



THE LIFE AND STRUGGLE OF RAJKUMAR SHUKLA: HERO OF CHAMPARAN SATYAGRAHA

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ABSTRACT

Those who know Gandhiji's satyagraha at Champaran in Bihar, also know the name of Pandit Rajkumar Shukla. There were many young nationalists, and who became big names later on, who started their political careers from the fields of Champaran. Peasants of Champaran were forced to cultivate indigo by their English landlords and the miserable conditions which arose due to this forced labour was instrumental in making Gandhiji, Rajendra Prasad, Brajkishore Prasad and others sensitive towards Indian peasant. The ill effects of British policies on Indian agriculture were also witnessed by Gandhiji through his own eyes, making his resolve even stronger regarding mobilization of Indian peasants for achieving independence. However it was a rustic agriculturist by the name of Pandit Rajkumar Shukla, who due to his untiring continuous efforts was able to bring Gandhiji to Champaran. He was also able to successfully spread the message among innocent rural folks about the importance of Gandhiji's visit and build a mass movement.



It was only after Champaran that Gandhiji carved out a new kind of mass movement taking in support from all quarters of Indian public, from peasants to industrialists.

Even before the advent of Gandhiji, there was fierce struggle going on between indigo farmers and their landlords. Ryots, as the farmers were called, fought many a times leading to loss of lives, destruction of property, filing of a number of court cases against the ryots, confiscation of property and agricultural produce by the authorities and slapping of huge fines on the ryots. They were led by Pandit Rajkumar Shukla, Sheikh Gulab, Harbansh Sahay, Radhumal Marwari and others. In an uprising in 1907-08 in Champaran, under the leadership of the above mentioned leaders, the ryots mercilessly beat their landlords and their goons for the excessive wrongdoings meted out to them. The ryots were largely illiterate and had tough time fighting legal battles against the wealthy and powerful landlords having full support of government machinery. This period saw rise of few young nationalists who were lawyers by profession and who tried to provide justice to these struggling farmers. There were few newspapers also like 'Pratap' under the editorship of Mohammad Munish which made great efforts to ensure that the voices of struggle of ryots reach far and loud. It was because of this uprising of 1907-08 and the subsequent struggle that the panchkathia system was replaced by tinkathia system, i.e. the tenant was now bound by law to cultivate indigo in three out of every twenty parts of his land instead of five out of twenty as prevalent earlier.

Hence, Pandit Rajkumar Shukla and others played an important role in fighting the injustices meted out to indigo ryots even before Gandhiji's arrival on the scene. Later, Pandit Rajkumar Shukla

traveled far and wide to reach out to Gandhiji and convince him to come to Champaran personally to witness the horrors of British system. Pandit Rajkumar Shukla also wrote numerous letters requesting Gandhiji to visit Champaran. Few lines from one of such letters are as follows:

“Dear Mahatma, you listen to everyone’s problem, today give me a chance to present my story as well...Our story is even more painful than the tale of struggle going on in South Africa, which you and your satyagrahis along with masses witnessed while staying at Tolstoy farm.”

(Pandit Rajkumar shukla’s letter to Gandhiji from Betia, Bihar on 27Feb, 1917)

Gandhiji dedicates a full chapter in his autobiography, “My experiments with truth”, in which he explains the persistency of Pandit Rajkumar Shukla in reaching wherever he goes and even describes Pandit Rajkumar Shukla as an ‘ubiquitous’ character while stressing upon Panditji’s simplicity and dedication. Hence had it not been the continuous efforts of Pandit Rajkumar Shukla, Champaran voices would hardly be heard at national and international level. Even after one hundred years, injustices at Champaran are being reflected and analyzed to understand Indian National Movement, peasant problems in British Raj and genesis of Gandhi as a mass leader.

After Gandhiji left Champaran, Pandit Rajkumar Shukla’s struggle kept on continuing as he fought many court cases filed against the ryots, mobilized public support in favour of Gandhiji and Congress, led fight against Rowlatt act and participated in non-cooperation movement. He was also actively associated with Kisan Sabha movement in Champaran for many years. English also realized him as the most important mass leader in Champaran as evident from intelligence reports of that period.

In 1929, at the height of his failing health Pandit Rajkumar Shukla reaches Sabarmati Ashram to meet Gandhiji and had an emotional encounter / conversation where Gandhiji assures Panditji that his sacrifices will bear fruit one day for sure. Shortly after reaching Motihari, at the age of 54, in 1929, Pandit Rajkumar Shukla passed away due to poor health. His funeral rites are done in Motihari itself where people collected money to arrange for final rites of this great son of Bihar.

An English officer, who was instrumental in ensuring that Pandit Rajkumar Shukla’s life was full of problems and suffering, was also shocked at the death of this great son of India. This English officer used every trick in the book to harass and torture Panditji to break his resolve of fighting against the indigo injustices but did not succeed. This officer personally attended the last rites of Panditji and said that the only ‘man’ of Champaran is now dead. He said that although Pandit Rajkumar Shukla was his opponent but still he had great respect for the ‘son of Champaran’ and prophesized that he would not live long as the person he respected the most in life has left him. This prophecy came true and the officer died just after few days. This was the effect of Panditji on even his opponents.

The paper attempts to evaluate the role played by Pandit Rajkumar Shukla in fight against the indigo injustices committed in Champaran prior to 1917, during Gandhiji’s satyagraha in 1917 and after 1917; which would be a tribute to one of the forgotten heroes of modern India who fought throughout his life for farmers’ rights.

KEY WORDS: forced labour, ryots, indigo farmers, panchkathia, tinkathia.

KEY THEME: Mass Participation in Freedom Struggle.

EARLY LIFE

Rajkumar Shukla was born on 26 August, 1875 in Satwaria, a small village around 18 kilometers east of Bettiah in present day Paschim Champaran district. Rajkumar Shukla’s father, Kohlahal Shukla was originally from Siwan and relocated to Satwaria where he owned a small piece of land. The family also owned cultivable land in Murli Bharhwa village. Rajkumar Shukla was the youngest of the three siblings; the older two being Ramphal Shukla and Govind Shukla. We do not

find any mention regarding Rajkumar Shukla's elementary education but he was well versed with Kaithi script as evident from the records that he wrote in his diary. Rajkumar Shukla was married at the age of 20 to a girl from neighboring district Gopalganj. She died at an early age after which Rajkumar Shukla married second time to Kewal Kunwar from Muzaffarpur district. He had one child from the first marriage and two from the second. One of the surviving members from this family lineage while living in Satwaria has kept Pandit Rajkumar Shukla's heritage alive.

The Beginning of Struggle

Pandit Rajkumar Shukla worked as an employee (*Muharrir* or *Munshi*) of Bettiah Raj in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. He left his service to do farming in Satwaria and Murli Bharhawa villages, where he owned land. He was a propertied farmer owning around three hundred cows and sixty buffaloes. He lost all his property in the struggle against the Indigo planters. He was a Brahmin by caste and was a raiyat under Belwa plantation. He was a small time moneylender having personal property of almost twenty five hundred rupees. He was part of the local panchayat and through this his confrontation with the indigo planters started who wanted him to put an end to the panchayat system of dispensing justice and transfer the rights of decision making to planters. He was regularly penalized for not following the orders of planters. Many a times goons hired by planters destroyed Rajkumar Shukla's crops because of his refusal to pay illegal abwabs like irrigation tax. In one such incident his home was burnt to ashes and all belongings destroyed. Rajkumar Shukla along with his family was beaten up and false court cases were imposed on him by the planters of Belwa kothi. Rajkumar Shukla also went to jail for few weeks under such false charges.

After undergoing this kind of humiliation and abuse, Pandit Rajkumar Shukla decided to oppose the injustices committed by planters with full vigour and determination. He started mobilizing raiyats and began establishing links with other local level leaders in nearby villages. As the stature of Rajkumar Shukla as a leader of raiyats increased, more the planters became annoyed. In 1906, massive floods ravaged the villages of Champaran. Instead of sympathizing with the raiyats for the losses they suffered indigo planters refused to show any leniency towards collection of taxes and begar. This led to a considerable deterioration of relations between raiyats and planters. Eventual result was killing of an indigo planter of Telhuda kothi, Bloomfield, at the hands of angry raiyats. During this period several local leaders emerged who through petitions and letters requested the administration to start an inquiry in to the Champaran injustices. Letters were also sent to prominent politicians of Bihar to raise this issue in legislative council. At the same time these local leaders were aggressive in character and were involved in some acts of violence against the planters from 1906 to 1908. Popularly it is known as Champaran uprising of 1907-08. Along with Pandit Rajkumar Shukla the other prominent local leaders were Sheikh Gulab, Sheetal Rai, Radhumal Marwari, Sheikh Rajbali, Saryu Tiwari and Lomraj Singh. The group received some success too when Sathi kothi plantation was closed on the orders of Lt. Governor of Bihar due to multiple petitions sent by this group, through prominent lawyers and leaders, highlighting the abuses suffered by the raiyats.

The group led by Rajkumar Shukla, Sheikh Gulab and Sheetal Rai also started a mass awareness program among raiyats and approached a number of leaders to make their voices heard at the highest levels. One such leader was famous lawyer Brajkishor Prasad who was also a member of Bihar and Orissa legislative council. He moved a resolution in the council which was eventually rejected and is as follows:

“A committee comprising of officials and non-officials should be formed immediately, which will look into the deteriorating relations between raiyats and indigo planters and will provide recommendations for redressal of the problem.”

The administration used many tricks to break the unity of the group by using its 'carrot and stick' policy but failed miserably. In October 1908, during Dusshera, these leaders gave speeches addressing thousands of raiyats asking them to unite against the indigo planters. They held a kisan sabha and thousands of raiyats took pledge to oppose collection of illegal taxes by the planters. Hindu-Muslim brotherhood was the main feature of this kisan sabha as an element of religious sanctification was added when Hindus took oath in the name of Goddess Kali and Muslims took oath looking towards west. After a series of events many of these leaders were arrested on charges of beating up the police and disturbing peace. Pandit Rajkumar Shukla and Sheikh Gulab went underground for few months. Raiyats were forced to pay the expenses incurred on police deployment in villages due to the activities of this group. On 29 November 1908 prominent newspaper 'The Statesman' published a story covering these events and stressed upon the fragile situation in the region highlighting the administration's decision to deploy Gurkha soldiers for the protection of Europeans in and around Champaran.

Gorle's Inquiry

To ease the mounting pressure, a fact finding commission was constituted by the government under an English officer of agriculture department, W. R. Gorle to inquire into the case of Champaran raiyats and planters. This inquiry took place at the end of 1908 and by middle of 1909 Gorle submitted his report, which was not made public. Gorle was a sensitive and honest officer and carried out an impartial study. His recommendations, which were kept confidential, asked for closing down of indigo factories and also highlighted the sufferings of raiyats. Brajkishor Prasad asked the government to release the findings of the report in legislative council but it was rejected. However, government did release innocent raiyats locked up in jail under various false charges and increased the rate of tinkathia indigo by 12.5% in 1910.

German Dye and New Phase of Exploitation

The demand for Indian indigo started falling down in the early twentieth century due to invention of artificial dye in Germany. To compensate their losses, the indigo planters started imposing new taxes like *sharahbeshi* which was first started in Motihari plantation in 1912. Under different conditions depending upon the type of lease and plantation, planters collected taxes like *tanav*, *harja*, *hunda* and numerous other illegal abwabs. The rates under *sharahbeshi* were so high that raiyats used to either sell or mortgage their land to pay it.

Indigo raiyats even petitioned King George V when he came to visit India in 1911 but nothing came out of it. In 1912, a Patna newspaper '*Beharee*' also picked up the cause of raiyats and published articles and stories of inhuman exploitation by planters of Champaran under the caption "The Planters and the Raiyats". Again in 1914, Rajkumar Shukla went to jail because of a court case filed by Belwa kothi planters under the charges of disturbing peace. On 10 April 1914 Brajkishore Prasad presided over the session of Bihar Provincial Association and raised the issue of Champaran raiyats. In the next session of Bihar Provincial Association at Chhapra, on 13 April 1915, Rajkumar Shukla gave an emotional speech describing the condition of Champaran raiyats. Finally, a decision was made to present a resolution in 1916 Lucknow session of Indian National Congress regarding Champaran raiyats.

Meanwhile, another inquiry commission led by an English settlement officer, Sweeney submitted its report to the government in June 1915. The report sympathized with the raiyats and held planters guilty for the subhuman condition of Champaran raiyats. In this report, it was also mentioned that the planters collected huge taxes even on usage of canal water for irrigation purposes. It was collected as '*Paiin Kharcha*'. In total, there were around forty to forty five different types of

taxes collected by the planters and there was no improvement in the situation of raiyats which made Rajkumar Shukla and other ground workers frustrated.

Rajkumar Shukla along with journalist Peer Mohammad ‘Munis’ met Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi, the editor of Kanpur based nationalist newspaper ‘Pratap’. It was ‘Pratap’ which took the lead by publishing articles on Champaran atrocities at a time when most newspapers played cautiously to avoid government’s attention. Vidyarthi published a series of articles titled “*Champaran ki Durdasha*” highlighting the sufferings of Champaran raiyats. Since 1914, the role played by ‘Pratap’ was exceptional as it deputed a team of journalists comprising Janma Nanda, Peer Mohammad ‘Munis’, Harbansh Sahay and Pashupati Lal to report on the Champaran situation on regular basis. The identity and details of this team were kept secret to avoid the administration’s wrath. By 1915 there were already rumors in the countryside regarding Gandhiji’s possible visit to Champaran.

Lucknow Congress, 1916

With an aim to use national level platform to sensitize leaders about Champaran wrongs, Pandit Rajkumar Shukla reached Lucknow to attend 31st annual session of Indian National Congress (26-30 December 1916). He met Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya, and while apprising them about the sufferings of raiyats in Champaran, he asked them to visit his district. However, both of them refused to give any commitment due to their busy schedules. Soon after this, he reached, along with Brajkishor Prasad, at the tent of Gandhiji and asked Gandhiji to visit Champaran. Gandhiji refused to give any assurance but showed willingness to witness and inquire the condition of raiyats through his own eyes before making a decision. Rajkumar Shukla was delighted at the prospect of Gandhiji visiting Champaran for a fact finding inquiry into the indigo raiyat’s condition. Brajkishor Prasad moved a resolution in the session on Champaran issue which is as follows:

“The Congress respectfully urges upon the government the desirability of appointing a mixed committee of officials to inquire into the causes of agrarian trouble and the strained relations between the Indian ryots and the European planters in North Bihar and to suggest remedies”.

In his autobiography, Gandhiji clearly mentions, the details of this encounter and states his ignorance about indigo cultivation in Champaran. He briefly explains the personality of Pandit Rajkumar Shukla and describes his character as ‘simple’, ‘ubiquitous’ and the ‘one which won his heart’. In the end it was because of relentless persuasion by Rajkumar Shukla that Gandhiji landed on the soil of Champaran.

Special Branch Officer’s Testimony about Lucknow Congress

An intelligence officer of Bihar police’s special branch was present at the Lucknow session of Congress and he submitted a report to the government titled “Indigo planters and raiyats in Bihar” on 13 January 1917. In that report, he gave details of Rajkumar Shukla’s speech at the session. This was the first time that a simple agriculturist addressed a Congress session. Some excerpts from the speech are as follows:

“It has been long time since the relationship between indigo planters and peasants has been pleasant, to say the least. It all began when indigo planters took plantation rights from Ramnagar and Bettiah regimes and started indigo plantation. According to the terms of agreement every peasant used to reserve three *katta* land out of one *bigha* for indigo plantation equivalent to roughly three out of every twenty parts of land. Even this was not acceptable to the indigo planters who imposed many other illegal conditions. They forced helpless raiyats to do *begar* on their land and in any case if someone refuses than all kinds of torture methods are used. Indigo planters have become so powerful that they themselves hold *diwani* and *fauzdari* courts and penalize poor peasants according to their

own wishes. Many a times we requested government to set up an inquiry over such injustices but all our requests fell to deaf ears. There happened a great uprising in the past due to exploitation by indigo planters. Bengal government constituted one officer commission to inquire into the case but the findings of the commission were never made public and hundreds of poor raiyats were sent to jail. I am a raiyat from Champaran. I can just imagine the kind of suffering and torture awaiting me when I reach Champaran because I came to this session and presented my case in front of this gathering.”

This report was followed by below mentioned observations from the governor E. A. Gate:

“There is a person named Rajkumar Shukla who lives in Mr. Ammon’s area and he is trying to build a movement against Mr. Ammon and other indigo planters”.

There was further deterioration in relations between indigo planters and peasants after Rajkumar Shukla’s address to Congress session in Lucknow. We find many government documents which speak about this uneasiness. Administration became active and decided to organize a grievance redressal camp at Harinagar on 26 January 1917. Rajkumar Shukla asked people from nearby villages to attend the camp and present their cases in front of District Collector. Collector promised raiyats speedy action on specific problems and asked raiyats not to pay illegal abwabs to Indigo planters. He further promised to hold such camps at other nearby villages in the coming month. However, the promise of grievance redressal was just an administrative exercise and nothing concrete came out of it.

Letter to Gandhiji

After not hearing from Gandhiji, Rajkumar Shukla asked Peer Mohammad ‘Munis’ to write a letter to Gandhiji reminding him of his promise to visit Champaran. The letter dated 27 February, 1917 was, however, written in the name of Rajkumar Shukla. The content of the letter are as follows: “Dear Mahatma,

You listen to everyone’s problem; today give me a chance to present my story as well.

You have made a near impossible feat to come true by putting it to work, the feat which even greatest of men like Tolstoy had just thought of. Filled with almost same kind of hope and faith we are ready to share our sacred story with you. Our story is even more painful than the tale of struggle going on in South Africa, which you and your satyagrahis along with masses witnessed while staying at Tolstoy farm.

We do not think it is appropriate to sadden your heart from the pain that has been inflicted upon us - the pain which 1.9 million souls are suffering from. We only pray you this that please witness this through your own eyes, then you will accept yourself that in one of the corners of this country, its people – who pride themselves to be living under the shadow of British regime- are forced to live like animals due to the enormous suffering brought upon them.

Writing no more, we would like to draw your attention on the vow that you took in Lucknow session of Congress and later on again in Kanpur, that you will visit Champaran in month of March or April. Sir, now the time has come to complete your vow. 1.9 million suffering souls of Champaran are eagerly waiting for your blessed presence and we are not just hoping but have full faith in our hearts that mere descending of your lotus feet will liberate us just like Ahalya found liberation by lord Ram’s touch.

Eagerly waiting for your presence,
Rajkumar Shukla.”

Rajkumar Shukla in Calcutta

Through newspapers, Rajkumar Shukla came to know that Gandhiji is arriving in Calcutta on 7 March 1917. Gandhiji wrote a letter to Rajkumar Shukla regarding his trip to Calcutta but

somehow it was not delivered to Rajkumar Shukla. Rajkumar Shukla wanted to meet Gandhiji at any cost but didn't have enough money for the trip. He borrowed twelve rupees from a friend and reached Calcutta on 9 March 1917. He then proceeded to Surendranath Banerjee's home and explained him about Champaran situation and asked for the place where Gandhiji was staying. Unfortunately, Rajkumar Shukla was unable to meet Gandhiji and then decided to meet Motilal Ghosh, editor of *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and apprised him of the Champaran atrocities. He then left for Champaran.

All these events ensured that Pandit Rajkumar Shukla was no more a simple raiyat in the eyes of British government. Administration was keeping a close eye on his movements and an intelligence report sent to home secretary, government of India by the chief secretary, Bihar and Orissa government explains it as follows:

“A person named Rajkumar Shukla, who participated in the Lucknow session of Congress and brought to focus the issue of growing discontent among indigo planters and peasants of Champaran, has created an atmosphere of uneasiness. Hence, the situation must be dealt seriously and with utmost care.”

Second trip to Calcutta

On 20 March 1917, another letter of Gandhiji was received by Rajkumar Shukla in which Gandhiji assured him to visit Champaran in the month of April and asked him about number of days that will be sufficient to understand the situation of Champaran in detail. Again on 3 April 1917, Gandhiji wrote to Rajkumar Shukla about the details of his trip to Calcutta and asked Rajkumar Shukla to meet him in person. Rajkumar Shukla didn't have a safe place to keep his family because of constant threats from Indigo planters and therefore he decided to make arrangements for his family at an acquaintance's home and proceeded for Calcutta to get Gandhiji in Champaran, which was his long awaited wish. He reached Calcutta and met Gandhiji on 8 April 1917. Gandhiji writes about Rajkumar Shukla in his autobiography as below:

“Where to go, what to do and what to see, I had no knowledge about these. Before I was about to reach Calcutta, Rajkumar Shukla was present at Bhupendranath Basu's place. This unsophisticated and unlettered but persistent agriculturist caught my attention.”

Gandhiji along with Rajkumar Shukla left for Patna on 10 April 1917 after attending a meeting of Congress working committee. In this meeting, Rajkumar Shukla was present as a delegate. This speaks a lot about Gandhiji's faith in Rajkumar Shukla as it was on the insistence of Gandhiji that Rajkumar Shukla participated.

Administration's Fears

The district administration of Champaran was already on alert as can be understood by a letter written by special branch to police superintendent about the fragile situation in Champaran and the repercussions of Gandhiji's possible public address of the indigo raiyats. This letter along with many others clearly showcases British government's fears of a violent uprising among Champaran peasants because of the atrocities committed by indigo planters and administration. Another such letter written by the district administration described the situation in Champaran as follows:

“Champaran is sitting on a volcano which can burst anytime.”

Thinking of Mahatma Gandhiji's presence amongst Champaran raiyats as a potentially dangerous situation, the administration decided to invoke infamous Defence of India act and file a case against Gandhiji under this act.

Rajkumar Shukla and Gandhiji in Patna

Gandhiji along with Rajkumar Shukla reached Bankipur railway station near Patna on 10 April 1917. Rajkumar Shukla then took Gandhiji directly to the house of Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the place where he thought that Gandhiji would be well treated and would be looked after properly. Dr. Rajendra Prasad was a famous lawyer and was providing legal assistance to indigo raiyats in several court cases. Dr. Rajendra Prasad was not at home and his servants, thinking of Gandhiji and Rajkumar Shukla as poor peasants in want of legal assistance, treated them badly. Bihar, at that time, was a heavily caste ridden society and the servants thought of Gandhiji and Rajkumar Shukla as low caste. Gandhiji was not allowed to use the toilet located inside the house and was not allowed to draw water from the well. Even multiple pleas of Rajkumar Shukla to treat Gandhiji properly were ignored by the servants. Gandhiji wrote a letter to Magan Lal on the same day explaining the events as below:

“The person who has brought me here is very simple and hardly knows anything. He has brought me to this house of an unknown person. The owner of the house has gone somewhere. Servants of the house think that we both are beggars. They are not even letting us use the toilet. What can I say about food and water?”

I keep my things of basic necessity after lot of thought, hence I am at ease. I have suffered lot of humiliations in life so this indifferent situation doesn't pain me much. If this kind of situation persists then it will be hard to proceed to Champaran. It doesn't look like there will be someone to guide me and I am not in a position to find my own path. In such condition I cannot give you my address. If I had brought someone here along with me then he too would be a burden on me. Besides carrying my own weight I would have to carry his weight too. I am just explaining you about my peculiar condition. You don't have to worry about me because I am at least enjoying my solitude. House is fine. There are some arrangements for bathing and washing, so the needs of body are being taken care of. Minimal to say but development of soul is also happening.”

Gandhiji has also mentioned this episode in his autobiography. Later in the day Rajkumar Shukla brought dates for Gandhiji to eat and on instructions from Gandhiji went to Mazharul Haq's home to inform him about Gandhiji's arrival in Patna. Mazharul Haq and Gandhiji knew each other since the days of their stay in England, where both were studying to become barristers. Gandhiji spent the night at Haq's place and next day left for Muzaffarpur where J.B. Kripalani along with some students welcomed him and Rajkumar Shukla. Next day Gandhiji met the secretary of Indigo Planters' Association, J.M. Wilson to apprise him about the purpose of his visit and asked for his support to carry out an investigation regarding the condition of indigo raiyats. Wilson didn't promise anything. Rajkumar Shukla travelled throughout the Muzaffarpur to spread the news of Gandhiji's arrival. Later on a group of educated volunteers joined Gandhiji and apprised him about the fear of government and indigo planters in the region, a condition which was clearly explained by Rajkumar Shukla to Gandhiji earlier. Gandhiji then met divisional commissioner of Tirhut on 13 April 1917. Gandhiji again asked for support from the administration to uncover the truth of indigo plantation in Champaran but divisional commissioner insulted Gandhiji and asked him to leave Muzaffarpur immediately. Gandhiji was very patient during his meeting with the divisional commissioner and assured him that his goal was not to disturb peace in the region. Gandhiji clarified that he will be proceeding to Champaran because he has been invited by the leaders from Bihar and would like to assess the situation through his own eyes but with the support from administration. One of the letters written by Brajkishor Prasad along with several other prominent leaders of Bihar like Ram Navami Prasad, Gaya Prasad Singh and Ram Dayalu Sinha invited Gandhiji for a fair and impartial investigation into indigo atrocities. Some contents of the letter are as follows:

“Dear Gandhiji,

We completely stand by the statement that you gave in front of Tirhut divisional commissioner... We too are part of the group who invited you to Bihar... We believe that because of your wide experience you are the most suitable person for carrying out a fair and impartial probe into this matter and this would be in best interests of each party involved in this case”.

Spreading the News

Meanwhile Rajkumar Shukla became very active in mobilising peasants in Champaran. Rajkumar Shukla was also worried about the kind of welcome people of Champaran should give to Gandhiji. His health was also on the verge of collapse but still he continued to propagate, village after village, about Gandhiji's arrival in Champaran. He asked peasants, suffering from exploitation at the hands of Indigo planters, to gather in large numbers and meet Gandhiji during his stay in Champaran. Shukla asked the raiyats to be fearless in explaining their ordeal to Gandhiji as he was the only person who can solve their problems. Rajkumar Shukla's motive behind such an exercise was to make raiyats confident and courageous so that they can explain their side of the story with full force and vigour. In this movement Rajkumar Shukla was equally helped and supported by journalist Peer Mohammad 'Munis'. Both of them travelled at night as indigo planters and administration were always looking for a chance to inflict bodily harm upon them. Even Rajkumar Shukla had to relocate his family after every few days to friends and relatives' houses because of fear of their safety as Rajkumar Shukla himself remained mostly away to organize peasants against indigo planters or to fight court cases filed by planters and administration against him and the raiyats.

Gandhiji reaches Champaran

Gandhiji arrived at Motihari along with Ram Navami Prasad and Gorakh Prasad. He stayed at Gorakh Prasad's home. News of Gandhiji's arrival spread like a wildfire in Champaran. Gandhiji decided to first visit Jasolipatti, a nearby village, to find the truth about an incident involving Lomraj Singh, who was tortured badly by the goons of indigo planters and the police. Rajkumar Shukla also joined Gandhiji and on 16 April 1917 along with some other leaders started their journey towards Jasolipatti. Halfway across a police constable came and handed over a notice to Gandhiji to first meet the collector at Motihari as the situation can turn violent in Jasolipatti due to Gandhiji's presence. Gandhiji came back to Motihari while other leaders continued their journey for Jasolipatti on his request and a notice was served to him under section 144 of CRPC. Gandhiji refused to accept charges slapped on him under section 144 and instead asked for the charges to be framed under section 188 of IPC. Gandhiji also informed the collector that he will not leave Champaran and would be available in the court for hearing of the charges. On 18 April 1917 Gandhiji appeared in the court at noon but even hours before his hearing thousands of raiyats gathered outside the court.

Gandhiji ensured a day in advance that in case he is jailed there is team of professionals to fight the cases for the cause of raiyats with a collective effort. Therefore he was ready to go to jail for the raiyats in case administration takes such a step. The court proceedings at Champaran became famous as Gandhiji defended his right to inquire about the condition of his fellow countrymen and refused to pay for his own bail. Newspapers like *Indian Patriot*, *Bengalee*, *Amrit Bazar Patrika*, *New India*, *Punjabi* and many others ran editorials praising the stand taken by Gandhiji and called it a 'courageous act'.

Gandhiji entrusted the leadership of Champaran movement to Mazharul Haq and Brajkishor Prasad in case he is jailed in near future. Gandhiji even laid out second line and third line of leadership comprising of Dharnidhar Prasad, Ram Navami Prasad, Rajendra Prasad, Shambhu Sharan Verma and Anugrah Narayan Sinha. He also advised them to inform the government of this decision.

Gandhiji starts Public Investigation

From 19 April 1917 thousands of indigo raiyats started coming at the doors of Gandhiji to apprise him about their condition. Gandhiji requested the collector to depute a police inspector who would be present when the statements of indigo raiyats are recorded. Gandhiji ensured all the arrangements for this mammoth exercise of recording statements of each and every raiyat who came to his doorstep in search of justice. Gandhiji even relocated himself from Gorakh Prasad's home to a more spacious place to carry out this exercise with the help of his team. It was also decided to call already established big leaders of Bihar like Sachinad Sinha, Hasan Imam and Rai Bahadur Krishna Sahay for participating in this exercise. However, they could not join due to their busy schedules but did send monetary help.

Meanwhile government scolded divisional commissioner of Tirhut and other district administrators regarding the mishandling of the case of Mahatma Gandhi and Champaran movement. It was decided to drop the charges imposed under section 144 of CRPC against Gandhiji and government also directed the district functionaries to provide all possible help to Gandhiji to carry out his investigation. It was no change of heart on the part of British government but they were scared of the fact that the raiyats were extremely angry at the treatment meted out to them by the administration and that at any given point of time this anger can take the form of a violent movement. Hence, British government decided to take a calculated step by assisting Gandhiji, who was their best bet in controlling the raiyats, in his investigations. On 20 April 1917 Gandhiji received a letter from the collector regarding dropping of charges and assistance in carrying out the inquiry.

Newspapers across India congratulated the government on this move. In Champaran, raiyats were coming every day in large numbers to catch a glimpse of Gandhiji and record their statements. Management of these raiyats was the task assigned to Rajkumar Shukla. It was the result of his and other ground workers efforts that so many raiyats were now coming out in open to express their miserable conditions.

Gandhiji Begins his Ground Tour

Later on Gandhiji toured extensively in Champaran. He started from Bettiah where a rousing welcome was given to him. In Bettiah, he stayed at Hazarimal Dharmashala owned by a Marwari family of Babu Surajmal, who had high regards for Gandhiji. Gandhiji visited the house of Peer Mohammad 'Munis' and the village along with his followers. After that he visited Pandit Rajkumar Shukla's village Murli Bharhwa along with Brajkishor Prasad and Ram Navami Prasad. Gandhiji was shocked to see the state of Rajkumar Shukla's home which was looted and partially burnt by the goons of indigo planter of Belwa kothi, Ammon. Gandhiji also stayed at Sant Raut's home while on his way back from Bettiah. Sant Raut was an associate of Rajkumar Shukla and was actively involved in mobilizing peasants against the indigo planters. Another close associate of Pandit Rajkumar Shukla was Khendar Rai who donated generously to any work initiated by Rajkumar Shukla. Gandhiji also visited an extremely volatile village Siriswa under Dhokraha plantation along with Rajkumar Shukla, J.B. Kripalani and Dr. Rajendra Prasad. The planters themselves set a portion of their kothi on fire and falsely attributed this to Gandhiji's visit. Government got into action and decided to initiate proceedings against Gandhiji and his followers under Defence of India act. Rajkumar Shukla had to remain underground for some period because of this event. After this Rajkumar Shukla marched through a number of villages like Harinagar, Taulahi, Narkatiaganj, Raxaul, Hardiya, Ratanpur and Sugaon to propagate the message of Gandhiji and mobilize raiyats into a wider movement against planters.

Government's Announcement

On 10 June 1917, government announced formation of an inquiry committee of which Gandhiji was made a member. The agenda given to this seven member committee was to look into the relationship between indigo planters and raiyats of Champaran along with a detailed analysis of the root cause of the problem arising due to the cultivation of the indigo. The committee was asked to present the report to the government after proper deliberations so that a solution could be found for the agrarian distress.

By this time, raiyats from 2841 villages of Champaran had recorded their statement of which five thousand gave their complete testimony and almost nine thousand submitted their brief statements. On 11 July 1917 committee started its work and hoped to finish its inquiry within three months. Pandit Rajkumar Shukla and Sant Raut were two such raiyats whose statements in front of the inquiry committee received much prominence. Inquiry committee interviewed many more raiyats, planters and administrators and finally submitted its report to the Bihar government on 4 October 1917. This report finally took the shape of Champaran agrarian bill which became a law in March 1918 after minor amendments leading to an end to the tinkathia system.

The Peacemaker

On 3 October 1917 Pandit Rajkumar Shukla came to know about a serious standoff between Hindus and Muslims on the occasion of Bakar-id due to killing of a cow. Court cases were filed by both the parties against each other and Rajkumar Shukla reached Motihari court to make a compromise. There he met his longtime associate Sheikh Gulab and asked him to meet Gandhiji to solve the misunderstanding. Rajkumar Shukla called for a *panchayat* having both Hindu and Muslim representatives like Bachchunath Tiwari, Prabhunath Tiwari and Rambahadur Singh as Hindu leaders and Sheikh Gulab and Sheikh Rajawali as Muslim representatives. This effort of Pandit Rajkumar Shukla was also successful as he was able to forge an alliance out of the two rivalling groups. Gandhiji expressed himself on this issue as such:

“Hindus and Muslims cannot leave a religious rite forcefully. Both the communities should ponder over this issue that how can killing of cows be stopped and how can both the communities be brought together.”

Later in the evening a feast was organized by the Muslim community in which Gandhiji, along with Rajkumar Shukla, Sheikh Gulab and more than thirty leaders from both the communities participated.

The Light of Education Spreads

Pandit Rajkumar Shukla was of the view that education was one of the most important ways via which new consciousness can be aroused among people of Champaran. The goal for which Champaran Agrarian Committee was established was almost achieved and now channelizing efforts towards emancipation through education was thought to be the need of the hour. In this venture too Pandit Rajkumar Shukla led from the front and did extensive ground work to ensure that village schools are opened in large numbers so that the most backward of the regions in Champaran can reap the fruits of education.

For achieving this aim, Rajkumar Shukla took help of rich farmers and asked them to contribute for the community. The first school was funded by a farmer Shivgulam Lal and was opened at Badaharwa Lakhansen village. Situated twenty miles east of Motihari, the school at this village was inaugurated by Gandhiji himself along with Brajkishor Prasad on 10 November, 1917. Gandhiji's youngest son, Devdas Gandhi taught at this school. Immediately after, another school was opened at Bhithiharwa. An ashram was also established nearby. The land and other resources were donated by Mahant of Bhithiharwa Math, Ramnarayan Das who later on started a trust in the name of

Gandhiji and registered it at Ramnagar. This was all done due to consistent persuasion by Pandit Rajkumar Shukla who inspite of being not formally educated took lot of pains to establish these schools, trust and ashram. Gandhiji along with Gorakh Prasad, Mahadev Desai and others stayed in the Bhitiharwa ashram and later on teachers from Bombay and Gujarat like Sadashiv Laxman and Yogeshwar Purohit taught in this school. Maa Kasturba was made in charge of this school and ashram.

Next school was opened at Belwa near Rajkumar Shukla's village Murli Bharhwa. It was situated next to Ammon's kothi, who shot off a letter to district administration falsely accusing Rajkumar Shukla of instigating raiyats under the guise of imparting education. Ammon also asked the administration for round the clock intelligence surveillance of these institutions and Rajkumar Shukla's activities which he regarded were against the interests of indigo planters and government.

Fruits of education were clearly visible in a short span of time as several discussion forums started in and around these places. People became more aware of nationalist thoughts and pan Indian problems due to British exploitation. Special mention could be made of Maa Kasturba Gandhi, Avantika Desai, Manibai, Anandibai and others who went from home to home to spread awareness among villagers in general and women in particular about cleanliness, sanitation and hygiene. They also started a drive against malaria and other diseases while holding free health camps where patients were given life saving drugs like quinine.

Hence, Pandit Rajkumar Shukla's decision to bring Gandhiji to witness indigo raiyat's plight bore rich dividends for the people of Champaran. Gandhiji's method, of training people in a holistic way via education, health drives and cleanliness mission brought a sense of confidence among people which was very much needed to fight the colonial state through non-violent struggle.

Pandit Rajkumar Shukla's role in laying foundations for the schools and ashram was no small feat. In spite of not having enough resources at his hand and continuous failing health, he kept on organizing community for constructive programs advised by Gandhiji. He lost many of his family members to illness and disease during his struggle. Just for the cause of opening schools he travelled extensively in Champaran mostly covering distances between villages on foot.

He collected construction material like wood, birch, stones and bamboo for the schools from a number of rich farmers. He organized his fellow raiyats for the construction of the buildings for school and ashram. Some of these iconic structures survive even today.

Champaran Agrarian Bill, 1918

On 29 November 1917 Champaran agrarian Bill was introduced in Bihar Legislative Council by the Bihar government. Mr. Maude introduced it and gave a brief speech about the history of indigo plantation and how justice has been done for the wrongdoings suffered by raiyats at the hands of planters. The bill was amended a little and on 20 February 1918 it was published in government gazette along with the amendments. Finally, on 4 March 1918, legislative council gave its approval to bill and it became a law. The gist of this law is as follows:

“In spite of there being an agreement between planters and raiyats, the raiyat will not be forced to grow a particular crop in a part of his land and will be free to cultivate any crop”.

Also there were provisions in the law to save the raiyats from any further litigation and reduction in taxes like *sharahbeshi*, up to twenty six percent. In this way the dreaded tinkathia system, whether for growing indigo or any other crop, was completely abolished in Champaran. The realization of abwab, another illegal tax, was completely abolished. It was also added that in future the raiyat would not pay any amount to the zamindars in excess of what is entered in their khatian or record of rights. Under this law, imposing and realizing of any kind of fines from the tenants was also constituted as illegal. The raiyats were to be informed about it and the zamindars and the lessees were prohibited from realizing the same. The law also made labour voluntary.

Later Years

After this historic win, Rajkumar Shukla went back to the constructive program that Gandhiji taught him. He was again involved in construction of a school in Madhuban in east Champaran. In this school Narhari Parekh, Manibai Parekh, Mahadev Desai, Durgabai Desai, Anandibai and others taught for some time. Professor J.B. Kripalani and Vishnu Sitaram Randive were also associated with this school for years.

Even after the passing of Champaran agrarian bill some indigo planters like Ammon of Belwa kothi were hell bent to destroy local leaders like Pandit Rajkumar Shukla, Babu Lomraj Singh and Peer Mohammad 'Munis'. Many a times Rajkumar Shukla's crops were destroyed by Ammon's men. Many more false court cases were slapped on Rajkumar Shukla and his friends. In spite of having poor health and being economically bankrupt, Pandit Rajkumar Shukla kept on fighting the atrocities with great courage. To further harass Rajkumar Shukla, Indigo planter Ammon tried to create obstacles in functioning of schools opened by Gandhiji and Rajkumar Shukla which was met with a strong warning by Rajkumar Shukla. This also resulted in a court case against Rajkumar Shukla under the charge of disturbing peace.

Later on, Rajkumar Shukla kept on mobilizing raiyats against inhuman colonial rule. While addressing the humble village folks Rajkumar Shukla used to say that till the time he won't send the British across seven seas back to their country he would not stop working. He used to ask raiyats to follow the path shown by Gandhiji and one day the British themselves will get tired of inflicting atrocities on innocent Indians and will leave the country.

Rajkumar Shukla also participated in anti-Rowlatt act demonstrations of 1919 and mobilized peasants for participation in non-cooperation movement in 1920. Rajkumar Shukla attended eleventh session of Bihar provincial association in 1919 as a representative of farmers. An intelligence officer who went to attend the conference described Rajkumar Shukla as the 'leader of peasants' in his report which was submitted to the home department.

Even after his early demise, the ground work done by Rajkumar Shukla was instrumental in popularizing of the kisan sabha movement in Champaran in late 1920s. Lifelong struggle of local leaders like Rajkumar Shukla was one of the important reasons because of which farmers in Champaran reposed their faith in peasant movements which came up in 1920s and 1930s

Throughout the 1920's Rajkumar Shukla kept on doing the organizational work for the Congress. He kept on reading about Gandhiji in newspapers and at times communicated with him through letters asking him to visit Champaran again. However, Gandhiji was not able to give any assurance because of his busy schedule. Rajkumar Shukla then decided to proceed to Sabarmati Ashram to meet Gandhiji where after a wait of fifteen days he was finally able to meet Gandhiji. Gandhiji assured Rajkumar Shukla that one day his hard work and prayers will surely be heard and India will be independent. On being asked when it will happen, Gandhiji did not answer anything.

Final Moments

After returning from Sabarmati Ashram, Rajkumar Shukla did not go to his village Satwaria but proceeded directly to the home in Motihari where Gandhiji stayed when he visited Champaran. His health deteriorated beyond recovery and at the age of 54 on 20 May 1929 he passed away. His youngest daughter, Devpati, was by his side in his last moments and before taking the ultimate sleep Rajkumar Shukla asked her to give *agni* to his body. Rajkumar Shukla's last rites were done at *Rambabu ka Bagicha* in Motihari. Thousands of people gathered and donated money to ensure that the last rites were done properly.

When indigo planter Ammon received the news of Rajkumar Shukla's death he was shocked and said that the only 'man' in Champaran has left this world. Ammon immediately asked his servant to go to Rajkumar Shukla's house and give three hundred rupees to his family for the last

rites on his behalf. Ammon went to attend the last rites of Rajkumar Shukla at his village in Satwaria where dozens of leaders like Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Brajkishor Prasad and Anugrah Narayan Sinha were present. When Dr. Rajendra Prasad asked Ammon that he must be feeling happy as his most bitter enemy has passed away, the following was the reaction of Ammon:

“Rajkumar Shukla was the only ‘man’ in Champaran who fought me for twenty five years. He left all his work to fight for his country and to help poor peasants. Whatever left was either taken or destroyed by me. Nobody can understand his sacrifices better than me. Even I will not live much longer now as the man whom I respected the most in my life has left me”.

Everyone was astonished to hear Ammon’s thoughts on Rajkumar Shukla. Later on Ammon ensured, with the help of his connections in administration, that Rajkumar Shukla’s son- in- law gets a job in police department. Ammon died a few months after Rajkumar Shukla’s death, corroborating his own prophecy. Such was the effect of Rajkumar Shukla’s personality even on his enemies. The rustic, simple and uneducated farmer left a golden mark on this country’s long history.

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