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A journey to Champaran: Celebrating 100 years of Neel Satyagraha

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Abstract

It is a tragedy that the agrarian situation in the country doesn't seem to have changed much even after a century. The plight of indigo farmers in Champaran a hundred years ago is the plight of farmers all over the country in modern-day India. Gandhiji's presence in this district and other parts of the state of Bihar for one hundred and seventy five days in Champaran had made him famous throughout the world and even today one can feel every corner of Champaran whispering the presence of Gandhiji. It was the first important work that Mahatma Gandhi undertook after returning from South Africa was in Champaran. He quoted it as a 'Home-rule'. This article reflects the tragedy of peasants under the colonial rule by the forced cultivation of indigo for ultimate profit. As a symbol of justice the role of M.K Gandhi has also been highlighted along with his path to fight against the foreign evils. The before and after math expression of Satyagraha has also been pointed out here. In the whole nation, the Champaran Satyagraha has taken a tremendous place as a symbol of resistance.

Keywords: Champaran, Satyagraha, peasants, non-violence

Introduction

A hundred years ago Gandhiji might have astonished to see thousands of people gathered around the Bapudham Motihari Railway station to witness history unfolding before them and receive the person who is going to carry forward the fight of farmers in Champaran district of Bihar. A man in the attire of the Father of the Nation realized that ours is an agrarian culture and the problem of peasants will affect the entire society. This thought has made him to visit Champaran district when he arrived from South Africa, after the words of Rajkumar Shukla, a farmer from Champaran who extracted words from Gandhi that he will soon visit the place. The Champaran Movement or Neel Satyagraha began in April 1917 and is significant because it was the first political action that Gandhiji led in India for a deeply oppressed peasantry and the success of the first civil disobedience movement. Champaran is a historic region, which now forms the East Champaran district, and the West Champaran district in Bihar, India. This area strongly supports a large population whose mainstay was agriculture. East Champaran is one of the thirty-eight district of the state of Bihar with its headquarter at Motihari which came into existence on 1st of December 1971 after the split of Champaran district into two districts, viz. Purbi Champaran & Paschimi Champaran. The name of Champaran owes its origin to Champa-Aranya or Champkatany. Champa or Champaka means Magnolia and arnya means forest. Hence Champaranya means Forest of Champa trees (Singh Shankar Dayal, 1994).

The journey begins

The Champaran movement or Neel Satyagraha is the symbol of the fight for ethics and rights. 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 labor done by the peasants. The peasants opposed not only the European planters, but also the Jamindars. In Champaran and as a matter of fact, in the whole of Bihar, there was an enormous personal increase in the land rent. The peasants were obliged to grow indigo and this curtailed their freedom of cultivation. The peasants were compelled to devote the better part of their land for growing particular crops as desired by the landlord.

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They were also required to give their best time and energy to the crops decided by the landlords and was paid meagre and poor wages which was very difficult for them to earn their livelihood. The tale of woes of Indian ryots, forced to plant indigo by the British planters, forms one of the darkest in the annals of colonial exploitation. Not a chest of Indigo reached England without being stained with human blood. The Champaran peasantry suffered terribly at the hands of European planters. The landlords and the government officials combined together also oppressed the peasantry, which was a clear exploitation of injustice and tyranny (Pandey Kundan, 2017) ^[5]

Atrocities faced by the peasants

There was a clear exploitation of the poorest of the poor and the motive was unbridled profiteering. It became a very emotional issue because on one side were rich landlords backed by the most powerful empire of the time, while on the other side was a completely disenfranchised and enslaved community—that of the subsistence farmer. The Tahasildars, Indigo factory owners, factory employees, Registrars and even the local police were all under the control and influence of Britishers played their respective roles in perpetrating the atrocities. The indigo factory made use of bullock carts ploughs and labourers free of cost or at very low nominal charges. Heavy taxes were imposed on cattle's, agricultural producers, weaving work, sale of animals, etc. After imposing taxes on trees, the factory claimed right of ownership of the trees and the tenant was not permitted to cut even the branches for their own use. The tenants had to agree if the factory decided to cultivate indigo and selected the best portion of the land for cultivation of indigo and if otherwise if any other crop was sown, the farmer's was forced to uproot the plants from that area, which resulted in punishment. When the factory owners realized that indigo cultivation was not profitable, they decided to cease indigo cultivation and with that the factory also decided to enhance the rent of the holdings of the tenant as compensation for not cultivating indigo for which that an agreement with the tenant for cultivation was in vogue. Labourers working in the field of a tenant were suddenly forced by the factory to give up and forced them to work in factory lands.

The factory also took away the fertile land, milk giving buffaloes, cows and fodder from any tenant without any agreement and was forced to sell ghee and curd to the factory at extremely low prices as compared to the market price. The life of peasants was extremely weak that they have to tolerate physical tortures if they did not give their thumb impressions or signature for agreements of surrender of land, cultivating indigo, use of bullock carts and compensation for non-cultivation of indigo. False criminal charges were also brought upon the tenants if they refused to pay the enhanced rent rather than the old rent. The tenants were physically carried to the factory and detained for days together in rooms meant for poultry and beaten mercilessly, if went late to the factory and were fined in lapse. The punishment for not paying the rent on due date was throwing into well by the factory employees. The other atrocities were bribes, rent paid were not recorded correctly and was not given any receipts, strict supervision of factory employees where indigo was cultivated and if something went wrong they were tortured and fined. Some tenants took courage to go and complain to the magistrate or

Superintendent of police, but they were all at the interest of powerful factory owners (Singh Shankar Dayal, 1994).

Role of Gandhiji against 'Tinkathia system'

Tinkathia was the system under which the native peasants of Champaran were forced by the European planters to cultivate illegal methods of indigo on 3/20th part of their land holdings. Mahatma Gandhi's arrival at Champaran was a matter of objection. The secretary of the planters association and commissioner did not accept Gandhiji intervene in the problem of Champaran and ordered him to leave. Gandhiji being a true fighter and Satyagraha for the establishment of truth and justice did not oblige the commissioner and adhered to his right to investigate the peasant grievances. Gandhiji with the support of Rajendra Prasad and Professor J.B Kriplani, Gandhi's objective was just to make a survey of the prevailing condition of the peasants and understand their grievances against the indigo planters. He also recorded the statement of the peasants and began to widen his public relations and concluded that ignorance of the cultivators was the main reason why it was possible for European planters to repress them. Voluntary organizations were started to improve economic and educational conditions of people. Gandhi presented a preliminary report to the governments of Bihar and Orissa. The report revealed the exploitation of cultivators and various atrocities committed by the planters. Finally, the government constituted a committee to go into the matter and Gandhi was made a member of it. The committee, in course of time, submitted its report on 3rd October 1917 with its recommendations. The government accepted those recommendations and on that basis was passed the Champaran Agrarian Act in 1918.

The Act abolished the *tinkathia* system and the peasants got the liberty to grow indigo on an optional basis. Gandhi's Champaran mission was an important event in the history of freedom struggle and also in Gandhi's own life. Here a new process in politics was started which became the dominant course of the next eventful decade. The process brought legitimacy to nonviolence and civil disobedience. It also helped Gandhi to become a national leader in his own right. Satyagraha as a method of intentional conflict made the people morally sensitized. His nonviolence, love, and readiness to act and suffer won over the Machiavellian politics. Champaran was the testing ground of nonviolence in politics. India came to know him and he could know the popular pulse of India through Champaran. Gandhiji knew that the authority, which was equipped with the most ruthless power, could not be challenged unless the people realized that they also possessed equally effective power. The perception of power was more important than the reality of power relations. The powerless suddenly realized that they were no more powerless. The powerful now felt that they could not apply their power. The conflict took a new turn. Collective response to resist, courage, and self-confidence demoralizes the opponent. The moral power of the people almost outpaced the oppressive power. Gandhi's Satyagraha was an ingenious combination of reason, morality and politics and relied on the powers of argument, suffering, love, and appealed to the opponents' head, heart, and interests. (Rajkumar Shankar 1969; Chaudhuri, R. 1974) ^[7, 1]. Hence Neel Satyagraha galvanized the whole nation and became a symbol of resistance.

100 years of Peasant struggle

While the centenary celebrations of Champaran Satyagraha are going on, the people are brewing another movement in the region. Earlier, people have to fight against the foreigners, but now they have to fight against their fellow citizens and government. Farmers Suicide in India has seen an increase over the period of time. A Satyagraha today has to concentrate on that particular area because their widows, parents and children do not become the seeds of conflict and seek revenge in future. Even today there is a widening gap between rich and poor, which will tremendously increase in future also. Champran Satyagraha as only a movement for the rights of farmers, it has lost its pertinence. But it remains relevant as a movement for the empowerment of the downtrodden.

The lands which Britishers acquired from peasants to undertake indigo cultivation become worthless when they were leaving our country. Around 40,500 hectares (comprising east and west Champaran now) of land were sold to industrialists and landlords to make profit out of it for the last time. Not a single form of justice was given by aliens, but had taken every penny of wealth from common people and resulted to poor condition of living. The government of Bihar has passed a land reform (Fixation of Ceiling & Acquisition of Surplus Land) Act, 1961 where the land was divided into different categories on the basis of its quality and set separate ownership limit for each. The excess land was distributed among landless after 1971. But a large number of peasants never got their possession, because the landowners drag the matter into court where it will drag for years. The Bihar department of Revenue claims that only 12000 numbers of people in West Champaran are yet to get possession, but people strongly argues with the statistics of 50,000 with 42 cases pending in district court. A Samiti named Lok Sangharsh Samiti has organized around seven Satyagraha until 2008 in 2017 as a deadline to solve their issue. The farmers marched to a designated farmland with tricolor and sow seeds to claim ownership. The farmer of the Champaran was moving along with the path led by Gandhiji hundred years ago with the weapon of passive resistance and non-violence for regaining their ancestral properties (Pandey Kundan, Gandhi Tushar; 2017) ^[5].

Conclusion

Gandhi's Champaran mission was an important event in the history of freedom struggle and also in Gandhi's own life. Here a new process in politics was started which became the dominant course of the next eventful decade. The process brought legitimacy to nonviolence and civil disobedience. It also helped Gandhi to become a national leader in his own right. His nonviolence, love, and readiness to act and suffer won over the Machiavellian politics. Champaran was the testing ground of nonviolence in politics. India came to know him and he could know the popular pulse of India through Champaran. Even now after his absence people are following his path of Ahimsa and non-violence to solve the issue. As a symbol of justice and the masses of Champaran believes Gandhiji and they have full confidence that they will win the fight easily if they just continue to follow the words and deeds of the Mahatma.

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