

CHAPTER VI

INDIA'S EXPERIMENT WITH PASSIVE RESISTANCE

IN A PREVIOUS chapter we discussed the character and spirit of Mahatma Gandhi into whose hands has fallen the duty of leading a country of 300 million people through a political revolution. It must be understood, however, that Gandhi is the leader of the revolution and not its creator. Modern thinkers universally admit that individuals or small groups of reformers do not make revolutions. "Agitators or men of genius and ability in a backward community might stir up sporadic revolts and cause minor disturbances, but no human agency can ever create mass revolutions. A successful revolution requires a state of political and social evolution ready for the desired transformation. The history of the world's important political and social revolutions furnishes sufficient evidence in support of this theory." * The insurrection of the slaves headed by the able Spartacus, in spite of their early admirable victories, could not overthrow Roman domination. The early attempts of the proletarian revolutionists, supported as they were by leaders of genius and daring, were doomed to failure. India's revolt against English rule in 1857 was ably led, yet it could not succeed. In all these cases the same argument holds. The time was not ripe for the desired change. In the present case, Gandhi has been eminently successful because

* Hyndman.

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India was prepared beforehand for a mass revolution. Passive resistance, or no passive resistance, the Indian revolution was bound to come as a necessary consequence of the country's long continued political oppression and economic exploitation. The people were already growing desperate when a united mass uprising was precipitated by the English government's brutal actions of 1919. During the war the English parliament had promised a measure of self-government to the people of India as a reward for their loyalty to the Empire. Early in 1919, when the country was agitating for the promised self-government, the English government of India forcibly passed against the unanimous opposition from all sections of the people, special repressive measures in order to check the spread of nationalism in India. Peaceful demonstrations directed against the newly passed bills were organized all over the country. Once again the government acted harshly in using inhuman methods in the form of public flogging, crawlings and so forth, in the effort to suppress the rising spirit of freedom throughout the land. Just at this time Gandhi came on the stage, and proposed to his countrymen the use of passive resistance for the accomplishment of their political revolution. His resolution of non-violent non-coöperation was officially adopted by the Indian National Congress, and the nation in its fight for freedom pledged itself to non-violence. What are passive resistance and non-violent non-coöperation?

"The ethics of passive resistance is very simple and must be known to every student of the New Testament. Passive resistance in its essence is submission to physi-

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cal force *under protest*. Passive resistance is really a misnomer. No thought is farther away from the heart of the passive resister than the thought of passivity. The soul of his ideal is resistance, and he resists in the most heroic and forceful manner." The only difference between his heroism and our common conception of the word is in the choice of the weapon. His main doctrine is to avoid violence and to substitute for physical force the forces of love, faith, and sacrifice. "Passive resistance resists, but not blow for blow. Passive resistance calls the use of the physical weapon in the hands of man the most cowardly thing in life." Passive resistance teaches men to resist heroically the might and injustice of the untrue and unrighteous. But they must fight with moral and spiritual weapons. They must resist tyranny with forbearance, hatred with love, wrong with right, and injustice with faith. "To hurl back the cowardly weapon of the wicked and the unjust is useless. Let it fall. Bear your suffering with patience. Place your faith in the strength of the divine soul of man." "The hardest fibre must melt before the fire of love. When the results do not correspond, the fire is not strong enough." "The indomitable tenacity and magic of the great soul will operate and win out; force must bow down before heroic gentleness." This is the technique of passive resistance.

The actual application of this principle to politics requires explanation. Individuals or groups have a right to refuse submission to the authority of government which they consider unjust and brutal. "The people of India," says Gandhi, "have been convinced, after long and fearful trials, that the English govern-

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ment of India is Satanic. It is based on violence. Its object is not the good of the people, but rapine and plunder. It works not in the interests of the governed, and its policies are not guided by their consent. It bases itself finally not on right but on might. Its last appeal is not to the reason, nor the heart, but to the sword. The country is tired of this creed and it has risen against it." Under these conditions the most straightforward course to follow is to seek the destruction of such an institution. The people of India can destroy the thing by force, or else they can refuse their coöperation with its various activities and render it helpless; then refuse their submission to its authority and render it useless.

Just consider the case of a country where all government officers resign from their offices, where the people boycott the various governmental institutions such as public schools and colleges, law courts, and legislatures; and where the taxpayers refuse to pay their taxes. The people can do all this without resort to force, and so stop the machinery of the government dead, and make it a meaningless thing without use and power. To quote Thoreau once again: "When the officer has resigned office, and the subject has refused allegiance, the revolution is accomplished." This is exactly what the people of India have set out to do by their present policy of passive resistance. However simple the theory may be, the practice of it is difficult and perilous. When a people resort to these peaceful means for the accomplishment of political revolution, they must be prepared to undergo unlimited suffering. The enemy's camp will be determined and or-

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ganized; from it will issue constant provocations and brutal exhibitions of force. Under these difficult circumstances, the only chance for the success of the passive resister is in his readiness for infinite and courageous suffering, qualities that in turn imply a powerful reserve of self-control and an utter dedication to the ideal. Evidently to prepare a nation of 300 million people for this tremendous task must take time and require great patience and courage. To quote Gandhi:

“Non-coöperation is not a movement of brag, bluster, or bluff. It is a test of our sincerity. It requires solid and silent self-sacrifice. It challenges our honesty and our capacity for national work. It is a movement that aims at translating ideas into action.”

The people of India are moving on the road to freedom with dignity. They are slowly nearing their goal. On their way the passive resisters are learning their lessons from bitter experience, and are growing stronger in faith every day. That they are headed in the right direction and are quietly pushing forward we do know in a definite way, but when they will emerge victorious we cannot say. To help the reader to catch the subtle spirit behind this movement, we shall quote a few more lines from the pen of its leader:

“I am a man of peace. I believe in peace. But I do not want peace at any price. I do not want the peace that you find in stone. I do not want the peace that you find in the grave; but I do want peace which you find embedded in the human breast, which is exposed to the arrows of the whole world, but which is protected from all harm by the power of the Almighty God.”

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The wearing of home-spun cloth by all classes of people, rich and poor alike, is one of the most important items in the non-coöperative program. Yet every time I have tried to justify it before my American friends, I have received as response a shrug of the shoulders. Not only the layman, but serious students of economics have replied: "That is going back into mediæval ways. In these days of machinery home-spinning is sheer foolishness." Yet one does not have to be an economist to know that "labor spent on home-spinning and thus used in the creation of a utility, is better spent than wasted in idleness." The majority of the population of India lives directly upon the produce of the soil. They remain in forced idleness for a greater part of the year. There are no industries in the country, cottage or urban. So the people have nothing to occupy them during their idle months. Before the English conquest, agricultural India had its supplementary industries on which the people could fall during their idle time. But these industries have been completely destroyed by the English fiscal policy for India, which was formulated with the desire to build England's own fabric and other industries upon the ruins of India's industries. The country produces more cotton than is needed for its own use. Under ordinary conditions this cotton is exported out of the country, and cloth manufactured in the mills of England is imported into the country for its consumption. For want of a substitute people are forced to buy this foreign cloth. And they are so miserably poor that the great majority of them cannot afford one meal a day. Nothing could be more sensible for these people

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than to adopt home-spinning during their idle hours. This will help to save them, partially at least, from starvation. Let me quote Gandhi on this subject:

"I claim for the spinning-wheel the properties of a musical instrument, for whilst a hungry and a naked woman will refuse to dance to the accompaniment of a piano, I have seen women beaming with joy to see the spinning-wheel work, for they know that they can through that rustic instrument both feed and clothe themselves.

"Yes, it does solve the problem of India's chronic poverty and is an insurance against famine. . . .

"When spinning was almost compulsorily stopped nothing replaced it except slavery and idleness. Our mills cannot today spin enough for our wants, and if they did, they will not keep down prices unless they were compelled. They are frankly money-makers and will not therefore regulate prices according to the needs of the nation. Hand-spinning is therefore designed to put millions of rupees in the hands of poor villagers. Every agricultural country requires a supplementary industry to enable the peasants to utilise the spare hours. Such industry for India has always been spinning. Is it such a visionary ideal—an attempt to revive an ancient occupation whose destruction has brought on slavery, pauperism and disappearance of the inimitable artistic talent which was once all expressed in the wonderful fabric of India and which was the envy of the world?"

The people of India have made mistakes in the past, and they will probably make others in the future. But that in sticking to non-violence they are fulfilling the noblest ideal ever conceived by man, and in staying

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loyal to the spirit of passive resistance they are following a truer and a richer light will not be questioned. Will humanity at large see the wisdom of passive resistance? To me in our present state that seems very doubtful. It will be easy to convince the common man of the virtue and wisdom of non-violence. But unfortunately the reins of our destiny are not in the hands of common people. Those who hold the power over the nations of the world have other interests to look after than the common interests of the average man. They are pledged to the service of other masters whose welfare is not the welfare of the whole race. "The world is ruled at the present day by those who must oppress and kill in order to exploit." So long as this condition continues, there is little hope for the reformation of human society. We must all suffer because we would not learn.

Mankind will not always refuse to listen to the voice of reason. A time will come when the great masses all over the world will refuse to fight, when exploitation and wars will cease, and the different groups of the human race will consent to live together in co-operation and peace.

An illustration of the might of passive resistance was furnished during the conflict between the British Government of India and the Akali Sikhs over the management of their shrines. This incident shows to what heights of self-sacrifice and suffering human beings can reach when they are under the spell of noble idealism. Sikhs are a virile race of fighting people. They are all members of a religious fellowship and form nearly one-sixth of the population of the province of

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Punjab in the northwest part of India. They constitute by themselves a very important community, which is closely bound together by a feeling of common brotherhood. They all go by the name of Singh, meaning the lion, and are rightly proud of their history, which though brief in scope of time, is yet full of inspiring deeds committed by the Sikh forefathers in the defense of religious freedom and justice during the evil days of a few corrupt and fanatic Moghul rulers of India. As a rule Sikhs belong to the agriculturist class and both men and women are stalwart and healthy-looking. Their men are distinguished by their long hair and beards. They are born with martial characteristics and are naturally very bold and brave in their habits. Once aroused to sense of duty towards the weak and the oppressed, they have always been found willing to give their lives without remorse or regret. Sikhs constitute a major portion of the military and police forces of India and of several British colonies. Those tourists who have been in the East will recall the tall, bearded Sikh policemen of the British principalities of Shanghai and Hongkong. Since the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, Sikhs have always been regarded as the most loyal and devoted subjects of the British Crown in India. "On the battlefields of Flanders, Mesopotamia, Persia, and Egypt they have served the Empire faithfully and well. Their deeds of heroism were particularly noticed during the most trying moments of the World War."

Before the British acquired the province in 1849 Sikhs were the rulers of the Punjab. During the period of their rule Sikh princes had made rich grants

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of land and other property to the historic temples and shrines of their religion. Because of the introduction of irrigation canals some of these properties have acquired immense values in recent years, their annual incomes in several cases running up to a million rupees or more.

The Sikhs have always regarded the temple properties as belonging to the community. And when it was brought to the notice of their progressive leaders that the hereditary priests at some of the historic and rich Sikh centers had become corrupt and were wasting the temple money in vicious pleasures, the Sikhs organized the Central Shrine Management Committee. The object of the committee was to take away the management of all important Sikh shrines from the corrupt priests and to vest it in the community. The committee was first organized in November, 1920, and its members were elected on the basis of universal franchise open to both sexes. The method of procedure followed by the committee was that of arbitration. A local sub-committee, consisting of the leading Sikhs in the neighborhood, was formed to watch over the affairs of every shrine. This sub-committee was to act in coöperation with the temple priest, who was henceforth to be a subordinate and not the sole master. Whenever the priests agreed to arbitrate the matter in a fair manner, they were allowed free use of their residence quarters and were awarded liberal salaries for household expenses. By this method the Central Shrine Committee in a short time became masters of some of the very rich and important Sikh shrines.

While in several of the smaller places such trans-

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fer of ownership was accomplished through peaceful means, in some of the bigger temples the community had to undergo heavy losses in life. For instance at Nanakana Sahib, the Jerusalem of the Sikhs, a band of one hundred unarmed followers of the Central Committee were surrounded by a band of armed hirelings of the priest. They were first shot at, then assaulted with rifle butt-ends, and later cut into small pieces or burnt alive after being previously soaked with kerosene oil. The priest personally supervised this whole affair of daylight butchery which did not finish until the last one of the Sikhs had been consumed by the bloody bonfire. Later it was discovered that the priest had prepared for the bloodshed long before, and that he had hired the armed ruffians and barricaded the temple premises after consultation with the local English Justice of the Peace. The leading dailies of the country openly stated that the English civil commissioner was a co-partner in the crime, but the government took no notice of the fact. The Hindu population was not surprised that the priest who had murdered one hundred innocent, inoffensive, devout Sikhs escaped capital punishment in the British courts or that in his prison he was surrounded with all the princely luxuries of his former palace.

Guru Ka Bagh is a historic Sikh temple, situated at a distance of nearly eight miles from the central headquarters of the Sikhs in the city of Amritsar. Through an agreement drawn between the Central Shrine Committee and the temple priest on January 31, 1921, Guru Ka Bagh had come under the management of a local board assisted by the priest. Six months later,

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presumably at the suggestion of the civil commissioner, the priest burned all the temple records and drove the representative of the Central Committee out of the temple premises; whereupon the Central Committee took full charge of the temple. They were in uncontested possession of the premises until trouble started, a year later, from the arrest of five Akali Sikhs, who had gone out to cut firewood from the surrounding grounds attached to the Guru Ka Bagh. A formal complaint was obtained by the civil commissioner from the ousted priest to the effect that in cutting wood for use in the temple kitchen the Akalis were trespassing on his property rights. The cutting of wood on the premises went on as usual until the police began to make wholesale arrests of all so-called trespassers.

This procedure continued for four days till the police found out that large numbers of Akalis (immortals) were pouring in from all sides, everyone eager to be arrested in protecting the rights of his community. Then the police began to beat the Akali bands with bamboo sticks six feet long and fitted with iron knobs on both ends. As soon as Akalis, in groups of five, started to go across for cutting wood, they were assaulted by the police armed with these bamboo sticks and were mercilessly beaten over their heads and bodies until they became unconscious and had to be carried away by the temple ambulance workers.

The news of this novel method of punishment at once spread throughout the country like wild fire and thousands of Sikhs started on their way to Amritsar. The government closed the sale of railroad tickets to all Akali Sikhs wearing black turbans, which consti-

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tuted their national uniform. The various highways leading into the city of the Golden Temple, Amritsar, were blocked by armed police. But after a call for them had been issued at the official headquarters of the Central Shrine Management Committee, nothing could stop the Akalis from crowding into the city. Where railroads refused passage they walked long distances on foot, and when river and canal bridges were guarded against them, both men and women swam across the waters to reach their holy temple at Amritsar. In the course of two days the huge premises of the Golden Temple were filled with Akalis of every sort and kind—boys of twelve with feet sore with blisters from prolonged walking, women of all ages—and still many were fast pouring in.

“Among them were medaled veterans of many wars who had fought for the English in foreign lands and won eminent recognition, and had now rushed to Amritsar to win a higher and nobler merit in the service of their religion and country. They had assembled there to be ruthlessly beaten and killed by the agents of the same government for whose protection they had fought at home and across the seas.” These old warriors, disillusioned by their English friends, who were now conspiring to take from them the simple rights of worship in their own temples, had not lost their independence and courage. They had always been the first to leap before the firing guns of the enemy on the battlefields of England; they were first again here to throw themselves at the feet of their Central Shrine Committee, willing to sacrifice their lives at its bidding. All were eager, one more than

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the other, to offer themselves for the beating at Guru Ka Bagh.

Seeing that their efforts to stop the Akalis from gathering at Arimitsar had been wholly unsuccessful, the Government issued strict orders against any person or group of persons from proceeding to Guru Ka Bagh. Sizing up the whole situation, the assembled leaders of the community represented in the Central Shrine Committee at once resolved on two things. First, the community would contest its right of peaceful pilgrimage and worship at Guru Ka Bagh and other temples until the last among the Sikhs had been killed in the struggle. Secondly, they would steadfastly adhere to the letter and spirit of Mahatma Gandhi's teachings of non-violence. Thirdly, they decided to send Akalis to Guru Ka Bagh in batches of a hundred each, in direct defiance of the orders of the British Government. Before starting on the march, each Akali was required to take an oath of strict non-violence; that he would not use force in action or speech under any provocation whatsoever; that if assaulted he would submit to the rough treatment with resignation and humility; that whatever might be the nature of his ordeal he would not turn his face backward. He would either reach Guru Ka Bagh and go out for chopping wood when so instructed, or he would be carried to the committee's emergency hospital unconscious, dead or alive.

The first batch started towards Guru Ka Bagh on August 31, 1922, after previously taking the vow of non-violence. The Akalis were dressed in black turbans with garlands of white flowers wrapped around

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their heads. On their way, as the Akalis sang their religious hymns in chorus, they were met by a band of policemen armed with bamboo sticks. Simultaneously the Akalis sat down and thrust their heads forward to receive blows. An order was given by the English superintendent, and on rushed the police with their long bamboo rods to do their bloody work. They beat the non-resisting Sikhs on the heads, backs, and other delicate parts of their bodies, until the entire one hundred was maimed and battered and lay there in a mass unconscious, prostrate, bleeding. While the volunteers were passively receiving blows from the police, the English superintendent sportively ran his horse over them and back. His assistants pulled the Sikhs by their sacred hair, spat upon their faces, and cursed and called them names in the most offensive manner. Later, their unconscious bodies were dragged away by the long hair and thrown into the mud on either side of the road. From the ditches they were picked up by the ambulance workers and brought to the emergency hospital under the management of the Central Shrine Committee.

In this way batches of one hundred, pledged to the principle of non-violence, were sent every day to be beaten by the police in this brutal fashion and then were picked up unconscious by the ambulance service. After the tenth day Akalis were allowed to proceed freely on their way. But the beatings in Guru Ka Bagh at the stop where wood for kitchen use had been cut, continued till much later. After a few over fifteen hundred non-resistant and innocent human beings had been thus sacrificed, several hundred of whom had

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died of injuries received and many others had been totally disabled for life, the Government withdrew the police from Guru Ka Bagh and allowed the Sikhs free use of the temple and its adjoining properties.

It was an acknowledgment of defeat on the part of the British Government and a definite victory for the passive resisters. Non-violence had triumphed over brute force. The meek Sikhs had established their moral and spiritual courage beyond a doubt. Those who earlier had laughed at Gandhi's doctrines now began to reconsider their opinions and wondered if it were not true that the soul force of man was the mightiest power in the world, more powerful than the might of all its armies and navies put together. "Socrates and Christ are both dead, but their spirits live and will continue to live." Their bodies were destroyed by those who possessed physical force, but their souls were invincible. Who could conquer the spirit of Socrates, Christ, or Gandhi when that spirit refused to be conquered? At the time of the Guru Ka Bagh incident the physical Gandhi was locked behind iron bars in a jail of India, but his spirit accompanied every Sikh as he stepped across the line to receive the enemy's cowardly blows.

The amazing part of this whole story is the perfect peace that prevailed throughout its entire course. The program of passive resistance was carried to completion without one slip of action on the part of the passive resisters. No community in the whole length and breadth of India is more warlike and more inflammable for a righteous cause than the Sikhs; and nothing is more provoking to a Sikh than an insult

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offered to his sacred hair. Yet in hundreds of cases their sacred hair was smeared with mud and trampled upon, while the bodies of non-resisting Sikhs were dragged by their hair in the most malicious manner by the police; but the passive resisters remained firm in their resolve to the last and thereby proved their faith both in themselves and in their principles.

Those who have not grasped the subtle meaning of passive resistance will call the Akali Sikhs cowards. They will say: "Well, the reason why the Akalis did not return the blows of the police was because they were afraid; and it was cowardice and not courage that made them submit to such insults as the pulling of their sacred hair and so forth. A truly brave person, who has a grain of salt in him, will answer the blows of the enemy under those conditions and fight in the defense of his honor until he is killed." Although we do not agree with the first part of our objecting friend's argument, we shall admit the truth of his statement that it takes a brave man to defend his honor at the risk of death itself. Yet we hold that the Akali who, while defending his national rights, voluntarily allowed himself to be beaten to death without thoughts of malice or hatred in his heart against anybody was a more courageous person than even the hero of our objecting friend. Why? To use Gandhi's illustration: "What do you think? Wherein is courage required—in blowing others to pieces from behind a cannon or with a smiling face approaching a cannon and being blown to pieces? Who is the true warrior—he who keeps death as a bosom-friend or he who controls the death of others? Believe me that a man de-

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void of courage and manhood can never be a passive resister."

Let us stretch the point a little further in order to make it more clear. During the martial law days at Amritsar in 1919, the commanding officer ordered that all persons passing through a certain lane, where previously an Englishwoman had been assaulted by a furious mob, should be made to crawl on the bellies. Those living in the neighborhood had submitted to this humiliation at the point of British bayonets. Later, when Mahatma Gandhi visited the lane, he is reported to have made a speech from the spot which may be summarized thus: "You Punjabees, who possess muscular bodies and have statures six feet tall; you, who call yourselves brave, submitted to the soul-degrading crawling order. I am a small man and my physique is very weak. I weigh less than a hundred pounds. But there is no power in this world that can make *me* crawl on my belly. General Dyer's soldiers can bind my body and put me in jail, or with their military weapons they can take my life; but when he orders me to crawl on my belly I shall say: 'Oh foolish man, don't you see, God has given me two feet to walk on? Why shall I crawl on my knees, then?'" This is an instance of passive resistance. Under these circumstances, would you call Gandhi a coward? You must remember this distinction between a coward and a passive resister: a coward submits to force through fear; while a passive resister submits to force *under protest*. In our illustration of the crawling order those persons who had submitted to the order because they were afraid of the punishment

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involved if they disobeyed it were cowards of the first degree. But Gandhi would be a passive resister, and you would not call him a coward, would you?

Let me give you a sample of the sublime heroism displayed by the Akalis at Guru Ka Bagh. In one instance the policeman's blow struck an Akali with such violence that one of his eyeballs dropped out. His eye was bleeding profusely, but still he walked forward towards his goal until he was knocked down the second time and fell on the ground unconscious. Another Akali, Pritipal Singh, was knocked down eight times. Each time as soon as he recovered his senses, he stood on his feet and started to go forward, until after the eighth time he lay on the ground wholly prostrate. I have known Pritipal Singh in India. We went to school together for five years. Pritipal was a good boy in every way. He was the strongest person in our school and yet the meekest of all men. He had a very jolly temper, and I can hear to this day his loud ringing laugh. Inoffensive in his habits, he was a cultured and a loving friend. When I read his name in the papers and later discovered how cruelly he suffered from the injuries which finally resulted in his premature death, I was indeed sorrowful. That such a saintly person as Pritipal Singh should be made to go through such hellish tortures and that his life should be thus cruelly ended in the prime of youth was enough to give anyone a shock. But when I persuaded myself that with the passing of that handsome youth there was one more gone for truth's sake, I felt peaceful and happy once more.

Lest the reader be at a loss to know what this

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whole drama of horrible tortures on the one hand and supernatural courage on the other was all about, we shall give the gist of the whole affair as follows:

At the time when the issue was precipitated in Guru Ka Bagh the Central Shrine Management Committee had already acquired control over many of the rich Sikh shrines, and become a powerful force in the uplift of the community. The committee was receiving huge incomes from the various shrine properties, which it proposed to spend on educational and social service work. Those at the helm of affairs were profoundly nationalistic in their views. Naturally, the British Government began to fear their power, which it desired to break through suppression. Hence the issue at Guru Ka Bagh was not the chopping of fuel wood. The ghastly motive of the Government was to cow the Sikhs and crush their spirits through oppression. How it started to demonstrate its power and how shamefully it failed in its sinister purpose has already been explained.

Many other examples of the victory of soul force over brute strength could be cited from the recent history of India. I chose the Guru Ka Bagh affair as the subject of my illustration for two reasons. In the first place, it was the most simple and yet the most prominent demonstration of the holiness and might of passive resistance; and secondly, the drama was performed in my own home town by actors who belonged to my own community and were kith and kin to me in the sense that I could know fully their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears.