

Champan Satyagraha Centenary Celebrations from April 10, 2017



On April 10, the Bihar government will launch year-long celebrations to mark the centenary of Mahatma Gandhi's Champaran satyagraha with a series of events. Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who has announced stringent prohibition laws, sees the celebrations as a natural follow-up to the liquor ban in the State as Gandhi was a strong advocate of prohibition.

Mr. Kumar feels that if the government can reach every doorstep with Gandhi's message, there can be no better prescription for bridging India's growing social divide.

Gandhian scholars and activists have pointed out that the state of farmers in and around Champaran and other parts of Bihar now is not better than the condition of Indigo farmers in 1917, which had brought Gandhi to the State in the first place.

Mahatma Gandhi was approached by several leaders from Bihar at the first meeting of the Congress at Lucknow in 1916 with a request to start a movement against the atrocities on farmers in Champaran. He assured them that he would visit the place. He arrived for the first time in Patna on April 10, 1917, and five days later, he reached Motihari, the district headquarters of Champaran, from Muzaffarpur.

On April 17, he set off on his Champaran satyagraha to better the lot of Indigo planters.

However, many Gandhians are upset at the derelict state of the sites and places where the Mahatma visited and stayed during his satyagraha. Even a marble plaque, with details of Gandhi's Champaran visit and his stay there, installed on the main Motihari-Raxaul road in the 1970s disappeared a few years ago. Except the Bhitiharwa Gandhi Ashram in the Gounaha block of West Champaran, where Gandhiji had stayed with his wife Kasturba for months, there is no signage to underscore the significance of any Gandhi site in Champaran. The ashram, too, has undergone only cosmetic changes.

What are the plans?

Mr. Nitish Kumar will set off on a Gandhi Smriti Yatra from Motihari on April 15 to mark Gandhi's first visit to Champaran hundred years ago. The yatra will be followed up by a series of social, cultural and political functions organised by different government departments throughout the year. However, the main State-level function will start with a two-day conclave at Gyan Bhavan in the newly constructed International Convention Centre in Patna on April 10. All members of Gandhiji's family will be invited.

A 'Gandhian circuit' will be developed for tourists visiting the State. The Tourism Department has listed 12 sites on the Gandhian trail, according to a government official. Prominent places and sites which are to be developed include Bhitiharwa Ashram, Brindaba, Shri Rampur, Koeldih, Amolwa, Murli Bharhawa, Sariswa and Hardiya Kothi, which used to be the house of G.P. Edward, a British Indigo planter.

The government will request the Railway Ministry to launch a train from Porbandar, Gandhi's birth place in Gujarat, to Motihari in Champaran during the centenary celebrations. It also plans to run promotional buses with books and videos on Gandhi's life. Plays, workshops and walks will also be organised across the State. The Gandhi Peace Foundation will be a partner in the yearlong celebrations.

How much will it cost?

An official of the Tourism Department said ₹50 crore had been earmarked for infrastructure development on 'Gandhi circuit' under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's special package for Bihar announced before the 2015 Assembly elections. But the funds are awaited.

The State government has been making preparations on a large-scale with the Chief Secretary monitoring them at regular review meetings. Bihar recently organised large celebrations to mark the 350th Prakash Parv for Sikh devotees in Patna, Kal Chhakra puja for Buddhist pilgrims at Bodh Gaya and an International Buddhist Conclave at Rajgir in Nalanda.