

Flamingo Chapter-5

Indigo

-Louis Fischer

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This chapter belongs to Mahatma Gandhi, a prominent political leader of India known as 'Bapu'(The Father of The Nation). His role in the freedom movement of India is unforgettable.

About The Author

Louis Fischer was born on 29 February, 1896 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. First he worked as a school teacher. Then he served as a volunteer in the British Army during the First World War and then he made a career as a journalist and wrote for 'The New York Times', 'The Saturday Review' and for 'European and Asian Publications'. As a journalist he lived through and reported the Second World War. He was a Jewish-American who was greatly influenced by Gandhiji's use of non-violence and spiritualism as political tools. He wrote highly acclaimed books on Gandhi and Lenin. He died at the age of 73 on 15 January, 1970 in Princeton, New Jersey, USA.

About The Chapter

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 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 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.

About The Characters

Gandhiji- A prominent political leader of India (The Father of The Nation).

Rajkumar Shukla- A poor, emaciated 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.

Mahadev Desai and Narhari Parikh- Volunteer teachers.

Kasturbai- Gandhi's wife.

Devdas- Gandhi's youngest son.

Main Points

Rajkumar Shukla's request to Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi starts narrating the incident which made him decide to urge the departure of the British from India. This incident occurred in 1917.

Gandhi had gone to the December 1916 Annual Convention of the Indian National Congress Party in Lucknow. A poor, emaciated and illiterate peasant named Rajkumar Shukla came to him and requested to come to his district, Champaran. The peasants of Champaran were sharecroppers and Rajkumar Shukla was one of them. He was a resolute man who had come to the Congress Session to complain about the injustice of the landlord system in Bihar.

At that time Gandhi had an appointment and had to visit some other parts of India. Rajkumar Shukla patiently accompanied him everywhere. Impressed by his determination Gandhi agreed to accompany him to Champaran after his Calcutta visit. When Gandhi went to Calcutta after some months, he found Shukla already present there.

Gandhi on His Way to Champaran

While going to Champaran, they went to Patna to Rajendra Prasad's house. He was a lawyer of Patna who represented the cases of sharecroppers in the court. He was out of town. The servants knew Shukla so they allowed them to stay there but Gandhi was not permitted to draw water from the well taking him to be an untouchable.

Gandhi decided to visit Muzzafarpur before Champaran to obtain more information about the condition prevalent in the area. He sent a telegram to Professor J.B. Kripalani who received them at the station with a large body of students. Gandhi stayed there for two days in the home of professor Malkani, a government teacher. According to Gandhi, it was an extra ordinary thing in those days because in smaller localities, the Indians were afraid to show sympathy for advocates of home rule.

When the sharecroppers of Champaran came to know about the arrival of Gandhi for their sake, they came rushing to Muzzafarpur to meet their Champion. Muzzafarpur lawyers met Gandhi. They told him about their cases and reported the size of their fee. Gandhi chided them for collecting high fee. He 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.

The Sharecropping Arrangement

Most of the arable land in Champaran was divided into large estates owned by English men and worked by Indian tenants. The chief commercial crop was indigo. The owner forced them to plant fifteen percent of their holdings with indigo and surrender the entire indigo harvest as rent.

In the mean time Germany had developed synthetic indigo. British landlords freed the Indian farmers from the fifteen percent of arrangement but asked them to pay compensation.

Meanwhile the news of synthetic indigo reached the sharecroppers. They felt cheated and became resentful. They wanted their money back.

At this point Gandhi arrived in Champaran.

Gandhi's Movement in Champaran

Gandhi started gathering details. He visited the secretary of the British landlord association who refused to give information to an outsider. Then he visited the British Commissioner of Tirhut Division who advised him to leave Tirhut.

Instead of leaving Tirhut Gandhi proceed to Motihari where he was greeted by a vast multitude. Using a house as headquarter, he continued his investigation. He also decided to go and see a peasant who had been maltreated.

Gandhi was ordered to come back. He did so. Thereafter he was served with an official notice to quit Champaran. He signed it and wrote that he would disobey the order. He was summoned to appear in the court the next day.

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

The news of Gandhi being in trouble with the authorities spread fast. Thousands of peasants came from Motihari and demonstrated in front of the courthouse. This was the beginning of their liberation from fear of the British.

The official felt powerless but Gandhi helped them to regulate the crowd. This was the proof that the British authority was no longer unchallengeable.

The government was baffled. The prosecutor wanted the trial to be postponed. He protested against the delay. He read a statement pleading guilty. He clarified that he broke the law to render humanitarian and national service. He claimed to have no disrespect for law but greater respect for the voice of his conscience.

The government was confused and ultimately set him at liberty, but kept the judgment reserved. Rajendra Prasad and other lawyers reached there. They held a discussion with Gandhi about what would

they do if Gandhi sentenced prison. They consulted and told Gandhi that they were ready to follow him to jail. Gandhi exclaimed, "The battle of Champaran is won".

The Lieutenant Governor dropped the case against Gandhi. This was the first triumph of civil disobedience in modern India.

Gandhi and his associates moved forward to conduct an inquiry into the complaints of farmers. The whole area was filled with the air of investigation and protest. The notes were made and documents were collected.

After four meetings with the Lieutenant Governor an official commission of inquiry was made. It consisted of landlords, government officials and Gandhi as an only representative of peasants.

A lot of evidence was collected against the landlords. They were left no choice but to agree in principle to refund the money to the peasants. They expected Gandhi to ask for full amount but he demanded just fifty percent. They offered him twenty five percent and to their amazement Gandhi agreed to it.

He explained that the amount of refund was less important than the fact that the landlord had been obliged to surrender part of the money and, with it, part of their prestige.

Now the peasants saw that they had rights. They learnt a lesson of courage.

Gandhi's Effort to Remove the Social and Cultural Backwardness of Champaran

Gandhi wanted to remove the social and cultural backwardness in the villages of Champaran. Health conditions were also miserable. He appealed for volunteers to help. Several people came forward for this noble purpose. His wife and his youngest son also arrived to help.

Primary Schools were opened. Kasturbai taught the ashram rule on personal cleanliness and community sanitation. Gandhi got a doctor to volunteer his service for six months.

Champaran Episode: A Turning Point

Champaran episode was a turning point in Gandhi's life. He declared that Britishers could not order him about in his own country. In whatever he did, he tried to mould a new free Indian who could stand on his own feet and thus make India free.

A Lesson in Self Reliance

Charles Freer Andrews, a devoted follower of Gandhi came to bid him goodbye before going on a tour of duty to the Fiji Islands. Gandhi's lawyer friends wanted him to help them. Gandhi strongly opposed this suggestion by saying that this showed the weakness of their heart. When the cause was just, they must rely upon themselves to win the battle. Gandhi in this way taught them a lesson in self reliance.

Examination Oriented Short Answer Type Questions

Qs1. Who was Rajkumar Shukla? What more do you know about him? (2011, 2017)

Ans. Rajkumar Shukla was a sharecropper of Champaran. He was poor, emaciated and illiterate. But he was resolute.

Qs2. Why did Gandhiji go to Lucknow in December 1916? Who met him there and why? (2013)

Ans. Gandhiji went to Lucknow in December 1916 to attend the annual convention of the Indian National Congress Party. Rajkumar Shukla, a peasant from Champaran met him there to complain about the injustice of the landlord system in Bihar.

Qs3. What did Rajkumar Shukla tell Gandhiji about the landlord system in Bihar? (2012)

Ans. Rajkumar Shukla told Gandhiji about the injustice of landlord system in Bihar. He told him about the problem of Indigo sharecroppers who were compelled by the British landlords to plant fifteen percent of their holdings with indigo and surrender the entire indigo harvest as rent.

Qs4. Why is Rajkumar Shukla described as being resolute?

Ans. Rajkumar Shukla had come to the Congress Session to complain about the injustice of the landlord system in Bihar and to take Gandhiji to Champaran. He met Gandhiji who could not give him any appointment at that time because he had to visit Cownpore and many other places of India. But he remained patiently with Gandhiji for weeks until he obtained a fixed date. So, he is described as a resolute.

Qs5. Why do you think the servants thought Gandhiji to be another peasant?

Ans. The servants knew Rajkumar Shukla as a poor peasant who often troubled their master, Rajendra Prasad, to help indigo sharecroppers. Gandhiji came there along with Rajkumar Shukla. So, they took Gandhiji to be another peasant.

Qs6. Why was Gandhiji not allowed to draw water from the well at Rajendra Prasad's house in Patna?

Ans. Gandhiji was not allowed to draw water from the well at Rajendra Prasad's house in Patna lest some drops from his bucket pollute the entire source. The servants did not know that he was not an untouchable.

Qs7. Why did Gandhiji decide to go to Muzzafarpur before going to Champaran?

Ans. Rajkumar Shukla had given a lot of information to Gandhiji about indigo sharecroppers. Gandhiji decided to go to Muzzafarpur before going to Champaran to obtain more information about the conditions there. He visited Muzzafarpur to inquire from the lawyers there about the issue.

Qs8. Why did Gandhiji chide the lawyers?

Ans. The lawyers frequently represented peasants group in court. They told him about the cases and the size of their fee. Gandhiji chided them for collecting big fee from the poor and crushed sharecroppers.

Qs9. What did the peasants pay the British landlords as rent? What did the British now want and why?

Ans. The peasants used to pay the entire indigo harvest to the British landlords as rent. Soon the landlords learnt that Germany had developed Synthetic Indigo. Now they wanted the sharecroppers to pay compensations as they released them from the fifteen percent arrangement.

Qs10. What would be the impact of synthetic indigo on the prices of natural indigo? (2010)

Ans. The synthetic indigo would have an adverse impact on the prices of the natural indigo because the synthetic indigo was far cheaper than the natural indigo.

Qs11. Why did Gandhiji agree to a settlement of 25 percent refund to the farmers? (2010, 2015)

Ans. Gandhiji agreed to a settlement of 25 percent refund to the farmers because he wanted to break the dead lock on the percentage of refund between the landlords and the peasants. For him the amount of the refund was not important. The important thing for him was that the landlords had been obliged to surrender part of the money as well as their prestige gave a moral victory to the farmers.

Qs12. How did the episode change the plight of the peasants?

Ans. The episode of 25 percent refund to the farmers between the landlords and the peasants was a big event. Till now the landlords had behaved as lords above the law. But now they had realised that they had their limitations. The peasants saw that they had their rights and defenders. They learnt the lesson of courage.

Qs13. How was the Champaran episode a turning point in Gandhi's life? (2009, 2012, 2015)

Ans. The Champaran episode proved to be a turning point in Gandhi's life as he realised his own power and made the Indians realise their power. He declared that the British could not order him in his own country. In everything he did, he tried to mould a new free Indian who could stand on his own feet and thus make India free. It was during this period that he decided to urge the departure of the Britishers.

Qs14. What did Gandhiji do in respect of the cultural and social backwardness in Champaran village? (2016)

Ans. Gandhiji appealed for teachers. Mahadev Desai and Narhari Parikh and their wives volunteered for the work. Several more came forward for this noble deed from other parts of India. Kasturbai and Devdas arrived from the ashram. Primary schools were opened. Kasturbai taught the ashram rules on personal cleanliness and community sanitation. The health conditions were miserable. Gandhiji got a doctor to volunteer his services for six months.

Qs15. What happened when Rajkumar Shukla took Gandhiji to the house of Rajendra Prasad in Patna? (2017)

Ans. Rajendra Prasad was out of town at that time. The servants knew Rajkumar Shukla as a poor peasant who pestered their master to help the indigo sharecroppers. So they mistook Gandhi to be another peasant. He was allowed to stay on the ground with his companion. But he was not permitted to draw water from the well because they did not know that he was not an untouchable.

Source: Class XII NCERT Text Book (Flamingo)