



CHAPTER I

MAHATMA GANDHI

CHAPTER - I: MAHATMA GANDHI :GANDHI'S LIFE :

Mahatma Gandhi the father of the Indian Nation, was born in October 1869 at Porbander in Kathiawar. At the age of 79, he was shot dead at New Delhi. His father was a Dewan at Porbander at Rajkot. He got married at the age of 12; and at the age of 19, he left for Great Britain to Qualify for the Bar. Before leaving India, he made a promise to his mother that he would avoid three things, meat, wine and women. After qualifying himself for the Bar Gandhiji began to practise at Rajkot and from there he shifted to Bombay. During t his stay at Bombay, Gandhiji came into intimate contaft with Rajchandra Ravjibhai. The latter exercised a tremendous influence on him. As a matter of fact, Gandhiji got his first lesson of non violence and truth from Rajchandra Ravjibhai.

Gandhiji went to South Africa in connection with professional work on behalf of a Mohammedan firm. His stay in South Africa was the formative period of his political life. It was in South Africa that he put into practice his

weapon of Satyagraha. He also developed self-confidence to lead a struggle. It was in that dark continent that he taught his countrymen to give up fear, resist evil, by truth and never to yield, and strive to rise to the full stature of man hood.

Gandhiji's opportunity came in 1906, when the Asiatic Registration Act was passed by the government of South Africa. This Act required all asiatics to register themselves and give their thumb impression. This involved a measure of humiliation which was impossible for the Indians. Gandhiji not only protested against the enactment but also led a deputation to England. However, all that brought about no change. Under leadership of Gandhiji, the Indians refused to get themselves registered or give their thumb impression. The result was that thousands of them were sent to jail. Gandhiji himself was awarded two months imprisonment. As the movement was a novel one and government found itself helpless, a compromise was arrived at. The Indians agreed to get themselves registered voluntarily and Gandhiji was the first to offer himself for registration. However, the struggle had to be started once again as the Transvaal authorities refused to carry out their part of the agreement. There was a resentment in India against the treatment of the Indians. Then

the invasion of Transvaal took place. Two thousand men marched into the Transvaal under the leadership of Gandhiji. The march was a great landmark. It was the march of truth against untruth, of justice against injustice, and of non-violence against violence. A commission of inquiry was set up and ultimately Asiatic Act was cancelled. The poll-tax was replaced. Marriages among the Indians were recognised.

Having won his laurels in South Africa, Mahatma Gandhi came to India in 1914. At that time he had complete faith in the love of justice of the Englishmen. Now wonder, he appealed to the Indians to help the British Government unconditionally. It was after 1914 that doubts arose in his mind regarding the ideals of the British rule. The passing of the Rowlatt Bills in the teeth of the opposition by the people had profound influence on his mind. It became his firm faith that the British rule in India was satanic.

In 1915, Gandhiji said that "as a passive resister, I discovered that the British Empire had certain ideals with which I have fallen in love and one of those ideals is that every subject of the British Empire has the freest scope for his energies and honour and whatever he thinks is due to his conscience. And I have found that it is possible for me to be

governed less under the British Empire. Hence my loyalty to the British Empire. To the viceroy, he wrote thus in 1918; If I could make my countrymen retrace their steps, I would make them withdraw all the Congress resolutions and not whisper 'home-rule' or responsible government during the pendency of the war. I would make India offer all her able-bodied sons as a sacrifice to the Empire at this critical moment; and I know that India by this very act, would become the most favoured partner and racial distinctions would become a thing of the past. In the same strain was his advice to his countrymen in which he exhorted them to fight unconditionally unto death with Britain for victory and agitate simultaneously, also unto death if we must, for the reforms which we desire. The Rowlatt Act, the Punjab disorders and the Khilafat agitation, however, completely shattered his belief in the justice and good faith of England.

Between 1916 and 1920 the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Gandhi; took up mass mobilization as a nationalistic political tactic which had been started by the extremists with their Hindu revivalist orientations, culminated under Gandhi's leadership, and the Indian nationalism spread out from its base in the tiny Westernized middle class and

became a mass movement agitating for the passions of the Indian masses right down to the village level.¹ Gandhi was solely responsible for involving the masses in the national movement.

In a letter to the Viceroy written in August 1920, he wrote, "Events that have happened during the past month have confirmed me in the opinion that the Imperial Government have acted in the Khilafat matter in an unscrupulous, immoral and unjust manner, and have been moving from wrong to wrong in order to defend their immorality." I cannot retain neither respect nor affection for such a government." Your Excellency's light hearted treatment of official crime, your exoneration of Sir Michael O' Dwyer, Mr. Montagu's Despatch, and above all the shameful ignorance of the Punjab events and the callous disregard of the feelings of Indians betrayed by the House of Lords have filled me with the gravest misgivings regarding the future of the Empire, have estranged me completely from the present government and have disabled me from rendering as I have hitherto whole heartedly rendered, my total co-operation."

In January 1921, Gandhiji wrote in Young India stated ■ The difficulty of Englishmen lies really in not believing that their rule is wholly, evil for India, i.e., it has made India worse in every thing that counts. India is poorer in wealth, in mouldiness, in godliness and in her son's power to defend themselves. It is sinful to coquet with evil. There is no meeting ground between good and evil, God and Satan. I have considered for thirty years, and been driven to the conclusion that British rule in its present form has proved a curse to India. ■ His criticisms had been based on his firm convictions.

Mahatma Gandhi combined his non co-operation movement with the Khilafat movement. He had firm faith in the ideal of Hindu-Muslim unity. In spite of this outward co-operation for some time, it was found that there was no union of hearts. Differences arose between the Hindus and Muslims, because of which he was much disturbed. The Moplah revolt in Malabar opened the eyes of the Hindus. Riots which took place in Bombay on the day the Prince of Wales landed in that city. In February 1922 there took place serious rioting at Chauri-Chaura near Gorakhpur in U.P. At that place, 21 constables and one sub-inspector of police were locked in a

police station and burnt alive by a mob. The result was that Gandhiji withdrew his non co-operation movement. He was arrested by the government and sentenced to six year's simple imprisonment. As his trial, he pleaded guilty to the charge and made the following observation in his reply to the judge :

■ Non violence is the first article of my faith. It is the last article of my faith. But I had to make my choice; I had either to submit to a system which I consider has done irreparable harm to my country or incur the risk of the mad fury of my people bursting forth when they understood the truth from my lips. I know that my people have some times gone mad; I am deeply sorry for it; and I am therefore here to submit not to a light penalty but to the highest penalty. I do not ask for mercy. I do not plead any extenuating act. I am here, therefore, to invite and submit to the highest penalty that can be inflicted upon me for what in law is a deliberate crime and what appears to me to be the highest duty of a citizen.■

On March 2nd, Gandhiji sent a letter to Viceroy Lord Irwing informing his of his decision to proceed to ' Dandi '

with a band of followers to break the salt Laws, " the most iniquitous " of all laws." ² On March 11th, Gandhiji addressing a mammoth meeting on the sands of Sabarmati, said,

" You may take it as my will. It was the message that I desired to impart to you before starting on the march or for the jail. I wish there be no suspension or abandonment of the campaign that commences tomorrow morning, or earlier if I am arrested before that time. I shall eagerly await the news that ten batches are ready as soon as my batch is arrested, I believe there are men in India to complete the work begun by me. I have faith in the righteousness of our cause and the purity of our weapons. And where the means are clean, there is God undoubtedly present with his blessings. And where these three combine, there defeat is an impossibility." ³

On the morning of March 12th, 1930, Gandhi, the saint of Sabarmati and the greatest leader of modern India started on his salt March to Dandi at 6.30 a.m. on foot with 78 followers after taking a vow that he would not return to the Ashram of Sabarmati till independence had been won. ⁴

With his chosen few, trudging behind him, Gandhi indefatigably marched along the dusty roads, addressing meetings of thousands of people preaching the duty of disloyalty to the government, advertising the cause and arousing the people to sedition and sacrifice.⁵

Gandhi reached Dandi on April 5th, 1930, covering a distance of 241 miles in 24 days. On April 6th, Gandhi accompanied by a procession of 2000 people, bathed in the sea at 8-30 a.m. and broke the salt law by picking up some natural salt lying on the shore of Dandi.⁶ Government did not arrest Gandhi for breaking the law, but there were country-wide arrests. At the beginning there was no violence other than the governments. Maunds of contraband salt was collected, manufactured, stored and distributed in thousands of packets. All wars started through small causes, salt worked wonders as the greased cartridges did in the war of Independence of 1857, Salt became the symbol of India's will to freedom.⁷

The Congress, however thought it unworthy of India to take advantage of the war situation by starting a Satyagraha to embrace the British government. It also did not wish success to Nazism though it could not be expected to rally support to the cause of a tottering imperialism which had not yet learnt, even in its hour of peril, to shed arrogance and

spirit of domination. In July 1940, the Congress Working Committee decided to assist in defence effort if the British without declaring independence established a fully national government.

Pushed to a course of active resistance and incensed by a desire to assert their self respect in the face of such calculated indifference and contempt, the Congressmen under Gandhiji's leadership chose to adopt individual Civil Disobedience in October 1940, to assert the right to speak publicly against the support of the war.

Emphasizing the highly complementary nature of constructive programme. Gandhiji wrote; " Civil disobedience is not absolutely necessary to win freedom through purely non-violent efforts if the cooperation of the whole nation is secured in the constructive programme ". He added " Civil disobedience in terms of independence without the cooperation of the millions by way of constructive effort is mere bravado and worse than useless. " 8

After Cripp's departure on April 12th, 1942 Gandhi saw his opportunity. Before Cripp's arrival his civil disobedience

struggle had ended in dark disappointment. The Congress influence with the masses had decreased greatly. The morale of the people was at a low ebb. Cripp's arrival raised their hopes, but their high expectations had ended in bitterness and frustration.

The Congress High Command was divided Gandhi felt he must save the Congress from internal disruption, unify it and regain the Congress hold on the people by turning their increasing bitterness and frustration against British government, " I waited and waited " he said desperately in Harijan of 7th June 1942, " until the country should develop the non-violent strength necessary to throw off the foreign yoke. But my attitude has now undergone a change. I feel that I cannot afford to wait. If I continue to wait, I might have to wait till dooms day. For the preparation that I have prayed for and worked for me never came, and in the meantime I may be enveloped and overwhelmed by the flames that threaten all of us. That is why I have decided even at certain risks which are obviously involved I must ask the people to resist the slavery." 9

In July, 1942 he had sent a letter to Roosevelt through Louis Fischer who stayed with him for a week at Sevagram.

In it he asked for the withdrawal of British power, keeping the Allied troops at their own expense. It was in his article "To American Friends", which he wrote on his way to Bombay on August 3rd, 1942 that he first used the slogan "Quit India" which resounded through out the world.¹⁰

There was a split in the Congress on the question of council entry. Motilal Nehru and C.R. Dass were in favour of the Congress entering the legislatures and fighting the government from within also. However a compromise was arrived at after some time and the Swarajist Party got its blessings.

Since then, Mahatma Gandhi continued to dominate not only the Congress but also the entire politics of the country. His position was absolutely unchallenged. In 1931, he went to London to attend the Second Round Table Conference, but came back empty-handed on account of the attitude of the British Government and Mr. Jinnah. On many occasions, he decided to fast unto death for various causes. India won her independence in 1947, under his leadership. Although he was neither the Prime Minister of India nor the President of the Congress, his was the last word on every important aspect. He spent many years of his life in the cause of the Harijans or untouchables.



He led a life of simplicity and devotion to his duties. His daily prayer meetings were attended by thousands of his admirers. He carved a place in the minds and hearts of the down-trodden sections of the society. It was simply Gandhiji who built the mass base of the national movement, and laid down the foundations of India's freedom struggle. In him people found the required leadership, and he was the only one responsible to bring forth the required base of mass mobilization. He identified himself with the masses.

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3. Ibid. :
4. Dhananjay Keer : Mahatma Gandhi, P. 522.
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9. Dhanajay Keer : Mahatma Gandhi, P. 701.
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