

## Global Significance of Champaran Satyagraha

-S.N. Sahu (8<sup>th</sup> May 2017)

The launching of the Champaran Satyagraha by Mahatma Gandhi hundred years back in 1917 marked a revolutionary landmark as much in the history of India as in the history of humanity for reconstruction of society and polity based on non-violence. Anchored on the strength of the ordinary and exploited people, it liberated them from exploitation without employment of violence and prosecution of the exploiters and offered refreshing lessons for humanity for peaceful social change and fine-tuning the governance process. It heralded the dawn of a non-violent freedom movement in India which gained strength during successive phases of struggle for independence under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi to liberate our country from foreign rule. It was an arduous task pursued in the face of insurmountable challenges. It represented a bold and courageous experiment to unshackle farmers from exploitation and substantially improve the agrarian situation. At its core it remained an integrated vision encompassing in its scope the ideals of gender equality, Hindu-Muslim unity, empowerment of dispossessed people, providing quality and interactive education and better sanitation. It envisioned and celebrated a social order of constructive action based on harmony, reconciliation, understanding and deepening of public reasoning.

For a century before 1917, farmers in many parts of India, including Champaran in Bihar, were forced by the British planters to grow Indigo and other plants like sugarcane in the best of their lands. Indigo was a plant from which natural dye, indigo, was being extracted from its leaves by fermenting them in water and later oxidising them. The cakes created in the factory from indigo extracted from those leaves were used for dyeing textiles in Britain. The British planters with the legal support of the British Government in India forced the Indian farmers in Champaran to grow Indigo in one-third of their best and fertile lands. Any attempt by farmers to resist forced Indigo plantation met with harsh punitive measures including denial of rights to use pathways, coercively snatching their cattle and even molestation of their women. On reaching Champaran, Mahatma Gandhi understood first-hand the grim and exploitative situation prevailing there and wanted to act and stay there “out of a sense of public responsibility”<sup>1</sup> not to start an agitation but to engage himself in what he called “genuine search for knowledge”<sup>2</sup> to find out the truth concerning the allegations made by the farmers.

He found that there was a reign of terror<sup>3</sup> in Champaran and the property of the farmers, their persons and their minds were under the heels of planters and many attempts by the farmers to violently oppose such exploitation were brutally suppressed by the British administration. The condition of farmers there worsened when for the first time in history Germany manufactured synthetic indigo by using organic chemistry in the laboratory. And the manufacturing of synthetic indigo based on benzene and naphthalene and its use for dyeing textiles perplexed the British planters who so far relied on natural indigo produced in vast tracts of agricultural land in Bihar and Bengal. As Germany had monopoly in synthetic indigo and none knew how to

manufacture it, Britain suffered huge economic loss because it could not produce so much indigo naturally to compete with artificial indigo. The loss was transferred to the farmers of Champaran who were reduced to paupers. The First World War, which started in 1914, further aggravated their conditions. Even Mahatma Gandhi in his "Report on Conditions of Ryots in Champaran", submitted on May 13, 1917 to the Chief Secretary of Bihar and Orissa, referred to the issue of synthetic indigo and very sensitively observed: "When, however, owing to the introduction of synthetic indigo the price of the local product fell, the planters .... devised a means of saddling the losses upon the *raiya*ts."<sup>4</sup>

It was during that period that one Rajkumar Shukla of Champaran heard of Mahatma Gandhi's success in South Africa for restoring the rights and dignity of Indians through his first Satyagraha started on 9/11, 1906. He repeatedly met Gandhi after 1915 when he returned to India from South Africa and asked him to come to Champaran and save the farmers who were forced to cultivate Indigo in their best land and were victims of exploitation for more than a hundred years. Somehow or other Gandhi used to decline to visit Champaran. Finally in 1917, when he was attending the Congress session in Calcutta, Shri Shukla came and met him and persuaded him to come to Champaran. Eventually Gandhiji agreed and reached Champaran to start his first and historic Satyagraha there.

#### **Gandhi's Arrival in Champaran in April 1917 and his Return of the Kaiser-i-Hind Gold Medal conferred on him in South Africa**

He first wanted to study the situation and understand the condition of farmers. Even though he clarified that he was there for doing humanitarian work in the pattern of what he did in South Africa, for which he was rewarded by the British authorities, his very arrival in Champaran and his attempts to study and explore the problems confronted by the farmers was resented by the concerned authorities of the erstwhile colonial regime. The district administration served an order asking him to go back as his presence was disturbing the peace of the area. But Gandhi refused and he wrote a letter from Motihari to the Private Secretary to the Viceroy on April 16, 1917 and categorically asserted that he would suffer the penalty for disobeying the order to withdraw and informed that he was returning the Kaiser-i-Hind Gold Medal conferred on him by the British Government for rendering humanitarian work in South Africa.

Stating in the text of the letter that his motive was to extend national service consistent with humanitarian dictates, he added that any finger pointed against his humanitarian motive would make him unworthy to retain the medal and, therefore, asked his people to return the medal to the Viceroy and took a stand that he would be honoured to receive it back when his motive was no longer questioned.<sup>5</sup> In locating his work in Champaran in the context of what he did in South Africa and describing it in terms of the wider humanitarian objectives, Mahatma Gandhi placed Champaran in the larger global arena of humanity thereby underlining its deeper significance beyond the national frontier.

He was arrested and taken before the Magistrate who asked him if he pleaded guilty for violating the law. He stunned everybody by pleading guilty and boldly stating that he violated the law as he was tuned to the higher law of conscience. The British Magistrate and administration could not believe the forthright and courageous stand of Mahatma Gandhi by invoking the law of conscience which always remained at a higher realm embodying the higher ideals. Flowing from his spiritual strength it further brought out his voluntary and willing acceptance of punitive measures for the sake of truthful resistance to injustice. His ringing words in a letter to Esther Faering, written from Motihari on April 17, 1917, that “I am absolutely joyed to think that I shall be imprisoned for the sake of conscience”<sup>6</sup> affirmed his elevated consciousness and high-minded ideals employed in Indian context for the first time to liberate two million farmers from the centuries old exploitation inflicted on them by British planters in concert with British administration. The government lawyers requested the Magistrate to postpone the trial keeping in mind the point that it would get dragged through many hearings and adjournments. But Gandhi’s pleading of guilt took the wind out of the sails of the administration and its cunning lawyers.

His statement before the Magistrate on April 18, 1917—that his presence could not disturb peace and cause loss of life in the region because his motives were for rendering humanitarian and national service and he could not do so without studying the problems of farmers in response to the pressing invitation to help the *ryots*—was very convincing.<sup>7</sup> It was exemplary and it flowed from his extraordinary statement in the court that “I am fully conscious of the fact that a person holding in the public life of India a position such as I do, has to be most careful in setting examples”.<sup>8</sup> The shining example set by Mahatma Gandhi eventually forced the British Government to drop the case against him. It was a big victory for the cause of truth and it is instructive to note that much later in 1939 Mahatma Gandhi, while addressing a public meeting in Brindaban near Champaran where he was presented a purse of Rs 20,000 on behalf of Champaran as a mark of its respect and loyalty to him, famously said that he successfully addressed the problem of farmers by employing “the armaments of truth and non-violence”.<sup>9</sup> The triumph of “the armaments of truth and non-violence” in Champaran in the face of the exploitation faced by the farmers constituted a new hope and beginning in the modern period of human history and hundred years later it acts as a beaconing light for humanity to address the pressing problems of injustice and inequality suffered by peoples across the globe.

The government permitted him to investigate the case of farmers and ordered the British administration to render all help to him. Gandhiji met the farmers and spent time with them to know the horrible exploitation caused by the British planters and reached out to the planters as well as to sensitise them about the sufferings they inflicted on the farmers. For the first time somebody heard their tales of woe and agony and they confided in him. In a letter to Esther Faering, written on May 13, 1917, Mahatma Gandhi gave a detailed account of what he did with the farmers and wrote: “My work here gives me greater and greater joy day by day. The poor *ryots* delight in simply sitting around me, feeling that they can trust me to do the right thing. I only hope I am worthy of all this love. I constantly see the planters and do not despair in

appealing to their sense of justice on behalf of the *ryots* who have groaned under the weight of oppression all these long years.”<sup>10</sup>

The farmers felt so relieved to see Gandhi freely mingling with them and going deep into their problems and sharing every moment with them. This had never happened before. Gandhi’s act of hearing the woes of the farmers and meeting the British planters constituted an attempt for dialogue for redressing the grievances of the suffering people without prosecuting the exploiters and demanding punitive measures against them. It actually meant an act for promoting reconciliation and understanding and a parallel can be drawn with Nelson Mandela who, after becoming the President of South Africa, established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission which just heard the victims of exploitation and those who exploited them without any measures to prosecute those who perpetrated apartheid and racial exploitation.

After Gandhi heard the terrible exploitation in Champaran he famously wrote in his “Report on Conditions of Ryots in Champaran”, submitted on May 13, 1917 to the Chief Secretary of Bihar and Orissa, that the British planters developed the exploitation as an “exact science”<sup>11</sup> to perpetuate their domination. The report, prepared by Gandhiji after hearing even the British planters who abused the whole system for their benefit and excluded the farmers from any opportunity to gain anything, brought out the architecture of exploitation under which the farmers suffered immeasurably. Gandhiji wanted the same set of rights both for the British planters and the farmers and, therefore, observed in the his Report: “I have entered upon my mission in the hope that they as Englishmen born to enjoy the fullest personal liberty and freedom will not fail to rise to their status and will not begrudge the *raiyyats* the same measure of liberty and freedom.”<sup>12</sup> Based on that Report the Champaran Agrarian Act of 1918 was enacted. That legislation was shown to Gandhi who fine-tuned it. Finally, because of that Act the forcible cultivation of indigo and other crops at the instance of the British planters was stopped and farmers got back their right to cultivate their own land and plant crops of their choice. Such a remarkable victory was registered by Mahatma Gandhi in six months of the commencement of the Champaran Satyagraha without subjecting anybody to any penal measure and without dragging anybody to the court of law.

It is instructive to note that Gandhiji, while analysing the pitiable conditions of cultivators of Champaran, was contextualising their problems by referring to the problems faced by the Indians in Fiji, Natal and South Africa as a whole. In doing so he was locating Champaran beyond the national frontiers and situating it in the larger global arena. In a letter written from Muzaffarpur to Maganlal Gandhi on April 15, 1917, Mahatma Gandhi described the situation in Champaran as more serious than what he had imagined and stated that it seemed to be worse than what had happened in Fiji and Natal.<sup>13</sup> In a letter to H.S.L. Polak, written from Motihari on April 17, 1917, Gandhiji recalled the best days in South Africa and wanted to have those days in a place where Ram and Janak lived and then fondly added that he would soon find such heroes of the first South Africa as Naidoos, Sorabjis, and Imams in Champaran.<sup>14</sup> In his “Notes on the Position on Champaran Todate”, dated May 14, 1917, Mahatma Gandhi wrote: “In Fiji and Natal, the evil was represented by a single law. The evil was dealt with, if the law could be

removed. In Champaran, the evil is like a weed growing everywhere and anyhow and in growing has smothered all law and order. The very laws for the protection of the *rayats* have been used by the planters to reduce them to serfdom. As the planters have placed themselves above law, even decrees of courts have had no binding effect on them in many cases. The evil, therefore, will require a tremendous effort before it is checked.”<sup>15</sup> All such correspondence of Gandhiji with European personalities concerning Champaran and his attempts to contextualise it by referring it to the situation prevailing in Fiji and South Africa brought out his narrative which located the Champaran issue at the global level.

### **Lessons of Champaran Satyagraha concerning Education**

The Champaran Satyagraha embodied in its scope the integrated vision of Mahatma Gandhi and had numerous profound dimensions whose significance are enormous for the twentyfirst century world. Its success, therefore, should be seen beyond the end of exploitation of the cultivators of the area at the hands of the British planters. When Gandhi visited Champaran he was shocked to see the pitiable or rather the near-absence of educational facilities for the people. So he sent volunteers to teach the children and adults. Writing in the *Harijan* on March 25, 1933 he recalled the Champaran Satyagraha and his attempts to impart education to the children of the area by appointing teachers for whom the guidelines for teaching were framed by him. Those guidelines mandated that no corporal punishment should be imposed on students and teaching should be based on interaction and joy.<sup>16</sup> Those guidelines of Gandhi issued in 1917 to remove corporal punishment in schools and make learning interactive and joyful constitute a great lesson for the twentyfirst century world where corporal punishment has been almost abolished based on instructions of the government and learning has now been made more interactive than in the earlier era.

Besides, Gandhi instructed that schools would teach culture to students and in his own words, “The central fact was to create round the school an atmosphere of culture”<sup>17</sup> and “In every case the school became the pride of the villagers and a centre of culture.”<sup>18</sup> All those guidelines were followed by the volunteers and there was a great success achieved by the voluntary teachers in attracting the children of the poor and exploited farmers to those schools. Such an attempt by Gandhiji to spread education among the poor and marginalised offers vital lessons for our time when education has been badly commercialised and there is hardly any cultural content in education which is being imparted in market- driven and commercially-oriented educational institutions.

### **Lessons on Gender Equality**

Another significant and larger dimension of the Champaran Satyagraha is gender equality and women’s empowerment. Both the Muslim and Hindu women Gandhi met in Bihar wanted his help to remove the *pardah*.<sup>19</sup> He spoke about the issue in his speech delivered at the Bhagini Samaja in Bombay on February 20, 1918, a few months after the successful conclusion of the Champaran Satyagraha. Muslim women confided to Gandhi that they would like to be liberated

from the veil which put a check on their vision and progress. Gandhi took up that cause in 1917 itself.

What shocked Gandhi was that many women in Champaran hardly took bath as they had only one saree to wear. When Kasturba went to a lady in Bhitiharva in the Champaran region to tell her to take bath, she asked as to how she would take bath when she had just one saree to put on.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, Gandhi narrated that incident in many meetings across the country to highlight the plight of the women in Indian society and the steps needed to provide opportunities to them for ensuring their dignity and empowerment. While addressing the Bhagini Samaja in Gujarat in 1918 he invoked the Chamaparan spirit and stressed on empowerment and education of women and paid tribute to the women of Champaran by saying that “Women who would ordinarily be considered uneducated are doing excellent work in Champaran. They are waking up their extremely backward sisters to the freedom which they themselves enjoy.”<sup>21</sup>

Immediately after invoking the Champaran spirit, he made a statement affirming equality of men and women. It is worthwhile to quote those lines. “Woman is the companion of man, gifted with equal mental capacities. She has the right to participate in the very minutest detail in the activities of man and she has an equal right of freedom and liberty with him. She is entitled to a supreme place in her own sphere of activity as man is in his. This ought to be the natural condition of things and not as a result only of learning to read and write. By sheer force of a vicious custom, even the most ignorant and worthless men have been enjoying a superiority over women which they do not deserve and ought not to have. Many of our movements stop half-way because of the condition of our women. Much of our work does not yield appropriate results ; our lot is like that of the penny-wise and pound-foolish trader who does not employ enough capital in his business.”<sup>22</sup>

### **Lessons on Sanitation**

The third lesson of the Chamaparan Satyagraha relates to sanitation and hygiene. Mahatma Gandhi was shocked to see the unclean life and dirty atmosphere in Champaran and taught the lesson of sanitation to the people. After hundred years of the Champaran Satyagraha the sanitation and hygienic conditions in our country are far below the standards prescribed by Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi wanted a high level of sanitation based on voluntary effort of people. He wanted to build a movement for sanitation by involving and educating the masses. So while fighting for the rights of the farmers he also fought for the cause of education and sanitation.

In one of his articles on “Diseases in Villages”, written on December 15, 1929, he invoked the Champaran Satyagraha and the measures taken during that period to eradicate diseases in the villages of that area and wrote that if villages were kept pollution-free many diseases affecting the people could be prevented.<sup>23</sup> It teaches us a vital lesson concerning pollution-free villages which we are striving to achieve in the face of widespread pollution of our atmosphere across the country.

## Lessons on Cow Protection without Killing Muslims

One of the valuable lessons of the historic Champaran Satyagraha relates to protection of the cow without inflicting any violence and ill-will on people of other faiths which do not prevent them to slaughter cows. Such a lesson is extremely relevant for our time, marked by the rise and spread of vigilante groups, which target Muslims and kill them in the name of Hinduism and cow protection and in the process cause irreversible damage to communal and social harmony. While spearheading the Satyagraha in Champaran in 1917 one *Gaurakshini Sabha* invited Mahatma Gandhi to lay the foundation-stone of a *gaushala* in Bettiah around October 9, 1917. Delivering a speech on the occasion Gandhiji very insightfully said: "It is the very opposite of religious conduct to kill a Muslim in order to save a cow."<sup>24</sup> Further, he observed: "If we wish the Muslims not to kill cows, we should bring about a change of heart in them. We shall not succeed by force. We should reach their hearts with prayer and entreaty and achieve our purpose by awakening their sense of compassion. In adopting this course, we should take a pledge that, while seeking to protect the cows, we shall bear no ill-will or malice towards Muslims or be angry with them or fight with them. It is when we have taken up such a reassuring attitude that we shall be qualified to raise the matter with them."<sup>25</sup>

Turning the search light inwards, he made a critical remark on Hindus for treating cows in a cruel manner and causing harm and injury to them. It is worthwhile to recall his thoughtful words uttered almost hundred years back. He said: "Hindu society has been inflicting terrible cruelty on the cow and her progeny. The present condition of our cows is a direct proof of this. My heart bleeds when I see thousands of bullocks with no blood and flesh on them, their bones plainly visible beneath their skin, ill-nourished and made to carry excessive burdens, while the driver twists their tails and goads them on."<sup>26</sup> Then he added: "I shudder when I see all this and ask myself how we can say anything to our Muslim friends so long as we do not refrain from such terrible violence."<sup>27</sup> Such critical self-assessment needs to be invoked to reverse and neutralise the counter-culture of terror, hatred and violence promoted with impunity by certain organisations in the name of cow protection.

It is illuminating to note that while speaking in Muzaffarpur on November 11, 1917 he again referred to the killing of Muslims by some Hindus in the name of the cow and said: "I should like to tell the Hindus that it is no religious act to kill Muslims in order to save cows."<sup>28</sup> Further, adding that he wanted to protect the cow, he pleaded with all humility: "For that purpose I would ask the Muslim friends to apply the knife to my neck and kill me rather than the cow. I am sure they will respond to this prayerful request. If we cherish our own freedom, we have no right to deprive others of theirs. Interference with one another's freedom leads to strained relations."<sup>29</sup> Then he emphatically made the point that "If the Hindu is out to shed Muslim blood in order to save the cow, *swaraj* will never come."<sup>30</sup> The killing of Muslims in the name of cow protection seventy years after independence is a negation of *Swaraj*.

During his stay in Motihari in 1917 he reiterated his stand on cow protection and expressed his disapproval of killing the Muslims for the purpose of protecting the cow when, in a letter to Ranchhodlal Patwari, he wrote: "Killing a Muslim for [saving] cows can never be a righteous act."<sup>31</sup> Three years later, that is, on December 8, 1920, while speaking in Muzaffarpur, Mahatma Gandhi maintained: "The Hindus cannot protect cows by killing Mohammedans"<sup>32</sup> and added by pleading forcefully that "If the Hindus are really serious about the protection of cows they must sacrifice themselves for Islam." Such statements of Gandhiji, uttered in the Champaran region hundred years back, are of critical relevance to stem the tide of majoritarian tendencies based on which the cow protection issue is being used to target Muslims and other minority community members.

It is heartening to note that Gandhiji continued to invoke the Champaran spirit in the context of cow protection in Belgaum on December 28, 1924, seven years after the Champaran Satyagraha, when he delivered his presidential address at a cow protection conference. He stated that once, when he was asked in Champaran to expound his views regarding cow protection, he told his friends there "...that if anybody was really anxious to save the cow, he ought once for all to disabuse his mind of the notion that he had to make the Christians and Mussalmans to desist from cow-killing".<sup>33</sup> Adding further, he said: "Unfortunately today we seem to believe that the problem of cow-protection consists merely in preventing non-Hindus, especially Mussalmans, from beef-eating and cow-killing. That seems to me to be absurd."<sup>34</sup> Clarifying the point that he was not indifferent to cow protection or could bear the practice of cow killing, he asked as to how he would ask Muslims not to kill cows just because his religion did not permit him to do so.<sup>35</sup>

He referred to the claim of Muslims that Islam permitted them to kill the cow and stated: "To make a Mussalman, therefore, to abstain from cow-killing under compulsion would amount in my opinion to converting him to Hinduism by force."<sup>36</sup> He then went on to make a bold declaration: "Even in India under *swaraj*, in my opinion, it would be for a Hindu majority unwise and improper to coerce by legislation a Mussalman minority into submission to statutory prohibition of cow-slaughter."<sup>37</sup> Such a daring statement of Mahatma Gandhi by recalling the Champaran spirit is of seminal significance for our time when many measures have been taken in many States of our country in clear violation of the vision of the Father of our Nation. Therefore, reiteration of the Champaran spirit is a categorical imperative for the twentyfirst century India and the world.

### **Lessons on Hindu-Muslim Unity**

Another aspect of the Champaran Satyagraha concerning Hindu-Muslim unity assumes enormous significance for our time when there is an unbridgeable gulf being created among Hindus and Muslims in our country. When communal riots broke out in the western and eastern parts of India following the partition of our country Mahatma Gandhi invoked the Champaran spirit of non-violence and exhorted people to invoke that spirit to establish harmony and peace among all faiths.

He went to Patna on March 12, 1947 on hearing that Hindus and Muslims in the city had destroyed one another's shrines and properties based on the killings of Hindus in Noakhali. While addressing a prayer meeting in the city, he insightfully told the people: "Today we need that nonviolence which was exemplified by the people of Champaran in 1917."<sup>38</sup> Yet again on March 13, 1947, while discussing with the Congress workers in Bir, he was distressed to note the attack on Muslims to avenge the attack on Hindus in Noakhali and invoked the non-violent spirit of the Champaran Satyagraha and said: "The non-violent fight which I had launched against injustice and oppression in Champaran had sent new life pulsating throughout India. The work in Bihar this time is far more difficult and significant. This time it seems I will have to strive to the utmost to prove that Hinduism and Islam can exist side by side. This is being put to test today. Many people believe that they cannot and one will have to remain subordinate to the other. I do not think so. If the Hindu Mahasabha insists that Muslims should remain subordinate to Hindus or if the Muslim League insists that Hindus should subordinate themselves to Muslims, this will not do. No one need live as subordinate to another. All have to live together as equals."<sup>39</sup>

### **Promotion of Urdu Language**

Exploration of deeper dimensions of the Champaran Satyagraha and their use by Mahatma Gandhi to educate the nation and the younger generation constitutes a vital lesson for our time. One such deeper dimension was centred on the Urdu language which Shri Rajendra Prasad and Brajkishore Babu used during the Champaran Satyagraha to communicate with the people and cultivators of Champaran. When large numbers of Muslims were killed following the partition of India, Mahatma Gandhi was deeply distressed and appealed to the people to atone for it by at least learning the Urdu language spoken by both Muslims and Hindus.

While speaking at a prayer meeting in Goriakhari on March 19, 1947, he cited the examples of Brijkishore Babu and Rajendra Babu who wrote in Urdu during the Champaran Satyagraha<sup>40</sup> and in that context appealed to the people to learn the Urdu language largely spoken by Muslims as a goodwill gesture to them because of the sufferings they had to undergo following the division of India and the attendant communal riots which devastated them. The fact that the Champaran spirit was summoned to sensitize the people to use the Urdu language testified to Mahatma Gandhi's finer sensibilities to remain tuned to the subtle dimensions of the Champaran Satyagraha for the larger cause of unity, reconciliation and understanding among the victims of communal conflagration.

### **Global Peace and Champaran**

The international and global significance of Champaran was underlined by Mahatma Gandhi in 1931 when he referred to the Champaran Satyagraha in Geneva while addressing a meeting organised under the auspices of the International Women's League for Peace and Freedom. While reflecting on the functioning of the League of Nations he lauded its vision to establish peace in the world by arbitrating the conflicting interests of the nations. While doing so he did

say that there was no sanction of non-violence behind the League and he boldly stated that “the means we have advocated in India supply the necessary sanction not only to a body like the League, but to any world organisation for this great cause of the world”.<sup>41</sup> The reference to the means adopted in India included the Champaran Satyagraha which was anchored on the non-violent method.

In that meeting when a question was put to Mahatma Gandhi as to “How could workers obtain justice without violence? If capitalists use force why should not workers use pressure?”, he answered by saying: “This is the old law, the law of the jungle—blow against blow—and I have told you that I am endeavouring to make this experiment essentially to substitute the law of the jungle, which is foreign to man.”<sup>42</sup> He explained that “If labour would only understand and recognise that capital is perfectly helpless without labour, labour would easily come to its own.”<sup>43</sup>

Stating that “We have unfortunately come under the hypnotic suggestion and influence of capital that capital is all in all on earth”, he added: “But a moment’s thought would show that labour has at its disposal a capital that capitalists never possess.”<sup>44</sup> He then explained that based on such a law and truth he could free almost two million cultivators in Champaran from age-long tyranny.<sup>45</sup> In doing so he was flagging the Champaran Satyagraha and its enduring message in the context of the opposition and contradiction between capital and labour and the resultant violence it caused in human history and the necessity of resolving such contradictions through non-violence.

The lasting message of the Champaran Satyagraha to peacefully resolve intractable problems involving labour and capital was placed by Mahatma Gandhi in Geneva in 1931 and it has a bearing for the twentyfirst century world witnessing increasing inequalities of income which threaten to endanger the society, economy and polity.

### **Champaran Satyagraha and Cultivation of Fruits**

It is rather distressing that the cause of farmers which Gandhiji took up in 1917 and redressed by the non-violent method has worsened in the twentyfirst century world. Hundreds and thousands of farmers are committing suicide and the state of agriculture is in a deplorable condition in our country. The spirit of Champaran is therefore of critical necessity to save our framers who are in despair and losing hope.

In this context Gandhiji’s remarks that fruits in Champaran were expensive and his lamentations that in the fertile land of Champaran no measures were taken to harvest fruits<sup>46</sup> bears significance for our time when cultivation of fruits is receiving priority attention.

## **Champan Satyagraha and Good Governance**

The whole architecture of the Champan Satyagraha assumes enormous significance in the context of orienting the governance process to address the problems and challenges faced by the people in a democracy. Mahatma Gandhi took up the cause of farmers in Champan by investigating their issues, engaging in dialogue with all the stakeholders, be it the exploited and the exploiters and all agencies of the government, and subjected every phase of investigation and dialogue to public scrutiny and made them totally transparent. All such methods adopted by him represented an approach which celebrated consultation, deliberation, public engagement and persuasive power to make all sides appreciate the diverse aspects of a complex problem. All such approaches adopted by Gandhi are now integral to the democratic method of governance which aims at achieving the desired results not by exercising crude power but through a process of arbitration, reconciliation and understanding.

It is educative to note that the Champan Satyagraha, based on the people's strength and non-violence, resulted in the Champan Agrarian Act of 1918. A movement taking the shape of a legislation gets the mandate of law and jurisprudence. Hundred years back the Champan Satyagraha set an example of a people's movement which was eventually backed by a law passed by the legislature. It is fascinating to note that the Champan Agrarian Bill was examined and fine-tuned by Mahatma Gandhi when the Revenue Secretary of Bihar and Orissa sent a copy to him for his study and scrutiny. After close examination of the Bill he recommended that the power of punishing complainants for lodging false complaints is to be sparingly used. Stating that "It requires a highly trained judicial mind to arrive at a firm conclusion as to complaints being false", he observed: "It is, therefore, a dangerous thing to give summary powers to a Collector who will not be acting judicially."<sup>48</sup>

Such close examination of a legislation keeping in mind the interests of the people who could complain against the exploiters and whose complaints should not be treated as false brings out the role of an enlightened citizen to defend democracy and fine-tune governance. Such a rich legacy of Champan need to be recalled when in the twentyfirst century world peoples of both developed and developing countries are losing faith in democratic institutions which are often used to serve partisan interests.

## **Higher Form of Non-violence Required**

After the independence of India Mahatma Gandhi stressed on a higher form of non-violence for independent India. On many occasions he did say that India would require a form of non-violence which would be higher than that of non-violence put into practice in Champan in 1917. Can India scale up the levels of non-violence which Gandhiji wanted to achieve in 1947 by invoking the Champan Satyagraha? This is the biggest challenge. It requires deepening of public reasoning on a higher scale than was done by Mahatma Gandhi in 1917 when he started the Champan Satyagraha and achieved his objectives in six months.

We need to deepen public reasoning which can promote peace, non-violence, harmony and reconciliation in society through dialogue and multilogue. We can achieve high levels of public reasoning by following his Constructive Programme of the early 1940s in which he put the issue of the kisans (farmers)<sup>48</sup> by invoking the work he did for the cultivators of Champaran. In doing so we can truly pay tribute to Mahatma Gandhi and enrich the legacy of the Champaran Satyagraha.

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