# CHAPTER XVI

DRAMA AT THE SEASHORE

G andhi was a reformer of individuals. Hence his concern for

the means whereby India’s liberation might be achieved.

If the means corrupted the individual the loss would be

greater than the gain.

Gandhi knew that the re-education of a nation was a slow pro¬

cess and he was not usually in a hurry unless prodded by events

or by men reacting to those events. Left to himself, he would not

have forced the issue of independence in 1930. But now the die

was cast; Congress had decreed a campaign for independence.

The leader therefore became an obedient soldier.

During the weeks after the stirring New Year’s Eve indepen¬

dence ceremony, Gandhi searched for a form of civil disobedience

that left no opening for violence.

Gandhi’s monumental abhorrence of violence stemmed from

the Jainist and Buddhist infusions into his Hinduism but, particu¬

larly, from his love of human beings. Every reformer, crusader

and dictator avows his undying devotion to the anonymous mass;

Gandhi had an apparently endless capacity to love the individual

men, women and children who crowded his life. He gave them

tenderness and affection; he remembered their personal needs and

he enjoyed catering for their wants at the unnoticed expense of his

limited time and energy. H. N. Brailsford, the humane British

Socialist, explains this by ‘the fact that female tendencies were

at least as strong in his mental make-up as male. They were

evident, for example, in his love of children, in the pleasure he

took in playing with them, and in the devotion he showed as a

sick-nurse. His beloved spinning wheel has always been a woman’s

tool. And is not Satyagraha, the method of conquering by self¬

suffering, a woman’s tactic?’ Perhaps. But maybe Brailsford is

being unfair to men and too fair to the fair. Like Brailsford,

everyone will interpret Gandhi’s loving kindness according to his

own experience. It wrapped the Mahatma’s iron will and austerity

in a downy softness; one touch of it and most Indians forgave his

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blunders, quirks and fads. It ruled out anything that could lead

to violence. In the successful Rardoli Satyagraha in 1928, for

instance, there was no violence, but there might have been. The

peasants might have allowed themselves to be goaded into the

use of force. The civil disobedience campaign of 1930, Gandhi

felt, had to preclude such potentials, for if it got out of hand no

one, not even he, could control it.

Rabindranath Tagore, for whom Gandhi had the deepest

veneration, was in the neighbourhood of Sabarmati Ashram and

came for a visit on January 18th. He inquired what Gandhi had

in store for the country in 1930. T am furiously thinking night

and day, 5 Gandhi replied, ‘and I do not see any light coming out

of the surrounding darkness.’

The situation made Gandhi apprehensive. ‘There is a lot of

violence in the air,’ he said. The British government had altered

the exchange rate of the rupee so that India might import more

from Lancashire; the Indian middle class suffered. The Wall

Street crash of October 1929, and the spreading world economic

depression hit the Indian peasant. Working-class unrest was

mounting for all these reasons, and because of the Government’s

persecution of labour organizers. Again, as in 1919 to 1921, a

number of young Indians saw an opportunity of striking a bloody

blow for freedom.

Civil disobedience in these circumstances involved ‘undoubted

risks’, but the only alternative was ‘armed rebellion’. Gandhi’s

confidence remained unshaken.

For six weeks, Gandhi had been waiting to hear the ‘Inner

Voice’. This, as he interpreted it, had no Jo an-of-Arc connota¬

tions. ‘The “Inner Voice” ’, he wrote, ‘may mean a message from

God or from the Devil, for both are wrestling in the human breast.

Acts determine the nature of the voice.’

Presently, Gandhi seemed to have heard the Voice, which

could only mean that he had come to a decision, for the February

27th issue of Young India opened with an editorial by Gandhi

entitled ‘When I am Arrested’, and then devoted considerable

space to the iniquities of the salt tax. The next number of the

magazine quoted the penal sections of the Salt Act. And on

March 2nd, 1930, Gandhi sent a long letter to the Viceroy serving

notice that civil disobedience would begin in nine days.

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It was the strangest communication the head of a government

ever received.

Dear Friend, Before embarking on Civil Disobedience and

taking the risk I have dreaded to take all these years, I would

fain approach you and find a way out.

My personal faith is absolutely clear. I cannot intentionally

hurt anything that lives, much less human beings, even though

they may do the greatest wrong to me and mine. Whilst, therefore,

I hold the British rule to be a curse, I do not intend harm to a single

Englishman or to any legitimate interest he may have in India, . . .

And why do I regard the British rule as a curse?

It has impoverished the dumb millions by a system of pro¬

gressive exploitation and by a ruinous expensive military and

civil administration which the country can never afford.

It has reduced us politically to serfdom. It has sapped the

foundations of our culture. And by the policy of cruel disarma¬

ment, it has degraded us spiritually. . . .

I fear . . . there never has been any intention of granting . . .

Dominion Status to India in the immediate future. . . .

It seems as clear as daylight that responsible British statesmen

do not contemplate any alteration in British policy that might

adversely affect Britain’s commerce with India ... If nothing is

done to end the process of exploitation India must be bled with

an ever increasing speed. . . .

Let me put before you some of the salient points.

The terrific pressure of land revenue, which furnishes a large

part of the total, must undergo considerable modification in an

Independent India . . . the whole revenue system has to be so

revised as to make the peasant’s good its primary concern. But

the British system seems to be designed to crush the very life out

of him. Even the salt he must use to live is so taxed as to make

the burden fall heaviest on him, if only because of the heartless

impartiality of its incidence. The tax shows itself still more

burdensome on the poor man when it is remembered that salt

is the one thing he must eat more than the rich man . . . The drink

and drug revenue, too, is derived from the poor. It saps the

foundations both of their health and morals.

The iniquities sampled above are maintained in order to carry

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on a foreign administration, demonstrably the most expensive in

the world. Take your own salary. It is over 21,000 rupees [about

£1750] P er month, besides many other indirect additions . . . You

are getting over 700 rupees a day against India’s average income

of less than two annas [twopence] per day. Thus you are getting

much over five thousand times India’s average income. The

British Prime Minister is getting only ninety times Britain’s

average income. On bended knee, I ask you to ponder over this

phenomenon. I have taken a personal illustration to drive home

a painful truth. I have too great a regard for you as a man to

wish to hurt your feelings. I know that you do not need the

salary you get. Probably the whole of your salary goes for charity.

But a system that provides for such an arrangement deserves to

be summarily scrapped. What is true of the Viceregal salary is

true generally of the whole administration . . . Nothing but

organized non-violence can check the organized violence of the

British government. . . .

This non-violence will be expressed through civil disobedience,

for the moment confined to the inmates of the Satyagraha

[Sabarmati] Ashram, but ultimately designed to cover all those

who choose to join the movement. . . .

My ambition is no less than to convert the British people

through non-violence, and thus make them see the wrong they

have done to India. I do not seek to harm your people. I want

to serve them even as I want to serve my own. . . .

If the [Indian] people join me as I expect they will, the suffer¬

ings they will undergo, unless the British nation sooner retraces

its steps, will be enough to melt the stoniest hearts.

The plan through Civil Disobedience will be to combat such

evils as I have sampled out ... I respectfully invite you to pave

the way for the immediate removal of those evils, and thus open a

way for a real conference between equals . . . But if you cannot see

your way to deal with these evils and if my letter makes no appeal

to your heart, on the eleventh day of this month I shall proceed

with such co-workers of the Ashram as I can take, to disregard

the provisions of the Salt Laws ... It is, I know, open to you to

frustrate my design by arresting me. I hope that there will be

tens of thousands ready, in a disciplined manner, to take up the

work after me. ...

T M.G.

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If you care to discuss matters with me, and if to that end you

would like me to postpone publication of this letter, I shall gladly

refrain on receipt of a telegram. . . .

This letter is not in any way intended as a threat but is a simple

and sacred duty peremptory on a civil resister. Therefore I am

having it specially delivered by a young English friend who believes

in the Indian cause. . . .

I remain,

Your sincere friend,

M. K. Gandhi.

The messenger was Reginald Reynolds, a British Quaker who

later wrote a book on beards. Clad in khadi and a sun helmet,

he entered the Viceroy’s house and delivered the letter to Irwin

who had flown back from the polo matches at Meerut to receive it.

Irwin chose not to reply. His secretary sent a four-line acknow¬

ledgment saying, ‘His Excellency . . . regrets to learn that you

contemplate a course of action which is clearly bound to involve

violation of the law and danger to the public peace.’

This law-and-order note, which disdained to deal with matters

of justice and policy, caused Gandhi to say, ‘On bended knee I

asked for bread and I received stone instead.’ Irwin refused to

see Gandhi. Nor did he have him arrested. ‘The government,’

Gandhi declared, ‘is puzzled and perplexed.’ It was dangerous

not to arrest the rebel, and dangerous to arrest him.

As March nth neared, India bubbled with excitement and

curiosity. Scores of foreign and domestic correspondents dogged

Gandhi’s footsteps in the ashram; what exactly would he do?

Thousands surrounded the village and waited. The excitement

spread abroad. Cables kept the Ahmedabad post office humming.

‘God guard you,’ the Reverend Dr. John Haynes Holmes wired

from New York.

Gandhi felt it was the ‘opportunity of a lifetime’.

On March 12th, prayers having been sung, Gandhi and seventy-

eight male and female members of the ashram, whose identities

were published in Young India for the benefit of the police, left

Sabarmati for Dandi, due south of Ahmedabad. Gandhi leaned

on a lacquered bamboo staff one inch thick and fifty-four inches

long with an iron tip. Following winding dirt roads from village

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to village, he and his seventy-eight disciples walked two hundred

miles in twenty-four days. ‘We are marching in the name of God,’

Gandhi said.

Peasants sprinkled the roads and strewed leaves on them. Every

settlement in the line of march was festooned and decorated with

India’s national colours. From miles around, peasants gathered

to kneel by the roadside as the pilgrims passed. Several times a

day the marchers halted for a meeting where the Mahatma and

others exhorted the people to wear khadi, abjure alcohol and

drugs, abandon child marriage, keep clean, live purely and —

when the signal came — break the Salt Laws.

He had no trouble in walking. ‘Less than twelve miles a day in

two stages with not much luggage,’ he said. ‘Child’s play!’

Several became fatigued and footsore, and had to ride in a bullock

cart. A horse was available for Gandhi throughout the march but

he never used it. ‘The modern generation is delicate, weak, and

much pampered,’ Gandhi commented. He was sixty-one. He

spun every day for an hour and kept a diary and required each

ashramite to do likewise.

In the area traversed, over three hundred village headmen gave

up their government posts. The inhabitants of a village would

accompany Gandhi to the next village. Young men and women

attached themselves to the marching column; when Gandhi

reached the sea at Dandi on April 5th, his small ashram band had

grown into a non-violent army several thousand strong.

The entire night of April 5th, the ashramites prayed, and early

in the morning they accompanied Gandhi to the sea. He dipped

into the water, returned to the beach, and there picked up some

salt left by the waves. Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, standing by his side,

cried, ‘Hail, Deliverer’. Gandhi had broken the British law which

made it a punishable crime to possess salt not obtained from the

British government salt monopoly. Gandhi, who had not used

salt for six years, called it a ‘nefarious monopoly’. Salt, he said,

is as essential as air and water, and in India all the more essential

to the hard-working, perspiring poor man and his beasts because

of the tropical heat.

Had Gandhi gone by train or motor-car to make salt, the

effect would have been considerable. But to walk for twenty-four

days and rivet the attention of all India, to trek across a country-

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side saying, ‘Watch, I am about to give a signal to the nation,’

and then to pick up a pinch of salt in publicized defiance of the

mighty Government and thus become a criminal, that required

imagination, dignity and the sense of showmanship of a great

artist. It appealed to the illiterate peasant and it appealed to a

sophisticated critic and sometime fierce opponent of Gandhi’s like

Subhas Chandra Bose who compared the Salt March to ‘Napo¬

leon’s march to Paris on his return from Elba’.

The act performed, Gandhi withdrew from the scene. India

had its cue. Gandhi had communicated with it by lifting up some

grains of salt.

The next act was an insurrection without arms. Every villager

on India’s long sea coast went to the beach or waded into the sea

with a pan to make salt. The police began mass arrests. Ramdas,

third son of Gandhi, with a large group of ashramites, was arrested.

Pandit Malaviya and other moderate co-operators resigned from

the Legislative Assembly. The police began to use violence. Civil

resisters never resisted arrest; but they resisted the confiscation of

the salt they had made, and Mahadev Desai reported cases where

such Indians were beaten and bitten in the fingers by constables.

Congress Volunteers openly sold contraband salt in cities. Many

were arrested and sentenced to short prison terms. In Delhi, a

meeting of fifteen thousand persons heard Pandit Malaviya appeal

to the audience to boycott foreign cloth; he himself bought some

illegal salt after his speech. The police raided the Congress party

headquarters in Bombay where salt was being made in pans on

the roof. A crowd of sixty thousand assembled. Hundreds were

handcuffed or their arms fastened with ropes and led off to jail.

In Ahmedabad, ten thousand people obtained illegal salt from

Congress in the first week after the act at Dandi. They paid what

they could; if they had no money they got it free. The salt lifted

by Gandhi from the beach was sold to a Dr. Kanuga, the highest

bidder, for 1600 rupees. Jawaharlal Nehru, the president of

Congress, was arrested in Allahabad under the Salt Acts and

sentenced to six months’ imprisonment. The agitation and dis¬

obedience spread to the turbulent regions of the Maharashtra and

Bengal. In Calcutta, the Mayor, J. M. Sengupta, read seditious

literature aloud at a public meeting and urged non-wearing of

foreign textiles. He was put in prison for six months. Picketing of

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liquor shops and foreign cloth shops commenced throughout India.

Girls and ladies from aristocratic families and from families where

purdah had been observed came out into the streets to demon¬

strate. Police became vindictive and kicked resisters in sensitive

parts. Civil resistance began in the province of Bihar. Seventeen

Bihar Satyagrahis, including resigned members of Legislative

Councils, were sentenced to periods of from six months to two

years in prison. A Swami who had lived in South Africa received

two and a half years. Teachers, professors and students made salt

at the sea and inland, and were marched to jails in batches.

Kishorlal Mashruwala, a faithful disciple of Gandhi, and Jamnalal

Bajaj, a rich friend of Gandhi’s, were sentenced to two years’

imprisonment. In Karachi, the police fired on a demonstration;

two young Volunteers were killed. ‘Bihar has been denuded of

almost all its leaders,’ Mahadev Desai wrote, ‘but the result has

been the opening of many more salt centres.’ Congress distributed

literature explaining simple methods of producing salt. B. G.

Kher and K. M. Munshi, leaders of the national Congress, were

arrested in Bombay. Devadas Gandhi was sentenced to three

months’ imprisonment in Delhi. The salt movement and the

arrests and imprisonments spread to Madras, the Punjab and the

Carnatic (Karnatak). Many towns observed hartals when Con¬

gress leaders were arrested. At Patna, in Bihar, a mass of many

thousands moved out of the city to march to a spot where salt

would be made. The police blocked the highway. The crowd

stayed and slept on the road and in the fields for forty hours.

Rajendra Prasad, who was present and told the story, received

orders from the police officer to disperse the crowd. He refused.

The officer announced that he would charge with cavalry. The

crowd did not move. As the horses galloped forward, the men

and women threw themselves flat on the ground. The horses

stopped and did not trample them. Constables then proceeded

to lift the demonstrators and place them in trucks for transporta¬

tion to prison. Other demonstrators replaced them. Mahadev

Desai was arrested for bringing in a load of salt. In villages,

millions of peasants were preparing their own salt. The British

pressed local officials to cope with the problem. The officials

resigned. Vithalbhai Patel, the speaker of the Legislative Assem¬

bly, resigned. A large group of prominent women appealed to

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Lord Irwin to prohibit the sale of intoxicating beverages. At

Karachi, fifty thousand people watched as salt was made on the

seashore. The crowd was so dense the policemen were surrounded

and could make no arrests. At Peshawar, the key to the volatile

north-west Frontier Province, an armoured car, in which the

Deputy Police Commissioner was seated, first ran full-tilt into a

crowd and then machine-gunned it, killing seventy and wounding

about one hundred. In parts of Bengal, in the United Provinces

and in Gujarat, peasants refused to pay rent and the land tax.

The Government tried to place all nationalist newspapers under

censorship, whereupon most of them voluntarily suspended pub¬

lication. Congress provincial offices were sealed and their property

and office paraphernalia confiscated. Rajagopalachari was

arrested in Madras and given a nine months’ sentence. The wild

Afridi tribe, in the north-west frontier Tribal Area, attacked

British patrols. In the city of Chittagong, Bengal, a band of violent

revolutionists raided the arsenal to seize arms. Some were killed.

The Viceroy, says Irwin’s biographer, ‘had filled the jails with

no less than sixty thousand political offenders’. Estimates ran as

high as a hundred thousand. ‘A mere recital of the action

taken by him during this time’, the biography affirms, ‘belies

once for all the legend that he was a weak Viceroy. Those who

were responsible for executing his orders testify that his religious

convictions seemed to reinforce the very ruthlessness of his policy

of suppression. . . .’

A month after Gandhi touched salt at the Dandi beach, India

was seething in angry revolt. But, except at Chittagong, there was

no Indian violence, and nowhere was there any Congress violence.

Chauri Chaura in 1922 had taught India a lesson. Because they

treasured the movement Gandhi had conjured into being, and

lest he cancel it, they abstained from force.

May 4th, Gandhi’s camp was at Karadi, a village near Dandi.

He had gone to sleep on a cot under a shed beneath the branches

of an old mango tree. Several disciples slept by his side. Else¬

where in the grove, other ashramites were in deep slumber. At

12.45 a - m -) in the night of May 4th to 5th, heavy steps were heard.

Thirty Indian policemen armed with rifles, pistols and lances, two

Indian officers, and the British District Magistrate of Surat invaded

the leafy compound. A party of armed constables entered Gandhi’s

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shed and the English officer turned the flashlight on Gandhi’s face.

Gandhi awoke, looked about him, and said to the Magistrate, ‘Do

you want me?’

‘Are you Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi?’ the Magistrate

asked for the sake of form.

Gandhi admitted it.

The officer said he had come to arrest him.

‘Please give me time for my ablutions,’ Gandhi said politely.

The Magistrate agreed.

While brushing his few teeth, Gandhi said, ‘Mr. District

Magistrate, may I know under which charge I am arrested. Is

it Section 124?’

‘No, not under Section 124. I have got a written order.’

By this time, all the sleepers in the compound had crowded

around the shed. ‘Please, would you mind reading it to me?’

Gandhi asked.

The Magistrate (reading): ‘Whereas the Governor-in-Council

views with alarm the activities of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi,

he directs that the said Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi should be

placed under restraint under Regulation XXXV of 1827, and

suffer imprisonment during the pleasure of the Government, and

that he be immediately removed to the Yeravda Central Jail.’

At 1 a.m., Gandhi was still cleaning his teeth. The officer told

him to hurry. Gandhi packed some necessities and papers in a

small bag. Turning to the officer, he said, ‘Please give me a few

minutes more for prayer.’

The officer nodded in assent, and Gandhi requested Pandit

Khare to recite a famous Hindu hymn. The ashramites sang.

Gandhi lowered his head and prayed. Then he stepped to the

side of the Magistrate who led him to the waiting vehicle.

There was no trial, no sentence and no fixed term of imprison¬

ment. The arrest took place under an ordinance, passed before a

British government existed in India, which regulated the relations

between the East India Company and Indian potentates.

The prison authorities measured Gandhi and noted his height:

five feet five inches. They also made sure to have his special

identification marks in case they needed to find him again: a scar

on the right thigh, a small mole on the lower right eyelid, and a

scar about the size of a pea below the left elbow.

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Gandhi loved it in jail. ‘I have been quite happy and making

up for arrears in sleep, 5 he wrote Miss Madeleine Slade, a week

after his imprisonment. He was treated extremely well; the prison

goat was milked in his presence. On his day of silence he wrote

a letter to the little children in the ashram.

Little birds, ordinary birds cannot fly without wings. With

wings, of course, all can fly. But if you, without wings, will learn

how to fly, then all your troubles will indeed be at an end. And

I will teach you.

See, I have no wings, yet I come flying to you every day in

thought. Look, here is little Vimala, here is Hari and here is

Dharmakumar. And you can also come flying to me in thought. . . .

Tell me too who amongst you are not praying properly in

Prabhubhai’s evening prayer.

Send me a letter signed by all, and those who do not know how

to sign may make a cross.

Bapu’s blessings.

Just before his arrest, Gandhi had drafted a letter to the Viceroy

announcing his intention, ‘God willing 5 , to raid the Dharasana

Salt Works with some companions. God, apparently, was not

willing, but the companions proceeded to effect the plan. Mrs.

Sarojini Naidu, the poet, led twenty-five hundred Volunteers to

. the site one hundred and fifty miles north of Bombay and, after

morning prayers, warned them that they would be beaten ‘but 5 ,

she said, ‘you must not resist; you must not even raise a hand to

ward off a blow 5 .

Webb Miller, the well-known correspondent of the United Press

who died in England during the second World War, was on the

scene and described the proceedings. Manilal Gandhi moved

forward at the head of the marchers and approached the great

salt pans which were surrounded by ditches and barbed wire and

guarded by four hundred Surat policemen under the command of

six British officers. ‘In complete silence the Gandhi men drew up

and halted a hundred yards from the stockade. A picked column

advanced from the crowd, waded the ditches, and approached

the barbed-wire stockade. 5 The police officers ordered them to

retreat. They continued to advance. ‘Suddenly, 5 Webb Miller

reported, ‘at a word of command, scores of native policemen

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rushed upon the advancing marchers and rained blows on their

heads with their steel-shod lathis. Not one of the marchers even

raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like nine-pins.

From where I stood I heard the sickening whack of the clubs on

unprotected skulls. The waiting crowd of marchers groaned and

sucked in their breath in sympathetic pain at every blow. Those

struck down fell sprawling, unconscious or writhing with fractured

skulls or broken shoulders . . . The survivors, without breaking

ranks, silently and doggedly march on until struck down. 5 When

the first column was laid low, another advanced. ‘Although

everyone knew, 5 Webb Miller wrote, ‘that within a few minutes

he would be beaten down, perhaps killed, I could detect no signs

of wavering or fear. They marched steadily, with heads up, with¬

out the encouragement of music or cheering or any possibility that

they might escape serious injury or death. The police rushed out

and methodically and mechanically beat down the second column.

There was no fight, no struggle; the marchers simply walked

forward till struck, down.’

Another group of twenty-five advanced and sat down. ‘The

police’, Webb Miller testifies, ‘commenced savagely kicking the

seated men in the abdomen and testicles.’ Another column ad¬

vanced and sat down. Enraged, the police dragged them by their

arms and feet and threw them into the ditches. ‘One was dragged

to a ditch where I stood,’ Miller wrote, ‘the splash of his body

doused me with muddy water. Another policeman dragged a

Gandhi man to the ditch, threw him in, and belaboured him over

the head with his lathi. Hour after hour stretcher-bearers carried

back a stream of inert, bleeding bodies.’

A British officer approached Mrs. Naidu, touched her arm, and

said, ‘Sarojini Naidu, you are under arrest.’ She shook off his

hand. ‘I’ll come,’ she declared, ‘but don’t touch me.’ Manilal

was also arrested.

‘By eleven [in the morning],’ Webb Miller continued, ‘the heat

had reached 116 and the activities of the Gandhi volunteers sub¬

sided.’ He went to the temporary hospital and counted three

hundred and twenty injured, many of them still unconscious,

others in agony from the body and head blows. Two men had

died. The same scenes were repeated for several days.

India was now free. Technically, legally, nothing had changed.

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India was still a British colony. Tagore explained the difference.

‘Those who live in England, far away from the East/ he told the

Manchester Guardian of May 17th, 1930, ‘have now got to realize

that Europe has completely lost her former moral prestige in Asia.

She is no longer regarded as the champion throughout the world

of fair dealing and the exponent of high principle, but as the

upholder of Western race supremacy and the exploiter of those

outside her own borders.

‘For Europe this is, in actual fact, a great moral defeat that has

happened. Even though Asia is still physically weak and unable

to protect herself from aggression where her vital interests are

menaced, nevertheless she can now afford to look down on Europe

where before she looked up. 5 He attributed the achievement in

India to Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi did two things in 1930: he made the British people

aware that they were cruelly subjugating India, and he gave

Indians the conviction that they could, by lifting their heads and

straightening their spines, lift the yoke from their shoulders. After

that, it was inevitable that Britain should some day refuse to rule

India and that India should some day refuse to be ruled.

The British beat the Indians with batons and rifle butts. The

Indians neither cringed nor complained nor retreated. That

made England powerless and India invincible.

3°o