

100 Years of Champaran and a Forgotten Figure

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This week marks the centenary of Gandhi's arrival in Bihar to address the concerns of indigo farmers in the Champaran district. The foundations for the success of the Champaran satyagraha were laid by Rajkumar Shukla, the man who was instrumental in bringing Gandhi to the district but has not received the credit due to him in historical writings.

Over a period of nearly three decades, Gandhi led many campaigns to emancipate India from colonial rule. The first such movement which also went some way in establishing his political reputation, started with his arrival in Champaran to attend to the problems of the indigo farmers in April 1917.

Indigo and Abuse

India was one of the earliest producers of indigo, which was used for dyeing a variety of textiles. But the modern story of Indian indigo is intimately tied with the global fortunes of European colonialism. In the 18th century, North American and West Indian plantations based on slave labour were a major source of indigo for Britain. By the end of the 18th century, these supplies were affected by American war of independence of 1776, slave revolts in the Caribbean, as well as the higher profitability of sugar. As a result, the British sought their indigo from Bengal and introduced newer varieties and processing techniques to improve production. They also increased their profits by the expedient of brutal force. Their rank exploitation of the peasantry gained public attention due to Dinabandhu Mitra's play *Nil Darpan*. The oppression of Bengali peasants was so severe that an English district magistrate testified to the Indigo Commission in 1860 that "not a chest of indigo reached England without being stained with human blood". A series of rebellions against the forced indigo cultivation tried to resist the abuse. It is in this context of unrest in Bengal that

indigo became significant in the Champaran region of Bihar.

The Permanent Settlement gave a few zamindars the control of Champaran, with the Bettiah Estate owning about half the villages in the region. The profligate ways of the Bettiah zamindar and the financial mismanagement of his estate led to his being heavily in debt. This eventually led to European planters being allowed to lease and control much of the cultivable land in the region. The result was that the unequal nature of the traditional relationship between the cultivator and the landlord became even more acute. Land-based buccaneers out to quickly amass a fortune, the planters also became virtual rulers who dispensed rough and ready justice. They subjected the peasants to multiple forms of exploitation and imposed their brutal will through violence perpetrated by musclemen. The planters and their henchmen illegally collected as many as 40 different types of *abwab* or cesses, which were imposed at will on the peasants. These included payments for the purchase of horses or motor vehicles by the planter. However, of the many customary and legal arrangements imposed on the peasant, the most hated was the *tinkathia*. In essence, the practice of *tinkathia* gave the planter the power to force a peasant to grow indigo on three *kathas* (per bigha) of their land.

Their racism apart, the despotism of the planters was also an outcome of the inherent risk in indigo trade where the returns dramatically varied from year to year. Towards the end of the 19th century, the profits of the Champaran planter took a severe hit with the invention of synthetic dyes in Germany. The easy availability of a cheaper substitute forced the global market for natural indigo into a secular decline. Legal terms and debts had locked cultivators into long-term agreements with the planters, often for as long as 20 years. Now in the face of falling profits, the planters began to demand a heavy compensation to release peasants from the dreaded *tinkathia* agreement imposed on them. However, with the outbreak of the World War I in 1914, the German supplies were disrupted and Champaran indigo became exceedingly profitable for a brief period. Nevertheless, none of the new profits trickled down to the cultivator. Enmeshed in such an exploitative legal and social regime, the Champaran peasant had little recourse to justice.

The historical narrative of the events of 1917 is rather well-known and can be very briefly summarised thus. Upon arriving in Champaran, Gandhi sought to witness and understand the state of affairs for himself. Served with an order of externment from the district, Gandhi introduced a new innovation into Indian public life. He refused to obey the order and also pleaded guilty to the charge of disobedience when hauled before the court. The local administration was at its wits end in the face of this novel approach and was eventually ordered by the Lieutenant-Governor to withdraw the case against Gandhi. Armed with this

moral victory, Gandhi and his newly found colleagues recorded thousands of statements from peasants who overcame the fear of reprisals to depose against the planters. Eventually, an enquiry committee was appointed with Gandhi as a member, tinkathia was abolished and Gandhi's Champaran satyagraha passed into legend.

Revisiting Gandhi's Leadership

As much as it has been celebrated in historiography, Gandhi's leadership of peasant causes has also been denounced and criticised. In a very broad sense, the critics can be grouped into two categories. The first of such approaches—exemplified by the Cambridge school—questions the motives of the leaders of the Indian struggle against British rule. In this view, the primary motivation was not the high value of a thirst for freedom and justice, but a rather base desire to enhance one's social and economic standing. For instance, in the case of Champaran it has been suggested that the upper caste agitators against the planters were motivated by the desire to be able to freely exploit the hapless peasants on their own terms. This is a rather derogatory interpretation of the fact that many individuals gave up comfortable careers, spent years in prison and subjected themselves and their families to much material privation.

The obverse of this approach has been a variety of devices employed to diminish the deprivations of colonialism. Thus, in the well-known study *Champaran and Gandhi: Planters, Peasants and Gandhian Politics*, the French historian Jacques Pouchepadass blames Champaran zamindars for setting a bad example. "A planter", Pouchepadass argues, "who in England would have been ashamed of the means which he employed, nonetheless resorted to them in India, because they were common in the indigenous milieu". Wholly sympathetic to the poor planters' predicament, Pouchepadass goes on to note that "there is no dearth of evidence concerning the paternal relations existing between the planters and his raiyats, and the humanitarian assistance which he dispensed to them in times of trial". Presumably this fact was so self-evident that he did not deem it necessary to proffer any evidence for such a claim.

The other approach that spans the left-subaltern spectrum of historical analysis argues that the Gandhian mass mobilisation only served to preserve the unequal class structure in the Indian countryside and thereby nullified the revolutionary potential of the peasantry. Much as one may disagree with this assessment, it merits a closer examination than that of the Cambridge School. Although a detailed analysis of Gandhi's position on zamindari and

peasant-landlord relations is outside our purview here, in Champaran, the goals were of a limited nature. It must be remembered that as a new arrival on the Indian political scene and an outsider in Bihar, Gandhi had very limited manpower and resources at his disposal. In fact, just two months prior to his arrival, Gandhi did not even know where Champaran was located. While it is true that in the 1930s and 1940s one sees a great divergence between the conservative Bihar Congress leadership and the peasant militancy of the Kisan Sabha, it is historically incorrect to apply this class divide to the Gandhian challenge to European planters in Champaran in 1917.

There were multiple events of sporadic protest against the planters in the years prior to Gandhi's arrival in Champaran, many of which would qualify as subaltern protests from below. But, independent of the moral undesirability of violent protest without a coherent objective, it is hardly the case that these constituted a truly revolutionary scenario in the Bihar countryside. As a new entrant on the Indian political scene, Gandhi could scarcely be expected to take on the wider and more serious challenge of entirely reworking the agrarian power structure in the region. In any event, both schools of critics fail to accord importance to the many novel ideas that Gandhi introduced into public action in Champaran. Just to consider one such factor, it is no mean feat to embolden an oppressed peasantry to testify against the planters at grave risk of personal harm.

Gandhi's success in Champaran was quickly followed by his decisive interventions in his home state of Gujarat, that is, the agrarian satyagraha of Kheda and his fast on behalf of striking mill workers in Ahmedabad. These events launched Gandhi's Indian career and the story of Champaran itself got fused into the large nationalist narrative of the struggle for freedom. This is particularly the case since many stalwarts of the Congress such as J B Kripalani and Rajendra Prasad entered public life during the Champaran campaign. In this context, in this centenary year, it is perhaps fruitful to revisit the local history of Gandhi's Champaran satyagraha.

If Gandhi's personality and political skill were major factors, the foundations for the success of the Champaran satyagraha were laid by another individual, Raj Kumar Shukla. The commonly held perception of Shukla is that of an illiterate peasant who doggedly pursued Gandhi and eventually persuaded him to come to Champaran. Perhaps this view owes its origins to misreadings of Gandhi's own assessment in his autobiography wherein Shukla is described an "ignorant, unsophisticated but resolute agriculturist" who captured the Mahatma's attention. Later, in Louis Fischer's influential *Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, Shukla becomes an "illiterate but resolute" sharecropper, although Gandhi had not used the term "illiterate". But the most egregious transformation is effected in the cinematic imagination

of Richard Attenborough in the film *Gandhi*. In a three-hour blockbuster of the Mahatma's life, Attenborough makes short work of fidelity to history. Having unmoored himself from such encumbrances as facts, Attenborough seeks melodramatic effect in portraying Shukla as a weak, helpless old man whose quivering voice croaks in despair and defeat. This is pure, uncreative fiction.

Raj Kumar Shukla

Sympathetic as these portrayals are to Gandhi and India's cause for freedom, they fail to do adequate justice to the persona of Shukla. Born on 23 August 1875, at the turn of the century, Shukla worked for a period of four years for the Bettiah Estate. Contrary to popular perception, Shukla was not always a penurious peasant. Living in the west Champaran region, he had a substantial money-lending business, owned a large number of buffaloes and cattle and was a cultivator of 20 bighas of land in Belwa and Sathi. Shukla's trouble started with his refusal to pay an illegal irrigation cess that was being extorted by A C Ammon, the English manager of the Belwa indigo factory. Ammon decided to teach Shukla a lesson that would act as a deterrent against further protests. Ammon's *lathiyal* henchmen continually harrassed him and also looted and burnt down his house. A number of frivolous cases were filed against Shukla and fighting them took up a substantial amount of time and resources. In the process, as intended by Ammon, Shukla ended up in prison and his personal fortunes went into precipitous decline. Shukla's story was by no means unique and being at the receiving end of the animus of the local planter was the fate of many a Champaran resident. What is unique, perhaps, is the dogged determination and endurance with which Shukla faced the woes inflicted on him.

The cry for redress from the Champaran peasantry was mostly ignored by the colonial administration. Although the educated, urban Indian elite were a bit more sympathetic, their involvement was also on very limited terms. Similarly the local newspapers were wary of directly opposing the powerful planters community. In this atmosphere, valuable support was provided by the Kanpur based newspaper *Pratap*, which was published by the nationalist Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi. In any event, towards the end of 1916, unable to muster adequate local support for action, Shukla headed to Lucknow for the 31st annual session of the Indian National Congress. This decision had momentous consequences in the following year.

As evidenced in his letters from early 1917, Gandhi's early perception of Shukla was not

altogether positive. Apart from Shukla's inability to answer the many probing legal questions posed by the Mahatma, their difficulty in communication was also an important factor. The two men belonged to distinct linguistic backgrounds. Gandhi spoke Gujarati and, at that point, had limited facility with Hindi. Shukla was a native speaker of Bhojpuri, a language distinct from Hindi. Indeed, since Shukla spoke only rudimentary Hindi and could not write in Devanagari, his well-known letter to Gandhi reminding the latter of his promise to visit Champaran was actually penned by someone else. That individual was another champion of Champaran peasants, the largely forgotten Pir Mohammad "Munis". A teacher in Bettiah, Munis had written a number of articles in *Pratap* from 1914 which vividly portrayed the oppression inflicted by the planters. Owing to such activities, Munis lost his job, was imprisoned in 1918 and spent a life in penury.

But to return to our story, while he did not write in Hindi, Shukla was not ignorant or illiterate. The evidence for this is the diary he maintained of his activities. Shukla's Bhojpuri diary was written in the Kaithi script which was prevalent till it was eventually displaced by the more familiar Devanagari. In recent years, the Patna-based scholar Bhairab Lal Das has rendered a singular service by translating the entire contents of Shukla's diary for 1917 into contemporary Hindi, thus making it widely accessible to scholars and interested readers (Das 2014). Thus, while we have had some important appraisals of Shukla's role in the Champaran satyagraha (Mittal 1976), the pages of his 1917 diary give us a more intimate and clearer understanding of the man.

At the Lucknow session, the 41 year old Shukla was an incongruous figure. Amidst the many lawyers and zamindars who formed the official delegation from the Bihar region, Shukla was the lone person who was an "agriculturist". During the session, Shukla failed to persuade Gandhi to move a motion on the Champaran issue. Gandhi's diffidence arose out of his personal ignorance of the facts of the indigo problem. In the event, a resolution demanding an official enquiry was passed and Shukla extracted a promise from Gandhi to visit Champaran and study the problem first-hand.

The Diary

While Shukla's diary records many mundane matters, we get occasional glimpses of his role in the events as they unfolded. While the official session ended on the penultimate day of

1916, on 1 January 1917, Shukla met Gandhi in the presence of Lokmanya Tilak and Gandhi's South African colleague H S L. Polak. Perhaps we may symbolically read the event as follows: If Polak represented Gandhi's past and Tilak controlled the Indian political space at that point, it was Shukla who offered Gandhi a path into the future.

Through 1917, whenever Shukla is with Gandhi, the diary gives us a detailed listing of the individuals who arrived to meet Gandhi on a given day. For instance, we learn that Polak and Mazharul Haq arrived in Motihari on the day before Gandhi's historic arraignment in court. While much of the nationalist historiography of the freedom movement limits Shukla's historic role to that of bringing the Mahatma to Bihar, the diary provides us vital clues to the significance of his activities and the depths of his commitment. Once prosperous, Shukla was living in greatly reduced circumstances owing to the harrassment by the planter Ammon and others. Thus, for instance, we learn that when Shukla went to Calcutta to fetch Gandhi, he had to borrow money to pay for the expenses of the trip.

Independent of Gandhi's activities, throughout the year, we find Shukla constantly attending court and judicial proceedings in multiple locations. In order to create an atmosphere of fear and obedience, the planters often foisted criminal cases against recalcitrant individuals. Invariably, we find Shukla present in court to lend his support to these unfortunate individuals in their moments of hardship. Amongst the many significant events in Champaran, the arrival of large crowds to greet the unknown Mahatma is often portrayed as an inexplicable phenomenon. But Shukla's years of fighting for the cause of justice on numerous occasions is an important ingredient in this "magical" mobilisation of the masses. A most vital clue is offered in his diary. Upon arriving in Patna on 10 April 1917, Gandhi moves to Muzzafarpur on 11 April. Between 2 April and 19 April, that is, for a whole week, Shukla leaves Gandhi's company and travels extensively in the area. Although he does not detail his activities in this period, he had undoubtedly spent this vital week mobilising the Champaran peasantry and exhorting them to join hands in a common fight. Indeed, while Gandhi's extensive use of the vast railway network of the raj has been remarked upon on many occasions, Shukla's use of the railways in the Champaran belt is of a similar nature. We find him constantly on the move, often making his journeys at night to avoid attracting attention of the planter's informants in the Belwa region. Shukla's efforts are particularly remarkable since he was unwell during this early period of mobilisation and was also sick on many occasions throughout the year.

With the end of Gandhi's Champaran campaign and departure from the region, Shukla was left to soldier on as best as possible. About a decade later, on 20 May 1929, having recently visited Gandhi at Sabarmati, an unwell Raj Kumar Shukla passed away. As an upper caste

local leader he did not qualify as a subaltern. At the same time, as a rustic unused to modern ways, he was not deemed important enough amongst the nascent Congress leadership of the 1920s. As a result, the public memory of Shukla has been limited to his persuading Gandhi to visit Champaran.

Unsung

Shukla was also a product of his times. Throughout his diary we find repeated evidence of a strict adherence to the dietary restrictions and rules of commensality that Brahmins of his time followed. It is also true that his personal sense of injustice at the hands of Ammon and the colonial dispensation was a powerful motivating factor. In seeking redress for himself, Shukla quickly widened the meaning of his life's work. In championing the cause of justice for others in a similar predicament, he became a lightning rod of the planters' ire and paid a great personal price.

The Champaran campaign was itself a short one and rapidly achieved its primary objective of the end of tinkathia. But by no means did it fully emancipate the peasantry of the region. Similarly, Gandhi's attempts at constructive work through the setting up of three schools in the region met with local indifference and very little success. While it attracted volunteers from afar, these efforts collapsed once Gandhi returned to Ahmedabad to attend to other issues demanding his attention. Nevertheless, a recognition of the limits of the achievements of the Champaran satyagraha should not blind us to its significance. In an atmosphere of fear and oppression that ruled the land, the end of tinkathia was a major psychological victory. Champaran was the pivot around which history turned and India was eventually liberated.

As we commemorate the contributions of Shukla, Gandhi and many others, it would also be worthwhile to reflect on the meaning of the Champaran satyagraha for our own times. In 1917, the oppressive European planter stood as an accused in the court of Indian public opinion. A hundred years hence, perhaps we may ponder the unenviable fate of the peasant in an independent India.

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