# CHAPTER XII

FUNDS AND JEWELS

I n the latter part of 1924, the world was subsiding into post¬

war ‘normalcy’. The Dawes Plan undertook to stabilize

German economic and political conditions. The big European

powers were granting diplomatic recognition to Soviet Russia.

Except in south China, where Chiang Kai-shek had an alliance

with Moscow, the threat of Bolshevism was on the ebb. Goolidge

and complacency presided over America. England had experi¬

enced her first Labour government. The British Empire, seriously

menaced in 1919-23 by Sinn Fein in Ireland and Near East

revolts, was becalmed in stagnant waters.

India, too, relaxed — and pursued the luxuries of division and

inaction. The passions of the post-Armistice-post-Amritsar

period were spent. Doubts and despondency had replaced faith

and fighting spirit. Perhaps Gandhi’s non-violence dampened

the ardour of belligerent nationalism. His twenty-one-day fast

had failed. It impressed many and altered the attitude of some,

but Hindu-Moslem tension continued unabated.

Gandhi did not consider this a time for a contest with Britain.

It was a time for mending home fences. His programme was:

prepare morally for future political opportunities; concretely —

Hindu-Moslem unity, the removal of untouchability and spread¬

ing the use of homespun or khadi or khaddar. In his propaganda

for homespun, Gandhi charged the British with killing India’s

village industries to help the textile mills of Lancashire. Otherwise,

his writings and speeches during 1925, 1926 and 1927 were

remarkable for an almost complete absence of denunciations of

British rule. He more often criticized Indians. ‘I am not in¬

terested’, he said, ‘in freeing India merely from the English

yoke. I am bent upon freeing India from any yoke whatsoever.’

For this reason, he could never get excited about participation in

the legislative or municipal councils: ‘Swaraj’, he affirmed, ‘will

come not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the

acquisition by all of a capacity to resist authority when it is

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abused.’ A few hundred Indians were elected to councils, and a

few thousand Indians, mostly townspeople, enjoyed the franchise

to elect them. In such circumstances, Indians might become

tyrants unless the masses were taught to discard docility.

The intellectuals remained unconvinced. ‘Though they like

me personally’, he wrote, they ‘have a horror of my views and

methods.’ He was not complaining; ‘I have simply stated the

fact with the object of showing my limitations.’

Educated Indians, he stated, were splitting into parties. ‘I

confess my inability to bring these parties together’, he wrote on

September 2nd, 1926. ‘Their method is not my method. I am

trying to work from the bottom upward,’ and he warned them

that if they did not support his khadi policy ‘educated India will

cut itself off from the only visible and tangible tie that binds them

to the masses’.

Gandhi put his trust neither in the once-hallowed tradition of

Congress petitions and ‘prayers’ to British officialdom nor in the

current Swaraj party’s desire to become parliamentarians and

officials. Bu having failed to carry the conviction home, ‘I must

no longer stand in the way of the Congress being developed and

guided by educated Indians rather than by one like myself who

had thrown in his lot entirely with the masses and who has

fundamental differences with the mind of educated India as a

body.’

An American clergyman once asked Gandhi what caused him

most concern. ‘The hardness of heart of the educated,’ Gandhi

replied.

He still wished to influence the intellectuals, he confessed, ‘but

not by leading the Congress; on the contrary, by working my way

to their hearts, silently so far as possible, even as I did between

1915 and 1919’. He regretted having been dragged into the

political leadership of Congress; he was retiring from it.

Loud protests rent the Indian air when he first announced his

intention of doing so after coming out of jail in 1924. ‘I do not

like, I have never liked,’ he said in reply, ‘this reliance on me for

everything. It is the very worst way of managing national

affairs. The Congress must not become, as it has threatened to

become, one man’s show, no matter how good or great that one

man be. I often think that it would have been better for the

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country and for me if I had served the full term of my imprison¬

ment.’

Nevertheless, he was persuaded to take the presidency of

Congress for 1925; his friends argued that his aloofness would

split Congress between those who followed his constructive

programme and the Swaraj party which advocated political

work in the councils. He exacted a price: the wearing of khadi as

a strict condition of membership in the Congress party; where

possible, Congress members should spin each day.

Someone said his retirement from politics would cost him his

moral authority. ‘Moral authority’, was the unequivocal retort,

‘is never retained by an attempt to hold on to it. It comes without

seeking and is retained without effort.’

In truth, his moral authority was increasing irrespective of

anything he did or did not do. It was fed by the Indian soil and

Indian mentality. Throughout 1925 he travelled, continuously,

across the 1500-mile width and the 1900-mile length of India,

visiting most provinces and many native states. He no longer

lived nor travelled like a poor man, he wailed; his co-workers

made him travel in a second-class compartment instead of third

where forty or fifty perspiring people sat squeezed together in an

unpartitioned space. He acquiesced because in third class he

could not write his articles, or rest, or take an occasional nap.

Wherever he went, he was besieged by hordes. ‘They will not

leave me alone even when I am taking my bath,’ he wrote. At

night, his feet and shins were covered with scratches from people

who had bowed low and touched him; his feet had to be rubbed

with vaseline. His deification had commenced. In one place he

was told that a whole tribe, the Gonds, were worshipping him.

‘I have expressed my horror and strongest disapproval of this

type of idolatry more than once,’ he wrote. ‘I claim to be a mere

mortal, heir to all the weaknesses that human flesh betrays. It

would be infinitely better that the Gonds should be taught to

understand the meaning of my simple message than that they

should indulge in a meaningless deification of me which can do

no good either to them or to me and can only intensify the

superstitious nature of such simple people as the Gonds.’

Even mere veneration seemed superfluous to him. ‘I am no

Mahatma,’ he cried out. ‘My Mahatmaship is worthless,’ he wrote.

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But the Mahatma was powerless; he had to be a Mahatma.

Many regarded him as a reincarnation of God, like Buddha, like

Krishna; God descended temporarily to earth. From the moun¬

tains, from the plains, from far-off villages, people came to have a

glimpse of him, to be sanctified if the eye or, much better, the

hand, touched him. Audiences were so large that he would

address them standing in front of them, then go to the right side,

the rear and the left side, always hoping that they would remain

seated on the ground and not stampede towards him. Many times

he was in danger of being crushed to death.

At Dacca, in Bengal, a man of seventy was brought before

Gandhi. He was wearing Gandhi’s photograph around his neck

and weeping profusely. As he approached the Mahatma, he fell

on his face and thanked Gandhi for having cured him of chronic

paralysis. ‘When all other remedies failed,’ the poor man said,

‘I took to uttering Gandhiji’s name and one day I found myself

entirely cured.’

‘It is not I but God who made you whole,’ Gandhi rebuked

him. ‘Will you not oblige me by taking that photograph off

your neck?’

Intellectuals too were not immune. One day, Gandhi’s train

stopped with a jerk; somebody had pulled the emergency cord. It

developed that a lawyer had fallen out of the train, head first.

When picked up he was unhurt. He ascribed it to being the

Mahatma’s fellow traveller. ‘Then you shouldn’t have fallen out

at all,’ Gandhi laughed. But wit was lost on the devout.

Women, even Hindu women, sometimes sat on their haunches

behind a screen when they listened to Gandhi at meetings. Just

as Moslems, Christians and even untouchables have borrowed the

institution of caste from Hindus, so Hindus have in places suc¬

cumbed to Islam’s purdah or segregation of women. But when a

woman came to Gandhi with her face hidden, he said, ‘No purdah

before your brother,’ and she immediately dropped her veil.

Gandhi was an incurable and irresistible fund raiser. He found

special relish in stripping women of their jewellery.

‘The army of my sweethearts is daily increasing,’ fie exclaimed

during a tour. ‘The latest recruit is Ranibala of Burdwan, a

darling perhaps ten years old. I dare not ask her age. I was

playing with her as usual and casting furtive glances at her six

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heavy gold bangles. I gently explained to her that they were too

heavy a burden for her delicate little wrists and down went her

hand on the bangles. 9

Ranibala’s grandfather encouraged her to give Gandhi the

bangles.

‘I must confess I was embarrassed, 5 Gandhi recalled as he told

the story. ‘I was merely joking as I always do when I see little

girls and jokingly create in them a distaste for much ornamenta¬

tion and a desire to part with their jewellery for the sake of the

poor. I tried to return the bangles. 9

But her grandfather said her mother would consider it an ill

omen to take them back. Gandhi agreed to keep them on one

condition: she was not to ask for new ones.

That day he addressed a ladies 9 meeting in the same town. He

told them about Ranibala. T got quite a dozen bangles and two

or three pairs of earrings, all unasked. Needless to say, they will

be used for khaddar. . . .

T notify all the young girls and their parents and grandparents, 9

Gandhi announced gayly, ‘that I am open to have as many

sweethearts as would come to me on Ranibala’s terms. They will

be handsomer for the thought that they gave their prized orna¬

ments to be used for the service of the poor. Let the little girls of

India treasure the proverb, “Handsome is as handsome does. 99 9

Still touring, he came to Bihar. At Kharagdeha, reached by a

branch railway and then a twenty-six-mile journey by car, the

programme began with a ladies’ meeting. ‘Hitherto, 9 Gandhi

reported, ‘I have restrained myself from criticizing the heavily

ornamental decoration of some of my fair audiences, oppressive

though it has appeared to me. But the bangled arms from wrist

practically to elbow, the huge thick nose-rings with about a three-

inch diameter which could with difficulty be suspended from two

holes, proved beyond endurance, and I gently remarked that this

heavy ornamentation added nothing to the beauty of the person,

caused much discomfort, must often lead to disease and was, I

could plainly see, a repository of dirt. 9

Gandhi feared he might have offended the ladies. But when he

had finished speaking they crowded around him and brought him

money, and many handed him their ornaments. He hoped Indian

women would dispense with ‘these articles of personal furniture 9 ,

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Wearing his homespun loincloth, a radiant smile and, usually\*

sandals (sometimes he went barefoot), he would stride with long,

easy steps to the speaker’s platform and make his appeal. While

the train waited during his meeting at a whistle stop in Bihar,

Gandhi made a one-minute speech: ‘I have come here to do

business,’ he said artlessly, ‘to collect money for the spinning

wheel and khadi and to sell khadi. Who knows, this may be my

last visit to Bihar. Let me do as much business as I can.’ With

that, he moved among the listeners asking for ‘ringing testimony’

of their devotion to homespun. The people rang the tin bowl with

their copper and nickel mites; 526 rupees were collected. (The

rupee was one shilling and fourpence.) Then he took an armful

of homespun cotton cloth, or loincloths, or women’s saris and sold

them for as much as he could get. Mahadev Desai, his first

secretary, Devadas, his youngest son and other members of his

group did likewise.

It was the custom to present him with a purse collected before

his arrival in larger towns. A purse might contain several hundred

or even several thousand rupees. At the same time, ceremonial

addresses of devotion were given to him. Many of these exquisitely

executed documents were enclosed in silver caskets. ‘Expensive

caskets are not required,’ he admonished one committee, ‘for I

have no use for them, nor. have I any room to keep them in.’ He

tried selling a casket to the people who gave it to him and not

only did they not mind, they paid lavishly for it. So he made a

habit of personally auctioning off such caskets; one brought

1001 rupees. He did the same with floral garlands thrown around

his neck. Why kill flowers unnecessarily, he argued, when they

could ‘garland 5 him with a ring of yarn. Yam garlands became

an Indian custom.

‘Bania’, Gandhi’s friends called him with amazement. He was

the shrewd, successful businessman, but his income and profits

were never for himself

An American friend asked me to get him the Mahatma’s

photograph with a personal inscription. I found a photograph

in the ashram, explained the request and asked him to sign.

‘If you give me twenty rupees for the Harijan Fund,’ Gandhi

said with a smile.

‘I’ll give you ten.’ He autographed it.

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When I told Devadas, he said, ‘Bapu would have done it for

five.’

In 1924, 1925, 1926 and 1927, the popularizing of khadi

possessed Gandhi’s mind. Each issue of the weekly Young India

devoted several pages to lists of persons and the exact number of

yards of yarn they had spun. Some spinners gave the yarn to the

fund which gave it to villagers, others wove their own. Gandhi’s

Sabarmati Ashram was manufacturing simple spinning wheels,

but in 1926 the manager announced that they had more orders

than they could fill. Schools were giving courses in spinning. At

Congress meetings, members would open a small box like a violin

case, take out a collapsible spinning wheel and spin noiselessly

throughout the proceedings. Gandhi had set the fashion.

Some of Gandhi’s closest friends accused him of khadi extrem¬

ism; he exaggerated the possibility of restoring India’s village

industries and overestimated the benefits that might accrue even

if he were successful; this was the machine age; all his energy,

wisdom and holiness would not avail to turn back the clock.

C A hundred and fifty years ago,’ Gandhi replied, ‘we manu¬

factured all our cloth. Our women spun fine yarns in their own

cottages and supplemented the earnings of their husbands . . .

India requires nearly thirteen yards of cloth per head per year.

She produces, I believe, less than half the amount. India grows

all the cotton she needs. She exports several million bales of

cotton to Japan and Lancashire and receives much of it back in

manufactured calico, although she is capable of producing all the

cloth and all the yarn necessary for supplying her wants by hand¬

weaving and hand-spinning . . . The spinning wheel was pre¬

sented to the nation for giving occupation to the millions who had,

at least for four months of the year, nothing to do . . . We send out

of India sixty crores [six hundred million] (more or less) of rupees

for cloth. . . .’

Many intellectuals sneered at khadi. The stuff was coarse, they

said. ‘Monotonous white shrouds,’ some mocked. ‘The livery of

our freedom,’ Jawaharlal Nehru replied. ‘I regard the spinning

wheel as a gateway to my spiritual salvation,’ Gandhi said.

Gandhi was trying to bridge brain and brawn, to unite city and

town, to link rich and poor. What greater service could he per¬

form for a divided country and an atomized civilization? To help

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the underdog, Gandhi taught, you must understand him and to

understand him you must at least sometimes work as he does.

Spinning was an act of love, another channel of communication.

It was also a method of organization. ‘Any single district that

can be fully organized for khaddar is, if it is also trained for

suffering, ready for civil disobedience. 5 Thus, khadi would lead

to home-rule.

Gandhi asked townspeople and villagers to spend an hour a

day at the wheel. ‘It affords a pleasant variety and recreation

after hard toil. 5 Spinning does not replace other reforms; it is in

addition to them. But he stressed them less than spinning.

‘For me, 5 Gandhi reiterated, ‘nothing in the political world is

more important than the spinning wheel. 5 One of India’s greatest

intellectuals, with a brain as keen as Gandhi’s and as habitually

sceptical as Gandhi was normally naive, enthusiastically sup¬

ported the Mahatma’s khadi contentions. Chakravarty Rajago-

palachari, the famous Madras lawyer, was second only to Gandhi

in his sanguine expectations from the nationwide use of home-

spun. ‘Khadi work is the only true political programme before

the country, 5 he declared on April 6th, 1926, in the textile-mill

city of Ahmedabad. ‘You are living in a great city. You do not

really know the amount of poverty that has overtaken the country

called India. As a matter of fact, in India there are thousands and

tens of thousands of villages where men do not get more than

2 \ rupees a month. There is no use shedding tears for them if we

won’t wear a few yards of khadi which they have manufactured

and want us to buy so that they may find a meal. If our hearts

were not made of stone we would all be wearing khadi. Khadi

means employment for the poor and freedom for India. Britain

holds India because it is a fine market for Lancashire. . . .’

Motilal Nehru also took to wearing khadi; he peddled it in the

streets as Gandhi did. Intellectuals might scoff, but khadi began

to have a fascination for them and from the mid-1920s, home-

spun became the badge of the Indian nationalist. A propagandist

for independence would no more dream of going into a village in

foreign clothes or foreign cloth or even in Indian mill cloth than

he would think of speaking English at a peasant meeting. Apart

from its economic value, which has not proved decisive, homespun

was Gandhi’s peculiar contribution to the education of political

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India: he made it physically conscious of poor, uneducated, non¬

political India. Khadi was an adventure in identification between

leadership and nation. Gandhi was prescribing for a disease which

plagued independent India and most independent countries.

He knew that the tragedy of India’s history was the canyon be¬

tween the gold-silver-silk-brocade-jewel-elephant splendour of

her palaces and the animal poverty of her hovels; at the bottom of

the canyon lay the debris of empires and the bones of millions of

their victims.

The work exhausted Gandhi. Three or four stops a day for

meetings, a different place to stop every night, heavy correspond¬

ence which he never neglected, and unnumbered personal inter¬

views with men and women who sought his word on the biggest

political problems and their smallest personal difficulties — all in

the great heat and humidity — wore him down. In November

1925, therefore, he undertook a seven-day fast.

India worried about him and protested. Why a fast? ‘The

public will have to neglect my fasts and cease to worry about

them,’ Gandhi stated. ‘They are part of my being. I can as well

do without my eyes, for instance, as I can without fasts. What the

eyes are for the outer world, fasts are for the inner.’ He would

fast whenever the spirit moved him. The result, to be sure, might

be disastrous. ‘I may be wholly wrong,’ he admitted. ‘Then the

world will be able to write an epitaph over my ashes: “Well

deserved, thou fool.” But for the time being, my error, if it be

one, must sustain me.’ This was a personal fast; ‘this fast has

nothing to do with the public’. It is said ‘I am public property

. . . So be it. But I must be taken with all my faults. I am a

searcher after truth. My experiments I hold to be infinitely more

important than the best-equipped Himalayan expeditions.’ He

was trying to scale the spiritual heights; he thought fasts conduced

to mental ascendancy over the body.

Gandhi’s fast brought him a tide of requests for his views on

fasting; even in India his frequent abstentions from food were

unusual. He gave his response in a Young India article. ‘With

apologies to my medical friends’, it read, ‘but out of the fullness

of my own experience and that of fellow-cranks, I say without

hesitation, Fast (1) if you are constipated, (2) if you are anaemic,

(3) if you are feverish, (4) if you have indigestion, (5) if you have

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a headache, (6) if you are rheumatic, (7) if you are gouty, (8) if

you are fretting and foaming, (9) if you are depressed, (10) if

you are overjoyed, and you will avoid medical prescriptions and

patent medicines. 5 His patent medical prescription for every¬

thing was fasting. c Eat only when you are hungry , 5 he added, ‘and

when you have laboured for your food. 5

His highest weight after being discharged from prison in

February 1924, he wrote in the same article, was 112 pounds.

He was down to 103 pounds when he started the fast. In the

seven days he lost nine pounds but regained it quickly. Physically,

he said, he lost nothing either from this fast or from the twenty-

one-day fast in 1924.

Water during fasts nauseated him without a pinch of salt or

bicarbonate of soda or a few drops of citrus juice. He never

suffered any pangs of hunger during the fast; in fact, ‘I broke it

half an hour later than I need have. 5 He spun every day and

attended the daily prayer meetings. The first three days of the

fast, he wrote, ‘I worked practically from four in the morning

till eight in the evening, 5 doing articles, answering letters, giving

interviews. On the fourth day, his head ached. He accordingly

abandoned work for a day; on the seventh day ‘I was able to

write with a steady hand my article on the fast. 5

The article furnished nine rules for fasting; he himself broke the

first which was ‘Conserve your energy both physical and mental

from the very beginning, (2) You must cease to think of food while

you are fasting, (3) Drink as much cold water as you can . . .

(4) Have a warm sponge daily, (5) Take an enema regularly dur¬

ing fast. You will be surprised at the impurities you will expel

daily, (6) Sleep as much as possible in the open air, (7) Bathe in

the morning air. A sun and air bath is at least as great a purifier

as a water bath, (8) Think of anything else but your fast, (9) No

matter from what motive you are fasting, during this precious

time think of your Maker and of your relation to Him and His

other creations and you will make discoveries you may not have

dreamed of. 5

It was for these discoveries that he fasted.

Gandhi’s year as president of Congress was now ended and at

Cawnpore, in December 1925, he relinquished the gavel to Mrs.

Sarojini Naidu, mistress of lyric words. Gandhi then took a vow

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of a year’s ‘political silence’. ‘At least up to twentieth December

next,’ he announced in Young India of January 7th, 1926, ‘I am

not to stir out of the ashram, certainly not out of Ahmedahad’

across the river. Body and soul needed rest.

The Swaraj party, which had sent its people into the legislative

councils to obstruct the British government, veered slowly towards

a measure of co-operation. A dissident group, headed by M. R.

Jayakar and N. G. Kelkar, who believed in still more co-operation

with the British, but less with the Moslems, split off from the

Swarajists and formed the Responsivist party. It leaned towards

the Hindu Mahasabha, a religious political party. In December

1925, the Moslem League session at Aligarh, attended by Jinnah,

Mohamed Ali and Sir Ali Imam, moved in the direction of

religious politics. Gandhi had hoped to unite India for nationalist

liberation. But she was splitting at her religious seam. Political

India, Gandhi found, was ‘disrupted and demoralized’. It seemed

a good time for silence. ‘Silence’, he quoted, ‘is the true language

of cosmic adoration.’

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