



Introduction

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Chapter 5: Indigo

By- Louis Fischer

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Summary

1. Rajkumar Shukla 'The Resolute Peasant':

Gandhi starts narrating the incident which made him decide to spur the exit of the British from India. The incident occurred in 1917. Gandhi had gone to the December 1916 annual convention of the Indian National Congress Party in Lucknow. A poor and emaciated peasant, Rajkumar Shukla, approached Gandhi there. Shukla was one of the sharecroppers of Champaran. Shukla wanted Gandhi to visit his district and look into the condition of the peasants there. He came to the Congress Session to complain about the injustice of the landlord system in Bihar.

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Gandhi had other commitments but Shukla accompanied him everywhere for weeks, he never left Gandhi's side. Gandhi was very impressed by his tenacity and agreed to accompany him to Champaran. He told him to come to Calcutta and take him from there. When Gandhi went to Calcutta after some months, he found Shukla already present there.

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2. Visit to Rajendra Prasad's House and then to Muzaffarpur:

Shukla and Gandhi went to Patna, Bihar, to meet a lawyer named Rajendra Prasad, the man who later became the President of the Congress Party and of India. Rajendra Prasad was out of town. The servants knew Shukla as a poor peasant who pestered their master to help the indigo sharecroppers. As Gandhi accompanied him, they thought him to be another farmer. Gandhi was not allowed to drink water from the well as they thought he was an untouchable.

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Gandhi decided to visit Muzaffarpur before Champaran to obtain more complete information about the conditions prevalent in the area.

Gandhi sent a telegram to Professor JB Kriplani, who received them at the station with a large body of students. Gandhi stayed in Muzaffarpur for two days in the home of Professor Malkani, a government school teacher.

He recalled that his stay in the house of a government servant was an extraordinary thing in those days'. In smaller localities, the Indians were afraid to show sympathy for advocates of home rule.

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3. Gandhi Scolded the Lawyers:

The news of Gandhi's arrival spread like wildfire. Sharecroppers from Champaran began arriving in large numbers. Muzaffarpur lawyers met Gandhi. They told him about their cases and reported the size of their fee.

Gandhi scolded the lawyers for collecting a huge fee from the poor sharecroppers. Gandhi concluded that the peasants were so crushed and fear-stricken that going to law courts was useless. The real relief for them was to be free from fear.

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4. The Sharecropping Arrangement:

Most of the land fit for cultivation in Champaran was divided into large estates owned by Englishmen. They forced the Indian tenants to plant 15% of their holdings with indigo and surrender the entire indigo harvest as rent.

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After the landlords learned that Germany had developed synthetic indigo, they asked for compensation from the sharecroppers for being released from the 15% arrangement. The sharecropping arrangement was irksome and so many peasants signed willingly.

However, some of them engaged lawyers. Meanwhile, the news of synthetic indigo reached the sharecroppers and they felt cheated, unhappy and then became resentful. They wanted their money back.

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5. Gandhi Disobeys the Official Order:

It was amidst such chaos that Gandhi arrived in Champaran. He visited the Secretary of the British landlord's association in order to piece together all the facts. He was met with resistance. The Secretary told him that no information would be given to an outsider. Gandhi answered that he was no outsider. He then visited the British Commissioner. Gandhi reported that he was bullied and asked to leave Tirhut.

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Gandhi proceeded to Motihari, the capital of it Champaran. A vast multitude greeted him. Using a house as headquarters, he continued his investigations. A report came that a peasant had been maltreated in a nearby village. Gandhi decided to check the matter himself.

On the way, he was ordered by a police superintendent's messenger to return to the town. Thereafter, he was served with an official notice to quit Champaran. Gandhi signed a receipt of the notice and further wrote that he would disobey the order. As a result, he was summoned to appear in the court the next day.

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6. Spontaneous Demonstration of the Peasants:

Gandhi could not sleep the whole night. He telegraphed Rajendra Prasad to come from Patna with influential friends and sent instructions to the ashram. He also wired a full report to the Viceroy.

Next day, several thousand peasants reached Motihari and started demonstrating around the courthouse. They had merely heard that a certain Mahatma who wanted to help them was in trouble with the authorities. Gandhi felt that this was the beginning of their liberation from fear of the British

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The officials felt powerless, but Gandhi helped them regulate the crowd. He gave them proof that the British tyranny will no longer be borne. The government was baffled.

The trial was postponed. Gandhi protested against the delay. He confessed that he broke the law but only because of the voice of his conscience. The magistrate announced a two hour recess and asked Gandhi to get a bail prepared. Gandhi refused. The judge didn't deliver the judgement for days and Gandhi was allowed to remain at liberty.

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7. Gandhi Influences the Lawyers:

Rajendra Prasad, along with many prominent lawyers, conferred with Gandhi. Gandhi asked them what they would do if he was sent to jail. The senior lawyer replied that they were there to help Gandhi; if he was arrested, they would go home. Gandhi reprimanded them about the injustice to the sharecroppers.

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The lawyers consulted among themselves. They thought that when Gandhi, a total stranger, was ready to go to jail for the sake of the peasants in their region, it would be shameful for them if they left the peasants, whom these lawyers claimed to serve.

They told Gandhi that they were ready to follow him to jail. Gandhi exclaimed, 'The battle of Champaran is won'.

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8. Civil Disobedience Triumphs, Lieutenant-Governor Summons Gandhi:

Gandhi was informed that the Lieutenant-Governor of the province had ordered the case to be dropped. Civil disobedience had triumphed for the first time in modern India. Inquiries into the grievances of the farmers over a wide area began. About ten thousand testimonials were reported. Notes were made of the evidence. The whole area throbbed with activity and the landlords protested vehemently against the inquiries.

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In June, the Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Edward Gait, summoned Gandhi. Gandhi laid out detailed plans for civil disobedience if he did not return from the summons. The Lieutenant-Governor, after having four protracted meetings with Gandhi, appointed an official commission to enquire into the situation. Gandhi was the sole representative of the peasants in the commission.

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9. Gandhi Agrees to 25% Compensation:

The evidence against the landlords was overwhelming. They asked Gandhi how much they should repay. They thought he would demand full repayment of the money which was illegally and deceitfully extorted from the sharecroppers. Gandhi asked for only 50%. The landlords offered to refund 25%. To everybody's surprise, Gandhi agreed.

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Gandhi explained that the amount of the refund was not important. What mattered was that the landlords were obliged to surrender part of the money, and with it, part of their prestige. The planters behaved as lords above the law, but after this incident, the peasants saw that they had rights and persons to defend them. They learned courage.

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10. The Poor Conditions of Champaran and Gandhi's Typical Methods:

Gandhi wanted to do something about the cultural and social backwardness in the Champaran villages immediately. He called for volunteers to help. His wife Kasturba and his youngest son also arrived to help. Primary schools were opened in six villages. Kasturba taught the ashram rules on personal cleanliness and community sanitation. Castor oil, quinine and sulphur ointment were given to the ailing.

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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. She showed her that there were no boxes or cupboards for clothes. The sari that she was wearing was the only one she had.

Gandhi kept a long distance watch on the ashram. He sent regular instructions by post and asked for financial accounts. The Champaran episode was a turning point in Gandhi's life. He explained that what he did was an ordinary thing. He declared that the British could not order him about in his own country.

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Champaran was an attempt to free the poor peasants from exploitation and it didn't begin as an act of defiance. This was the typical Gandhi pattern. His politics were intertwined with the practical day-to-day problems of the millions.

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11. Self-reliance-The Making of a Free Indian:

In all the things that Gandhi did, he tried to mould a new free Indian, who could stand on his own feet and thus make India free. Charles Freer Andrews, an English pacifist, who had become a devoted follower of Gandhi, came to bid him goodbye. Gandhi's lawyer friends wanted Andrews to help them. Gandhi strongly opposed the suggestion.

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According to him, asking for Andrews' help was showing the weakness of their hearts. He assured them the cause was just and they must rely upon themselves to win the battle.

Gandhi in this way taught them a lesson on self-reliance. Self-reliance, Indian independence and help to the sharecroppers were all bound together.

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Conclusion

To sum up, Indigo summary, we learn how Gandhiji did not merely help in freeing India, but was always working for the betterment of his countrymen from the very start.

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