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## ARTICLE

# GANDHIJI AND CHAMPARAN SATYAGRAH

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Over a period of nearly three decades, Gandhiji led many campaigns to emancipate India from colonial rule. The first such movement which also went some way in establishing his political reputation, started with his arrival in Champaran to attend to the problems of the indigo farmers in April 1917. After his return to India from South Africa in 1914 Gandhiji tried his method of Satyagraha on what may be called a mass scale for the first time in Champaran.

The Champaran experiment forms a vital chapter in the development of the Satyagraha method in India. One of the most remarkable episodes of modern Indian history, it opened a new phase in the national movement by joining it to the great struggle of the Indian peasantry for bread and land. It is no exaggeration to say that to all students of Gandhiji's method of social and political work knowledge of the detailed history of the experiment is indispensable.

In Champaran, a district northwest of Bihar, peasants were constantly subjected to various types of economic exploitation by the British planters since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The main source of exploitation was the compulsory growing of indigo by the peasants under an exploitative system known as the *Tinkathia*. Under this system ryots were bound to grow indigo for their *European landlord* on the three-twentieths of their holdings. The tenant was asked to give the best land for the landlord's crops. He has been obliged to give his best time and energy also to it, so that little time has been left to him for growing his own crops -his means of livelihood against their will. This exploitative system had caused a great deal of economic hardship to the peasants of Champaran. The peasants opposed the Tinkathia system. According to Bipan Chandra: "The story of

Champaran begins in the early nineteenth century when European planters had involved the cultivators in agreements that forced them to cultivate indigo on 3/20th of their holdings (known as the Tinkathia system). Towards the end of the Nineteenth century, German synthetic dyes forced indigo out of the market and the European planters of Champaran, keen to release the cultivator from the obligation of cultivating indigo tried to turn their necessity into their advantages by securing enhancements in rent and other illegal dues as a price for the release.”

How a delegation from Champaran, attracted by news of the Lucknow session of the Indian National Congress in December 1916, went to the session to draw attention to the Champaran peasants’ plight and how later Raj Kumar Shukla brought Gandhiji from Calcutta to Patna and inexplicably left him there in April 1917 are matters now of traditional lore. It is what followed that is of the utmost importance.

Gandhi’s handling of the Champaran struggle proved to be a model of serious leadership. He was stepping into an area where the peasants had been kept suppressed for so long that no ‘satyagraha’ of the form he had led in South Africa could here be organised. He, therefore, announced that he had come only to study the conditions and collect information, for which he was able to gather a group of intrepid men, including his principal assistant here, Brajkishore Prasad and the future principal Congress leaders of Bihar, Rajendra Prasad and Acharya Kripalani. What he and his group began to do was to move among peasants and just record their grievances. To the end, this was the form and substance of the Champaran Satyagraha.

The British authorities knew that this was not as harmless an enterprise as it seemed. The very fact that once an individual peasant could go and record his complaints meant that others would follow him from the ranks of what uptill now had been a subdued demoralised *raiyyat*. On April 16, 1917, the English district magistrate ordered Gandhiji to leave the district, the order being issued under Section 144 of the Criminal Penal Code. Defying the ban, Gandhiji pleaded “guilty” before the district magistrate at Motihari on April 18, ready to face imprisonment for following “the voice of conscience”. It was this combination of moderation with determination that won the day.

The administration, trying to tie down Gandhiji with a long drawn-out case, was shocked at his cutting it short by the “guilty” plea. On the other hand, now not only the volunteers, including the famous Bihar Congress leader Mazharul Haq, but also a crowd of peasants gathered at the court, this being perhaps, the first real peasant

demonstration taking place in Champaran. The English magistrate did not know what to do and adjourned the court, releasing Gandhiji on his own assurance of presence. Finally, the government climbed down: On April 21 Gandhiji received intimation from the lieutenant governor of Bihar and Orissa of the withdrawal of the proceedings against him with even instructions issued to local officials to assist his “enquiry”.

This success opened the gates to the voicing and recording of complaints from peasants. Local lawyers in large numbers joined his band of volunteers. The recording project turned into a real mass movement. As many as 8,000 peasants came and recorded their complaints, defying the planters and their men whose authority visibly crumbled. Peasants also began defiantly to return the high-rent carrying *zira* ‘at lands that planters had imposed on them.

The work of collection of peasants’ complaints took Gandhiji and his volunteers to poverty-stricken villages, where peasants could at last obtain a ray of hope that things could change. Not long afterwards, he received an invitation from another quarter: he was graciously invited to meet a high official of the government, ‘Honourable W. Maude’ at Ranchi on May 10. Gandhiji, as usual, never rejected negotiations and duly met Maude, whom he promised to send a preliminary report on his findings, which he did on May 13. But he politely rejected Maude’s suggestion that he dissolve his team and abandon further pursuit of the enquiry into peasant grievances.

By now the planters and their association had exhausted their entire arsenal: threats and inducements to individual peasants, manufactured incidents of violence or arson, canvassing, of English officials as men of their own race and overtures to the great zamindars of Bihar. Gandhiji, on his part, won the moral battle by being ever ready to meet the planters and being unfailingly polite and courteous with them at the personal level. But he never left the side of the peasants.

Finally, the government capitulated. No less a person than E. A. Gait, the lieutenant governor of Bihar and Orissa, along with the chief secretary, H. McPherson, held a long meeting with Gandhiji on June 5 at Ranchi, and here a settlement was worked out. A committee of enquiry, with such broad terms of reference as to cover all the matters that were relevant to peasants’ grievances was to be instituted, the committee to include Gandhiji, as member along with a representative of planters and another of zamindars and three British officials, including the president of the committee. All the evidence that Gandhiji had collected could be placed before it. It was assumed that its recommendations would

be honoured by government. In return, Gandhiji at last agreed to terminate his campaign of collecting peasant grievances.

The mass movement at Champaran revolving around the recording of grievances was over. But the actual work of alleviating the grievances had now to be taken up. Again, it is a sign of Gandhiji's mature leadership that he took up work on this committee with the greatest care and earnestness. He attended all its meetings, presented full evidence before it and was alert in assessing promptly all the proposals that were put before it.

Gandhiji kept the European planters' transgressions alone as the target of attack. The planters expressed their readiness to reduce the sharahbeshi rent by only 25%, while Gandhiji demanded a reduction of at least 40%. When the official members proposed that the balance of 15% might be met from the revenues of the Bettiah Estate, Gandhiji at once protested. Clearly, he did not wish to annoy the zamindars of Bihar, who had remarkably remained neutral in the matter. Ultimately, he accepted a 26% reduction in sharahbeshi, this to be borne entirely by the cost of planters.

It is remarkable that the committee was able to present a unanimous, well-written, factually-rich report by October 3, 1917. It practically conceded the truth of all the grievances that Gandhiji's own "enquiries" had brought out. It recommended the abolition of the *Tinkathia System* and gave freedom to the peasants to grow whatever crop they chose. It denounced the payment by planters for indigo by the area sown and not actual production. The reduction of sharahbeshi rent by 26% (as settled by Gandhiji with planters) was approved; and it was recommended that the *tawan* be abolished, no further payment of principal or interest on this account to be levied on the peasants. All *abwabs* or additional levies and perquisites as well as fines were held illegal. It recommended that a proclamation to this effect, with penalties to be prescribed, be issued. Above all, the *thekadari* or village-contracting system by which the planters gained zamindari rights over peasants in villages outside their plantations was to be phased out. Rights in hides were to belong to the peasant owners of the animals, not the planters. The minutes of the committee meetings show how Gandhiji took up every issue of interest to the peasants and argued their case mostly successfully.

The major recommendations of the committee required certain changes to be embodied in law and so the government ordered a law to be prepared in the very month of October 1917, this taking the form of the Champaran Agrarian Act, 1918. It is characteristic of Gandhiji that he also scrutinised the draft Bill and suggested

changes in its text to protect the tenants' interests. Characteristically too, he spent little time in celebrating the huge success he had achieved for the peasants and the poor of Champaran.

The Champaran campaign was itself a short one and rapidly achieved its primary objective of the end of *Tinkathia*. But by no means did it fully emancipate the peasantry of the region. Similarly, Gandhiji's attempts at constructive work through the setting up of three schools in the region met with local indifference and very little success. While it attracted volunteers from afar, these efforts collapsed once Gandhi returned to Ahmedabad to attend to other issues demanding his attention.

The Champaran Satyagraha was the first struggle that Gandhiji undertook on Indian soil after his great 20-year long movement for the defence of Indians' rights in South Africa. It was to be followed quickly by the Ahmedabad workers' strike against indigenous millowners and by the Kheda Satyagraha against revenue enhancements, both in 1918; and then the all-India April satyagraha of 1919 against the Rowlatt Acts and, finally, the non-cooperation and Khilafat movement of 1920-22.

Nevertheless, recognition of the limits of the achievements of the Champaran Satyagraha should not blind us to its significance. In an atmosphere of fear and oppression that ruled the land, the end of *Tinkathia System* was a major psychological victory. Champaran was the pivot around which history turned and India was eventually liberated. As we commemorate the contributions of Mahatma Gandhi, Shukla and many others, it would also be worthwhile to reflect on the meaning of the Champaran Satyagraha for our own times. In 1917, the oppressive European planter stood as an accused in the court of Indian public opinion. A hundred years hence, perhaps we may ponder the unenviable fate of the peasant in an independent India.

The Champaran Satyagraha will always remain as the crucial starting point, the yoking, for the first time, of peasant unrest to the national movement, an assured guarantee for the ultimate success of the latter. As we are observing the centenary of the event this year, one wonders how any tribute could be adequate for the firmness and determination shown by Gandhi and the unflinching resistance offered by the long-oppressed Champaran peasants at his call.

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