CHAPTER - II

THE AHMEDABAD MOVEMENT
Chapter II

THE AHMEDABAD MOVEMENT

Gandhi came back from South Africa in 1915. There he had partial success. Pound 3 tax was abolished by General Jan Smut's Indian Relief Act of 1914 and Indian marriages were declared valid. The discrimination against Indians was still there and exploitation of Indians and Africans by white races remained still in vogue. But as Judith M. Brown said 'South Africa had forged Gandhi, the man, the Satyagrahi and public figure'.

Gandhi was eager to return to India as indicated by him in a letter from London in 1914, that he was fed up with the artificial, materialistic and immoral environment of the west which seemed to be atrophying his spirit. While on his way to India he pondered over his future and made up his mind to be satisfied with whatever fate would offer him in his public career.

He postponed launching satyagraha for about five years. Gopal Krishna Gokhale advised Gandhi not to comment on public matters for one year and to travel far and wide in India to acquaint himself with the difficulties and problems of people. He visited Bombay, Bengal, Burma and his own state Gujarat.

Very rapidly his concern for truth drew him into situations which were totally new to him in an Indian setting which were still unfamiliar. He

came to the point of trying out satyagraha much earlier than he had anticipated.  

During the first three years after his return, Gandhi acquired the reputation of a man who would take up local wrongs of Champaran Indigo cultivators, Kheda peasants and Ahmedabad Textile workers.

Gandhi selected Ahmedabad as his seat of activities as the public there was of same background as Gandhi and there was no language difficulty. Gandhi thought that people there would understand his concept of 'New India'.

Ahmedabad founded by Sultan Ahmedshah in 1411 became famous for textile industry during the British rule in India. It began to be called the 'Manchester of India'.

Ahmedabad with a population of about 274,000 in 1921 was one of India's largest cities, and the second largest in the Bombay Presidency. It was a long established commercial centre and had experienced various changes of fortune through the centuries until, with the new political tranquility under the British raj, it throve on a growing cotton industry and expanding markets. Castes with old trading traditions took up the opportunities the new era offered and, building on old foundations, turned Ahmedabad into a modern, industrial city, equipped to prosper in the twentieth century.

It was in 1861 that the first mill started working. Second mill was established in 1867 after which the industry started growing rapidly.

The condition at Ahmedabad favoured the growth of the industry as there was no dearth of capital and labour. The traditional weavers were a great help to the textile industry. Raw cotton was available in abundance as the area around Ahmedabad was a cotton growing area.

During the early years of the industry, working conditions were very bad. Working hours were long (from 6.30 A.M. to 7 P.M.). Wages were meagre. Even the children and women had to work in the mills. Children were to work for half day and so they used to work in two different mills in a day. There used to be no arrangement of drinking water. There were no drinking halls and canteens. In case some damage occurred to the cloth, the workers were compelled to purchase it and sell it in the market.

On the whole the workers had become accustomed to the inhuman conditions. But sometimes under unbearable conditions, they would simply walk out of the mill. The mill-owners were not intelligent enough to understand the problems of workers. Sudden stoppage of work by workers was

---

considered as 'hoolad' or 'riot'. Government also took it as against law and order. Such conditions prevailed for over fifty years.  

During the early decades of the twentieth Century, government framed laws to better the working conditions in Textile mills. At the same time social organisations such as Kamgar Hitwardhak Sabha and Servants of India Society in Bombay, the Theosophical Society and the Venkatesha Gumritha Varshini Sabha in Madras and the Mazdoor Mitra Mandal in Ahmedabad took sufficient pains to bring about reforms by providing free medical aid, teaching hygiene, running night schools and establishing credit societies. Such welfare measures brought these societies very close to workers and they began to take part in disputes of workers with the mill-owners.  

In Ahmedabad at that time, Anasuyabehn Sanibhai with Shankar Lal Banker established 'Mazdoor Mitra Mandal'. Though she was primarily a social worker she took an active part in disputes of workers with owners also.  

Plague had been endemic in Bombay Presidency from 1896 onwards, but until 1917 it had not spread to Ahmedabad. By July 1917, the authorities in Ahmedabad were sure that increasing death in the city were due to plague. In 1917-18 there were 22,966 plague deaths. This figure constituted nearly 10 percent of the population. As the workers began to die due to plague, many of them started going to their villages. The mass migration
affected industry, which was working to full capacity. To dissuade workers' families from leaving the city, and to provide care for them, one millowner converted his personal residence into a hospital when Ahmedabad's only hospital failed to keep pace with the needs of the population. Fearing shortage of labour, the mill owners offered a bonus equivalent to 70 to 80% of wage to check their exodus.  

Warpers, who were not given the plague bonus, went on strike under the leadership of Anasuyabehn Sarabhai in December 1917. The strike lasted for 20 days. Finally the warpers got a 20% increase in their wages.  

The First World War was a boon to Ahmedabad. During this war, the conditions had become very favourable for textile industry in India especially in Ahmedabad. Imports from Lancashire had become less and import duty was raised by Government to cope up with the war expenditure. The textile industry raised their production from 250 million yards in 1913-14 to 392 million yards in 1916-17 and was making big profits due to rise in prices.  

But the coal supply was disrupted due to war time restriction on railway traffic. The mills were facing acute shortage of coal. It had become difficult for the owners to keep the mills running.  

---

12. Desai, Mahadev H., A Righteous Struggle, Ahmedabad, 1951, p.4; also see Gillion, Kenneth L., op.cit., p.77.  
13. Gillion, Kenneth L., op.cit., p.156; also see Majumdar, Paresh, op.cit., p.77.  
This was the time when mill-owners declared to stop the plague bonus from February 15, 1918 as the plague had subsided by then. 16 Workers were agitated with this declaration. There were 10,000 weavers among workers of the Ahmedabad mills who were receiving a bonus of nearly 75%. The weavers sought the help of Anasuyabehn Sarabhai who had led the warpers' strike to a success. Anasuyabehn Sarabhai requested Gandhi to intervene.

The first indication that Gandhi was interested in the Ahmedabad mills was a letter he wrote while he was in Champaran to Ambalal Sarabhai. Sarabhai was a prominent Ahmedabad millowner and personal friend of Gandhi: he had in fact saved Gandhi's ashram when it was in financial difficulties in its early days by an anonymous gift of Rs. 13000.

His sister, Anasuyabehn Sarabhai visited Kaira during Gandhi's Satyagraha there, and even before Gandhi took up the cause of the mill-workers she had taken an interest in them and started a night school for them. Gandhi had earlier visited the children's school run by Anasuyabehn Sarabhai and her assistants. He had appreciated her social welfare activities among the textile workers. Gandhi promptly wrote a letter to Ambalal Sarabhai asking him to accept the weaver's demand for higher wages. 17

The Ahmedabad Millowners Association did not like the intervention of outsider in their matters. After the written request Gandhi met Ambalal Sarabhai in person in Bombay on February 2, 1918, and as a result of their discussion decided to intervene in the dispute. He was also approached

16 Local Government Fortnightly Report, Bombay, March 1, 1918, Home Department (Political) Deposit, March, 1918, No. 41.
by the collector of Ahmedabad who feared a serious breakdown of law and order. The mill workers had no recognised leadership, though they tended to look to Gandhi for guidance. Gandhi was invited to preside at a meeting on February 8, 1918. The meeting was attended by about 3000 workers. At this meeting Gandhi appealed to the men to search for a solution which would not create bitterness between the opposing parties. He suggested that they should write to the owners about their grievances, but not demand an immediate wage increase of 50-60%, and that if their appeal failed they should resort to arbitration.

The Times of India observed that the issue involved was as to what extent the percentage of increase should be granted to men to compensate the rise in prices of food stuffs and other necessaries of life. The mill owners decided to increase the wages by 20% in lieu thereof. But the weavers who were the greatest beneficiaries of the bonus, opposed the decision of the owners and threatened to resort to hostile activities. The mill owners, however, were firm and non-yielding.

Gandhi, then started examining the case. He held discussions with both workers and mill owners separately. So far he had not made up his mind to intervene directly. When the situation became serious, the collector wrote to Gandhi to use his influence over the mill owners to come to a compromise. After studying the matter Gandhi suggested an arbitration. The Times of India observed that the issue involved was as to what extent the percentage of increase should be granted to men to compensate the rise in prices of food stuffs and other necessaries of life. The mill owners decided to increase the wages by 20% in lieu thereof. But the weavers who were the greatest beneficiaries of the bonus, opposed the decision of the owners and threatened to resort to hostile activities. The mill owners, however, were firm and non-yielding.

Gandhi, then started examining the case. He held discussions with both workers and mill owners separately. So far he had not made up his mind to intervene directly. When the situation became serious, the collector wrote to Gandhi to use his influence over the mill owners to come to a compromise. After studying the matter Gandhi suggested an arbitration. The Times of India observed that the issue involved was as to what extent the percentage of increase should be granted to men to compensate the rise in prices of food stuffs and other necessaries of life. The mill owners decided to increase the wages by 20% in lieu thereof. But the weavers who were the greatest beneficiaries of the bonus, opposed the decision of the owners and threatened to resort to hostile activities. The mill owners, however, were firm and non-yielding.

Gandhi, then started examining the case. He held discussions with both workers and mill owners separately. So far he had not made up his mind to intervene directly. When the situation became serious, the collector wrote to Gandhi to use his influence over the mill owners to come to a compromise. After studying the matter Gandhi suggested an arbitration. The Times of India observed that the issue involved was as to what extent the percentage of increase should be granted to men to compensate the rise in prices of food stuffs and other necessaries of life. The mill owners decided to increase the wages by 20% in lieu thereof. But the weavers who were the greatest beneficiaries of the bonus, opposed the decision of the owners and threatened to resort to hostile activities. The mill owners, however, were firm and non-yielding.

Gandhi, then started examining the case. He held discussions with both workers and mill owners separately. So far he had not made up his mind to intervene directly. When the situation became serious, the collector wrote to Gandhi to use his influence over the mill owners to come to a compromise. After studying the matter Gandhi suggested an arbitration. The Times of India observed that the issue involved was as to what extent the percentage of increase should be granted to men to compensate the rise in prices of food stuffs and other necessaries of life. The mill owners decided to increase the wages by 20% in lieu thereof. But the weavers who were the greatest beneficiaries of the bonus, opposed the decision of the owners and threatened to resort to hostile activities. The mill owners, however, were firm and non-yielding.
reported that Gandhi had suggested an arbitration after due consideration and discussion with workers and mill-owners to which both parties agreed. After a long discussion it was agreed that the question of rate of increase was to be decided by an arbitration board comprising of three representatives of mills, Gandhi and two other representatives of workers to be nominated by Gandhi himself.\textsuperscript{21} Thus an arbitration Board was set up under the Chairmanship of the collector. The mill-owners were represented by Ambalal Sarabhai, Seth Jagabhai Dalpathbhai and Seth Chandu Lal in the Board and Gandhi. Vallabhbhai Patel and Shankar Lal Banker were the representative of the workers\textsuperscript{22}. It was tentatively agreed that the wages were not to exceed the wages of Bombay mill hands. Further the notice of stoppage of plague bonus was withdrawn.

However, the situation worsened as workers in a few mills went on strike before the arbitration board could settle the issue. The mill-owners taking the benefit of this strike, declared the arrangement was no more valid and withdrew themselves from the Arbitration Board. Gandhi immediately intervened and offered a public apology. Of course, some mill owners had also played a part in precipitating the conflict. They nonetheless disregarded Gandhi's apology and declared that they treated the strike as a revocation of the agreement to settle the issue by arbitration. Gandhi at once regretted to the millowners for what had happened and informed them that the workers were ready to rectify their mistakes. It must be stated that it was not as if the mill-owners were free from all blame. But Gandhi concerned himself only with the mistake committed by his own side and showed his readiness to correct

\textsuperscript{21} The Times of India, March 18, 1918, p.10, Col. 2, 3.
\textsuperscript{22} Desai, Mahadev H., \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 5-6, Brown Judith M., \textit{op.cit.}, p.116.
it. The mill owners would not agree. They declared that they would dismiss all the workers who were not prepared to accept the 20 percent increase. Gandhi meanwhile studied the condition of employment, their wages compared to Bombay workers, cost of living, trend in prices etc. and decided that the workers should ask for a 35 percent increase. Many workers were not satisfied with a 35 percent increase, but they were persuaded to accept the compromise by Gandhi. In fact Gandhi exerted himself to the utmost to avert this situation but the mill-owners were adamant and refused to budge an inch and declared a lockout on February 22, 1918. The intransigence on the part of millowners was widely commented. The Government tried to play it cool. However, they largely supported the stand taken by the millowners. The press praised Gandhi for his realistic approach and critically commented on the attitude & response of the millowners. The nationalist press in particular supported the Gandhian initiative and had a word of caution and advise to both the millowners as well as the workers.

This conflict entered a new phase of agitation then. Gandhi asked the workers to take a pledge to refuse work till they were given a 35 percent increase based on July 1917 wages and to remain non-violent during this period of lockout.

Before the actual strike took place, Gandhi took vows of good and moral behaviour from the workers and then began 'Righteous struggle': A Chronicle of Ahmedabad Textile Labourer's Fight for Justice

The mill owners reacted and threatened united action against their workers. At this Gandhi commented that they were organizing a union of elephants against a union of ants. Gandhi organised the strike on the principle of satyagraha which was different from the familiar patterns.20

Gandhi had begun to organize the weavers with daily mass meetings and leaflets through which he explained the nature of struggle, and exhorted them to remain peaceful and disciplined. Apart from visits to workers house and public meetings for educating the workers about the struggle, leaflets were issued with a view, fixing firmly in their minds the principle and significance of the struggle. The leaflets were issued in the name of Anasuyabehn Sarabhai but they were in fact written by Gandhi, while one was written by Shankar Lal Banker.27

Leaflet No. 1 issued on February 26, 1918 revealed the situation under which plague bonus was withdrawn and how arbitration board was set up but before this tribunal could give its award, there was lock out on February 22, 1918. At this point the tribunal sensing its responsibility recommended an increase of 35 percent. But before doing so they intimated their intention to the millowners and promised to consider if they had anything to say against it. The employers did not express their view on this matter. This leaflet also contained the workers pledge as under:

1. That they will not resume work until a 35 percent increase on the July wages is secured.
2. That they will not, during the period of lockout, cause any disturbance or resort to violence or indulge in looting, nor damage any property of the employers or abuse anyone, but will remain peaceful. 28

27. Brown, Judith M., op.cit., p.117; also see Desai, Mahadev H., op.cit., p.8.
On the fifth day of the lock out i.e. February 26, 1918 Gandhi delivered a speech to Ahmedabad workers encouraging them by saying "If a time comes when you starve, have confidence that we will eat only after feeding you. We shall not allow you to die of starvation." 29

To those workers who demanded more than 35 percent he said, "I say you can demand a 100 percent increase. But it would be unjust if you do so. Be content, in the present circumstances with what you have demanded. If you ask for more, it will pain me. We cannot demand anything unreasonable from anybody. I think that the demand for 35 percent is quite fair." 30

Leaflet No. 2 was issued on February 27, 1918 in which it was discussed as to how the workers can succeed in their pledge. For this purpose he thus enumerated certain qualities of a worker that the worker should be truthful, should possess courage, should have sense of justice and should remain peaceful. In the concluding para of this leaflet Gandhi assured the workers like this. "A worker who behaves in this manner, will never find it difficult to keep his pledge." 31

On February 2, 1918, he addressed the Mill-hands of Ahmedabad advising them not to pay heed to people who might discourage them and should only depend on their own strength. He said, "Your success depends on yourselves, upon your sincerity, upon your faith in God and upon your courage." He asked them to stand by the pledge firmly thus, "I urge you all, do not allow yourselves to be dissuaded by anyone and give up the pledge: stand by it firmly." 32

30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., pp. 219-220.
32. Ibid., pp. 222-223.
Leaflet No. 3 was issued on February 28, 1918 in which he discussed as to how the workers might keep themselves occupied during the lock out. He enumerated certain things which the workers should not do. These were gambling, sleeping during the day, talking of the employers and lockout.

In this leaflet he then advised the workers what they should do. These were - cleaning and repairing their houses and compounds, reading books, teach illiterate, spend their time in learning new work, those who knew skilled work could seek work for themselves. 33

Gandhi's address on February 28, 1918 advised workers to be patient and work unitedly to win their legitimate demands. He was against violence of any kind. He even advised millowners not to inflict humiliation on the workers as this was bound to recoil and disturb the harmony among the workers and millowners. The national press repeatedly quoted Gandhi's observation" The heat and strength acquired in breaking stones are not to be had by handling a pen. 34 Obviously he was advising the local leaders to avoid unnecessary heat while arguing the cause of the workers. Often he was heard observing that the measure of fury doubles if physical violence is employed. Probably he was commenting on the possible tie up between the local administration and the millowners.

The leaflet No. 4 was issued on March 1, 1918. It was explained how the workers would be given help. He started with what could not be done by him thus:-

1. We shall not help the workers in doing anything which is wrong.
2. We shall have to abandon the workers and cease helping them if they do anything wrong or make inflated demands or commit violence.

34 Ibid., p.226.
3. We can never wish ill to the employers, ........we shall promote the workers interest while duly safeguarding the employers.

Then he explained what they would do for the workers: 1. We are with the workers so long as they conduct themselves well as they have done so far.

2. We shall do all we can to obtain for them. 35% increase in wages.

3. We are, as yet, entreating the employers,.....But we shall be prepared, if the situation demands it, to acquaint the whole of India with workers plight.

4. We shall not rest till the workers get what they are entitled to.

5. .......We shall show the workers how they may improve their economic condition.

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

7. We shall nurse the sick and get for them the services of vaids and doctors."

Mahadev H. Desai in his book, 'A Righteous struggle' has observed: "Gandhiji took the opportunity to emphasize to the workers, whenever there was an occasion to do so that the struggle was not to harass the employers but to secure the employers' good, while at the same time securing the welfare of the workers: -every word contained in this leaflet was carried out literally. 35

Then Mahadev H. Desai observed "After this stage, the tone of the leaflets is changed."

Gandhi spoke to the workers of Ahmedabad Mill on March 1, 1918 but only a part of the speech is available. In this speech he told the workers what they should expect from him. He also asked them to confront and censure him if they found him committing mistake.\(^{36}\)

In the leaflet No. 5 issued on March 2, 1918 Gandhi discussed about the outcome or result of the efforts of workers and the efforts of employers. He said that the result of workers' efforts might have one of these two results. 1). They may get a 35% increase in wages or (2). They may have to resume work without getting such increase." He pointed out that in case they got the increase, then they would be benefitted and the employers would earn credit and in the second case, the workers would be demoralized and obliged to bow before the employers as slaves. As regards Employer's efforts, he expected one of these two results." They may concede the workers an increase. 2. They may not do so." Discussing this he analysed thus: "If the employers concede it, the workers will be contended and justice will be done to them. The employers are afraid that, if the workers' demands are conceded, they will become overbearing. This fear is baseless. Even if the workers are suppressed today, it is not impossible that, when opportunity arises, they will take to such ways..... The employers will always distrust the suppressed workers." In this leaflet he concluded that the employers' success lay in that of the workers; and the latter's defeat likewise, would be their defeat.\(^{37}\)

Leaflet No. 6 issued on March 3, 1918 discussed the modern and ancient way of justice. He defined them: "Pure justice is that which is inspired by fellow feeling and compassion. We in India call it the Eastern or

---

the ancient way of justice. That way of justice which has no place in it for fellow-feeling or compassion is known as satanic, western or modern justice." He also compared the two ways of justice and said that where there is fellow-feeling there is no need for a third party or arbitration. Disputes between master and servant are settled between themselves amicably. Even now the sense of fellow-feeling is not altogether absent in our country but a totally different way of life prevails in the west today; there is no place for fellow feeling or compassion. The leaflet concluded that the ancient idea of justice would help the workers to secure their rights.38

Leaflet no. 7 dated March 4, 1918 not only advised workers but was an attempt to impress the employees to follow a right path. It started describing how European workers in South Africa tried to get their wages increased by unjust ways. The leaflet further described how Indian workers fought for their demands. It said, "When the Railway strike was launched, a strike involving 20,000 Indian workers had already begun. We were fighting the Government of that country for justice, pure and simple. The weapon our workers employed was satyagraha. They did not wish to spite the Government nor did they wish it ill. They had no desire to dislodge it. The leaflet then went on to explain how eventually the workers succeeded and the Government got credit because it did justice by accepting their demands. Quoting the instance, he asked the workers to note observations as follows, "If we conduct one struggle on the same basis with the sense of justice, if we bear no malice towards the employers and ask only for what is our right, not only shall we win but there will also be increased good-will between the workers and the employers. Another thing to observe from this instance is

that in satyagraha, both the sides need not be followers of truth." Finally the leaflet encouraged the workers thus "We may, therefore, rest assured that, if we fight on with firmness and courage we are bound to win in the end."

On March 4, 1918, Gandhi delivered a speech to Ahmedabad Millhands. In the partly available speech, he advised the workers on the basis of example of Indian workers strike in South Africa that they should not seek to harass the mill-owners by taking advantage of any sudden crisis in their affairs but should run to their rescue.

In leaflet no 8 issued on March 5, 1918 some examples of true satyagrahis were mentioned. The concluding para of the leaflet summed up the work of satyagrahies like this, "The satyagraha of all the three was pure. All of them suffered hardships, went to jail but kept their pledge. There is no such cloud hanging over us. The utmost we have to suffer by keeping our pledge is to give up some of our luxuries and pull on somehow without the wages we earned."

While speaking to the mill hands of Ahmedabad on March 5, 1918 Gandhi referred to the Satyagrahis who did not have to pay any tax and yet they joined the strike with the rest for the sake of honour of Indians in South Africa. Pointing out thus he encouraged the workers like this "Your struggle, on the other hand, is for your own good. It should, therefore, be easier for you to remain firm. May these examples, strengthen you and make you resolute.

40. Ibid., p.237.
41. Ibid., pp. 237-238.
42. Ibid., p. 239.
On March 6, 1918 leaflet No. 9 was issued in which it was mentioned that the three satyagrahis discussed in last leaflet were not the only satyagrahis in that struggle but there were 20,000 of them and the struggle continued for seven years. Examples of some satyagrahis were cited who suffered great hardship and two of them sacrificed their lives but did not give in. After encouraging the workers thus, it was explained that in the leaflet issued by employers, we find that in their anger, they have said many unworthy things, have been exaggerated, may be unintentionally, and a few twisted, we may not meet anger with anger. Gandhi did not try to provoke the workers on this occasion and simply asked them not to be misled by such statements of the employers.

Leaflet No. 10 was issued on March 7, 1918 in which causes of the poverty of the workers was discussed. It tried to make the workers understand what exorbitant interest they were paying for the money they borrowed. They were told not to pay interest higher than 12%. It was suggested "The best way out of this situation is to start co-operative credit societies of workers------The workers should risk everything to free themselves from this scourge. Paying such high rates of interest is a major cause of poverty. Probably all other causes count for less."  

On March 11, 1918, leaflet no. 11 was issued regarding a rumour that lock-out was being lifted and the workers were being tempted to return to their work. The leaflet advised the workers as under. "Employers are entitled to get the workers back to work by employing others to persuade them. They have taken oath not to accept anything less than 35%. Placed in this

44. Ibid., pp. 246-247.
predicament, unless a 35% increase is granted, the workers cannot return to work except by violating their pledge, their honour and their manliness. It is possible, however, that every worker may not have such a sense of honour. .... our duty is to find out such unthinking workers and acquaint them with the true state of affairs. But let it be remembered that even they are not to be coerced in any way." Then the workers were told through this leaflet to assemble at 7.30 a.m. the next day i.e. on Tuesday to avoid temptation of employers reopening the mills and to search out the workers from other parts of the country who lived as strangers to them and who have hitherto not attended those meetings.45

Though the workers were determined to keep on fighting they were facing poverty and hunger. They were in need of monetary help to continue the strike. Gandhi and Anasuyabehn Sarabhai were requested to arrange some allowance to the starving workers but Gandhi did not agree46.

As against Gandhi's initiative and inspiring appeals to the workers and advice of restraint on the part of millowners the response of millowners was surprisingly unimaginative and purely guided by narrow interests. The handbills issued by the association of millowners were the sorry catalogue of the workers' difficulties if the advice of Gandhi was accepted by the workers. In these handbills the millowners too often displayed towards the workers the attitude of the red-necked bigots. The series of warnings thus issued to the workers speak volumes of contempt the millowners felt for those whom it was their duty to protect. The deep within the millowners' psyche was that comfortable assurance that the authority and might of civil order were on their side.

46 Yajnik, Indulal, Gandhi as I know Him, Delhi, 1943, p.38.
Gandhi's efforts to organize and mobilize the workers were countered by mill-owners through the distribution of handbills. The millowners brought out eight pamphlets. The pamphlets highlighted one important point: whose advise should the workers accept; the millowner's or Gandhi's? If they accepted Gandhi's they would be committing a mistake. 'In the modern times, the workers and the mill owners had to deal with each other and not use traditional weapons such as Satyagraha to force the mill owners and workers to come to a compromise.47

The protracted confrontation between the mill owners and workers exhausted the workers and they began to disintegrate. For once it appeared that the Gandhian method might not bring desired results. All this, be it millowners arm twisting and governmental inaction, took its toll - economic, social and psychological. The workers felt threatened. They felt degraded and humiliated. A cold core of resentment grew -for there is no rage like that of the powerless when subjected to unnecessary and arbitrary force.

In short, the determination of workers began to shatter. Some of them were compelled to return to work. Attitude of strikers towards such blacklegs was threatening and there was a possibility of outbreak of rowdyaism. Attendance in daily meetings began to decrease gradually. The strike was about to collapse48. Contemporary evidence gives the figure as 'thousands' during the early days of the lock out. Later, the same sources indicate that attendance started dwindling and, by March 10, 1918, was reduced to two hundred 49. Clearly, Gandhi had lost hold over the workers.

47. Prajabanahu, March 3, 1918, pp. 20-22, March 10, 1918, p.16 and March 17, 1918, p.20.
49. Prajabanahu, March 17, 1918, pp. 18-19.
At this point, the millioners lifted the lock out in the belief that they had won the battle. They asked the weavers to report to work if they agreed to a 20 percent increase. The work force was divided and dejected. In the meanwhile Jivan Lal Desai a barrister and public worker of Ahmedabad had written a letter to Gandhi showing his sympathy and trying to persuade him to end the struggle. Gandhi wrote back on March 12, 1918 telling him: "Why should you have to persuade me .... my activities and actions are motivated by the desire to find a speedy solution but the millowner's friends are prolonging the dead-lock ... why do you not try to persuade the millowners." On the same day i.e. March 12, 1918 Gandhi also wrote a letter to Mangal Das Parekh a prominent mill-owner of Ahmedabad telling him that it was in the hands of mill-owners to bring the struggle to an end and advised the mill-owners not to make it a point of prestige for not giving 35 percent increase. In the end he asked him not to merely watch the great struggle unconcernedly.

On March 12, 1918 itself another leaflet No. 12 was issued. The leaflet advised the workers to keep the pledge and that they could not resume work without securing a 35 percent increase whatever the suffering they might have to go through. On March 12, 1918 he also wrote a letter to Ambalal Sarabhai who represented the mill-owners in the tribunal. This was in response to a letter from him. He made it clear in this letter to Ambalal Sarabhai that he was not in favour of any pressure on the workers.

52. Ibid., p.248.
53. Ibid., pp. 248-249.
to keep them away from mills. He wrote, 'I am even ready, myself, to escort any worker who says he wants to attend the mill'.

On the next day i.e. March 13, 1918 leaflet no. 13 was issued which said that the workers who were willing to resume work, under coercion and threats of physical assault, would not get any help from them and that in this struggle he alone would win who kept his pledge.

Just as all efforts were made by the opposite party to induce the workers to resume work, similarly the Workers' Party made every attempt to strengthen the workers. A report was brought to Gandhi that some enthusiastic persons among the workers brought pressure to bear on the weaker ones to prevent them from resuming work. Gandhi could not tolerate this. Gandhi advised them, "You should keep up their morale by influencing their heart and their feelings, not by terrorizing them."

Only a part of the speech delivered by Gandhi to Ahmedabad Mill-hands on March 15, 1918 is available in which he advised that it was not proper for the workers to ridicule the machines and call them 'empty show cases' because through those very machines they had their living. He said that it served no purpose or reflected no credit on them if it is said that rich went about in motor cars on account of them.

On March 15, 1918 Gandhi appealed to the sympathizers of workers (whether orally or through a letter is not known) not to help the workers with money as he thought it was against Satyagraha. He observed, "The essence of Satyagraha lies in cheerful submission to the suffering that

55. Ibid., pp. 250-251.
may follow it. The more a Satyagrahi suffers the more thoroughly he is tested."

Leaflet No. 14 issued on March 15, 1918 tried to explain to the workers that those workers who collected funds and maintained themselves out of these funds did not deserve to win. It urged the workers to engage themselves in some other work to enable them to keep their oath and remain firm. The leaflet also contained special instruction to workers to persuade those who had weakened for one reason or other, without using threats or violence.

Twenty two days passed and the workers were in the grip of starvation. They began to lose faith in God and feel sorry for the pledges they made. Now Gandhi's reputation was at stake. After thinking over the situation seriously he declared on 21st day of the strike that unless the strikers rally and continued the strike till settlement or till they left the mills altogether, he would not touch any food. To bring the strikers to rally around was perhaps not the only reason of his fast. Rumour had spread among workers that Gandhi, not caring about workers, was moving about in car taking his meals heartily while the workers were starving. When Chhagan Lal Gandhi requested the Jugaldas Chawl workers one day to gather for meeting in the morning, they showed their anguish by accusing Anasuyabehn Sarabhai and Gandhi of eating sumptuous food and going to and fro comfortably in their cars. They refused to attend the meeting as it could not prevent starvation. Gandhi on hearing all this was cut to the quick. In normal circumstances he had not bothered about criticism but as it

59. Ibid., pp. 254-255.
was a real depiction of the situation he was very much moved. He himself noticed next day only a thousand dejected faces with disappointment written thereon instead of usual attendance of five to ten thousand determined workers. He announced in the meeting that it was not bearable for him for a minute to see the workers breaking their pledge. He also declared that he himself would not take any food nor use a car till the workers get 35% increase or till they die in the fight.

On hearing this announcement, all present moved to tears. They felt that they had offended Gandhi by showing their weakness who now was making amends for their mistake. Then hundreds of workers with residents of Jugaldas Chawla started coming to Gandhi, regretted for what they had said and requested Gandhi to give up his fast. They expressed their determination to continue the strike for any length of time. They were even ready to leave the mills but would not break their pledge. Some of them threatened to take some extreme step if Anasuyabehn Sarabhai did not withdraw her fast. She had also taken an oath to fast along with Gandhi. One of them actually came out with a knife to commit suicide. Anasuyabehn Sarabhai, however, agreed to take food over this sentimental and pathetic gesture.

His fast not only encouraged the workers, it softened the hearts of mill-owners. The mill-owners started negotiations with Gandhi. They were being requested through telegrams from all over India to settle the issue and save Gandhi's life.

60. Desai, Mahadev H., op.cit., p.26; also see Yajnik, Indulal, op.cit., p.38.
61. Desai, Mahadev H., op.cit., p.28; also see Yajnik, Indulal, op.cit., p.38.
The fast lasted for a few days when Annie Besant, then the president of the Congress sent a telegram to Ambalal. The telegram said that Gandhi's life was too valuable to be sacrificed for such a small matter. We told Gandhi that we had won the fight and he was coercing us to an agreement by fasting. But he made it plain that we should not accept his proposal unless we saw the justice of the worker's cause. His basic proposal was that whenever there were differences between the workers and the mill-owners, neither side should take unilateral action, but should submit the issue to an impartial arbitrator whose verdict should be accepted by both the parties. As none of us wanted to risk the life of Gandhi, we finally accepted his proposals.

Leaflet No. 15 dated March 16, 1918 was issued to explain the motive and significance of Gandhi's vow to fast. The leaflet also encouraged the workers to remain firm in their oath and to rely on their own strength of fight.

On March 17, 1918 Gandhi in a prayer discourse in Ashram explained in details the reasons for undertaking the fast in connection with strike by mill-hands of Ahmedabad.

On March 17, 1918 Gandhi wrote a letter to Ambalal Sarabhai in response to some of his suggestions. He told Ambalal Sarabhai, "If you want me to accept this, I will, but I won't have you decide the matter in haste. Let the arbitration meet us and come to a decision right now, and let us announce the wage fixed by him.

65. Ibid., pp. 260-263.
66. Ibid., p. 264.
Ambalal Sarabhai was greatly pained by Gandhi's act. He and many other employers requested Gandhi to give up his fast. Some of them told Gandhi "we will give 35% increase to workers this time for your sake." But Gandhi replied thus, "Do not give 35% out of pity for me, but do so to respect the workers' pledge and to give them justice."67

The mill-owners became worried about Gandhi's health but at the same time they were unhappy with Gandhi's mediation in this dispute. As one of them remarked thus "It is not possible to tolerate our workers behaving in any manner they please vis-a-vis ourselves because of the instigation of others. If that continues, the worker will lose his quality of obedience, and it is hardly in keeping with our prestige that every time there is a disagreement between the workers and us, a third party should arbitrate."68

Gandhi was constantly aware of the coercive effect his fast was having on the mill-owners. He, therefore, prepared himself to accept a compromise giving the workers a 35% increase on the first day to enable them to uphold their pledge, a 20% increase on the second day to honour the employers and then 27.5% in the interim till the arbitrator decided the case.69 Although the settlement saved face for both parties, Gandhi was dissatisfied because his fast had put pressure on the mill owners, contrary to the principle of Satyagraha. As he said to people in his asram, "My weak condition left the mill-owners no freedom. It is against the principle of

67. Desai, Mahadev H., op.cit., p.32.
justice to get anything in writing from a person or make him agree to any condition or obtain anything whatever under duress. A Satyagrahi never do so.\(^{70}\)

The *Times of India* reported that the dispute between labour and capital ended in a compromise on Monday. This ending was reached because Gandhi took a vow to abstain from food till the settlement was reached.\(^{71}\)

The nationalist press justified the stand taken by Gandhi. The press argued that the workers inspite of great provocation remained non-violent under the leadership of Gandhi and Ansuyabehn/ The rigid and unimaginative behaviour of the mill-owners came under heavy attack. Contrary to the *Times of India*, the nationalist press did not see the fast of Gandhi as a strategy. It was taken as an emotional response coupled with the deep commitment to the power of Satyagraha in which Gandhi had abounding faith.

Thus by an agreement with Gandhi on March 18, 1918 the millowners decided to send the issue to the arbitration and the arbitrator selected was Professor Dhruve, Vice Principal of Gujarat College, Ahmedabad.\(^{72}\)

On the same evening i.e. March 18, 1918 a meeting was held at Ambalal Sarabhai’s house in which mill owners distributed sweets among workers. Gandhi spoke that whole of India would be proud of this struggle. Then he apologized to the employers by saying, ”I have pained them very much. I apologize to them humbly. I am as much their servant as the workers. All I ask is that both should utilize my services to the full.”\(^{73}\)

---

71. *The Times of India*, March 20, 1918, p. 8, Col. I.
72. Desai, Mahadev H., *op. cit.*, p.34.
Times of India reported that the weavers organized a procession in honour of Gandhi and Anusuyabehn Sarabhai. Gandhi and Anusuyabehn Sarabhai were seated in a carriage and they were garlanded at many places. Thousands of operatives with bands and banners marched in procession.\textsuperscript{74}

In the leaflet No. 17 issued on March 19, 1918 it was explained to the workers that in Satyagraha both the parties invariably succeed. It was made clear to workers what the settlement contained and how the arbitrator was to give its award. The leaflet said "whatever amount is decided by the arbitrator will be adjusted against 27½% i.e. if the arbitrator award more than 27½%, the employers will give that increase and, if he awards less than 27½% the workers will refund the excess." The leaflet also advised the workers to work sincerely, obediently and with energy to win the employers good-will.\textsuperscript{75}

The mill owners accepted the terms, which were announced on March, 19, 1918 and the mills resumed work the next day. On August, 10, 1918 the arbitrator announced his decision accepting 27.5 percent increase in wages.\textsuperscript{76}

The outstanding feature of the great lock out that had taken place in the textile industry of Ahmedabad was a struggle of power between the mill-owners and the weavers. Not only Ahmedabad but whole of Gujrat and to some extent whole country was watching this struggle with great zest but without bitterness while the mill owners were completely taken aback.

\textsuperscript{74} The Times of India, March 20, 1918, p.8, Col. 1.
\textsuperscript{75} Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. XIV, pp. 269-272.
\textsuperscript{76} Brown, Judith M., op.cit., p. 118-119; also see Mujumdar Paresh, op.cit., pp. 79-82; Desai, Mahadev H., op.cit., p.68-72; Reveri, Chamanlal, op.cit., p.76.
by the strength, organization and continuity of purpose shown by the workers. Some, specifically Ambalal Sarabhai, were worried about the implications of working-class mobilization on the hitherto elite oriented politics of the city. However, they were sure that they had won the first round of the struggle. It was the only occasion when they yielded and agreed to the establishment of the arbitration board. As Gandhi held the loyalty of the workers, the mill-owners were prudent to come to an understanding with him. A 35 percent increase was indeed a small matter if, by forging an alliance with Gandhi, the latter could guarantee a strike moratorium. The alliance thus had the solid foundation of convenience rather than an acceptance of ideological position. To the mill-owners the alliance settled issues once for all.

Gandhi became involved in the controversy over mill wages because various interested parties appealed to him to intervene in a situation of potential conflict. The mill-workers were disorganised and leaderless, but those who spoke to Gandhi were Secretary of Gujarat Sabha, Anusuyabehn Sarabhai, sister of mill-owner, Ambalal Sarabhai, who saved Gandhi's Ashram from financial disaster and British Collector. So, as Judith M. Brown said, "Gandhi became implicated in a fraught and potentially violent industrial situation not of his own choosing." Thus, Gandhi took up the workers' cause as another experiment in Satyagraha. The Ahmedabad Satyagraha was the first occasion when Gandhi participated in a purely industrial dispute; in 1913 he had called miners out on strike in South Africa, but that was for political reasons. Now in Ahmedabad, the idealist of 'Hind Swaraj' who condemned industrial civilization faced the realities of

Indian industrialization, and had to adopt a practical attitude to industrial relations. One thing that Gandhi made clear was that he could never think of harming the city's industry, and that he did not champion workers as workers, but justice, on whichever side it might be.

This industrial Satyagraha was not a back water in Gandhi's experience as a leader, merely contributing to his theory of industrial relations. Despite the parochial nature of the dispute and the fact that it did not involve conflict with the government, it was highly significant in Gandhi's political development.

In the wider pattern of leadership the weavers' grievances gave Gandhi the opportunity to organise industrial workers, and to build up both an urban and rural base in Gujarat. The situation was resolved in a way that was most advantageous for Gandhi's own standing. Bluntly put, Gandhi acquired the support of the mill-owners because he held the loyalty of the workers who were the key to their prosperity. During the Satyagraha the owners had been afraid of Gandhi and hoped to break his power but having failed to beat him they joined him, though some hesitation still remained about the wisdom of activities. Their alliance had a solid foundation of mutual convenience, but it was undoubtedly strengthened by the more gracious ties of personal friendship, a common loyalty to Gujarat and a common concern for Ahmedabad's prosperity. The city's politicians had angled for such an alliance with the businessmen when Gandhi succeeded where they failed. They had even more reason for giving him their loyalty, since he freed them from the possibility of a clash between the interests of the local commercial and professional elites.

Infact, the most significant aspect of the strike was the mill-owners' acceptance of Gandhi as the workers' representative. So far the
mill-owners had opposed the workers' organisation but during this strike they accepted Gandhi as workers' representative and also agreed to negotiate with him. There could be two reasons for his acceptance as representative of workers by mill-owners, his moral and ethical background and his moderate style i.e. settling disputes by non-violence and compromise. Thirdly Gandhi was an esteemed leader not only of Gujarat but also of the whole country. These were the reasons which influenced the mill owners.

The real purpose of the strike could not be attained. There was drastic cut in the wages made by an arbitrator appointed with the consent of Gandhi. The arbitrator finally gave his decision in favour of capitalists though the wage cut proposed was reduced to some extent. Though the mill-owners were ready to negotiate with representatives of workers, they had some hesitation over arbitration by outsiders. Gandhi as a representative of workers was more acceptable to them than the arbitration by outsiders. They had opposed arbitration in earlier strikes of weavers and had also not agreed to settle future disputes through arbitration.

The strike could have been prolonged to achieve the desired results and Gandhi collected funds from all over the country to help starving strikers. Gandhi at the same time devised a method of providing help to workers by offering a little money to strikers for some building and digging work. The labourers worked for the whole day under the burning sun, and got little money. This experiment failed miserably. The workers gave way under starvation and their cause was defeated. Gandhi was responsible for it.

Gandhi's three day fast misserised the workers so much that when Gandhi called the defeat as their victory they agreed with this
comment. Whatever Gandhi's motives, the fast created a tremendous flurry in Ahmedabad. In the realm of political technique, this was Gandhi's first fast intended to influence public events, and was the forerunner of his hunger strikes in All India politics.

The settlement which arrived after the Ahmedabad strike of 1918 was welcomed as a victory for both the parties. On these basis principles for the Indian Labour movement were laid down. These were:

1. The workers should not be extravagant in their demands. They should properly study the merits and demerits of the case before extending their demands. Both the parties should be prepared to admit their mistake if arguments were convincing.

2. Strike should be a last resort when possibilities of arbitration were exhausted. Workers should accept any just solution or a proposal of arbitration if suggested during the strike period.

3. Workers should remain peaceful and non-violent even under provocation, an essential condition for achieving justice. Workers should keep in mind that their fight is against the evil of employers and not the employers.

4. Workers should develop the self-respect and hence they should not depend on charity funds during strikes. They should be able to maintain themselves through alternate employment while on strike.

5. Workers should remain determined during the strike even if they are on the brink of starvation. They should stick to their pledge. Strike should be taken as a sort of Satyagraha.

6. Workers should treat the industry as their own. In fact they should consider themselves as co-owners. As such they should feel a sense of responsibility towards the industry.
In short, the Ahmedabad Movement was a new experiment in the on-going labour movements in India. Here, the trial of strength was between the weapon of Satyagraha and the economic interests of both the mill-owners and the mill-workers. In the psyche of workers, the result was the victory of their just cause. The mill-owners' power was questioned and a procedure for settling disputes was laid down which they accepted grudgingly. A sort of realisation had dawned on them. They felt that pressing the workers too often and too hard might be futile and self-defeating. If it is persisted, the workers might lose the fear of it. The mill-owners had also realised that the governmental support may not be coming all the time. Thus neutralising the governmental response was one of the greatest achievements of Gandhian Satyagraha and non-violence. The cooperative and not the confrontational attitude of the provincial government under instruction from the centre and Deputy Commissioner's guided support to Gandhi opened a new era in Labour build-up in Indian political horizon. Perhaps Gandhi was reaching the point where the accumulating anger created more pressure than the fear or the pain when it derived the workers beyond fear, beyond pain.

Further it was also clear that this progress, inadequate but undeniable, could not have been achieved if workers had fomented violence. Neither the government nor the mill-owners had enough ground to accuse the workers. Moreover, Gandhi's entry and active participation had aroused sympathy for the workers in the press and public opinion. The antagonism between colonial power and colonized subjects did not ripen. Consequently, the fight was blunted as it was not as much against the system per se, as against the mill-owners' manipulation of it. The worker also was not prepared...
61

to wipe out the power of the establishment as much as he wanted to be part of it.

The Ahmedabad Labour Movement was thus the first in the series in which Gandhi seems to have prepared and implemented his belief in full. Gandhi stood for class cooperation. He wanted support for all classes. In Ahmedabad he succeeded in winning the heart of mill owners as well as of workers. In this kind of struggle lay the genius of Gandhi, where no one was the victor or vanquished. This model of struggle was not total enough to call forth the total commitment and the willingness to fight till the last against the capitalist who represented the exploiter against the exploited.

However, the Gandhian experiment was not very appealing to the workers of India. The Ahmedabad Labour Movement thus remained an isolated phenomenon which had very few takers in ongoing labour struggles in India.

Most probably, Gandhi was aware of difficulties confronting this new experiment. As such even after the compromise was made, Gandhi's interest in Ahmedabad Labour Association continued. The success and failure of Ahmedabad Labour Movement meant a lot for Gandhi. It was a challenge to Gandhi's charisma. Gandhi recognized that indeed it could be a useful mechanism in organizing labour power. The history of Ahmedabad Textile Labour Association after 1920s though basically different from other labour associations is marked with a sense of strength, cohesion and courage. The mill-owners and workers cooperated and the local leaders of the workers and the nominees of the millowners, solved their problems amicably. But whenever, the problem arose Gandhi was always available to lend his support.
From 1919 onwards, Gandhi had become a national leader. Anti-imperialism was the dominant idea with which Gandhi had to experiment. Consequently, Gandhi's involvement with labour problem was not direct. Thus the target became less visible as the focus of the national struggle moved from the labour class to the united front of all classes fighting against the foreign power. Inspite of all these changes on the national scene, Gandhi's and Congress responses for the labour struggles are important. The Chapter - III deals with the Labour Movements between 1919 to 1927.