

Champan Satyagraha: Gandhiji's Intervention in an Agrarian Situation

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Champan Satyagraha is generally described as Gandhiji's first significant non-political grassroots struggle for the cause of poor and exploited peasants in Champan district in North Bihar located in the foot hills of Himalayas. British Planters had moved in to Champan 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.

The historical accounts tell us that there were rebel and revolts by farmers rich and poor with different interests, but the situation had not improved to any significant extent. Gandhiji intervened in 1917 and brought freshness to the rebel and revolt and forced the British Administration to improve the condition substantially. Most analysts and biographers have highlighted Gandhiji's role and its significance in catapulting him into a national leader who then on moved to organise Independence movement in the country. It is also adjudged as first important and successful application of *Ahimsa* and *Satyagraha* in protesting against tyrannical rule in British India. However, some research and scholastic writings including subaltern writings have interpreted and written the Champan *Satyagraha* differently in the framework of agrarian and peasant movements in British India. It is argued that Gandhiji arrived on the scene when already farmers and leaders of the oppressed had rebelled against the order and were trying to seek fundamental redress. It is also argued that there were some rich peasants landlords and powerful local moneylenders who had their own vested interest in driving the European planters away and secure back their domain and dominance. Gandhiji's role has been interpreted as the agent of the 'haves' class and the one who spoiled or relegated the revolution prospects in to oblivion.

There is a need to revisit and analyse Gandhiji's intervention in the Champan Agrarian situation in the Gandhian thought framework. The present work is intended to make a modest attempt in this direction. In section one that follows a brief review of accounts given by major biographers is presented. In section two, a review of critical analysis attempted by social scientists is endeavoured. The third and final section analysis of the *Satyagraha* is attempted in Gandhian thought framework.

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I

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 first biography to take note of *Champaran Satyagraha* is that of C.F. Andrews in early 1930s². Titled as *Satyagraha in India*, Andrews shows that Gandhiji had full faith in the liberal and value based English Empire and sincerely believed. Andrews notes that Gandhiji's experience in South Africa, both with the British and the Dutch, made him quite positive in his own mind that they would respect his utter frankness of opposition, and also his good-humour, in the drastic struggle that he was carrying on against what he held to be the rottenness of their administration.³ In India Gandhiji's Pan India non-cooperation programmes were preceded by local *Satyagrahas* with emphasis on correcting serious wrongs in the British administration. In this context Andrews lists *Champaran Satyagraha* in brief as follows.

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.⁴

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 analysed the situation in Champaran or described any previous attempts made there to correct the situation.

Louis Fischer's biography (1950)⁵ 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 official inquiry assembled a crushing mountain of evidence against the big planters, and they agreed, in principle, to make refunds to the peasants. 'But how much must we pay?' they asked Gandhi.

They thought full repayment that they had illegally and deceitfully extorted from the share-croppers. Gandhiji asked only 50 per cent. 'There he seemed adamant', writes Reverend J. Z. Hodge, a British missionary, observing the entire episode at close range. 'Thinking probably that he would not give way, the representative of

² Gandhiji's Autobiography was published in 1927. *Dinabandhu* C.F. Andrews thus became first person to attempt Gandhiji's biography. It has not been possible to cover all biographers, but the ones covered are deemed important in *Gandhiana*.

³ Andrews Charles F. 2009. *Mahatma Gandhi: His life and Ideas*, Jaico Publishing House, Mumbai. Delhi, Sixth Impression. p 159. First published in 1929 by Allen and Unwin, London.

⁴ The first was Viramgam *Satyagraha* offered by Motilal tailor. Gandhiji had advised him to put up *Satyagraha* with non-violence and go to jail if situation so arose. The second was anti-indenture struggle. *Ibid* pp 159-61.

⁵ Fischer Louis. *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. Harper and Brothers, New York. It is first among all the biographies published after Gandhiji's death. Various editions and impressions have followed.

the planters offered to refund to the extent of 25 per cent, and to his amazement Mr. Gandhi took him at his word, thus breaking the deadlock.⁶

Gandhiji told Fischer that the Champaran event was a turning point of his life. What he had done was an ordinary thing. He had just declared that the British could not order him in his country. In Fischer's assessment in *Champaran Satyagraha Self-reliance, Indian Independence and help share-croppers* were all bound together.

D.G. Tendulkar wrote Gandhiji's biography in eight volumes in 1951. However, he was invited to write on Champaran Satyagraha as well. It was first published in 1957. It is an analytical account and hence it will be considered in next section.

The biography by B. R. Nanda in 1958 received worthy appreciation. Nanda has recognised 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 cultivators⁷. 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,

The Government of India felt perturbed at Gandhi's presence in Champaran and the possibilities of a Satyagraha struggle developing in the indigo farmers in Bihar. At the suggestion of Craddock, the Home Member, the Viceroy write to Edward Gait, the Government of Bihar suggesting the appointment of a Commission of Inquiry on which a seat could be offered to Gandhi as well. Edward at first resisted the suggestion. 'It would be a device,' he wrote to Lord Chelmsford, 'for heading off Mr. Gandhi; and it is by no means certain that it would be effective.' The Champaran Agrarian Committee was thus appointed at the instance of Government of India and not because, as Gandhi suggested in his autobiography the Governor was 'good.'⁸

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

⁶ *Ibid* p 114

⁷ Nanda B.R. 1958. *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi. Tenth Impression 2006. pp 158-62 There is a factual error about December 1916 Congress Session's location. Nanda has noted it as Calcutta whereas it was held in Lucknow.

⁸ *Ibid* p 160

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 strategical triumph.⁹

Robert Payne wrote *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi* in 1969. A very brief account only notes that Rajkumar Shukla was insistent upon taking Gandhiji to Champaran.

Gandhi's Truth published in 1970 by Eric Ericson analyses Gandhiji's psychology in depth. Where Champaran Satyagraha gets some space. He does not attribute the Champaran Satyagraha to an accidental meeting with Rajkumar Shukla and his persuasion. Ericson notes,

His biographers and even the editor of the *Collected Works*, claim that Gandhi was drawn to the scene of his first skirmish "more or less accidentally." He himself creates a modern parable by claiming a peasant, "ubiquitous Rajkumar," to have been responsible for the whole thing... "One day will be enough," Rajkumar said, and he was right, for Gandhi immediately became fascinated with the problem, and the very hindrances which beset his first attempt to orient himself must have aroused his stubbornness¹⁰...

Ericson has referred to Gandhiji's experience on the first day stay of few hours in Lawyer's house in Patna. Gandhiji was treated as some poor farmer client and was not allowed to use the inside latrine for the fear of polluting it. Ericson believes Gandhiji was looking for an opportunity to do something big in the country later and this was the one.

Thus, in a minor cause on the outskirts of an empire, a number of future national workers were recruited; and one of the local lawyers who became a "clerk and translator," would thirty years later become India's first President: Rajendra Prasad.¹¹

Ericson has noted that the ignorance of the local administration and the European indigo planters led them to stop and charge Gandhiji for disturbing the local peace in the area had set the ideal scene and he came into his original form of a satyagrahi, the one that he had tried and mastered in South Africa. Gandhiji made Champaran his home. Ericson further notes that being a satyagrahi for Gandhiji meant to make a painstakingly detailed and fair study of the facts, to present them in an open and generous way in public meetings, and to formulate minimum demands backed up by a threat to take recourse to Satyagraha by support of the poorest among the local population and wide publicity throughout the country. In Ericson's assessment the victory came easily to Gandhiji in this case and even before that Gandhiji had proceeded to 'the further and final phase of any of his campaigns: re-education.'

With the help of material gathered by Pyarelal,¹² Sushila Nayar has written about Champaran Satyagraha in volume five.¹³ Hers is perhaps the largest account attempted so far. It begins with history of indigo production in India by the British planters. The account describes earlier resistance, rebel and protests before Gandhiji. The conflict between the indigo farmers and the British planters had started since the second half of nineteenth century. The issue was not compulsion for cultivation of indigo but passing on the factory

⁹ *Ibid* p 161.

¹⁰ Ericson Eric, 1970. *Gandhi's Truth*. W.W. Norton and Company, New York. pp 292

¹¹ *Ibid*

¹² Gandhiji's secretary from the 1920s until latter's assassination, decided to write a multi volume biography. He began with the 'last phase' beginning in 1944. The Volume was published in 1962. He had collected and collated material for other volumes but could not finish writing. His sister, a medical doctor who attended Gandhiji, Dr. Sushila Nayar finished the unfinished task.

¹³ Nayar Sushila, 1994. *Mahatama Gandhi Volume V, India Awakened*. Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad. pp 137-74

losses to farmers. Synthetic indigo invented in Germany towards the end of nineteenth century flooded the markets crashing prices of the organic indigo. The meeting between Lt. Governor Edward Baker and planters during 1909-10 resulted in agreement by which *teen kathia* was reduced to two and the indigo procurement prices were increased by 12 per cent. Planters did not implement the agreement and oppression of farmers continued. Repeated petitions were submitted by farmers during 1911-13. Unwillingness of the local administration for mandatory enforcement of the agreement made farmers' suffer immensely.

In Pyarelal's account¹⁴ one gets to know about Gandhiji's visit to Rajkumar Shukla's house on April 23, 1917, supported by Shukla's statement before the Agrarian Inquiry Committee. Pyarelal has not given any analysis or interpretation on Champaran Satyagraha. Only in the last section of his account he writes,

But putting an end to the system of exploitation that was the chief and immediate cause of the misery of the Champaran peasantry did not exhaust the scope of Gandhiji's activities in the district. Gandhiji saw, as soon as he set foot in Champaran, that if the condition of the peasantry was to be improved a great deal of work at the village level would need to be accomplished. He wrote: "As I gained more experience of Bihar I became convinced that a work of permanent nature was impossible without proper village education. The raiyats' ignorance was pathetic."¹⁵

Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, written by Stanley Wolpert in 2001 give a brief account of Champaran issue. He has interpreted Champaran as Gandhiji's first Satyagraha campaign on Indian soil.¹⁶ Wolpert's reading of the Champaran Satyagraha comes out as distinct from many others. He says,

What Gandhi soon discovered, of course, was that this exploitation of Indian peasants by planters and large landowners was hardly limited to one district of Bihar. He was not ready, however, to lead a nationwide Satyagraha against rural inequities and violations of law. Adhering to the fixed rule of Satyagraha he had established in South Africa, he never expanded his original goal, focussing his yogic powers instead on the single target he had chosen. "No stone is being left unturned," Gandhi reported, even as he acknowledged his limited goal in doing so... But he turned over those heavy "stones" in Bihar, multiple social problems swiftly emerged – from starving children forced to work all day instead of receiving minimal education, to women suffering every indignity of the poor and helpless, to misshapen men, bent low and disfigured by goitre growths, too timid to complain of the virtual slavery in which they were kept.¹⁷

Among the recent biographies, an important biography has by Rajmohan Gandhi published in 2006.¹⁸ Although not providing much space to Champaran, he has made some interesting observations. He observes that Gandhiji indicated his willingness to visit Champaran and took interest in the case instinctively. He has treated Gandhiji's writing letters to others outside Bihar as a strategy. Gandhi had taken care, through letter, to keep a range of his friends in the world outside Bihar keep posted about the happening in Champaran – Andrews, Srinivasa Sastri, Malavia, Polak, Kallenbach, Maganlal in Ahmedabad, and others. Some of

¹⁴ Pyarelal had advantage of having access to letters and papers of those times being personal secretary to Gandhi. He has given a fairly detailed account of the Gandhiji's entry and stay in Champaran.

¹⁵ *Ibid* p 171.

¹⁶ Wolpert Stanley, 2001. *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi*. Oxford University Press, New York. p 89.

¹⁷ *Ibid* p 89.

¹⁸ Gandhi Rajmohan, 2006. *Mohandas: A True Story of a Man his People and an Empire*. Penguin/Viking New Delhi.

these friends were in touch with the press, and at times Gandhi himself was.¹⁹ The news of Gandhiji pleading guilty in the courtroom in Motihari created ripples. Rajmohan Gandhi has noted thus,

The courtroom statement was big news across India. Reading it in Ahmedabad, Rao Saheb Harilalbhai 'shot up from his chair' at the Gujarat Club and said to those around him, 'Here is a man, a hero, a brave man! We must have him as [the Gujarat Sabha's] president.' Vallabhbhai Patel and others immediately concurred. There were similar reactions elsewhere. In Bihar, Kripalani asked Gandhi if he could join the ashram, and Rajendra Prasad, Brajkishore Prasad and several others were captured for life.²⁰

Rajmohan advances three reasons for Gandhiji's success in Champaran. First is Gandhiji's familiarity with, and understanding of, the poor masses and that of the white ruling class. There was sympathy for him New Delhi. Second, Gandhiji could gain support from the Champaran peasants and from its nationwide publicity. Third, organic indigo was losing commercial value worldwide and hence the ruling government had less of an incentive to stand up to Gandhiji.

Rajmohan has mentioned another significant matter in his brief Champaran Satyagraha account. One of the powerful planters who was also a regular contributor to press had warned the administration in an article that If Gandhiji continued to speak of his attachment to cow as a Hindu, there would be communal disturbances. But Gandhiji made a remarkable utterance which to this day can guide the misguided cow vigilantes.²¹

Bidyut Chakrabarty's in 2007 is a historical biography that attempts to articulate the historiography of India's freedom struggle where Gandhiji has been assumed to be a central figure. Referring to Champaran Satyagraha, Chakrabarty clearly recognises that Gandhiji had entered into the Champaran agrarian situation that had prevailed for a long time and peasantry had risen against the indigo planters, factory owners and also against the state. According to Chakrabarty the pre-Gandhian efforts were led by middle and rich peasants and had failed to involved actual cultivators.²²

Gandhiji's intervention in Champaran was clearly a political movement and it was unique. Interestingly, Gandhiji did not name it as political and so do many other writers on subject. Chakrabarty has restrained from giving any account of events in Champaran, but he has highlighted the Gandhi factor in effectively diffusing the agrarian crisis in Champaran. Chakrabarty has quoted from the report that the British Sub-Divisional sent to the District Magistrate and says, "To the masses, Gandhi represented a resurrection of hope".²³ Non-violence protest was the unique feature of the intervention. Chakrabarty crediting Gandhiji with effective intervention says,

Gandhi emerged as the supreme leader and non-violence gained salience. This was not a subaltern protest, but one in which the subalterns were inducted into the process of political mobilisation.²⁴

¹⁹ *Ibid* p 204

²⁰ *Ibid*

²¹ Those interested may read the paragraph in Rajmohan Gandhi *Ibid* p 205.

²² Chakrabarty Bidyut, 2007. *Mahatma A Historical Biography*. Roli Books, New Delhi. pp 57-59

²³ *Ibid* p 58

²⁴ *Ibid* p 59

Jay Adams in his biography of Gandhiji titled *Gandhi: Naked Ambition* (2010) takes the Ericson's argument further that Gandhiji wanted to launch an all India movement against the British rule and was looking for an appropriate opportunity. According to Adams at the internment of Annie Besant in early 1917 Gandhiji wanted to mount an all India Satyagraha over the issue, but the Congress leadership did not agree. He did not woo the Congress leadership but he got his opportunity. In Adams assessment Gandhiji tried to mobilise farmers and industrial workers during the first year of his return from South Africa.²⁵ Adams has briefly reconstructed the events with some inaccuracies but the content matches with most other biographers and the records of the available history. His assessment is interesting. In his opinion indigo planters controlled the local government. But the British officers at the national level were more sophisticated and knew that Bihar province was notorious and fraudulent in behaviour and would not stand international security that Gandhi would attract. Adams writes,

Gandhi's Satyagraha was backed by the government of India – they would not allow the administration in Bihar to persecute his supporters for the sake of planters' corrupt gains. Consequently, the Lieutenant Governor Edward Gait asked to see Gandhi and told him he was willing to convene a government inquiry. Gandhi sat on the resulting committee... Eventually the Champaran Agrarian Act of 1917 abolished the forced cultivation of Indigo and reduced the rent increases imposed on the farmer. It did not end the unrest in the region between the farmers and their landlords, but Gandhi's organisational skills were widely praised.²⁶

II

Social scientists have reviewed Champaran Satyagraha more critically than the biographers. Most social scientists have reviewed and analysed it in the context of agrarian movements during British India. Some have reviewed in the context of class, caste and nationalism as well. Ravinder Kumar has commented on the Champaran movement in the context of Gandhiji's quest for popular consensus across class, community and nation at a time when a strong argument that India could not be called a nation held. His reading is that Gandhiji's involvement in the initial movements after returning from South Africa did not really tested his success or failure in gaining popular consensus. In case of Champaran Gandhiji was able to exploit a technique he had applied in South Africa without developing it further. According to him,

these agitations impressed upon Gandhi the fact that there existed substantial bodies of discontent in the villages and in the cities which a skilful politician could exploit to gain his objectives... At Champaran, and at Ahmedabad²⁷, Gandhi faced the problem of redressing the grievances of an easily identifiable social group; in the first instance, the peasants who were made to cultivate the indigo on unfair terms by the planters... The peasants of Champaran wanted a revision of the terms on which they were required to cultivate the indigo... By organizing agitations on the principles of Satyagraha, Gandhi was able to satisfy the aspirations of both the peasants of Champaran and the workers of Ahmedabad.²⁸

²⁵ Adams Jad, 2010. *Gandhi: Naked Ambition*. Quercus, pp 145-8. London. Literally, it was not first year but third year. He returned to India from South Africa on January 9, 1915 and visited Champaran for the first time in April 1917. The industrial worker issues in the textile industry in Ahmedabad cropped up in late 1917.

²⁶ *Ibid* p 148.

²⁷ Here the reference is to the Ahmedabad Mill-Workers' strike that Gandhiji led in 1918.

²⁸ Ravinder Kumar, 1969. "Class, Community or Nation? Gandhi's Quest for a Popular Consensus in India," in *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 4, Gandhi Centenary Number (1969), pp. 357-376

In the context of class and community; Champaran Satyagraha and Gandhiji's role has been criticised. 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 Baniyas were mostly outsiders who purchased with avidity the propriety rights of the Zamindars and peasants when they came under the operations 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.²⁹

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 mobilisation 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 analysts. But in an article that appeared in 1976 there is specific focus on Rajkumar Shukla. In fact it is on him³⁰. The authors' - 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 the 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."³¹

In this context it needs to be mentioned that in some critical writings on Champaran Rajkumar Shukla is referred to as a big farmer. It is argued that Gandhiji fought for big farmers and middle peasantry and moneylenders who wanted to regain their dominance by removing the English indigo planters. Mittal and Dutt have shown that Shukla was indeed son of a big farmer and lived in two houses; one in Satwaria (where his father had lived) and second in Murali Barharwa. At one time he owned 60 buffaloes and 300 cows. But his

²⁹ Stokes Eric, 1978. *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India*. Vikas Publishing House Private Limited, New Delhi. pp 159-60

³⁰ S. K. Mittal and Krishan Dutt, 1976. "Raj Kumar Sukul and the Peasant Upsurge in Champaran", in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 4, No. 9 (Apr., 1976), pp. 25-36

³¹ *Ibid*

commitment to the cause was total. He was passionate about removing the indigo stain from the peasants of Champaran and he gave up whatever he had. In a statement that he made before the Champaran Agrarian Inquiry Committee, he had said that he was left with 3 buffaloes, 8 cows and 6 bullocks. His house at Murli Barharwa was ransacked and looted. His passion may be the reason for his gross unhappiness over Gandhiji's compromise. Mittal and Dutt note,

Raj Kumar Sukul perhaps did not like the compromising attitude of Gandhiji towards landlords and planters. He presumably insisted on a more uncompromising attitude towards them. The Survey and Settlement Report very clearly mentioned, "After Mr Gandhi had left the district, the more turbulent element among the raiyats frankly repudiated him and his agreement on their behalf" and raised objections to the recording of rents by the Settlement Department.³²

Gandhiji's intervention in the Champaran agrarian situation thus had issues that call for more analysis and discussion.

Dhanagare has attempted a scholarly and comprehensive analysis calling it Gandhian Politics and agrarian movements.³³ He has included Champaran Satyagraha as a case for his analysis that deals with assessment of specific and localised movements which concerned agrarian questions and peasants' grievances. He has tried to analyse the nature of such movements, their class character, and Gandhian ethos and why they occurred during those times. In the process he has also tried to bring out Gandhi's own understanding and position over the issues.

In Dhanagare's view Gandhiji was criticised severely during his life time also by two thought forces. In his words,

Throughout his ascendancy in the Indian freedom struggle Gandhi was as much as an object of devastating criticism as of deification. His social and political ideas and his choice of means to attain them were severely criticised from time to time. Among his critics two sections of the then contemporary Indian opinion were most prominent. One of these represented various shades of militant nationalists and the other the newly emerging left wing of young Marxists. The former expressed in no uncertain terms their scepticism over Gandhi's ideas regarding Hindu-Muslim unity... This line of criticism need not be gone further into as it is not quite relevant for our present purpose. However, the Marxist critique of the Indian national movement in general and Gandhi's role in particular needs to be looked into in some detail as it offers a basis for raising sociologically more meaningful questions about the various peasant and agrarian movements under Gandhi's or Gandhian leadership.³⁴

The young Marxists had obviously viewed the uprising of masses under the Gandhiji's leadership under Marxian perspective of revolution for overthrowing the capitalistic capture of the socioeconomic power based on economic exploitation of the masses. They could see the potential for such a revolution in the awakening of the Indian society at large against the Imperial role and the Imperial capitalists hold, but they could also see that Gandhiji was thwarting the move towards revolution by advocating non-violence in all struggles. A more serious accusation by M.N. Roy said that Gandhiji was 'the acutest and the most desperate manifestation of the forces of reaction'.³⁵

³² *Ibid*

³³ Dhanagare had delivered three Extension Lectures at the Institute of Social Sciences, Agra University, Agra, during 28 February 2 March 1974. The lectures were published as Dhanagare D.N. 1975. *Agrarian Movements and Gandhian Politics*. Institute of Social Sciences, Agra University, Agra.

³⁴ *Ibid* p 18.

³⁵ *Ibid* p 19

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 of 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.³⁶

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 kathia* 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 *raiyyat* 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.³⁷ The situation in Champaran was sufficiently inflammable to justify such a conjecture.

³⁶ *Ibid* p 25

³⁷ It may be recalled that in 1867 first such outburst of anger had happened spontaneously. It was followed by periodic spontaneous violent outbursts the last of which had happened a few years before Gandhiji arrived on the scene. Unfortunately, all of such violent agitations were crushed by the local administration and cost of police actions was recovered from the raiyyats as additional cess on revenue.

The anti-revolutionary stance of Gandhiji's approach and technique in Champaran served two purposes. One, certain section of Bihar political opinion and certain class of Champaran peasantry veered round his new technique of agitation and they could see their advantage. Secondly, it helped Gandhiji gain respectability in the eyes of both the Government and the political stalwarts in the country.

At the highest level, the British Government was thinking in terms of benefits it could possibly derive from Gandhiji's manner of handling political struggle and problem situation from the beginning. For them it was *déjà vu* – context Gandhiji's Satyagrah in South Africa.³⁸

The next point Dhanagre makes in his analysis is that Gandhiji did not see European planters as his or the *raiyat's* adversary. On the contrary, he sought their cooperation and disassociated with all those who harboured any ill-will or even anti-European feeling toward them. Dhanagre argues that despite having taken testimonies from over 4000 *raiyats* about the *sharabheshi*, *tawan*, and other forms of exploitation practices of planters, he resorted to actions 'that made *raiyats* buy their freedom ironically enough by paying higher rents. At times it appeared that he took greater care of the planters' interest. Dhanagre refers to a telegram in which Gandhiji had advised the higher officials not to grant any open inquiry into indigo system as that would have exposed the ugliest practices by the planters.

Acceptance of inquiry by Gandhiji and his being the sole representative of the *raiyats* is also criticised by Dhanagre. It was against the wishes of many among *raiyats* and it was simply arbitration whose decisions were to be final and binding for both the parties. Gandhiji's efforts finally ended up legitimising the enhancement of rents to get rid of indigo cultivation. It ended up preserving a feudal arrangement and planters' domination under which the agitating *raiyats* were bound to pay higher rents for several years to come.

The oft repeated critic of the Champaran Satyagraha relates to the local leadership by the elite and rich people. Dhanagre held a similar view.

Local leaders who assisted Gandhi in Champaran were drawn mostly from urban, educated upper and middle classes. Misra has listed some 32 local leaders who took prominent...22 of them were lawyers...2 journalists, 1 professor, 2 professional workers (One Hindu and the other Muslim), 1 from the princely family of Darbhanga, 1 ex-member of civil and judicial service, and only 3 peasant cultivators.³⁹

Dhanagre is somewhat harsh when he comments on the lawyers. He says that they under the facade of service to the distressed peasants had charged exorbitant fee and yet could not get the desired reliefs. And after realising such failure, they tried for a political solution. He takes the argument further that as Gandhiji had sought the entry to *raiyats'* world via the elite local leadership; he was exposed mostly to middle and rich farmers who were the clients of the lawyers gathered to assist him.

Yet another apparently potent criticism of Dhanagre relates to Gandhiji's contact and his approach towards the poor peasants and agricultural labourers with or without any operational holding. Dhanagre writes that by 1907 there were 17 indigo factories of which 7 had some 28 sub factories spread all over the places in Champaran. On an average every day

³⁸ It has been argued by some that even in South Africa, Gandhiji did not address the problem of indentured labour as he never wanted to displease the British whose suzerainty he has accepted fully.

³⁹ *Ibid* p 27

33,000 workers were employed during winter when they really were out of work. Low wage rates were offered deliberately looking at the near destitution levels of survival among them.⁴⁰ It is argued that Gandhiji despite being fully aware of their plight ignored their issue and did not discuss it in the Inquiry Committee. It is further argued that because the large rural mass was poor, illiterate and ignorant, it could not have launched any agitation. It is implied that Gandhiji could have, but he did not because he only had a superficial contact with them. They all came for his *Darshan* and 'by appearing before the masses like an exhibit at particular hours' it was clear that his attitude was condescending.

Dhanagre argues that the events in Champaran so configured the Gandhian agrarian movements that its properties got defined in the following way.

- (i) Minor agrarian issues to be preferred to more fundamental questions relating to structure of agrarian relations;
- (ii) A compromise with those in authority and over as a point of termination of a movement;
- (iii) Support from better-off sections –the middle peasant- whose interest the issues (under i) represent;
- (iv) A semblance of relief or constructive work for the poor peasantry so as to prevent it from any potentially revolutionary activity.

Champaran *Satyagraha* has been critically reviewed by a few other scholars after Dhanagre's comprehensive review appeared. On the issue of reconciliation and considering no one as adversary Gandhiji for some has gone overboard to support the 'haves' or the exploiting class. Abha Pandya has advanced such an argument while discussing the Gandhiji's role toward agrarian class in the framework of trusteeship. She says,

Gandhi in his anxiety to build harmonious relations between conflicting elements in Indian society, applied the concept of trusteeship only to their conflicts and not to those related to the alien government. During the struggle of the Champaran peasants (1916) against British indigo planters as also the Bardoli struggle (1928) against the Bombay government, the concept of trusteeship was not applied. In Champaran the European planters asked why they alone among the landlords of Bihar became the target for a long-term, large scale and eventually successful popular agitation.⁴¹

The argument of no fight for the agricultural labourers has found favour with Chaube while making a case for Gandhi as a resolute opponent of the British who began by being a moderate believer in equal partnership in the empire. In South Africa too, the demand for equal partnership had a specific meaning in the context. He was representing the community of free Indians,

that is, those labourers whose indenture had expired and traders who had come of their own entered into economic competition with British colonists... It may be noted that Gandhi did not fight for the rights of the indentured labourers in Africa. He assiduously desisted from venturing into any critical economic struggle.⁴²

⁴⁰ Most of the Statistics used by Dhanagre and other scholars are mainly based on a seminal work of documentation and analysis done by B.B. Misra. The document is Misra B.B. 1963. *Select Documents on Mahatma Gandhi's Movement in Champaran 1917-18*. Government of Bihar. Reprinted in 2017 on the occasion of the Centenary year. It is also a very comprehensive and critical review from where most scholars have drawn.

⁴¹ Abha Pandya, 1978, "Gandhi and Agrarian Classes", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 13, No. 26 (July, 1978), pp. 1077-1079

⁴² S.K. Chaube, 1985. "Gandhi and the Indian Freedom Movement", in *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 46, No. 4, Special Issue on The Indian National Congress: A Century in Perspective (October-December 1985), pp. 430-437

Reinforcing the point about leadership by the middle class and the rich peasantry Mundargi has argued that it was a reaction against the financial implications of the planters' Raj. Further he says,

It was directed mainly against European planters and not against the rich landed interests who were equally, or sometimes more ruthless in their exploitation of the peasantry... the main actors who took part in it...had substantial moneylending business; almost all of them came from upper Hindu castes.⁴³

Mundargi argues that the transformation of the country-side with indigo cultivation by the European planters had hurt the upper caste moneylenders and the Marwaris' economic interests. Raiyats 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 outturn came from Bihar. However, there was absence of any significant and large scale organised 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 blow 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.⁴⁴

Examining the peasant's perception of Gandhi and his programme in Oudh years after the Champaran *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 mobilisation 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.⁴⁵

⁴³ Tirumal Mundargi, 1990. "Congress and Zamindars Collaboration and Consultation in Bihar, 1915-36", in *Economic and Political Weekly* June 2, 1990

⁴⁴ Raaj Sah, 1980. "Features of British Indigo in India", in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 9, No. 2/3 (Sep. - Oct., 1980), pp. 67-79

⁴⁵ Kapil Kumar, 1983. "Peasants' Perception of Gandhi and His Programme: Oudh, 1920-22", in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Feb. 1983), pp. 16-30

Kumar notes that Gandhiji had as a matter of act restrained the revolutionary potentiality of the peasants at Champaran which might have erupted into militant struggles. Yet in the end he had carried the image in Champaran of a liberator of the peasants or a messiah who could ameliorate the peasants' lot. And it was this image that prompted people in Uttar Pradesh to invite him to participate and lead in peasants' struggles. How he gained such images among the poor peasants and the hapless labourers is also examined by Shahid Amin for Gorakhpur in a very deep and comprehensive research. Indeed there were rumours, deification, and manipulation by local leaders in spreading and strengthening such untruthful images,⁴⁶ but it remains a fact that poor peasantry and labourers were drawn in huge numbers towards Gandhiji.

Irfan Habib has also refuted the position of many scholars that Gandhiji in Champaran Satyagraha was merely leading rich peasants.⁴⁷ He says that first of all Gandhiji did not lead them because they were rich. In this context Habib refers to historical evidence revealed in the letter that was written by the Sub Divisional Officer W.H. Lewis to the Collector. Chakrabarti has quoted from the text of Lewis's letter which bears out the point made by Habib. Lewis wrote,

We may look on Mr Gandhi as an idealist, a fanatic, or a revolutionary according to our particular opinions. But to the raiyats he their liberator, and they credit him with extraordinary powers. He moves about in the villages, asking them to lay their grievance before him, and he is daily transfiguring the imagination of masses of ignorant men with visions of an early millennium.⁴⁸

According to Habib the goals of *Satyagraha* had to be narrow and achievable - even partial, otherwise the *Satyagraha* would have had demoralising 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 the zamindars...Compromises will always be subject to criticism, but in the long term even when Gandhi was talking about zamindars as trustees, as custodians of peasants who should be paid rent so that they open schools and hospitals, he was still raising a fresh 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.⁴⁹

With Habib's comprehensive refutation Dhangre's criticism stands answered. Others are also more or less answered. However, there is a need to show that Gandhiji did not go to

⁴⁶ Amin Shahid, "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP 1920-22". <http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/sj6/AminGandhiasMahatma.pdf>

⁴⁷ Habib Irfan, 1995. "Gandhi and the National Movement", in *Social Scientist*, Vol. 23, No. 4/6 (Apr.-Jun., 1995), pp. 3-15

⁴⁸ Chakrabarti Bidyut *op.cit.* p 58.

⁴⁹ *Ibid* p 10

Champanan to lead a revolution by organising the peasants. It is true that his getting to know and work in Champanan 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. Champanan *Satyagraha* should be reviewed in the context of Gandhi's thought framework as well. This is attempted in the next section.

III

Gandhiji was not a revolutionary; at least not in 1917 when the major political movement in India was around Home Rule. He had developed thoughts on political economy but he had not expressed them in which Marx had developed his framework. Gandhiji was quintessentially a libertarian but digressed from the concept of liberty of Mill and Spenser.⁵⁰ For Gandhiji rights emerged from performing one's duty. It means becoming responsible for self and society. It is assumed in Gandhi's framework that body has soul. The quest is for Truth and in the process one finds own truths. As and when there are conflicts between the truths, *Satyagraha* is the way of conveying one's own truth to others and also importantly understand the truth of others. The force applied in helping the other to see own truth is soul force or love force which is thoroughly non-violent in nature. There is preparedness to pay a price which is self-sacrifice beginning from suffering to give up life. This approach to life and society has potential of revolution but it is achieved through incremental reforms. His realisation was born out of experiments. Hence, it always remained evolving. His first major experience was fighting for citizen's rights to freedom to live and do business as the British and European citizens did in the Colony. Assessment of facts and ascertaining of grievances in socio-political situations before deciding action is critical aspect of any movement in Gandhian framework. Since the action is human and sources are not always primary there is always scope for errors including blunders. Concurrent and post facto evaluation are also integral part of the Gandhian methodology of protest. Outcome is not victory of defeat but improvement in the quality of overall situation in personal life and public. It is proposed to review the Champanan *Satyagrha* in the above framework.

Right from day one when he landed in Patna with 'ubiquitous'⁵¹ Rajkumar Shukla and met his London acquaintance and co-student at law institution, he understood that the problem was deep rooted and complex. He had also understood that he would have to know all the three sides involved i.e., farmers, planters, and local administration. The first step in any work that he undertook in public interest, he would inform the concerned people and seek cooperation. On 11 April Gandhiji met Mr. J.M. Wilson, Secretary of Bihar Planters Association and explained to him the purpose of his visit and sought help and assistance of Association. Mr. Wilson said that he would try to help in personal capacity, but would not make any commitment on behalf of association.⁵² Gandhiji wrote a letter to the

⁵⁰ Those interested in details may refer Parel Anthony J. (Editor) 1997. *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and other writings*. Foundation Books, New Delhi for Cambridge University Press, and Dasgupta Ajit K. 1996. *Gandhi's Economic Thought*. Routledge, London

⁵¹ The word is used by Gandhiji in his *Autobiography* to convey Shukla's perseverance in literally following Gandhiji and make him visit Champanan.

⁵² For an authentic account of events that unfolded in Champanan Rajendra Prasad's book *Satyagraha in Champanan* written first in Hindi in 1919 and published in 1922 may be referred. The English version which was also penned by Rajendra Prasad was first published in 1928 by Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. The details drawn in this paper are drawn from a second revised English edition printed by same publisher in 1949. Two more accounts must be mentioned for detailed account of events. One is by D.G. Tendulkar and

Commissioner, Tirhut Division Mr. L.F. Morshead under whose jurisdiction, Champaran fell and informing about his intent and seeking possible assistance.⁵³ Not getting any response Gandhiji wrote another letter next day 13 April 1917 and attached with it a letter from the local friends inviting him to study the plight of indigo farmers.

The meeting with Mr. Morshead was not very encouraging. Collector of Champaran was also present. Gandhiji was told that the matter was being looked into and intervention of a stranger would be embarrassing and his presence may disturb peace in the area. Gandhiji insisted that he had come on invitation and his mission was that of making peace with honour. Sensing that the indigo problem was far more serious and sensitive and that he will be faced with difficulties and hardships he informed Maganlal Gandhi.⁵⁴ He wrote,

The situation here is more serious than I had imagined. It seems to be worse than in Fiji and Natal. However, we shall know better as we proceed with the inquiry. I have seen the authorities. They may be thinking of apprehending me. I have not a minute to spare here. I am leaving for Champaran right now, and am writing this just as I am leaving. I cannot say when I shall be able to return even if I am not arrested. If I go to jail, this will be my last letter for the present. Whatever happens you will know by wire. Nobody need think of coming here and going to jail.⁵⁵

The letter is clear. Gandhiji at once had understood the gravity of the problem. He also became certain that the inquiry will have to be thorough. He also sensed that he may be apprehended if he persists for conducting the inquiry. He was clearing seeing the scope to work in Champaran on the lines of South Africa. Civil disobedience was on cards. He did not heed to the advice of Morshead. The reference to Fiji and Natal was made because Maganlal Gandhi would immediately understand the gravity and import of the Gandhiji's stay in Champaran.

The Satyagraha in Champaran had already begun. Gandhiji had taken decision. The truth on the ground had to be ascertained and if he was stopped he should resist and go to jail if necessary and that his associates should continue the search for truth. This is what he shared with his new colleagues in Muzaffarpur and all proceeded to Motihari, the headquarters of Champaran district. He was already listening to his conscience. After reaching Motihari on April 15, he set out for an inquiry in Jasauli patti where a peasant's house was raided by the indigo factory *amlas* (factory employees). The inquiry in right earnest had begun. Rajendra Prasad in his account has noted that the news of Mahatmaji's arrival had already reached Champaran and a large number of tenants came all the way to Muzaffarpur. They narrated the ground condition and Gandhiji became more resolute to go to Champaran. Rajkumar Shukla after accompanying Gandhiji up to Muzaffarpur had made himself scarce and had perhaps become busy in spreading the news of Gandhiji's arrival. As the events unfolded it is clear that Rajkumar Shukla was not always present in the activities in Motihari. He on his own must have taken up vigorously work of meeting as many as he could and spreading the news

Pyarelal. Tendulkar wrote *Gandhi in Champaran* at the invitation of the Publication Division, Government of India in 1957 and Pyarelal has written a chapter in the biography. It is argued by the left critics that Gandhiji's associates have written about the Champaran Satyagraha more out of *Bhakti* (faith) toward Gandhi and hence they are not all objective. But a careful reading of the works suggests that the authors have understood well that quest for Truth implies being correct on facts and verified facts about the ground reality.

⁵³ The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG), Volume 13 page 362. Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad.

⁵⁴ After meeting with the Commissioner Gandhiji spoke to the group of people who were with him in Muzaffarpur and expressed his concern that the administration would not hesitate arresting him if he pursued his inquiry. He told them that he was firm and even if he was arrested the work should continue.

⁵⁵ CWMG *op. cit.* p 363 letter to Maganlal Gandhi dated April 15, 1917. The letters contained in the CWMG also help in constructing the sequence of events and the story with facts.

that Gandhiji had arrived. It was mouth to mouth canvassing initiated by Shukla that the turn out in Motihari on April 18, when Gandhiji appeared in Magistrate's court thousands of *raiya*s had thronged. In a Satyagraha mobilising people whose cause is taken up is extremely important. Gandhiji not only knew this from his South Africa days, he also made conscious effort in the direction. The leader of South Africa Satyagraha lost no time in understanding the critical events were going to unfold soon and he must ready himself by informing the world that he was seeking redress for something that was grievously wrong. In Satyagraha it must be clear to self and to all others that the insistence is for recognising the truth of the protestor while being open to understand the perceived truth of the other. Gandhiji's move has to be assessed in this framework and not perceive his action only as a drama! His appearance in Motihari court and the proceedings produced dramatic effect indeed, but Gandhiji as a leader of potential Satyagraha was keenly aware of it and had prepared to that effect. On April 14 he had visited a village near Muzaffarpur and had seen the poverty and the problem. In the evening he spoke to the new associates about his experiences in South Africa and added:

I wish that the work is done in the same way here. I know that these people (planters and Government officials) would act harshly towards me and a warrant for my arrest may come any moment. I am, therefore, anxious to reach Champaran as quickly as possible, so that whatever action they may have to take against me, may be taken in the midst of *raiya*s of Champaran.⁵⁶

The seasoned leader of Satyagraha in South Africa was fully prepared and he could anticipate moves by the administration. He obviously knew that he carried some good will at the central government level because some of the officers in highest offices knew him and his work in South Africa. After being detained on way to Jasuali Patti and escorted back to Motihari, Gandhi's preparation for next course of actions were clear from the letters he wrote. On April 16, 1917 He wrote to Maganlal Gandhi:⁵⁷

Please send my gold medal by registered parcel to the Private Secretary to H. E. the Viceroy, Simla. An order to leave the District has been served upon me and I have refused to obey. It is likely that a warrant of arrest or something like it will be served upon me any moment. Lakshmi has come to apply the auspicious *tilak* sooner than expected and I have not stopped even to wash my hands. None of us could have imagined that I should be sent to jail in Bihar, a province hallowed by the footsteps of Ramachandra, Bharata, Janaka and Sitaji. Even Shri Rama did not know [what would happen the following morning.]

p.s. If any inquiries are made there about my property, tell them I do not own any.

The letter is in Gujarati and the nuances of it would be difficult to comprehend from the translation. Laxmi is the Goddess of prosperity. Symbolically it is said that when she on her own comes to apply *tilak*, one should not go to wash the face! The message is success is on door and one should not fritter it by any delay in action. Habib has stated that Gandhiji communicated in religious language that could have been avoided, but Gandhiji was deeply embedded in the culture of the soil. That is the language he spoke. But let us not miss the point. The first sentence he writes is about returning the Gold Medal.⁵⁸ He wanted to impress upon the highest official of the British Administration that he was in the district for a right cause and he had the right to do what he was doing as a good citizen. If the local

⁵⁶ Prasad Rajendra, 1949 (revised edition) *Satyagraha in Champaran*. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad. p 104

⁵⁷ The letter is reproduced from CWMG *op.cit.* p 365.

⁵⁸ This is an example of *Samman Vaapasi*. Recently many were highly critical about it when sensitive authors, writers and artists chose to return honours after the killing of rationalists in a brutal fashion by the right wing fundamentalists. A committed citizen may resort to such a step as protest. Gandhiji did it in 1917!

administration perceived differently then he should return the honour he had received for such good work elsewhere. The post script is important. He had foreseen that he may be asked to provide personal security by the court and he wanted to convey that he did not own any property for advancing as surety. The Magistrate did ask for such surety in the court on April 18! He knew the law well of course. Since on 16th he was not asked to appear in court he wrote another long letter to Maganlal Gandhi on the same day. In it he mentioned 'the penalty for this crime is six months' imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 1,000. I am awaiting further developments'.⁵⁹

One of the important letters he wrote was a letter written to Private Secretary of Viceroy. In the letter he had said that he was doing his duty and wanted conducted an inquiry to equip with facts. His credentials were being doubted by the district administration and hence he was returning the medal back to the Government that had appreciated his work back in South Africa.

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 statements and follow him to jail if served notice. Gandhiji was relaxed and assured that the Satyagraha will continue. The commitment of these two first close Champaran associates may have come from the turnout of raiyats on the previous day to get their statements 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 for their cause and with willingness to go to jail and suffer for them. The genuineness in 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 favour 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 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'.

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.

⁵⁹ *Ibid* p 366

A related point also needs to be made here. In Satyagraha there are no adversaries. There are truth holders on either side. One will have pure goodwill for the other. This is an important intrinsic value that a satyagrahi has to maintain. It has demonstrable values as well. Ericson in the context of Champaran Satyagraha has noted it thus.

...the invading Satyagrahi puts himself on equal footing with the lawful government and then asks their assistance in getting the facts necessary to proceed against them...This Mahatma later claimed, was his his country's first object lesson in Civil Disobedience. And the Lesson worked.⁶⁰

Ericson has then quoted Gandhiji that amply demonstrates that Satyagrahi by good will can win heart of the other truth holder and in the case of Champaran peoples' fear of authority vanished.

A sort of friendliness sprang up between the officials – Collector, Magistrate, Police Superintendent – and myself. I might have legally resisted the notices served on me. Instead I accepted them all, and my conduct towards the officials was correct. They thus saw that I did not want to offend them personally, but that I wanted to offer civil resistance to their orders. In this way they were put at ease, and instead of harassing me they gladly availed themselves of my and my co-workers cooperation in regulating the crowd. But it was an ocular demonstration to them of the fear that their authority was shaken. The people had for the moment lost all fear of punishment and yielded obedience to the power of love which their new friend exercised.⁶¹

Responding to Dhanagre's point about picking up a minor issue instead of taking on the major issue of agrarian structure, one can say that even if Gandhiji had taken up a minor issue the impact he created among the locals and all over the nation was gigantic.⁶² In any case in Satyagraha minor nature of the problem is not an issue. Satyagrahi seeks no revolution, he/she seeks reform (external and internal) and it is incremental. The force applied is love force with fearlessness.

Reform rather revolution is more arduous exercise and calls for lot of patience. In Gandhian thought framework gradual but firm incremental reforms leads to changes that eventually transforms the society from a conflict ridden violent society to harmony seeking non-violence society. When critical reforms are sought, facts become very important foundation on which the reform is built. Reform is concrete and not abstract and revolutions are affected for abstract ideals. In Gandhian framework there is ideal abstract but moving toward that is through concrete incremental reforms.

It is true that Gandhiji categorically said that Champaran *Satyagraha* was not political for him, it was a local problem, but a serious one and he wanted to help redress it. To Commissioner, Magistrate, Collector and planters he told that he wanted to inquire into the complaints people were making about exploitative arrangements with respect to indigo cultivation. He had therefore reached there to understand the problem. This is what he precisely did. Once he was given permission to stay he settled down to understand the indigo issue in depth and also record the complaints of the raiyats. A Satyagrahi should know the facts on the ground properly to build his truth. Gandhiji was trying to understand the system and the issues involved in it.

⁶⁰ Ericson *op. cit.* p 293

⁶¹ *Ibid*

⁶² Refer to Rajmohan Gandhi's description of what happened in Gujarat Club in Ahmedabad. Gandhi Rajmohan, *op.cit.* in this paper. Sardar Patel was so impressed that he then gave up his practice as a Barrister and volunteered to lead the Kheda Satyagrha.

Rajendra Prasad has given the figures for the tenants' statements that were recorded by Gandhiji's team. The recording had begun on April 17, 1917 and it was stopped on June 12, 1917. This is when the Inquiry Committee was announced. During this time period 8,000 statements were recorded under personal supervision of Gandhiji. Gandhiji had given written instructions on how to collect evidence.⁶³ It was to be strictly adhered to. The most important point he had made to the workers and his associates was that no raiyat under any circumstances should resort to violence of any kind. A cardinal principal of Satyagraha is that it is totally free of any kind of violence including ill-will for the other. Out of 2,841 villages Tenants from 850 villages had got their statements recorded against 60 factories.⁶⁴ Many documents pertaining to the subject including the court judgements were also collected and collated. Gandhiji made deep study of all of these.

Between April 17 and May 10 when Gandhiji met Mr Maude, Member of Executive Council, Bihar and Orissa at the suggestion of the Governor of Bihar Gandhiji had developed fair amount of insight into the indigo issues and how the system worked. By then 4000 statements of the tenants had been recorded. The Satyagrahi was well-prepared to share the ground reality with Mr Maude. At the end of the meeting Mr Maude requested Gandhiji to send a written report to the Governor and also ask for what needed to be done. A satyagrahi does not miss a chance to put his/her point across with respect to understanding the truth. Gandhiji wrote in the beginning that he was deeply hurt by the Governor's suggestion that came through Mr Maude that the assistance of his associates was to be withdrawn. A Satyagrahi also assures the other that no harm will ever be done and intended and there will not be violence of any kind. Gandhiji wrote so in the report.⁶⁵ The Report has a distinct imprint of a Barrister. The report explains the ground reality with full understanding of the system. Gandhiji understood the economics of indigo cultivation very well, the world market crisis, and effect of synthetic indigo on local prices. He also explained how the planters were trying to saddle the losses upon the raiyats. In the very first report he had said that the factory workers were paid less and they also were further exploited by the petty officials by making them pay *Dasturi* amounting to fifth of their wages.

The Satyagrahi Gandhi then writes about the wrongs and how they should be righted.

The wrongs are twofold. There are wrongs which are accomplished facts and wrongs which continue. The continuing wrongs need to be stopped at once and a small inquiry may be made as to past wrongs, such as damages and *abwabs* already taken and *sharahbeshi* payments already made. The *raiya*s should be told by proclamation and notices distributed broadcast among them that they are not only not bound to pay *abwabs*, *tawan* and *sharahbeshi* charges but that they ought not to pay them, that the *Sarkar* will protect them if any attempt is made to enforce payment thereof. They should further be informed that they are not bound to render any personal service to their landlords and that they are free to sell their services wherever they choose and that they are not bound to grow indigo, sugarcane or any other crop unless they wish to do so and unless it is profitable for them. The Bettiah Raj leases given to the factories should not be renewed until the wrongs are remedied and should, when renewed, properly safeguard the *raiya*s' rights.⁶⁶

Gandhiji admitted in the report that he had made very little arguments, but said that he was ready with full documentation to tender proof if the Government so desired. Toward the end he wrote,

⁶³ Gandhiji had written down instruction on 16 April 1917 just a day after he had reached Motihari. CWMG *op.cit.* p 369

⁶⁴ Prasad Rajendra *op.cit.* p 170

⁶⁵ For the text of the Report refer CWMG *op.cit.* p386

⁶⁶ *Ibid* p 389

In conclusion, I would like to state that I have no desire to hurt the planters' feelings. I have received every courtesy from them. Believing as I do that the *raiya*t s are labouring under a grievous wrong from which they ought to be freed immediately, I have dealt, as calmly as is possible for me to do so, with the system which the planters are working. 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 *raiya*t s the same measure of liberty and freedom.

Champanan Satyagraha critics should have understood from this report that Gandhiji was trying to argue a case based on the principles that the opponents claimed they follow. First of all he did not have anything to complain against planters. He expressed his good will. The point he made was that he wanted the Champanan *raiya*t s to be as free as the planters were in making their choice of crops and terms of partnering with others. His argument was that if 'Englishmen were born to enjoy fullest personal liberty and freedom', then same principles must be applied to all British citizens and for that matter he would have applied it to whole humanity. It was freedom of enterprise that Gandhiji wanted to gain for *raiya*t s in Champanan. This was the truth he was addressing. British were employing two separate principles one for British and other for non-British. Gandhiji had experienced this in South Africa.⁶⁷ He appealed to the value of individual liberty that British celebrated and followed principal of fair and equal opportunity for economic enterprise principle and value that British followed.

Gandhiji during April 17 and May 17 began a process. He made visits to villages, met people, and also communicated with planters, Collector and sub divisional office. Besides the report he sent to Governor he generated confidential notes for internal discussions and sharing status. Perhaps Dhanagre got this impression from these activities that Gandhiji turned the potential action programme into an academic exercise. Indeed, Gandhiji brought the rigour of research in investigation and issued strict protocols, but his ultimate objective was to build a strong case for negotiating redress.

The British administration soon found it hard to allow Gandhiji to continue in this fashion. He had awakened the whole of Champanan and for that matter whole of India. The administration wanted to wind up the issue. Sir Edward Gait guided firmly by the office of the Viceroy was asked to institute a full inquiry with Gandhiji as a member. The other party was willing to understand the truth of the Satyagrahi. Gandhiji agreed with the condition that he would also appear as the representative of the aggrieved party. The Champanan Agrarian Enquiry Committee was announced on June 10, 1917. At this point Dhanagre's criticism in this regard needs a revisit. He has argued that 'at times Gandhi expressed greater concern for planters' interest than for the *raiya*t s'. He has quoted a letter Gandhiji wrote to Zamindar Maharaja Bahadur Sir Rameshwar Singh, and a telegram to the chief secretary of Bihar. The letter was written on June 4, 1917 six days prior to formal announcement of the Inquiry Committee. If the full letter⁶⁸ is read then one gets a clear idea that Gandhiji was not turning an inquiry committee into an arbitration committee, but from the in-depth investigations he

⁶⁷ In 1906 Transvaal was a crown colony and hence Lord Elgin, Secretary of State for Colonies disallowed the Black Act in consultation with the South Africa representative on these matters. He told Transvaal chief Mr Richards that 'if an identical measure was passed by the Transvaal legislature constituted after the grant of responsible government, it would not be refused the royal assent. But so long as the Transvaal was a Crown Colony, the Imperial Government would be held directly responsible for such class legislation, and as racial discrimination was a departure from the fundamental principles of the British Empire, he could not but advise His Majesty to disallow the measure in question'. Those interested should refer Gandhi M.K. *Satyagraha in South Africa*, Navajivan Trust, Ahmedabad (Various editions) chapter 15.

⁶⁸ Interested readers should refer CWMG Volume 13 *op.cit.* p 435 for letter and p 439 for the text of the telegram.

and his team had conducted, he had arrived at certain non-negotiable decisions. Let us view the text.

Tinkathia in every shape and form, hand-notes being balances of *tawan* and *hundas* as in the Dhokraha *kothi*, should be declared as abolished or cancelled... And in any inquiry that is the result of a mutual understanding, an investigation into methods of coercion can find no place. There would then remain only the question of *sharahbeshi sattas* and individual hardships, in the shape of *raiya*t's having been dispossessed of their lands, etc., and the refund of *tawan* and *sharahbeshi* already taken. These the Committee will investigate. *Sharahbeshi* payments should meanwhile be suspended...

Upon the Committee being appointed, the scope of our work will be altered. It will then consist in collecting, collating and leading evidence and in simultaneously carrying out the educative and protective programme sketched before you. Such a Committee, then, may be in the nature of an arbitration of which the planters' and the *raiya*t's nominees (one of each) will be members with the right to them to appoint an umpire. The decision of the arbitration should be treated as final and binding on both the parties.

Gandhiji did not favour planters anywhere in this letter. On the contrary he was abundantly clear that all exploitative systems and practices have to simply go. The part which would then remain where *raiya*t's have entered into contracts willingly, there will have to be arbitration.

Coming to the telegram, the text under scanner reads: 'If planters require open inquiry I am entirely satisfied; my suggestion regarding privacy was wholly in their interest'. This telegram is dated June 8, the Committee was formed and ToR were written; only formal announcement was pending that happened on June 10. Gandhiji was speaking in planters' interest not because he had become their agent, but because he had incriminating evidences against planters that would come out in open. And it did. A Satyagrahi who does not treat the other party as adversary would not want to see their public exposure and condemnation. Their admission of wrong and willingness to see the truth and correct it is what a Satyagrahi desires.

The details of the proceedings are known so also the recommendations. But most importantly Gandhiji has been criticised that he compromised heavily against the interest of *raiya*t's. Planters alone gained. Dhanagre has typified Gandhiji's such interventions by calling it 'a compromise with those in authority and over as a point of termination of a movement'. If we go by Gandhiji's letter to Zamindar mentioned above it will become clear that it was no compromise. Planters were not at all happy at the recommendations of the Committee. They were vociferous in public about it. In this context two observations are worth noting. The first one is by Rajendra Prasad who writing a foreword to the 1928 English edition of his book noted the following.

To enable the reader to further appreciate the effect of the intensive work of 1917 I may state here that within the last ten years indigo has practically ceased to be grown in Champaran, that the biggest indigo factories have either been sold or are being sold, that many of the smaller ones have disappeared and the ryot of Champaran is a bolder and more self-respecting individual than he was ten years ago.⁶⁹

Gandhiji was asked about the enhancement not being removed completely and refunding of the entire *Tawan* amounts. Gandhiji's response was that the fear was the main thing and the compulsion in entering into to contract had to go. This was achieved. Rajendra Prasad has noted after ten years of the Act that the *raiya*t of Champaran was a bolder and more respecting person.

⁶⁹ Prasad Rajendra *op.cit.* p ix.

Second, Eric Erikson has made an interesting point which refutes Dhanagre's point on compromise. Ericson notes referring to the abolition of Tinkathia system that

Even if this was something of an empty victory in view of the declining value of indigo in the world market, Gandhi had succeeded in demonstrating, in an area and in an issue of his choosing, the applicability to any part of India of the instrument which he had created in South Africa.⁷⁰

Obviously he was referring to Satyagraha.

Dhanagre's third point was about Gandhiji receiving support from better-off sections and the middle peasants who had vested interests. This is a weak point because the people who came with him changed and changed for life. Dhanagre and others who have made the point seem to have ignored the fact that almost each one of the Gandhiji's associates in Champaran committed their life to the nation. The lawyers and other professionals gave up their practices and became full time volunteers with Gandhiji first in Champaran and later in national freedom movement and initiated constructive work including adoption and promotion of Khadi. Arvind Mohan has recently documented life of more than 30 persons who were prominent volunteers in Champaran which bears out that all of them without exception worked for freedom movement.⁷¹

Finally, Gandhiji's constructive work in Champaran also came under criticism. Dhanagre called it 'a semblance of relief or constructive work for the poor peasantry so as to prevent it from any potentially revolutionary activity'. Dhanagre and others have missed last chapter of Rajendra Prasad's book that is titled 'How Volunteers Served'. It is true that Gandhiji could not build a strong local team of Champaran origin who could have carried forward the work of education, sanitation and other constructive programmes in the district, but in any Satyagraha constructive programme is an integral part of the thought framework. The reforms that are sought by way of justice and or improvement in the existing situation has to be accompanied by satyagrahis own weakness that have to be removed by reflection and appropriate action. Gandhiji identified two main problems: pathetic ignorance of raiyats and insanitary conditions of the village. He organised schooling sanitation by getting volunteers from Ashram and from Mumbai and Pune.

In conclusion it may be said the Champaran Satyagraha was first significant effort by Gandhiji to put into practice his thought framework in which the individual had to be liberated with a clear social obligation toward contributing to forming a non-violence society. The setting was in an agrarian situation. 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 criticised and form part of the Dhanagre'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 Chamapran. Rajendra Prasad has ended his book with the following remark that aptly concludes what was achieved in Champaran by Gandhiji.

⁷⁰ Ericson *op.cit.* p 194-5

⁷¹ Arvind Mohan, 2017. *Champaran Satyagrha ke Sahayogi* (Hindi). Sasta Sahitya Mandal, New Delhi.

The seed of Indian Swaraj has been truly sown in Champaran and the freedom which the poor, helpless downtrodden tenants of Champaran have secured against the educated, ever vigilant and wealthy planters, living under the protecting wings of the powerful Government, is but a precursor of that larger freedom which Indians, trampled under the heels for centuries, are going to achieve in their struggle for Swaraj.

It was a precursor indeed.