

GANDHI WITH THE CHAMPARAN SATYAGRAHA

Rashmi Riva

Research Scholar, Department of History, L.N. Mithila University, Darbhanga, India

Received: 20 May 2019

Accepted: 24 May 2019

Published: 31 May 2019

ABSTRACT

The historical accounts tell us that there were rebel and revolts by farmers rich and poor with different interests, but the situation had not improved to any significant extent.

The Government of India felt perturbed at Gandhi's presence in Champaran and the possibilities of a Satyagraha struggle developing in the indigo farmers in Bihar. At the suggestion of Craddock, the Home Member, the Viceroy write to Edward Gait, the Government of Bihar suggesting the appointment of a Commission of Inquiry on which a seat could be offered to Gandhi as well.

With the help of material gathered by Pyarelal, Sushila Nayar has written about Champarna Satyagraha in volume five. Hers is perhaps the largest account attempted so far. It begins with history of indigo production in India by the British planters. The account describes earlier resistance, rebel and protests before Gandhiji.

Acceptance of inquiry by Gandhiji and his being the sole representative of the rayats is also criticized by Dhanagre. It was against the wishes of many among raiyats and it was simply arbitration whose decisions were to be final and binding for both the parties.

The letter is clear. Gandhiji at once had understood the gravity of the problem. He also became certain that the inquiry will have to be thorough. He also sensed that he may be apprehended if he persists for conducting the inquiry. He was clearing seeing the scope to work in Champaran on the lines of South Africa.

KEYWORDS: *Non-Violence, Gandhi's Legacy, The Ahimsa*

INTRODUCTION

The historical accounts tell us that there were rebel and revolts by farmers rich and poor with different interests, but the situation had not improved to any 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 analysis and biographers have highlighted Gandhiji's role and its significance in catapulting him into a national leader who then 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.

It is also argued that there were some rich peasants landlords and powerful local moneylenders who had their own vested interest in driving the European planters away and secure back their domain and dominance. Gandhiji's role has been interpreted as the agent of the 'haves' class and the one who spoiled or relegated the revolution prospects in to oblivion.

Gandhiji told Fischer that the Champaran event was a turning point of his life. What he had done was an ordinary thing. He had just declared that the British could not order him in his country. In Fischer's assessment in Champaran Satyagraha Self-reliance, Indian Independence and help share-croppers were all bound together.

D.G. Tendulkar wrote Gandhiji's biography in eight volumes in 1951. However, he was invited to write on Champaran Satyagraha as well. It was first published in 1957. It is an analytical account and hence it will be considered in next section.

However, when Rajkumar Shukla persisted, Gandhiji went to the field and after learning about the ground reality he stayed on. Nanda has given emphasis to the report by W.A. Lewis, I.C.S., the Sub Divisional Officer, Bettiah to W.H. Heycock, District Magistrate, Champaran. Lewis was monitoring the presence and visits of Gandhiji under his jurisdiction and had been present in some villages when Gandhiji and his associates were collecting the testimonies and inquiring about the excesses committed and types of exploitation by the European planters and indigo factory owners.

The Government of India felt perturbed at Gandhi's presence in Champaran and the possibilities of a Satyagraha struggle developing in the indigo farmers in Bihar. At the suggestion of Craddock, the Home Member, the Viceroy write to Edward Gait, the Government of Bihar suggesting the appointment of a Commission of Inquiry on which a seat could be offered to Gandhi as well. Edward at first resisted the suggestion. 'It would be a device,' he wrote to Lord Chelmsford, 'for heading off Mr. Gandhi; and it is by no means certain that it would be effective.'

Robert Payne wrote *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi* in 1969. A very brief account only notes that Rajkumar Shukla was insistent upon taking Gandhiji to Champaran.

Gandhi's Truth published in 1970 by Eric Ericson analyses Gandhiji's psychology in depth. Where Champaran Satyagraha gets some space. He does not attribute the Champaran Satyagraha to an accidental meeting with Rajkumar Shukla and his persuasion. Ericson notes,

His biographers and even the editor of the *Collected works*, claim that Gandhi was drawn to the scene of his first skirmish "more or less accidentally." He himself creates a modern parable by claiming a peasant, "ubiquitous Rajkumar," to have been responsible for the whole thing..."One day will be enough," Rajkumar said, and he was right, for Gandhi immediately became fascinated with the problem and the very hindrances which beset his first attempt to orient himself must have aroused his stubbornness.

Ericson has referred to Gandhiji's experience on the first day stay of few hours in Lawyer's house in Patna. Gandhiji was treated as some poor farmer client and was not allowed to use the inside latrine for the fear of polluting it. Ericson believes Gandhiji was looking for an opportunity to do something big in the country later and this was the one.

Thus, in a minor cause on the outskirts of an empire, a number of future national workers were recruited; and one of the local lawyers who became a "clerk and translator," would thirty years later become India's first President: Rajendra Prasad.

With the help of material gathered by Pyarelal, Sushila Nayar has written about Champarna Satyagraha in volume five. Hers is perhaps the largest account attempted so far. It begins with history of indigo production in India by the British planters. The account describes earlier resistance, rebel and protests before Gandhiji. The conflict between the indigo farmers and the British planters had started since the second half of nineteenth century. The issue was not compulsion for cultivation of indigo but passing on the factory losses to farmers. Synthetic indigo invented in Germany towards the end of

nineteenth century flooded the markets crashing prices of the organic indigo. The meeting between Lt. Governor Edward Baker and planters during 1909-10 resulted in agreement by which teen kathia was reduced to two and the indigo procurement prices were increased by 12 per cent. Planters did not implement the agreement and oppression of farmers continued. Repeated petitions were submitted by famers during 1911-13. Unwillingness of the local administration for mandatory enforcement of the agreement made farmer's suffer immensely.

Stokes further agreeably argues that Jacques Pouchempadass had sought to dispose of the myth that Gandhi and his associates had a monopoly of political activism while 'the peasants themselves remained as a pathetic downtrodden mass in the background. He had concluded that the main agent in peasant political mobilization was the 'richer peasants' who found the European plutocracy a rival to their ambitions for dominance in landholding and the supply of credit.

In the above context it would be interesting to know about Rajkumar Shukla who has been underplayed by some biographers and analysis. But in an article that appeared in 1976 there is specific focus on Rajkumar Shukla. In fact it is on him. The author's – Mittal and Dutt, tone about Gandhiji getting apprehensive about Shukla, when both reached Patna from Kolkata (then Calcutta) on 10 April 1917, is that Gandhiji was less kind to him. They argue that Rajkumar Shukla was at his best in serving Gandhiji. He ran all errands and attended to him with full commitment. According to them.

In this context it needs to be mentioned that in some critical writings on Champaran Rajkumar Shukla is referred to as a big farmer. It is argued that Gandhiji fought for big farmers and middle peasantry and moneylenders who wanted to regain their dominance by removing English indigo planters. Mittal and Dutt have shown shukla was indeed son of a big farmer and lived in houses; one in Satwaria (where his father had lived) and second in Murali Barharwa. At one time he owned 60 buffaloes and 300 cows. But his commitment to the cause was total. He was passionate about removing the indigo stain from the peasants of Champaran and he gave up whatever he had. In a statement that he made before the Champaran Agrarian Inquiry Committee, he had said that he was left with 3 buffaloes, 8 cows and 6 bullocks. His house at Murli Barharwa was ransacked and looted. His passion may be the reason for his gross unhappiness over Gandhiji's compromise. Mittal and Dutt note.

The young Marxists had obviously viewed the uprising of masses under the Gandhiji's leadership under Marxian perspective of revolution for overthrowing the capitalistic capture of the socioeconomic power based on economic exploitation of the masses. They could see the potential for such a revolution in the awakening of the Indian society at large against the Imperial role and the Imperial capitalists hold, but they could also see that Gandhiji was thwarting the move towards revolution by advocating non-violence in all struggles. A more serious accusation by M.N. Roy said that Gandhiji was ' the acutest and the most desperate manifestation of the forces of reaction.

In Dhanagre's opinion the more vocal and doctrinaire among Marxists have accused Gandhiji of deliberately adopting sterile techniques and being out and out a representative of national bourgeoisie of upper and middle class petty bourgeoisie. However, he hastens to add that imputing such motives to Gandhiji would be unfair unless convincing evidences are provided. In this specific context he has examined the composition of social class and their dominance in the social and political movements under Gandhi's and Gandhian leadership. Pan India movements would render such an exercise difficult and hence Dhanagre has selected specific and local movements. Champaran Satyagraha is one such movement examined.

Dhanagre has clearly defined the parties involved in dispute so that at the time of analysis it could be clearly established in whose support Gandhiji was and how he dealt with all. Thus, for him the Champaran agrarian problem was

simple and straightforward. There were two parties in dispute; the European planters and their tenants (raiyaats or raiyaats). He has quoted 1911 Census and showed that there were 2700 European planters in India and in Champaran there about 200 engaged in indigo and zamindari concerns. They were thikadars of the overlords who had after borrowing heavily had lent collection rights to these thikadars. Dhanagre briefly narrates the well-known scene of exploitation of tenant farmers forced to engage in indigo farming and later to wriggle out it. In Dhanagre's understanding.

Dhanagre is somewhat harsh when he comments on the lawyers. He says that they under the façade of service to the distressed peasants had charged exorbitant fee and yet could not get the desired reliefs. And after realizing such failure, they tried for a political solution. He takes the argument further that as Gandhiji had sought the entry to raiyaats world via the elite local leadership; he was exposed mostly to middle and rich farmers who were the clients of the lawyers gathered to assist him.

At the highest level, the British Government was thinking in terms of benefits it could possibly derive from Gandhiji's manner of handling political struggle and problem situation from the beginning. For them it was déjà vu-context Gandhiji's Satyagraha in South Africa.

The next point Dhanagre makes in his analysis is that Gandhiji did not see European planters as his or the raiyat's adversary. On the contrary, he sought their cooperation and disassociated with all those who harboured any ill-will or even anti-European feeling toward them. Dhanagre argues that despite having taken testimonies from over 4000 raiyaats about the sharabheshi, tawan, and other forms of exploitation practices of planters, he resorted to actions ' that made raiyaats buy their freedom ironically enough by paying higher rents. At times it appeared that he took greater care of the planters' interest. Dhanagre refers to a telegram in which Gandhiji had advised the higher officials not to grant any open inquiry into indigo system as that would have exposed the ugliest practices by the planters.

Acceptance of inquiry by Gandhiji and his being the sole representative of the raiyaats is also criticized by Dhanagre. It was against the wishes of many among raiyaats and it was simply arbitration whose decisions were to be final and binding for both the parties. Gandhiji's efforts finally ended up legitimizing the enhancement of rents to get rid of indigo cultivation. It ended up preserving a feudal arrangement and planters' domination under which the agitating raiyaats were bound to pay higher rents for several years to come.

The Oft Repeated Critic of the Champaran Satyagraha Relates to the Local Leadership by the Elite and Rich People. Dhanagre Held A Similar View.

Dhanagre argues that the events in Champaran so configured the Gandhian agrarian movements that its properties got defined in the following way.

- Minor agrarian issues to be preferred to more fundamental questions relating to structure of agrarian relations;
- A compromise with those in authority and over as a point of termination of movement;
- Support from better-off sections- the middle peasant- whose interest the issues (under i) represent;
- A 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 Dhanagre's comprehensive review appeared. On the issue of reconciliation and considering no one as adversary Gandhiji for some has gone overboard

to support the 'haves' or the exploiting class. Abha Pandya has advanced such an argument while discussing the Gandhiji's role toward agrarian class in the framework of trusteeship. She says.

Irfan Habib has also refuted the position of many scholars that Gandhiji in Chamaparan Satyagraha was merely leading rich peasants. He says that first of all Gandhiji did not lead them because they were rich. In this context Habib refers to historical evidence revealed in the letter that was written by the Sub Divisional Officer W.H. Lewis to the Collector. Chakrabarti has quoted from the text of Lewis's letter which bears out the point made by Habib. Lewis wrote.

Right from day one when he landed in Patna with 'ubiquitous' Rajkumar Shukla and met his London acquaintance and co-student at law institution, he understood that the problem was deep rooted and complex. He had also understood that he would have to know all the three sides involved i.e., farmers, planters, and local administration. The first step in any work that he undertook in public interest, he would inform the concerned people and seek cooperation. On 11 April Gandhiji met Mr. J.M. Wilson, Secretary of Bihar Planters Association and explained to him the purpose of his visit and sought help and assistance of Association. Mr. Wilson said that he would try to help in personal capacity, but would not make any commitment on behalf of association. Gandhiji wrote a letter to the Commissioner, Tirhut Division Mr. L.F. Morshead under whose jurisdiction, Champaran fell and informing about his intent and seeking possible assistance. Not getting any response Gandhiji wrote another letter next day 13 April 1917 and attached with it a letter from the local friends inviting him to study the plight of indigo farmers.

The meeting with Mr. Morshead was not very encouraging. Collector of Champaran was also present. Gandhiji was told that the matter was being looked into and intervention of a stranger would be embarrassing and his presence may disturb peace in the area. Gandhiji insisted that he had come on invitation and his mission was that of making peace with honour. Sensing that the indigo problem was far more serious and sensitive and that he will be faced with difficulties and hardships he informed Maganlal Gandhi. He wrote,

The situation here is more serious than I had imagined. It seems to be worse than Fiji and Natal. However, we shall know better as we proceed with the inquiry. I have seen the authorities. They may be thinking of apprehending me. I have not minute to spare here. I am leaving for Champaran right now, and am writing this just as I am leaving, I cannot say when I shall be able to return even if I am not arrested. If go to jail, this will be my last letter for the present. Whatever happens you will know by wire. Nobody need think of coming here and going to jail.

The letter is clear. Gandhiji at once had understood the gravity of the problem. He also became certain that the inquiry will have to be thorough. He also sensed that he may be apprehended if he persists for conducting the inquiry. He was clearing seeing the scope to work in Champaran on the lines of South Africa. Civil disobedience was on cards. He did not heed to the advice of Morshead. The reference to Fiji and Natal was made because Maganlal Gandhi would immediately understand the gravity and import of the Gandhiji's stay in Champaran.

The letter is in Gujarati and the nuances of it would be difficult to comprehend from the translation. Laxmi is the Goddess of prosperity. Symbolically it is said that when she on her own comes to apply tilak, on should not go to wash the face! The message is success is on door and one should not fritter it by any delay in action. Habib has stated that Gandhiji communicated in religious language that could have been avoided, but Gandhiji was deeply embedded in the culture of the soil. That is the language he spoke. But let us not miss the point. The first sentence he writes is about returning the Gold Medal. He wanted to impress upon the highest official of the British Administration that he was in the district for a right

cause and he had the right to do what he was doing as a good citizen. If the local administration perceived differently then he should return the honour he had received for such good work elsewhere. The post script is important. He had foreseen that he may be asked to provide personal security by the court and he wanted to convey that he did not own any property for advancing as surety. The Magistrate did ask for such surety in the court on April 18! He knew the law well of course. Since on 16th he was not asked to appear in court he wrote another long letter to Mahatma Gandhi on the same day. In it he mentioned 'the penalty for this crime is six months' imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 1,000. I am awaiting further developments.

Metaphysical Views of Ahimsa

Gandhi derived his principle of ahimsa, perhaps from his metaphysical views. He emphasizes the fallibilism of the inner voice. It is possible that the person whom we injure, may be right and we may be wrong. Thus search for moral and factual truth may lead to non-violence. The ontological view of truth or what is may also lead to non-violence. We are ultimately one. Therefore, by injuring others we injure ourselves and confine our own capacity for self-realization and not only others capacity from self-realization. As already stated Gandhi had his metaphysical views. The principle of non-violence follows from these views.

Love and Ahimsa

Love is the very soul of ahimsa in its positive form. Love is not to be taken in the narrower sense which demands physical response. Love in the wider sense is a spiritual force. It is the true love that demands no consideration. According to Gandhi, true life consists in transferring itself from the body to the dweller within and then necessarily realizing the oneness of all life inhabiting numberless lives. In this sense, ahimsa embraces even the evildoer but it does not co-operate with his evil. A devotee of ahimsa would not shun the company of an evildoer. He would rather try to come into contact with so that so that he may be reformed. Ahimsa implies boycott evil and not implies that a votary of ahimsa should yield humbly to the will of the evil-doer. He should rather apply his soul force against the will of the tyrant. His tyranny should not be overcome by tyranny, by violence or by retaliation. Applying physical violence would amount to coming down to the level of the evil-doer and denying the spiritual unity with him. Non-violence tries to overcome evil by good. It releases its moral and spiritual forces to resist violence and immortality. It believes in the essential goodness of human nature. Patience and self-suffering are the hallmarks of ahimsa. Love does not burn to others, it burns itself. A devotee of Gandhian ahimsa is a model of self-discipline and enlightened forgiveness. He develops soul-force by overcoming his feeling of anger and resentment. Moreover, he achieves self-purification and self-realization as is humanity possible. In brief ahimsa consists in allowing others the maximum of convenience at the maximum of inconveniences.

Gandhi's doctrine of non-violence is based on the inherent goodness of man. He believed that human nature is essentially good and that man is divine in essence. He regarded violence as an evil and opposed it but we should do away with the spirit of violence. Ahimsa or soul force can accomplish this job. It brings about a change in the mind of the opponent. Gandhian non-violence is not the same thing as fatalism. Fatalism implies that things would happen as they should happen. But Gandhi wanted to bring about a change in the existing hostile, atmosphere. He wanted to free man from hatred and fear by changing the attitude of man towards society and other fellow, beings. Gandhi aimed at creating a social revolution through love, truth and non-violence and relentless efforts. Those critics of non-violence, who claim that violence is history, Gandhi say, "If we are to make progress, we must not repeat history but make new history. We must

add to the inheritance left by our ancestors. If we make new discoveries and inventions in the phenomenal world, must we declare bankruptcy in the spiritual domain?

Non-violence is the soul-force. It purifies both the guilty and the votary of non-violence. It is love in action. It is an advance in the ethical march of human thought. Tolstoy, the great Russian writer say, "what one calls non-resistance is in reality nothing but love unreformed by false interpretation-love is the aspiration of solidarity and communion with other souls and that aspirations always liberates the source of noble activities. Love is supreme and unique law of human life which everyone feels in the depths of his soul.

It is true that Gandhiji categorically said that Champaran Satyagraha was not political for him, it was a local problem, but a serious one and he wanted to help redress it. To Commissioner, Magistrate, Collector and planters he told that he wanted to inquire into the complaints people were making about exploitative arrangements with respect to indigo cultivation. He had therefore reached there to understand the problem. This is what he precisely did. Once he was given permission to stay he settled down to understand the indigo issue in depth and also record the complaints of the raiyats. A Satyagrahi should know the facts on the ground properly to build his truth. Gandhiji was trying to understand the system and the issues involved in it.

Between April 17 and May 10 when Gandhiji met Mr. Maude, Member of Executive Council, Bihar and Orissa at the suggestion of the Governor of Bihar Gandhiji had developed fair amount of insight in to the indigo issues and how the system worked. By then 4000 statements of the tenants had been recorded. The Satyagrahi was well-prepared to share the ground reality with Mr. Maude. At the end of the meeting Mr. Maude requested Gandhiji to send a written report to the Governor and also ask for what needed to be done. A satyagrahi does not miss a chance to put his/her point across with respect to understanding the truth. Gandhiji wrote in the beginning that he was deeply hurt by the Governor's suggestion that came through Mr. Maude that the assistance of his associates was to be withdrawn. A Satyagrahi also assures the other that no harm will ever be done and intended and there will not be violence of any kind. Gandhiji wrote so in the report. The Report has a distinct imprint of a Barrister. The report explains the ground reality with full understanding of the system. Gandhiji understood the economics of indigo cultivation very well, the world market crisis, and effect of synthetic indigo on local prices. He also explained how the planters were trying to saddle the losses upon the raiyats. In the very first report he had said that the factory workers were paid less and they also were further exploited by the petty officials by making them pay Dasturi amounting to fifth of their wages.

CONCLUSIONS

According to Indian, particularly, Hindu philosophy Moksha is the ultimate goal of human life. Moksha implies spiritual freedom and salvation or transcendental bliss. For the attainment of 'Moksha' tapes self restrain, self-suffering and identity with all other beings is required. For Gandhi, Moksha, symbolized absolute truth to be attained by means of taps or self-suffering. The relation between Moksha and tapes was the same as that between 'Satya' and 'Ahimsa' in the concluding lines of his autobiography he writes "My uniform experienced has convinced me that there is no other God than 'truth' and that the only means for the realization of truth is 'ahimsa'. I am striving for the kingdom of heaven which is Moksha. For Gandhi, the utter extinction of egoism is Moksha and who has achieved it will be the very image of truth or God. The quest of truth requires 'tapes-self-suffering. Thus Satya, requires the tapes, of; ahimsa' and his means self-suffering and self-sacrifice. Thus Gandhi gave a new meaning and significance to the traditional values of 'Moksha' and 'traps'. He interpreted

'Moksha' as the full realization of truth and he justified ahimsa, as an exercise in 'traps' self-suffering. He said, 'The law of Karma does not imply determinism, thought t limits the range for the exercise of our free will. Evil is the result of man's abuse of his free will and has a place in the scheme of progresses.

He was soon to intervene using similar method in Kheda (then Kaira) district in Gujarat where farmers were aggrieved. Due to floods farmers had lost 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 criticized 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 Chamaparan. Rajendra Prasad has ended his book with the following remark that aptly concludes what was achieved in Champaran by Gandhiji.

REFERENCES

1. *Gandhiji's Autobiography* was published in 1927. Dinabandhu C.F. Andrews thus became first person to attempt Gandhiji's biography.
2. Those interested may read the paragraph in Rajmohan Gandhi Ibid p 205.
3. *Gandhi and Agrarian Classes*, in *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 13, No. 26 (July, 1978), pp. 1077-1079.
4. Tirumal Mundargi, 1990. "Congress and Zamindars Collaboration and Consultation in Bihar, 1915-36", in *Economic and Political Weekly* June2, 1990.
5. Charabarti Bidyut *op.cit.* p 58.
6. Those interested in details may refer Parel Anthony J. (Editor) 1997. *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and other writings*. Foundation Books, New Delhi for Cambridge University Press, and Dasgupta Ajit K. 1996. *Gandhi's Economic Thought*. Routledge, London.
7. The word is used Gandhiji in his *Autobiography* to convey Shukla's perseverance in literally following Gandhiji and make him visit Champaran.
8. Prasad Rajendra, 1949 (revise edition) *Satyagraha in Champaran*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad.
9. The letter is reproduced from CWMG *op.cit.* p 365.
10. Ericson *op. cit.* p 293.
11. Refer to Rajmohan Gandhi's description of what happened in Gujarat Club in Ahmedabad. Gandhi Rajmohan, *op.cit.* in this paper.
12. Gandhiji had written down instruction on 16 April 1917 just a day after he had reached Motihar. CWMG *op. cit.* p 369.
13. Prasad Rajendra *op.cit.* p 170.
14. For the text of the Report refer CWMG *op.cit.* p 386.
15. Prasad Rajendra *op.cit.* p ix.

16. Arvind Mohan, 2017. *Champaran Satyagraha ke Sahayogi (Hindi)*. Sasta Sahitya Mandal, New Delhi.
17. Diwakar, R.R. *Gandhian Non-violence: A landmark's in political Thinkers of Modern India* by V. Grover, p.47.
18. *Young India*, 1919-22., p262.
19. Verma, V.P. *Modern Indian Political Thought*, p 230.
20. Singh, Khuswant, *A History of the Sikhs*, vol-II, p. 299.
21. R, Coupland, 1943. *The Indian problem 1933-35*, Bombay, p. 141.

