# CHAPTER XXIII

MY WEEK WITH GANDHI

W H a t an unhappy country! That was my first impression

of India in May 1942, and the impression was deepened

by my two months’ stay. Rich Indians were unhappy,

poor Indians were unhappy, the British were unhappy.

One did not have to be in India for more than a few days to

realize how abysmally poor the people were. American and many

European farmers would consider it bad for business to keep their

livestock in accommodation as unhealthy as the tenements I

visited with Dr. Ambedkar in Bombay; hundreds of thousands

lived in them. Gandhi was fully dressed compared to the naked¬

ness of peasants one saw in villages. The vast majority of Indians

are always, literally always, hungry.

‘The expectation of life,’ says the 1931 British official census

report on India, is ‘26.56 years for females and 26.91 for males.’

The average person born in India could look forward to only

twenty-seven years of life.

According to British figures, one hundred and twenty-five

million Indians contracted malaria annually and only a few

could afford a grain of quinine. Half a million Indians died of

tuberculosis each year.

Climate is only part of the explanation; an Indian community

had a death rate five times higher than a neighbouring British

settlement.

Despite disease and mortality, India’s population was increasing

by five million each year. This was the biggest problem of the

nation. In i92i ? India had 304,000,000 inhabitants; in 1931,

338,000,000; in 1941, 388,000,000. In the same twenty years the

area under cultivation was practically stable and industry did not

appreciably expand. The poorer the country the higher the birth

rate. The higher the birth rate the poorer the country.

The British in India stressed their achievements. But they did

not deny the cankers. They blamed the Hindu religion and

Moslem backwardness; Indians blamed England. It was an

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atmosphere in which work and life were becoming increasingly

unsatisfactory for the British.

Englishmen whose families had made India their career for

more than a century knew that there was no future for them here.

India did not want them and they sensed it and were sad. Sir

Gilbert Laithwaite, the Viceroy’s private secretary, and Major-

General Moles worth, Assistant to Wavell as Commander-in-

Ghief, bicycled to and from work under the hot Indian sun to save

petrol though they had cars and drivers. Many of the British were

good men, but India preferred to be ruled by bad Indians.

Governing unwilling India was no longer ‘fun’; the British

officials were as sick of India as India was of them. Twenty years

of Gandhi’s non-violence had destroyed their faith in the future

of the Empire.

A typical New Delhi university student delivered a passionate

diatribe against Britain. I said to him, ‘Tell me, since you dislike

the British so violently, would you want Japan to invade and

conquer India?’

‘No,’ he replied, ‘but we Indians pray that God may give the

British enough strength to stand up under the blows they deserve.’

Some Indians went to the length of preferring Japan to England.

No Indian party or group was supporting the war except the

Communists. After Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941, they

supported Britain, and the British imperialists in India supported

them but did not relish the unnatural liaison.

I heard Nehru address a hundred thousand in Bombay. The

Communists formed a heckling island in the vast ocean cf brown

faces and white clothes. ‘This is a people’s war,’ they chorused.

‘If you think it is a people’s war go and ask the people,’ Nehru

shouted. That and the public’s hostile reaction silenced them.

They knew he told the truth and the British knew it too.

‘I would fight Japan sword in hand,’ Nehru declared, ‘but I

can only do so as a free man.’

India could have been held if it had had no freedom, just as a

dictator can rule by complete suppression. But the moment

Nehru was free enough to say he was not free, India’s freedom was

inevitable. That is why Gandhi always insisted on freedom of

speech as the irreducible minimum. The British administrators

in India saw this even when London did not.

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‘We will be out of here two years after the war ends/ Sir

Reginald Maxwell, Home Member in the Viceroy’s Council, told

me in his home at dinner. He was in charge of police and internal

order, and the Indians hated him, but he had no illusions because

to him Empire was a daily grind while to Churchill it was

romance.

The Viceroy said to me, ‘We are not going to remain in India.

Of course, Congress does not believe this. But we will not stay

here. We are preparing for our departure.’

When I reported these opinions to Indians they did not believe

them. They argued bitterly: Churchill and many lesser Churchills

in New Delhi and the provinces will obstruct independence or

vitiate it by vivisecting the country.

Nehru said to me, ‘Gandhi has straightened our backs and

stiffened our spines.’

You cannot ride a straight back.

Independence was near. But the present was so black that few

could see the future. History had stood still so long in India that

nobody foresaw how fast it was about to move. Indians resented

the stagnation; it gave them a sense of frustration.

In Bombay I talked to J. R. D. Tata, the head of the big steel-

chemicals-airlines-textiles-hotels trust. His father was Parsi, his

mother French; he speaks excellent English and French and is

intelligent and cultured. He said he was unhappy because

strangers ruled his country. On his desk stood several brightly

polished two-inch anti-tank shells which a Tata mill was making

for the British — and a plastic plaque of Mahatma Gandhi.

An American general stationed in India said ‘the British are

like a drop of oil in a bucket of water’.

The Viceroy talked about Gandhi. ‘Make no mistake about it,’

he asserted. ‘The old man is the biggest thing in India . . . He

has been good to me ... If he had come from South Africa and

been only a saint he might have taken India very far. But he

was tempted by politics. Make no mistake. His influence is

very great.’

Gandhi, he said, was now contemplating some kind of civil

disobedience campaign. ‘I have been here six years,’ Lord Lin¬

lithgow declared, ‘and I have learned restraint. I sit here until

late in the evening studying reports and carefully digesting them,

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I will not take precipitate action. But if I felt that Gandhi was

obstructing the war effort I would have to bring him under con¬

trol . 5 He struck the desk with his hand and the four telephones

tinkled.

I said it would be bad if Gandhi died in jail.

T know , 5 the Viceroy agreed. ‘He is old, and you know you

can’t feed the old man. He is like a dog and can empty his

stomach at will... I hope none of this will be necessary but I

have a grave responsibility and I cannot permit the old man to

interfere with the war effort . 5

Nehru was going down to Sevagram to consult the Mahatma

about the contemplated civil disobedience action. I asked him to

arrange an interview for me. Soon I received a telegram reading:

‘Welcome. Mahadev Desai . 5

I got out of the train at the small town of Wardha, was met by

an emissary from Gandhi and slept on the roof of a Congress

hostel; all night the orange-white-green Congress flag played a

Morse code in the breeze. Early in the morning, I took a tonga

with Gandhi’s dentist for Sevagram. (A tonga is a one-horse,

two-wheel vehicle in which passengers sit behind the driver with

their backs to the horse.) I tried to make him talk about Gandhi’s

teeth. He talked about British politics.

The tonga stopped where the dirt road met the village. There

stood Gandhi. He said, ‘Mr. Fischer , 5 with a British accent and

we shook hands. He greeted the dentist and turned round and I

followed him to a bench. He sat down, put his palm on the bench

and said, ‘Sit down . 5 The way he sat down first and the way he

touched the bench with his hand was like saying, ‘This is my

house, come in . 5 I felt at home immediately.

Each day I had an hour’s interview with Gandhi; there was

also an opportunity for conversation at meals; in addition, I

walked with him once or twice a day. I usually arrived for the

morning constitutional while he was still sitting on his bed in the

open air eating mango pulp. Between spoonfuls he plunged into

serious discussion. Breakfast finished, he accepted a towel and a

long, rectangular, narrow-necked, corked bottle of water from

Kasturbai and washed his hands before starting on the stroll

across nearby fields. Kasturbai, with sunken face, straight mouth

and square jaw, seemed to listen attentively, but I did not hear

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or see her say a single word to her husband during the entire

week, nor he to her. At meals and prayers she sat slightly behind

his left shoulder fanning him solicitously. She always looked at

him; he rarely looked at her, yet he wanted her nearest to him

and there appeared to be perfect understanding between them.

During walks, Gandhi kept his arms on the shoulders of two

young girls or boys but moved forward with long quick strides

and kept up a rapid conversation without losing breath or, appar¬

ently, tiring. The walk lasted not less than half an hour. When he

returned I was ready for rest and leaned against a post while he

continued to speak.

Gandhi was well built, with fine muscular bulging chest, thin

waist, and long thin firm legs, bare from sandals to short, tight

loincloth. His knees were pronounced bulges and his bones wide

and strong; his hands were big and the fingers big and firm. His

chocolate-coloured skin was soft, smooth and healthy. He was

seventy-three. His fingernails, hands, feet, body were immaculate;

the loincloth, the cheesecloth cape he occasionally wore in the

sun, and the folded, moistened kerchief on his head were bright

white. Once a drop of yellow mango juice stained his loincloth

and he scratched it intermittently during an hour.

His body did not look old. He did not give one a feeling that

he was old. His head showed his age. His head was large, wide

at the top and tapering down to a small face; big ears extended

away from it abruptly. His upper lip, covered with a black-and-

white stubble moustache, was so narrow that it almost met the

fat, down-pointed nose. The expression of his face came from his

soft and gentle eyes, the sensitive lower lip which combined self-

control with strength and showed suffering, and the ever-present

smile revealing naked gums. (He wore his dentures only for

eating and took them out and washed them in public; he wore

gold-rimmed bifocals; he shaved his face every day with a straight

razor, but sometimes one of the men or women disciples shaved

him.)

His facial features, with the exception of his quiet, confident

eyes, were ugly and in repose his face would have been ugly, but

it was rarely in repose. Whether he was speaking or listening, it

was alive and registering actively. He spoke with a low, sing¬

song, undistinguished voice (many Indians have the same sing-

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song when they speak English) and he gestured eloquently, but

not always, with the fingers of one hand. His hands were beautiful.

Lloyd George looked like a great man. One could not help

seeing that Churchill and Franklin D. Roosevelt had stature and

distinction. Not Gandhi. (Nor Lenin.) Outwardly he had noth¬

ing remarkable about him; perhaps the lower lip. His personality

was in what he was and what he had done and what he said. I

felt no awe in Gandhi’s presence. I felt I was in the presence of a

very sweet, gentle, informal, relaxed, happy, wise, highly civilized

man. I felt, too, the miracle of personality, for by sheer force of

personality, without an organization — Congress was a loose

organization — or government behind him, Gandhi had radiated

his influence to the far ends of a disunited country and, indeed, to

every corner of a divided world. He did it not through his writ¬

ings; few people anywhere had read his books, and his articles,

though known abroad and republished widely in India, were not

the source of his hold on people. He reached people through direct

contact, action, example and loyalty to a few simple, universally

flouted principles: non-violence, truth, and the exaltation of

means above ends.

The big names of recent history: Churchill, Roosevelt, Lloyd

George, Stalin, Lenin, Hitler, Woodrow Wilson, the Kaiser,

Lincoln, Napoleon, Metternich, Talleyrand, etc., had the power

of states at their disposal. The only non-official figure comparable

to Gandhi in his effect on men’s minds is Karl Marx whose dogma,

however, was a prescription for a system of government. One has

to go back centuries to find men who appealed as strongly as

Gandhi did to the conscience of individuals. They were men of

religion, in another era. Gandhi showed that the spirit of Christ

and of some Christian fathers, and of Buddha and of some Hebrew

prophets and Greek sages, could be applied in modern times and

to modern politics. He did not preach about God or religion;

he was a living sermon. He was a good man in a world where

few resist the corroding influence of power, wealth and vanity.

There he sat, four-fifths naked, on the earth in a mud hut in a

tiny Indian village without electricity, radio, running water, or

telephone. It was a situation least conducive to awe, pontification,

or legend. He was in every sense down-to-earth. He knew that

life consists of the details of life.

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‘Now put on your shoes and hat,’ Gandhi said. ‘Those are two

indispensable things here. Don’t get a sunstroke.’ It was no°

with practically no shade except inside the huts, which were like

heated ovens. ‘Come along,’ he said in a friendly tone of mock

command. I followed him to the common dining hall which

consisted of two long walls of matting connected by a third back

wall of the same material. Where one entered, the building was

open to the elements.

Gandhi sat down on a cushion near the entrance. At his left

was Kasturbai, on his right Narendra Dev, an Indian Socialist

leader whom the Mahatma had undertaken to cure of asthma. I

was Dev’s neighbour. There were about thirty diners. Women

sat apart. Several bright-eyed, brown-faced youngsters, between

the ages of three and eight, were opposite me. Everyone had a

thin straw mat under him and a brass tray in front of him on the

ground. Male and female waiters, members of the ashram, moved

noiselessly on bare feet, depositing food on the trays. A number of

pots and pans were placed near Gandhi’s legs. He handed me a

bronze bowl filled with a vegetable stew in which I thought I

discerned chopped spinach leaves and pieces of squash. A woman

poured some salt on my tray and another gave me a metal tumbler

with warm water and another with warm milk. Then she came

back with two little boiled potatoes in their jackets and some

soft, flat wheatcakes baked brown. Gandhi handed me one hard,

paper-thin wheatcake from a metal container in front of him.

A gong sounded; a robust man in white shorts stopped waiting

on the trays, stood erect, closed his eyes leaving only a white slit

open — it made him look blind — and started a high-pitched chant

in which all others, including Gandhi, joined. The prayer ended

with ‘Shahnti, Shahnti, Shahnti’ which, Dev said, means ‘Peace’.

Everyone started eating with their fingers, fishing out the veget¬

able stew with a wheatcake folded in four. I was given a tea¬

spoon and then spme butter for the cake. Gandhi munched busily,

stopping only to serve his wife, Dev and me.

‘You have lived in Russia for fourteen years,’ was his first politi¬

cal /remark to me. ‘What is your opinion of Stalin?’

I was very hot, and my hands were sticky, and I had commenced

to discover my ankles and legs from sitting on them, so I replied

briefly, ‘Very able and very ruthless.’

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‘As ruthless as Hitler?’ he asked.

‘At least.’

After a pause, he turned to me and said, ‘Have you seen the

Viceroy?’ I told him I had, but he dropped the subject.

‘You can have all the water you want,’ he told me. ‘We take

good care that it is boiled. And now eat your mango.’ I began to

peel it and several people, Gandhi too, laughed. He explained

that they usually turned it in their hands and squeezed it to make

it soft and then sucked on one end, but he added that I was right

to peel it to see whether it was good.

Lunch was at eleven and dinner just before sundown. Kurshed

Naoriji, a member of the ashram and granddaughter of Dadabhai

Naoriji, brought my breakfast — tea, biscuits or bread with honey

and butter and mango — to the mud-walled, bamboo-roofed

guest hut where I lived.

At lunch on the second day, Gandhi handed me a tablespoon

for the vegetable dish. He said the tablespoon was more com¬

mensurate with my size. He offered me a boiled onion from his

pot. I asked for a raw one instead; it was a relief from the flat

food of the menu.

At lunch on the third day, Gandhi said, ‘Fischer, give me your

bowl and I will give you some of the vegetables.’ I said I had eaten

the mess of spinach and squash four times in two days and had

no desire for more.

‘You don’t like vegetables,’ he commented.

‘I don’t like the taste of these vegetables three days running.’

‘Ah,’ he exclaimed, ‘you must add plenty of salt and lemon.’

‘You want me to kill the taste,’ I interpreted.

‘No , 5 he laughed, ‘enrich the taste.’

‘You are so non-violent you would not even kill a taste,’ I said.

‘If that were the only thing men killed, I wouldn’t mind,’ he

remarked.

I wiped the perspiration from my face and neck. ‘Next time

I’m in India . . .’ Gandhi was chewing and seemed not to have

heard me so I stopped.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘the next time you are in India. . . .’

‘You either ought to have air-conditioning in Sevagram or live

in the Viceroy’s palace.’

‘All right,’ Gandhi acquiesced.

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He encouraged banter. One afternoon when I came to his hut

for the daily interview, he was not there. When he arrived he lay

down on his bed. ‘I will take your blows lying down,’ he said,

inviting questions. A Moslem woman gave him a mud pack for

his abdomen. ‘This puts me in touch with my future,’ he said.

I did not comment.

‘I see you missed that one,’ he noted.

I said I had not missed it but thought he was too young to

think about returning to the dust.

‘Why,’ he declared, ‘you and I and all of us, some in a hundred

years, but all sooner or later, will do it.’

On another occasion he quoted a statement he had made to

Lord Sankey in London; ‘Do you think,’ he had said, ‘I would

have reached this green old age if I hadn’t taken care of myself?

This is one of my faults.’

‘I thought you were perfect,’ I ventured.

He laughed and the eight or ten members of the ashram who

usually sat in on the interviews laughed. (He had asked me

whether I objected to their presence.) ‘No,’ he declared. ‘I am

very imperfect. Before you are gone you will have discovered a

hundred of my faults and if you don’t, I will help you to see them.’

Usually the hour’s interview began with his finding the coolest

place in the hut for me to sit. Then with a smile he would say,

‘Now’, inviting ‘blows’. As the hour was about to end he would,

with an unerring time sense, look at his big ‘dollar’ watch and

proclaim, ‘Now, your hour is up.’ He was minutely punctual.

One day when I was leaving his hut after a talk, he said, ‘Go

and sit in a tub.’ I wondered whether that was the Indian

equivalent of ‘go sit on a tack’. But crossing the sun-baked

hundred yards between Gandhi’s hut and the guest hut, the heat

made the inside of my head feel dry and I decided that sitting in

a tub would be a very good idea. In fact I thought I could

improve on it. Adjoining the one living-room-bedroom of the

guest hut was a small water room with cement floor on which

stood a variety of pots, pitchers, tubs and bowls; an old woman

kept them filled with water. Six or seven times a day I would

step into this bathroom, slip off the two pieces of clothing and

sandals I wore, and take a standing splash bath with the aid of

a cup.

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The worst ordeal of the day was typing the complete record of

my conversations with Gandhi and others in the ashram, and with

Nehru who came for two days of that week. After five minutes I

was tired and wet all over with perspiration. Stimulated by

Gandhi’s suggestion to sit in a tub, I placed a small wooden

packing case in one of the tin wash-tubs filled with water, put a

folded Turkish towel on the packing case, then set a somewhat

larger wooden packing case just outside the tub and placed my

portable typewriter on it. These arrangements made, I sat down

on the box in the tub and typed my notes. At intervals of a few

minutes, when I began to perspire, I dipped a bronze bowl into

the tub and poured the water over my neck, back and legs. By

that method I was able to type a whole hour without feeling

exhausted. The innovation stirred the ashram to mirth and jolly

comment. It was not a glum community. Gandhi saw to that.

He made eyes at the little children, provoked adults to laughter

and joked with all and sundry visitors.

I asked Gandhi to be photographed with me. ‘If a photographer

is around by accident,’ he replied, ‘I have no objection to being

seen in a photograph with, you.’

‘That,’ I said, ‘is the biggest compliment you have paid me.’

‘Do you want compliments?’ he inquired.

‘Don’t we all?’

‘Yes,’ Gandhi agreed, ‘but sometimes we have to pay too dearly

for them.’

During the week he inquired whether I knew Upton Sinclair,

Dr. Kellogg, the food specialist of Battle Creek, Michigan, and Mrs.

Eleanor Roosevelt. But I noticed no general curiosity. He focused

his attention on issues which he could affect and on questions

put to him.

I said I had been told that the Congress party was in the hands

of big business and that he himself was supported by Bombay

millowners. ‘What truth is there in these assertions?’ I probed.

‘Unfortunately they are true,’ he affirmed. ‘Congress hasn’t

enough money to conduct its work. We thought in the beginning

to collect four annas from each member per year and operate on

that. But it hasn’t worked.’

‘What proportion of the Congress budget,’ I pressed, ‘is covered

by rich Indians?’

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‘Practically all of it,’ he admitted. ‘In this ashram, for instance,

we could live much more poorly than we do and spend less

money. But we do not and the money comes from our rich friends. 5

(There is a famous quip attributed to Mrs. Naidu, which

Gandhi enjoyed tremendously, to the effect that ‘it costs a great

deal of money to keep Gandhiji living in poverty 5 .)

‘Doesn’t the fact that Congress gets its money from the moneyed

interests affect Congress politics? 5 I asked. ‘Doesn’t it create a

moral obligation? 5

‘It creates a silent debt, 5 he stated. ‘But actually we are very

little influenced by the thinking of the rich. They are sometimes

afraid of our demand for full independence . . . The dependence

of Congress on rich sponsors is unfortunate. I use the word

“unfortunate 55 . It does not pervert our policy. 5

‘Isn’t one of the results that there is a concentration on national-

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ism almost to the exclusion of social and economic problems? 5

‘No, 5 he replied. ‘Congress has from time to time, especially

under the influence of Pandit Nehru, adopted advanced social

programmes and schemes for economic planning. I will have

those collected for you. 5

Most of the money for the maintenance of Gandhi’s ashram and

of Gandhi’s organizations for Harijan and peasant uplift and the

teaching of a national language came from G. D. Birla, million¬

aire textile manufacturer at whose house in New Delhi the

Mahatma sometimes, lived. Birla first saw Gandhi in 1920 in

Calcutta. On Gandhi’s arrival at the railway station, Birla, then

a young broker, and several friends unhitched the horses of the

Mahatma’s landau and pulled it through the streets. Birla became

a devotee. He did not agree with some of the Mahatma’s policies,

but that did not matter; Gandhi was his ‘father 5 , he says. Had

Birla believed in the spinning wheel he would have had to close

his mills, but he did not believe in it. After the death of Birla’s

wife, he never remarried and became a Brahmachari; that was

probably part of the bond between him and Gandhi. Gandhi

first went to Birla’s house in 1933 for ten days. Subsequently, he

stayed a number of times for shorter or longer periods. Often,

however, Gandhi preferred to make his headquarters in the Delhi

Harijan colony near Kings way; his upkeep there cost Birla fifty

rupees a day. The ashram, including its hospital and dairy, cost

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Birla an estimated fifty thousand rupees a year and he supported

it after 1935; never kept accounts of what he gave Gandhi.

But Gandhi wrote out in his own hand every smallest item of

expenditure and presented it to Birla who tore it up before Gandhi’s

eyes without examining it. In addition, Birla backed many wel¬

fare institutions in which Gandhi was interested. His outlay for

Gandhian enterprises ran into millions of rupees. Gandhi’s friend¬

ship gave Birla prestige and satisfaction and perhaps even business

advantages, for he learned many political secrets from the

Mahatma. But had the occasion demanded, Gandhi might have

led a strike of Birla’s mill workers, as he did in the case of his

friend and financial backer, Ambalal Sarabhai of Ahmedabad.

Gandhi was tolerant of capitalists even when he opposed capitalist

exploitation; he was equally tolerant of Englishmen after die

turned against the British Empire. He would undoubtedly have

stayed in Churchill’s house. He was too sure of his purity and

purpose to think he could be contaminated. To Gandhi nobody

was an untouchable, neither Birla, nor a Communist, nor a Hari-

jan, nor an imperialist. He fanned the spark of virtue wherever

he discovered it. He allowed for the diversity of human nature

and the multiplicity of man’s motives.

Early in the week I spent at the ashram in June 1942, it became

obvious that Gandhi was determined to launch a civil disobedience

campaign with a view to making England ‘Quit India’. That was

to be the slogan.

Gandhi felt that unless England purged herself by leaving

India the war could not be won and the peace could not be won.

One afternoon, after Gandhi had talked at length about the

reasons that were prompting him to start civil disobedience against

the British government, I said, Tt seems to me that the British

cannot possibly quit India altogether. That would mean making

a present of India to Japan; England would never agree, nor would

the United States approve. If you demand that the British pack

up and go bag and baggage, you are simply asking the impossible;

you are barking up a tree. You do not mean, do you, that they

must also withdraw their armies?’

For at least two minutes Gandhi said nothing. The silence in

the room was almost audible.

‘You are right,’ Gandhi said at last. ‘No, Britain and America

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and other countries too can keep their armies here and use Indian

territory as a base for military operations. I do not wish Japan to

win the war. But I am sure that Britain cannot win unless the

Indian people become free. Britain is weaker and Britain is

morally indefensible while she rules India. I do not wish to

humiliate England.\*

‘But if India is to be used as a military base by the democracies,

many other things are involved. Armies do not exist in a vacuum.

For instance, the western allies would need good organization

on the railroads.\*

‘Oh,’ he exclaimed, ‘they could operate the railroads. They

would need order in the ports where they received their supplies.

They could not have riots in Bombay and Calcutta. These matters

would require co-operation and common effort.\*

‘Could the terms of this collaboration be set forth in a treaty of

alliance?\*

‘Yes,\* he agreed, ‘we could have a written agreement. . . .’

‘Why have you not said this?\* I asked. ‘I must confess that when

I heard of your proposed civil disobedience movement I was

prejudiced against it. I believe that it would impede the prosecu¬

tion of the war. I think the war has to be fought and won. I see

complete darkness for the world if the Axis wins. I think we have

a chance for a better world if we win.’

‘There I cannot quite agree,\* he argued. ‘Britain often cloaks

herself in the cloth of hypocrisy, promising what she later does not

deliver. But I accept the proposition that there is a better chance

if the democracies win.\*

‘It depends on the kind of peace we make,’ I said.

‘It depends on what you do during the war,’ he corrected. ‘I

am not interested in future promises. I am not interested in

independence after the war. I want independence now. That

will help England win the war.\*

‘Why,’ I again inquired, ‘have you not communicated your

plan to the Viceroy? He should be told that you have no objection

now to the use of India as a base for Allied military operations.’

‘No one has asked me,’ he replied weakly.

Several of Gandhi’s most intimate disciples were unhappy over

his readiness to tolerate British and other armed forces in India.

They felt his statement to me a serious blunder. He himself

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admitted publicly that he had changed his mind. ‘There was

obviously a gap in my first writing,’ he said in Harijan shortly

after my interview with him. ‘I filled it in as soon as it was dis¬

covered by one of my numerous interviewers. Non-violence

demands the strictest honesty, cost what it may. The public have

therefore to suffer my weakness, if weakness it be. I could not be

guilty of asking the Allies to take a step which would involve

certain defeat. . . Abrupt withdrawal of the Allied troops might'

result in Japan’s occupation of India and China’s sure fall. I had

not the remotest idea of any such catastrophe resulting from my

action. . . .’

Before I left the ashram Mahadev Desai asked me to tell the

Viceroy that Gandhi wished to see him. The Mahatma was

prepared to compromise and perhaps to abandon the projected

civil disobedience movement. In New Delhi, later, I received a

letter from Gandhi for transmission to President Roosevelt. The

accompanying note said, characteristically, ‘If it does not com¬

mend itself to you, you may tear it to pieces.’

He was malleable. ‘Tell your President I wish to be dissuaded,’

he told me. He was deeply convinced, however, that India should

be granted self-government during the war; if the anti-Axis

powers did not understand this he would call it to their attention

by a civil disobedience campaign. ‘Your President,’ Gandhi

declared one afternoon, ‘talks about the Four Freedoms. Do they

include the freedom to be free?’

Gandhi felt that the democratic position on India was morally

indefensible. Roosevelt or Linlithgow could dissuade him by

changing the position. Otherwise he had no doubts. Nehru and

Azad did. Rajagopalachari had resigned from the Congress

leadership because of his differences with the Mahatma. Gandhi

could not be shaken. He convinced Nehru and Azad. Nehru

had considered the foreign and domestic situation inopportune.

‘I argued with him for days together,’ Gandhi reported. ‘He

fought against my position with a passion which I have no words

to describe.’ Nehru’s personal contacts, Gandhi explained, ‘make

him feel much more the misery of the impending ruin of China

and Russia ... In that misery he tried to forget his old quarrel

with [British] imperialism’. But before Nehru left the ashram

‘the logic of facts’, as Gandhi put it, ‘overwhelmed him’. Indeed,

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Nehru became such a staunch supporter of the proposed civil

disobedience campaign that when I asked him subsequently in

Bombay whether Gandhi ought to see the Viceroy, he replied, ‘No,

what for?’ Gandhi was still hoping for an audience with Linlithgow.

I left the ashram on June ioth in the car that took Azad and

Nehru to the Congress hostel in Wardha. Several hours later, the

car returned to Sevagram to fetch Gandhi for further consulta¬

tions with the two Congress leaders. At three in the afternoon,

Gandhi entered the hostel alone. Three-quarters of a mile from

Wardha the car had broken down. Gandhi got out and walked

the distance in the broiling Indian afternoon June sun. When he

reached the house he was in a gay mood; if he suffered from

fatigue it was not noticeable and must have retreated before the

pleasure of being able to comment on the unreliability of ‘these

new-fangled technical achievements of the industrial age\*.

He had great charm. He was a remarkable natural pheno¬

menon, quiet and insidiously overwhelming. Intellectual contact

with him was a delight because he opened his mind and allowed

one to see how the machine worked. He did not attempt to express

his ideas in finished form. He thought aloud; he revealed each

step in his thinking. You heard not only words but also his

thoughts. You could therefore follow him as he moved to a con¬

clusion. This prevented him from talking like a propagandist; he

talked like a friend. He was interested in an exchange of views,

but much more in the establishment of a personal relationship.

Even when evasive Gandhi was frank. I was asking him about

his dreams of the post-independence India. He argued back and

forth. ‘You want to force me into an admission,’ he said, ‘that

we would need rapid industrialization. I will not be forced into

such an admission. Our first problem is to get rid of British rule.

Then we will be free, without restraints from the outside, to do

what India requires. The British have seen fit to allow us to have

some factories and also to prohibit other factories. No, for me the

paramount problem is the ending of British domination.’

That, obviously, was what he wanted to talk about; he did not

conceal his desire. His brain had no blue pencil. He said, for

instance, that he would go to Japan to try to end the war. He

knew, and immediately added, that he would never get an

opportunity to go and, if he went, Japan would not make peace.

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He knew too that his statement would be misinterpreted. Then

why did he make it? Because he thought it.

Gandhi asserted that a federal administration would be un¬

necessary in an independent India. I pointed out the difficulties

that would arise in the absence of a federal administration. He

was not convinced. I was baffled. Finally he said, ‘I know that

despite my personal views there will be a central government.’

This was a characteristic Gandhi cycle: he enunciated a principle,

defended it, then admitted with a laugh that it was unworkable.

In negotiation, this faculty could be extremely irritating and time-

wasting. In personal conversation, it was attractive and even

exciting. He himself was sometimes surprised at the things he

said. His thinking was fluid. Most persons like to be proved

right. So did Gandhi. But frequently he snatched a victory out

of an error by admitting it.

Old people are prone to reminiscences. Lloyd George would

commence to answer a question on current events and soon be

talking about his conduct of the first World War or a campaign

for social reform early in the century. At seventy-three, Gandhi

never reminisced. His mind was on things to come. Years did

not matter to him because he thought in terms of the unending

future. Only the hours mattered because they were the measure

of what he could contribute to that future.

Gandhi had more than influence, he had authority, which is

less yet better than power. Power is the attribute of a machine;

authority is the attribute of a person. Statesmen are varying

combinations of both. The dictator’s constant accretion of power

which he must inevitably abuse, steadily robs him of authority

Gandhi’s rejection of power enhanced his authority. Power feed

on the blood and tears of its victims. Authority is fed by service

sympathy and affection.

One evening I watched Mahadev Desai spin. I said I had been

listening carefully to Gandhi and studying my notes and wonder¬

ing all the time what was the source of his hold on people; I had

come to the tentative conclusion that it was his passion.

‘That is right,’ Desai said.

‘What is the root of his passion?’ I asked.

‘This passion,’ Desai explained, ‘is the sublimation of all the

passions that flesh is heir to.’

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‘Sex?’

‘Sex and anger and personal ambition . . . Gandhi is under his

own complete control. That generates tremendous energy and

passion.’

It was a subdued, purring passion. He had a soft intensity, a

tender firmness and an impatience cotton-wooled in patience.

Gandhi’s colleagues and the British sometimes resented his

intensity, firmness and impatience. But he retained their respect,

often their love, through his softness, tenderness and patience.

Gandhi sought approval; he was very happy when the great

Tagore agreed with him. But he could defy the whole world and

his political next-of-kin.

Gandhi was a strong individual, and his strength lay in the

richness of his personality, not in the multitude of his possessions.

His goal was To be, not To have. Happiness came to him through

self-realization. Fearing nothing, he could live the truth. Having

nothing, he could pay for his principles.

Mahatma Gandhi is the symbol of the unity between personal

morality and public action. When conscience dwells at home but

not in the workshop, office, classroom and market-place, the road

is wide open to corruption and cruelty and to dictatorship.

Gandhi enriched politics with ethics. He faced each morning’s

issues in the light of eternal and universal values. He always

distilled a permanent element out of the ephemeral. Gandhi thus

broke through the framework of usual assumptions which cramp

a man’s action. He discovered a new dimension of action. Un¬

confined by considerations of personal success or comfort, he

split the social atom and found a new source of energy. It gave

him weapons of attack against which there was often no defence.

His greatness lay in doing what everybody could do but doesn’t.

‘Perhaps he will not succeed,’ Tagore wrote of the living

Gandhi. ‘Perhaps he will fail as the Buddha failed and as Christ

failed to wean men from their iniquities, but he will always be

remembered as one who made his life a lesson for all ages to

come.’

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