

## **INDIGO- By Louis Fischer**

### **SUMMARY**

In the book Indigo, the author (Louis Fischer) describes a vital event in India's history, the first Civil Disobedience movement which was started by Mahatma Gandhi at Champaran in 1916. The problem which was faced by the sharecroppers in Champaran was that all the tenants were forced to plant 15% of their land with Indigo crops. This had been a long-term contract between the sharecroppers and the British planters/estate owners which had an adverse effect on the sharecroppers and their families. Gandhi then launched what is said to be the first instance of Satyagraha in India and the movement ended with a victory as the English landlords were forced to return 25% of the money which they had extorted from the sharecroppers.

Indigo is a story to glorify the struggle of Mahatma Gandhi against the British for the peasants of Champaran, Bihar. This war lasted a whole year but didn't come empty-handed. The Britishers agreed to meet the demands of the peasants. Gandhi didn't stop after the victory, he took social matters in his hand. He helped them with education, personal hygiene, their health and worked to build their self-confidence. In the end, he taught the peasants a very important lesson of self-confidence and self-sufficiency.

### **Timeline of Events**

#### **1. The Inception**

Gandhiji tells Louis about the first time when he encountered this problem which is the year 1917. Gandhiji had gone to the December 1916 annual meeting of the Indian national convention of the Indian national congress in Lucknow when a poor peasant came up to him. He was sitting on his haunches waiting for Mahatma Gandhi. That man was Rajkumar Shukla from Champaran who wanted Gandhi to visit his district. It was located near the kingdom of Nepal in Bihar. Shukla was a sharecropper who was seeking justice against the injustice pulled by the English landlord's at Champaran. Someone told him that he should ask Gandhiji to help him as Gandhiji gained his reputation of fighting injustice against the British but in his own way, by following non-violence.

#### **2. Rajkumar Shukla's Resoluteness**

Rajkumar Shukla had come to the congress session to complain about the widespread injustice of the landlord system in Bihar. This is where he met Gandhi and requested him to visit Champaran to see the unjust system prevailing there. At that time Gandhi had to visit many other parts of India but Shukla was adamant and begged Gandhi to fix a date. This impressed Gandhi who in turn asked Shukla to meet him in Calcutta(Kolkata) and take him to Champaran from there. From Calcutta, both men boarded a train for Patna. There Shukla took him to the house of a lawyer named Rajendra Prasad but he was not present at that time. The news of Gandhiji's arrival in the village of

Bihar spread like wildfire. Many lawyers and groups of peasants came in large numbers to support him in his mission against injustice and inequality.

### **3. Off to Muzaffarpur**

To obtain more information about the condition of Champaran, Gandhi decided to go to Muzaffarpur first. There he stayed for 2 days with professor Malkani. The news of his arrival quickly spread through Muzaffarpur and then to Champaran.

### **4. Landlords of Champaran**

Most of the fertile land in Champaran was owned by the Britishers while the Indian tenants worked for them. Since at that time Synthetic Indigo had been developed by Germany, the indigo plantation was not very profitable. Hence the owners obtained agreements from the sharecroppers (sharecroppers) to pay for being released from the 15% rule. Seeing that the Britishers no longer needed Indigo from these peasants, they asked for compensation in return to free them. This was not acceptable to the poor peasants of Champaran. Even though many of the peasants were illiterate, they saw through the trick of the landlords and were not ready to pay. Those who had signed before wanted their money back.

### **5. Summon to Appear in Court**

The first step which Gandhi took was to meet the secretary of the British landlord association which did not yield any result. Afterward, he met the commissioner who warned Gandhi to leave but Gandhi did not leave. Gandhi then went to the capital of Champaran, Motihari. A huge crowd greeted him at the station. After a little while, he got an official notice from the authorities to leave Champaran immediately but he made it clear that he would disobey the orders. Next, Gandhi received a summon to appear in court the next day. Thereafter he prepared a full report to the viceroy. The next morning thousands of peasants demonstrated in support of Gandhi. This was the beginning of the liberation of people's fear of the Britishers.

### **6. The Reaction of the Britishers**

The government was baffled on seeing so many people backing Gandhi. The authorities wanted to postpone the trial but Gandhi himself protested against the delay. He told the judge that he was caught in a 'conflict of duties'. It was his duty not to set a bad example as a lawbreaker but justice to the thousands of poor sharecroppers was more important. The court didn't deliver the judgment for several days.

After seeing the support Gandhiji was getting, the British Government decided to put a halt in the satyagrah. They arrested Gandhiji on the basis of creating disturbance in the district and being the cause of unrest.

When the news reached the magistrate George Chandar, he visited Gandhi in the jail at Motihari. He told Gandhi that he will pay a fine of 100 Rs to bring him out from there but Gandhi being Gandhi, dismissed this idea.

His being in the jail, revolted people. People in large numbers protested and rallied to demand his release. The British government was left with no choice but to release Gandhiji, they did it unwillingly.

## **7. Commission of Inquiry**

Gandhi had many interviews with the lieutenant-governor in the upcoming days. The lieutenant-governor appointed an official commission of inquiry into the indigo sharecroppers' situation. Gandhi was made the representative of the sharecroppers. He stayed in Champaran for almost 7 months. There were multiple pieces of evidence of the landlords and British officials for illegally taking money from the sharecroppers. Gandhi demanded back 50% but the landlords and British officials offered to refund only 25%. Gandhi finally agreed because this was the first instance that the British government had backed down.

## **8. Social and Cultural Uplifting**

While staying in the Champaran village, Gandhi saw the social and cultural backwardness which was prevalent throughout. He wanted to immediately do something about it. 2 men Narhari Parikh and Mahadev Desai joined him as disciples and their wives volunteered for the work. Many people came from other parts of the country to join the cause, including Gandhi's youngest son, Devadas and Gandhi's wife, Kasturba. As a result, primary schools were opened in 6 villages, and many awareness programs such as cleanliness and sanitation were started by other people. Three medicines were made available- castor oil, quinine and sulphur.

## **9. Impact of the Champaran Episode on Gandhi and India**

The Champaran episode was a turning point in Gandhi's life and Indian History. It was more than just a simple victory against the Britishers, this incident showed the Britishers that the people of India were capable of standing against them. Gandhi tried to mould a new free India, thus paving a way for self-reliance.

From this experience, Gandhiji learned a lot about himself. Before this incident, he only worked for the people of Gujarat. This was the first time he won outside his native town, Gujarat. His credibility touched a massive height in Gujarat itself. People were more aware of him and he became a threat in the eyes of the British Government.

They started taking him seriously after Gandhi dismissed the appeal of leaving the district of Champaran which he signed at the time of arrival in the district. This news reached every ear of the nation but when it reached Ahmedabad, Gujarat club's legal fraternity decided to make this great man their president.

## **10. People with whom Gandhi was Associated with.**

There were many people Gandhi came across while spending time in Champaran. Few became close to him during his stay. The first person that came in contact with Gandhi was J B Kriplani, a lawyer by profession. He met Gandhi at the station of Muzaffarpur when he arrived at the station. Kriplani

and Gandhi then met Brij kishore Prasad. Later they met Rajendra Prasad, a scholar from Calcutta.

The three of them were devoted to Gandhi even after many years from the Champaran incident.