

## CHAMPARAN SATYAGRAHA OF GANDHIJI: AN EVOLUTION

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The historical accounts tell us that there were rebel and revolts by farmers rich and poor with different interest, but the situation had not improved to say significant extent. Gandhiji intervened in 1917 and brought freshness to the rebel and revolt and forced the British Administration to improve the condition substantially.*

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*The Satyagraha in Champaran had already begun. Gandhiji had taken decision. The truth on the ground had to be ascertained and if he was stopped he should resist and go to jail if necessary and that his associates should continue the search for truth. This is what he shared with his new colleagues in Muzaffarpur and all proceeded to Motihari, the headquarters of Champaran district.*

*The path of non-violence was not a bed of roses in order to traverse it Gandhi had to face numerous hardships and from back. He had to struggle and experiment with truth which kept on illuminating his awareness and that of his followers particularly in the Congress.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Champaran, Gandhiji, British Administration*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The historical accounts tell us that there were rebel and revolts by farmers rich and poor with different interest, but the situation had not improved to say significant extent. Gandhiji intervened in 1917 and brought freshness to the rebel and revolt and forced the British Administration to improve the condition substantially. Most analysts and biographers have highlighted Gandhiji's role and its significance in catapulting him into a national leader who then on moved to organize Independence movement in the country. It is also adjudged as first important and successful application of Ahimsa and satyagraha in protesting against tyrannical rule in British India. However, some research and scholastic writings including subaltern writings have interpreted and written the champaran satyagraha differently in the framework of agrarian and peasant movements in British India, It is argued that Gandhiji arrived on the scene when already framers and leaders of the oppressed had rebelled against the order and were trying to seek fundamental redress. It is also argued that there were some

rich peasants landlords and powerful local moneylenders how had their own vested interest in driving the European planters away and secure back their domain and dominance. Gandhiji role has been interpreted as the agent of the haves class and the one who spoiled or relegated the revolution prospects in to oblivion.

The first biography to take note of Champaran Satyagraha is that of C.F. Andrews in early 1930. Titled as stayagraha in India, Andrews shows that Gandhiji had full faith in the liberal and value based English Empire and sincerely believed. Andrews notes that Gandhiji's experience in South Africa, both with the British and the Cutch, made him quite positive in his own mind that they would respect his utter frankness of opposition, and also his good-humour, in the drastic struggle that he was carrying on against what he held to be the rottenness of their administration. In India Gandhiji pan India non-cooperation programmes were preceded by local stayagrahas with emphasis on correcting serious wrongs in the British administration. In the context Andrews lists Champaran satyagraha in brief as follows.

There is a need to revisit and analyze Gandhiji intervention in the Champaran Agrarian situation in the Gandhian thought framework. The present work is intended to make a modest attempt in this direction. In section one that follows a brief review of accounts given by major biographers is presented. In section two a review of critical analysis attempted by social scientists is endeavored. The third and final section analysis of the stayagraha is attempted in Gandhian thought framework.

The Government of India left perturbed at Gandhiji presence in Champaran and the possibilities of a Satyagraha struggle developing in the indigo farmers in Bihar. At the suggestion of Craddock, the Home Members, the viceroy wrote to Edward Gait, the Government of Bihar suggesting the appointment of a Commission of Inquiry on which a seat could be offered to Gandhiji as well. Edward at first resisted the suggestion. It would be a device, he wrote to Lord Chelmsford, for heading off Mr. Gandhiji and it is by no means certain that it would be effective, The Champaran Agrarian Committee was thus appointed at the instance of Government of India and not because, as Gandhiji suggested in his autobiography the Governor was good.

Social scientists have reviewed Champaran Satyagraha more critically than the biographers. Most social scientists have reviewed and analysed it in the context of agrarian movements during British India, some have reviewed in the context of class, caste and nationalism as well. Ravinder kumar has commented on the Champaran movement in the context of Gandhiji quest for popular consensus across class, community and nation at a time when a strong argument that India could not be called a nation held. His reading is that Gandhiji's involvement in the initial movements after returning from South Africa did not really tested his success or failure in gaining popular consensus. In case of Champaran Gandhiji was able to exploit a technique he had applied in South Africa without developing it further, According to him,

These agitations impressed upon Gandhiji the fact that there existed substantial bodies of discontent in the villages and in the cities which a skilful politician could exploit to gain his objectives...At Champaran and at Ahmedabad Gandhiji faced the problem of redressing the grievances of an easily identifiable social group; in the first instance, the peasants who were made to cultivate the indigo on unfair terms by the planters the peasants of Champaran wanted a revision of the terms on which they were required to cultivate the indigo by organizing agitations on the principles of satyagraha, Gandhiji was able to satisfy the aspirations of both the peasants of Champaran and the workers of Ahmedabad.

Gandhiji's Satyagraha was backed by the government of India- they would not allow the administration in Bihar to persecute his supporters for the sake of planter's corrupt gains. Consequently the Lieutenant Governor Edward Gait

asked to see Gandhiji and told him he was willing to convene a government inquiry. Gandhiji sat on the resulting committee. Eventually the Champaran Agrarian Act of 1917 abolished the forced cultivation of Indigo and reduced the rent increases imposed on the farmer. It did not end the unrest in the region between the farmers and their landlords, but Gandhiji organizational skills were widely praised.

What Gandhiji soon discovered, of course, was that this exploitation of Indian peasant by planters and large land owners was hardly limited to one district of Bihar. He was not ready, however, to lead a nationwide satyagraha against rural inequities and violations of law. Adhering to the fixed rule of satyagraha he had established in South Africa, he never expanded his original goal, focusing his yogic powers instead on the single target he had chosen. "No stone is being left unturned" Gandhiji reported, even as he acknowledged his limited goal in doing so. But he turned over those heavy stones in Bihar multiple social problems swiftly emerged from starving children forced to work all day instead of receiving minimal education, to women suffering every indignity of the poor and helpless, to maimed men, bent low and disfigured by goiter growths, too timid to complain of the virtual slavery in which they were kept.

Among the recent biographies, an important biography has by Rajmohan Gandhi published in 2006. Although not providing much space to Champaran, he has made some interesting observations, he observes that Gandhiji indicated his willingness to visit Champaran and took interest in the case instinctively. He has treated Gandhiji writing letters to others outside Bihar as a strategy. Bihar Gandhiji had taken care, through letter, to keep a range of his friends in the world outside Bihar kept posted about the happening in Champaran—Andrews Srinivasa Sastri, Malaviya, Polak, Kallenbach, Maganlal in Ahmedabad, and other some of these friends were in touch with the press, and at times Gandhiji and at times himself was. The news of Gandhiji pleading guilty in the courtroom in Motihari created ripples. Rajmohan Gandhi has noted thus,

Gandhiji intervention in the Champaran agrarian situation thus had issues that call for more analysis and discussion.

Dhanagare has attempted a scholarly and comprehensive analysis calling it Gandhiji Politics and agrarian movements. He has included Champaran Satyagraha as a case for his analysis that deals with assessment of specific and localized movement which concerned agrarian their class character, and Gandhiji ethos and why they occurred during those times. In the process he has also tried to bring out Gandhiji own understanding and position over the issues.

In Dhanagare's view Gandhiji was criticized severely during his life time also by two thought forces. In his words, throughout his ascendancy in the Indian freedom struggle Gandhiji was as much as an object of devastating criticism as of deification. His social and political ideas and his choice of means to attain them were severely criticized from time to time. Among his critics two sections of the then contemporary Indian opinion were most prominent. One of these represented various shades of militant terms their skepticism over Gandhiji ideas regarding Hindu Muslim unity... This line of criticism need to be gone further into as it is not quite relevant role for our present purpose, However the Marxist critique of the Indian national movement in general and Gandhiji role in particular needs to be looked into in some detail as it offers a basis of raising sociologically more meaningful question about the various peasant and agrarian movements under Gandhiji or Gandhi leadership.

Yet another apparently potent criticism of Dhanagare relates to Gandhiji contact and his approach towards the poor peasants and agricultural labourers with or without any operational holding. Dhanagare writes that by 1907 there were 17

indigo factories of which 7 had some 28 sub factories spread all over the places in Champaran. On an average every day 33,000 workers were employed during winter when they really were out of work. Low wage rates were offered deliberately looking at the near destitution levels of survival among them. It is argued that Gandhiji despite being fully aware of their plight ignored their issue and did not discuss it in the Inquiry Committee. It is further argued that because the large rural mass was poor, illiterate and ignorant, it could not have launched any agitation. It is implied the Gandhiji could have but he did not because he only had a superficial contact with them. They all came for his Darshan and by appearing before the masses like an exhibit at on particular hours. It was clear that his attitude was condescending. Dhanagare argues that the events in Champaran so configured the Gandhiji agrarian movements that it's got defined in the following way.

- Minor agrarian issues to be preferred to more fundamental question relating to structure of agrarian relations;
- A compromise with those in authority and over as a point of termination of a movement;
- Support from better off section the middle peasant whose interest the issues (under) represent;
- Semblance of relief or constructive work for the poor peasantry so as to prevent it from any potentially revolutionary activity.

Champaran Satyagraha has been critically reviewed by a few other scholars after Dhanagare's comprehensive review appeared. On the issue of reconciliation and considering no one as adversary Gandhiji for some has gone overboard support the haves of the exploiting class. Abha Pnadya has advanced such an argument while discussing the Gandhiji role toward agrarian class in the framework of trusteeship. She says, Gandhiji in his anxiety to build harmonious relations between conflicting elements in Indian society, applied the concept of trusteeship only to their conflicts and not to those related to the alien government. During the struggle of the Champaran peasant (1916) against British indigo planters as also the Bardoli struggle (1928) against the Bombay government the concept of trusteeship was not applied, In Champaran the European planters asked why they alone among the landlords Bihar of became target for a long term scale and eventually successful popular agitation.

Obviously he was referring to satyagraha. Dhanagare third point was about Gandhiji receiving support from better off section and the middle peasants who had vested interest. This is a weak point because the people who came with him changed and changed for life. Dhanagare and others who have made the point seem to have ignored the fact that almost each one of the Gandhiji associates in Champaran committed their life to the nation. The lawyers and other professionals gave up their practices and became full time volunteers with Gandhiji first in Champaran and later in national freedom movement and initiated constructive work including adoption and promotion of Khadi. Arvind Mohan has recently documented life of more than 30 persons who were prominent volunteers in Champaran which bears out that all of them without exception worked for freedom movement.

Finally Gandhiji constructive work in Champaran also came under criticism. Dhanagare called it a semblance of relief or constructive work for the poor peasantry so as to prevent it from any potentially revolutionary activity. Dhanagare and others have missed last chapter of Rajendra Prasad book that is titled How Volunteers Served. It is true that Gandhiji could not build a strong local team of Champaran origin who could have carried forward the work of education, sanitation and other constructive programmes in the district, but in any case that are sought by way of justice and/or improvement in the existing situation has to be accompanied by satyagraha own weakness that have to be removed by reflection and

appropriate action. Gandhiji identified two main problems. Pathetic ignorance of raiyats and insanitary conditions of the village. he organized schooling sanitation by getting volunteers from Ahsram and from Mumbai and Pune.

### **THE SATYAGRAHI GANDHI THEN WRITES ABOUT THE WRONGS AND HOW THEY SHOULD BE RIGHTED**

The wrongs are twofold. There are wrongs which are accomplished facts and wrongs which continue. The continuing wrongs need to be stopped at once and a small inquiry may be made as to past wrongs, such as damages and abwabs already taken and sharalibeshi payments already made. The raiyats should be told by proclamation and notices distributed broadcast among them that they are not only not bound to pay abwabs, tawan and sharahbeshi charges but that they ought not to pay them, that the Sarkar will protect them if any attempt is made to enforce payment thereof. They should further be informed that they are not bound to render any personal service to their landlords and that they are free to sell their services wherever they choose and that they are not bound to grow indigo, sugarcane or any other crop unless they wish to do so and unless it is profitable for them. The Bettiah Raj leases given to the factories should not be renewed until the wrongs are remedied and should, when renewed, properly safeguard the raiyats' rights.

Champan Satyagraha critics should have understood from this report that Gandhiji was trying to argue a case based on the principles that the opponents claimed they follow. First of all he did not have anything to complain against planters. He expressed his good will. The point he made was that he wanted the Champan raiyats to be as free as the planters were in making their choice of crops and terms of partnering with other. His argument was that if 'Englishmen were born to enjoy fullest personal liberty and freedom', then same principles must be applied to all British citizens and for that matter he would have applied it to whole humanity. It was freedom of enterprise that Gandhiji wanted to gain for raiyats in Champan. This was the truth he was addressing. British were employing two separate principles one for British and other for non-British. Gandhiji had experienced this in South Africa. He appealed to the value of individual liberty that British celebrated and followed principal of fair and equal opportunity for economic enterprise principle and value that British followed.

Gandhiji during April 17 and May 17 began a process. He made visits to villages, met people, and also communicated with planters, Collector and sub divisional office. Besides the report he sent to Governor he generated confidential notes for internal discussions and sharing status. Perhaps Dhanagre got this impression from these activities that Gandhiji turned the potential action programme into an academic exercise. Indeed, Gandhiji brought the rigor of research in investigation and issued strict protocols, but his ultimate objective was to build a strong case for negotiating redress.

Gandhiji was not a revolutionary; at least not in 1917 when the major political movement in India was around Home Rule. He had developed thoughts on political economy but he had not expressed them in which Marx had developed his framework. Gandhiji was quintessentially a libertarian but digressed from the concept of liberty of Mill and Spenser. For Gandhiji rights emerged from performing one's duty. It means becoming responsible for self and society. It is assumed in Gandhi's framework that body has soul. The quest is for Truth and in the process one finds own truths. As and went ere are conflicts between the truths, Satyagraha is the way of conveying one's won truth to others and also importantly understand the truth of others. The force applied in helping the other to see own truth is soul force or love force which is self-sacrifice beginning from suffering to give up life. This approach to life

and society has potential of revolution but it is achieved through incremental reforms. His realization was born out of experiments. Hence, it always remained evolving. His first major experience was fighting for citizen's rights to freedom to live and do business as the British and European citizens did in the Colony. Assessment of facts and ascertaining of grievances in socio-political situations before deciding action is critical aspect of any movement in Gandhian framework. Since the action is human and sources are not always primary there is always scope for errors including blunders. Concurrent and post facto evaluation are also integral part of the Gandhian methodology of protest. Outcome is not victory of defeat but improvement in the quality of overall situation in personal life and public. It is proposed to review the Champaran Satyagraha in the above framework.

The Satyagraha in Champaran had already begun. Gandhiji had taken decision. The truth on the ground had to be ascertained and if he was stopped he should resist and go to jail if necessary and that his associates should continue the search for truth. This is what he shared with his new colleagues in Muzaffarpur and all proceeded to Motihari, the headquarters of Champaran district. He was already listening to his conscience. After reaching Motihari, on April 15, he set out for an inquiry in Jasauli patti where a peasant's house was raided by the indigo factory amlas (factory employees). The inquiry in right earnest had begun. Rajendra Prasad in his account has noted that the news of Mahatmaji's arrival had already reached Champaran and a large number of tenants came all the way to Muzaffarpur. They narrated the ground condition and Gandhiji became more resolute to go to Champaran. Rajkumar Shukla after accompanying Gandhiji up to Muzaffarpur had made himself scarce and had perhaps become busy in spreading the news of Gandhiji's arrival. As the events unfolded it is clear that Rajkumar Shukla was not always present in the activities in Motihari. He on his own must have taken up vigorously work of meeting as many as many as he could and spreading the news that Gandhiji had arrived. It was mouth to mouth canvassing initiated by Shukla that the turn out in Motihari on April 18, when Gandhiji appeared in Magistrate's court thousands of raiyats had thronged. In a Satyagraha mobilizing people whose cause is taken up is extremely important. Gandhiji not only knew this from his South Africa days, he also made conscious effort in the direction. The leader of South Africa Satyagraha lost no time in understanding the critical events were going to unfold soon and he must ready himself by informing the world that he was seeking redress for something that was grievously wrong. In Satyagraha it must be clear to self and to all others that the insistence is for recognizing the truth of the protestor while being open to understand the perceived truth of the other. Gandhiji's move has to be assessed in this framework and not perceive his action only as a drama! His appearance in Motihari court and the proceedings produced dramatic effect indeed, but Gandhiji as leader of potential Satyagraha was keenly aware of it and had prepared to that effect. On April 14 he had visited a village near Muzaffarpur and had seen the poverty and the problem. In the evening he spoke to the new associates about his experiences in South Africa and added.

### **STRUGGLE AND NON-VIOLENCE**

The path of non-violence was not a bed of roses in order to traverse it Gandhi had to face numerous hardships and from back. He had to struggle and experiment with truth which kept on illuminating his awareness and that of his followers particularly in the Congress. He passed through varied experiences and ordeals especially during the days of non-cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements. From the lower levels of consciousness he reached the higher level of spiritual insight. In order to meet the challenge of social life he tapped the reserves of his spiritual energy.

## IDEAL OF NON-VIOLENCE

Gandhi declared that the ideal of non-violence could be practiced generational gourds without reference to God. He says, "It is unnecessary to believe in an extramundane power called to maintain our faith in ahimsa. In order to justify the rationality of non-violence, Gandhi says that non-violence satisfies the test of universal applicability and therefore, it has an ultimate value. Again, non-violence contributes to all other values without taking away anything from any of them. Moreover, non-violence can be applied to any extent or degree. Better justice can be realized by applying non-violence in a better way.

## CODE OF AHIMSA

Ahimsa was the quintessence if Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. According to the Gandhara Samhita, one must think good of all created life and one must desist from all forms of killing or harm. For Gandhi ahimsa was significant as a philosophy of life and a non-violent technique of action, so he desired that the Congress must follow this ideal in its struggle against the British to achieve its goal of complete independence. Ahimsa is an ethical and moral virtue. It the supreme dharma ahimsa pormodharmo as Yudhisthira, the apostle of truth, in Mahabharata defines moral law (Dharma). According to this definition, the only rule that applies to all societies, at all times is that, of ahimsa. But unintentional harm must be differentiated from the calculated harm.

Gandhi was deeply influenced by the Indian thought, in general and Jainism in particular. Traditionally an Indian is particular. Traditionally an Indian is non-violent. He is horrified at the idea of killing. For him there is only one life. What to say of killing he has veneration even for animal and vegetable life. Gandhi gave expression to the latent ideas of and Indian by declaring his gospel of non-violence. He added new dimensions to ahimsa. Gandhian non-violence is flexible but unbreakable. A non-violent worker sacrifices his life so that truth might be awakened in the other person. Gandhi imposed upon himself a fast as penance for the sins of others. He realized that the only way the guilty parties could be made to realize his distress and the depth of their own failure would be for him to do some penance. The results of the penance expressed even his expectations. He risked his life for the welfare of others. Gandhi ahimsa symbolizes sacrifice, suffering, courage but above all truth and purity.

## CONCLUSIONS

It may be said the Champan Satyagraha was first significant effort by Gandhiji to put into practice his thought framework in which the individual had to be liberated with a clear social obligation toward contributing to forming a non-violence society. The setting was in an agrarian situation. It gave him ample opportunity to understand the agrarian scene in India. He was soon to intervene using similar method in Kheda (then Kaira) district in Gujarat where farmers were aggrieved. Due to floods farmers had ost crops and appealed to the British district administration to grant relief in land revenue. The appeal was rejected. Gandhiji intervened and Sardar Patel took lead. Bardoli Satyagraha was to follow later in 1928. Gandhiji's Kheda and Bardoli Satyagrahas have also been similarly criticised and form part of the Dhanagre's work. But as Eric Ericson has noted, Gandhiji got yet another scope to try the non-cooperation and Satyagraha. Gandhiji was able to convince that the entire nation will have to follow the path that he had walked in Champan. Rajendra Prasad has ended his book with the following remark that aptly concludes what was achieved in Champan by Gandhiji.

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