

The Champaran Crusade

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On 14th August, 2017 a significant event took place in Hyderabad. A small book in Telugu titled A Great Historical Movement - Champaran Righteous Crusade was released by Sri Nayani Narasimhareddy, the Home Minister of the state of Telangana. Sri P. Janardan Reddy presided over the meeting. It is significant as it marks the centenary of the Champaran movement led by Gandhi. It was the movement to free the farmers of Champaran in Bihar from the suffocating grip of the colonial authorities.

It is no doubt small book containing translations of articles by Tushar Gandhi, Irfan Habeeb and J B Kripalani. Particularly Kripalani happened to be himself a partner in the great movement and explained the troubles and travails of Gandhi in organizing and conducting the movement. Added to that is a part of the autobiography of Gandhi wherein he explains how he was drawn into the troubles of the innocent farmers. How he was discriminated against initially due to caste apprehensions, but accepted and honoured later. He was magnanimous enough to understand the influence of the traditions prevailing then and did not complain. His method was first to acquaint himself of the problem by direct contact with the indigo farmers and then infuse confidence in them to stand united against the government to get out of their predicament. It was no doubt difficult to make them understand that they could resist the onslaught of the colonial power in a non-violent way without incurring the wrath of the inhuman power.

Gandhi knows he has to defy the law if he wants to save the farmers and it will necessarily attract violent punishment from the government. He was tactical to respond humbly to the dictates of the authorities. When he was asked to leave the state, he said politely that he came to help the innocent farmers and would leave immediately after their problems were solved. The government was forced to take note of the problems of the farmers and realise the justice in the demands of the movement. By showing his willingness to undergo the punishment for his defiance, he introduced an element of ethics in his movement. It was the first time that Gandhi had to run a movement of farmers in India after coming from South Africa. While dealing with the innocent and fearing farmers on one side and the inhuman colonial power on the other, Gandhi could find a way to success in a nonviolent method. That was a big relief and he decided to apply the same method throughout the fight for freedom for the entire country. It was as if Champaran was a training ground for Gandhi to become a leader of the freedom movement and succeed without violence. In fact non-violent resistance considers the most significant contribution of Gandhi. The foundation for it was laid in Champaran. That is the significance of that movement. Encouraged by that example, an agricultural movement took place later in other parts of the country.

Of more significance is the fact that the Marxist intellectual Irfan Habeeb paid a glowing tribute to Gandhi for what he did in Champaran and the manner in which he did it. It was almost a lesson on how to organize a mass movement, the breath of Marxists. Irfan referred to the way in which Gandhi reacted to the dictates of the colonial authorities and finally made them support his activities. Irfan was particularly appreciative of the manner in which Gandhi earned the confidence of the people who were strangers when he approached them. As Marxist, he might not agree to all Gandhi did. But he had the intellectual honesty to appreciate what Gandhi did as a pragmatist revolutionary, because what he did was nothing less than a revolution in Champaran. Perhaps, Irfan Habeeb felt that was what a Marxist should have done in that situation. Such an intellectual honesty is a scarcity in our present day politics. To what party he belongs is not relevant.

In spite of the significance of this movement in the history and economy of the country, it is a pity that the present work brings to the notice of the young generation not only the historical importance but also the relevance of Gandhian principles to the present society. As stated by Sudhir Chandra at the end, remembering Champaran amounts to remembering Gandhi himself.

While releasing the book, the Hon'ble Minister referred to the present conditions of farmers and took the opportunity to explain the various schemes of his government to ameliorate the conditions of farmers. The pity is that the conditions of farmers were the same as being in Champaran a century ago. The troubles of farmers are the same. But the social situation has worsened. Earlier there was cohesion in the society. Neighbours used to share the burden of each other. But now in the name of progress the society is atomized and farmers feel helpless in time of trouble. Suicides have become the order of the day.

Mr. K. Pratap Reddy, a senior advocate, emphasized the relevance of Gandhian principles at the present juncture to solve the problems. The path shown by Gandhi is valid even 70 years after his death, he said.

Prof. G R S Rao explained the social significance of the movement started by Gandhi and its impact on the various aspects in development. He also emphasized the way the movement was conducted which gave results without much of the violence. He lamented that the leaders now are wary of going to the level of the people to understand their problems but they want to lead them. They naturally fail to get dedicated followers. They will be no mass movements.

The book is compiled by Sri P. Janardan Reddy, ex-MLA and the doyen of socialist movement in this part of the country. He was assisted by Sri Ravela Somayya in compilation and in organizing the function successfully. The translation from English was done by Mr "Gourav", an established writer in Telugu, who is eager to propagate progressive ideas, without bearing any "ism" on his sleeves. The translations run smoothly, bringing out the flow and cohesion in the original essays.

The book is published by the Hyderabad Writers, Printers and Publishers Cooperative Society. There is a dearth of nonfiction books in Telugu and the publishers are filling that vacuum now. We can expect more books like this from them and enrich the Telugu literature.