

Lesson-7

Indigo

When I first visited Gandhi in 1942 at his ashram in Sevagram, in central India, he said, "I will tell you how it happened that I decided to urge the departure of the British. It was in 1917."

He had gone to the December 1916 annual convention of the Indian National Congress party in Lucknow. There were 2301 delegates and many visitors. During the proceedings, Gandhi recounted, "A peasant came up to me looking like any other peasant in India, poor and emaciated, and said, 'I am Rajkumar Shukla. I am from Champaran, and I want you to come to my district'!" Gandhi had never heard of the place. It was in the foothills of the towering Himalayas, near the kingdom of Nepal.

Under an ancient arrangement, the Champaran peasants were sharecroppers. Rajkumar Shukla was one of them. He was illiterate but resolute. He had come to the Congress session to complain about the injustice of the landlord system in Bihar and somebody had probably said, "Speak to Gandhi".

Gandhi told Shukla he had an appointment in Cawnpore and was also committed to go to other parts of India. Shukla accompanied him everywhere. Then Gandhi returned to his ashram near Ahmedabad. Shukla followed him to the ashram. For weeks he never left Gandhi's side.

"Fix a date," he begged.

Impressed by the sharecropper's tenacity and story Gandhi said, "I have to be in Calcutta on such-and-such a date. Come and meet me and take me from there."

Months passed. Shukla was sitting on his haunches at the appointed spot in Calcutta when Gandhi arrived; he waited till Gandhi was free. Then the two of them boarded a train for the city of Patna in Bihar. There Shukla led him to the house of a lawyer named Rajendra Prasad who later became President of the Congress party and of India. Rajendra Prasad was out of town, but the servants knew Shukla as a poor yeoman who pestered their master to help the indigo sharecroppers. So they let him stay on the grounds with his companion, Gandhi, whom they took to be another peasant. But Gandhi was not permitted to draw water from the well lest some drops from his bucket pollute the entire source; how did they know that he was not an untouchable?

Gandhi decided to go first to Muzzafarpur, which was en route to Champaran, to obtain more (complete) information about the conditions than Shukla was capable of imparting. He accordingly sent a telegram to Professor J.B. Kripalani, of the Arts

College in Muzzafarpur, whom he had seen at Tagore's Shantiniketan school. The train arrived at midnight, 15 April 1917. Kripalani was waiting at the station with a large body of students. Gandhi stayed there for two days in the home of Professor Malkani, a teacher in a government school. "It was an extraordinary thing in those days," Gandhi commented, "for a government professor to harbour a man like me". In smaller localities, the Indians were afraid to show sympathy for advocates of home-rule.

The news of Gandhi's advent and of the nature of his mission spread quickly through Muzzafarpur and to Champaran. Sharecroppers from Champaran began arriving on foot and by conveyance to see their champion. Muzzafarpur lawyers called on Gandhi to brief him; they frequently represented peasant groups in court; they told him about their cases and reported the size of their fee.

Gandhi chided the lawyers for collecting big fee from the sharecroppers. He said, "I have come to the conclusion that we should stop going to law courts. Taking such cases to the courts does little good. Where the peasants are so crushed and fear-stricken, law courts are useless. The real relief for them is to be free from fear."

Most of the arable land in the Champaran district was divided into large estates owned by Englishmen and worked by Indian tenants. The chief commercial crop was indigo. The landlords compelled all tenants to plant three twentieths or 15 percent of their holdings with indigo and surrender the entire indigo harvest as rent. This was done by a long-term contract.

Presently, the landlords learned that Germany had developed synthetic indigo. They thereupon, obtained agreements from the sharecroppers to pay them compensation for being released from the 15 per cent arrangement.

The sharecropping arrangement was irksome to the peasants, and many signed willingly. Those who resisted, engaged lawyers; the landlords hired thugs. Meanwhile, the information about synthetic indigo reached the illiterate peasants who had signed, and they wanted their money back.

At this point Gandhi arrived in Champaran.

He began by trying to get the facts. First he visited the secretary of the British landlord's association. The Secretary told him that they could give no information to an outsider. Gandhi answered that he was no outsider.

Next, Gandhi called on the British official commissioner of the Tirhut division in which the Champaran district lay. "The commissioner," Gandhi reports,

"proceeded to bully me and advised me forthwith to leave Tirhut".

Gandhi did not leave. Instead he proceeded to Motihari, the capital of Champaran. Several lawyers accompanied him. At the railway station, a vast multitude greeted Gandhi. He went to a house and using it as headquarters, continued his investigations. A report came in that a peasant had been maltreated in a nearby village. Gandhi decided to go and see; the next morning he started out on the back of an elephant. He had not proceeded far when the police superintendent's messenger overtook him and ordered him to return to town in his carriage. Gandhi complied. The messenger drove Gandhi home where he served him with an official notice to quit Champaran immediately. Gandhi signed a receipt for the notice and wrote on it that he would disobey the order.

In consequence, Gandhi received summon to appear in court the next day.

All night Gandhi remained awake. He telegraphed Rajendra Prasad to come from Bihar with influential friends. He sent instructions to the ashram. He wired a full report to the Viceroy.

Morning found the town of Motihari black with peasants. They did not know Gandhi's record in South Africa. They had merely heard that a Mahatma who wanted to help them was in trouble with the authorities. Their spontaneous demonstration, in thousands, around the courthouse was the beginning of their liberation from fear of the British.

The officials felt powerless without Gandhi's cooperation. He helped them regulate the crowd. He was polite and friendly. He was giving them concrete proof that their might, hitherto dreaded and unquestioned, could be challenged by Indians.

The government was baffled. The prosecutor requested the judge to postpone the trial. Apparently, the authorities wished to consult their superiors.

Gandhi protested against the delay. He read a statement pleading guilty. He was involved, he told the court, in a "conflict of duties" - on the one hand, not to set a bad example as a lawbreaker; on the other hand, to render the "humanitarian and national service" for which he had come. He disregarded the order to leave, "not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of our being, the voice of conscience". He asked the penalty due.

The magistrate announced that he would pronounce sentence after a two-hour recess and asked Gandhi to furnish bail for those 120 minutes. Gandhi refused. The judge released him without bail.

When the court reconvened, the judge said he would not deliver the judgement for several days. Meanwhile he allowed Gandhi to remain at liberty.

Rajendra Prasad, Brij Kishor Babu, Maulana Mazharul Huq and several other prominent lawyers had arrived from Bihar. They conferred with Gandhi. What would they do if he was sentenced to prison, Gandhi asked. Why, the senior lawyer replied, they had come to advise and help him; if he went to jail there would be nobody to advise and they would go home.

What about the injustice to the sharecroppers, Gandhi demanded? The lawyers withdrew to consult. Rajendra Prasad has recorded the upshot of their consultations - "They thought, amongst themselves, that Gandhi was totally a stranger, and yet he was prepared to go to prison for the sake of the peasants; if they, on the other hand, being not only residents of the adjoining districts but also those who claimed to have served these peasants, should go home, it would be shameful desertion."

They accordingly went back to Gandhi and told him they were ready to follow him into jail. "The battle of Champaran is won," he exclaimed. Then he took a piece of paper and divided the group into pairs and put down the order in which each pair was to court arrest.

Several days later, Gandhi received a written communication from the magistrate informing him that the Lieutenant-Governor of the province had ordered the case to be dropped. Civil Disobedience had triumphed, the first time in modern India.

Gandhi and the lawyers now proceeded to conduct a far-flung inquiry into the grievances of the farmers. Depositions by about ten thousand peasants were written down, and notes made on other evidence. Documents were collected. The whole area throbbed with the activity of the investigators and the vehement protests of the landlords.

In June, Gandhi was summoned by Sir Edward Gait, the Lieutenant - Governor. Before he went he met leading associates and again laid detailed plans for Civil Disobedience if he should not return.

Gandhi had four protracted interviews with the Lieutenant - Governor who, as a result, appointed an official commission of inquiry into the indigo sharecroppers' situation. The commission consisted of landlords, government officials, and Gandhi as the sole representative of the peasants. Gandhi remained in Champaran for an initial uninterrupted period of seven months and then again for several shorter visits.

The visit, undertaken casually on the entreaty of an unlettered peasant in the expectation that it would last a few days, occupied almost a year of Gandhi's life.

The official inquiry assembled a crushing mountain of evidence against the big planters, and when they saw this they agreed, in principle, to make refunds to the peasants. "But how much must we pay?" they asked Gandhi.

They thought he would demand repayment in full of the money which they had illegally and deceitfully extorted from the sharecroppers. He asked only 50 per cent. "There he seemed adamant," writes Reverend J.Z. Hodge, a British missionary in Champaran who observed the entire episode at close range. "Thinking probably that he would not give way, the representative of the planters offered to refund to the extent of 25 percent, and to his amazement Mr. Gandhi took him at his word, thus breaking the deadlock."

This settlement was adopted unanimously by the commission. Gandhi explained that the amount of the refund was less important than the fact that the landlords had been obliged to surrender part of the money and, with it, part of their prestige. Therefore, as far as the peasants were concerned, the planters had behaved as lords above the law. Now the peasant saw that he had rights and defenders. He learned courage.

Events justified Gandhi's position. Within a few years the British planters abandoned their estates, which reverted to the peasants. Indigo sharecropping disappeared.

Gandhi never contented himself with large political or economic solutions. He saw the cultural and social backwardness in the Champaran villages and wanted to do something about it immediately. He appealed to teachers. Mahadev Desai and Narhari Parikh, two young men who had just joined Gandhi as disciples, and their wives, volunteered for the work. Several more came from Bombay, Poona and other distant parts of the land. Devadas, Gandhi's youngest son, arrived from the ashram and so did Mrs. Gandhi. Primary schools were opened in six villages. Kasturba taught the ashram rules on personal cleanliness and community sanitation.

Health conditions were miserable. Gandhi got a doctor to volunteer his services for six months. Three medicines were available - castor oil, quinine and sulphur ointment. Anybody who showed a coated tongue was given a dose of castor oil; anybody with malaria fever received quinine plus castor oil; anybody with skin eruptions received ointment plus castor oil.

Gandhi noticed the filthy state of women's clothes. He asked Kasturba to talk to

them about it. One woman took Kasturba into her hut and said, "Look, there is no box or cupboard here for clothes. The sari I am wearing is the only one I have."

During his long stay in Champaran, Gandhi kept a long distance watch on the ashram. He sent regular instructions by mail and asked for financial accounts. Once he wrote to the residents that it was time to fill in the old latrine trenches and dig new ones otherwise the old ones would begin to smell bad.

The Champaran episode was a turning-point in Gandhi's life. "What I did," he explained, "was a very ordinary thing. I declared that the British could not order me about in my own country."

But Champaran did not begin as an act of defiance. It grew out of an attempt to alleviate the distress of large number of poor peasants. This was the typical Gandhi pattern - his politics were intertwined with the practical, day-to-day problems of the millions. His was not a loyalty to abstractions; it was a loyalty to living, human beings.

In everything Gandhi did, moreover, he tried to mould a new free Indian who could stand on his own feet and thus make India free.

Early in the Champaran action, Charles Freer Andrews, the English pacifist who had become a devoted follower of the Mahatma, came to bid Gandhi farewell before going on a tour of duty to the Fiji Islands. Gandhi's lawyer friends thought it would be a good idea for Andrews to stay in Champaran and help them. Andrews was willing if Gandhi agreed. But Gandhi was vehemently opposed. He said, "You think that in this unequal fight it would be helpful if we have an Englishman on our side. This shows the weakness of your heart. The cause is just and you must rely upon yourself to win the battle. You should not seek a prop in Mr. Andrews because he happens to be an Englishman."

"He had read our minds correctly," Rajendra Prasad commented, "and we had no reply..... Gandhi in this way taught us a lesson in self-reliance."

Self-reliance, Indian independence and help to sharecroppers were all bound together.

- Louis Fischer

About the Lesson:

Louis Fischer (1896-1970) was born in Philadelphia on 29 February 1896. He studied at the Philadelphia School of Pedagogy from 1914-16 and afterwards became a teacher. He worked with several newspapers. Louis Fisher's most famous works

include his 'Life of Mahatma Gandhi' (1950) and 'A Life of Lenin'. 'A Life of Lenin' won him the 1965 National Book Award in History and Biography. 'A Life of Mahatma Gandhi' was also made into a film 'Gandhi' which won the Academy Award (1982).

'Indigo' is an excerpt from Louis Fischer's book 'The Life of Mahatma Gandhi'. In 'Indigo' the author describes how Gandhi played a vital role in fighting for the cause of the sharecroppers of Champaran in Bihar during the British rule. The poor peasants were exploited by the cunning land owners. The lesson exposes how the British landlords made the poor and illiterate peasants sign agreements to perpetrate their exploitation. 'Indigo' becomes the symbol of exploitation and extortion and Mahatma Gandhi the Champion of the struggle against extortion and exploitation. The lesson also shows how Gandhi was able to unite the peasants, liberate them from the fear of the British rule of repression and create in them the feeling of self reliance. Louis Fisher also shows here how Gandhiji's stay of more than seven months in Champaran proved to be a 'turning point in the history of Indian struggle for freedom' as it was here that Gandhi for the first time used his most potent weapons of Civil disobedience and Non-Violence with incredible success.

Glossary:

delegate (n)	-	representative to a convention
emaciated (v)	-	weakened
resolute (adj)	-	determined, firm of purpose
complied (v)	-	acted in accordance with request or command
conferred (v)	-	consulted, made a decision, bestowed
grievance (n)	-	cause for complaint, dissatisfaction
vehement (adj)	-	very emotional, ardent, strong forceful, intense
defender (n)	-	protector
filthy (adj)	-	very offensive, very dirty
trench (n)	-	a long narrow and usually deep ditch

ACTIVITY 1: COMPREHENSION:

A. State whether the following statements are True or False. Write 'T' for true and 'F' for false.

1. Raj Kumar Shukla was a landlord.
2. Gandhiji went to Champaran on his own to begin the Civil Disobedience Movement.

3. All the peasants of Champaran agreed to sign a contract with the British landlords for compensation.
4. Gandhiji did not want to meet Prof. Malkani and Dr. Rajendra Prasad.
5. Gandhiji was a lawyer so he did not scold the lawyers for charging heavy fee from poor peasants.
6. Gandhiji helped the poor peasants in their upliftment, by making them aware about education, hygiene, fundamental rights, and self reliance.
7. Champaran was Gandhiji's Water-loo.

B. Answer the following questions in about 20-30 words each:

1. Why did Raj Kumar Shukla approach Gandhiji?
2. What were the terms of contract between British landlords and peasants?
3. Why did Gandhiji not agree to proceed to Champaran with Raj Kumar Shukla immediately?
4. What happened when Gandhiji and Raj Kumar Shukla wanted to meet Rajendra Prasad?
5. Why did Gandhiji plan to go to Muzzafarpur?
6. What was the effect of synthetic indigo on natural indigo crop?
7. How did British landlords compel poor peasants?
8. Why did Gandhiji scold the lawyers?
9. How did the Champaran episode prove to be a turning point in the political career of Gandhiji?
10. What did Gandhiji do for social upliftment of the poor families of peasants?

C. Answer the following questions in about 60-80 words each:

1. How did Gandhiji help the peasants in Champaran?
2. Explain in your own words, how Raj Kumar Shukla convinced Gandhiji to proceed to Champaran?
3. Why did Gandhiji decide to consult Prof. Malkani and Dr. Rajendra Prasad?
4. What were the old terms and conditions of the contract between the British landlord and the peasants?
5. What was the impact of the Champaran episode on the peasants and the British government?

ACTIVITY 2: VOCABULARY:

(a) Given below are some phrasal verbs. Consult a dictionary and use each of them in a sentence:

act upon, add up to, aim at, argue down, ask after, back down, back out, back up, bring up and bring about

(b) Given below are some confusing words. Consult a dictionary and use each of them in a sentence:

A	B
1. a lot	allot
2. a while	awhile
3. adapt	adept and adopt
4. amused	bemused
5. apart	a part
6. braise	braze

ACTIVITY 3: SPEECH ACTIVITY:

1. Draft a speech on non-violence as a potent weapon for world peace.
2. Prepare a speech for your prayer assembly on the role of the revolutionary leaders of the Indian Freedom Struggle.

ACTIVITY 4: COMPOSITION:

1. Write a letter to the editor of the Indian Express about the exploitation of Indigo farmers at the hands of the English landlords on the basis of this lesson.
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