

MAHATMA GANDHI AND THE IMPORTANCE OF FARMERS

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Mahatma Gandhi's own experience with farmers in Champaran and Kheda followed by the expansion of his Constructive Programme which included the thrust on rural industries, helped in his articulation of the importance of peasants. He wanted farmers to become peasants by their choice and not be forced to take up the profession due to circumstances.

He stopped at the threshold of the huts of the thousands of dispossessed, dressed like one of their own. He spoke to them like one of their own. He spoke to them in their own language. Here was living truth at the last and, not only quotations from books. For this reason the Mahatma, the name given to him by the people of India, is his real name. Who else has felt like him that all Indians are his own flesh and blood? When love came to the door of India that door was opened wide. At Gandhi's call India blossomed forth to new greatness, just as once before, in earlier times, when Buddha proclaimed the truth of fellow-feelings and compassion among all living creatures." - Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore on the ascent of Mahatma Gandhi as a messiah of the dispossessed.

The Nobel laureate, Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore has beautifully portrayed how Mahatma Gandhi reached out to the thousands of dispossessed across the length and breadth of the country by speaking their own language. He talks of how both Gandhi and Buddha had instilled the spirit of fellow-feelings and compassion amongst the people. The depth of Gandhi's approach to reach out to the last person has been stressed by his non-violent action throughout his interventions during India's freedom struggle. His Talisman is a poignant reminder of the necessity to not only think but also act for the benefit of the last person in the society. Amongst the groups of dispossessed, Gandhi tried to address, farmers remained a pivotal group, which actually gave shape to his evolution from Mohandas to Mahatma. One of those farmers who actually became a catalyst in this process was Rajkumar Shukla from Champaran, Bihar.

The ingenuity and perseverance of Rajkumar Shukla with which he succeeded to invite Gandhi to Champaran to initiate the struggle of the peasants against the unjust Tinkathiya System is a significant feature of the chequered history of our freedom struggle. Champaran was a struggle of the people and an important experiment of truth and ahimsa. Gandhi was clear as he wrote in his autobiography



that his objective in Champaran was to inquire into the condition of the Champaran agriculturists and understand their grievances against the indigo planters. For this purpose, he said he needed to meet thousands of ryots. After meeting the peasants, Gandhi wrote in his autobiography: "That day in Champaran was an unforgettable event in my life and a red-letter day for the peasants and for me." He further observed: "In this meeting with the peasants I was face to face with God, Ahimsa, and Truth."

Later on, in 1939, speaking in a public meeting at Benaras, Gandhi observed: "Just a few decades ago, I never knew what Hindustan was nor did Hindustan know what I was. I came to Champaran in 1917 with a view to redressing the grievances of the peasantry who were mere toys in the hands of the planters. I came here with my heart open and had no other instrument for the fight except the armament of truth and non-violence."

It was again his work with the peasants of Champaran from where Gandhi's constructive work evolved. The peasants there were not only fearful but totally ignorant. He noted in the autobiography that unless the peasants were engaged in variety of initiatives like education, health, sanitation, their condition might not improve. He said he was convinced that work of 'permanent nature was impossible without proper village education'.

In fact, Gandhi did not stop at just trying to provide primary education to the peasants.

He described the condition of the village in his autobiography: "The villages were insanitary, the lanes were full of filth, the wells surrounded by mud and stink and the courtyards unbearably untidy. The elder people badly needed education in cleanliness. They were all suffering from various skin diseases. So, it was decided to do as much sanitary work as possible and to penetrate every department of their lives."

Another important farmer struggle which Gandhi led was the Kheda Satyagraha. A condition of famine had arisen in the Kheda district of Gujarat due to widespread failure of crops. The farmers wanted the revenue assessment for the year suspended. When the pleas of the farmers were not heard, Gandhi motivated the farmers to resort to Satyagraha.

An important common thread in both the Champaran and Kheda Satyagraha was that Gandhi was able to instil amongst the farmers the spirit of fearlessness. For instance, during the Kheda Satyagraha, Gandhi writes in his autobiography, "The main thing was to rid the agriculturists of their fear by making them realize that the officials were not the masters but the servants, in as much as they received their salaries from the tax payers."

Writing further on his experiences of Champaran and Kheda, Gandhi said, "An illiterate farmer can represent the difficulties of the agricultural classes much better than an Indian learned but without experience in that particular field. I wish, therefore, to see an ever-increasing number of delegates from among farmers, weavers, carpenters, blacksmiths, shoe-makers and other such groups. I, for one, think that no substantial progress in the country is possible so long as patriotic farmers do not attend our political and social conferences in numbers proportionate to their numerical strength. The understanding of farmers' conditions which, through direct experience, I acquired in few months in Champaran and Kheda cannot be had from any number of books." (Collected Works, VOL. 21: 1 JULY, 1920 - 21 NOVEMBER, 1920)

The importance Gandhi attached to the farmers can be gauged by this saying, "If Swaraj is attained by the effort of the whole people, as it must be under non-violence, the kisans must come into their own and have the uppermost voice. ...If the legislature proves itself to be incapable of safeguarding Kisan's interests, they will, of course, always have the sovereign remedy of civil disobedience and non-cooperation." (The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi)

Elsewhere, he had written, "India lives in farmers' huts. The weavers' skill is a reminder of India's glory, and so I feel proud in describing myself as a farmer and weaver." (Collected Works, VOL. 18: 1 MAY, 1919 - 28 SEPTEMBER, 1919) Again, he points out, "Years ago, I read a poem in which the peasant is described as the father of the world. If God is the Provider, the cultivator is his hand. What are we going to do to discharge the debt we owe to him? So long we have only lived on the sweat of his brow." (The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi)

For Gandhi, farmers being in touch with the soil had an educated mind. He had pointed out, "A farmer cannot work without applying his mind. He must be able to test the nature of his soil, must watch changes of weather, must know how to manipulate his plough skilfully and be generally familiar with the movements of the stars, the sun and the moon. The farmer knows enough of astronomy, geography and geology to serve his needs. He has to feed his children and has, therefore, some idea of the duties of man, and, residing as he does in the vast open spaces of this earth, he naturally becomes aware of the greatness of God. Physically, it goes without saying, he is always sturdy. He is his own physician, when ill. Thus, we can see, he does have an educated mind." (VOL. 13 : 12 MARCH, 1913 - 25 DECEMBER, 1913)

To conclude, Gandhi's own experience with farmers in Champaran and Kheda followed by the expansion of his Constructive Programme which included the thrust on rural industries, helped in his articulation of the importance of peasants. He wanted farmers to become peasants by their choice and not be forced to take up the profession due to circumstances. He wrote, "I do not want the power of a Hitler; I want the power of free peasant. I have been trying to identify myself with the peasants all these years, but have not succeeded in doing so. What, however, differentiates me from the kisan today is that he is a kisan and labourer not by choice but by force of circumstances? I want to be a kisan and a labourer by choice, and when I can make him also a kisan and a labourer by choice, I can also enable him to throw off the shackles that keep him bound today and that compel him to do the master's bidding." (The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi)

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