CHAPTER IV

The Event Retold

THE Ahmedabad Event is usually considered to have been initiated by a meeting between Ambalal and Gandhi in Bombay, on one of Gandhi's lightning trips "out of Champaran." It would make a good beginning for a parable: There was a wealthy man, a powerful mill owner from Ahmedabad, who came to see Gandhiji in Bombay: "Master," he said to him, "do not return to Bihar, come back and take care of Ahmedabad, our city." This would be a counterpart to the parable of Champaran — how Gandhi gave in to the poor peasant who followed him from city to city until Gandhi agreed to go with him to the foothills of the Himalayas. The fact is that Gandhi in those years was testing in his mind, by scientific premeditation, a number of situations, as is obvious (if from nothing else) from a letter he wrote to an informed friend asking for a list of grievances then extant anywhere in India. And as we saw, he had begun carefully to select those whom, in the Autobiography, he called his companions.

Gandhi had kept in touch with conditions in Ahmedabad. He had visited his ashram twice from Champaran, and on one occasion had made a speech on the deplorable state of the city's water supply. In July 1917 he had also sent lengthy memoranda on how to meet the acute danger of a plague epidemic.

Conditions had been desperate. One needs to have seen the slums of Indian cities to imagine the damage an excessively heavy monsoon can do to the crowded clusters of floorless lean-tos, not to speak of the ground around them and the fresh water supply—if any. The monsoon of 1917 was extraordinarily heavy and helped to set in motion the whole chain of causes leading to a plague epidemic. Plague had been endemic in the Bombay Presidency since 1896, but serious plague outbreaks had so far stopped short of Ahmedabad. However, beginning in July of 1917, deaths from plague steadily increased in the city, reaching their peak in the middle of November with 600 new cases and 550 deaths. This percentage of about 10 per cent recovery apparently maintained itself throughout the epidemic. And the municipality was nearly powerless. It could neither provide the clean water needed nor keep out the bad water dreaded: vindictively the clean upper section of the Sabarmati River showed a tendency to "recede from the vicinity of the supply wells," while its polluted section overflowed exactly where drainage pumping was insufficient. "The question," so the municipality declared, "is of expert knowledge." To make matters worse, many of the city's employees left town without leave, along with those who had relatives in the vicinity. The health officers did a heroic job in trying to inoculate the remaining population and to disinfect abandoned premises with crude petrolatum, paraffin emulsion, and naphthalene powder. But catastrophes always increase superstition, which in India means a fear of pollution—not by dirty water, mind you, nor by rats or rat-fleas, but by health schemers, who would put public hygiene above caste apartheid.

Only about 30,000 people could be induced to accept inoculation. And the city's infectious diseases hospital had room for exactly twenty-six patients. Ambalal turned over his roomy mansion in Mirzapur to a young physician, a Dr. Tanka Karivalia, as a plague hospital, with one request: not to spare any amount of money to provide help for anybody who needed it. This was an uphill job as it was; and Ambalal insisted that the hospital be "integrated." Although some special accommodations had to be offered to some high-class Hindus who avoided hospitals in
normal times (I almost said "like the plague") and otherwise would have preferred to die by "natural" pollution, Jains as well as Christians were admitted, Banias and Mohammedans, Brahmans and Untouchables. The hospital, it seems, never had more than one hundred patients, but it did accomplish a fifty per cent recovery rate and thus tested the efficacy of some hygienic measures, while isolating at least some of the potentially most dangerous patients.

Besides the two European matrons, nurses imported from Baroda, and some conscientious ward-boys and ambulance workers, Dr. Tankariwalla could unexpectedly count on a "heroic party" of stretcher-bearers from Rajputana. I will tell this story briefly, in honor of those among our young people of today who are engaged in self-chosen restitutional work in the Peace Corps or at home. The "party" consisted of seven young men, educated Hindus of high caste and class. They suddenly appeared in Ahmedabad and asked whether they could help. Directed to the Sarala Devi Hospital, they offered to do the dirtiest and most dangerous work without caste discrimination. They accepted food rations but no money, and when after ten weeks the plague had subsided, they disappeared without giving their names, to Ambalal's intense chagrin.

Schools, colleges, and most public institutions had, of course, been shut down. The mills, however, decided to remain open and to offer a special bonus to the workers not for leaving the city, but for staying. Many of them, it must be added, were loath to leave the city anyway lest their meager possessions be looted in their absence. This, then, is the "plague bonus" which was to become the central issue of the strike that followed.

In the midst of this grim story of polluted water and rat-fleas, of municipal failure and mortal superstition, one finds the civic-mindedness of an Ambalal and the humanity of the stretcher-bearers from Rajputana. But one also finds the following item, characteristic of the isolation, geographic and psychological, of the city's elite circles. During a week in early September, when 400 city dwellers contracted the plague and 350 died, the theater critic of the Praja Bandhu also reported an "Allies Tableau" to be presented by a number of ladies to raise money for the British war effort:

The Allies Tableau is bound to be immensely appreciated. The heart of every patriotic person will pulsate with emotions at the scene presented. Each of the Allied Nations will be personified by a young lady. You will see Belgium crushed but dignified—hopeful for the future. You will see Servia trampled upon but undaunted—un-broken in spirit. Of course, you will cheer England and her brave friends—cheer with all your might. But, you are entitled to bring down the roof of the Theatre with your shouts of joy when you see India (personified by a young Parsi lady) marching proudly in the procession of Nations. The other scenes will be equally attractive. There will be a scene episode, which Hindus will specially welcome; the representation of the court of Jehangir and Noorjahan will dazzle you with its grandeur; and you will be conveyed to the historical past of your city by the scene representing King Ahmedshah in his beautiful garden.

In the meantime, a labor dispute had arisen owing to the fact that the five hundred warpers in the textile mills—Brahmans, Banias, and Muslims—just because they were a relatively better-paid elite among the workers and were too well settled in their urban homes to be tempted to flee the city, had not been offered a plague bonus and now demanded a 25 per cent "dearness allowance." Anasuya, from her work among these people, knew that this was a justified demand and (as already recounted) suddenly found herself the leader by acclamation of a small group of organized workers and the mill owners found themselves confronted with a strike threat signed by a Sarabhai! They tore it up contemptuously and requested Ambalal to discipline his rebellious sister. He argued, however, that if his sister had been a brother she would have received half his father's property; why should she be deprived of her rights because she was a woman? "I have no right to prevent her from doing her duty."

It was this situation which Anasuya, frightened by her unexpected role, had written to Gandhi about, asking for his blessing. Paradoxically, however, a very much bigger issue arose when the plague began to subside. The mill owners announced their
intention simply to disallow the bonus (up to 75 per cent of their wages) which had been given to the weavers while the plague raged.

At a meeting in Bombay, then, Ambalal took Gandhi aside to tell him of the worsening situation in Ahmedabad—that is, of his and his friends' determination to end the plague bonus—and imploring him, in his own and Anasuya's names, to intervene. But Gandhi had already seriously considered making Ahmedabad and all it stood for a testing ground for a full Satyagraha in labor relations. He had had a talk with the owners and the workers in Ahmedabad early in January; and there, no doubt, he had recognized the fact, clearly expressed in the behavior of the workers, that Anasuyaben in her simple, womanly way had already initiated a Satyagraha in the labor movement when she had imposed peacefulness on the striking warpers. He knew that the immediate power which this compassionate sister of one of the bosses had gained over the illiterate workers could hardly be overestimated.

However, as we have seen, Gandhi was preoccupied with his inner ambivalences as well as with the ambiguities of the situation, and he did everything to postpone the moment of action and decision—and this just because he knew that now he needed an occasion to demonstrate his principles "to the death." On February 8, in his very first address to workmen (his talks to the striking miners in Newcastle were not so much on work conditions as on national injustices), he warned them first to clarify for themselves what demands they could justly make. Even though the owners had offered bonuses up to 80 per cent in plague time, a demand for a 50 or 60 per cent increase in wages would be too easy for them to refuse because neither public nor press would sympathize with it. Only if a just demand could be established would arbitration follow. In the meantime, he said, they could count on Anasuyaben ("she lives only for you") and on him. The fact was that Anasuya was then more intimately known to the workers than he was, wherefore all the early suggestions and announcements were actually made in her name. And the ceaseless moralist could not help adding, from the start, that if they were asking for better earnings, he hoped that they also intended to learn to be clean, to get rid of various addictions (among which was included, no doubt, the "tea habit"), and to see that their children got an education.

In the meantime, Shankerlal reported from Bombay that wages there were already about 25 per cent higher than in Ahmedabad. This, however, the mill owners could easily disavow with the argument that Bombay was a harbor, while Ahmedabad was forced to import coal and export goods by rail.

On February 1, the Collector wrote to Gandhi that the mill owners were planning a lockout and that "I am informed that the mill owners will, if at all, only heed your advice; you are sympathetic to them, and you are the only person who can explain their case to me." 86 Shades of Durban: the only person available! But here the Collector was probably also referring to Gandhi's friendship with Ambalal. And Ambalal was becoming a key figure because the president of the Millowners' Association, Sheth Mangaldas Parekh, wanted nothing to do with lock-outs or strikes, was willing to continue the plague bonus in his own mills, and saw no reason to close them. From here on, "the mill owners" meant a majority of adamant agents formed for the occasion into a sub-association under the leadership of Ambalal. All kinds of political and economic issues were, no doubt, involved in the disagreements among the mill owners. Indian mills had made enormous profits while the war was keeping British textiles out of African and Asian harbors accessible to Indian ships; and the thrifty Ahmedabadis had hoarded their profits toward future purchases of British and American machinery unavailable during the war. A reliable labor force, therefore, exploited to the utmost, was the only guarantee that the equipment already installed could continue to supply the demand. And a steady labor force with little absenteeism was, then as later, Ahmedabad's main advantage over the larger industrial centers. So it seemed wise to establish the uses and the limits of arbitration then and there—and with Gandhi's soothing help. According to British secret intelligence, in fact, the war-
time shortage of coal and transportation made it quite convenient for the mill owners to close down the mills at this time and to settle issues of power which went far beyond the question of the bonus.

Ambalal's judgment as usual was more complex. As the mill owners' leader, he was determined to play it tough, although he recognized in his sister's success signs of a new consciousness in the working class, and he knew that unionization was unavoidable and desirable. He was glad to have to deal with Gandhi, who, he knew, would keep violence to a minimum, although he really wished the man would stay on the other side of the river and attend to the spiritual and national uplift which Ambalal was so willing to finance. He was quite determined to oppose his sister's economic influence in the community, but he was also glad to see her in the guiding hands of Gandhiji; and, at any rate, he continued to be totally unwilling to disavow or hinder her activities authoritatively. What Ambalal could not accept, however, was the interference of that agitator from Bombay who had lately been staying at his sister's house—on his compound. For him and his Gandhian pronouncements Ambalal reserved his most scathing remarks:

An arbitration board was established, and it clearly reflected the developing line-up: Ambalal and two mill owners on one side, and for the workers, Gandhi, Shankerlal and Vallabhbhai Patel, an as yet unknown Ahmedabad lawyer. The Collector was "umpire." But to the aroused workers this was just one more maneuver which they did not understand and in which they played no active role. So a few groups in a few mills struck anyway. Gandhi rushed back from Kheda, scolded the workers, apologized to the owners, and wrote to the Secretary of the Mill-owners' Association:

I think the principle of arbitration is of far-reaching consequence and it is not at all desirable that the mill-hands should lose faith in it... Banker has collected figures of what the Bombay mills pay. I shall be obliged if you send me, without delay, a statement of wages paid by the local mills... I am not particularly disposed to favour workers as workers; I am on the side of justice and often this is found to be on their side. Hence the general belief that I am on their side. I can never think of harming the great industry of Ahmedabad.

But it was too late. Most mills closed, and the first phase of the Event, the lockout, started: only those workers who agreed to accept a 20 per cent increase would be invited back, the owners announced. They refused to assist Gandhi in any further "re-search." He by then had made up his mind that 35 per cent was necessary for the workers, bearable for the industry, a worthy public cause—and midway between 20 per cent and 50 per cent. And, as is shown by the correspondents' column of the Bombay Chronicle, the public now did become interested. The Chronicle's Ahmedabad correspondent had most of the facts and figures wrong, but he seemed, at any rate, most agitated about the dissenters among the group of owners:

The chief aim of the dissenters, as can be seen, is not to protect the interest of the labourers, but to have a lion's share by working their mills, giving plague allowance only, and then to settle the question according to the settlement to be arrived at, after the strikes and lock-outs of other mills are over.

A few days later the Chronicle noted the fact that the Collector had called on Gandhi at the ashram and that arbitration had been decided on.

The readiness with which the Collector fell in with Mr. Gandhi's idea is also encouraging and it shows that if officials show a genuine desire to cooperate with—and not to patronize—the recognized leaders of the people, considerable good can be done to the commonwealth of the community."
The correspondent concludes by asking whether "anybody could bring forward a scheme to overcome these difficulties?" A few days later, another shareholder warned of the danger that locked out workers would find work elsewhere.

All these letters from Ahmedabad, however, were to be found only on the back pages of the Chronicle. The whole matter was not newsworthy, and "Mr. M. K. Gandhi" was considered to be not much more than an admirable do-gooder—way down in South Africa or way out in Bihar.

In the meantime, Gandhi and his co-workers quietly attended to the laborers. Mahadev writes:

Gandhiji believed in silent work, and took care to prevent coloured reports appearing in the Press about his activities. It is for this reason that those who obtain their information from newspapers do not know anything about the steps Gandhiji took in Champaran to transform the inner life of the people, and the results he achieved; people know only about the enquiry he held there. Similarly in Ahmedabad reports of the speeches made by Gandhiji during the struggle of the mill workers were deliberately not supplied to the newspapers.

Anasuya, Shankerlal, and Gandhi's nephew Chhaganlal, a "veteran" from South Africa, spent every morning and evening visiting the workers' districts, questioning and advising them, sending medical help or suggesting temporary employment, and bringing back to Gandhi daily reports on hardships and rumors, on the readiness to hold out and the sporadic inclination to give up. In the evenings, often until after midnight, Anasuyaben's house would be open to any worker with a special question.

Gandhi, in the meantime, seemed to be ready to create a number of new rituals adapted to the requirements of this particular Satyagraha. For one, over the name of Anasuya, he issued daily leaflets so well printed that they are still clear and clean today in the ashram's folders. Furthermore, every evening Gandhiji would gather the workers around him under the famous babul tree on the banks of the Sabarmati outside the Shahpur Gate.

I wanted to find the tree, of course. But a great flood had washed it away. The Shahpur Gate itself has now been torn down, for it could not funnel the traffic of vehicles and animals which at this point converges to spill out of the inner city, onto the approaches to the river and over the bridge which connects the city with a thriving residential suburb. And where this monumental tree once stood towering over sandbanks, today the worst slum of shacks in Ahmedabad hovers, housing, it is said, members of former "criminal" tribes.

Every afternoon Gandhi would arrive with his co-workers in Anasuya's 1915 Overland roadster, over the only then available bridge down river. They would be awaited by a crowd of workers, rarely numbering less than 5,000, and sometimes closer to 10,000, some having walked two or three miles, now seated to watch the little man in the loincloth speak—for very few could hear him. What he said, they knew, would only enlarge on the content of the leaflets which the few literate workers had read aloud in the various quarters of the city, or in the nearby villages. Rarely, if ever, had any man reached out to them more directly and without any trace of talking down to them. And nowhere before or since has Satyagraha been explained so clearly, in an "object lesson" in installments, printed or spoken, and each one attuned to all the participants in the developing struggle.

If Gandhi quietly insisted on transforming this event into a religious experience, some of the workers were prepared for it. On being locked out, they had solemnly said goodbye to their looms, the Hindus putting coconuts on the machines, the Muslims salaaming them, and both promising to return. And as Gandhi addressed the workers daily, what Shankerlal describes as "an emotion of high order" seemed to prevail—for a while. The police had been prepared for the worst, and armed constables began to patrol all streets, especially when the strikers began to march through the streets shouting, "Ek tek!"—"Keep your pledge!"—and improvising songs. After two days, how-ever, the Commissioner was convinced that Gandhi had the
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situation well in hand. He posted some horse carriages with constables at strategic intersections for another two days and then withdrew the special force altogether.

First Leaflet

As a condition for his and Anasuya's leadership, Gandhi had demanded of the workers the pledge which they affirmed with their cry. The first leaflet, on February 26, the fifth day of the lockout, certified that the workers' demands were moderate:

After giving full consideration to the interests of both the mill-owners and the workers and to all the other circumstances, [the arbitrators] decided that an increase of 35 per cent was justified and that the workers be advised accordingly. . . . The employers did not express their view on this matter. The workers, whose demand was for a 50 per cent increase, withdrew it and resolved to ask for a 35 per cent increase. 92

Then followed the Workers' Pledge:

The workers have resolved:
1. that they will not resume work until a 35 per cent increase on the July [1917] wage is secured.
2. that they will not, during the period of the lock-out cause any disturbance or resort to violence or indulge in looting, nor damage any property of the employers or abuse anyone, but will remain peaceful.

How the workers can succeed in their pledge will be discussed in the next leaflet.

If workers have anything to tell me [Anasuyaben] they are welcome to see me at my place at any hour of the day.

Under the babul tree, Gandhi added:

Today is the fifth day of the lock-out. Some of you probably think that everything will be all right after a week or two of suffering. I repeat that, though we may hope that our struggle will end early, we must remain firm, even if that hope is not realized and must not resume work even if we have to die. Workers have no money but they possess a wealth superior to money—they have their hands, their courage and their fear of God. If a time comes when you have to starve, have confidence that we shall eat only after feeding you. We shall not allow you to die of starvation 93

The Event

Gandhi usually drove back with Anasuya to Ambalal's compound and attended her tea hour. The mill owners' committee, too, met Ambalal in the afternoon, and afterward he often would come over to his sister's house. He had accepted Gandhi's proposition that they should talk over developments every day; and he would, in fact, often drive out to the ashram at noon in order to share a meal with Gandhi and Anasuya. On those occasions Gandhi, not without a chuckle, would insist that Anasuya serve her brother; he delighted in making the "domestic affair" more domestic.

Thanks to Mahadev's note-taking, we have, then, three sets of daily announcements which complement one another: in the morning Gandhi would address the daily prayer meeting at the ashram in his usual intimate and candid manner, after which he would go for his walk (which always also meant animated talk), attend to his correspondence and his visitors, and then "dine" with his co-workers—and on occasion, Ambalal. Sometime during the day or evening he would compose the next day's leaflet; and in the afternoon he would be fetched by Anasuya and Shankerlal in her Overland, in order to arrive under the babul tree at five o'clock sharp. I by no means trust Mahadev's notes altogether—there are interesting instances in which Gandhi disavows Mahadev's version of his dictation—but all in all, Gandhi's style emerges clearly. I will use the series of leaflets as a chronological guide, since all other details are necessarily less systematic and less complete.

Second Leaflet

On the day of the second leaflet (February 27), Gandhi told the prayer meeting:

I feel like repeating to you what the Collector told me yesterday, something which I have not mentioned anywhere else. I think I can say it in the Ashram. The Collector did not mean it as mere formality; he said what he really felt. For the first time in his life, he said, he saw here a struggle between workers and mill-owners conducted with mutual regard. I too don't think I have ever observed as good relations between the parties as here. As you see, Shri Ambalal is on the other side in this
struggle but he dined here yesterday. When I told him that he was to do so again today, he understood my meaning. He saw why I wanted him to dine with me and immediately agreed."

In the second leaflet, as promised in the first, Gandhi enlarged on the intrinsic strength with which the workers could back up their pledge:

If workers have no money however, they have hands and feet with which they can work, and there is no part of the world which can do without workers. Hence, if only he knows it, the worker holds the key to the situation. Wealth is unavailing without him. If he realizes this, he can be sure of success.

This Gandhi followed up with moral admonishments which might be read (or bypassed) as mere homilies, were it not for the universal problem of the inherent lack of discipline to be expected in colonialized peoples and in exploited masses—a lack, which may well lead to impulsive rioting when, for the first time, they recognize their potential strength. If the workers, then, are admonished to be truthful, this is not merely a matter of not telling factual lies, but also an exhortation against the spread of rumors by which an undisciplined group can easily become a delusional mob. If they are told to be courageous, it is because their previous state of near-slavery always opens them to the dread of total abandonment if they arouse anger in their "masters" to the point of release senseless violence—or surrender. At this point, Gandhi introduced a seemingly paradoxical device of Satyagraha:

At present [the employers] are angry. Also, they suspect that, if the present demands of the workers are granted, they will repeatedly harass them. To remove this suspicion, we should do our utmost to reassure the employers by our behaviour. The first thing to that end is to harbour no grudge against them.96

That the workers would not simply laugh at such a suggestion could be attributed to the ingrained respect for ahimsa, or to a childish trust in saintly leaders. But here it must be remembered that the vast majority of these workers were Muslims who, as a matter of fact, could easily be aroused to fanatic gestures and impulsive action. Yet Gandhi had recognized in South Africa that mastery over anger is less foreign to those who have learned to express anger in traditional and disciplined ways. Besides, to take active charge of senseless suffering by deliberately choosing to court meaningful suffering can be experienced as an exhilarating mastery over fate within a new ritualization such as Satyagraha:

Happiness follows suffering voluntarily undertaken. It is but suffering for the worker to be denied a wage sufficient to enable him to make both ends meet. Because of our ignorance, however, we endure this and manage to live somehow. Seeking a remedy against this suffering we have told the employers that it is not possible for us to maintain ourselves without the wage increase demanded and that if it is not granted to us and we are not saved from continuous starvation we would rather starve right now."

But it is a large order to convince an illiterate mass of workers of the power of self-suffering, especially if counter-leaflets put out by their employers (none, as far as I know, preserved) make fun of their leaders and the leaders' exhortations, while guaranteeing the stubborn workers and their families only one sure outcome: senseless hunger. So under the babul tree that afternoon Gandhi placed the "domestic affair" in the widest possible context, one which certainly the workers in Ahmedabad had never envisaged:

If you had accepted defeat from the beginning, I would not have come to you, nor would have Anasuyaben; but you decided to put up a fight. The news has spread all over India. In due course, the world will know that Ahmedabad workers have taken a pledge, with God as their witness, that they will not resume work until they have achieved their object. In future, your children will look at this tree and say that their fathers took a solemn pledge under it, with God as their witness. If you do not fulfil that pledge, what will your children think of you? The future of your posterity depends on you.99

One can easily see the analogy to the struggle in South Africa in which a few thousand Indians were made to feel that not only Mother India but the very principles of the British Empire
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depended on them. And Gandhi did not fail to teach the workers a new attention and a new concentration:

Remember each word in these leaflets and keep the pledge conscientiously. There is no point in knowing them by heart mechanically. Many can repeat parrot-like the Holy Koran or the Gita: some can recite both the Gita and the Tulsi Ramayana. It is not enough, though, that one knows them by heart. If, having learnt them by heart, you put the teaching into practice, rest assured that none can whittle down your 35 per cent even by a quarter per cent. 100

But even as Gandhi came to feel responsible—now to the death—for a few thousand workers whom he had drawn and tied to himself by recourse to the mighty name which must not be used in vain, he wrote the tenderest letter to his son Ramdas, 20 years old, working with a tailor in Johannesburg:

I keep worrying about you these days. I detect a note of despondency in your letters. It seems you feel the want of education. You feel, too, that you have not settled down to anything. If only you were with me, I would take you on my lap and comfort you. In the measure in which I fail to make you happy, I think I must be wanting in something. There must be something lacking in my love. Please think of any wrongs I may have done as unintended and forgive me. Children are entitled to much from their parents, being all submission to them. A mistake on the part of the parents will ruin their lives. Our scriptures place parents on a level with God. It is not always that parents in this world are fit to carry such responsibility. Being but earthly, they pass on the legacy to their children and so from generation to generation mere embodiments of selfishness come into this world. Why should you think that you are an unworthy son? If you are so, don't you see that that would prove that I was unworthy? I don't want to be reckoned as unworthy; how could you be so then?

You need not ask my forgiveness. You have given me no reason to be unhappy. I want you to come over to me after your experiments there are over. I shall do my part to see you married. If you want to study, I shall help you. You need not ask my forgiveness. You have given me no reason to be unhappy. I want you to come over to me after your experiments there are over. I shall do my part to see you married. If you want to study, I shall help you. If you but train your body to be as strong as steel, we shall see to the rest. At the moment, we are scattered wide apart. You there, Manilal in Phoenix; Deva in Badharwa, Ba in Bhitharwa, Harilal in Calcutta, and myself ever on the move from place to place. Maybe, in this separation lies service to the nation and the way to spiritual uplift. Whether that is so or not, let us bear with cheerful mind what has fallen to our lot. 101

The third leaflet (February 28) takes up the matter of the dignity of all work, as against that of any particular line of work especially sanctioned by caste and tradition. This is a basic problem which must be faced sooner or later by every civilization. Luther dealt with it extensively; and, of course, the revolution of peasants and workers in Russia was in full swing at the time of the Ahmedabad lockout. In a civilization in which one's caste position in this life, as well as one's eternal Karma, is associated not only with the kind of work one does, but with the kinds of work one must avoid at all cost, it was no small matter to address workmen as follows:

In India, a person in one occupation thinks it below his dignity to follow any other. Besides, some occupations are considered low and degrading in themselves. Both these ideas are wrong. There is no question of inferiority or superiority among occupations which are essential for man's existence. Nor should we be ashamed of taking up an occupation other than the one we are used to. We believe that weaving cloth, breaking stones, sawing or splitting wood or working on a farm are all necessary and honourable occupations. We hope, therefore, that instead of wasting their time in doing nothing, workers will utilize it in some such useful work. 102

With this came detailed advice: do not waste your time in gambling, sleeping, gossiping, and drinking tea; don't loiter around the mills. What a chance you now have to clean and...
places still does) arouse a metaphysical shudder: one is not in accord with the drift of the universe. Gandhi, never one to exclude himself from a redefinition, promised, in the fourth leaflet, to define his own duties as a leader.

In the meantime, he did not hesitate to tell the highest British dignitary in the city what he thought his duty was. He and Commissioner Pratt had had a talk on the Kheda situation on February 27 and, as was so typical for Gandhi, something in the tone of the conversation continued grating on him. So he sent off an immediate and frank letter worded with the force of a prophet who knew that he would implement the change he predicted:

A new order of things is replacing the old. It can be established peacefully or it must be preceded by some painful disturbances. What it will be lies largely in the hands of civil servants like yourself, more than those of the King's representatives quite at the top. You desire to do good, but you rule not by right of love, but by the force of fear. The sum total of the energy of the civil service represents to the people the British Constitution. You have failed, probably not through any fault of your own, to interpret it to the people as fully as you might have. . . . I presumptuously believe that I can step into the breach and may succeed in stopping harmful disturbances during our passage to the new state of things. . . . I can only do so if I can show the people a better and more expeditious way of righting wrongs. . . . The only dignified and truly loyal and uplifting course for them is to show disapproval by disobeying your orders which they may consider to be unjust, and by knowingly and respectfully suffering the penalty of their breach.

*Fourth Leaflet*

The fourth leaflet (March 1) was devoted to the advisers' role. As if to avoid false promises, it first stated "what we can not do": for example, support the workers in any wrongdoing, such as making irresponsible demands or committing violence. Furthermore, the leaders can only promote the workers' interest "while safeguarding the employers.'"

On the other hand, the workers' interest was defined as including vastly more than the 3 5 per cent increase to which the leaders commit themselves once again.

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We shall show the workers how they may improve their economic condition; we shall strive to raise their moral level; we shall think out and teach them ways and means of living in cleanliness and we shall work for the intellectual improvement of such of them as live in ignorance.

And then a fateful promise:

We shall not ourselves eat or dress without providing food and clothing to such of the workers as are reduced to destitution in the course of the struggle.

Before this statement, Gandhi, with his equal tolerance of the wealthy and the poor, had not shown that he fully comprehended what class differences the workers would perceive in the simple daily fact that while they were beginning to starve, their leaders would arrive in an American-built car after—as far as the workers knew or imagined—a good meal in Anasuya's well-stocked house. For the moment, he would only encourage the workers to come, confront, and censure the advisers "whenever you see us committing mistakes or slackening in our efforts to carry out our pledge."

Yet, as if to counterbalance the emphasis in this leaflet on what the advisers and the employers had yet to learn, Gandhi had written to Ambalal in the morning:

If you succeed, the poor, already suppressed, will be suppressed still more, will be more abject than ever and the impression will have been confirmed that money can subdue everyone. If, despite your efforts, the workers succeed in securing the increase, you and others with you will regard the result as your failure. Can I possibly wish you success in so far as the first result is concerned? Is your desire that the arrogance of money should increase? Or that the workers be reduced to utter submission? Would you be so unkindly disposed to them as to see no success for you in their getting what they are entitled to, may be even a few pice more? Do you not see that in your failure lies your success, that your success is fraught with danger for you?

. . . My success everyone will accept as success. My failure, too, will not harm anyone, it will only prove that the workers were not prepared to go farther than they did. An effort like mine is Satyagraha. Kindly look deep into your heart, listen to the still small voice within and obey it, I pray you. Will you dine with me?
The fifth leaflet (March 2) told the workers what the employers feared. They were apprehensive of two things, according to Gandhi: that the workers, once their demands had been met, would become overbearing and ever-more demanding; and that, the advisers' influence over the workers would become permanent. To the first of these fears, Gandhi countered that the greater danger was that the workers, if continually sup-pressed, would become more and more vindictive. As to the advisers, he agreed that the employers would never succeed in dividing advisers and workers—least of all by disappointing the workers—but he suggested that generous employers could always count on help from the advisers if the workers ever failed in their duty toward the employers.106

So far, so good. But here the reassuring tone suddenly gave way to what almost amounted to a curse. Was Gandhi, in his turn, beginning to be apprehensive, lest the employers play a cheating game against his way of pure justice? He concluded the leaflet: "the employers have adopted the Western, or the modern, Satanic notion of justice"—an indictment which lumps the capitalist and the communist conception of a labor dispute together in one devilish, Western, modern trend: class warfare.

The first words of the sixth leaflet were 'pure justice.' And it seems understandable that Gandhi felt the need to explain this concept, which opposes Western ways to native Indian systems of justice:

There was a time in India when servants, passing from father to son, used to serve in the same family for generations. They were regarded and treated as members of the family. They suffered with the employers in their misfortunes and the latter shared the servants' joys and sorrows. In those days India was reputed for a social order free from friction, and this order endured for thousands of years on that basis. Even now this sense of fellow-feeling is not altogether absent in our country. Where such an arrangement exists, there is hardly any need for a third party or

It is obvious that this (possibly oversimplified) version of the good old jajman-kamin system was offered in an attempt to save in a new and industrialized world what traditional values still existed on both sides. The leaflet contained a note of disappointment:

We had confidently hoped that the Jain and Vaishnava employers in the capital city of this worthy land of Gujarat would never consider it a victory to beat down the workers or deliberately to give them less than their due.107

Those who would ride roughshod over such 'feudalism' should remember that Gandhi was an excellent judge of what values had retained their actuality for these ex-peasant workmen, and what kind of actuality was apt to confirm an existing sense of identity—on both sides. For while I believe (and Ambalal has confirmed this) that the mill owners, on the defensive, did not hesitate to use all the tricks in the arsenal of ownership, I am also certain that, even to this day, the older generation of owners would be loath to abandon a certain paternalist role, decried of course by socialists and progressivists. This native feudalism Gandhi contrasted with what was then a popular version of Social Darwinism.

[In] the present war in Europe . . . no means is considered improper for defeating the enemy. Wars must have been fought even in the past, but the vast masses of the people were not involved in them. We would do well not to introduce into India this despicable idea of justice. When workers make a demand merely because they think themselves strong enough to do so, regardless of the employers' condition, they will have succumbed to the modem, Satanic idea of justice. The employers, in refusing to consider the workers' demands, have accepted this Satanic principle of justice maybe unintentionally or in ignorance. The employers ganging up against the workers is like raising an army of elephants against ants. If they had any regard for dharma, the employers would hesitate to oppose the workers. You will never find in ancient India that a situation in which the workers starved was regarded as the
employers' opportunity. That action alone is just which does not harm either party to a dispute.\textsuperscript{108}

I have italicized the last sentence because it is the very soul of any Satyagraha struggle. It is fair to assume that at this point relations between Gandhi and Ambalal became rather strained; for it is almost a rule that powerful opponents, in their stubborn bewilderment over being faced with this new nonviolent kind of struggle, become more ruthless. That this bewilderment induces them to use means not entirely in accord with their traditional and personal values provides a critical moment in any Satyagraha struggle, because it shows up the moral weakness of the powerful.

In the meantime, Gandhi managed to give to the meetings under the babul tree the form of a major ritual which would soon sprout minor ones. The descriptions all agree: A crowd of thousands would wait for hours, then make way for Gandhi and his party. Perfect silence reigned while the day's leaflet was read aloud and while Gandhi discoursed on it. Day by day, more and more outsiders would come to witness the strange ceremonial, with its concluding mass reaffirmation of the original pledge, followed by a friendly contest among various groups who had made up new songs for the occasion. Some of these were doggerel and loudly appreciated; others indicated clearly that a transfer of traditional religious feeling to this new kind of social experience was underway.

If, to Gandhi's initial horror, much of the religious sentiment began to focus on him as a charismatic figure, one can only say he should have known better: for this was only the beginning of his inevitable Mahatmaship. At the end of the meeting, as he withdrew with his retinue, the work-men would form small processions to march through town singing the newly improvised songs. The texts of these songs, stripped of the gaiety, the improvisation, and the rhythm of musical intonation, now appear to be banal. Nonetheless, here are some examples from Mahadev's booklet and from Shankerlal's notebook:

**Be not afraid for we have a divine helper.**

If we are to die of starvation, let us die but it is proper that we do not give up our resolve.

May God give great glory and fame to kind-hearted Gandhi.

And incidentally he has awakened us from the dream of ignorance.

Kindhearted Gandhiji and our sister Anasuya.

May their names remain before the world till the day of resurrection.

There probably were other kinds of songs (one would almost hope so) such as good Gandhites would be loath to note down for posterity. Gandhi alluded to this development toward the end of the strike, indicating that he kept an eye on this new kind of poetry, too. "It is not proper," he once interrupted a gay singer who had received enthusiastic applause that you ridicule the machines and call them "empty show-cases." These inanimate machines have not done you any harm. You had been getting your wages from these very machines. I must advise our poets that we must not use bitter words; we should not cast aspersions on the employers. It is no use saying that the rich go in motor cars because of us. By saying so we only lose our own self-respect. I might as well say that even the King Emperor George V rules because of us, but saying so does not redound to our credit. We do not prove ourselves good by calling others bad. God above sees who does wrong. He punishes him. Who are we to judge? We merely say that the employers are wrong in not giving us the 35 per cent increase.\textsuperscript{106}

But the issue of the 35 per cent increase, as Gandhi knew only too well, had by now been absorbed in a struggle which had its own momentum. He knew that workmen not inspired or intellectually persuaded by an economic ideology could not accept the stark fact of hunger without some religious conviction. And they were hungry. What help some had been receiving from their village relatives or from more fortunate co-workers was beginning to dwindle.

So far, however, the workers had been discouraged from seeking alternative employment: as long as there was hope that the mill owners would give in early in the game, any action had to be avoided which might make it appear that the workers con-
sidered themselves a potentially migratory group rather than an indigenous labor force, an organic part of the textile industry.

It seems quite probable that if the lockout continues for about a fortnight or more, a great many labourers who are at present willing to resume work and accept the allowance with the millowners’ group have decided to give, would find means of living at places other than this, and so when the settlement is effected and the weaving sheds commence working, an unusual scarcity of labour is sure to be experienced.10

It may have been this threat, together with some wish to support Gandhi’s "pure justice," which caused a number of outsiders to offer financial aid to the workers. One of Shankerlal’s Bombay friends offered a big sum, and Gandhi had to admit that he had had similar offers from Ahmedabad friends. But he adamantly refused all help, giving the usual combination of ideological and practical reasons: "A struggle supported by public charity is not Satyagraha." Furthermore, the mill owners would be provided with an extraneous and artificial factor in their pending decisions: "All they have to do is calculate how long such support could last." But from here on, alternative employment was suggested, and Gandhi himself set an example by offering some employment at the ashram.

Seventh Leaflet

Leaflet seven (March 4) starts off surprisingly: "South Africa is a large British Colony." Gandhi was now going to give the workers a historical (or is it mythological) perspective on the dawn of Satyagraha in South Africa. But always intent on connecting a new theme with the actuality of the day, he began with the very last phrase of the South African struggle as an example of "pure justice." So almost perversely he told the striking mill hands about the time Satyagraha was suspended because the European railroad workers had gone on strike:

When the railway strike was launched, a strike involving 20,000 Indian workers had already begun. We were fighting the Government of that country for justice, pure and simple. The weapon our workers employed was satyagraha. They did not wish to spite the Government, nor did they wish it ill. They had no desire to dislodge it. The European workers wanted to exploit the strike of the Indians. Our workers refused to be exploited. They said, "Ours is a satyagraha struggle. We do not desire to harass the Government. We will, therefore, suspend our struggle while you are fighting." Accordingly, they called off the strike."

One may ask in passing where, on that occasion, was the solidarity of the working class, that is, of railroad and industrial workers. But the reader will remember that the laboring class in South Africa, then as now, did not extend such solidarity to "coloured" people, and was, if anything, more violent in its racism than the middle class, which was less endangered by competition from immigrant workers. At any rate, he now presented a new gospel, which fit the workers’ semi-religious mood.

Eighth Leaflet

From leaflet eight (March 5):

Let us on this occasion think of what other persons like ourselves have done. Such a satyagrahi was Hurbatsingh. He was an old man of 75 years. He had gone to South Africa on a five-year contract to work on an agricultural farm on a monthly wage of seven rupees. When the strike of 20,000 Indians, referred to in the last leaflet, commenced, he also joined it. Some strikers were jailed and Hurbatsingh was among them. His companions pleaded with him and said, "It is not for you to plunge into this sea of suffering. Jail is not the place for you. No one can blame you if you do not join such a struggle." Hurbatsingh replied: "When all of you suffer so much for our honour, what shall I do by remaining out-side? What does it matter even if I die in jail?" And, verily, Hurbatsingh died in jail and won undying fame. . . . and hundreds of Indians joined his funeral procession.112

Nor was this a matter of social class:

Like Hurbatsingh was the Transvaal business man, Ahmed Mahomed Cachalia. By the grace of God he is still alive, and lives in South Africa where he looks after the Indian community and safeguards its honour. During the struggle in which Hurbatsingh sacrificed his life, Cachalia went to prison several times. He allowed his business to be ruined and, although he now lives in poverty, is respected everywhere. He saved his honour, though he had to pay heavily for it.

Nor should age be a dividing factor:
Gandhi's Truth

Just as an old labourer and a middle-aged business man of repute stood by their word and suffered, so also did a girl of seventeen years. Her name was Valliamah. She also went to jail for the honour of the community during that same struggle. She had been suffering from fever when she was imprisoned. In jail, the fever became worse. The jailer advised her to leave the jail, but Valliamah refused and with an unflinching mind completed her term of imprisonment. She died on the fourth or the fifth day after her release from jail.

Under the babul tree, Gandhiji brought home the moral:

These three sought nothing for themselves. These sisters and brothers of ours did not have to pay the tax. Cachalia was a big merchant and did not have to pay it. Hurbatsingh had migrated before the tax was imposed, so he, too, did not have to pay it. The law imposing the tax had not been brought into force at the place where Valliamah lived. And yet all these joined the struggle. . . . Your struggle on the other hand is for your own good. It should therefore be easier for you to remain firm.113

And as for a few weeks of hardship:

The trouble was not over within twelve days. The entire struggle lasted for seven years and during that period hundreds of men lived under great suspense and anxiety and stuck to their resolve. Twenty thousand workers lived homeless and without wages for three months Many sold whatever goods they had. They left their huts, sold their beds and mattresses and cattle and marched forth. Hundreds of them marched several days, each getting only \( \frac{3}{4} \) lb. of flour and an ounce of sugar. There were Muslims as well as Hindus among them.114

That day, a letter to South Africa rejoiced that Satyagraha "is beginning to have full play in all departments of life."115

But there is some exasperation, too: "Ambalal . . . is the most stubborn opponent in the strike."

Ninth Leaflet, Tenth Leaflet

At the conclusion of the ninth leaflet, Gandhi finds it necessary to refer to the employers' tactics as "unworthy," "exaggerated," "twisted."

The tenth leaflet (March 7) had to meet an immediate danger: some workers were trying to alleviate their situation by borrowing money at exorbitant interest rates. And yet, there was no use denying the need:

It is just about a fortnight since the lock-out commenced, and yet some say that they have no food, others that they cannot even pay rent . . . . Such extreme poverty is a painful thing indeed. But a 35 per cent increase will not by itself cure it. Even if wages were to be doubled, in all likelihood the abject poverty would remain unless other measures were also adopted.

Knowing that without some long-range vision a momentary remedy would seem trivial, he promised help beyond the present emergency—a promise which would be kept:

If, as part of the present struggle, all workers take an oath not to pay such excessive interest, they will have an unbearable burden lifted from them. Nobody should pay interest at a rate higher than twelve per cent. Some may say: "It is all right for the future, but how shall we pay back what we have already borrowed on interest? We have this thing with us for a lifetime now." The best way out of this situation is to start co-operative credit societies of workers.116

In the meantime, the mill owners exploited the workers' predicament in their own way. They promised a money reward to any worker who could persuade five other workers to return with him to the mill. Furthermore, they spread rumors that the lockout might be lifted any day, possibly as soon as March 12, for those workers who were willing to accept a 20 per cent increase in wages. Compared with nothing, twenty per cent, of course, now seemed like much, and only a little less than the seemingly unreachable thirty-five. There were additional hints that the extra 35 per cent would be granted soon after the resumption of work or paid to the workers indirectly by a distribution of grains and foodstuffs. The city began to sympathize with such promises, and many considered it laughable that hungry workmen, or for that matter any Indian workmen, presumed to know how to take or keep a pledge without the dictatorial presence of a mahatma. And, indeed, Gandhiji knew only too well (and would tell the mill hands at the end of it all) that he, as an expert in vow-taking, had single-handedly lifted the workers' moral aspiration to a level which in the long run could
be maintained only by a total change in their condition; while the slightest chance for such a change would be forfeited for a long time to come if the workers' temporary awareness were now to be lost. In the meantime, a rush back to the mills could, of course, be easily started by workmen who had not taken the pledge, including those who had not previously returned to town from the villages.

Eleventh Leaflet

On March 11, therefore, Gandhi suddenly told the workers (and announced in leaflet eleven) that on the following day the meeting under the babul tree would be held at 7:30 in the morning—at the very moment the factory whistles might suddenly announce that the mills were open.

You should also search out the workers from other parts of the country who live as strangers to you and who have hitherto not attended these meetings, and see that they attend them. In these days, when you are facing a temptation, all manner of thoughts will occur to you. It is a miserable thing for a working man to be without a job. The meetings will keep up the patience of all workers who feel so. For those who know their strength, there can be no enforced unemployment.

The decisive moment had obviously arrived. In the early hours of March 12, Gandhiji dictated letters to influential men who had urged him to abandon the struggle in view of the pitiful conditions in the workers' districts. To Sheth Mangaldas, the president of the Millowners' Association, who had not joined the lockout, he wrote: "Why don't you participate in this? It does not become you merely to watch this great struggle unconcernedly."

But it was already too late. The lockout was declared ended on March 12, a conclusion which Gandhi turned into a beginning—"Today a new chapter begins." It was initiated by a letter from Ambalal which Gandhi immediately destroyed upon reading without even giving Mahadev a chance to copy it. But from Gandhiji's answer (which he likewise forbade Mahadev to preserve in its entirety), it can be seen that Ambalal had complained of unfair pressure on the workers, and yet, matching Gandhiji's

"will you dine with me?" and maybe in the expectation that the struggle would end that day, he had invited Gandhiji to his home. From memory Mahadev reconstructed these passages of Gandhiji's answer:

I have certainly no desire that a labourer should be forced against his will to keep away from it [the mill]. I am even ready, myself, to escort any worker who says he wants to attend the mill. I am altogether indifferent whether a labourer joins or does not join.

In view of the task you have set me, how can I accept the pleasure of staying with you? I should very much like to see your children. How is that possible at present, though? Let us leave it to the future."

Twelfth Leaflet

At any rate, there was now a new play of forces: "Today," leaflet twelve announced, "the employers' lock-out is at an end and a workers' strike has commenced."

Gandhiji now played for the highest odds. "The workers," he wrote, "may rise from their present condition" only if they have no other way to advance themselves except to stand by their oath, and it is our conviction that, if only the employers realize it, their welfare too lies in the workers' keeping their oath. Eventually, even the employers will not *ain by taking work from workers who are too weak to keep their oath. A religiously-minded person will never feel happy in forcing a person to break his pledge or associating himself with such an effort. We have, however, no time now to think of the employers' duty. They know it all right. We can only entreat them. But the workers must think seriously what their duty is at this time. Never again will they get an opportunity like the present one.

In view of the immediate danger of losing this possibly irretrievable opportunity, Gandhiji at last consented to what he had vetoed so far, namely, an appeal to the solidarity of Indian workers:

It is possible that the workers from outside Gujarat are not well-informed about this struggle. In public work we do not, and do not wish to, make distinctions of Hindu, Muslim, Gujarati, Madrasi, Punjabi, etc. We are all one or wish to be one. We should, therefore, approach these workers with understanding and enlighten them about the struggle and make them see that it is to their advantage, too, to identify themselves with the rest of us.
Gandhi's Truth

Thirteenth Leaflet

At the same time (and he may have waited to inform the wider public until this was firmly established), the identity of the struggle as a Satyagraha could not be compromised; and even as, quite in accord with his practice in South Africa, he had offered to guide any scared strike-breaker personally through a threatening picket line, so he now insisted, in leaflet thirteen, that the strikers should not prevent anybody from entering the mills; they should, in fact, keep away from the mills, and look for opportunities to work elsewhere. But this was too much for the workers. To be locked out is a passive thing, and dignity would demand that one not stand by the gates dramatizing oneself as unwanted. To strike, while a mill is open to willing workers, is an aggressive act, and it is hard to forego the opportunity of dramatizing both one's refusal and the power of denying entrance to strike-breakers. The strikers' songs now became more aggressive, and when Gandhi continued to reprimand them, the movement lost much of its previously pervasive spirit. A second crisis was imminent.

As if to signify also the relative national isolation of this "domestic affair," at this critical moment Annie Besant arrived in town to give two lectures in one day, one on "National Education" and the other on "Swaraj." In the afternoon, Gandhiji chaired the meeting and introduced the speaker with his brand of gallantry: "No matter if she commits hundreds of mistakes, we shall honor her." But the strike was not mentioned. At a reception preceding the evening meeting, however, Gandhi, pointed to Ambalal, and said to Mrs. Besant: "These people have decided to destroy the mill workers." To which Ambalal re-plied, "and they want to do the same to the mill owners." Mrs. Besant, always willing to take over, immediately wanted to know whether she should ask the authorities to intervene—the very gesture of Benares! But Gandhi declared this to be quite unnecessary: "There is full regard for each other amongst . . . us." Mrs. Besant declared this to be rather unusual.

Fourteenth Leaflet

A fourteenth leaflet was ready exhorting the workmen again to keep busy:

It behooves us that we maintain ourselves by doing some work. If a worker does not work, he is like sugar which has lost its sweetness. If the sea-water lost its salt, where would we get our salt from? If the worker did not work, the world would come to an end.

And he concluded: "Even if only one person holds out, we shall never forsake him."

But the time for leaflets, and even for those with a biblical ring, was passing. Gandhiji obviously felt that he himself would have to be the one person to hold out and also the one not to forsake himself. He suddenly heard himself say: "I cannot tolerate for a minute that you break your pledge. I shall not take any food, nor use a car till you get 35 per cent increase or all of you die fighting for it."

The fast, begun on March 15, 1918, was the first of seventeen fasts "to the death" which Gandhi was to undertake throughout his long life. In later years, all of India would hold its breath while the Mahatma fasted, and whole cities would leave their lamps unlit in the evening in order to be near him in the dark.
And since then, many others have followed the Mahatma's example, though their reasons have often been impulsive, vindictive, or faddish. It is, therefore, especially important to understand what motivated Gandhiji's decision in this first instance and why he came to regret it as not quite worthy of his cause. But it should be clear that there cannot really be any "pure" decision to starve oneself to death, for such determination can only emerge from a paradoxical combination of a passionate belief in the absolute vitality of certain living issues and the determination to die for them: thus one "lives up" to a principle by dying for it. A martyr, too, challenges death, but at the end he forces others to act as his executioners. The decision to let oneself die is of a different and admittedly more obscure order.

No doubt, this fast was improvised, but no doubt also, fasting as a last resort must have been considered before by the leading Satyagrahi. To those present at the scene, however, it must have come as a kind of metaphysical shock.

Excitable Muslims provided immediate drama. When Anasuya declared that of course she would join Gandhi, many workmen burst into tears and swore right then and there to do likewise, or to kill themselves if she should die. One flamboyant Muslim became the hero and the victim of the excitement, and his name is preserved: Banuma—a weaver who was always immaculately dressed, wore a pink turban, and was proud of his four looms and fond of his two wives. He suddenly bared a big knife and was about to stab himself when Gandhiji himself...
labor as such, and the workers knew or sensed that the "inner advance" which Gandhiji expected of them was the conviction that it is more important to keep a pledge and to suffer than to maintain ancient proprieties or to indulge in ancient avoidance. So now, many came and kept demonstratively busy about the place; and it is reported that the two children of the bourgeoisie, Shankerlal and Anasuya, deprived as they were of fasting with Gandhiji, took to carrying baskets of sand on their heads alongside the workmen in the hot sun.

In the late afternoon of the first day of the fast, Gandhiji waded back to the babul tree, where thousands, starving but newly inspired, awaited him. Gandhiji first assured the men and women from the Jugaldas Chawl that he was not angry with them. On the contrary, he and other would-be servants of India could learn only from the workers' criticism. The central problem was the pledge, and the willingness to beat starvation by doing other kinds of available work:

But what should I do to persuade you to maintain yourselves with manual labour? I can do manual work, I have been doing it, and would do so even now, but I do not get the opportunity for it. I have a number of things to attend to and can, therefore, do some manual work only by way of exercise. Will it behave you to tell me that you have worked on looms, but cannot do other physical labour? . . . When I came to know of your bitter criticism of me, I felt that, if I wanted to keep you to the path of dharma and show you the worth of an oath and the value of labour, I must set a concrete example before you. We are not out to have fun at your cost or to act a play. How can I prove to you that we are prepared to carry out whatever we tell you? . . . I am used to taking such pledges. For fear that people may wrongly imitate me, I would rather not take one at all. But I am dealing with hundreds of thousands of workers. I must, therefore, see that my conscience is clean. I wanted to show you that I was not playing with you.123

After this meeting, Gandhiji was persuaded by Anasuya to stay at her house in order to save himself further river-bed crossings and to preserve his strength. The next day, March 16, he apparently stayed there and attended to other irons already in the fire. He wrote a letter to the Governor of Bombay that if his pleas concerning the Kheda situation were ignored, he would advise the peasants "openly" not to pay land revenue. He owed the Governor this information, he added, because he had promised to warn him whenever he was contemplating an "extreme step." And he offered to come and see him immediately, if desired!

Fifteenth Leaflet

He also wrote out leaflet fifteen, again signed by Anasuya for the sake of consistency, and therefore referring to himself in the third person. He now told the workers of the "taint" on his fast:

It is necessary to understand the motive and significance of Gandhiji's vow to fast. The first thing to remember is that this is not intended to influence the employers. . . . we shall be ridiculed if we accept 35 per cent granted out of pity for Gandhiji. . . . Even if fifty persons resolve to starve themselves to death on the employers' premises, how can the employers, for that reason, give the workers a 35 per cent increase if they have no right to it? If this becomes a common practice for securing rights, it would be impossible to carry on the affairs of society. . . . Gandhiji felt, that if he fasted, he would show through this how much he himself valued a pledge. Moreover, the workers talked of starvation. "Starve but keep your oath" was Gandhiji's message to them. He at any rate must live up to it. That he could do only if he himself was prepared to die fasting. . . . But they must rely on their own strength to fight. They alone can save themselves.124

But Gandhiji then became homesick for the ashram and his "family," and on March 16 he waded back over to the other side of the river again. There is every reason to believe that he needed the prayer meetings at the ashram as a setting for an honest appraisal of the situation. For during the days of his fast he underwent extreme mood-swings which, at one moment, permitted him to see his fast as a necessary step toward all-Indian leadership, and at another, as a betrayal of Satyagraha itself. As I pointed out at the beginning of this book when I justified my interest in the Event, the intensity of these feelings agreed ill with the tentativeness with which this whole episode is treated in the Autobiography as well as by some biographers. The reason for this treatment, we can now see, is identical with the paradox
Gandhi's Truth

intrinsic to the Event itself. In trying to use his homeland as a platform from which to ascend to national leadership, he suspected he might have slipped into the muck of Bania bickering.

On March 17, early in the morning, a bit of music apparently intensified his need and willingness to make a confession to his "family"; and here is the heroic version of the Event:

It would make me very unhappy to miss the morning and evening prayers in the Ashram. . . . therefore, although it was Anasuyaben's express wish yesterday that I should stay on there, I insisted on coming over to the ashram. At a time like this, the music here has a very soothing effect on me. This is indeed the best occasion for me to unburden my soul to you . . . .

Then comes an evaluation of the extant leaders of India, similar to the summary appraisal of them in Hind Swaraj, and yet, one feels, more passionate; and this time, he refers to Russia, as well:

From the ancient culture of India, I have gleaned a truth which, even if it is mastered by few persons here at the moment, would give these few a mastery over the world. Before telling you of it, however, I should like to say another thing. At present there is only one person in India over whom millions are crazy, for whom millions of our countrymen would lay down their lives. That person is Tilak Maharaj. I often feel that this is a great asset of his, his great treasure. He has written on the inner meaning of the Gita. But I have always felt that he has not understood the age-old spirit of India, has not understood her soul and that is the reason why the nation has come to this pass. Deep down in his heart, he would like us all to be what the Europeans are. As Europe stands on top at present, as it seems, that is, to those whose minds are steeped in European notions—he wants India to be in the same position. He under-went six years' internment but only to display a courage of European variety, with the idea that these people who are tyrannizing over us now may learn how, if it came to that, we too could stand such long terms of internment, be it five years or twenty-five. In the prisons of Siberia, many great men of Russia are wasting their whole lives, but these men did not go to prison in obedience to any spiritual promptings. To be thus prodigal of one's life is to expend our highest treasure to no purpose. If Tilakji had undergone the sufferings of internment with a spiritual motive things would not have been as they are and the results of his internment would have been far different. This is what I should like to explain to him.... To give him first-hand experience of it I must furnish a living example. Indirectly, I have spoken to him often enough,

but should I get an opportunity of providing a direct demonstration I should not miss it, and here is one.

Another such person is Madan Mohan Malaviya. . . . But although he is so holy in his life and so well informed on points of dharma, he has not, it seems to me, properly understood the soul of India in all its grandeur. I am afraid I have said too much. If he were to hear this, Malaviyaji might get angry with me, even think of me as a swollen-headed man. . . . I have this opportunity to provide him, too, with a direct demonstration. I owe it to both to show now what India's soul is....

That a pledge once taken, at my instance, should be so lightly broken and that faith in God should decline means certain annihilation of dharma. . . . for ten thousand mill-hands to break faith with themselves would spell ruin for the nation. It would never again be possible to raise the workers' issues. At every turn they would quote this as an example and say that ten thousand mill-hands endured suffering for twenty days with a man like Gandhi to lead them and still they did not win . . . . Well, then to keep those ten thousand men from falling, I took this step. This was why I took the vow and its impact was electrifying. I had never expected this. The thousands of men present there shed tears from their eyes. They awoke to the reality of their soul, a new consciousness stirred in them and they got strength to stand by their pledge. I was instantly persuaded that dharma had not vanished from India, that people do respond to an appeal to their soul. If Tilak Maharaj and Malaviyaji would but see this, great things could be done in India.

The very same day, Gandhi, with equal candor, gave the unheroic version of the Event:

... [But I am also] aware that [this pledge] carries a taint. It is likely that, because of my vow, the mill-owners may be moved by consideration for me and come to grant the workers' [demand for] thirty-five per cent increase.... They would do so out of charity and to that extent this pledge is one which cannot but fill me with shame. I weighed the two things, however, against each other: my sense of shame and the mill-hands' pledge. The balance tilted in favour of the latter and I resolved, for the sake of the mill-hands, to take no thought of my shame. In doing public work, a man must be prepared to put up even with such loss of face 1

And indeed, it must have been on that day that Ambalal appeared with a compromise formula. Gandhiji answered by urging him to disregard his fast: it "gives me immense pleasure and need not cause any pain to anyone." He called the formula
"foolishness to satisfy our conscience or our pride," and something which in the eyes of the simple-minded workers could only be regarded as "calculated deception." But he felt that he had no choice.

I should, therefore, prefer some other way, if we can find any. If you want me to accept this, I will, but I won't have you decide the matter in haste. Let the arbitrator meet us and come to a decision right now, and let us announce the wage fixed by him; that is, 35 per cent on the first day, 20 on the second and, on the third what the arbitrator decides. There is foolishness even in this, but things will be left in no doubt. The wage for the third day should be announced this very day.127

It is clear, 35 per cent on the first day was meant to keep the workers from feeling that they had broken their pledge; and twenty per cent on the second was to reassure the owners like-wise. But how to guide the workers through the narrow straits between "deceptive foolishness" and "religious adherence to honor?"

Sixteenth Leaflet

While Gandhi was undergoing both his fast and his agonizing conflict, the sixteenth leaflet was written (and signed) by Shankerlal Banker. His opening sentences speak for the man:

This is the first leaflet I write for you. I wish, therefore, to state at the very outset that my right to advise you is only nominal. I have not done any manual labour. I have not suffered the miseries that workers have to endure, nor can I do anything myself to remove that misery. Therefore I feel hesitant in giving advice on this occasion. But, in-deed, he would keep his word.

At the prayer meeting of March 18, a tired, dejected, and ashamed Gandhiji announced the impending "solution." "My weak condition left the mill-owners no freedom," he said, reminding his audience of the simplest principle of justice namely, that nobody should be forced to sign his name to anything under duress. They would have met the workers' demands in full, had he insisted, but:

If I had done anything of the kind, I would have felt that I was breaking my fast by swallowing something most repulsive; how could I, who would not take even amrit [a drink of the gods, supposed to confer immortality] except at the proper hour, swallow such a thing?129

The oral simile may well prepare us for a deeply depressed discourse. He attempted to relieve the pressure with a bit of rough talk: "If an honest man finds himself surrounded on all sides by crooks, he should either turn his back on them or be as they are." But then his mind turned to sacred matters, to the Himalayas, the Vindhya mountains—and to Thoreau, whose poetic oratory he always mistook for a heroic life actually carried through.

When I compare my state with that of these illumined souls, I am such a mere piggly that I don't know what to say. To be sure, it is not as if I did not know the measure of my strength. But in the outside world it is esteemed much higher than it ought to be. Every day I discover so much of hypocrisy in the world that many times I feel I just cannot go on being here. At Phoenix, I often told you that, if one day you did not find me in your midst, you should not be surprised. If this feeling comes over me, I will go where you will never be able to seek me out. In that hour, do not feel bewildered, but go on with the tasks on hand as if I were with you all the time.130

It is this Gandhi, sad to the bone, who, in the afternoon marched and waded for the last time to the babul tree. To a crowd joyous over the end of the misery—a crowd joined by many prominent Ahmedabadis and by the Commissioner himself—he had only a low-key and cautionary address to offer. The settlement, he said, merely (and he obviously meant "barely") upholds the workers' pledge; but at least it forces the mill owners to accept the principle of arbitration. But, if the report of a local Gujarat newspaper is correct, he added: "I shall succeed in getting 35 per cent from the arbitrator”—a strange way for him to "accept the principle of arbitration." Here is the deal that was made:

On the first day, an increase of 35 per cent will be given in keeping with our pledge; on the second day, we get 20 per cent in keeping with the
mill-owners'. From the third day till the date of the arbitrator's award, an increase of 27 1/2 per cent will be paid and subsequently, if the arbitrator decides on 35 per cent, the mill-owners will give us 7 1/2 per cent more and, if he decides on 20 per cent, we shall refund 7/2 per cent.\(^{131}\)

One hates to think of the mechanics of a refund under such conditions, and one joins, for a brief moment, those habitual anti-Banias who shudder derisively at the logic of the formula given on March 19 in the final leaflet:

We have accepted 35 per cent for one day deliberately as the best thing to do in the circumstances. "We will not resume work without securing a 35 per cent increase" may mean one of two things; one, that we will not accept anything less than a 35 per cent increase at any time and, two, that we will resume work with a 35 per cent increase, it being enough even if we get it just for a day.\(^{132}\)

It is now fully understandable that Gandhiji concluded his speech to the mill hands that day with a remark both dejected and rejecting:

What I have brought for you is enough to fulfil the letter of the pledge, but not its spirit. Spirit does not mean much to us and so we must rest content with the letter.\(^{133}\)

And then he formulated a warning which would be echoed many a time in later years when Gandhi would come to feel that what the masses at times could do for him, they could not be counted on to do for themselves:

After twenty years experience, I have come to the conclusion that I am qualified to take a pledge; I see that you are not yet so qualified. Do not, therefore, take an oath without consulting your seniors. If the occasion demands one, come to us, assured that we shall be prepared to die for you, as we are now. But remember that we shall help you only in respect of a pledge you have taken with our concurrence. A pledge taken in error can certainly be ignored. You have yet to learn how and when to take a pledge.\(^{134}\)

At that, Gandhi broke his fast before the hushed crowd. Other speakers followed. Even the Commissioner, who already was Gandhi's principal opponent in the Kheda situation, congratulated everybody and told the workers that as long as they followed Gandhi Saheb's advice and did what he told them, they would fare well and secure justice. As he said this he undoubtedly hoped the peasants in Kheda were not listening in. But then, the Ahmedabad workmen were probably not listening any more either, because everybody felt that a parade was in order. Gandhiji, together with Anasuya and Ambalal, was put in a carriage, which on this occasion may even have been pulled by the workmen themselves, although Gandhi disliked that kind of honor. To Anasuya the workmen gave a red silk sari.

When the parade returned to what now had been named the \textit{Ek-Tek} Tree, the mill owners had carted enormous quantities of sweets under its generous branches. But this proved to have been unwise. As if to relieve a situation overloaded with words of goodwill, the evening ended in confusion, because the beggars of Ahmedabad crashed this party of owners and workers and scrambled for the supply of sweets, much of which was trampled underfoot. This caused an embarrassing tension, for some outsiders immediately believed that the workmen themselves were behaving in this undignified way; however, when the intruders were identified as beggars, the honor of labor was restored, and the workers were invited to a more select gathering on Ambalal's compound, where the salvaged sweets had been taken. Deeply touched by the mill hands' trust, Gandhiji made one more speech, at last awakening to the fact that all in all, this had been a most remarkable struggle:

I have never come across the like of it. I had had experience of many such conflicts or heard of them but have not known any in which there was so little ill will or bitterness as in this. I hope you will always maintain peace in the same way as you did during the strike.\(^{35}\)

Gandhi concluded that the whole of India had reason to be proud of the Ahmedabad workers.

The country had, to some extent, taken notice of the fast. But, as a perusal of the major papers of that day shows, it was nowhere reported as newsworthy. True, Annie Besant had wired the mill owners, "Do not sacrifice a great man to a small cause," probably not endearing herself to them with such a formulation; and there had been much comment in informed
circles, which called his fast alternately "silly" and "cowardly" or, as Gandhi put it, "still worse." For the sake of these critics as well as that of all those readers who had never heard of the strike or the fast, Gandhi himself sent a lengthy summary of the whole struggle to the leading newspapers in India's largest cities. As I reported at the beginning of this book, this letter was relegated to the Letters-to-the-Editor column on page 12 of the Bombay Chronicle of March 27. It certainly invalidates any later attempts, even of the Mahatma himself, to disparage the Event; for he declares: "Perhaps I owe an explanation to the public with regard to my recent fast." And the letter is (for once) a document written, or at least corrected, in Gandhi's English.

I felt that it was a sacred moment for me, my faith was on the anvil, and I had no hesitation to rising and declaring to the men that a breach of their vow so solemnly taken was unendurable by me and that I would not take any food until they had the 35 per cent increase given or until they had fallen. A meeting that was up to now unlike the former meetings, totally unresponsive, woke up as if by magic.136

He then describes the ambiguities of his decision but concludes:

Whatever may be the verdict of friends, so far as I can think at present, on given occasions I should not hesitate in future to repeat the humble performance which I have taken the liberty of describing in this communication.137

And he ends with the characterization of Ambalal and Anasuya which I quoted at the beginning of this book:

I have not known a struggle fought with so little bitterness and such courtesy on either side. This happy result is principally due to the connections with it of Mr. Ambalal Sarabhai and Anasuyaben.

One can well see, however, that few individuals even among Gandhi's friends at that time were able to recognize the principles of a nonviolent struggle in a "domestic affair" which remained unpopular because of its obvious personal and economic ambiguities. And yet, great movements can begin with small moments, and if Gandhi cannot be said to have made a deep dent in the national affairs of India with this campaign of three weeks, he certainly came one step closer to his people, identifying his

name now with the kind of saga which travels by word of mouth and reaches the vast constituency of the Indian masses, who in those days were almost totally untouched by the news which the press saw fit to print. Maybe in historical actuality the most important objective is to make one's encounters matter, whether at, the time they seem big or small.

But by the time his letter appeared in the press, a fully re-covered Gandhi had already chaired a meeting in Ahmedabad on the situation of indentured labor in the Fiji Islands, had on March 22 inaugurated the Kheda Satyagraha by addressing 5,000 peasants in Nadiad, and had traveled to Delhi to meet the Viceroy's Private Secretary in order to discuss the release of the Ali brothers, two prominent Muslim rebels. This, then, is the difference between a case history and a life-history: patients, great or small, are increasingly debilitated by their inner conflicts, but in historical actuality inner conflict only adds an indispensable momentum to all superhuman effort.
The Leverage of Truth

The Instrument

1. TACTICS

We have reported Gandhi's saying that God appears to you not in person but in action. But this also means that the full measure of a man—and that includes his unconscious motivation—can never be comprehended in isolation from his most creative action. What, then, is the essence of the social tools which Gandhi created?

Here I will roughly follow Joan Bondurant's indispensable treatment in her *Conquest of Violence*, which analyzes six Satyagraha campaigns in a fashion both scholarly and compassionate. If I do not fully accept either her discourse or her conclusions, it is, I believe, because she writes as a political scientist, whereas I must come to some psychological conclusions. Neither of us (she would agree) can hope to do more than approximate the meaning which Satyagraha had for its originator, his first followers, and the Indian masses. And both of us must restate these meanings in the terms of our disciplines and our days in the West: the truth (Gandhi would tell either of us) can only be revealed in the kind of appraisal which is our action. Satyagraha purports to be a strategy which depends, every minute, on the unmistakable experience of something as evasive as "the truth." I have tried to trace what truth had come to mean to Gandhi, throughout his development, in order to fathom what it may have meant to him in a given action; and even then the interpretation of his meaning was bound by our own imagery and terminology. If this seems too elusive even to attempt to formulate, I will ask the reader in how many connotations he has used the term "reality" throughout his life, or "virtue," or "health," not to speak of "identity"—all terms which serve to characterize the essence of a man's being and action.

Sat, we are told, means "it is." We can come closer to "what is" only by asking further: in comparison with what, where, and when? In comparison with what might have been or what should be, or with what only seems to be or is only felt to be? Thus "what is" is obviously relative to any era's world-image, and to the methodologies which determine what questions are considered important and are asked relevantly. Yet, for each individual, "what is" will also depend on his personal way of facing being in all its relativity—relative to an absolute Being who alone is truth, or relative to non-being, or relative to becoming. Gandhi commits himself only to "the relative truth as I have conceived it," but he also clings firmly to the dictum that only insofar as we can commit ourselves on selected occasions "to the death" to the test of such truth in action—only to that extent can we be true to ourselves and to others, that is, to a joint humanity. This seems to call for an altogether rare mixture of detachment and commitment, and for an almost mystical conflux of inner voice and historical actuality. And in spite of the fact that it opens up wide every opportunity for self-deceit and the misuse of others, Gandhi, "in all modesty," considered it his mission to lead his contemporaries into "experimental" action. As he wrote to C. F. Andrews:

I have taken up things as they have come to me and always in trembling and fear. I did not work out the possibilities in Champaran, Kheda or Ahmedabad nor yet when I made an unconditional offer of service in 1914. I fancy that I followed His will and no other and He will lead me amid the encircling gloom.  

Yet there is no reason to question the fact that the sudden conviction that the moment of truth had arrived always came upon him as if from a voice which had spoken before he had
Gandhi's Truth

quite listened. Gandhi often spoke of his inner voice, which would speak unexpectedly in the preparedness of silence—but then with irreversible firmness and an irresistible demand for commitment. And, indeed, even Nietzsche, certainly the Mahatma's philosophical opposite, claimed that truth always approached "on the feet of doves." That is, the moment of truth is suddenly there—unannounced and pervasive in its stillness. But it comes only to him who has lived with facts and figures in such a way that he is always ready for a sudden synthesis and will not, from sheer surprise and fear, startle truth away. But acting upon the inner voice means to involve others on the assumption that they, too, are ready—and when Gandhi listened to his inner voice, he often thought he heard what the masses were ready to listen to. That, of course, is the secret of all charismatic leader-ship, but how could he know it was "the truth"? Gandhi's answer would be: Only the readiness to suffer would tell.

Truthful action, for Gandhi, was governed by the readiness to get hurt and yet not to hurt—action governed by the principle of ahimsa. According to Bondurant "the only dogma in the Gandhian philosophy centers here: that the only test of truth is action based on the refusal to do harm." With all respect for the traditional translation of ahimsa, I think Gandhi implied in it, besides a refusal not to do physical harm, a determination not to violate another person's essence. For even where one may not be able to avoid harming or hurting, forcing or demeaning another whenever one must coerce him, one should try even in doing so, not to violate his essence, for such violence can only evoke counter-violence, which may end in a kind of truce, but not in truth. For ahimsa as acted upon by Gandhi not only means not to hurt another, it means to respect the truth in him. Gandhi reminds us that, since we can not possibly know the absolute truth, we are "therefore not competent to punish"—a most essential reminder, since man when tempted to violence always parades as another's policeman, convincing himself that what-ever he is doing to another, that other "has it coming to him." Whoever acts on such righteousness, however, implicates himself in a mixture of pride and guilt which undermines his position psychologically and ethically. Against this typical cycle, Gandhi claimed that only the voluntary acceptance of self-suffering can reveal the truth latent in a conflict—and in the opponent.

A few years ago I had occasion to talk on medical ethics to a graduating class of young doctors and found myself trying to reinterpret the Golden Rule in the light of what we have learned in clinical work, that is, in the encounter of two individuals as "unequal" as a therapist and a patient.12

I suggested that (ethically speaking) a man should act in such a way that he actualizes both in himself and in the other such forces as are ready for a heightened mutuality. Nothing I have read or heard since has dissuaded me from the conviction that one may interpret Gandhi's truth in these terms. In fact, Gandhi made a similar assumption when he viewed Satyagraha as a bridge between the ethics of family life and that of communities and nations.

Bondurant concludes that the "effect" of Gandhi's formulation was "to transform the absolute truth of the philosophical Sat to the relative truth of ethic principle capable of being tested by a means combining non-violent action with self-suffering." The truth in any given encounter is linked with the develop-mental stage of the individual and the historical situation of his group: together, they help to determine the actuality, i.e., the potential for unifying action at a given moment. What Bondurant calls "veracity," then, must have actuality as well as reality in it, that is, it depends on acting passionately as well as on thinking straight; and acting passionately would include acting upon and being guided by what is most genuine in the other. Truth in Gandhi's sense points to the next step in man's realization of man as one all-human species, and thus to our only chance to transcend what we are.

I have attempted to sketch the whole configuration of actualities which led to Gandhi's choice of Ahmedabad as the setting for the Event: the compulsion coming from the Mahatma's individual past and from his cultural tradition as well as from the situational attraction as presented by Ambalal and Anasuya. Gandhi later had reason to repudiate this beginning, but not
because any other place on earth would have been more suitable; for origins are inescapable. As to the reality of the situation, Gandhi always made his inner voice "hold its breath" for a while in order to give him time to study the facts; but the sum of the facts consisted not only of the statistics which proved the textile workers right, it also included the over-all political and economic situation which governs public opinion. The goal, in Ahmedabad, was 35 per cent—an increase considerable enough to be of help to the workers, moderate enough to be borne by the industry and to be tolerated by the public, and enough of a compromise to be symbolic. The objective was eventually reached. But it probably could have been reached with less spectacular means, sealed with no more than an announcement on the factory's bulletin board, and a notice in the local press. But the wider objective was that of establishing a method which would prove applicable to other social and national settings, even as in the local milieu it was to improve permanently the relation of each participant to himself (honor), to all others (co-operation), and to a common God (truth). All this, then, depended on stringent conditions which Bondurant summarizes under *rules, a code of conduct*, and certain orderly *steps*. Here I must select a few combinations.