gurkhas (soldiers

from Nepal) and twenty-five Baluchis from Baluchistan armed

with rifles, forty Gurkhas armed only with knives and two

armoured cars. ‘On arriving at Jallianwalla Bagh’, the Report

declares, ‘he [Dyer] entered with this force by a narrow entrance

which was not sufficiently wide to allow the cars to pass. They

were accordingly left in the street outside.

202

/

MURDER

‘As soon as General Dyer entered the Bagh, 5 the Report con¬

tinues, ‘he stationed twenty-five troops on one side of the higher

ground at the entrance and twenty-five troops on the other side.

Without giving the crowd any warning to disperse, which he

considered unnecessary as they were in breach of his proclama¬

tion, he ordered his troops to fire and the firing continued for about

ten minutes. There is no evidence as to the nature of the address

to which the audience was listening. None of them were provided

with firearms, although some of them may have been carrying

sticks.

‘As soon as the firing commenced the crowd began to disperse.

In all 1,650 rounds were fired by the troops. The firing was

individual and not volley firing ... As a result of this investigation

it was discovered that approximately 379 people were killed.’

The Report estimates that there were three times as many

wounded as dead. This adds up to 379 dead plus 1137 wounded

or 1516 casualties with 1650 bullets. The crowd, penned in the

low-lying garden, was a perfect target.

Under cross-examination before the Hunter Commission, Dyer

revealed his mind and purpose:

‘Question: From time to time you changed your firing and

directed it to the place where the crowd were thickest?

‘Answer: That is so. 5

The crowd had rushed to the lowest wall, which was five feet

high and that is where the bullets felled many of them.

‘Question: Supposing the passage was sufficient to allow the

armoured cars to go in, would you have opened fire with the

machine-guns?

‘Answer: I think, probably, yes. 5

‘When examined before us 5 , the Hunter Report asserts, ‘he

[Dyer] explained that his mind was made up as he came along in

his motor car; if his orders against holding a meeting were dis¬

obeyed he was going to fire at once. 5

‘I had made up my mind, 5 Dyer testified, ‘I would do all men

to death. . . . 5

General Dyer’s own dispatch to his military superior, which is

quoted in the Hunter Report with his italics, said, ‘I fired and

continued to fire until the crowd dispersed and I consider this the

least amount of firing which could produce the necessary effect

203

GANDHI IN INDIA

it was my duty to produce if I was to justify my action. It was no

longer a question of merely dispersing the crowd , but one of producing a

sufficient moral effect from a military point of view not only on

those who were present, but more especially throughout the

Punjab. There could be no question of undue severity.’

The Hunter Commission decided that ‘This was unfortunately

a mistaken conception of his duty.’ It also found that ‘in continu¬

ing to fire for so long as he did it appears to us that General Dyer

committed a grave error’.

Moreover, the Report notes that ‘General Dyer’s action in not

making provision for the wounded at Jallianwalla Bagh has been

made the subject of criticism’. Dyer said at the hearings, ‘I was

ready to help them if they applied.’

Sir Michael O’Dwyer, British Acting Governor of the Punjab,

approved of Dyer’s action and referred to the disturbances as

‘rebellion’. The Hunter Commission commented: ‘The action

taken by General Dyer has also been described by others as having

saved the situation in the Punjab and having averted a rebellion

on a scale similar to the Mutiny. It does not, however, appear to

us possible to draw this conclusion, particularly in view of the

fact that a conspiracy to overthrow British power had not been

formed prior to the outbreaks.’

Not only was no insurrection intended or planned, but, accord¬

ing to the Hunter Report, ‘It appears that the outburst on the

ioth April subsided in a few hours, there was no repetition of any

serious incident afterwards either on that date or on subsequent

dates. And even with regard to the events on the ioth ... if the

officer in charge . . . had done his duty, the worst crimes, viz.,

the murders of the bank officers . . . would in all probability have

been prevented.’

Amritsar had been calm for two and a half days when Dyer’s

butchery occurred. His unnecessary massacre was the child of

the British military mentality then dominant in India. To

characterize this mentality, the Hunter Report quotes an utter¬

ance of General Drake-Brockman of Delhi who said, ‘Force is the

only thing that an Asiatic has any respect for.’

‘I thought I would be doing a jolly lot of good,’ was Dyer’s airy

summary of the massacre at Jallianwalla Bagh.

To add humiliation to hurt, General Dyer published his in-

204

MURDER

famous C crawling order 5 . On April ioth Miss Sherwood, the

headmistress of a girls 5 school in Amritsar, had been barbarously

attacked by the mob. Several days after the Jallianwalla Bagh

blood bath, Dyer issued instructions that anybody passing the

street where Miss Sherwood was assaulted would have to go on all

fours. This applied even to members of families whose only

approach to their homes was through that street. Gandhi felt

worse about this ‘outrage 5 , as he called it, than about the massacre.

At the spot, moreover, on which Miss Sherwood was beaten,

Dyer erected a whipping post for the public flogging of those who

ignored his order that Indians on animals and vehicles must

alight, Indians carrying umbrellas or parasols must lower them,

and all Indians must salute or ‘salaam 5 with the hand as they

passed British officers in some districts of Amritsar.

The British Secretary of State for India, Edwin S. Montagu, in

an official dispatch to the Viceroy, Lord Chelmsford, dated

May 26th, 1920, wrote, ‘His Majesty’s Government repudiate

emphatically the doctrine upon which Brigadier-General Dyer

based his action 5 at Jallianwalla Bagh. The crawling order,

Montagu added, ‘offended against every canon of civilized govern¬

ment 5 . Innumerable Englishmen were ashamed of Dyer’s deed,

yet he found many defenders.

Dyer was asked to resign from the army. Towards the end of his

life, he invented a range finder for sighting aircraft. He died in

retirement at Bristol on July 23rd, 1927.

Under the Hunter Commission’s cross-examination, General

Dyer had said, ‘Yes, I think it quite possible that I could have

dispersed them perhaps without firing 5 but ‘I was going to punish

them. My idea from the military point of view was to make a

wide impression. 5

‘We have no doubt 5 , the official British Hunter Report con¬

tinued, ‘that he succeeded in creating a very wide impression and

a great moral effect, but of a character quite opposite from the one

he intended. 5 Jallianwalla Bagh quickened India’s political life

and drew Gandhi into politics.

205