



100 YEARS OF CHAMPARAN: THE FIRST SATYAGRAHA IN INDIA

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Abstract

The first Satyagraha movements inspired by Mahatma Gandhi is very important and turning point of Indian freedom movement. Champaran Satyagraha was the first to be started, but the Satyagraha word was used for the first time in 1919. Under British Colonial era laws, many tenant farmers were forced to grow some indigo on a portion of their land as a condition of their tenancy. This indigo was used to make a dye. The Germans had invented a cheaper artificial dye so the demand for indigo fell. Some tenants paid more rent in return for being let off having to grow indigo. However, during the First World War the German dye ceased to be available and so indigo became profitable again. Thus many tenants were once again forced to grow it on a portion of their land- as was required by their lease. Naturally, this created much anger and resentment.

Keywords: Satyagraha, Ideology,

Introduction

The first Satyagraha movements inspired by Mahatma Gandhi occurred in Champaran district of Bihar on 1917. Champaran Satyagraha was the first to be started, but the word Satyagraha was used for the first time in Anti Rowlatt Act agitation on 1919. Champaran, is a district in the state of Bihar. Under British Colonial era laws, many tenant farmers were forced to grow some indigo on a portion of their land as a condition of their tenancy. This indigo was used to make a dye. The Germans had invented a cheaper artificial dye so the demand for indigo fell. Some tenants paid more rent in return for being let off having to grow indigo. However, during the First World War the German dye ceased to be available and so indigo became profitable again.



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Objectives

1. To collect information of first Satyagraha and to study the Mahatma Gandhi's ideology of Satyagraha.
2. To find importance of this movement in the freedom struggle.
3. To analyse and compare Gandhiji's Satyagraha ideology in the current national situation.
4. To find the importance of Champaran Satyagraha in the freedom struggle in India.

Champaran Satyagraha

Many tenants alleged that Landlords had used strong-arm tactics to exact illegal cesses and to extort them in other ways. This issue had been highlighted by a number of lawyer & politicians and there had also been a Commission of Inquiry. Raj Kumar Shukla, a money lender who also owned some land, persuaded Gandhi to go to Champaran and thus, the Champaran Satyagraha began. Gandhi arrived in Champaran on 10th April 1917 with a team of eminent lawyers Brajkishore Prasad, Rajendra Prasad, Anugrah Narayan Sinha, Ramnavmi Prasad, and others including Acharya Kripalani.

Gandhi established an ashram in Champaran (Bihar), organising scores of his veteran supporters and fresh volunteers from the region. His handpicked team of eminent lawyers comprising Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Dr. Anugrah Narayan Sinha & Babu Brajkishore Prasad organised a detailed study and survey of the villages, accounting the atrocities and terrible episodes of suffering, including the general state of degenerate living.

Building on the confidence of villagers, he began leading the clean-up of villages, building of schools and hospitals and encouraging the village leadership to undo purdah, untouchability and the suppression of women. He was joined by many young nationalists from all over India, including Brajkishore Prasad, Rajendra Prasad, Anugrah Narayan Sinha, Acharya Kriplani, Ram Navami Prasad and later Jawaharlal Nehru.



But his main assault came as he was arrested by police on the charge of creating unrest and was ordered to leave the province. Hundreds of thousands of people protested and rallied outside the jail, police stations and courts demanding his release, which the court unwillingly did. Gandhi led organised protests and strike against the landlords, who with the guidance of the British government, signed an agreement granting more compensation and control over farming for the poor farmers of the region, and cancellation of revenue hikes and collection until the famine ended. It was during this agitation, that Gandhi was addressed by the people as **Bapu (Father)** and **Mahatma (Great Soul)**.

Importance of Champaran Satyagraha in Indian freedom struggle

The oppression of Champaran's indigo farmers by white planters dated back to the 19th century; in 1848 a British civil servant wrote that "not a chest of indigo reached England without being stained with human blood." By the time Gandhi arrived, the indigo farmers were in the grip of the pernicious tinkathia system whereby they were forced to dedicate three out of 20 parts of their land to the cultivation of indigo.

Not only did the peasants get poor remuneration, they were also subject to almost 40 different kinds of bizarre, illegal cesses called abwabs. If the planters wanted to buy elephants for shikaar, the tenants had to raise money and this was called hathiahi. Similar taxes were extorted for purchasing horses or cars (ghorahi, motorahi). And so on. Dr Basu points out that at various points in the history of the region, the peasantry had rebelled but all such movements were suppressed ruthlessly.

When Gandhi arrived in Champaran, he introduced a new, different kind of political activity. He demonstrated the hallmarks of his future political actions for the first time in India, particularly his ability to effectively mobilise people. Says Dr Mukherjee, "People say that Gandhi was charismatic, that's why he was able to mobilise millions of people. But the truth is that he understood people at the grassroots because of the extraordinary hard work he put in — look at the number of people he met every day of his life, the hundreds of people he corresponded with, the weekly journal he brought out... His unerring political instinct was born out of tremendous experience."



In Champaran, he decided that the peasants were so crushed and fear-stricken, it would be useless to go to law courts for a reprieve. “The real relief for them is to be free from fear. We cannot sit still until we have driven tinkathia out of Bihar,” he wrote.

With that goal in mind, he swung into action, displaying his formidable appetite for meticulous, unflagging hard work. Along with a band of trusted associates, mostly local vakils, he toured the region relentlessly, recording the statements of the cultivators. He travelled third class in trains, walked miles in the scorching sun, sometimes rode on elephant back (a common mode of transport in the area) buffeted by hot, dusty winds, as he went from one village to another.

By the end of April, wrote Rajendra Prasad (who worked closely with Gandhi in Champaran and later wrote a book Satyagraha in Champaran), they had “recorded testimonies of thousands of tenants and become acquainted with almost all the grievances of Champaran. There was hardly any locality in the whole District from which some tenants had not come to us and given their statements.”

But from the moment he set foot in Patna on April 10, Gandhi was on the radar of the British. On April 15, he had arrived in Motihari, only to set off at nine the next morning for the village of Jasaulipatti where he had heard of the oppression of a farmer. He was intercepted three hours later at a village called Chandrahia by a police sub-inspector and delivered an ultimatum by the Commissioner to leave the district because he was considered a “danger” to “public tranquility.” Gandhi replied that he “was unable to leave the District but if it so pleases the authorities, I shall submit to the order by suffering the penalty of civil disobedience.”

This was unusual. As historians have noted, to offer passive resistance or civil disobedience to an unjust order was novel. Even leaders like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, when exonerated from a particular province, had obeyed orders though they organized public protests against them.

By April 18, Gandhi was preparing to go to jail. The news of his possible arrest had spread like wildfire in Motihari and thousands of tenants started assembling in the court from the morning itself. “According to the law I was to be on trial, but truly speaking Government was to be on trial,” wrote Gandhi. He was told that if he promised to leave and not return, the case against him



would be withdrawn. Gandhi refused: "Not to speak of this time alone, I shall make Champaran my home even after my return from jail." At 7 pm on April 20, a confused, jittery administration, which had thought that Gandhi would offer defence, withdrew the case. Gandhi wrote: "The country thus had its first direct object-lesson in Civil Disobedience."

Rajkumar Shukla, an indigo farmer, met Gandhi at the Lucknow Congress in 1916 and urged him to visit Champaran. It was his persistent efforts that brought Gandhi to rural Bihar. (National Gandhi Museum)

When his arrest had seemed imminent, Gandhi had displayed yet another hallmark of his political action —the practical, organisational aspect. He put together a plan: if he went to jail, his associates Mazharul Haque and Babu Brajkishore Prasad would take over the work. If they were arrested, Babu Dharnidhar and Babu Ramnavmi would take over. If they were picked up, Rajendra Prasad, Shambhusharan and Anugrahnarayan Sinha would step in. And so on.

The close cooperation with his associates over months of intense toil bound Gandhi to them in lifelong friendship. He had brought them on board to act as his translators and interpreters (he did not understand the local dialects), and to help him with the task of recording evidence, but over time, the Mahatma also brought about dramatic changes in their lifestyle. In the early days, all the vakils had a servant and a cook and their own separate kitchens. Eventually, the servants were dispensed with and all the kitchens were amalgamated. Gandhi pointed out that this freed up a lot of time and energy which was then diverted to the task at hand.

Brajkishore Prasad or "vakil babu" went on to become one of Gandhi's most "esteemed" co-workers in Champaran. (National Gandhi Museum)

Eventually, the government was compelled to appoint a Commission of Inquiry and nominated Gandhi as one of its members. He had already collected the testimonies of 8,000 peasants and the evidence was hard to refute. The tinkathia system was abolished and the planters partially refunded the money that they had extorted from the peasants.



Conclusion

The first Satyagraha movements inspired by Mahatma Gandhi occurred in Champaran district of Bihar on 1917. When Gandhi arrived in Champaran, he introduced a new, different kind of political activity. He demonstrated the hallmarks of his future political actions for the first time in India. The success of the first civil disobedience movement is all the more significant because, as Gandhi said, when he arrived, no one knew him (despite his fame from his South African days) and the Congress party was practically unknown in those parts. But the real significance of Champaran was, in the words of his biographer DG Tendulkar, the fact that Gandhi “forged a weapon by which India could be made free.”

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