# CHAPTER IV

INDIGO

W hen I first visited Gandhi in 1942 at his ashram in Seva-

gram, in central India, he said, ‘I will tell you how it

happened that I decided to urge the departure of the

British. It was in 1917.’

He had gone to the December 1916 annual convention of the

Indian National Congress party in Lucknow. There were 2301

delegates and many visitors. During the proceedings, Gandhi

recounted, ‘a peasant came up to me looking like any other

peasant in India, poor and emaciated, and said, “I am Rajkumar

Shukla. I am from Ghamparan, and I want you to come to my

district!” ’ Gandhi had never heard of the place. It was in the

foothills of the towering Himalayas, near the kingdom of

Nepal.

Under an ancient arrangement, the Champaran peasants were

share-croppers. Rajkumar Shukla was one of them. He was

illiterate but resolute. He had come to the Congress session to

complain about the injustice of the landlord system in Bihar, and

somebody had probably said, ‘Speak to Gandhi’.

Gandhi told Shukla he had an appointment in Cawnpore and

was also committed to go to other parts of India. Shukla accom¬

panied him everywhere. Then Gandhi returned to his ashram near

Ahmedabad. Shukla followed him to the ashram. For weeks he

never left Gandhi’s side.

‘Fix a date,’ he begged.

Impressed by the sharecropper’s tenacity and story Gandhi said,

‘I have to be in Calcutta on such-and-such a date. Come and

meet me and take me from there.’

Months passed. Shukla was sitting on his haunches at the

appointed spot in Calcutta when Gandhi arrived; he waited till

Gandhi was free. Then the two of them boarded a train for the

city of Patna in Bihar. There Shukla led him to the house of a

lawyer named Rajendra Prasad who later became President of

the Congress party and of India. Rajendra Prasad was out of

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town, but the servants knew Shukla as a poor yeoman who

pestered their master to help the indigo sharecroppers. So they

let him stay on the grounds with his companion, Gandhi, whom

they took to be another peasant. But Gandhi was not permitted

to draw water from the well lest some drops from his bucket pollute

the entire source; how did they know that he was not an un¬

touchable?

Gandhi decided to go first to Muzzafarpur, which was en route

to Champaran, to obtain more complete information about con¬

ditions than Shukla was capable of imparting. He accordingly

sent a telegram to Professor J. B. Kripalani, of the Arts College

in Muzzafarpur, whom he had seen at Tagore’s Shantiniketan

school. The train arrived at midnight, April 15th, 1917. Kripa¬

lani was waiting at the station with a large body of students.

Gandhi stayed there for two days in the home of Professor Malkani,

a teacher in a government school. ‘It was an extraordinary thing

in those days,’ Gandhi commented, Tor a government professor

to harbour a man like me.’ In smaller localities, the Indians were

afraid to show sympathy for advocates of home-rule.

The news of Gandhi’s advent and of the nature of his mission

spread quickly through Muzzafarpur and to Champaran. Share¬

croppers from Champaran began arriving on foot and by con¬

veyance to see their champion. Muzzafarpur lawyers called on

Gandhi to brief him; they frequently represented peasant groups

in court; they told him about their cases and reported the size of

their fees.

Gandhi chided the lawyers for collecting big fees from the share¬

croppers. He said, T have come to the conclusion that we should

stop going to law courts. Taking such cases to the courts does little

good. Where the peasants are so crushed and fear-stricken, law

courts are useless. The real relief for them is to be free from

fear.’

Most of the arable land in the Champaran district was divided

into large estates owned by Englishmen and worked by Indian

tenants. The chief commercial crop was indigo. The landlords

compelled all tenants to plant three-twentieths or 15 per cent of

their holdings with indigo and surrender the entire indigo harvest

as rent. This was done by long-term contract.

Presently, the landlords learned that Germany had developed

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synthetic indigo. They thereupon obtained agreements from the

sharecroppers to pay them compensation for being released from

the 15 per cent arrangement.

The sharecropping arrangement was irksome to the peasants,

and many signed willingly. Those who resisted, engaged lawyers;

the landlords hired thugs. Meanwhile, the information about

synthetic indigo reached the illiterate peasants who had signed,

and they wanted their money back.

At this point Gandhi arrived in Champaran.

He began by trying to get the facts. First he visited the secretary

of the British landlords’ association. The secretary told him that

they could give no information to an outsider. Gandhi answered

that he was no outsider.

Next Gandhi called on the British official commissioner of the

Tirhut division in which the Champaran district lay. ‘The com¬

missioner,’ Gandhi reports, ‘proceeded to bully me and advised

me forthwith to leave Tirhut.’

Gandhi did not leave. Instead, he proceeded to Motihari, the

capital of Champaran. Several lawyers accompanied him. At

the railway station, a vast multitude greeted Gandhi. He went to

a house and, using it as headquarters, continued his investigations.

A report came in that a peasant had been maltreated in a nearby

village. Gandhi decided to go and see; the next morning he

started out on the back of an elephant. He had not proceeded

far when the police superintendent’s messenger overtook him and

ordered him to return to town in his carriage. Gandhi complied.

The messenger drove Gandhi home where he served him with an

official notice to quit Champaran immediately. Gandhi signed a

receipt for the notice and wrote on it that he would disobey the

order.

In consequence, Gandhi received a summons to appear in

court the next day.

All night Gandhi remained awake. He telegraphed Rajendra

Prasad to come from Bihar with influential friends. He sent

instructions to the ashram. He wired a full report to the Viceroy.

Morning found the town of Motihari black with peasants. They

did not know Gandhi’s record in South Africa. They had merely

heard that a Mahatma who wanted to help them was in trouble

with the authorities. Their spontaneous demonstration, in thou-

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sands, around the courthouse was the beginning of their liberation

from fear of the British.

The officials felt powerless without Gandhi’s co-operation. He

helped them regulate the crowd. He was polite and friendly. He

was giving them concrete proof that their might, hitherto dreaded

and unquestioned, could be challenged by Indians.

The government was baffled. The prosecutor requested the

judge to postpone the trial. Apparently, the authorities wished to

consult their superiors.

Gandhi protested against the delay. He read a statement plead¬

ing guilty. He was involved, he told the court, in a ‘conflict of

duties’: on the one hand, not to set a bad example as a lawbreaker;

on the other hand, to render the ‘humanitarian and national

service’ for which he had come. He disregarded the order to

leave, ‘not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience

to the higher law of our being, the voice of conscience’. He asked

the penalty due.

The magistrate announced that he would pronounce sentence

after a two-hour recess and asked Gandhi to furnish bail for those

120 minutes. Gandhi refused. The judge released him without

bail.

When the court reconvened, the judge said he would not deliver

the judgment for several days. Meanwhile he allowed Gandhi to

remain at liberty.

Rajendra Prasad, Brij Kishor Babu, Maulana Mazharul Huq

and several other prominent lawyers had arrived from Bihar.

They conferred with Gandhi. What would they do if he was sen¬

tenced to prison, Gandhi asked. Why, the senior lawyer replied,

they had come to advise and help him; if he went to jail there

would be nobody to advise and they would go home.

What about the injustice to the sharecroppers, Gandhi de¬

manded. The lawyers withdrew to consult. Rajendra Prasad has

recorded the upshot of their consultations: ‘They thought, amongst

themselves, that Gandhi was totally a stranger, and yet he was

prepared to go to prison for the sake of the peasants; if they, on

the other hand, being not only residents of the adjoining districts

but also those who claimed to have served these peasants, should

go home, it would be shameful desertion.’

They accordingly went back to Gandhi and told him they were

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ready to follow him into jail. ‘The battle of Champaran is won, 5

he exclaimed. Then he took a piece of paper and divided the

group into pairs and put down the order in which each pair was

to court arrest.

Several days later, Gandhi received a written communication

from the magistrate informing him that the Lieutenant-Governor

of the province had ordered the case to be dropped. Civil dis¬

obedience had triumphed, the first time in modern India.

Gandhi and the lawyers now proceeded to conduct a far-flung

inquiry into the grievances of the farmers. Depositions by about

ten thousand peasants were written down, and notes made on

other evidence. Documents were collected. The whole area

throbbed with the activity of the investigators and the vehement

protests of the landlords.

In June, Gandhi was summoned to Sir Edward Gait, the

Lieutenant-Governor. Before he went he met his leading associates

and again laid detailed plans for civil disobedience if he should not

return.

Gandhi had four protracted interviews with the Lieutenant-

Governor who, as a result, appointed an official commission of

inquiry into the indigo sharecroppers’ situation. The commission

consisted of landlords, government officials, and Gandhi as the

sole representative of the peasants.

Gandhi remained in Champaran for an initial uninterrupted

period of seven months and then again for several shorter visits.

The visit, undertaken casually on the entreaty of an unlettered

peasant in the expectation that it would last a few days, occupied

almost a year of Gandhi’s life.

The official inquiry assembled a crushing mountain of evidence

against the big planters, and when they saw this they agreed, in

principle, to make refunds to the peasants. ‘But how much must

we pay?’ they asked Gandhi.

They thought he would demand repayment in full of the money

which they had illegally and deceitfully extorted from the share¬

croppers. He asked only 50 per cent. ‘There he seemed adam¬

ant,’ writes Reverend J. Z. Hodge, a British missionary in

Champaran who observed the entire episode at close range.

‘Thinking probably that he would not give way, the representative

of the planters offered to refund to the extent of 25 per cent, and

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to his amazement Mr. Gandhi took him at his word, thus breaking

the deadlock.’

This settlement was adopted unanimously by the commission.

Gandhi explained that the amount of the 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. Theretofore, as

far as the peasants were concerned, the planters had behaved as

lords above the law. Now the peasant saw that he had rights

and defenders. He learned courage.

Events justified Gandhi’s position. Within a few years the

British planters abandoned their estates, which reverted to the

peasants. Indigo sharecropping disappeared.

Gandhi never contented himself with large political or economic

solutions. He saw the cultural and social backwardness in the

Champaran villages and wanted to do something about it im¬

mediately. He appealed for teachers. Mahadev Desai and

Narhari Parikh, two young men who had just joined Gandhi as

disciples, and their wives, volunteered for the work. Several more

came from Bombay, Poona and other distant parts of the land.

Devadas, Gandhi’s youngest son, arrived from the ashram and so

did Mrs. Gandhi. Primary schools were opened in six villages.

Kasturbai taught the ashram rules on personal cleanliness and

community sanitation.

Health conditions were miserable. Gandhi got a doctor to

volunteer his services for six months. Three medicines were avail¬

able: castor oil, quinine and sulphur ointment. Anybody who

showed a coated tongue was given a dose of castor oil; anybody

with malaria fever received quinine plus castor oil; anybody with

skin eruptions received ointment plus castor oil.

Gandhi noticed the filthy state of women’s clothes. He asked

Kasturbai to talk to them about it. One woman took Kasturbai

into her hut and said, ‘Look, there is no box or cupboard here for

clothes. The sari I am wearing is the only one I have.’

During his long stay in Champaran, Gandhi kept a long-distance

watch on the ashram. He sent regular instructions by mail and

asked for financial accounts. Once he wrote to the residents that

it was time to fill in the old latrine trenches and dig new ones

otherwise the old ones would begin to smell bad.

The Champaran episode was a turning-point in Gandhi’s life.

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‘What I did\*, he explained, ‘was a very ordinary thing, I declared

that the British could not order me about in my own country, 5

But Ghamparan did not begin as an act of defiance. It grew out

of an attempt to alleviate the distress of large numbers of poor

peasants. This was the typical Gandhi pattern: his politics were

intertwined with the practical, day-to-day problems of the

millions. His was not a loyalty to abstractions; it was a loyalty to

living, human beings.

In everything Gandhi did, moreover, he tried to mould a new

free Indian who could stand on his own feet and thus make India

free.

Early in the Ghamparan action, Charles Freer Andrews, the

English pacifist who had become a devoted follower of the Mahat¬

ma, came to bid Gandhi farewell before going on a tour of duty

to the Fiji Islands. Gandhi’s lawyer friends thought it would be

a good idea for Andrews to stay in Ghamparan and help them.

Andrews was willing if Gandhi agreed. But Gandhi was vehe¬

mently opposed. He said, ‘You think that in this unequal fight

it would be helpful if we have an Englishman on our side. This

shows the weakness of your heart. The cause is just and you must

rely upon yourselves to win the battle. You should not seek a

prop in Mr. Andrews because he happens to be an Englishman, 5

‘He had read our minds correctly, 5 Rajendra Prasad comments,

‘and we had no reply . . , Gandhi in this way taught us a lesson

in self-reliance. 5

Self-reliance, Indian independence and help to sharecroppers

were all bound together.

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