# CHAPTER XI

OPERATION AND FAST

N the evening of January 12th, 1924, Mahatma Gandhi

was hastily carried from Yeravda Central Prison, where he

V-/ was lodged on March 20th, 1922, to Sassoon Hospital in

the city of Poona. He had developed acute appendicitis. The

Government was ready to wait for Indian physicians to arrive

from Bombay, three hours’ distance by train, but shortly before

midnight Colonel Maddock, the British surgeon, informed Gandhi

that he would have to operate immediately. Gandhi consented.

While the operating theatre was being prepared, V. S. Srinivasa

Sastri, head of the Servants of India Society, and Dr. Phatak,

Poona friend of the Mahatma, were summoned at his request.

Together, they drafted a public statement which declared that he

had agreed to the operation, that the physicians had treated him

well and that, whatever happened, there must be no anti-govern¬

ment agitation. The hospital authorities, and Gandhi, knew that

if the operation went badly India might burst into flames.

When the declaration was ready, Gandhi drew up his knees and

signed it in pencil. ‘See how my hand trembles,’ he remarked to

Colonel Maddock with a laugh. ‘You will have to put this right.’

‘Oh,’ replied the surgeon, ‘we will put tons and tons of strength

into it.’

Chloroform was administered and a photograph taken. During

the operation, a thunderstorm cut off the supply of electricity.

Then the flashlight which one of the three nurses had been holding

went out, and the operation had to be finished by the light of a

hurricane lamp.

The appendicectomy was successful and the Mahatma thanked

the surgeon profusely. An abscess formed locally, however, and

the patient’s progress was too slow. The Government thought it

wise or generous in these circumstances to release Gandhi on

February 5th.

The operation piqued Gandhi’s curiosity, and when Manu

Gandhi, the granddaughter of his cousin, had to undergo an

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appendicectomy at Patna, in Bihar province, during a tour, the

Mahatma asked the surgeon, Dr. D. P. Bhargava, the same who

was first to reach Gandhi’s side after the assassination, whether

he could be present. Dr. Bhargava assented on condition that

Gandhi wore a gauze mask, and two snapshots taken during the

operation show Gandhi sitting on a chair, an unusual perch, with

a white mask covering the lower half of his face and tied around

the back of his head. Dr. Bhargava says Gandhi did not utter a

word during the entire hour. (This was on May 15th, 1947, at

9.30 p.m.)

‘The West’, Gandhi once wrote to Miss Slade, ‘has always com¬

manded my admiration for its surgical inventions and all-round

progress in that direction.’

Nevertheless, Gandhi never quite cast off his prejudices against

physicians. Once Gandhi resisted a penicillin injection.

‘If I give you penicillin’, the doctor said, ‘you will recover in

three days. Otherwise it will take three weeks.’

‘That’s all right,’ Gandhi replied. ‘I’m in no hurry.’

The doctor said he might infect others.

‘Then give them penicillin’, Gandhi advised.

In an unguarded moment, the same physician told Gandhi that

if all sick people simply went to bed they’d get well.

‘Don’t say that aloud,’ Gandhi cautioned. ‘You will lose all

your patients.’

Gandhi liked to be his own doctor. Mahadev Desai, who knew

him well, said, ‘But for his fundamental objection to vivisection,

he might have been a physician and a surgeon.’ Gandhi wrote a

book on health, and loved to recommend ‘quack’ remedies to

friends, callers and all of India. Accordingly, when he received

his unconditional discharge from Yeravda Jail and went to the

beach at Juhu, near Bombay, to recuperate in the home of

Shantikumar Morarjee, an industrialist, he decided that since

he would be doctoring himself he might as well doctor others too;

he converted the seaside villa into a temporary hospital where

ailing associates, summoned from near and far, gave Gandhi

pleasure by submitting to his mud packs, water baths, food fads

and massage. Chiefly, however, he advanced his and their con¬

valescence with the medicine of laughter and companionship.

Others came to Juhu too — unasked — and Gandhi appealed to

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them through the press to come, if they must, between 4 and 5 in

the evening for prayers on the sands. But ‘seeing me 5 , he explained,

‘is not likely to be of benefit to you. It is an indication of your

love for me, but it is an exaggerated indication’. It would be much

better to spend the money and time on spinning. If they gave him

peace he could husband his ‘very small . . . capital of energy’ and

resume the active editorship of Young India , his ‘viewspaper’, and

Navajivan , which he did on April 3rd, 1924.

To Juhu, too, came G. R. Das and Motilal Nehru for discussions

on the ugly situation that had arisen during the twenty-two

months Gandhi spent in prison.

First, Hindu-Moslem friendship, the firm rock on which Gandhi

hoped to build a united, free India, had been all but submerged

in an angry tide of hostility between the two communities. The

Khilafat movement was dead, killed not by Britain, but by Kemal

Pasha (Ataturk), the master of Moslem Turkey. Wiser than most

of his Indian co-religionists, Kemal had created a secular republic,

Latinized the cursive Arabic script, proscribed the fez and other

Oriental head-dress and, having deposed the Caliph, allowed him

to flee to the island of Malta in a British man-of-war in November

1922. A weak heir clung to the illusion of the Caliph’s religious

primacy, but in March 1924 he too became a refugee.

Left without a cause, the Khilafat movement disintegrated.

Therewith, large-scale Hindu-Moslem political collaboration

came to an end.

Second, the non-co-operation movement was dead. ‘Scores of

lawyers have resumed practice,’ Gandhi said, summarizing what

he was told at Juhu and what he learned first-hand. ‘Some even

regret having given it up . . . Hundreds of boys and girls who

gave up government schools and colleges have repented of their

action and returned to them.’ Moreover, Motilal Nehru, C. R.

Das and their many adherents favoured a return to the municipal,

provincial and national legislative councils. This, they main¬

tained, would enable them to participate in elections, keep in

touch with the people, air grievances in the deliberative assem¬

blies and obstruct the British government. Indeed, in some cases

the Government might lack a majority in the councils and be

forced to rule by administrative fiat, thus unmasking the sham

of dyarchy and showing the British nation that their imperialist

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leaders were not ready to share power with Indians. This demon¬

stration might induce England to alter the system in India.

To carry out their programme, Das and the elder Nehru had, at

the end of 1922, launched the Swaraj (Home-Rule) Party whose

‘immediate’ aim was Dominion Status within the Empire.

Those who continued to uphold Gandhi’s non-violent non-co-

operation were called No-Changers. The two factions wanted

Swaraj but had been fighting like bitter enemies. A compromise

giving them freedom of action kept both inside the Congress.

Confronted with this picture at Juhu, Gandhi entered into the

Gandhi-Das Pact which confirmed the live-and-let-live arrange¬

ment between the Gandhians and the Swaraj party. He did not

want to split Congress.

Gandhi was still a non-co-operator, still a champion of civil

disobedience and ‘a strong disbeliever in this government’, he

declared in Young India of April 10th, 1924. He would therefore

have pressed the boycott of the courts, schools and government

jobs and titles. But the Gandhians had grown discouraged during

his absence in jail. The boycott involved tremendous personal

sacrifice which few could bear. The Swaraj party’s policy, on the

other hand, was alluring. It meant election victories, membership

in legislatures, speech-making, etc. Gandhi had no short-range

programme to match it. He accordingly withdrew from Indian

politics for several years and devoted himself to purifying India.

Swaraj depended on how good India was, not how bad the British

were. ‘My belief is that the instant India is purified India be¬

comes free and not a moment earlier,’ he wrote ‘Charlie’ Andrews.

Gandhi’s purpose, during this period of withdrawal from

politics, was to foster the brotherhood of man among Indians.

Looking around, it soon became obvious to him that ‘the only

question for immediate solution before the country is the Hindu-

Moslem question. I agree with Mr. Jinnah,’ he added, ‘that

Hindu-Moslem unity means Swaraj . . . There is no question

more important and more pressing than this’.

Great editor that he was, Gandhi dedicated the entire May 29th,

1924, issue of Young India to his 6ooo-word article on ‘Hindu-

Moslem Tension, its Causes and Cure’. After recording the Hindu

charges against Moslems (‘Mussulmans’, he called them) and the

Moslem countercharges and noting the growth of quarrels,

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disputes and riots between the communities, he expressed the

opinion that all this was ‘a reaction against the spread of non¬

violence. I feel the wave of violence coming. The Hindu-Moslem

tension is an acute phase of this tiredness’.

What would cure this loss of faith in non-violence, Gandhi

asked. Non-violence, he answered.

Gandhi’s lengthy article was advocacy rather than analysis.

He believed in the immediate possibility of Hindu-Moslem

friendship ‘because it is so natural, so necessary for both and

because I believe in human nature’. That is almost all of Gandhi

in one sentence.

‘The key to the situation lies with the Hindus,’ he wrote. The

‘two constant causes of friction’ with the Moslems were cow-

slaughter and music.

‘Though I regard cow protection as the central fact of Hinduism

[Gandhi declared], I have never been able to understand the

antipathy towards the Mussulmans on that score. We say nothing

about the slaughter [of cows] that daily takes place on behalf of

Englishmen. Our anger becomes red-hot when a Mussulman

slaughters a cow. All the riots that have taken place in the name

of the cow have been an insane waste of effort. They have not

saved a single cow, but they have on the contrary stiffened the

backs of the Mussulmans and resulted in more slaughter. I am

satisfied that during 1921 more cows were saved through the

voluntary and generous effort of the Mussulmans than through

the Hindu effort during all the previous twenty years, say. Cow

protection should commence with ourselves. In no part of the

world are cattle worse treated than in India . . . The half-starved

condition of the majority of our cattle are a disgrace to us. The

cows find their necks under the butcher’s knife because Hindus

sell them. The only effective and honourable way is to befriend

the Mussulmans and leave it to their honour to save the cow. Cow

protection societies must turn their attention to the feeding of

cattle, prevention of cruelty, preservation of the fast disappearing

pasture land, improving the breed of cattle. . . .’

Then there was the music played in Hindu religious processions

as they passed mosques at prayer time. Somehow, the processions

contrived to arrive in front of mosques just when the followers of

the Prophet were supplicating Allah. Gandhi had heard that

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Hindus sometimes did this ‘with the deliberate intention of irri?

tating Mussulmans’. This was as wrong as the Moslem resort

to violence in angry retaliation.

Gandhi’s long article ignored the social-economic reasons for

the exacerbation of intercommunity relations except in one

reference to the Moslem demand that a percentage of jobs in the

Government be reserved for them. A Moslem middle class was

beginning to emerge in India (and throughout the Arab world);

it found itself handicapped in competing with Hindus, Parsis and

Christians who had the advantages of better education and

better connections. The Moslems therefore wanted a certain

number of jobs kept for them irrespective of their qualifications.

Gandhi objected. He said,

Tor administration to be efficient it must be in the hands of the

fittest. There should certainly be no favouritism. If we want

five engineers we must not take one from each community but we

must take the fittest five even if they were all Mussulmans or all

Parsis . . . The educationally backward communities will have a

right to favoured treatment in the matter of education at the

hands of the national government. . . But those who aspire to

occupy responsible posts in the government of the country can

only do so if they pass the required test.’

This was logical, fair and sensible, but completely unsatisfactory

to the Moslems. And since the economic backwardness of India

made government employment one of the major, if not the major,

industries of the country, the reservation of official jobs for Moham¬

medans remained a sore point as long as British rule lasted.

In the seven hundred thousand villages of India, Hindus and

Moslems had always lived together in peace. The Hindu-Moslem

tension of the twentieth century was a man-made, middle-class,

urban disease. Indians are often ambitious and dynamic. A

city like Bombay throbs with vitality. The inhumanly crowded

towns, with their herring-barrel tenements and the frustration

which comes from animal-like poverty and the very limited

opportunities to earn, learn and advance, make urban Indians

easily excitable — especially in the maddening heat of the long

summer. In cities, Gandhi’s non-violence contended with nature

as well as human nature.

Gandhi, the optimistic Karma yogi, regarded difficulties as

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spurs to greater exertions of will. The editor who gave an entire

issue of his magazine to a problem was the doer who would give

his whole life to solve it. On September 18th, 1924, therefore,

Gandhi started a twenty-one-day fast for Hindu-Moslem friendship.

Gandhi had been ill for months in jail. Then came the urgent

appendicectomy. The wound suppurated and healed slowly.

Convalescence was retarded. Weeks of tense talks followed by

weeks of strenuous touring wore him out. The political situation

depressed him; years of work seemed to have been lost. At a

conference of the All-India Congress Committee in June, when he

realized how many , of his associates really did not believe in non¬

violence, he wept in public. The steady stream of reports on

Hindu-Moslem fighting and the atmosphere of bickering, hate and

gloom weighed heavily on his body and spirit. He was fifty-five.

He knew that a twenty-one-day fast might be fatal. He did not

want to die. There were too many unfinished tasks. He revelled

in life. Suicide was religiously and physically repugnant to him.

The fast was no tryst with death. It gave him no pleasure to

suffer. The fast was dictated by duty to the highest cause — the

universal brotherhood of man.

For Gandhi, an act had to be right and true. Then he never

counted the cost to himself or even to others; in this sense, he was

without mercy. Service meant sacrifice, renunciation and detach¬

ment. You detach yourself from yourself. All that remains is

duty. On September 18th, 1924, Gandhi felt it his duty to fast.

Gandhi always kept his eye on his objective and when he could

not see it he kept his eye on the spot where he thought it would

appear. He also had an eye for drama. He fasted in the home

of a Moslem, Mohamed Ali, the younger brother of Shaukat.

Mohamed Ali was a staunch Congress supporter, a champion

of Hindu-Moslem friendship. But the Moslem community was

moving away from him. Gandhi had said in his article that ‘the

key to the situation lies with the Hindus’, but with his heart,

the senior partner of his mind, he knew that Moslems were the

offenders; conditions, he said, were making the Moslem ‘a bully’.

Gandhi wished to strengthen Mohamed Ali’s hand. ‘It is our

duty’, he once wrote, ‘to strengthen by our fasting those who hold

the same ideals but are likely to weaken under pressure.’ For

twenty-one days India’s attention would be focused on the house

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where Gandhi lay fasting. Moslems would see that Mohandas

and Mohamed were brothers. Hindus, moreover, would note

that their saint had confided his life to a Moslem.

No personal benefit could come to Gandhi from the fast; on

the contrary. Nor was there any element of compulsion in it.

The Moslem in Calcutta or Agra, the Hindu in Amritsar or

Allahabad would not be compelled to change their conduct be¬

cause Gandhi was dying for Hindu-Moslem amity. They would

change, if at all, because the Mahatma’s great sacrifice established

a spiritual bond between him and them, a kind of common wave¬

length, a means of communication over which he conveyed to

them the importance, the necessity, the urgency, the sacredness

of the cause for which he was fasting. It was his way of going out

to them, of entering their hearts, of uniting himself with them.

In part, this is Eastern, Indian. The bridges of the West are

made of concrete, steel, wire, words. Eastern bridges are of spirit.

To communicate, the West moves or talks. The East sits, con¬

templates, suffers. Gandhi partook of West and East. When

Western methods failed him, he used Eastern methods.

The fast was an adventure in goodness. The stake was one man’s

life. The prize was a nation’s freedom. If Indians were united as

brothers, no outsider could long be their master. The British

official report on conditions in India in 1919 remarked, £ One

noticeable feature of the general excitement was the unpre¬

cedented fraternization between the Hindus and the Moham¬

medans.’ In 1924, Gandhi felt that the fraternization, and with it

freedom, was ebbing away. Hence the ordeal under his Moslem

brother’s roof.

‘Nothing evidently which I say or write can bring the two

communities together,’ he declared in announcing the fast. T am

therefore imposing on myself a twenty-one-day fast from today

and ending Wednesday October 6th. I reserve the liberty to

drink water with or without salt. It is both a penance and a

prayer ... I respectfully invite the heads of all communities,

including Englishmen, to meet and end this quarrel which is a

disgrace to religion and to humanity. It seems as if God has been

dethroned. Let us reinstate Him in our hearts.’

Two Moslem physicians were in constant attendance. Charles

Freer Andrews, the Christian missionary, served as nurse.

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On the second day of the fast, Gandhi wrote a page-long plea

for Young India on ‘unity in diversity 5 . ‘The need of the moment 5 ,

he stressed, ‘is not one religion but mutual respect and tolerance

of the devotees of the different religions. 5 On the sixth day with¬

out food he wrote a page article which ended, ‘To paraphrase a

Biblical verse, if it is no profanation, “Seek you first Hindu-Moslem

unity, removal of untouchability and the spinning wheel and

Khaddar [homespun] and everything will be added unto you 55 . 5

Twelve days after the fast commenced he wrote 112 words for

publication: ‘Hitherto it has been a struggle and a yearning for a

change of heart among Englishmen who compose the government

of India. That change has still to come. But the struggle must for

the moment be transferred to a change of heart among the Hindus

and the Mussulmans. Before they dare think of freedom they

must be brave enough to love one another, to tolerate one an¬

other’s religion, even prejudices and superstitions, and to trust

one another. This requires faith in oneself. And faith in oneself

is faith in God. If we have that faith we shall cease to fear one

another. 5

The twentieth day he dictated a prayer: ‘Presently from the

world of peace I shall enter the world of strife. The more I think

of it the more helpless I feel ... I know that I can do nothing.

God can do everything. O! God, make me Thy instrument and

use me as Thou wilt. Man is nothing. Napoleon planned much

and found himself a prisoner in St. Helena. The mighty Kaiser

aimed at the crown of Europe and is reduced to the status of a

private gentleman. God has so willed it. Let us contemplate

such examples and be humble. 5 The twenty days had been ‘days

of grace, privilege and peace 5 .

That evening ‘Mahatma Gandhi was wonderfully bright and

cheerful, 5 Andrews wrote. ‘Many of his most intimate friends

came to see him as he lay upon his bed on the open roof of the

house, which was flooded by the moonlight. 5 They prayed.

‘Then followed a long silence. The friends parted one by one and

he was left alone. 5

The twenty-first day: ‘Before four o’clock in the morning . . .

we were called for the morning prayers, 5 Andrews recorded.

‘There was no moon and it was very dark. A chili breeze was

blowing from the east . . . Bapu was wrapped warmly in a dark

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shawl and I asked him whether he had slept well. He replied,

“Yes, very well indeed.” It was a happiness to notice at once

that his voice was stronger than the morning before, instead of

weaker.’ After prayers, many people came for darshan, a sight

that blesses.

At about io a.m. (Andrews writes), Mahatmaji called for me

and said, ‘Can you remember the words of my favourite Christian

hymn?’

I sajd, ‘Yes, shall I sing it to you now?’

‘Not now,’ he answered, ‘but I have in mind that when I

break my fast, we might have a little ceremony expressing religious

unity. I should like the Imam Sahib to recite the opening verses

of the Koran. Then I would like you to sing the Christian hymn,

you know the one I mean, it begins, “When I survey the wondrous

Cross” and ends with the words,

Love so amazing, so divine,

Demands my soul, my life, my all.

And then last of all I should like Vinoba to recite from the

Upanishads and Balkrishna to sing the Vaishnava hymn . . .’ He

wanted all the servants present.

Now at last the midday hour had come and the fast was to be

broken.

The doctors went to Gandhi’s room; the Ali brothers, Maulana

Abu! Kalam Azad, Motilal Nehru, C. R. Das and many others

sat on the floor near the bed. Before the actual breaking of the

fast, Gandhi spoke, ‘and as he spoke his emotion was so deep that

in his bodily weakness his voice could hardly be heard except by

those who were nearest of all to him’. He asked them to lay down

their lives, if need be, for the cause of brotherhood. The Moslem

leaders renewed their pledge. Then the hymns were sung. ‘Dr.

Ansari brought forward some orange juice and Mahatma Gandhi

drank it. So the fast was broken.’

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