

Champanan Satyagraha

Sudarshan Iyengar

Champanan Satyagraha is a story of Gandhiji's first significant non-political grassroots struggle for the cause of poor and exploited peasants in Champanan district in North Bihar located in the foot hills of Himalayas. With the advent of Indigo (*Neel*) factories, about 70 in number, British Planters invaded the Champanan 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. For about a hundred years the poor peasants suffered indignity, physical abuse and exploitation. The British administration was at best indifferent.

Introduction of synthetic Indigo in world market in 1897 hit the organic indigo production adversely. A new wave of exploitation began. The losses were transferred to poor peasants. They were given an option to give up indigo cultivation by paying higher rents for the land. They were also encumbered with any number of *ad hoc* levies. Farmers did try to protest and oppose but were cruelly crushed. Now and then the British administration instituted inquiries but most of it was eyewash in Bihar. Gandhiji was accidentally introduced to this issue in early 1917 and he approached the problem differently and came out with unique solution that had other positive impact on the minds of downtrodden and poor peasantry in the country.

Rajkumar Shukla, an illiterate but an aware Indigo farmer from village Murli Bharhawa in Bettiah sub-division of Champanan district, had made up his mind to fight the severe ills of indigo farming system. He was a sufferer. He had risen against the British Planters and factory management and had got punished severely. He had heard about Gandhiji's work in South Africa and had perhaps intuitively felt that Gandhiji's direct leadership would create an impact in his area and relief may come. He went to Kochrab Ashram in Ahmedabad only to find that Gandhiji had left for Pune. Since he did not have money to go to Pune he returned home.

In December 2016 Shukla attended the Lucknow Congress and was after the Congress leaders to take up the cause of indigo farmers. When he learnt that Gandhiji was there attending the Congress he searched for him and met him. 'Vakil Babu will tell you everything about our distresses', he would go on repeating. The Vakil Babu was none other than Babu Brajkishore Prasad, who would become a close Gandhi associate in near future. At that point Gandhiji was not impressed from what he saw in the Vakil Babu. In his characteristic way Gandhiji told the Vakil Babu, 'I can give no opinion without seeing the condition with my own eyes', and suggested him to move resolution in the Congress and leave him alone. But Shukla would not leave Gandhiji alone. He followed him everywhere and finally Gandhiji travelled with him from Kolkata in train to Patna on April 9, 1917.

Gandhiji had anticipated a short trip but once he came to know the problem, Champanan became his home for next one year or so. In Patna Mazharul Haq, who was Gandhij's friend in London helped and suggested that Gandhiji should go to Muzaffarpur to know more. Gandhiji reached Muzaffarpur where J.B. Kripalani first gave him grand welcome with his

students and then became his close associate. Many prominent lawyers joined Gandhiji under the leadership of Babu Brajkishore Prasad. One of them was Babu Rajendra Prasad, a brilliant lawyer who eventually became the first President of Independent Indian Republic. Gandhiji immediately grasped the nature of the problem and probable solution and communicated to the band of lawyer friends who committed to help the cause the following. 'I shall have little use of your legal knowledge...I want clerical assistance and help in interpretation. It may be necessary to face imprisonment'. He also told them that it may take long time and there will be no remuneration. The work will have to be done for love and out of a spirit of service.

The local administration viewed Gandhiji's visit suspiciously and responded by issuing local ordinances to stop him from his investigations. The District Magistrate asked him to leave the area immediately or face imprisonment. As Eric Erikson has noted this set an ideal scene for Gandhiji. This became a high drama in the whole of Champaran Satyagraha right in the beginning! Gandhiji first gently refused to leave the district before completing his inquiry and then when asked to present himself in the court pleaded guilty. However, for the night before the appearance Gandhi wrote letters to Maganlal Gandhi at Ashram, Henry Polak, Mazharul Haq, Madanmohan Malaviya and many others about the possibility of his arrest. He also wrote to the Private Secretary to the Viceroy and informed that he was returning the Kaiser-i-Hind Gold Medal awarded to him in South Africa for his humanitarian services by the British Royalty. The information about Gandhiji's polite defiance of the Government order spread like wild fire. From midnight farmers thronged Motihari town. Gandhiji walked to Magistrate's court with his friends and a huge crowd followed. The poor peasantry of distant and interior Bihar had hardly seen such a human entity that had come from some distance for their cause, and was willing to go to jail for them. His courage and fearlessness towards mighty British Government electrified the minds of hitherto cowed down and hapless people. This could only be a Mahatma who was willing to suffer for others! The air rent with slogans of *Mahatma Gandhi ki jai*.

Gandhiji notes that that his response of stating his intention honestly and gently defying the order instead of challenging it legally developed a kind of friendliness between the Collector, the Magistrate and the Police Chief. Gandhiji and his friends helped police in managing the crowd that had gathered in and around the Court. The Magistrate was perplexed with the situation and the government pleader stated that he would require some time before he could get the witnesses. Gandhiji intervened and said that there was no need for it, he was pleading guilty and that he wanted to read a brief submission. The submission and the subsequent events that unfolded in Champaran propelled Gandhiji into a new height in country's leadership beyond Congress. He said that he was invited by farmers to inquire into their conditions and thus he was duty bound to do so. He did not want to disobey the law, but he submitted,

'Amid this conflict of duty, I could only throw the responsibility of removing me from them on the administration... It is my firm 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'.

Magistrate could not decide what to do with this kind of submission! A *Satyagraha* indeed. He postponed the judgement for a later date. Gandhiji was set free pending judgement. The environment in the district and in Bihar changed completely. The Bihar Governor instructed

the district administration to drop the case and cooperate in the inquiry. The entire team of Vakil Babus, Prof. Kriapalani and others turned volunteers and joined Gandhiji's drive for collecting all sorts of evidences of injustice, abuse and excesses and exploitation. In collecting facts a systematic method was evolved and volunteers were oriented. Gandhi introduced and institutionalised methods and rigour in practice that came to stay with him and his followers all through the investigations, *Satyagrhas* in years to come. The quest for the Truth begins from being truthful in this-worldly affairs - *manasa, vacha, karma*.

Between April and June 1917 the entire Bihar was awakened. The district administration was worried; the British Planters sensed their defeat and combined pressure was exerted on the Bihar Governor to stop Gandhiji. In June the Governor summoned Gandhiji and shared the apprehensions and asked to stop the work and submit a report. Gandhiji agreed to submit an interim report but refused to discontinue the inquiry. The Governor upon receiving the preliminary report constituted a committee in which he invited Gandhiji to join as a member representing the farmers. Gandhiji agreed on one condition that he would be allowed to make presentation as the aggrieved party. Gandhiji and his team had collected about 12,000 cases substantiated with evidences and his presentation was very effective. The Committee submitted its report in October 1917 with unanimous recommendations. The Planters association protested and tried to stop the Report being accepted. The Report was accepted, a Bill was introduced in the Bihar Council on 4 March 1919 which became a law soon. The notorious *Ten Kathia* was gone and tenant farmers were given relief on many other counts. The British Planters and factory owners were asked to pay back the farmers 25 per cent of *Tawan* they had collected.

An important feature that surfaced during the *Champran Satyagraha* was Gandhiji's insistence on constructive programme along with struggle. Gandhiji was sad and depressed to see crass insanitation and complete lack of education and literacy. He said that abject poverty was only a minor cause explaining that. People had to be sensitised, made aware and educated. He invited volunteers from Ahmedabad Ashram and from elsewhere that included Kasturba and two other women. All of them engaged in taking up sanitation work by involving local communities and in running schools for children. People of Bhitiharwa village even today maintain the school building as memorial remembering Kasturba.

Gandhiji through *Champran Satyagraha* achieved a few things distinctly. The most significant achievement was that Gandhiji was able to demonstrably remove fear instilled deeply by the British Raj from the minds of the poor rural masses in the country. Farmers in *Champran* witnessed that the Raj could be challenged. Secondly, he demonstrated to the middle and rich class people that they could also become selfless public servants of people by shedding their feudal habits and assuming a role of servant citizens. Third, Gandhiji also demonstrated that along with the struggle the volunteers and public servants must simultaneously engage in effective constructive programme leading to building new society. With *Champran Satyagraha* the world witnessed India awakening.

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