GANDHI: SAINT AND STATESMAN

BY SYUD HOSSAIN

THE arrival, at last, of Mahatma Gandhi in London marks an event whose momentous potentiality is equalled by its picturesque interest. It has taken twelve years of travail and desperate struggle between Great Britain and India to make the occasion possible, and it is safe to say that the result of the deliberations in which he is participating for good or ill, will determine the internal history of India for the next generation, besides having far-reaching effects on the evolution and even the existence in its present form of the British Empire. Needless to say, the denouement of this drama will have a corresponding influence upon the world situation as a whole.

The specific issue that is engaging the Round Table Conference convening in London is the attainment of responsible self-government by India, and the constitutional mold into which it shall be cast. This conference seems to promise the last opportunity for a settlement by consent to be arrived at between the representatives of the British Government and those of the Indian people. It is certainly a propitious fact that in spite of the recent domestic upheaval in Great Britain, one group will be headed by Ramsay McDonald and the other by Mahatma Gandhi.

There can be little doubt, however, that not only is Mahatma Gandhi the observed of all observers in London, but that he exerts the most powerful single influence both on the course of the deliberations and the ultimate result of the conference. It may, indeed, be affirmed with confidence, that any settlement that is acceptable to Gandhi will be acceptable to India, and equally, that any proposed arrangements from which he withholds his endorsement will be automatically rejected by the Indian National Congress and probably by a considerable majority of the Indian people.

Such a statement could not be made about any other Indian leader in the same position and constitutes the measure of the uniqueness of the influence and prestige which Gandhi enjoys among his countrymen.

Mahatma Gandhi is present in London with a type of mandate for which there be but few precedents in the annals of national or international plenipotentiaries. The Indian National Congress at its sessions in Karachi last March, in spite of the fact that much inflammatory dissent was known to exist within its ranks against the course, nevertheless unanimously endorsed the Gandhi-Irwin truce concluded between the Mahatma and the British Viceroy which served as the prelude to the calling of the Round Table Conference in London. Subsequently, the working committee of the All-India National Congress decided to make Mahatma Gandhi its sole representative and spokesman at the Round Table Conference; whereas, in the ordinary course a score or more of veteran leaders with eminent records of public service would have gone to London to negotiate the terms of settlement on behalf of the Congress. Such a declaration of national confidence in one man is as impressive as it is unprecedented.

The measure of Gandhi's prestige is also the measure of the responsibility that will rest upon him.

Gandhi thus is the pivot of the Conference. The Mahatma has not only captured the heart of India but apparently the imagination of the world, and in some ways is already, as was perhaps inevitable, tending to become a legendary figure. What is attempted here is a brief sketch of the character and personality of India's great leader in the light of personal contact and first-hand knowledge. It may prove helpful in making Gandhi's role at the Round Table Conference more vivid to the reader.

The Western world is getting gradually reconciled, it would seem, to a saint functioning as a statesman apparently without loss of saintliness and to the probable good of the politics involved.

The term Mahatma in the Indian language means, literally, "Great Soul." It is an appellation of veneration that the Indian people of all types and kinds and religious persuasions have voluntarily applied to Gandhi for the better part of twenty years. That is the measure of their reverence and affection for this extraordinary man. Gandhi has more than once in recent years publicly pro-

tested against having holiness thus thrust upon him, but in vain. It looks now as though he will irrevocably go down to history as the Mahatma.

This title gives the clue both to Gandhi's inner personality and to his unparalleled influence over his fellow countrymen.

India has produced a great many saints, as well as a great many statesmen in her age-long history. It is the unique distinction of Mahatma Gandhi that, while an authentic saint according to the criteria of Indian tradition, he has devoted himself to tasks which have hitherto been regarded generally in the West and East alike as the exclusive province of the statesman. Moreover, paradoxical as it may seem, he is meeting these practical and conventional weapons or tactics of so-called statesmanship but primarily with the spiritual resources of a saint projected into the province of statesmanship.

To explain this paradox of the same person acknowledged as a saint, as the leader of one of the greatest national revolutionary movements of history, and as an international statesman, it is necessary to understand the personality of Gandhi and the principles and forces that have gone to the moulding of his personality.

Mahatma Gandhi is at once the exponent and exemplar of a personal philosophy of life whose roots go back to the immemorial spiritual traditions of his race and country. Hinduism, Buddhism and particularly, Jainism, in which he himself was brought up,— all lay great stress upon the inviolable sanctity of life, and the practice of "non-injury," both as a social duty and as the personal method of spiritual self-realization.

Reared in this faith and tradition, Gandhi also from his earliest days found them congenial to his own temperament, and in the course of his educational studies in adolescence and early manhood deepened his convictions by a process of assembling and assimilating much corroborative truth from other sources and religions than his own. The Sermon on the Mount, for instance, as can easily be imagined, made a great appeal to him and he also came to be attracted to and impressed by the Tolstoyan teaching and attitude to life.

This was the broad base upon which his remarkable public life of now more than thirty years' standing came to be erected.

In the spiritual synthesis which Gandhi thus personally achieved,

the guiding principle is service of Truth by non-violence and self-sacrifice. Analyzed, this means that Gandhi believes that there is and should be only one governing law operative in all the affairs and relationships of humanity—individual, domestic, national, international and any other. By the same token he rules out hate in any shape or form from the scheme of human relationship—in the interest not so much of the potential objects of one's hatred as in that of the sanctity and integrity of one's own immortal soul! By ruling out hate from his scheme of things Gandhi automatically rejects and repudiates violence or coercion which he regards as merely the instruments which subserve hate. To him the attainment of any end, however intrinsically laudable it may be in itself, by methods of forcible compulsion, is a gross immorality. For Gandhi emphatically the end does not justify the means. But in contemning the conventional methods, Gandhi is very far from following the line of least resistance. If from his point of view the implement of force is sinful, even in retaliation to injury, so also even more are the oppression and exploitation of the poor and the humble. And Gandhi holds it to be the bounden duty of every individual not to acquiesce in or compromise with Evil, but on the contrary, positively to give it battle. But the difference is that Gandhi gives battle to wrong not by retaliatory hate and violence but by love and self-suffering. In other words, it is the practical unvarying application in daily life and to mundane affairs of the spirit embodied in "Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do." The application, however, is at once retrospective and redemptive.

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution of Gandhi to the ethical idealism of his time is his application of these principles on a scale that is unprecedented, and in a domain where it has never been tried before, namely, the notoriously sanguinary field in which Imperialism and Nationalism deadlock for mutual destruction.

We may now perhaps better realize how the saint came to be also the recognized and undisputed leader of perhaps the greatest national revolutionary movement of history.

It was after long years of careful study and observation, and after disillusionment had followed upon disillusionment, that Gandhi finally and reluctantly came to the conclusion that British rule in India was, in his own words, "satanic"—that it had operated in its totality to the grave detriment of the Indian people. It had, he

held, spiritually emasculated them by sustained denial and filching away of their natural and national rights; and by prolonged economic exploitation, it had materially impoverished them to the point of destitution. When Gandhi had become finally convinced of this in his own mind and had despaired of the British Government ever relaxing their strangle-hold upon India of their own accord or volition, he served notice upon them that if the situation could not be mended then it must be ended.

That was the beginning of the now famous "non-violent non-cooperation movement" in India twelve years ago. This unwieldy phrase had to be especially invented to give expression to the peculiar technique of the revolution launched by Mahatma Gandhi. In effect, he announced that inasmuch as British rule in India rested upon a foundation of coercive force, military and naval, and was motivated primarily by greed and self interest, it was immoral; and that therefore it was sinful for Indians in any shape or form to cooperate with it and thereby help its perpetuation. On the contrary, Mahatma Gandhi held that it was their duty to "non-cooperate" with the British Government in all its ways and works, and even to embark upon the civil disobedience of all laws passed by the British Government which were repugnant to the moral sense of the people or infringed their inalienable natural rights.

This movement of nation-wide non-cooperation, however, was to be conducted at every stage and at all times in a spirit and by methods of complete and unconditional non-violence. Upon his followers he enjoined non-violence not only in action but even in thought and in spirit. They must resist the British but not hate them. Even if and when confronted with repression and terrorism by the agents of government they might never retaliate with violence but unflinchingly suffer. They were to conquer by love. They might die but never kill.

Such, in broad outline, has been the scope and character of the passive resistance with which the Indian people have confronted British imperialism for the last decade under the intrepid and inspiring leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. It is no exaggeration to say that the actual number of those actively participating in the non-cooperation movement ran into hundreds of thousands, and it is a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi's leadership and to the spiritual reserves of the Indian people, that on the whole the movement

sustained the almost super-human moral discipline and self control under provocation, that was demanded of it.

This is now generally admitted, even by British authorities, and it is this circumstance indeed that provides the clue to the measure of the success of the movement as shown in the truce that the British Government made with Mahatma Gandhi as a preliminary to the meeting in London of the Round Table Conference and which, it is hoped, a final peace settlement will be arrived at between Great Britain and India. One of the conditions of the armistice signed by Mahatma Gandhi and Lord Irwin was the unconditional release of sixty thousand followers of Mahatma Gandhi who had been imprisoned by the British Government during the course of the movement of civil disobedience. That gives one some idea of the scale of the passive resistance that had been offered. It was only when the Government realized that "the King's Government" could not be carried on without constant resort to ever-increasing repression and after British trade with India had been knocked off almost fifty per cent under the intensive boycott of the non-cooperators, that it finally agreed to the truce. No wonder Edgar Snow, American staff correspondent in India has described Mahatma Gandhi as "the world's first conqueror by nonviolence."

It is in this capacity that Mahatma Gandhi has taken his seat at the Round Table Conference now convening in London. Its deliberations will be fraught with the most far-reaching consequences, political and economic, for the millions comprised in the sub-continent of India and the British Empire. But above all, if the conference should prove a success and lead to a permanent and peaceful settlement of the nearly two-hundred-year-old moral war between British imperialism and Indian nationalism, it will have set a totally new precedent in the solution of international conflicts.

Until Gandhi appeared upon the scene, every revolutionary movement in history had been fought out in terms of hate and by the instrumentality of force. Gandhi chose to mobilize what he calls "soul-force"—to conquer your enemy, by love and the compulsion of self-suffering and self-sacrifice. If this concept, exemplified effectively in practice by Gandhi and his followers, ever comes to dominate the consciousness of war-torn and hat-ridden humanity, the millenium will be at hand.