

LESSON - 5

INDIGO

About the author

Louis Fischer (1896-1970) was born in Philadelphia. He served as a volunteer in the British Army between 1918 and 1920. Fischer made a career as a journalist and wrote for The New York Times, The Saturday Review and for European and Asian publications. He was also a member of the faculty at Princeton University. The following is an excerpt from his book- The Life of Mahatma Gandhi. The book has been reviewed as one of the best books ever written on Gandhi by Times Educational Supplement.



INTRODUCTION

This chapter is an excerpt from Louis Fischer's famous book 'The Life of Mahatma Gandhi'. The writer observed Gandhiji's work to fight for the cause of the voiceless, downtrodden Indians who reeled (moved) under the rule of the indifferent, oppressive colonial British rule. 'Indigo' is one of the many episodes of Gandhi's long political struggle. The chapter describes the Champaran visit of Mahatma Gandhi which was undertaken casually on the entreaty (request) of a poor peasant, Rajkumar Shukla, in the expectation that it would last a few days, occupied almost a year of Gandhi's life. The story describes Gandhiji's struggle for the cause of the sharecroppers of Bihar and how he asked the Britishers to leave the country. It highlights the leadership shown by Gandhi to secure justice for oppressed people.

CHARACTERS AND PLACES

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| Gandhiji | : | A prominent political leader of India (The Father of The Nation). |
| Rajkumar Shukla | : | A poor, emaciated (lean and thin) but resolute peasant of Champaran. |
| Rajendra Prasad | : | A lawyer who later became the First President of India. |
| J.B. Kripalani | : | A professor of the Arts College in Muzzafarpur. |
| Malkani | : | A Government school teacher. |
| Sir Edward Gait | : | The Lieutenant Governor. |
| Kasturba bai | : | Gandhi's wife. |
| Devdas | : | Gandhi's youngest son. |
| Mahadev Desai and Narhari Parikh | : | Volunteer doctor. |
| Charles Freer Andrews | : | A follower of Gandhi |

BACKGROUND

Louis Fischer reviews 'The Life of Mahatama' observing closely 'The Champaran episode'. A simple peasant's entreaty brings the historical change to learn courage and self-reliance to protest against the wrong doers for their rights.

GIST OF THE LESSON

- Gandhiji went to attend Annual Convention of Indian National Congress at Lucknow in December 1916.
- During the proceedings, a peasant from Champaran, named Rajkumar Shukla met him.
- Under an ancient arrangement, Champaran peasants were sharecroppers.
- Rajkumar Shukla was one of them. He was illiterate but resolute.
- He didn't leave Gandhiji until he agreed to visit Champaran.
- Gandhiji would be in Calcutta on a certain date. Shukla received him from there and then they boarded into the train to Patna.
- Shukla first took Gandhiji to the house of a lawyer named Rajendra Prasad who later became the President of Indian Natinal Congress and India.

- Rajendra Prasad was out of the town and his servant didn't allow Gandhiji to draw water from the well thinking him to be an untouchable.
- Gandhiji first decided to go to Muzzafarpur. He was received by Prof. J. B. Kriplani of Arts College, at the railway station.
- Gandhiji stayed at the house of Prof. Malkani for two days.
- It was an extraordinary thing for Prof. Malkani to harbor Gandhiji because in smaller localities people were afraid to show sympathy for the advocates for home rule.
- As soon as Gandhiji reached Champaran, people went to see him.
- The lawyers told Gandhiji that they represented peasant groups in the court and also reported the size of their fee.
- Gandhiji chided the lawyers for collecting such a big fee and told them its no use taking their cases to the law courts.
- The chief commercial crop in Champaran was Indigo. The landlords compelled all tenants to plant three twentieths or 15 % of their holdings with indigo and surrender the entire indigo harvest as rent.
- Meanwhile Germany developed synthetic Indigo. The landlords asked the peasants to pay them compensation for being released from the 15% agreement.
- Later when the peasants came to know about the synthetic Indigo, they wanted their money back. Gandhiji reached Champaran at this stage.
- Gandhiji first went to the Secretary of the British Landlord's association and then to the British Official Commissioner of Tirhut Division. None of them helped Gandhiji instead he was asked to leave Tirhut. But Gandhiji, instead of leaving Tirhut, went to Motihari.
- There again he got an official notice to quit Champaran. Gandhiji signed a receipt for the order but he wrote on the back that he would disobey the order.
- In consequence, he got summons to appear in the court.
- Gandhiji informed all about it and the next morning all the people gathered in the court premises.
- The officials felt powerless without Gandhiji's cooperation.
- Gandhiji helped them to regulate the crowd but he had given them proof that their might could be questioned.
- Gandhiji told the court that he was caught in a conflict of duties. On the one hand, he didn't want to set a bad example as a law breaker and on the other hand, he wanted to do national and humanitarian service.
- When the court was reconvened, the judge said the he would deliver the judgement several days later and meanwhile he allowed Gandhiji to be at liberty.
- Later the Lt. Governor ordered the case to be dropped against him and it proved to be the first victory of Civil Disobedience in Modern India.
- In June Gandhiji was summoned by Sir Edward Gait. They had four protracted meetings as a result of which an enquiry commission was set up.
- The enquiry brought crushing mountain of evidences against the big planters.
- Gandhiji asked 50% refund but the planters wanted to pay only 25%.
- Gandhiji agreed even to that. He said the amount of 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.
- Gandhiji was also concerned about the social and economical backwardness of Champaran villages. He appealed to the people to volunteer their services.
- Primary schools were opened in six villages. Kasturba Bai taught the ashram rules on personal cleanliness and community sanitation.
- Health conditions were also miserable. Three medicines were available- castor oil, quinine and sulphur ointment.
- Gandhiji's politics was intertwined with the practical day to day problems of the millions. His was not a loyalty to abstractions; his was the loyalty to living human beings.
- Gandhiji's lawyer friends wanted Charles Freer Andrews who was Gandhiji's devoted follower to stay in Champaran and help them but Gandhiji was vehemently opposed. He told them to rely on themselves instead of seeking a prop in Mr. Andrews.

THEME OF THE LESSON

This story revolves around the issues of help to sharecroppers, Indian independence and self-reliance. Gandhi ji visited Champaran at the entreaty of a peasant named Rajkumar Shukla to remove sharecropping system from Champaran. In his attempt to do this Gandhi ji taught them self-reliance as well. Moreover, he also had the first victory of Civil Disobedience Movement in this process.

SETTING

Champaran is located in the foothills of the towering Himalayas near the kingdom of Nepal where most of the action takes place. Apart from this, some other parts of Bihar also find a mention in it

MESSAGE OF THE LESSON

The story 'Indigo' highlights the unequal economic system that existed during colonial British rule. It resulted in Indian peasants suffering, while the British planters exploited them. It also highlights the importance of Gandhi's decision to take up their case, which exposed the unjust system.

Answer the following questions in 30 to 40 words.

1. Why was Gandhiji not allowed to draw water from the well?

Ans. Gandhi ji was very simple in his dress and manners. He was thin of body and had a dark complexion. The servants had never seen him. They mistook Gandhi ji an untouchable. They didn't want to get well water polluted by allowing him to draw water out from the well. So they did not allow Gandhi ji to draw water out from the well.

2. Where did Gandhiji go from Patna? What did he do there?

Ans. In order to get complete and true information about the peasant's condition of Champaran, Gandhiji went to Muzzafarpur. His mission was to free the farmers from the injustice of the British landlords. He was received by professor J.B. Koiplani at the railway station with a large number of students. He stayed there for two days and received much more information about the share croppers of Champaran.

3. What did the Muzzafarpur lawyers brief Gandhi ji about Champaran peasants?

Ans. Just after reaching Muzzafarpur, Gandhi ji started collecting information about Champaran share croppers. Muzzafarpur lawyer came to brief Gandhi ji about their cases of Champaran peasants. They also reported about the size of the fees they charged from the peasants for which Gandhi ji scolded them.

4. Why did Gandhiji conclude that they should stop going to courts taking such cases of Champaran peasants?

Ans. Gandhiji found that the farmers of Champaran were badly crushed by the British landlords. There were afraid of Britishers. Gandhiji found that the law courts could not make them free from fear. So he concluded that the lawyers should stop going to the courts.

5. Why was Gandhiji told to leave Tirhut immediately?

Ans. Gandhi ji was told to leave Tirhut because he tried to collect facts from the secretary of the British Landlords Association. He considered Gandhiji as an outsider and denied to give him any information. The British official commissioner bullied Gandhi ji and advised him to leave Tirhut at once. The messenger of Police Superintendent took him back and a court notice was issued to him.

6. Why did the officials at Motihare feel powerless without Gandhi's help?

Ans. The Champaran farmers heard that a Mahatma who had come to help them was in trouble with the authorities. By the next morning the whole of Motihari was crowded with the farmers. Their spontaneous demonstration, in thousands around the court house, made the officials feel powerless. They requested Gandhi ji to help them regulate the crowd.

7. What did Gandhi ji do to do away with the cultures and social backwardness in the Champaran villages?

Ans. Gandhi ji appealed for teachers to do away with the social and cultural backwardness. The two new young disciples, Mahadev Desai and Narshare Parikh with their wives, volunteered for the work. Several more from Bombay, Poona and other distant places joined. Devdas and his mother Kasturbai also joined. She taught the rules of cleanliness and community sanitation.

8. What was done to improve the miserable health condition?

Ans. A doctor volunteered his services for six months. There were three medicines available – castor oil, quinine and ointment. Persons with coated tongue were given a dose of castor oil. Those with malaria fever got quinine plus castor oil. Others with skin eruptions got ointment plus castor oil. Mrs. Gandhi taught women individual and general cleanliness.

9. How was Gandhiji able to influence lawyers? Give instances.

Ans. Gandhiji's sincerity of purpose, convincing argumentation and a logical approach deeply influenced the lawyers chiding them for over charging the peasants. He encouraged them to court arrest for the poor peasant's cause, if he himself got imprisoned. He opposed even seeking help from Mr. Andrews in their battle with Britishers.

10. How did the Champaran episode change the plight of the peasants?

Ans. The Champaran episode released the peasants from the mortal fear of British Landlords and made them aware of their rights. Apart from getting back 25% of the compensation money, they also learnt 'courage'. The episode thus marked a beginning of the cultural, social and economic transformation of the poor and exploited peasants of Champaran. Within a few years, the British planters abandoned their estates, which reverted to the peasants.

11. "Freedom from fear is more important than legal justice for the poor". Comment.

Ans. Securing legal justice in one single specific episode would have resulted in limited short term benefits. But getting over perpetual fear of the oppressors as in the case of Champaran episode brought about a permanent attitudinal change that helped the farmers face life more boldly and live it more fruitfully. Hence freedom from fear is more important.

12. What made Mahatma Gandhi ji declares 'the battle of Champaran is won'?

Ans. When the lawyers reconsidered their decision about their course of action in the event of Gandhiji's arrest, they volunteered to court arrest for the cause of the share croppers. Gandhiji was very pleased and he expressed his satisfaction with these words of "the battle of Champaran is won".

Answer the following questions in 100 to 120 words.

1. "Freedom from fear is more important than legal justice for the poor." Do you think that the poor of India are free from fear after Independence?

Ans. It is true that legal justice is important for the citizen of a country. But freedom from fear is more important. It is because of the fear, everyone whether rich or poor, develops a sense that something enormously wrong and dangerous or even fatal is going on. The fear of any kind harasses the person and mass his capabilities, energies, happiness and even the peace of mind.

During the settlement of the refund amount representatives of the landlord were afraid how much around. They must have to refund. Similarly the Indian farmers were afraid of the torture of British planters. In small localities no one was ready to give shelter to the lawyers. Gandhi ji tried his best to free them from the fear of Britishers.

After Independence there is a great change in the social system. The poor and untouchable classes are now enjoying more freedom. They are participating in every field of social, culture and national life. Yet we can see that they are always afraid of communal riots, exploitation, negligence, poverty, corruption, disease, ill health, regionalism etc. Politicians, bureaucrats and the rich create havoc. That's why for the success of democracy freedom from fear is the primary need.

2. How was the Champaran episode a turning point in Gandhi's life?

OR

Why do you think Gandhi considered the Champaran episode to be a turning – point in his life?

Ans. Champaran episode was a turning point in the life of Gandhi ji. He became successful to give courage to the millions of people. The farmers were suffering from tyranny of the Britishers. They ill-treated them. They illegally and deceitfully compelled them to surrender 15% earnings of their total holdings as a rent. Gandhi ji efforts helped them to get rid of this problem. British planters abandoned their estates within a few years. Civil Disobedience won victory for the first time and paved way for freedom.

Gandhi ji brought not only political and economic solution for the farmers but also took their cultural and social upliftment. They were made conscious of personal cleanliness and community sanitation. They were provided schools for teaching their children. Doctors were managed for improving the health. Gandhi ji aimed at growing self – reliance among Indians. Thousands of people demonstrated spontaneously against Britishers. Gandhi ji made the British authorities realized that their power could be challenged by Indians. He tried to mould a new free Indian who could stand on his feet. The Champaran episode gave Gandhi ji self – confidence and direction to launch freedom movement throughout the country.

3. Why was the official Inquiry commission appointed? What did the findings of the commission reveal? What was its impact on British planters?

Ans. British planters were exploiting the sharecroppers Gandhi ji complained against the condition of share cropper then Sir Edward Gait, the Lieutenant Governor appointed a commission to know the situation of indigo cultivators. The commission consisted of landlords, Govt. officials, and Gandhi ji as the sole representative of the farmers.

The commissions found that the planters had collected money illegally and deceitfully from the sharecroppers. They found huge evidence against the big planters. They all agreed to make refunds to the peasants. Gandhi ji demanded 50% but the representative of the landlord offered to return to the extent of 25% which Gandhi ji accepted to break the deadlock.

This settlement was adopted unanimously by the commission. To Gandhi ji the amount was less important. More important was, the landlords had been obliged to surrender part of the money and with it part of indigo – their prestige. The British planters who had been behaving as lords above law for a long time, had to abandon their estates within a few years which reverted to the farmers. Indigo sharecropping disappeared. Now the farmers saw that they had rights and defenders. They learned courage.

4. Write a brief note on the sharecropping system in Champaran.

Ans. There were big indigo estates in the district of Champaran. All these belonged to the British planters. The peasants working on these estates were all Indians. By an ancient long – term contract, the planters had bound the farmers to a cruel system. Under this agreement, the peasants had to plant indigo on fifteen percent of the land. The entire product went as rent to the landlords. This system was irksome to the farmers but they were helpless. Then it was known that synthetic indigo had been developed by Germany. The British planters now found that producing natural indigo on their lands was not profitable. So they forced the farmers to give compensation for releasing them from the contract. It was grave injustice and the farmers opposed it. There was a long struggle under Gandhi ji's leadership. The landlords agreed to return 25% of the compensation they had extracted illegally. Thus at last share – cropping system came to an end. By and by, the British planters left their estates. These lands now came back to the actual peasants.

5. Why was Gandhi summoned to appear in the court? How did civil disobedience triumph for the first time in India?

Ans. Gandhi had reached Motihari, the capital of Champaran, to study the problems of the sharecropper peasants. He was on his way to a neighbouring village, where a peasant was ill-treated. On the way, he was stopped by the police superintendent's messenger and ordered to return to town. When he reached home, he was served with an official notice to quit

Champaran at once. Gandhi wrote on the receipt that he would disobey the order. So Gandhi received a summon to appear in the court the next day.

Next morning the town of Motihari was black with peasants. Thousands of peasants demonstrated voluntarily outside the court. The prosecutor requested the judge to postpone the trial. Gandhi protested against the delay. He read out the statement pleading guilty. He asked the penalty. The judge announced that he would pronounce the sentence after a two-hour recess. He asked Gandhi to furnish bail for that period. Gandhi refused. The judge released him without bail. After the recess, the judge said that he would not deliver the judgment for several days. Meanwhile he allowed Gandhi to remain at liberty. Several days later Gandhi received a letter. The case against him had been dropped. Thus, civil disobedience had triumphed, for the first time in India.

6. What was the dispute between the Landlords and the Champaran peasants? What role did Gandhiji play in resolving the dispute successfully?

Ans. When the news of the synthetic indigo reached the peasants they were able to see through the manipulative game of the British landlords. Realizing that they had extorted compensation illegally and deceitfully, the peasants demanded their money back. The Landlords tried to silence the peasants with muscle power. It was at this point of time that Gandhiji arrived in Champaran. An in-depth study of the cases laid bare the blatant injustice of the Britishers. Gandhiji's thorough investigations, documentation and collection of evidence became a cause of concern for the authorities. Edwards Gait, the Lt. Governor of Bihar summoned Gandhiji and after four protracted interviews with him constituted a commission of inquiry comprising Landlords, Government officials and Gandhiji as the representative of the peasants. Gandhiji diligent collection of documents and evidence made them agree in principal to refund the money. The Landlords expected that Gandhiji would demand full repayment of the money which they had extorted from the share croppers, but Gandhiji asked for only 50% as the settlement. After some deliberation it was settled that the peasants would be refunded 25% of the money. Gandhiji accepted the settlement because he did not want a deadlock between the Landlords and the farmers. Taking it to be a victory of principal, he didn't attach much importance to the amount of money the peasants got. He gave more importance of the victory of principals. Thus the issue got resolved.

7. Why do you think Gandhi considered the Champaran episode to be a turning point in his life?

Ans. The Champaran episode began as an attempt to alleviate the distress of a large number of poor peasants. But it became a turning point in Gandhi's life. It built- up Gandhi's confidence that the British rulers could be made to bend and concede a popular demand. He declared that British could not order him in his own country. It was during this struggle in 1917 that he decided to urge the departure of the British. When he came to Champaran, he was appalled to see fear -stricken peasants and injustice of landlord system in Chamaparan. His readiness to go to jail for the sake of seeking justice instilled courage among ordinary people and motivated the lawyers for court arrest. He led civil disobedience by refusing to leave Champaran even after he got the official notice. Civil disobedience triumphed for the first time when the case for disregarding the official order against him was dropped. Britisher's agreement to pay 25 percent of the compensation made him and the peasants confident. It made the peasants realise that they had rights and defenders and he established that the authority of the British could be challenged. He taught the lawyers a lesson of self-reliance by dissuading them from seeking the assistance from an English man, Charles Andrew. Gandhi never contended himself with larger and political solutions. He also made endeavour to bring about cultural and social upliftment in the village.

8. How do we know that ordinary people too contributed to the freedom movement?

Ans. The author mentions several ordinary people who contributed to the freedom movement. Rajkumar Shukla was instrumental in arranging Gandhi's visit to Champaran. Professor Malakai, despite being a government servant, harboured Gandhi when he arrived at Muzzafarpur. When the news of Gandhi's advent spread through Muzzafarpur and Champaran,

Sharecroppers from Champaran began arriving on foot to see their champion. Their gathering in huge number at Motihari was the beginning of their freedom from the fear of the British. The lawyers also agreed to court arrest in case Gandhi went to Jail. Gandhi and the lawyers conducted a detailed inquiry into the grievances of the farmers. They prepared cases for about ten thousand peasants and collected relevant documents. Moreover, the masses volunteered to help in bringing cultural and social reforms in the village. The two young men, Mahadev Desai and Narihari Parikh and their views volunteered to work. Several people came from Bombay, Poona and other distant parts of the land. Devadas, Gandhi's youngest son arrived from the ashram. Kasturbai taught ashram rules on personal cleanliness and community sanitation.

9. Justify the appropriateness of the title "Indigo" to this extract.

Ans. The title 'Indigo' focuses our attention on the central issue of the chapter –exploitation of indigo sharecroppers at the hands of cruel British planters. Britishers compelled them through a long term agreement to plant indigo on 15 percent of their land and surrender the entire harvest as rent.

After the development of synthetic indigo by Germany, The British planters extracted money from the peasants as compensation from being released from the 15 percent agreement. The peasants who wanted their money back filed civil suits. Rajkumar Shukla persuaded Gandhi to take up the case of Indigo sharecroppers.

So indigo sharecropping exemplifies the injustice of the Britishers and Indians' submission to British authority. The exploitation of indigo sharecroppers led Gandhi to arrive in Champaran to alleviate their distress. Peasants not only got back the compensation but also became courageous and confident. They learnt the lesson of self-reliance.

The Champaran movement that centred on indigo sharecropping led to social and cultural upliftment of the peasants. Their education, health and hygiene received due attention. Thus the title 'Indigo' is highly suggestive and appropriate.

10. How did Gandhi use Satyagraha and non-violence to achieve his goal?

Ans. Non-violence and Satyagraha were the weapons used by Gandhi to secure justice for oppressed peasants of Champaran. He adopted legal, moral and democratic path of negotiation. Gandhi refused to leave Tirhut division in which Chamaparan district lay despite being told by the British official commissioner to do so. Later he defied the official order to leave Chamaparan for which he received summon to appear in the court. When the British authorities could not regulate the unmanageable crowd at Motihari, he pacified the crowd in polite and friendly way. Thus he gave concrete proof of the power of Satyagraha and non-violence.

In the court he clarified that he did not want to set a bad example as a law breaker but intended to render humanitarian and national service. His convincing argumentation baffled the magistrate who released him without the bail. Later he fought the case of the peasants peacefully by collecting evidences and the documents pertaining to the case. When the Britishers agreed to pay the compensation he peacefully negotiated with the landlords and accepted 25 percent of the amount due. So the peasants got a partial refund of the compensation with the use of Satyagraha and nonviolence.