

A Historical Study of Peasant Movements in Champaran (Bihar)

Sunil Kumar Paswan
NET, Ph. D. (History)
At. + P. O. - Laxmi Sagar
Near Gas Dodown Road
District - Darbhanga

Abstract

The Champaran peasant movement was launched in 1917-18. Its objective was to create awakening among the peasants against the European planters. These planters resorted to illegal and inhuman methods of indigo cultivation at a cost, which by no canons of justice could be called an adequate remuneration for the labour done by the peasants. Gandhiji studied the grievances of the Champaran peasantry. The peasants opposed not only the European planters but also the zamindars.

Article

The tenant peasants' goals not explicitly stated. They include, but are not limited to a fair ending of tinkathia system (an obligatory indigo planting on a portion of a tenant's holding on nominal compensation), the ending of tax exploitation from the British planters, and improving their life situation. When Gandhi joined, his main goal was to inquire the truth and fact of the conditions of the peasants in Champaran, in order to take the necessary steps to be taken in order to eradicate the problem.

During the time of British occupation of India, peasants of Champaran district of the Bihar state were highly exploited by the indigo cultivation. The lessees of Indigo and agricultural areas had been Indians until 1793, but as the British Empire began its rule in India, European planters began to take over and gained total control of the indigo and sugar cane cultivation.

The super-government system that the European planters controlled implemented the tinkathia system—an obligatory indigo planting on a portion of a tenant's holding for nominal compensation. The Government Executive favored the planters, overlooking any pleas including legal action. The Bengal Tenancy Act and other reactionary laws further helped exploit the peasants,

requiring the peasants to plant 3/20, and sometimes up to 5/20, of their holdings with indigo.

The development of a chemical substitute made the market for indigo unprofitable, and both the tenants and the planters suffered economically. The European planters came up with several methods to minimize their losses by extracting money from the peasants. European planters who had permanent leases on the land offered the Indian peasants to withdraw the tinkathia system, but under the condition that the tenants agreed to pay increased rents, thus permanently increasing the rent. If some European planters only had temporary leases, they demanded a large sum for peasants to be released from the system. The planters also used forceful methods to extract money from the peasants. The planters beat the peasants and placed them in temporary prisons. They took the cattle, looted houses, and prevented the peasants from entering and leaving their homes. The planters also imposed numerous illegal taxes on marriage, homes, oil-mills, or even collecting special taxes when the planter wanted extra money for personal uses.

In December 1916, Rajkumar Shukla, a Champaran farmer no longer able to stand the oppression, went to see Mahatma Gandhi at an Indian National Congress meeting. Shukla insisted that Gandhi move a resolution condemning the situation and treatment of Champaran tenant farmers. Gandhi declined by saying he could not give any opinion without having seen the condition with his own eyes. Instead, Gandhi promised to spend a day or two in Champaran during his tour of India. After seeing the conditions himself, Gandhi would come up with a plan of action.

On April 9, 1917, Gandhi and Shukla left Calcutta for the Champaran region. As an ex-lawyer, Gandhi was aggravated by the expensive charges of lawyers, and concluded that action via the law courts would be slow and impractical in this case. He pointed out that the primary solution was to free the peasants from fear. In Champaran he gathered the assistance of several part-time and full-time lawyers to help him as clerical assistants and interpreters.

Gandhi decided that his project would be a very detailed study and survey of the 2,841 villages in Champaran, to investigate the conditions of the peasants and to know the truths and facts. First Gandhi thought it was necessary to understand where the higher European authority stood in the situation. On April 11, Gandhi interviewed the Planters' Association secretary Mr. Wilson. Wilson

said that he himself could not presume any responsibility for the association, and that Gandhi was an outsider who had no right interfering. Gandhi then informed

Mr. Wilson that he felt he was a part of the Indian people, and that he had every right to inquire into the peasant conditions if they wished him to do so.

The European Commissioner Mr. Morshead of the Tirhut division (that includes the Champaran district) advised Gandhi to leave the district because governmental inquiries were being made already. Gandhi then presented Morshead a letter from several prominent Indian congressmen asking Gandhi to assess the situation of the peasants. Gandhi continued his journey, listening to the tenants and studying available documents.

On April 16, 1917, while Gandhi and his assistants were working, a police sub-inspector came up and told Gandhi that the superintendent sent his compliments. Gandhi understood that this meant the superintendent was arresting him. Gandhi told his co-workers to continue their work of investigation. The police showed Gandhi a notice that required Gandhi to abstain from staying in Champaran, and ordered him to leave by the next available train. Gandhi wrote a returning letter that said he would not leave Champaran and that he would suffer the penalties of disobedience instead.

On the 18th, Gandhi was ordered to appear before the sub-divisional officer for violating the Section 144 C.P.C. (Criminal Procedure Code). Meanwhile, Gandhi decided that his co-workers would continue their investigation until higher authority ordered them to leave, too. Then the co-workers would send in other assistants to continue. After much discussion, however, the co-workers said they would follow Gandhi to jail. Even without any publicizing or information sharing, the news spread rapidly and peasants crowded at the place where Gandhi was staying and the court where Gandhi's trial was held. So many people gathered that they could not fit into the court. Some broke in through the glass doors. This is the first time the peasants had gathered together to support Gandhi and his work.

During the trial, Gandhi read aloud his statement as to why he disobeyed the law willingly and submitted to the penalty of disobedience without protest. Not knowing how to properly respond to civil disobedience, the court was reluctant to imprison him. The magistrate offered to release Gandhi on the bail of 100 rupees but Gandhi said he had no bailer. That night, Gandhi was released on the Magistrate's personal recognizance. Furthermore, the Lieutenant-Governor ordered the case to be withdrawn before Gandhi had to appear back in court to receive sentence. Legally, Gandhi was allowed to continue with his work.

However, aggravated by Gandhi's popularity and the way he stirred up the peasants¹, the European planters began a "poisonous agitation" against Gandhi, where they spread false reports and rumors about Gandhi and his co-workers. Gandhi sent information to the newspapers, but they were never published.

As Swami Sahajanand Saraswati² tells us in his autobiography *Mera Jeevan Sangharsh* (1952), even as Gandhi enthusiastically took up the case of peasants against the British in the agitations of Champaran. Subsequently he toed the Congress line, which advocated that a balance be maintained between the interests of the zamindars and peasants, 'Initially, when we established the Kisan Sabha in 1927-28, it was meant to arrive at a compromise between peasants and zamindars. This was the principle of Congress party'.

Pushyamitra's³ stays clear of analysing these aspects of Gandhi's subsequent politics on the issues of peasants. He does not even hint at it. Such an approach reduces Champaran and Gandhi's role in it representing his larger politics on peasantry.

By June 12, Gandhi and his co-workers had recorded over 8,000 statements, and began to compile an official report. They also held several meetings with planters and peasants in various places such as Bettiah and Motihari. The gatherings were somewhere between 10,000 and 30,000 people. On October 3, they submitted a unanimous report favoring the peasants to the Government. On October 18, the Government published its resolution, essentially accepting almost all of the report's recommendations. On November 2, Mr. Maude introduced the Champaran Agrarian Bill that was passed and became the Champaran Agrarian Law (Bihar and Orissa Act I of 1918). The government accepted the Laws in March of 1918.

References

1. Singh, Shankar Dayal (1994) : Gandhi's first step : Champaran movement B. R. Pub. Corp. New Delhi, p. 12
2. Saraswati, Sahajanand (1952) : *Mera Jeevan Sangharsh*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi, p. 193
3. Pushyamitra, (2018) : *Jab Neel Ka Daag Mita : Champaran 1917* Rajkamal Prakashan, New Delhi, p. 54
