



## **Champaran: How Gandhi's Journalistic Traits and Communication Strategy Brought Justice to the Ryots**

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### **Abstract**

*Journalism had played a significant role in Gandhi's graduation from Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to the Mahatma. His philosophical journey and the shaping up of his thoughts and ideas while dealing with the British Raj and leading India's movement for independence were reflected in his writings as a journalist. Since his days in South Africa, reporting from the battlefield of Boer War to editing his first journal Indian Opinion to shifting his base to India and taking up the editorship of Satyagraha, Navajivan, Young India and Harijan, Gandhi has shown how he used his journals and journalistic skills to give expression to his thoughts and philosophical viewpoints, drawing the attention of the authorities and common people building a strong public opinion. His writings for these journals and other publications also underline his ever-changing political and philosophical positions and how they ultimately shaped up 'Gandhian thoughts'. When Gandhi reached India in 1915 from South Africa, he did not edit any journal for a couple of years. However, his visit to Bihar's Champaran and organising Satyagraha with the indigo farmers can be seen through the prism of journalistic pursuits and robust communication strategy that Gandhi had practised all his life. Champaran Satyagraha is considered to be Gandhi's launchpad in Indian politics and the first successful grassroots movement. Though Gandhi did not visit the remote villages in Bihar with any pure journalistic purpose, his inquiry into the plight of the indigo farmers as a political activist highlights the application of his brilliant communication skills and can be a model for a ground reporter. This essay through a historiographical study attempts to explore Gandhi's journalistic traits and communication strategy during Champaran Satyagraha. It tries to look through the prism of journalism, how Champaran inquiry helped Gandhi to achieve his goals, both for the tortured indigo farmers and on the personal front.*

**Keywords:** Mahatma Gandhi, Journalism, Champaran.

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## I

Mahatma Gandhi properly got introduced to the newspapers only when he was 19 years old and that too in England. Neither he nor anyone else ever thought at that time that newspapers would become an important vehicle for disseminating the thoughts in the life of a trained lawyer. Starting as a mere amateurish food writer for the Vegetarian journal of the UK and contributing various articles on the food habits, Gandhi took up journalism quite seriously later.

He believed that the newspapers had the power to draw the attention of both the higher authorities as well as the masses to serious issues of the society and they could be used as a tool to build public opinion. All his life Gandhi has used his journals to perform these jobs and his writings and the focus of his journals showed how Gandhi changed his philosophical and political standpoints. They also portray how Gandhian thoughts had taken a shape over decades of his public life. The journals he edited were the testimony to his understanding of the societal and political issues at hand and how he wanted to deal with them. Three distinct phases in his life were reflected in Gandhi as a journalist. He wrote: “the changes in the journal were indicative of changes in my life (CWMG 1958)

Contributing to the Vegetarian magazine could be considered as a starter for Gandhi who went to become a towering figure in the history of people’s movement in the world. He expressed his opinion on vegetarianism as well as the food habit of the Indians in that journal. Since his days in South Africa, the use of journalism and journals were a deliberate and thoughtful attempt by Gandhi to carry forward his political goals to attain justice for the oppressed. If Indian Opinion in South Africa was to highlight the issues of atrocities on the Indian diaspora living in that country, Young India was to propagate his thoughts on Satyagraha and non-violence at the peak of the Indian freedom movement to achieve independence from the British rule; Harijan was to eradicate the vices of untouchability from the Indian society and how an independent nation-state could shape itself based on its rural economy. As a brilliant communicator, Gandhi utilized his journalistic skills to its fullest potential to achieve the goals of his life.

However, Gandhi’s journalistic pursuits were not just restricted to these journals he had edited. He had applied his skills of communication at every step of his life, be it political or spiritual spheres. Moreover, Gandhi was never just an editor-journalist. Like his political movements, his life as a journalist was full of on-the-field experiences and he could sense the pulse of the people and communicate to them the way they would understand his messages.

Gandhi’s life as a journalist in South Africa did not begin with Indian Opinion. Rather he started with pure field reporting in South Africa. During the Boer War, Gandhi led the Indian Ambulance Corps to support the wartime crisis-ridden British government on the battlefield. He had the intention of supporting the British to show his allegiance to the Crown so that the rulers would show mercy to their Indian subjects. That was not to be. However, the war gave Gandhi a sound exposure in journalism. He used to send dispatches from the

war field for Times of India in Bombay. His reportage, unlike another participant in the Boer War, Winston Churchill who went on to become the Prime Minister of Britain, also reported from the battlefield, was full of human interest stories.

Similarly, in India when Gandhi reached in 1915 from South Africa and started living in the country of his birth permanently, his life as an editor-journalist was preceded by a rigorous 'field-reporting' exercise. His visit to Champaran and documenting the plight of thousands of indigo farmers who were oppressed in the hands of British and European planters could be considered as an example of his great communication skills and journalistic pursuits. In the Boer War, Gandhi's primary objective was not to do reporting but treat the injured British soldiers through Ambulance Corps. Here in Champaran, he did not go with any journalistic mission, but he had a political ambition in his mind. However, in both cases, Gandhi as a communicator-journalist came out shining.

## II

On his mentor, Gopal Krishna Gokhale's insistence Gandhi returned to India on 9 January 1915 after spending a quarter of a century abroad. Gokhale apparently wanted him to join the Indian freedom movement. However, Gokhale had advised Gandhi to travel across India to understand people of the country well before joining active politics. In an interview to the Bombay Chronicle (1915) on 11 January 1915, Gandhi said,

*“For the present, as Mr Ghokhale has very properly pointed out, I, having been out of India for so long, have no business to form any definite conclusions about matters essentially Indian, and that I should pass some time here as an observer and a student. This I have promised to do, and I hope to carry out my promise”*

He followed Gokhale's instructions. Between leaving South Africa and taking up the editorship on an unregistered journal Satyagraha during the protests over the Rowlatt Act, Gandhi did not edit any journal. His communication with the press was limited to the contribution of articles to some newspapers and addressing the media on certain occasions. In a speech at the Servants of India Society, Bombay on 14 January 1915 Gandhi made it clear that he “would go over the country for one year and, after studying things for himself, he would decide his line of work” (Indian Opinion 1915).

Even though he joined the sessions of Indian National Congress, Gandhi did not want to come in the limelight as yet. In 1917, a sudden opportunity to visit a tiny district in Northern Bihar, Champaran, changed Gandhi's life as a politician and turned out to be a landmark incident in the Indian freedom movement (Fischer and Kock 1951). Though Gandhi had given himself five years to launch a mass movement in India after landing in Bombay, the chance-visit to Champaran and joining the rebellion of the indigo farmers changed his course of action. Gandhi launched his Satyagraha movement to bring justice to the farmers. His communication skills were helpful in not only bringing justice to the indigo

farmers fighting with the British planters and the rulers but also projecting himself as a prominent leader in the freedom movement. At a time when the Indian National Congress was going in the dominating hands of extremists or hardliners, Gandhi's entry into active political movement brought back the reins of the party in the hands of the moderates.

Like any other journalist, the tip-off over Champaran crisis came to Gandhi from a non-descript source. As any 'busy journalist do', Gandhi too ignored such information coming from a remote corner of the country. When Gandhi was attending Lucknow Congress in December 1916, a farmer Raj Kumar Shukla approached him with 'Vakil babu' Brajkishore Prasad to invite him to Champaran. Gandhi as a busy politician did not give much importance to the appeal of Raj Kumar. He pushed the matter with excuses. Gandhi refused to express any opinion on the crisis of the Champaran farmers without "seeing the condition" in his own eyes when he was asked to speak on the resolution in support of the Champaran farmers in Lucknow Congress. As a public figure and as a journalist with integrity, he did not want to comment on the situation without visiting the spot himself. Though, he had later confessed that he had no idea of indigo farming in India or Champaran. In Gandhi's (1983) own words,

*"I must confess that I did not then know even the name, much less the geographical position, of Champaran, and I had hardly any notion of indigo plantations. I had seen packets of indigo, but little dreamed that it was grown and manufactured in Champaran at great hardship to thousands of agriculturists"*

Raj Kumar was adamant to take Gandhi to Champaran. He insisted that Gandhi must visit the place at least for a day. For the next couple of months, Raj Kumar followed Gandhi wherever he had gone. From Kanpur to Sabarmati to Kolkata, Raj Kumar was at Gandhi's doorstep to persuade him to meet the indigo farmers in Champaran. Gandhi was not aware of the situation there and he did not have much acquaintance with any person in Bihar who could feed him with inputs from the ground. After a point, Gandhi could not resist the request of Raj Kumar. He agreed to visit Champaran. And in early 1917, Gandhi travelled to Champaran via Patna from Kolkata with this non-descript agriculturist Raj Kumar Shukla.

### III

There is no doubt that a journalist must gather background information before visiting a spot for covering an event or doing a story. Gandhi too was looking for local sources to formulate his ideas about the spot and the issues of the indigo farmers before reaching Champaran. Unfortunately, Raj Kumar Shukla turned out to be an innocent villager having no influence in Patna. Gandhi (1983) realised that Rajkumar could not guide him and he must take control of the situation in his own hands. He did what a professional journalist would do to verify the information provided by Raj Kumar. It is a quality of a master strategist to assess the situation and it is important to take stock of the facts before venturing out to the mission. He tried hard on his own to understand the crisis faced by the Champaran farmers

independent of the initial sources who gave him the tip-off. Moreover, he wanted to find out how he could reach Champaran. He called up an old friend from London legal circuit and the then president of Muslim League when Gandhi attended Mumbai Congress session in 1915, Maulana Mazharul Haq. With his guidance, Gandhi reached Muzaffarpur and met a few old mates like Professor J B Kripalani and Dr Choithram of GBB College. They were the first independent sources from whom Gandhi could gather more information about the plight of the farmers. “Professor Kripalani spoke to me about the desperate condition of Bihar, particularly of the Tirhut division and gave me an idea of the difficulty of my task. He had established very close contact with the Biharis, and had already spoken to them about the mission that took me to Bihar,” Gandhi (1983) noted in his autobiography. Soon after reaching Muzaffarpur, Gandhi had a meeting with a group of lawyers who were fighting cases on behalf of the indigo farmers. Each Champaran farmers were bound by law to plant indigo in three out of the twentieth part of a bigha of land. It was known as Tin Kathia system. The British planters chose the best part of the land to cultivate indigo. The tenants of the land did not receive enough return, not even the cost of cultivation, for the indigo plantation and disobeying the order of the British planters meant atrocities on the farmers.

Gandhi realised that legal recourse was not the best possible solution to the problem. He could understand the fear among the indigo farmers was the main cause of why they were not being able to fight against the British planters and the exploitation was going on. So the first recourse he suggested while strategizing his movement was to stop going to the court of law. “Having studied these cases, Gandhi (1983) suggested,

*“I have come to the conclusion that we should stop going to the law courts. Taking such cases to the courts does little good. Where the ryots (farmers) are so crushed and fear-stricken, law courts are useless. The real relief for them is to be free from fear. We cannot sit still until we have driven #tinkathia# out of Bihar”*

As a good journalist can smell a good story, Gandhi too could sense a greater possibility in Champaran in supporting the farmers there and even told the lawyers there he would stay here until the issue got resolved. As a good communicator, he also realised the potential in the discontent among the farmers of the Champaran and it was an “easily identifiable social group” whose problems could be redressed and their aspirations could be satisfied in a less difficult way (Kumar 1969). His desperation to check the condition of the farmers and documenting them led Gandhi deeper down the problem and launch satyagraha in South African model.

He also apprehended that the mission he was going to take up could warrant arrest by the government of the day. So he warned his companion about the possibilities of such a situation. Apart from understanding the ground realities, Gandhi had an issue with comprehending the local Hindi dialect and he needed an interpreter. Quite tactfully Gandhi involved the lawyers in his mission at the outset. Though he did not require legal assistance

from them, he wanted to engage them with clerical work and, more importantly, the job of interpreting documents and verbal communication which were generally in local Hindi dialect, Koithi and Urdu.

The mission he set for himself was clear. He wanted to inquire about the condition of the Champaran indigo farmers and their “grievances” against the British planters. The practice of objectivity in journalism is an important aspect for a journalist. The objective understanding of an issue or a proposed story comes with the inquiry into the matter from the stakeholders of both sides. Here in Champaran, Gandhi applied the principle of objectivity while approaching the ground-zero. At this stage, Gandhi maintained neutrality and tried to be objective. Before visiting the villages and talking to the farmers, he thought it prudent to get the counter-version of the issues Raj Kumar Shukla and his lawyer friends had raised. In a letter to the Divisional Commissioner LF Morshead, Gandhi (1958) had explained his desire to cross-check the material he got so far from the lawyers and the local agriculturist Raj Kumar Shukla, "I am anxious to test the accuracy of the statements made to me by various friends regarding indigo matters and to find out for myself whether I can render useful assistance." Gandhi was not populist and did not want to join the chorus without assessing the situation first-hand. Here too he did not hesitate to cross-check what Raj Kumar and other lawyers had told him.

Journalistically speaking, Gandhi did the right thing by seeking the appointment of two important stakeholders in the crisis: the British planters and government officials, in this case, it was the Commissioner of the Division. He believed that it was necessary to have knowledge of the viewpoint of the opposition forces in order to use satyagraha as a weapon. On 12 April 1917 Gandhi (1958) wrote to the Commissioner of the Tirhut Division, LF Morshead,

*“I would like to do my work with the cognizance and even cooperation, if I can secure it, of the local administration. I shall be obliged if you will kindly grant me an interview so that I may place before you the object of my inquiry and learn whether I may receive any assistance from the local administration in furtherance of my work”*

As defined by Le Breton (2004) and Goffman (1967), Gandhi's mode of communication was based on actual contact between two interlocutors without any unanimity in principle or political belief. Even if he did not like the views of the opponent, the principle of satyagraha taught him to not insult the opponent. This type of real communication is effective when reciprocity, commitment, clarity and authority characterize the communication process (Marsan and Daverio, 2009). In the case of Gandhi in Champaran, the strategy worked well.

Informing the administration or the stakeholders about his course of action was part of his communication strategy. Arifon (2017) notes, “Gandhi gave prior written intimation



about what he was intending to do, explaining the reasons for such a line of action, backed by precise facts; here, his training as a lawyer stood him in good stead, allowing him to structure his thoughts and marshal his arguments. This method helped in diffusing any possible tension, for his arguments were presented in a composed and cogent fashion, an approach he invariably referred to as “experiments with truth”.

As the journalists often face it, Gandhi too faced reluctant Secretary of the Planters’ Association, JM Wilson, who refused to oblige Gandhi by providing any information to the questions he put forward. Gandhi was branded an “outsider” by the official of the Planters’ Association which asked him to stay out of the ‘business’ of Planters and the tenants of the land or ryots. At the most Gandhi could present a representation if he desired, said the Secretary. Gandhi refused to do so and he, as a master strategist, wanted to reach the villages of the indigo farmers either in Motihari or Bettiah before getting arrested.

Gandhi was sure that the government would prevent him from visiting the spot and arrest him beforehand. He perhaps wanted to highlight that he was arrested from one of the Champaran villages where farmers were in deplorable condition. If one of the intentions was to see their condition for himself, the other was to draw the attention of the government and other institutions to the problems of Champaran. He wrote several letters to his acquaintances before setting out for the villages.

The day Gandhi had set off for Motihari to see a ryot whose house got burnt for disobeying the British planters, on the way he was intercepted by the ‘messenger of Superintendent of Police’ who eventually served a notice to Gandhi asking him to leave the district immediately. As a crusader of the passive resistance movement and a seasoned Satyagrahi, Gandhi refused to obey the order of the local administration and instead accepted he would face the court’s trial the next day. This put the local and the provincial administration in a dilemma. They wanted to defer the court proceedings during the trial failing to comprehend the possible repercussions. This symbolic gesture of disobeying law without violence is a trait that Gandhi had used for civil disobedience in South Africa and achieved significant results. These moves by a good communicator puzzle the authority. They get confused if they should “let things be as they are or use force in a relationship of weak versus strong” (Arifon, 2017). As a satyagrahi, he was determined to finish his inquiry before he left the place.

The fearless leader of the people’s movement adopted another strategy of writing letters and sending telegrams to his acquaintances and the people in the higher administration on 16 April 1917. Describing the situation, he sent out the messages over the night before he had to face the trial. He also made it a point that the news of his visit spread like a wildfire and he was successful in creating the buzz in this small town. He even wrote to the Viceroy Lord Chelmsford that he was ready to return the Kaiser-i-Hind Gold Medal which was awarded to him by the British government for his humanitarian work in South Africa. The

next morning hundreds of villagers, mostly indigo farmers, gathered in front of the court and the house where Gandhi was staying.

The local administration was incapable of handling the situation and they could not understand how to deal with Gandhi who showed no sign of aggression or violence. He simply disobeyed the order of the local administration and even pleaded guilty in the local court. According to BR Nanda (2001), one of the biographers of Gandhi, “The Government of India felt perturbed at Gandhi’s presence in Champaran and the possibilities of a Satyagraha struggle developing in the indigo farmers in Bihar.”

Due to the inexperience of the local police and administration to tackle any Satyagrahi like Gandhi, it was easier for him to put tremendous pressure on the officials who fumbled before the magistrate and tried to delay the hearing of Gandhi’s case. On the insistence of Gandhi, the magistrate heard his statement and in the statement, the stalwart of Indian politics took the court to a higher intellectual level. He told the court (1983),

*“As a law-abiding citizen my first instinct would be, as it was, to obey the order served upon me. But I could not do so without doing violence to my sense of duty to those for whom I have come. I feel that I could just now serve them only by remaining in their midst. I could not, therefore, voluntarily retire. Amid this conflict of duties, I could only throw the responsibility of removing me from them on the Administration”*

Ultimately with the intervention of Viceroy, the case against Gandhi for violating Section 144 of CrPC was withdrawn and in the process, he befriended the district officials and was free to move forward with his mission.

Though Gandhi wanted to draw the attention of his acquaintances and the higher authorities of the British government, he claimed that he did not want to fall in the trap of the media before launching his inquiry in full form. Gandhi was especially quite concerned with the Indian press of that time. He did not want the press to go overboard with the issue as that could hamper Gandhi’s investigation process. He, in fact, wrote to the editors of the newspapers asking them not to send reporters to the field. He promised them that he would send materials for publication if needed.

*“...the inquiry did not need support from press reporters or leading articles in the press. Indeed the situation in Champaran was so delicate and difficult that over-energetic criticism or highly coloured reports might damage the cause which I was seeking to espouse. So I wrote to the editors of the principal papers requesting them not to trouble to send any reporters, as I should send them whatever might be necessary for publication and keep them informed (Gandhi 1983)”*



He took the onus of reporting the Champaran situation on his own shoulder. However, there is a contrary view to what Gandhi stated about media attention. Though Gandhi recorded that he was not interested in getting Champaran issue highlighted in the press, he had strategically kept on writing letters to his friends outside Bihar to keep them abreast of the situation and, of course, draw the attention of the national press. Because some of these friends were indeed in touch with the media and got the news of Gandhi's movements in Champaran published in the newspapers (Gandhi, 2006). Rajmohan Gandhi (2006) writes, "The courtroom statement was big news across India. Reading it in Ahmedabad, Rao Saheb Harilalbai 'shot up from his chair' at the Gujarat Club and said to those around him, 'Here is a man, a hero, a brave man! We must have him as [the Gujarat Sabha's] president.' Vallabhbhai Patel and others immediately concurred. There were similar reactions elsewhere. In Bihar, Kripalani asked Gandhi if he could join the ashram, and Rajendra Prasad, Brajkishore Prasad and several others were captured for life." This strategy, many would call by its modern name, public relations and propaganda. Be it the threat to give up Kesh.

The main purpose of Gandhi's visit to Champaran though was to collect evidence on the agrarian crisis due to the exploitation of the indigo farmers by the European planters. By defying all odds, Gandhi wanted to document them properly. There is no alternative to gather first-hand information from ground zero. On the one hand, Gandhi adopted the strategy to stay put in Champaran and make occasional visits to the villages whenever he heard of any atrocities on the farmers, on the other he set up camps and with the assistance of the local volunteers, he asked villagers to record their statement. They were cross-examined by the volunteers and their name, signature or thumb impressions were taken on the recorded statement. Gandhi had to face problem in recording the statements of thousands of farmers. But he was adamant and relentlessly carried on with his work of evidence-collection against the European planters who were forcing the ryots to plant indigo and extorting them. This also reflects another important part of Gandhi's communication model. He knew it was not possible for him to reach out to thousands of farmers and at the same time he wanted to send his message to this huge population. So he took the help of the volunteers to carry out his message and on his behalf speak to the people. He had adopted this strategy on various occasions during his satyagraha movement. Gandhi had always set certain rules for the satyagrahis so that they don't violate the line of ahimsa drawn by him.

Gandhi's integrity towards his assignment that he took up for himself could be understood from the point that he had decided to collect any donations either from the people of Champaran or the outsiders. He noted in his autobiography, "I was equally determined not to appeal to the country at large for funds to conduct this inquiry. For that was likely to give it an all India and political aspect." It showed how Gandhi wanted to keep his Champaran mission out of bound for the Congress and did not want to highlight at a pan-Indian level. This was his first attempt to reach out to the grassroots level farmers and lead a movement in his own way.

During the recording of the statement, Gandhi adopted another interesting strategy to make the farmers more fearless of the power of the police administration. The Criminal Investigation Department (CID) officials used to shadow the statement-recording sessions. Instead of resisting them from being present while the farmers narrated their horrific stories, Gandhi asked his men to “treat them with courtesy”. This, according to Gandhi, “made the peasants more fearless. Whilst on the one hand excessive fear of the C.I.D. was driven out of the peasants’ minds, on the other, their presence exercised a natural restraint on exaggeration.” At the same time, Gandhi did not want to antagonise the planters. Rather he kept on trying to win their hearts. He did not stop at their refusal to cooperate with his mission of inquiry. Gandhi met the planters and attempted to get the reaction of those planters against whom there were serious allegations. Gandhi wrote, “I met the Planters’ Association as well, placed the ryots’ grievances before them and acquainted myself with their point of view. Some of the planters hated me, some were indifferent and a few treated me with courtesy”.

He travelled across Champaran district and visited various villages in Motihari, Bettiah to collect evidence. An important part of Gandhi’s communication strategy was to involve the local people in his mission so that there is no trust deficit between the local people and Gandhi himself and to arouse their consciousness. Simultaneous to the statement-recording, Gandhi stressed on education and sanitation in the villages of Champaran and thereby reached out to more and more villagers who trusted Mahatma with his mission. He had practised swadeshi and village reconstruction work on many occasions. This not only aroused consciousness among the villagers but also helped him to build a “communication network” with a common cause (Gonsalves, 2017). Much before he started his struggle for Swaraj and Swadeshi, Gandhi had experimented with these thoughts in Champaran. It was also Gandhi’s desperation to reach out to the poor farmers. Since he saw that the poor peasants would not be able to provide financial or intellectual support, while he asked his friends to send teacher-volunteers to Champaran, he asked the villagers to provide them with food (Gandhi, 1985).

At the same time, the Government had written to Gandhi to withdraw himself from Bihar as his mission was getting prolonged. Gandhi wanted the government to constitute an official enquiry committee considering there was a prima-facie substance in the ryots allegations against the indigo planters. After thousands of farmers deposed before Gandhi and his volunteers, their statements were recorded and evidence collected, the Lieutenant Governor Edward Gait finally relented and formed a committee to inquire into the plight of the indigo farmers. He made Gandhi a member of the committee who could represent the farmers’ point of view. On 12 May 1917, Gandhi, based on the evidence collected, submitted his report to Maude mentioning main points of the farmers’ complaints.

#### IV

The report had meticulously recorded the statements of 4000 ryots. This can be considered to be an example of a brilliant investigative report where facts, evidence, statistics

were presented without any ambiguity. Gandhi begins his report in an informal way showing solidarity to his lawyer companions. The local administration had asked Gandhi to get rid of his companions fearing they could create trouble. However, he dispelled all the apprehensions and showed faith in them. This showed the quality of a great leader who did not abandon his comrades despite pressure from the administration.

Explaining the methods of exploitation by the indigo planters, Gandhi alleged in his report that the practice was illegal and when the ryots protested under the hardship, they were dealt with force. "When, however, owing to the introduction of synthetic indigo the price of the local product fell, the planters desired to cancel the indigo sattas. They (indigo planters), therefore, devised a means of saddling the losses upon the ryots. In lease-hold lands they made the ryots pay tawan i.e. damages to the extent of Rs. 100 per bigha in consideration of their waiving their right to indigo cultivation," the report stated.

There was no scope of complaining that the report did not provide enough supporting data. The Champaran report included an estimation of the increase in rent of the land. Gandhi in his report put forward the data he collected while recording the statements of the ryots. "In mokarrari land the damages have taken the shape of sharahbeshi sattas, meaning enhancement of rent in lieu of indigo cultivation. The enhancement according to the survey report has in the case of 5,955 tenancies amounted to Rs. 31,062, the pre-enhancement figure being Rs. 53, 865" the report noted.

Apart from the exploitation and forceful cultivation of indigo by the tyrant British planters, there was evidence of corruption in these areas. Gandhi had rightly highlighted noting, "Dasturi has been taken by the notoriously ill-paid factory amlas out of the wages received by the labourers often amounting to the fifth of their daily wages and also out of the hire paid for the carts."

The lack of governance in Champaran and their failure in bringing justice to the ryots were also highlighted in the report and fingers were directly pointed at the administration for allowing the planters to take law in their own hands. In a bold statement in his report, Gandhi pointed out, "resorted to actual physical force and wrongful confinements. The planters have successfully used the institutions of the country to enforce their will against the ryots and have not hesitated to supplement them by taking the law in their own hands." The farmers did not receive enough support from the law keepers and even if they got it, the action was meagre to grow any sense of faith on the law keepers.

The 'cumbersome' bureaucratic system of the land officials assessing the complaints of the ryots also came in Gandhi's report. At the same time, Gandhi proposed a series of solutions to protect the rights of the ryots from the atrocities of the planters and the landlords. He suggested investigation where the ryots were forced to pay different forms of rent illegally and an assurance from the government that no such payment was required to be made. Gandhi also raised the issue of human rights and asked the government to ensure that the

ryots were not made to render physical labour for the personal work of the landlords. Rather they should be allowed to work at their will and grow crops of their choice.

The report did not mention the version of the planters to the allegation made by the ryots, however, Gandhi admitted that though there were not much 'arguments' in his report, he was ready to depose before the government with proof and evidence for the statements he made in his report.

Interestingly, Gandhi did not circulate the report for publication in any media. Rather he was opposed to the idea of 'public discussion' or scrutiny of the Champaran situation at that time. Apart from the officials of the administration, Gandhi passed on the copy of his report to the political and social leaders who were in touch with Gandhi during the investigation in Champaran villages. According to Rajendra Prasad (1949), though Gandhi kept the relevant political leaders and the administration abreast with the development in Champaran, he carefully avoided putting up the reports in the newspapers. He writes, "At the same time not one of these bulletins or reports or any of the facts mentioned therein was ever allowed to be published in newspapers. The reason was plain. Mahatmaji was anxious to redress the grievances of the tenants, not to create any agitation."

Gandhi maintained his stand despite the planters tried to spread rumours against his mission and about the false misdeeds of the ryots. Gandhi on 16 May received a telegram from Associated Press claiming that some tenants had burnt down a factory. Gandhi did not respond to the AP telegram asking for his reaction. Rather he carried out an independent enquiry and with the help of the administration, he ascertained that the claims were false. The tenants were not involved in the incident. This was a tactic by Gandhi to exert pressure on the government to act showing he did not want the press to highlight the issue and he was not reacting the press reports giving enough space to the administration to resolve the issues. This imparted a morally higher ground for Gandhi in his battle for Champaran ryots.

Gandhi's strategy worked out well in his favours when the planters used the press to demand a government-run enquiry commission. On 15 May 1917, The Pioneer, considered to be an Anglo-Indian newspaper, wrote as quoted by Rajendra Prasad (1949), "It appears to us that the Government of Bihar could do well forthwith to appoint a Commission to investigate the differences which exist between the planters and the ryots in the Indigo Districts. It is difficult to see what good can come of Mr. Gandhi's investigation. But an enquiry conducted with strict impartiality by a Commission containing possibly a non-official element would give both sides a fair opportunity of stating their cases and ought to result in a lasting peace."

Finally, on 13 June 1917, the Government of Bihar and Orrisa appointed the committee of inquiry giving credence to the investigation carried out by Gandhi and the report he submitted based on the investigation. The news of non-violent satyagrahis against the oppressive opponents including the administration calls for more attention than violence between the two forces. Gandhi believed that "British would have to surrender, at least for

fear of being embarrassed before the world, if not for genuine sentiments of guilt or fear of anarchy." That is why Gandhi took help of mass media as "a positive partners" in the struggle for truth (Gonsalves, 2010) to expose the oppressive character of the opponent, especially the British Raj.

The planters were not happy with Gandhi's inclusion in the committee and through the Anglo-Indian press, they wanted to create pressure on the government to remove him of the committee and Champaran as well. In a letter published in The Statesman on 22 June 1917 as quoted by Rajendra Prasad (1949),

*"With regard to Mr. Gandhi's appointment to the Committee it is difficult to see what his qualifications for the post consist of. He is a complete stranger to the Province and ignorant of its complicated system of land tenure. He came to the District frankly prejudiced in his views on the question while he professed his intention of making an impartial enquiry. He has spent a considerable time at the head of a band of agitators who by means of exaggerated stories as to his position and authority have attempted to induce the ryots to break their agreements and to ignore the decisions of the Settlement and Civil Courts and have succeeded in raising a considerable amount of racial ill-feeling"*

Despite all opposition to Gandhi's inclusion in the committee, it finished its investigation and ultimately the tin-kathia system was abolished through Champaran Agrarian Act of 1917 and the committee recommended that if someone wanted to get into any agreement they can do it not due to force but at their will.

## V

The planters on principle had accepted the points of contention of the ryots and they, in front of the inquiry committee, agreed to refund only 25 per cent of the money exacted from the farmers. Gandhi had initially asked them to refund 50 per cent but agreed to the offer of concession by the planters (Fischer and Kock, 1951). Many saw it as if Gandhi had given up to the European planters to end the satyagraha. However, some are of the view that Gandhi had tremendously hurt the prestige of the indigo planters and they were forced to vacate Champaran in the next decade (Nanda, 2001). There lied the success of Gandhi's Champaran strategy. Though, some allege that Gandhi's movement was spearheaded by the rich peasants and moneylenders with vested interest to drive the European planters out of Champaran (Stokes, 1978), to many Gandhi was successful in this first-ever satyagraha movement in India replicating his experience in South Africa, because unlike the previous movements in Champaran, he could reach out to the poor peasants to garner their support (Chakraborty, 2007). Rajmohan Gandhi (2006) thinks he was successful as he had a clear understanding of the British rulers whom he still considered to be liberal in their approach and at the same time he could understand the sentiment of the peasants. He also believes, Gandhi could gain support and publicity at the national level and as the organic indigo did not

enjoy much profit worldwide, the British government did not show much interest in opposing Gandhi on Champaran issue. A Marxist critique (Dhanagre, 1975) of this movement says Gandhi had, in fact, defused the steam of mass agitation of the peasants through his empirical study. There is no doubt that Champaran Satyagraha had put Gandhi at a different pedestal in the eyes of both Indian political leaders and the British government. However, the scope of this essay was to understand Gandhi's power as a communicator and his journalistic traits that he used in Champaran to achieve his goals.

Even if he had defused a growing possibility of violent agitation by the Champaran farmers it was possible because of Gandhi's traits as a successful communicator. He could send out the message of satyagraha in such a way that the local peasants who had never seen Gandhi before had trusted him with the finding solutions to the most pressing problem in their life. A successful communicator would disseminate the philosophical standpoint in which he had a firm belief and practised in his own life. He could easily garner the support of the peasants in Champaran. Here Gandhi did not use any journal or any consistent series of writings on the issue to draw the attention of the masses or the opinion leaders. He had used certain methods like reaching out to the farmers, British administration and even the planters directly or through writing letters. His presence with popular support of the peasants was enough to send out the message to the British government about his power to move the public opinion in his favour.

Unlike the later period of his life, in Champaran, Gandhi did not have the weapons of his journals like *Young India*, *Navajivan* or *Harijan* to give proper shape to his ideas and circulating them to the opinion leaders as well as the masses. In 1917, he did not introduce the prayer meetings or organised padayatras. In this tiny district of North Bihar, Gandhi confined his communication strategy with the masses through oral communication. He insisted on going to the villages, mostly on foot, to speak to the farmers who faced the wrath of the British planters. In this way, he covered a large area and populations through direct people to people connect.

Though he documented his disinterest in getting media hype over Champaran issue, he tactfully used the national press in reporting on the plight of the farmers. He knew how to 'create news event' and through what channels one needed to reach out to the press. While the European planters used Anglo-Indian newspapers, Gandhi had a positive coverage in national media opposed to what the planters wanted to tell people. Gandhi, as it was seen in later stages of his life, had entered into a conflict in Champaran as a third party. He had shown great restraint despite all the obstacles the European planters had created for him. As a true satyagrahi, he did not bow down to any pressure until he resolved the conflict. While he used direct people-to-people contact, building people's network, involving the villagers in his mission through various steps like building schools or taking up sanitation programmes to arouse the consciousness of the mass, he used petitions, letters, deputations and face to face interaction as the weapons to reach out to the planters and the administration. He used media, despite his reservations, and his friends outside Bihar to create pressure on the British Raj. He



had shown a great deal of investigative journalism to prepare such a detailed report on the plight of the indigo farmers. All his efforts were aimed at one mission: resolving the conflict. Gandhi's journalistic and communication-related traits made his mission successful and brought justice to the farmers of Champaran.

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