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CHAPTER VI

CRISIS

One of the reasons why the Government of India was able to pursue its policy of non-interference towards the non-co-operation and Khilafat movements was, as we have seen, their non-violent character. Another was that the movement proceeded step by step: the first items of its programme, like the boycott of law-courts, schools and elections did not present any serious dangers to the government. When, however, the non-co-operators and the Khilafatists came nearer to violence and especially when they turned to the last item, non-payment of taxes, the government could hardly maintain its waiting attitude. In consequence of this development an external crisis was bound to come. But at the same time — we are speaking about the second half of 1921 — there were indications of a possible internal crisis threatening the unity of the movement, and partly for the same reasons.

Non-violence was the creed the movement professed, but it did not have the same meaning for all individuals and groups concerned. For Gandhi, we think, its meaning was predominantly moral and religious. Violence he regarded as evil, and since means and ends were “convertible terms”¹ in his philosophy of life, no good could come from the use of violent means.² Non-violence for him was also something positive; it was not the “weapon of the weak” as even some of his sympathizers might think,³ nor was it an expedient only, to be discarded when a better one came to hand — it was a value in itself.

A good many of his followers may have been moved by the same sentiments, but less strongly than he. This was why Gandhi experienced, from the very beginning of the non-co-operation movement, disappointments with respect to non-violence. He knew, from the moment he had confessed his “Himalayan” blunder with respect to the first big *hartal* in March-April, 1919, that he was playing with fire because the masses were not ready for a wholly non-violent movement. For some time the violence could take the relatively innocent shape of social boycott and the picketing of liquor shops and so on, but even this was sure to evoke

ill-feeling and might easily lead further on towards a slippery slope, ending in downright violence. The non-co-operation and Khilafat movements steadily came nearer to this danger, if only because of their growth; in the summer of 1921 they had, coupled together, truly become a mass movement.⁴

This brings us to another group of Gandhi's followers — the majority of Congress leaders, who had taken some time to be converted to the non-co-operation programme. They had, by accepting this programme, accepted the fact that politics in India were no longer the monopoly of their own élite from the upper and middle classes but had come within the reach of the masses. But actual political leadership remained, for the time being at least, in the hands of the old leaders, or younger men who came, however, from the same group. Though the number of peasant delegates increased about 1920⁵ the leadership, to be found in the A.I.C.C., was recruited from the same groups as before; "... upper caste Hindus and a fair number of upper class Muslims; most of them had had a Western education and followed the new professions."

The number of landlords was relatively small and tended to become even smaller in these years.⁶ Gopal Krishna, from whom we borrow these results of an analysis of Congress leadership in the period 1918-1923, sees one significant change: before 1920, Congress leadership was based upon social position, but after that year upon the willingness to renounce social position. We may assume, however, that in individual cases this change did not come about quite abruptly; the choice between social position and political leadership for many of these men may not have been an easy one and it would be only natural if some of them had tried to make the best of both worlds. This situation must have caused tension between leadership and following. Would the following dictate to the leadership the course of the movement, or would it be the other way round? In this state of things, the leadership must have been looking for a means to keep control over the mass movement, and non-violence may have been just what they wanted.

This aspect of political developments about 1920, to wit increasing tension between political leadership and mass following, has been stressed by R. Palme Dutt,⁷ and we think his analysis contains a good deal of truth. It is confirmed, to some extent, by facts we have already observed: the reluctance, especially among well-to-do Muslims on good terms with the British, to support the Khilafat movement when it turned out to be a rather radical mass movement; the relative lack of success of the boycott of honours and titles. We do not, however, entirely adopt his

analysis; his emphasis on class interests as the motive determining the attitude of the leadership is, we think, rather one-sided. No doubt, this motive was not absent; we will come across an instance where it is quite obvious. But other considerations very likely had some part in it, too. One of them was that a violent conflict with the British Raj would probably end in failure, perhaps in disaster. Another might have been that control of the masses was necessary for maintaining national unity; everything tending to bring out class antagonism had to be avoided. If, as Dutt contends, non-payment of taxes would "inevitably mean a No-Rent campaign",⁸ then it is hardly probable that this item could have been accepted at all by the Congress leadership at the Nagpur session in December, 1920.

It is curious to observe just how this item got on to the programme. As we have seen, it was not included in the non-co-operation programme accepted at Calcutta in September, which had met with considerable resistance. But at Nagpur, this rather important extension of the programme was announced in a very casual way,⁹ and it was advocated by C. R. Das, who moved the resolution in question, only as being "stronger, fuller and bolder than the Calcutta resolution."¹⁰ The question of its potential dangers to class interests does not seem to have come up.¹¹ We might infer that the point concerning non-payment of taxes was regarded as an additional weapon with which to fight government, and when the resolution was carried by acclamation we think we have to consider this a triumph for unity in the national struggle — Congress now had taken exactly the same stand as the Khilafatists in this respect — rather than a defeat for class interests. This does not mean to say that, as a matter of fact, class interests were not put in jeopardy by the decision but only that, in our opinion, the participants did not, or not primarily at least, consider things in that light. For the time being, national enthusiasm silenced the doubts they may have had.

Thus far, we have discussed Gandhi's attitude towards non-violence and also the view of Congress leaders with regard to it. Another important group whose attitude we must consider are the Muslim Khilafatists. To some degree, the motives determining Congress leadership must have held good for them also but, in our opinion, the religious character of their movement tended to make them less cautious with regard to mass action, eventually of a violent nature; especially the ulama wing may be supposed not to be afraid of losing their grip on the masses. Generally speaking, to the Khilafatists non-violence was not the same as to Gandhi; it was an expedient, to be used only because they were too weak to use

force.¹² They had accepted non-violence conditionally; they would cling to it only if it brought results.¹³ Their temper rose; the Angora government — which they still regarded as defending the Caliphate — was the whole time beset with dangers,¹⁴ and there was as yet no question of any willingness to revise the treaty of Sèvres. The threat of violence was always looming up in their declarations, and this might mean an assault on Hindu-Muslim unity since it was apt to assume communalist forms. If, as we have contended, control of mass action and the violence that might attend it, was necessary to maintain national unity in the teeth of class antagonisms, one might say the same with respect to communal antagonisms.

In the summer of 1921 the tone of speeches by some Khilafat leaders became ever more violent; this tendency was displayed at any rate by the Ali brothers, Hasrat Mohani and Yakub Hasan.¹⁵ It is hard to say whether their object in this was “forcing Mr. Gandhi into a campaign of violence”,¹⁶ but it certainly put Gandhi in a quandary. If he wanted to save Hindu-Muslim unity he could not wholly disavow them, but by taking their side he would frighten away those Hindus who felt alarmed at the prospect of Muslim violence degenerating, possibly, into communalist violence; moreover, he would endanger a principle very dear to him.¹⁷ But he took this risk. In this connection we must pay attention to some conspicuous events of this episode, since they caused a considerable stir at the time: the talk about an Afghan invasion, the apologies of the Ali brothers, and their arrest.

In April 1921 Muhammad Ali delivered a speech at Madras¹⁸ on the duties of Indian Muslims in the case of an Afghan invasion. He said that if the Amir invaded India aiming at its subjection, Muslims should resist the attack; but if his object were to defeat the oppressors of Islam and the Caliphate, then it would be the duty of Indian Muslims to withhold all assistance from the Government of India, and even to fight the good fight for Islam side by side with the Afghans. This opinion, of course, caused a good deal of uneasiness among Hindus. Probably for that reason, some time later Muhammad Ali formulated his advice in a more cautious way: if any Power waged war against the Government of India to make India free, they would not render help to the government but would simply watch the fight, since they did not believe in violence.¹⁹ This corresponded with Gandhi's view, who wrote in *Young India*: “I would, in a sense, certainly assist the Amir of Afghanistan if he waged war against the British Government; that is to say, I would openly tell my countrymen that it would be a crime

to help the government, which has lost the confidence of the nation to remain in power. On the other hand, I would not ask India to raise levies for the Amir.”²⁰ But not even this reassured all Hindus; Malaviya was reported²¹ to scorn any idea of accepting Afghan help.

Muhammad Ali’s recanting probably should be seen in connection with his apologies. Very soon after his arrival in India Lord Reading had, in May 1921, six interviews with Gandhi²² in which he pointed out to the latter that, notwithstanding his professed creed of non-violence, some of his followers and close associates were using violent language, inciting other people to violence. Gandhi had to acknowledge that this interpretation could be put on some speeches of the Ali brothers, whereupon he told the Viceroy that he would ask them to put things right, as he was convinced that they did not really mean violence but merely had not been cautious enough in choosing their words. After that the Viceroy told him that should they apologize, he would stop the proceedings which the government was considering to institute against them.

When the Ali brothers declared that they regretted that some of their speeches might have been interpreted as inciting to violence, which had not been their intention, and when the Government of India made known that in the light of these apologies it had decided not to arrest and prosecute them, the construction the public put upon these events was, naturally enough, that the Ali brothers had apologized in order to escape imprisonment.²³ Reading was very pleased at his success, and considered that he had “seriously damaged” the reputation of the Ali brothers.²⁴ He went, however, a bit too far in exploiting his success,²⁵ and then found himself compelled to issue a declaration²⁶ stating that Gandhi had promised to use his influence upon the Ali brothers before the Viceroy had mentioned any intention of prosecuting them; “there was no desire to bargain.”²⁷ The real motive of the Ali brothers for apologizing probably was, as Muhammad Ali wrote: “. . . not to avoid prosecution, but to allay Hindu suspicions and in particular to prove to Gandhi that we have no personal pique . . .”²⁸ At any rate, Muhammad Ali had openly declared that he owed apologies only to his friends and not to the government,²⁹ and in his subsequent speeches he showed no less violence. The effect of his apologies upon Indian public opinion was considerably less than at first had been believed.³⁰

The rising temper of the Khilafat leaders and their readiness to challenge the government were demonstrated once more at an All-India Khilafat Conference held at Karachi on July 10, 1921; it was presided over by Muhammad Ali, but Gandhi was not present. Thirteen resolu-

tions were passed, most of them dealing with Khilafat matters.³¹ The conference professed its devout allegiance to the Caliph-Sultan, at the same time begging him to appreciate the services of Mustafa Kemal Pasha; it repeated the known demands of the Khilafatists and declared (resolution no. 7): "...that in the present circumstances the Holy Shariat forbids every Mussalman to serve or enlist himself in the British Army or to raise recruits for it, that it is incumbent on all Muslims in general and all Ulemas in particular to carry this religious commandment to every Muslim soldier in the British Army." It was this passage, coupled with the fact that by means of leaflets the Army was already being worked upon in this sense by some Khilafat leaders, which accounted for the arrest of the Ali brothers, Dr. Kitchlew and four co-workers in September. In November they were tried and sentenced to two years in prison.³²

The Congress activities of boycott of liquor shops and foreign cloth³³ and the use of *khaddar* were mentioned in only two of the resolutions of the Karachi conference; it does not seem to have had much use for these innocent forms of action. Nor did the word *swaraj* occur in the resolutions, but the notion did, and in a rather radical form. For resolution no. 7 went on: "This meeting further declares that in case the British Government directly or indirectly, secretly or openly, resumes hostilities against the Government of Angora, the Indian Muslims will be compelled in co-operation with the Congress to resort to civil disobedience and at the next session of the Congress at Ahmedabad to declare India's independence and the establishment of an Indian Republic." Whereas Gandhi had never defined *swaraj* and thus had kept open many possible interpretations of the concept, here it was given an interpretation, and an extreme one at that. It may have been no accident that Gandhi did not attend the Karachi conference. He could hardly have endorsed a resolution of this kind without frightening the more conservative among his Congress followers. They might have objected as much to the fact that an open conflict with the British was courted as easily as that, and without their having been consulted about it, as to the occasion chosen for it — peace or war with the Turks whose fate was not the first concern of all Indians.

The Ali brothers' arrest and trial constituted, to some extent, a change in the policy of non-interference which the Government of India had pursued thus far. But tampering with the army was considered a serious matter; the C.-in-C., Lord Rawlinson, asked for action on the part of the authorities, and the Viceroy and his Council could not but agree.³⁴

Local Governments concurred with that view, though two Indian members of the Government of Bombay advised against it. They argued, that just at the moment when the Greeks were pushing on in Anatolia, this prosecution would give the impression that England was bent upon the annihilation of Islam, and that, moreover, prosecution was not necessary since the force of the non-co-operation and Khilafat movements was already on the wane.³⁵

So in the summer of 1921 we get the following picture of the relations between the Khilafat leaders and the majority of Congress leaders: the Khilafatists, besides concentrating on their special programme, were urging a more extremist line in the nationalist movement, while Congress was pressing for a more cautious advance and was more ready to compromise.³⁶ But the need for unity was acknowledged by both of them, as was evident from the stand Gandhi took with regard to the Afghan question, and the Ali brothers' readiness to pipe down somewhat on their former speeches; it was also the purport of talks at a meeting of the Congress Working Committee at Patna in August,³⁷ and of the resolutions of a C.K.C. meeting at Delhi in September.³⁸ But about this time Hindu-Muslim unity was heavily damaged by the Moplah rising which broke out in August.³⁹

The Moplahs (or Mappillas) were a community of very poor Muslim peasants on the coast of Malabar, living side by side with a nearly equally strong Hindu element, except in the district of Ernad where a sizable Muslim majority existed.⁴⁰ This district, the poorest of the whole area, became the centre of the rebellion⁴¹ after a period of agitation in the whole area. The Hindus, among whom nearly all of the landlords were to be found, were generally better educated and better off economically, many of the Muslims being low-caste Hindu converts. It was an area characterized by repeated troubles, the last important ones dating from 1894 and 1896, for which mainly poverty, ignorance and fanaticism were held responsible. The 1921 rebellion was preceded by some months of agitation during which riots occurred, as well as several cases of violence against people who refused to join the Khilafat movement or to close their shops when a *hartal* was proclaimed. On August 20 the police, assisted by soldiers, tried to arrest some people, which caused bloodshed and subsequent open rebellion. A "Khilafat King" proclaimed himself (for a time there were even two of them), setting up a reign that to some people meant terror — defiling of Hindu temples, forced conversion of Hindus, murder of Europeans, Hindus, public women, and some Moplahs who assisted the British — but to

others the elevation of Islam and social justice. Several regiments had to be called in and martial law was proclaimed, but it was not until January, 1922 that the worst was over, and for more than six months after that bands of armed rebels had to be rounded up. The official number of casualties was over 2,300; about 40,000 persons were arrested, of whom over 24,000 received varying sentences.

In the context of our subject some questions regarding this episode demand an answer. The first one is: does a "Khilafat King" mean that this rebellion was, purely and simply, a result of the Khilafat movement? Understandably enough, Congress and Khilafat leaders denied this, since nobody wanted to be held responsible for this outbreak of violence. The Working Committee of Congress declared that the forced conversions — of which it acknowledged only three cases — were the work of fanatical gangs opposed to the Khilafat and non-co-operation movements, and that the disturbances had only taken place in areas where Congress and Khilafat propaganda had been prohibited.⁴²

Muhammad Ali condemned the Moplahs in two speeches, and said he did not know the cause of the rising: agrarian troubles or provocations by the government.⁴³ W. C. Smith looks upon the Moplah revolt as "a class struggle fought in communal guise",⁴⁴ as essentially the fight of poor peasants (who happened to be Muslims) against oppressive landlords (who happened to be Hindus). Hitchcock does not suppose the Hindu landlords to have been especially oppressive at the time, but calls attention to a rise in the population about 1920.⁴⁵ This, in a poor agrarian area, is synonymous with extreme poverty and shortage of arable soil, and, whether oppressive or not, the landlord class may attract the wrath of the poor landless peasants. But, as Smith writes, the religious factor in cases like this is probably often the most conscious one, and is important because it embitters the conflicting parties. Therefore, the Moplah revolt, whatever its deeper roots may have been, manifested itself as a politico-religious outburst, fiercely anti-British and anti-Hindu.

This seems to be confirmed by the victims it claimed. About these, W. C. Smith writes: "... they (*i.e.* the Moplahs) attacked the police and the military ... they attacked their landlords and moneylenders, they attacked everyone in sight."⁴⁶ Hitchcock, who reproduces some fifty pages of what he calls typical Moplah trials, reaches the conclusion that "the Hindus were murdered as they refused to accept Islam and the Muhammadans for helping the troops."⁴⁷ In the trials quoted by him the killing of only one landlord is mentioned as such, but many

cases occur of Hindus who saved their lives by embracing Islam. The motives given by the accused are always related to the Khilafat cause and the expected downfall of the British Raj — oppressive landlords are not mentioned.⁴⁸ The Moplahs themselves seem to have experienced their revolt as nationalist (anti-British), as religious (they were “destroying sin and establishing a kingdom of good”⁴⁹), and as communalist (under Moplah rule there would be “no place for the Hindu”⁵⁰).

Perhaps we may sum up the case as follows. It would be absurd to say that what happened in Malabar was wished for by either the Khilafat or Congress leaders, but it would be equally absurd to contend that it was in no way connected with the Khilafat and non-co-operation movements, as a Congress enquiry concluded.⁵¹ This particular rising showed certain characteristics that were absent from former risings in the same area, like the burning of toddy and arrack shops,⁵² which was quite in line with non-co-operation propaganda. And Khilafat slogans, distorted in the simple Mappillas’ minds, certainly influenced the revolt. The ambiguous way in which Khilafat leaders spoke about non-violence was understood by the Moplahs as an advice to fight if they were strong enough;⁵³ the Afghans were supposed by the Moplahs to be already engaged in the conquest of northern India;⁵⁴ the British were reported to be bent on destroying the holy places.⁵⁵ The men who let loose these slogans, even if worded a bit more cautiously, among these ignorant people cannot entirely wash their hands of it — they were playing with fire.⁵⁶ And when the anti-government part of the movement gravitated towards violence, it was the better situated people — predominantly Hindus in this area — who dissociated themselves from it.

Another question is, whether the Government of India used the Moplah rebellion for widening the gulf between Hindus and Muslims, as has been asserted.⁵⁷ This certainly cannot be said about its official history. Hitchcock begins by stating: “But to call this a Mappilla rebellion is misleading, partly because of the large share some Hindus had in bringing it about, and partly because of the many Mappillas who had no share in it.”⁵⁸ He discerns⁵⁹ two phases in the troubles: (1) the Hindu phase, during which non-co-operation was stressed and it was mostly volunteers who were active, the Mappillas only helping them; the main object of the movement was then to damage the government; and (2) the Mappilla phase, when the Mappillas started an armed revolt against the British Raj, but soon turned also against the Hindus. This story could hardly reassure the Hindu community elsewhere in

India, but if the author had been trying to sow discord between the communities, he would not have divided the blame as he more or less does, moreover partly excusing the worst offenders, the Mappillas, by pointing out repeatedly their extreme poverty and ignorance.

This was a confidential account appearing only in 1925, but at the time of the troubles we do not find in official statements a tendency towards setting up one community against the other. When Sir William Vincent expounded his view on the events in the Viceroy's Council, he gave a carefully balanced picture, not putting all the blame on one side and explicitly discerning between extremist Muslim agitators whom he held responsible, and other Khilafatists whom he exonerated expressly from any guilt in the matter.⁶⁰ In our opinion, his speech constitutes another instance of the government's policy of drawing a line between moderates and extremists, but not between the communities. And when in the Madras Legislative Council the matter came up in September 1921, Lord Willingdon in a long speech only once mentioned serious Hindu-Muslim enmity, but emphasized the looting and destruction of public buildings, and the numerous cases of arson, extortion, robbery and murder.⁶¹

All the same, the whole episode could not but increase communalist feelings among the Hindus, and in our context perhaps the most important effect of the Moplah revolt was that it put a heavy strain on Hindu-Muslim relations.⁶² It represented a kind of violence which was the very thing many leaders feared a mass movement might lead them into. Mr. Andrews, Gandhi's close friend, explicitly stated that the very popularity of the movement brought out its defects and caused social tyranny against people who refused to participate in it. He disapproved of the burning of foreign cloth as giving proof of narrow nationalism and racism, and reports Tagore's profound disappointment with the movement: it "shouted" to him, Tagore said, and did no longer "sing".⁶³ On the Muslim side too, critical voices could be heard: the loose talk about *jihad* and an Afghan invasion were denounced, as well as the role Khilafat agitators had played in the Moplah rising.⁶⁴

On the other hand, the Congress machinery in the summer of 1921 came ever more under control of men ready to go extreme lengths, especially owing to the growing influence of the Working Committee.⁶⁵ At the same time, the number of volunteers increased and their activities became more alarming. In April, 1921, the Government of India considered enacting a law against "illegal drilling" and "the carrying of swords in urban areas, or by men in company, or on occasions of

meetings.”⁶⁶ In October the Viceroy informed the Secretary of State that volunteers grew in numbers, but that he saw no dangers in this as yet.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, ten days earlier he had issued a letter to all Local Governments and Administrations, asking for information and their opinions on the volunteer movement.⁶⁸ Their answers to these questions were compiled into a lengthy report.⁶⁹ We quote here from the answer Delhi sent⁷⁰: “Present day volunteer movement is subtle in its working. Some general or special form of social service is the lure by which young men are induced to join a new formation. Where, as sometimes happens, this social service is rendered in a manner really helpful to public to which little or no exception can be taken, such as assisting strangers at fairs and places of pilgrimage, or helping in regulating processions, popular sympathy sides with volunteers, but experience has shown that, with few exceptions, organisers of these formations, having obtained adherents under the cloak of social service, and having inculcated a certain amount of cohesion and discipline, soon begin to divert their activities to directions in which they become a nuisance to law-abiding citizens and a danger to public peace. These activities have hitherto taken the form of attempts to usurp the functions of police, intimidations to enforce hartals and social and commercial boycotts, and organised demonstrations in the streets. Some of the corps are formed with no other intentions than these from their inception; others gradually develop these undesirable functions . . . In Delhi there can be no doubt that the ultimate objective is to combine the various ‘volunteers’ corps into one definite semi-military organisation. This is still a long way ahead. But the intention may be divined from their adoption of military titles, from Lieutenant to Colonel, for their leaders, and the general aping of military formations. A few of the corps occasionally turn out for drill in small batches under a paid retired drill instructor or an ex-constable of police. This is restricted to infantry drill without arms of any kind, and the drills are attended with great irregularity.”

Even if the worst features of reports like this proceeded more from surmise than from solid fact, it is small wonder that dangerous developments were feared and Montagu repeatedly expressed his anxiety with regard to them.⁷¹ Gandhi, who surely realized that he was playing with fire, did tread warily and shied back from declaring general civil disobedience implying non-payment of taxes. This, in its turn, would certainly lead to an open conflict with government and might prepare the way for social troubles from which all vested interests would suffer, thus endangering national unity in the struggle with the British. The

great thing was to restrain the mass movement which was being urged upon him.

At an A.I.C.C. meeting at Delhi on November 4, 1921, it cost him an effort to prevent the assent for starting the last phase of non-co-operation in such districts or provinces as would like to do so. Notably Hasrat Mohani advocated this, and at last Gandhi was compelled to announce its start in one district, that of Bardoli, for November 23.⁷² This would constitute a crucial test as well as a valuable object-lesson for further actions. In government circles the question was raised — not for the first time — whether Gandhi should not be arrested, but the Government of India decided that the time had not yet come; it wanted to wait for a moment when Gandhi had put himself palpably in the wrong.⁷³

But the situation got out of hand when the Prince of Wales visited the country in November. Some months before, Congress and Khilafat organizations had resolved to boycott his visit and to effect a general *hartal* throughout India.⁷⁴ On the one side, they seem to have been fairly successful in doing so⁷⁵: when the Prince disembarked at Bombay on November 17, they succeeded notably in that city and in Calcutta in paralyzing public life. On the other side, however, the principle of non-violence was, on this occasion, completely forgotten by the volunteers as well as the masses, and serious riots ensued: in Bombay alone there were 53 dead in a few days.⁷⁶ Once more Gandhi was proved to have overestimated the capacity of his followers for non-violent action; the Bombay riots broke out “contrary to all his confidence and almost triumphant expectation of a peaceful boycott.”⁷⁷ Again he repented, announced that he would fast until the Hindus and Muslims of Bombay made their peace with the other communities — and suspended the preparations for the civil disobedience campaign in Bardoli.⁷⁸ But yet again he was driven on by his following: the Congress Working Committee, summoned by Gandhi to consider the situation, resolved that civil disobedience was postponed, but not abandoned and that “all Non-Cooperation Volunteer Corps, Khilafat Volunteer Corps, and other non-official volunteer bodies, should be brought under central control and named National Volunteer Corps.”⁷⁹ The C.K.C. was asked to concur with this resolution.

But these very events — the increasing violence and the stronger organization of the volunteer movement — forced the government’s hand. It felt that it had to take action. Still refraining from wholesale arrest of all leaders for their part in the non-co-operation movement,

the Government of India could no longer completely adhere to the policy of non-interference. Local Governments were told that action on a more drastic and comprehensive scale was now required. In several provinces the volunteer corps were declared unlawful, and numerous political meetings were prohibited. Those who defied these orders were arrested, and in a few weeks some 30,000 people were imprisoned, among them prominent leaders like Lajpat Rai, Motilal Nehru and C. R. Das.⁸⁰ The greatest number of arrests, however, were made among the Khilafatists, who constituted the most turbulent element in the agitation and were consequently the greatest source of anxiety to the government.⁸¹

These large-scale arrests, however, provoked a reaction the government had not expected.⁸² They thought that moderate opinion would support these measures; after all, in Bengal the moderates had called for strong government action after the Calcutta riots.⁸³ It seems that here again the Government of India underrated the national character of the movement. The difference between moderates and extremists was mainly one of method, not of ultimate aims; therefore the moderates too resented the stern measures taken against the extremists. Moreover, government action was not leveled directly at violence, but at the volunteer corps and the political meetings from which government thought the violence originated; therefore the volunteers were outlawed and meetings prohibited. But in this way the issue had become one of freedom of association and of speech, and thereby the moral advantage had shifted, from a government that hitherto had pursued a wise policy of non-interference, towards a movement which defended democratic freedom. Another aspect of the development was that non-co-operation took on another appearance in the moderates' eyes: as a violent mass movement it was something fraught with social dangers, but now it presented itself as a respectable, purely political movement. Therefore the moderates, who for quite a time had been sitting on the fence, now seemed ready to come down on the extremists' side.⁸⁴

Reading had to try and recover some support from the moderates. This was essential to the continued existence of constitutional government in India and to the working of the reforms; moreover, it could put a check upon the plans of the violent extremists.⁸⁵

The situation was complicated by the impending visit of the Prince of Wales to Calcutta on December 24, which might lead to *hartals* and riots as serious as those of the previous month. The prospect did not appeal to either the Viceroy or the moderate leaders. Some of these, headed by Malaviya,⁸⁶ in mid-December approached Reading and

proposed the summoning of a Round Table Conference of nationalist leaders (moderates as well as extremists) and the Government of India, with a view to finding some compromise, and the Viceroy was inclined to embark on this course. This would mean that the government would set free the arrested volunteers, while the non-co-operators would stop agitation. But Reading realized quite well that there would be another price to pay. The proposed conference could not but confront his government with a demand for some kind of *swaraj*, and concessions in this respect were inevitable if it came to a conference at all. He told Montagu⁸⁷ that his immediate aim was to prevent demonstrations or *hartals* when the Prince was visiting Calcutta; but, however guardedly he was expressing himself, it was also clear from his message that he was considering amendments of the Government of India Act of 1919 — embodying the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms — speeding up the pace on the road towards Dominion status for India. Evidently he was willing to let Gandhi emerge the victor from the struggle, which proves that he felt he was fighting with his back to the wall.

But precisely the momentous character of the move he contemplated caused considerable opposition from some governors of provinces,⁸⁸ and also from the British cabinet. Montagu, though in favour of the proposed conference, at the same time wanted to warn the Viceroy against the danger of committing himself and the Imperial Government too far. Curzon and Churchill, however, were adamant in their rejection of what they characterized as something like a bargain: a good reception of the Prince of Wales for *swaraj*. It was they who carried the day: the cabinet resolved that no conference could be sanctioned for the time being.⁸⁹

Reading must have felt himself cornered, but he was saved from this impasse by Gandhi who, having at first consented to a conference without preliminary conditions,⁹⁰ now wanted the release not only of all arrested volunteers but also of the Ali brothers without giving any promises himself.⁹¹ By doing so he put himself in the wrong with the moderate leaders⁹² and, though they kept trying to bring about the desired conference, they became less inclined to slide over towards the extremist wing of the non-co-operation movement.⁹³

Nevertheless, the waves of political tension still ran high, as is evident from the tone prevailing at the annual sessions of Congress, the Khilafat Conference and the Muslim League, all of them meeting in the last days of December, 1921, at Ahmedabad.⁹⁴ In Congress, where Gandhi obtained a position of nearly absolute power,⁹⁵ on the one hand a trend was perceptible towards coaxing the moderate element by assuring them

that they were not obliged to subscribe to the whole programme of non-co-operation, and yet would be welcome in the movement. But on the other hand, the volunteers' pledge was altered. Thus far they had promised to maintain non-violence "so long as the policy of non-violence is continued by the nation"; henceforth they should declare that non-violence was the correct mode of action "as India is circumstanced". The new formula was less rigid and set the door ajar for violent action, since circumstances are more easily changed — or may be considered by individuals to have changed — than is the policy of a nation.

The government felt this to be an important development because, although violence was not advocated openly, there was strong pressure for taking actions which would almost certainly involve violence.⁹⁶ Congress adopted a resolution that individual and mass civil disobedience were the only means by which the existing government could be dislodged. Significantly, it was one of the Khilafat leaders who tried to urge Congress one step further. Hasrat Mohani put forward a motion at the Congress session that henceforth the Congress programme should be attainment of *swaraj* "by all proper and possible means".

At the Muslim League and the Khilafat Conference sessions the same Hasrat Mohani tried to put through a resolution declaring Indian independence. At the Muslim League his attempt was warded off in the Subjects Committee, while at the Khilafat Conference it was ruled out by the president, Hakim Ajmal Khan — an action for which the latter was bitterly blamed.⁹⁷ Yet in his address to the Muslim League, Hasrat Mohani urged his audience to ask Gandhi that he should declare India an independent republic on January 1, 1922. At the same time he suggested changing the League's constitution in order to make it a mass organization. It is not surprising that both Reading and Montagu regarded the situation as most alarming, the more so because they were of the opinion that Hasrat Mohani's proposals fell through only on grounds of expediency, not of principle.⁹⁸

And while the various groups were still fencing for position — the extremists ready to risk violence, the moderates still trying to bring about a Round Table Conference, the Government of India hesitating whether it should arrest leaders like Mohani for mere speeches or not, and Gandhi being driven on by his followers but trying to hold them back — something had to happen, some action became inevitable because of the ever rising political temperature. One gets the impression of being a spectator of a war of nerves: whoever made the first move would give his opponent an advantage, but neither of the two principal parties in the

struggle could wait indefinitely. The Government of India had to reckon with the impatience of Local Governments⁹⁹ and the British cabinet,¹⁰⁰ whereas Gandhi's difficulty was, as Bamford puts it, of keeping the pot boiling without allowing it to boil over.¹⁰¹

It was Gandhi who lost the game. He was hard pressed from two sides: on his right by the moderate leaders, on his left by impatient extremists. In mid-January Malaviya and Jinnah convened a meeting at Bombay of about 300 Indian leaders, representing all shades of opinion. They still aimed at a conference with the government but Gandhi, who was attending as an observer, was not willing to make substantial concessions and so the meeting fell flat. Its president, Sir Sankaran Nair, left before the meeting was finished, issuing a letter to the press in which he stated his reason: talks with Gandhi and his party were useless, since Gandhi made demands which no government could admit.¹⁰² But from the other side Gandhi was urged to sanction the last phase of non-co-operation: the no-tax campaign. Preparations for it were already in progress in some districts in South-India, the Punjab, and the C.P.,¹⁰³ and it had actually started in the district of Guntur in Madras.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, however, it became evident that it would develop into something more than a move in the political game against the government, and that the landlords were threatened as well.¹⁰⁵ Gandhi instructed the Guntur district to stop the campaign, but he felt he could no longer wait; he was going to try out the no-tax campaign in the carefully prepared district of Bardoli where he could hope to remain in control.¹⁰⁶

In the first days of February¹⁰⁷ he issued something like an ultimatum to the Government of India, announcing his intention to launch civil disobedience at Bardoli within a week if the non-co-operators who were under arrest had not been released from jail by then. This was the move the government had waited for. They felt pretty sure that over the issue of civil disobedience, endangering the whole fabric of society and the state, they would find the moderates behind them; the outcome of the "Malaviya Conference" had given an indication to that effect. They issued a communiqué declaring their resolution to repress mass civil disobedience, and asking for the support of loyal citizens.¹⁰⁸ The hour of the great struggle had arrived at long last.

But events had already overtaken these moves. On February 5, a mob led by volunteers attacked a police station at Chauri Chaura in the U.P., killing and burning the entire staff of 23 men.¹⁰⁹ Gandhi repented publicly in *Young India*¹¹⁰ and, at the instance of moderate leaders,¹¹¹

called a meeting of the Working Committee, where civil disobedience was suspended until it could be trusted to maintain a completely non-violent character. At the same time, all action against the *zamindari* was explicitly repudiated; they were assured that "the Congress movement is in no way intended to attack their legal rights."¹¹² At the end of the month, the A.I.C.C. confirmed the Bardoli resolutions.

The motives for this decision may be interpreted in various ways. That the Congress leaders wanted an excuse for calling off an action the consequences of which they were fearing¹¹³ seems to be probable. But just which consequences did they fear? Was it the need to maintain non-violence at every price which inspired the Bardoli resolutions?¹¹⁴ R. P. Dutt argues¹¹⁵ that there was no question of violence or non-violence, because the non-payment of rent could not be called a violent action; he neglects, we think, the fact that if non-payment is not in itself violent, it will certainly cause violence, since neither the government nor the landlords could be expected to accept it meekly. The real issue, according to Dutt, was the protection of class interests: "The dominant leadership of the Congress associated with Gandhi called off the movement because they were afraid of the awakening mass activity; and they were afraid of the mass activity because it was beginning to threaten those propertied class interests with which they themselves were still in fact closely linked."

There is probably a great deal of truth in this, at least as far as "the dominant leadership of the Congress" is concerned. The "moderate" leaders, as we have called them in the preceding pages, may well have been motivated by this fear, though we would not proclaim it as their only motive. For one thing, they probably anticipated that no good could come from a violent conflict with the British Raj. Non-violence for them may have been something else than "petty-bourgeois moralising speculation and reformist pacifism" as Dutt considers it,¹¹⁶ but rather an expedient to be used by people without force at their disposal.

But we think it unlikely that Gandhi's case may be entirely thrown in with theirs. To begin with, non-violence had a special meaning for Gandhi and it seems to be questionable if, in his case, it may be wholly explained away as "a cover, conscious or unconscious, for class interests."¹¹⁷ And next, if Gandhi had been as intent as were the moderate leaders on eliminating the dangerous mass activity, why then did he not jump at the opportunity of reaching a compromise, which arose in mid-December?¹¹⁸ To a rational and realistic politician, this would have presented so obvious a chance to escape — and with honour — all

difficulties, that we are inclined to think that Gandhi's motive perhaps should be looked for not in the rational, but in the irrational sphere. In our opinion, one of the most remarkable features of Gandhi's public apology for what happened at Chauri Chaura is that he treated the whole matter as if it were something between God and himself: "God has been abundantly kind to me . . . I retraced my steps . . . I humbled myself . . . He (*i.e.* God) made me eyewitness . . . The humiliation was greater than in 1919. But it did me good . . .", and so on. Gandhi is speaking here not as a political leader, not even as a religious leader, but as a man mainly interested in his relation to God. Bearing this in mind, we are inclined to look for an explanation of Gandhi's part in the Bardoli resolutions in his feelings of guilt and his desire for punishment.¹¹⁹

But whatever the correct explanation may be, there can be little doubt that these events dealt a shattering blow to the non-co-operators' morale. The more moderate among them, those who had already doubted the desirability of civil disobedience, were confirmed in their doubts by the Chauri Chaura tragedy and the agrarian unrest connected with the no-tax campaign, and now questioned the soundness of Gandhi's whole strategy.¹²⁰ On the other hand, the extremists were deeply disappointed by Gandhi's sudden change of policy, and notably the Khilafatists felt that they had been betrayed.¹²¹ The non-co-operation movement, already endangered from within by increasing Hindu-Muslim distrust, now disintegrated as a consequence of the outburst of violence, of the class antagonism that had come out into the open, and of the ensuing Bardoli resolutions. The Khilafat movement, which had almost completely merged with the non-co-operation movement under Gandhi's leadership — and thereby with the nationalist movement — now disentangled itself, and in the next stage we will see it operating much more on its own. How fast the process of disintegration took place is proved by the fact that when Gandhi was arrested, four weeks after Bardoli, the event caused no stir at all.¹²² The crisis in India was over.