

## GANDHI IN CHAMPARAN: A REVISIT

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Champaran Satyagraha is generally described as Gandhiji's first significant non-political grassroots struggle for the cause of poor and exploited peasants in Champaran district in North Bihar located in the foot hills of Himalayas. British Planters had moved in to Champaran area in the early nineteenth century and took over the cultivation from gawky Zamindars and thekedars. The British planters forced the tenant farmers to cultivate indigo (Neel) in three twentieth part of a Bigha of their operational holding.*

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**KEYWORDS:** *Peasant Movements, Non-Violence, The Satyagraha*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Champaran Satyagraha is generally described as Gandhiji's first significant non-political grassroots struggle for the cause of poor and exploited peasants in Champaran district in North Bihar located in the foot hills of Himalayas. British Planters had moved in to Champaran area in the early nineteenth century and took over the cultivation from gawky Zamindars and thekedars. The British planters forced the tenant farmers to cultivate indigo (Neel) in three twentieth part of a Bigha of their operational holding. Twenty Kathias made a Bigha – a measurement of land that was about one third of a hectare. Hence, it also came to be known as Teen Kathia system. The planters chose the best portions of land for indigo cultivation and offered very low prices for the indigo output that failed even to cover the cost of cultivation. The Planters also cultivated Indigo on the farms that they had acquired tenure rights. For about a hundred years the poor peasants suffered indignity, physical abuse and exploitation. The British administration was at best indifferent.

Gandhi's biography has been attempted by persons of repute in different fields. Needless to say, each with specific focus on some aspect of Gandhiji's persona to revealed to people. Nevertheless most have touched upon the Champaran Satyagraha. In this article, time sequence is followed only for convenience. There are minor variations with respect to times, places and details mainly due to different reference sources and to some extent less attention to details.

The third in order came the Champaran struggle (undertaken in order to remedy the evils that grown up connected with the indigo plantations). Here Satyagraha had actually to be offered. Mere preparedness for it did not suffice, as powerful vested interests were arrayed in opposition. The peace maintained by the people of Champaran deserves to be

placed on record. I can bear witness to the perfect non-violence of the leaders in thought, word and deed. Hence it was that this age-long abuse came to an end in six months.

For Andrews thus, it was continuation of experiment of non-violent Satyagraha after it was first undertaken with some success in South Africa, Andrews has not analyzed the situation in Champaran or described any previous attempts made there to correct the situation.

Louis Fischer's biography (1950) devoted a full chapter titled 'Indigo' in part I on the biography. Writing based on recollection of the account given by Gandhiji to him in 1942; Fischer's account becomes the nearest to what Gandhiji has given in autobiography. However, important aspect of the account is the manner in which Fischer had viewed the event.

The biography by B.R. Nanda in 1958 received worthy appreciation. Nanda has recognized situation in Champaran as agrarian discontent and put forward two points. One, it was a seething discontent. Second, the racial factor had given additional acerbity to relationship between European Indigo factory owners and Indian cultivators. Nanda has succinctly described the situation in Champaran before Gandhiji intervened. He has interpreted Gandhiji's hesitated denial to move motion for resolution and speak about Champaran situation in the December 1916 Congress as his clear disinterest. 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. In Nanda's assessment, it was Lewis's report that mainly alerted the British administration. In Nanda's words.

Nanda has noted that after collecting and presenting evidence of 8,000 tenants. Gandhiji had thoroughly acquainted himself with all possible agrarian problems in the region. Nanda does mention about Gandhiji agreeing to a lowered concession but seemed to agree with Dr. Rajendra Prasad's explanation that Gandhiji had hit at the prestige of the planters which was more important. Nanda on similar line concludes,

A compromise on a point of detail which pleased the planters immediately could not alter the fundamental fact that the spell of fear had been lifted from the peasantry. More than the legislation which embodied the recommendations of the Inquiry Committee, it was the psychological change which was to drive the planters out of the district within a decade. The tactical surrender on the part of Gandhi thus concealed what proved to be a strategically triumph.

Gandhian ahimsa demands, that a life which is past recovery may be put to an end, Gandhi justified Dr. Herald Blazer, a country doctor of Colorado's action of killing his thirty two year old imbecile daughter without arms, legs, speech or thought. The doctor had argued that he knew that there would be no one to look after his/her death. The doctors were already 61 years old. Similarly, a comrade in the battlefield who has received a fatal wound may be killed if no medical aid is available and if a lingering and torturing death is in store for him. In fact, the violence or non-violence of this act of killing is determined by the selfish or selfless intention underlying the said above.

Ahimsa is an empty dream without self-purification. The path of ahimsa is the path of salvation. A devotee of ahimsa reduces himself to zero. He identifies himself with the lowly of the lowest. Non-violence is love-incarnate and it is

the law of our life. Impossible things may be achieved by the practice of non-violence. This can be exemplified by those who lead a non-violent life of sacrifice.

For Gandhi ahimsa was a fact of life as well as an act of faith. This faith can be maintained only if our actions are in harmony with our faith. Of Course, this is a difficult thing to achieve. Human life is a continual striving after perfection. The ideal of non-violence can be achieved if we overcome our weakness. A devotee of ahimsa display single mindedness and stead-fastness in perfecting the powerful weapon of ahimsa is "an inward growth depending for substance intense individual effort". The votaries of non-violence should demonstrate the power of non-violence by their own examples as models of love, truth and non-violence.

Gandhi pleaded for ahimsa as policy by pointing out the futility of 'Himsa'. Acts of violence like those of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin and Genghis are transitory and short-lived. On the other hand, acts and effects of Buddha's non-violence are ever-lasting and ever-growing. If at all, the good effects of violence are temporary and the evil effects are ever-lasting. Gandhi even condemns revolutionary violence which is born out of anger and ill-will. He looks down upon hypocrisy in non-violence. Gandhi's gospel of 'ahimsa' 'harmonizes with the Hindus doctrine of 'ahimsa'. Ahimsa' does not consist in indulging in acts of violence or conspiring with others in acts of violence only but also in ignoring acts of violence committed by others. Passive spectators of wrongs perpetrated and not doing anything about them is also guilty committing violence.

According to Gandhi, non-injury or non-killing is only the least manifestation of ahimsa. Harassment is sometimes worse than killing an earring person Gandhi enlarged the scope of ahimsa beyond moor non-killing. It embraces penance and limitless patience. A devotee of ahimsa in sot only sympathetic towards an enemy, but also denies existence of an enemy. His bear's malice towards none. All human beings are alike for him. He rises above the petting of life. In fact, ahimsa is a state of soul and mind. Gandhi felt the necessity of demonstrating ahimsa by practical examples of a few devotees, who would be embodiments of moral and spiritual discipline in ahimsa. Under the influence of Buddhism and Jainism, Gandhi extended the scope of ahimsa to all the moral virtues. He equated it with humility, forgiveness love, charity, selfishness, fearlessness, strength, non-attachment and innocence. For him ail unfair and soul means like trickery, falsehood, intrigue, and deceitfulness were different aspects of ahimsa. A person, who sticks to his duty but does not bother about the results of his action, is not tempted to ahimsa. According to Gandhi may ultimately be identical with divine love, the sense of oneness with all that belongs to the great prophets and mystics.

Ahimsa slowly but surely brings about a change in the mentality of the earning person. It does net coerce the wrong doer but converts him by its spiritual insight into a better human being. He is re-born; a votary of ahimsa puts a restraint on his desire for vengeance or retaliation. But this does not imply that ahimsa eschews real fighting against wickedness. According to Gandhi, ahimsa seeks to blunt the edge of the tyrant's sword, not by putting up a sharper-edged weapon but by disappointing his expectation by not offering physical resistance. Self-suffering or penance is the essence of ahimsa.

In the context of class and community; Champaran Satyagraha and Gandhiji's role has been criticized. It has been argued that the movement was by and for rich and middle peasants and moneylenders who had immense vested interest in removing the English planters and the indigo producers and regain their lost space. Before the English planters came in, the landlords and money lenders had good going with British administration. Eric Stokes quoting S.B. Chaudhary says that

there was unwitting partnership of the moneylender and the British Revenue Law. Chaudhary had noted,

The Banias were mostly outsiders who purchases with avidity the propriety rights of the Zamindars and peasants when they came under the operation of the sale law. As village money lenders they also practiced unmitigated usury. The English courts which offered facilities to the most oppressive moneylenders in executing a decree for the satisfaction of an ordinary debt against an ignorant peasantry produced the greatest resentment amongst agriculturist population and a dangerous dislocation of social structure. The protection thus afforded to this class through the medium of this course is the sole reason why the peasants and other inferior classes of wage earners to whom borrowing was the only recourse were so vindictive and uncompromisingly hostile against the English during the rebellion. It was not so much for the fear of their religion that provoked the rural classes and landed chiefs to revolt. It was the question of their rights and interests in the soil and hereditary holdings which excited them to a dangerous degree.

Stokes further agreeably argues that Jacques Pouchepadass 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,

To turn back to Raj Kumar, suffice it to say that by bringing Gandhiji to Champaran through his persistent efforts he served a historical purpose, setting in motion a chain of events that profoundly affected our history and freedom struggle. Had he not kept on pestering Gandhiji or "tugging at his sleeves" Gandhiji would not have rediscovered himself in the fields of indigo. Gandhiji's early annoyance with Raj Kumar had given way to a genuine fondness. His experience, wrote Gandhiji, had "enhanced my regard for Raj Kumar Sukul.

Dhanagre goes on to summarise the Marxian critique and says two important points. One that Indian Marxist of those times and even later had argued about the sterility and futility of Gandhian technique non-cooperation and civil disobedience because it did not embody in it an unambiguously defined set of principles and programmes of basic social and economic reconstruction even within the framework of the anti-imperialist national liberation struggle. The movements that occurred were just to redress superfluous grievances. The second point was that the Marxian criticism of Gandhian approach has prevailed among all Marxists over time irrespective of the several factions to which they belong.

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 (raiyyats or raiyats). 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

The confrontation between popular leaders and the Government was a new experience for the villagers and Gandhi's saintly appearance as well as his methods of recording statements from raiyyats had richly added to that novelty.

The high point of the movement was the preparedness of the Government in justifying mistakes surprisingly for the local officials censured their actions. It allowed Gandhiji to conduct his inquiry, collect testimonies and also institute an inquiry in which he was appointed as a member. It led to the Champaran Agrarian Bill of 1917 and an Act under which the infamous teen kathi system was abolished for ever.

The critique which Dhanagre has raised is as follows.

Looking carefully at Gandhi's movement in Champaran one cannot help feeling that the first thing he (Gandhiji) did was he turned what was purely an existential problem for an average raiyat into an academic one. Whether he meant it or not, his empirical exercises during the inquiry released the steam of popular resentment which otherwise would have certainly found a spontaneous expression into a mass agitation. The situation in Champaran was sufficiently inflammable to justify such a conjecture.

Mundargi argues that the transformation of the country-side with indigo cultivation by the European planters had hurt the upper caste moneylenders and the Marwari's economic interests. Raiyyats did not sell the food-grain to the moneylenders, who were dealing in grain networks. The moneylenders joined hands with the urban professionals and agrarian middle classes. All of them supported Gandhiji. Thus the struggle was in support of the middle classes.

There are scholars who have advanced arguments while reviewing the Satyagraha that refute the critiques raised above. In the context of mass uprising in Champaran against the indigo cultivation an important point has been made in an analysis by Raj Saah. In his paper he has noted that at the peak of indigo production in the Bengal Presidency during 1849-59, about 31 per cent of total output came from Bihar. However, there was absence of any significant and large scale organized resistance in Bihar until 1867. The first skirmish happened then. From then on there had been continuous attempts. However, a large scale unrest that occurred in 1907 was contained by the English planters. The nexus between the local administration and the planters was complete. Saah's central argument and his critic has not been so much on the revolutionary potential that existed among the Bihar Peasantry and poor, but that the planters had lost out the indigo game in the international market. He notes that by 1907,

Indigo dye was being forced out of the world market by the synthetic dye and indigo demand was falling except for a brief pickup during the first World War. The last of the indigo planters in Bihar imposed exorbitant rents, which produced serious discontent. This along with the rising national movement brought Mahatma Gandhi to Champaran in

1917 to deliver the death below to this infamous system. But at that stage indigo was dying a natural death, and Gandhi's intervention was only symbolic in an economic sense.

Examining the peasant's perception of Gandhi and his programme in Oudh years after the Champarna Satyagraha, Kapil Kumar also like Dhanagre asks the question which section of peasantry participated in Kisan Sabha and Aika movements in Oudh ? He comes up with a different answer. He disagrees with Eric Stokes, Jacques Pouchepadas and Judith Brown that the political mobilization was based on the rich peasants. He says that there was evidence to show that the rich peasantry was conspicuous by its absence and that it was the poor peasantry, who, along with the agricultural labourers, challenged their oppressors in Oudh. In Sultanpur, the movement was initially of landless agricultural labourers. In Fyzabad, the movement was given a radical turn by the ploughmen, landless agricultural labourers and tenants-at-will and the targets were zamindars, banias (traders), mahajans (moneylenders) and well-to-do cultivators.

According to Habib the goals of Satyagraha had to be narrow and achievable – even partial, otherwise the Satyagraha would have had demoralizing effect. On the point that Gandhiji compromised in negotiating in favour of planters because he was in fact representing the petty bourgeoisie, Habib argues that it is not a serious argument because, Even the greatest Marxists would have done the same. They may perhaps have not gone on hunger strike, but at some stage they must have compromised. You cannot in one agitation overthrow the landlord system in India. Another important achievement, as I see, in Gandhi is his immediate identification with the peasantry. He might use religious language for it, which one may deplore, but the essential point remains that to him peasants were those with whom he identified himself most. I have been amused to read in *Subaltern Studies, Volume I*, an analysis of a document in which Gandhi is supposed to have abandoned the peasants and made a compromise with zamindars. Compromises will always be subject to criticism, but in long term even when Gandhi was talking about zamindars as trustees, a custodians of peasants who should be paid rent so that they open schools and hospitals, he was still raising afresh issue. For Gandhi rents could be reduced by peaceful methods, by negotiation, but he was to be justified only if it was spent on health and education. Why should a zamindar collect rent if he was not able to enjoy it? This meant that even the idea of trusteeship brought into question rights of the zamindars in an indirect manner. And one should also remember that in the 1920s while peasants might rise here and there, the general situation was not of unrestrained revolt. One cannot read into the peasant movement of 1919-22 what was the creation of the Left in the 1930s. It would be absurd and it would be belittling the contribution of the Left and of Gandhi's own 'constructive' programme in the 1920's and 1930's to consider peasant consciousness in the 1920s at level with peasant consciousness in the 1930s.

With Habib's comprehensive refutation Dhanagre's criticism stands answered. Others are also more or less answered. However, there is a need to show that Gandhiji did not go to Champaran to lead a revolution by organizing the peasants. It is true that his getting to know and work in Champaran was a chance phenomenon. Once he was there he could see the scope to correct the wrongs using the method that had applied in South Africa with some degree of success. The method arises from the thought framework and the vision of an ideal society that Gandhi's thought contain. Champaran Satyagraha should be reviewed in the context of Gandhi's thought framework as well. This is attempted in the next section.

Gandhiji appearing in Magistrate's court in Motihari on April 18, 1917 has been recorded by many. It is also known that he had prepared his statement well before and written letters to several friends. The critics have missed out a significant point which a leader of revolution also takes into account. The leader should convey to the masses he leads that

he is aware of the cause and that he is ready to suffer for it on their behalf. It was only in the before noon of April 18 that Dharanidhar Babu and Ramnavami Prasad while accompanying him walking to the Magistrate's court confidently told that they would continue the work of recording Satyagraha will continue. The commitment of these two first close Champaran associates recorded and on the following day in still large number to attend the court to see what happens to this strange person who had come from some distant land in the country to fight action and commitment to walk the talk impressed the raiyats. The critical part of the statement Gandhiji made taking a firm stand to violate the law of land in favor of law of higher order-the conscience, is worth revisiting.

'Amid this conflict of duty, I could only throw the responsibility of removing me from them on the administration. It is my belief that in the complex constitution under which we are living. What I have decided to do, that is, to submit without protest to the penalty of disobedience. I have disregarded the order served upon me, not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience of the higher law of our being, the law of conscience'.

The court episode in Champaran Satyagraha was also very important because Gandhiji indeed had strategically planned that way. During his short presence in the districts and the stories he heard from raiyats and his colleagues he had immediately sensed fear among most of them. Raiyats have been witnessing now for generations planters violating the law, abusing them, insulting them, harming them physically with impunity. Gandhiji wanted to remove this fear from the minds of raiyats in a demonstrable way. The Marxian critics have perhaps understood but ignored this aspect. An emasculated and subdued lot could not rise for revolution of the kind for which the Marxian critics saw potential.

## CONCLUSIONS

Gandhi laid emphasis on the affinity between truth and non –violence. Satya and ahimsa as the only common basis of human aspiration . Gandhi derived his metaphysical concepts from the Hindus philosophy . Satya and ahimsa are traditionally identified with dharma ,the cosmic law which governs human conduct. According to Jainism ‘Satva’ (falsehood) leads to open violence-himsa. Gandhi opines that Hindu scriptures have given us to immortal maxims; i. ahimsa is the supreme law or dharma and ii. There is no other law or dharma, other than, ‘Satya’ or ‘truth’. Once he wrote to a Burmese friend that he adopted non-violence because of his unadulterated love of truth. Even his knowledge of Buddhism inspired him to further the cause of non-violence. Towards the end of his life Gandhi confirmed that the root of all his activity lay in truth. He also believed in the Indian thought that absolute truth of God is unmanifested as well as manifested in nature. He regarded ‘ahimsa’ as the manifest part of truth. Man cannot acquire the manifest and transcendental ground of absolute truth, but he can receive its manifestation through love. Anger, greed, pride fear blind the seeker’s eyes. ‘Ahimsa’ is the means and truth is the end if we take care means, we are bound to reach the end, important Gandhi made the difference between ‘ahimsa’ and truth clear during the period of our study, when he said, “out of truth emanate love. Tenderness, humility. A votary of truth has to be humble as the dust. His humility increases with his observance of truth.” In his autobiography, Gandhi argued that the search for truth is in vain unless it is able to efface himself and love the meanest creature as on self. Ahimsa is rooted in fear which can be removed only by the strength that issues from Satya. Non-violence requires tolerance of and even generosity towards those who oppose us. Ahimsa the means to ‘Satya’ which is superior to ‘Ahimsa’.

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 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 Dhanagare'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 Champaran.

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