

Celebrating Champaran 1917

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At a moment when the ideals and events of our National Movement seem to be fading from public memory, it is gratifying, indeed, that there should be a celebration of the centenary of one of the most remarkable episodes of modern Indian history, the Champaran Satyagraha of 1917— that opened a new phase in the National Movement by joining it to the great struggle of the Indian peasantry for bread and land.

Even since Plessey (1757) British rule had meant a constant exploitation of India, the main burden of which had fallen on the peasants, artisans and the labouring poor of India. It has been the great intellectual achievement of the early nationalists that they were able to show how the twin processes of drain of wealth and de-industrialisation had ruined India. One sees the exposure and analysis in its classic form, in Dadabhoi Naoroji's *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (1901) and, in the form of a historical narrative, in R.C. Dutt's two-volume *Economic History of India under British rule* (1901, 1903). Gandhiji himself summarised these findings in his *Hind Swaraj* (1909), originally written in Gujarati.

The impoverishment of India which the early nationalists so ably exposed was largely accomplished through means in which Englishmen themselves hardly ever appeared as the exploiters: the land revenue was exacted through zamindars or native officials; English goods, destroying Indian crafts, were sold by Indian shopkeepers and hawkers. It was mainly in plantations and mines that the Englishman appeared directly as the oppressor. And among plantations, it was the indigo plantations where such oppression had the longest history. Indigo was a celebrated product of India, down the centuries, raised and processed locally by peasants. But in the seventeenth century European-owned slave-plantations in West Indies began to produce it, the extraction process they used being improved immensely by use of boilers. When the English conquered Bengal, European indigo planters appeared soon enough. Obtaining zamindaris they coerced peasants into raising indigo, for the dye to be processed out of the plants in their 'factories'. The coercion exercised by European planters on peasants to raise indigo and sell it cheaply to them— under methods portrayed in Bandhu Mitra's famous *Nil Darpan* (1860)— led to peasant 'disturbances' in Naddia in Bengal in 1859 and 1860. But these were suppressed by the administration.

Indigo plantations extended into Bihar where too European planters used the zamindari system to force their peasant tenants to bow to their will. Where they could not buy zamindaris they obtained leases from local zamindars, and in the form of 'thekadars' exercised the same rights over peasants as they would have had as zamindars. In Champaran district of Bihar, most European planters obtained *thekas* for whole villages from the large Bettiah zamindari. Here, as the demand for indigo grew with expanding textile imports, the planters imposed what came to be known as the *tin-kathia* system, the peasants being forced to raise indigo on the best parts of their rented lands.

A crisis occurred when a synthetic dye was developed in Germany in the late 1880s. Since natural indigo dye could not compete with it, indigo exports from India declined in value from Rs 4.75 crore in 1894-95 to Rs. 2.96 crore five years later. As indigo prices and the planters' profits from indigo manufacture fell, the planters began correspondingly to increase the rent-burden on the peasants, invoking their rights as zamindars. The impositions took two major forms: As zamindars or thekadors the planters simply increased the rents paid by peasants, the increase in rent being called *sharahbeshi*, usually amounting to 50 to 60 per cent of the previous rent. The second form was a curious one. Since indigo prices fell, the peasants did not now wish to produce indigo, as they had to under the *tinkattia* system. The planters, who did not wish to buy it either, allowed the peasant to shift to other crops only if he agreed to pay them a large amount, known as *tãwãn*, 'compensation'. The amounts imposed were so large that the peasants had to undergo much hardship only to pay interest on it at the rate of 12% per annum, let alone pay the principal. Another imposition on the peasants took the form of transferring to them plots out of the indigo factories' own cultivated lands (*zira'at*) charging high rents, under threat of throwing them out of their tenancies, if they declined to agree to take these on rent. The planters also collected illegal dues (*abwab*) and imposed fines. Alongside these exactions the planters made full use of the traditional zamindari practice of *begar*, forced unpaid or ill-paid labour, requisitioning at will the peasant's cattle, plough and carts or compelling them to provide labour for their plantations. In other words, the planters tried to throw the entire burden of the crisis caused by competition from synthetic indigo on to the shoulders of the peasants, while safe-guarding or even increasing their own profits.

That crisis for the planters eased in 1914 owing to the outbreak of World War I. Germany, the main producer of synthetic indigo, being one of the belligerent powers, the planters' profits from indigo revived, and many of them began to compel peasants to grow indigo again under the *tinkathia* system, while underpaying them for the crop by taking into account not the actual produce, but the area sown with the crop. The earlier burdens on the peasants under both *sharahbeshi* and *tawan* continued as before, along with forms of *begar*. Peasants were thus faced with a situation where while prices increased owing to the War they were themselves subjected to rack-renting and forced to grow indigo despite a manipulated low rate of return on it, though raised in their best lands. They faced other kinds of ill-treatment as well at the hands of the planters and their staff, including beatings and pretty bribery. The planters' *raj* was complete and there was no relief for peasants forthcoming from the Bittiah Estate (now under Court of Wards at the time), which, having given leases (*thekas*) to the planters, shared in the gains made out of the oppression of the peasants.

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 2017 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 'stayagraha' 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 Brajkishore Prasad and the future principal Congress leader of Bihar, Rajendra Prasad. 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, others would follow from the ranks of what uptill now had been a subdued demoralised *raiya*. On 16 April the English District Magistrate ordered Gandhiji to leave the district, the order being issued under Sec. 144 Cr.P.C. Defying the ban, Gandhiji pleaded "guilty" before the District Magistrate at Motihari on 18 April, 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 flabbergasted 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, and the first real peasant demonstration 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 21 April Gandhiji received intimation from the Lt. Governor of Bihar and Orissa (no less!) 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 vakils in large numbers joined his band of volunteers. The recording project turned into a real mass movement. As many as 8000 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 Government, 'Hon. W. Maude' at Ranchi on 10 May. 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 13 May. 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 all their 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 Lieut. Governor of Bihar and Orissa, along with the Chief Secretary, H. McPherson, held a long meeting with Gandhiji on 5 June 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 per cent, while Gandhiji demanded a reduction, at least, of 40 per cent. When the official members proposed that the balance of 15 per cent might be met from the revenues of the Bettiah Estate, Gandhiji at once demurred. Clearly, he did not wish to annoy the zamindars of Bihar, who had remarkably remained neutral in the matter. Ultimately, he accepted a 26 per cent reduction in *sharahbeshi* to be borne entirely by the planters.

It is remarkable that the Committee was able to present a unanimous well-written factually rich report by 3 October 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 outturn. The reduction of *sharahbeshi* rent by 26 per cent (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 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 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 mill owners 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. But 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 observe the centenary of the event today, one wonders how any tribute could be adequate for the firmness and determination shown by Mahatma Gandhi and the unflinching resistance offered by the long-oppressed Champaran peasants at his call.