# CHAPTER XVII

PARLEYS WITH THE REBEL

M any British Labour ministers and their supporters were

champions of Indian independence. Prime Minister Ram¬

say MacDonald could be faced with his own unequivocal

statements in favour of India’s freedom. It was embarrassing for

Labour to keep Gandhi and tens of thousands of Indian national¬

ists in jail. To Lord Irwin, Gandhi’s imprisonment was more

than an embarrassment; it paralysed his administration. Revenues

dropped steeply. Unrest mounted. When the news of Gandhi’s

arrest reached industrial Sholapur, in the Bombay Presidency or

province, the population overpowered the police, raised the

national flag, and declared themselves independent of British

rule. In Peshawar, the police surrendered the city to the non¬

violent, religious ‘Red Shirts’, an organization led by Khan

Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the ‘Frontier Gandhi’. The army appeared

three days later and machine-gunned peaceful citizens. But a

platoon of Garhwal Rifles, famous Hindu regiment of the British

Army, mutinied, refused to fire on Moslems, and were court-

martialed and sentenced to ten to fourteen years’ hard labour.

On June 30th, Motilal Nehru was arrested. More than a hundred

thousand Indians, and almost all Congress first-, second-, third-

rank leaders were in prison.

The situation was politically intolerable for MacDonald and

Irwin. Gandhi in jail was as much a nuisance as Gandhi on the

march or at the beach or in the ashram.

Conscious of their dilemma and of the growing revolt, the

authorities permitted George Slocombe, handsome, red-bearded

correspondent of the London Labour paper, the Daily Herald, to

interview Gandhi in prison, on May 19th and 20th, only two

weeks after the Mahatma’s arrest. Gandhi gave Slocombe the

terms on which he would be ready to negotiate with the British

government. In July, with the Viceroy’s consent, Sir Tej Bahadur

Sapru and Mr. M. R. Jayakar, leaders of the moderates, went to

Gandhi’s cell for parleys. Gandhi was glad to talk to them but

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said he could not reply to overtures before he consulted the Con¬

gress Working Committee. Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru, father

and son, and Syed Mahmound, the acting secretary of Congress,

were accordingly transported in a special train, with every com¬

fort and courtesy, from their jail in the United Provinces to

Gandhi’s jail at Poona where Mrs. Naidu and Vallabhbhai Patel

were also confined. Irwin willingly brought his prisoners together,

but Working Committee members still at liberty were not allowed

to participate in these prison conversations.

After two days’ discussion (August 14th-15th), the leaders

announced publicly that ‘an unbridgeable gulf’ separated them

from the British position.

The first Round Table Conference opened in London on

November 12th, 1930; Jinnah, the Maharaja of Bikaner, Srini¬

vasa Sastri and others were there. No Congress representa¬

tive attended. The Conference accomplished nothing. But the

Labour government’s conciliatory attitude was apparent through¬

out; indeed, at the closing session, on January 19th, 1931, Ramsay

MacDonald expressed the hope that Congress would send delegates

to the second Round Table Conference.

Irwin gladly took the hint — or the command — and uncon¬

ditionally released Gandhi, the Nehrus, and more than twenty

other Congress leaders on January 26th, Independence Day.

In appreciation of this graceful gesture, Gandhi wrote a letter to

the Viceroy asking for an interview. ‘Face-saving’ was an un¬

intelligible concept to Gandhi. He did not believe in ending a

relationship that could be mended, and since he had an undying

faith in mending, he tried never to end a personal or political

relationship.

The first meeting between Irwin and Gandhi began on Febru¬

ary 17th, at 2.30 p.m., and lasted till 6.10 p.m. ‘So the stage was

set’, writes Irwin’s biographer, ‘for the most dramatic personal

encounter between a Viceroy and an Indian leader in the whole

seething history of the British raj.’

It was more than dramatic; the mere fact of the encounter was

historically decisive. Winston Churchill, always clear-eyed, saw

this better than anyone. He was revolted by ‘the nauseating and

humiliating spectacle of this one-time Inner Temple lawyer, now

seditious fakir, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceroy’s

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palace, there to negotiate and to parley on equal terms with the

representative of the King-Emperor\*.

A fakir is an Indian mendicant monk.

Churchill realized that it was not an ordinary interview.

Gandhi did not come, like most of the Viceroy’s visitors, to ask

favours. He came as the leader of a nation to negotiate ‘on equal

terms’ with the leader of another nation. The Salt March and

its aftermath had proved that England could not rule India against

or without Gandhi. The British Empire was at the mercy of the

half-naked fakir, and Churchill did not like it. Churchill saw

that Britain was conceding India’s independence in principle

while withholding it, for the time being, in practice.

The negotiations between Irwin and Gandhi took place in the

Viceroy’s new palace, designed by the gifted British architect Sir

Edwin Lutyens. Rising suddenly, high, expensive and resplen¬

dent, out of the flat Delhi plain amidst the ruins of Mogul mosques

and forts, it symbolized the towering might of the British raj. But

almost the first act within its halls marked the beginning of the

end of that power.

Gandhi and Irwin conferred again for three hours on February

18th, and for half an hour on the 19th. Meanwhile Irwin was

cabling his superiors six thousand miles away in London, while

Gandhi held long meetings with the Congress Working Committee

members in New Delhi. (The great Motilal Nehru had died on

February 6th.) Shuttling between the two parties, Sapru,

Jayakar and Sastri strove to prevent a deadlock.

Once, during a conference, Irwin asked Gandhi whether he

would have tea. ‘Thank you,’ said Gandhi, taking a paper bag

out of a fold in his shawl, ‘I will put some of this salt into my tea

to remind us of the famous Boston Tea Party.’ Both laughed.

Difficulties arose. There were no talks for seven days. On

February 27th they were resumed. On March 1st, Gandhi came

to Irwin at 2.30 p.m. The discussions continued till his dinner

time so Miss Slade had brought his dinner — forty dates and a

pint of goat’s milk — to the palace and Gandhi ate it in the

presence of the Viceroy. At 5.50 p.m. Gandhi left the Viceroy,

but that same evening he walked, unescorted, from Dr. Ansari’s

house, where he was staying, to the palace, a distance of five miles,

and remained closeted with Irwin till after midnight. ‘Good

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night/ Irwin said to him as he departed to trudge home alone in

the darkness. ‘Good night, Mr. Gandhi, and my prayers go with

you.’ Gandhi reached home at 2 a.m. The Workipg Committee

was waiting for him.

Finally, after further wrangling between the two men and be¬

tween each of them and their colleagues, the Irwin-Gandhi Pact,

or The Delhi Pact as Irwin’s biographer calls it, was signed after

breakfast on March 5th. The key word is ‘Pact’. Two national

statesmen had signed a pact, a treaty, an agreed text, every phrase

and stipulation of which had been hammered out in tough bar¬

gaining. British spokesmen maintained that Irwin won the battle,

and a good case could be made for the contention. But in the

long-range terms in which the Mahatma thought, the equality

that had been established, in principle, between India and Eng¬

land was more important than any practical concession which he

might have wrung from the reluctant Empire. A politician would

have sought more substance. Gandhi was satisfied with the

essence: a basis for a new relationship.

For the millions, and for history, the thousands of words of the

Pact with its many articles, headings and subheadings which

appeared in the official Gazette of India Extraordinary of March 5th,

1931, meant: civil disobedience would be called off, prisoners

released, and salt manufacture permitted on the coast; Congress

would attend the next Round Table Conference in London.

Independence w'as not promised. Dominion Status was not

promised.

In an address to American and Indian journalists that day,

Gandhi paid a tribute to the Viceroy. ‘I am aware,’ he told the

newsmen, ‘that I must have, though quite unconsciously, given

him cause for irritation. I must also have tried his patience, but

I cannot recall an occasion when he allowed himself to be be¬

trayed into irritation or impatience.’ The settlement, Gandhi

said, was ‘provisional’ and ‘conditional’; a ‘truce’. The goal

remained: ‘complete independence . . . India cannot be satisfied

with anything less . . . The Congress does not consider India to

be a sickly child requiring nursing, outside help and other

props’.

One has a feeling, in reviewing Gandhi’s 1930 negotiations, that

he viewed them at the time in the perspective of several decades

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later. What does the phraseology or even content of Article 2

matter now? Seventeen years after the Delhi Pact, India was'an

independent nation. What are seventeen years in the life of an

old nation like India?

Subhas Chandra Bose, a critic of the Mahatma, watching the

public reaction during a tour with Gandhi after the Pact was

signed, wrote, T wonder if such a spontaneous ovation was ever

given to a leader anywhere else.’ And Bose admitted that Irwin,

‘though a prominent member of the Conservative Party . . . had

proved himself to be a well-wisher of India’. To Gandhi, who

was often guided in politics by his responses to persons, this

warranted the signing of the Pact.

The moment the Pact was signed, complaints of non-fulfilment

were levelled against the Government, and soon Gandhi was again

negotiating, this time with the new Viceroy, Lord Willingdon.

Adjustments made, the Congress convention at Karachi which,

according to Bose, was ‘the pinnacle of the Mahatma’s popularity

and prestige’, elected Gandhi its sole delegate to the second Round

Table Conference.

At noon on August 29th, Gandhi sailed from Bombay aboard

the S.S. Rajputana. Accompanying him in various capacities were

Pandit Malaviya, Mrs. Naidu, his son Devadas, Mahadev Desai

who, Gandhi said, ‘out-Boswelled Boswell’, Pyarelal Nayyar, a

secretary and disciple, Miss Slade, who had made India her per¬

manent home and Gandhi her spiritual father, and G. D. Birla,

the big Indian industrialist. ‘There is every chance of my return¬

ing empty-handed,’ he said on embarking.

Gandhi had given orders that he and his party should travel by

the lowest class. When he discovered how much luggage they had

brought he saw to it that seven suitcases and trunks were sent back

from Aden. He himself spent most of the day and all night on

deck, spinning, writing, sleeping, eating, praying, talking and

playing with child passengers. Like so many steamship passengers

the world over, he was the Captain’s guest on the bridge, where

he looked through the sextant and steered the ship for a minute.

Gandhi arrived in London on September 12 th, and remained

in England until December 5th. He stayed in an East End

Settlement House called Kingsley Hall as guest of Muriel Lester

who had visited him in 1926. Kingsley Hall is five miles from the

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centre of the city and from St. James’s Palace where the Round

Table Conference sat.

Friends told him that he would save many hours for work and

sleep if he lived in an hotel, but he did not want to spend the

money. Nor would he avail himself of the hospitality \*of Indians

and Englishmen who had big houses nearer the heart of London.

He would come home to Kingsley Hall every evening, often very

late, because, he said, he enjoyed living among his own kind, the

poor people. To spare interviewers the necessity of coming all the

way to the East End, however, he agreed, under pressure, to keep

a little office at 88 Knightsbridge. (The building was destroyed

in the second World War.)

In the mornings, he walked through the slum streets around

Kingsley Hall, and women and men going to work would smile

and greet him and some would join him for conversation; he

visited several in their homes. Children ran up and held his

hand. ‘Uncle Gandhi’, they called him. One mischievous

youngster yelled, ‘Hey, Gandhi, where’s your trousers?’ The

Mahatma laughed heartily.

Questioned by a reporter about his dress, Gandhi said, ‘You

people wear plus-fours, mine are minus fours.’ Gandhi was

wonderful newspaper copy, and journalists covered every move

he made. The dailies and weeklies in Europe and America

eagerly sought special features about him. George Slocombe

wrote a story about Gandhi’s generosity and as an illustration

said that when the Prince of Wales visited India the Mahatma

prostrated himself before him. The next time Gandhi saw Slo¬

combe, he smiled and said, ‘Well, Mr. Slocombe, this does not

even do credit to your imagination. I would bend the knee before

the poorest untouchable in India for having participated in crush¬

ing him for centuries, I would take the dust off his feet. But I

would not prostrate myself, not even before the King, much less

before the Prince of Wales, for the simple reason that he repre¬

sented insolent might.’ Gandhi went to Buckingham Palace to

have tea with King George V and Queen Mary. On the eve of

the event, all England was agog over what he would wear. He

wore a loincloth, sandals, a shawl and his dangling watch. Later,

someone asked Gandhi whether he had had enough on. ‘The

King,’ he replied, ‘had enough on for both of us.’

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David Lloyd George, Britain’s war-time Prime Minister, invited

Gandhi to his farm at Churt, in Surrey. They talked for three

hours. In 1938, when I saw Lloyd George at Churt, he mentioned

the Gandhi visit. He said the servants did what no guest had

ever inspired them to do: they all came out to meet the holy

man.

Four years later, I told Gandhi that Lloyd George had talked

to me about his visit. ‘Yes,’ Gandhi queried eagerly. ‘What did

he say?’

‘He told me that you squatted on his couch and just as you got

settled a black cat they had never seen before entered through the

window and rested in your lap.’

‘That’s correct,’ Gandhi recalled.

‘And when you left, Lloyd George said, the cat disappeared.’

‘Ah,’ Gandhi said, ‘that I don’t know.’

‘Lloyd George,’ I continued, ‘said that the same cat returned

when Miss Slade visited him at Churt.’

‘That too I don’t know,’ Gandhi declared.

As soon as Gandhi reached England he inquired about Colonel

Maddock who had performed the operation on him for appendi¬

citis in 1924, and the moment he found some leisure he went

down to spend some hours at the home of Colonel and Mrs.

Maddock near Reading where they sat in the beautiful garden

and reminisced and told one another they did not look a year

older.

Charlie Chaplin asked to see Gandhi. Gandhi had never heard

of him; he had never seen a moving picture. On being enlightened,

Gandhi said no, he had no special interest in actors. But when told

that Chaplin came from a poor family in the London East End, he

received him at the home of Dr. Katial. The encounter turned

into a competition between toothless and toothsome smiling and

the inevitable discussion about Gandhi’s attitude to the machine,

which was Chaplin’s first question. The answer may have

inspired one of the actor’s subsequent films.

George Bernard Shaw also paid his respects. With unusual

modesty he gave the palm to Gandhi and called himself‘Mahatma

Minor’. ‘You and I,’ he said, ‘belong to a very small community

on earth.’ They touched on a score of subjects and Shaw’s

humour immensely amused ‘Mahatma Major’, but it cannot be

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said that Gandhi liked the playwright’s love of the word that

shocks. Neither had Tolstoy.

Gandhi met Lord Irwin, General Smuts, the Archbishop of

Canterbury, the Dean of Canterbury, Harold J. Laski, C. P. Scott,

the retired editor of the Manchester Guardian , Arthur Henderson

and hundreds of others. Churchill declined to see him. Smuts

said, apropos South Africa, T did not give you such a bad time

as you gave me.’

T did not know that,’ Gandhi apologized.

At the Montessori Training College Gandhi joyously drank in

the beautiful rhythmic exercises of the healthy, happy children

who made him think, with sadness, of ‘the millions of children in

semi-starved Indian villages’. Madame Maria Montessori intro¬

duced him as ‘Noble Master’. ‘Thought of world civilization and

thought of the child,’ she said, ‘that is what links us . . .’ In his

speech, Gandhi declared, ‘I believe implicitly that the child is

not born mischievous in the bad sense of the term. If parents

behave themselves while the child is growing, the child will

instinctively obey the law of truth and the law of love . . . From

my experience of hundreds — I was going to say thousands — of

children, I know that they have a finer sense of honour than you

and I have . . . Jesus never uttered a loftier or grander truth than

when he said that wisdom cometh out of the mouths of babes. I

believe it. . . .’

With what is regarded as typical American enterprise, the

Columbia Broadcasting System arranged for a radio address to

the United States the day after Gandhi’s arrival in England. He

refused to prepare a script and spoke extemporaneously. In the

studio, he eyed the microphone, and said, ‘Do I have to speak

into that?’ He was already on the air.

India’s struggle, Gandhi stated, had drawn the attention of the

world not because Indians were fighting for their freedom, but

because ‘the means adopted by us for attaining that liberty are

unique, and as far as history shows us, have not been adopted by

any other people . . . Hitherto, nations have fought in the manner

of the brute. They have wreaked vengeance upon those whom

they have considered to be their enemies. . . We in India,’ Gandhi

continued, ‘have endeavoured to reverse the process. We feel that

the law that governs brute creation ... is inconsistent with human

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dignity. I personally would wait, if need be for ages, rather than

seek to attain the freedom of my country through bloody means.

I feel in the innermost recesses of my heart... that the world is sick

unto death of blood-spilling. The world is seeking a way out and

I flatter myself with the belief that perhaps it will be the privilege

of the ancient land of India to show the way out to the hungering

world. ...

‘It is a matter of deep humiliation to confess that we are a house

divided against itself, that we Hindus and Mussulmans are flying

at one another. It is a matter of still deeper humiliation that we

Hindus regard several million of our own kith and kin as too

degraded even for our touch.’

He then elaborated on the curse of drink and of drugs and on the

destruction, by the East India Company, of village industries for

the benefit of British manufacturers. At this juncture, a note was

passed to Gandhi saying his time was almost up and New York

would cut him off in three minutes. Unperturbed, he delved still

further into the economics of British rule, and closed with a plea:

‘May I not, then, on behalf of the semi-starved millions, appeal

to the conscience of the world to come to the rescue of a people

dying to regain its liberty?’

The C.B.S. producer signalled him to stop. ‘Well, that’s over,’

Gandhi said. He was still on the air. His voice was clear and the

reception perfect.

In his eighty-four days in England, Gandhi visited Eton, Cam¬

bridge, where he sentimentally asked to be taken to Trinity, which

was Jawaharial Nehru’s and C. F. Andrews’s college, and Oxford,

and addressed scores of public meetings of women’s organizations,

Quakers, Indian students, Indian merchants, British students,

Labourites, Members of Parliament, the London School of

Economics, The American Journalists Association, which arranged

a vegetarian luncheon at the Savoy in deference to his habits,

Friends of India, Temperance Society, Vegetarians, etc. etc.

Gandhi’s two weekends at Oxford were memorable. He stayed

with Professor Lindsay, the Master of Balliol, who later be¬

came a peer, Lord Lindsay of Birker. ‘Both my wife and I said’,

Lindsay wrote in 1948, ‘that having him in our house was like

having a saint in the house. He showed that mark of a great and

simple man that he treated everyone with the same courtesy and

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respect whether one were a distinguished statesman or an un¬

known student. Anyone who was in earnest in wanting an answer

to a question got a real one.’

Another view of Gandhi at Oxford was expressed by Dr.

Edward Thompson, at whose home, on his second Oxonian week¬

end, Gandhi had a discussion with a group that included the

Master of Balliol, Gilbert Murray, Professor S. Coupland, Sir

Michael Sadler, P. C. Lyon and other trained minds. ‘He can

be exasperating, 5 Professor Thompson remarked after Gandhi’s

visit.

Describing the intellectual joust, Thompson said, ‘For three

hours he was sifted and cross-examined ... It was a reasonably

exacting ordeal, yet not for a moment was he rattled or at a loss.

The conviction came to me, that not since Socrates has the world

seen his equal for absolute self-control and composure; and once

or twice, putting myself in the place of men who had to confront

that invincible calm and imperturbability, I thought I understood

why the Athenians made “the martyr-sophist 55 drink the hemlock.

Like Socrates, he has a “daemon”. And when the “daemon” has

spoken, he is as unmoved by argument as by danger. 5

Apparently, not all those present possessed the Socratic imper¬

turbability, for Professor Thompson says, ‘I can still hear Lind¬

say’s desperate tones, as he cited Cromwell’s appeal to the

Presbyterian ministers — “In the bowels of Christ, I beseech you

to think it possible that you may be mistaken” — and added, “Mr.

Gandhi! think it possible that you may be mistaken !” Mr. Gandhi

did not think it possible.’

But Mahadev Desai was there, taking notes as usual, and he

records Gandhi as pleading for ‘the liberty to make mistakes’.

On the other hand, Gandhi was adamant in defending civil dis¬

obedience; he would never give it up. ‘I will not purchase my

country’s freedom at the cost of non-violence,’ he told the pro¬

fessors who thought they could not be mistaken. ‘You may be

justified’, Gandhi admitted, ‘in saying that I must go more warily,

but if you attack the fundamentals you have to convince me.’

They failed.

In all Gandhi’s public and private, official and unofficial

utterances during his eighty-four days in England, he tried, above

all else, to clarify what he meant by the independence of India.

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‘How far would you cut India off from the Empire?’ a member

of the audience at the Raleigh Club asked.

‘From the Empire entirely,’ Gandhi replied. ‘From the British

nation not at all, if I want India to gain and not to grieve. The

Emperorship must go and I should love to be an equal partner

with Britain sharing her joys and sorrows and an equal partner

with the Dominions. But it must be a partnership on equal terms.’

He advocated ‘an honourable partnership ... We can have a

partnership between England and India ... I still aspire to be a

citizen not in the Empire, but in a Commonwealth, in a partner¬

ship if possible; if God will it, an indissoluble partnership, but not

a partnership superimposed upon one nation by another . . . The

Congress does not stand merely for isolated independence which

may easily become a menace to the world ... I would heartily

welcome the union of East and West provided it is not based on

brute force . . . England and India [should be] bound by the silken

cord of love . . . India as an independent partner would have a

special contribution to make in a world which is getting weary of

war and bloodshed. In case of an outbreak of war it would be the

common effort of India and Great Britain to prevent war, not

indeed by force of arms, but by the irresistible force of example’.

In these statements, Gandhi described precisely, and with re¬

markable prevision, the status which independent India volun¬

tarily assumed in the Commonwealth in 1948. More, the pro¬

tagonists of that move used the very argument — and almost the

exact words — which Gandhi had used in London seventeen years

earlier. Gandhi saw that the only beneficent independence was

the kind that led to interdependence. ‘Isolated independence is

not the goal,’ he said. ‘It is voluntary interdependence.’ He

arrived at this conclusion through no abstruse theorizing about

internationalism or world government. Gandhi was addicted to

love; it was the basis of his relations with people. Love is creative

interdependence. And since Gandhi regarded nations not as

abstract legal entities but as agglomerations of human beings with

names, noses, aches and smiles, he believed that international

relationships should be founded on interdependence and love.

Gandhi had been criticized for acquiescing in Article Two of

the Irwin-Delhi Pact of March 5th, 1931, which stated that in

the contemplated constitution of India, England would retain

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control over defence, foreign affairs, minority probleins and

financial obligations to foreign creditors. It was a severe limitation

on freedom. Gandhi took the criticism to heart. Indeed, the

Congress convention in Karachi at the end of March 1931, in¬

structed Gandhi to change his position on this key question.

Gandhi, accordingly, told British audiences that ‘it is part of the

mandate given me by Congress that complete independence

would be meaningless unless it was accompanied by complete

control over finance, defence and external affairs’. This reversal

in Gandhi’s attitude exasperated the British; he had gone back

on his signature. Gandhi had a technical justification in the man¬

date of Congress, his master. Actually, he attached no political

importance to the stipulation in the Delhi Pact and only propa-

paganda importance to his advocacy of the opposite in London.

England was not yet parting with power in India. That was the

crucial fact. Hair-splitting over who would control what was

therefore futile.

This being his approach, Gandhi concentrated more on con¬

vincing the British people than on debating with the British

government at the Round Table Conference. ‘I find that my

work lies outside the Conference,’ he told one audience. Referring

to his efforts to explain India to England, he said, ‘This to me is

the real Round Table Conference . . . The seed which is being

sown now may result in softening the British spirit. . . and in pre¬

venting the brutalization of human beings.’ He made friends

through his charm, frankness, humanity and accessibility. He

won the hearts of the Christians in England who recognized him

as a big brother and ally. He touched what was Christian in all

Englishmen. He found an echo in their common sense; it was

clear after his visit that some day, sooner than some thought,

sooner than Churchill wished, India would be liberated. Many

considered him ‘difficult’, and he undoubtedly could be. But he

moderated the hostility of the most rabid. He even walked into

the lion’s den and went to Lancashire where his agitation against

foreign cloth and in favour of khadi had caused unemployment

and loss of profits. At a meeting, one man said, ‘I am one of the

unemployed, but if I was in India I would say the same thing

that Mr. Gandhi is saying.’ There is a telling photograph, taken

outside the Greenfield Mill at Darwen, Lancashire, showing

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Gandhi, wrapped in white cotton from neck to knee, overcome

with coyness and squeezed in amidst cotton factory workers, most

of them women, One of them holding his hand, and all of them,

young, old, male, female, cheering the Mahatma and smiling

He made friends among those whom he hurt.

The Government assigned two Scotland Yard detectives, Ser¬

geant Evans and Sergeant Rogers, to guard Gandhi; they were

special policemen, giants in stature, usually assigned to protecting

royalty. They grew to like‘the little man’. Unlike most prominent

personalities in such circumstances, Gandhi did not keep them at

arms’ length or ignore them. He talked to them and visited their

homes. Before leaving England, he begged that they be allowed

to accompany him to Brindisi, Italy. The bureaucrat asked the

reason for this strange request.

‘Because they are part of my family,’ Gandhi answered.

From India he sent each a watch engraved ‘With love from

M. K. Gandhi'.

Between lectures, speeches, forums, press interviews, trips,

innumerable individual appointments, and answering a mountain

of mail — all with a view to conquering Britain’s heart — he

attended to the official business which had brought him to Lon¬

don: the second Round Table Conference. His official and un¬

official activities usually kept him busy twenty-one hours a day;

diaries preserved show that he sometimes got to bed at 2 a.m.,

awoke at 3.45 a.m. for prayers, rested again from 5 to 6 a.m.,

and had no respite from then till the next morning at 1 or 2 a.m.

The schedule wore him out; he delighted in driving his body to

the maximum of endurance and beyond. As a result, what he

gave the Round Table Conference was not of his best quality,

yet the participants heard some remarkable, and certainly unique,

utterances from his lips. He attended regularly, although most

plenary sessions and committee meetings bored him; they were so

political that he lost all sense of their reality. Often he sat with

eyes closed. He may have slept a few winks.

The purpose of the Round Table Conference was ‘constitution¬

building’ for India. Lord Reading, a member of the British dele¬

gation, formulated the British purpose in one sentence: ‘I believe

that the true policy between Britain and India is that we should

in this country strive all we can to give effect to the views of India

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while preserving at the same time our own position, which we

must not and cannot abandon.’

How could England give effect to the views of India while

remaining the mistress of India?

The Round Table Conference was worse than a failure. By

intensifying the religious divisions of India it exercised a sinister,

tragic influence on the future.

The Conference consisted of 112 delegates: 20 representing the

Government of the United Kingdom, 23 from princely India—

rajas, maharajas, nawabs and their subordinates — and 64 from

British India. The Viceroy appointed the princes, and, with the

exception of Gandhi, Mrs. Naidu and a few others, he appointed

the visitors from British India.

His selections were careful and purposeful. The British govern¬

ment advocated a federation of princely India, which was roughly

a third of India, with British India. This would have introduced

the weight of the autocratic princes, British puppets all, into the

government of India. Thus what seemed like the unification of the

two Indias was calculated to strengthen feudal, medieval reaction

and reinforce British rule.

The delegation from British India included the Aga Khan and

others like him. It included British merchants, Anglo-Indians,

Christians, Hindus, Moslems, landlords, Labourites, untouchables

and Parsis (but not one peasant), and each of these groups de¬

manded a separate electorate for itself. In other words, a number

of seats in the legislative assemblies would be reserved for English¬

men resident in India, for landlords, for Moslems, etc., and the

Englishmen would be elected only by the votes of the Englishmen

of India who could vote for no one else, the landlords would be

elected by landlords, the Moslems could vote only for Moslem

candidates, and so on. Every divisive tendency in India was

encouraged.

The Conference set up a Minorities Committee comprising six

Englishmen from England, thirteen Moslems, ten Hindus, two

untouchables, two Labourites, two Sikhs, one Parsi, two Indian

Christians, one Anglo-Indian (Anglo-Indians are descendents of

mixed marriages between British men and Indian women), two

Englishmen domiciled in India and four women. Only the

women did not ask for a separate electorate. Of the thirteen

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PARLEYS WITH THE REBEL

Moslems in the Committee only one was a nationalist Moslem

who was an Indian politically and a follower of the Prophet

religiously. The remaining twelve mingled Church and State and

put the political interests of their religious community above the

welfare of India as a whole.

Mr. Fazl-ul Huq, a Moslem, was addressing the Plenary Session

of November 28th, 1931. T wonder’, he said, ‘if Sir Austen

Chamberlain has come across two such incongruous specimens of

humanity as Dr. Moonje [a Hindu member of the Conference]

and myself — professing different religions, worshipping different

Gods.’

‘The same God,’ a member interjected.

‘No,’ Mr. Fazl-ul Huq demurred, ‘no, it cannot be the same

God. My God is for separate electorates; his God is for joint

electorates.’

The Moslem delegate was partitioning God. But Gandhi would

not partition God or India. He told the conference he rejected

all separate electorates. In an independent India, he said, Indians

would vote as Indians for Indians. The virtue of Indian nationalism

and its appeal to Outsiders was not that it would create new

national barriers — there were already too many — but rather

that it would rid England and the world of the incubus of im¬

perialism and take religion out of politics in India. Instead, the

Round Table Conference, under British management, intensified

old and attempted to introduce new fissiparous influences.

‘Divide and Rule’ is the law of Empire; the more the rule is

threatened the more diligently that law is applied.

The solution for India would have been to banish religious con¬

siderations from politics. But with all its twentieth-century vitality,

Indian nationalism still lacked the strength to unite that which

religion, provincial loyalties and economic differences separated.

The Indian national movement was faced with the task of libera¬

tion before the Indians had been welded into a nation.

The caste system was a further divisive influence which

weakened nationalism. The Harijans or untouchables feared

and often hated the Hindus who had harnessed so many brutal

disabilities upon them. They, too, through their gifted and am¬

bitious representative at the Conference, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji

Ambedkar, a lawyer who studied at Columbia University of New

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GANDHI IN INDIA

York under a scholarship from the Gaekwar Maharaja of Baroda,

demanded a separate electorate or at least a right to a specified

number of Hindu seats in the legislative assemblies.

Mahatma Gandhi, a supremely devout Hindu, was incapable

of discriminating against anyone on account of religion, race,

caste, colour, or anything. His contribution to the equality of

untouchables and to the education of a new generation which

was Indian instead of Hindu or Moslem or Parsi or Christian has

world significance. But at the time of the Round Table Con¬

ference of 1931, and especially with the British government

pulling in the opposite direction, his arm lacked the power to

draw the Hindu, Moslem and Harijan communities together into

an Indian unity which could have commanded the British raj to

go home.

At the last plenary sitting of the Round Table Conference, on

December 1st, 1931, the chairman, James Ramsay MacDonald,

Prime Minister, since the general elections of October 27th, 1.931,

not of a Labour government but of a Tory government in which

he and J. H. Thomas were prisoners, referred to Gandhi as a

Hindu.

‘Not Hindu,’ Gandhi exclaimed.

To his God, Gandhi was a Hindu. To the British Prime

Minister, and in politics, he was an Indian. But there were few

such Indians at the Round Table Conference and too few in

India.

That was the upshot of the Round Table Conference. It was

completely abortive. It made the situation in India worse.

Gandhi left it and England with a heartache, for though he had

charmed and convinced many English people, he had failed to

bridge or even to narrow the gulf that separated Hindus from

Moslems; and the British government was holding on to India.

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