



A Critique of Bihar Indigo Peasant Protest in the 19th Century: A Prelude to the Champaran Satyagraha, 1917

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The Champaran Satyagraha that Gandhi led has immense significance in the history of India's anti-colonial struggle. The 'regional patriotism' or 'sub-national nationalism' of Bihar acquired a pan-Indian nationalist identity in the ongoing anti-colonial struggle. It was with the Champaran Satyagraha that peasant question became integrated with the national movement. However, discontent of the Raiyats against the Indigo Planters was first noticed in Bihar in 1830 when the Acting Magistrate of Tirhut informed the Government of Bengal that the natives were not at all trusted by the Planters and the latter paid no attention to the representation made by them. In 1839, the Planters of Tirhut, Saran and Munger sent representation to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal asking for a specific regulation to check the violation of indigo contracts by the raiyats. The raiyats of Bihar were agitated because of three reasons: prices paid to them were not remunerative; the time of sowing indigo was the same as that of the food-crops; and indigo cultivation exhausted the fertility of the soil. A perusal of the primary sources enables us to say that the tenants of indigo growing districts of Bihar were not only directly involved in the production of indigo cultivation, but they were also the instruments of social and economic changes in an agrarian society. Clearly ground had been prepared for the participation by the masses for political action in Bihar, i.e. Gandhi's Champaran Satyagraha and others.

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The Champaran Satyagraha that Gandhi led has immense significance in the history of India's anti-colonial struggle. The 'regional patriotism' or 'sub-national nationalism' of Bihar acquired a pan-Indian nationalist identity in the ongoing anti-colonial struggle. It was with the Champaran Satyagraha that peasant question became integrated with the national movement. However, discontent of the Raiyats against the Indigo Planters was first noticed in Bihar in 1830 when the Acting Magistrate of Tirhut informed the Government of Bengal that the natives were not at all trusted by the Planters and the latter paid no attention to the representation made by them.¹ The breach of contract by the Raiyats was often noticed and it was found that the land which was prepared for indigo was sown with food-crops. In that case a decree imposing the penalty on Raiyats was managed, though Raiyats were generally too poor to pay the penalty. Although, there were numerous complaints in Behar (Behar in record in this context stands for Patna District) only eight fauzdari cases were filed by the Raiyats of Bihar against the indigo planter. This does not include cases registered at the thana level.²

In 1839, the Planters of Tirhut, Saran and Munger sent representation to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal asking for a specific regulation to check the violation of indigo contracts by the raiyats. The raiyats did not act upon their engagement and refused to cultivate the indigo land and sowed it with food-crops. They did not cut the harvest plants on time. Evasion of engagement by the natives even led to breach of peace. A faujdari case was filed against the planter, Maclead of Saraiya factory. Though localised, the protests initiated by the raiyats involved many planters in legal battles. Under such condition, the planters alleged that neither life nor property was safe.³ It is significant of the pervading anti-planters stand of the common masses that even the ploughmen and cart-drivers refused to cooperate with the planters. Disturbed at this development, the planters sought a legislative safeguard for their interest in the form of binding the raiyats, ploughmen and cartmen not to injure the planters' interest.

The Santhal Rebellion caused anxiety to the government, and it apprehended agrarian disturbances in indigo growing areas of Bihar. It is against this background that the government for the first time entertained a petition from the raiyats of Panchananpur in Bhagalpur district against the indigo planter, Mr. Gray of Maldah. The Commissioner of Bhagalpur found that not only the raiyats, but also the Zamindar was against the planter and the latter was unable to produce any witness on his own behalf. He, therefore, decided the case against the planter.⁴ A consolidated account of how the indigo growing passed in the area of Munger, Bhagalpur, Purnea and Tirhut districts was sent by the Commissioner of Bhagalpur to the Lieutenant Governor.

The raiyats of Bihar were agitated because of three reasons: prices paid to them were not remunerative; the time of sowing indigo was the same as that of the food-crops; and indigo cultivation exhausted the fertility of the soil. The government's reluctance to accept that fertility of the soil was seriously eroded due to indigo cultivation ultimately gave way to the raiyats a firm and unwavering stand that this was a reality and the Tajpur factories conceded that indigo exhausted the strength of the soil to a very great extent.⁵ Left with no alternative, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal observed that the raiyats should be advised to go in for the rotation of crops for retaining the fertility of the soil.

Compared to the sporadic complaints and protests of the raiyats of Saran, Tirhut, Munger, Bhagalpur and Purnea in the 1830s against the planters, the tenants protest in Pandaul (Madhubani) was more sustained and enduring. The protest here took the form of a movement for three months lasting from January to March 1867.

A number of villages in Madhubani Subdivision united together in a body and refused to grow indigo. They also did not allow the planters to cultivate indigo land.⁶ Although the Magistrate did not apprehend very serious disturbances, these appeared to him 'impossible to foretell exactly what might occur'. Keeping in view the law and order situation that might arise, the Magistrate of Tirhut asked the Assistant Magistrate of Madhubani, D.M. Barbour to remain in the neighbourhood of villages where the latter apprehended disturbances.⁷ A notice under section 62 of the Criminal Procedure Code was also issued to the Planter, Gale, to abstain from ploughing Assamiwar land in some villages. This unusual action of the government made the raiyats feel bold enough to sow their land with food-crops. The planters, however, did not reconcile himself to what he believed to be an ex parte decision. The government also came to realize that the raiyats of other indigo concerns might refuse

to cultivate the land for indigo. This was considered to be a quite disturbing possibility and therefore, the Commissioner of Patna Division asked the Magistrate of Tirhut to settle the case of disputed possession between the factory and the raiyats.⁸ United action of the tenants of Pandaul concern in refusing to cultivate indigo was considered serious enough to warrant appropriate measures from the government. Not only information through proper channels reached the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, but also a police force was ordered to be posted in the neighbourhood of the disturbed villages to overawe the local population. The Commissioner of Patna also asked to proceed at once to the spot and take all measures necessary to the preservation of peace. Gale, the Planter of Pandaul concern, on the one hand insisted on cultivation of the assamiwar land with indigo despite warning issued to him not to do so by the Assistant Magistrate of Madhubani. The action of D.M. Barbour, the Assistant Magistrate of Madhubani to prevent a Planter from sowing assamiwar land was not liked by the Magistrate of Tirhut who called for an explanation from the former. While explaining his position Barbour argued that since he received a number of complaints from the raiyats and ploughmen against the Planter, he had to stop forcible cultivation of assamiwar land with indigo. Gale, on the other hand, tried to assert his claim to the land; he wanted to retaliate the raiyats. When the kothials of the factory reached the spot, they were warned by a large mob of raiyats to desist from asserting the authority of the Planter. Thereupon the Magistrate of Madhubani referred the case to the Judicial Department for final decision. Besides filing a petition to the government, a large number of raiyats had gone to Darbhanga to register their grievances against Gale who threatened to evict them from their holdings.⁹

While communicating his decision, D.M. Barbour informed the Magistrate of Tirhut the exact nature of the dispute. According to him, there was **zeerband** land owned by the planter as **zeerat** land. But there was land in every village other than **zeerat** land which was cultivated by the raiyats. In respect of such land, the raiyats were not the cultivators of indigo under assamiwar system of cultivation, but they were merely hired labourers and getting mehnatana (wage) in return of indigo cultivation. Since Barbour was not convinced by the explanation of Gale, the case was referred to a Judge for decision. Unfortunately, the raiyats could not establish their right to the land. The Judge pronounced his decision in favour of the Manager of the factory, Gale. According to the judgement, the raiyats were sentenced to undergo rigorous imprisonment for one month and one day for having committed trespass.

Imprisonment of the raiyats did not produce any demoralising effect on them. A body of raiyats from Darbhanga village in Terwarra concern sent another petition to the government with a request to interfere in the dispute between the raiyats and the planters, but it did not pay any attention to it. Inspired by the bold step taken by the raiyats, the village, Narar, adopted a similar attitude in refusing to cultivate indigo.

Frequent visits of government officials in rural areas gave an impression to the raiyats as if government was opposed to indigo plantation. Although, this was not true, this impression emboldened the raiyats of Khutchha factory to decide on 'combined opposition' to the planter and collect a sum through voluntary subscription on the basis of the number of cattle, each of them owned. The government got a hint of this development and considered it serious enough to seek the help of the Darbhanga Raj.

That the movement of resistance were infectious and tended to percolate to new areas is borne by the fact that the raiyats of several villages of Hathouri factory began to sow zeerat land with food crops.¹⁰ According to the report, the raiyats of the villages cultivating indigo for Hathouri factory did not allow the servants of the factory to sow indigo even in zeerat land.

The tenants of Bhour & Co; Ekwari Pargana, Zila Tirhut were also disgusted with the planters due to their oppression and ill-treatment. They sent a joint petition to the Commissioner of Patna on 27 January 1867.¹¹ They complained that since their grain producing land had been brought under indigo cultivation, they were put to hardship at the time of famine. Their other grievances included forcibly taking away of bullocks and ploughs under the authority and influence of the thikadars and the planters, especially during the season when they were required most. They also expressed their resentment at the payment of very low wage to the labourers, erection of 14 new kothis and forcible eviction of the raiyats from their holdings even after the rent had been paid to the firangees. They wanted an inquiry to be instituted against the oppressive planters. But the government did not pay any attention to their petition as no specific charges were levelled against the planter.

The Raiyam factory charged Harihar Rai, Tulsi Koiri and Santokh Koiri with having beaten the servant of the factory.¹² This case was decided in favour of the raiyats as they proved that they were the cultivators of the land.

Of all the areas of resistance to indigo planters in Bihar, Champaran witnessed the most sustained and violent upsurge on this issue. The raiyats of Tuppeh Madholi and Nanore Seronah in the Majhaua Pargana of Motihari Subdivision sent a petition to the Government of Bengal against the planters. The main grievances of these petitioners against the planter of Seharho were : that they had to cultivate four kathas a bigha with indigo at the rate of Rs.20-8-0 per bigha, whereas the expenses on indigo cultivation were about Rs.18; Rs.2 or 3 were advanced to them and the balance was promised to be paid afterwards, but the same balance was never paid to them even after the fulfilment of the terms of satta. In such a situation the land was sown by the raiyats with cheena, barley, sugarcane, and cotton. The planter retaliated through destroying the standing food-crops of the raiyats by his men. The raiyats' complaints to the Magistrate of Motihari were not entertained and the factories fined them for refusing to cultivate indigo. Lala Har Charan Lal Patwari was dismissed from the service by the planter for having adopted a sympathetic attitude towards the raiyats. The raiyats naturally felt seriously wronged and made use of the visit of the Commissioner of Patna to Motihari by presenting before him some 20,000 aggrieved persons and recorded in most unmistakable terms their grievances against the Planters. They prayed to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal to appoint a commission of inquiry, failing which they threatened "bloodshed and destruction of property".¹³

Another petition was sent to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal through Keso Prasad by the raiyats. In their petition they requested the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal to regulate the rate of the hire for carriage; to fix the rate for the ploughmen and Labourers connected with indigo cultivation, and to regulate the cultivator's prices for indigo. But the Lieutenant Governor informed the raiyats that it was not within his power to comply with their prayer. This petition was clearly somewhat more radical than the previous one.

A petition by a group of Raiyats from Bajria village was sent to His Excellency the Governor-General of India in Council on 5 December 1867.¹⁴ The main grievance of the raiyats was that the planters had almost appropriated all the land in the Mauza for indigo cultivation. The complaints included low wages and long hours of work for labourers, forcible seizure of cattle and improvement of nearly half the peasantry in Champaran due to indigo cultivation. The Collector of Champaran wrongly alleges that a handful of influential raiyats were at the root of the unrest.¹⁵ According to the Collector, Mahashaya Singh, Daulat Singh and others belonging to Bhawanipur Village were the originators of the disturbances. However, the agitation was more broad-based than the authorities were willing to concede as the complaints covered other exploited sections too.

The refusal to sow indigo by the raiyats of Jokeetia was followed by other villages and in no time, it took the shape of a movement. The raiyats of Purandar factory also refused to grow indigo. Metcalfe noted that although each raiyat had his individual grievances, on the issue of indigo cultivation they were completely united.¹⁶ He, however, blamed the influential raiyats for instigating the multitude and got the permission of the Lieutenant Governor to take suitable counter measures.

Eviction from the holdings of the raiyats of Champaran was frequent and it was an emotive issue. The Commissioner of Patna Division was of the opinion that the planters' alleged oppression was not the only cause for disturbance and that the raiyats were in fact alert and conscious enough of the enormous profit of the planters and considered themselves entitled to a share in it.

A combination of powerful groups so formed by the raiyats did not confine its struggle against the Planters only; it also posed a serious threat to the landlords. The tenants of 63 villages refused the payment of rent directly to the zamindars' cutcherry and deposited it in the Motihari Collectorate. This action of the tenants was occasioned by the landlords' failure to deposit the rent to the government as a result of which the villages had fallen under the jurisdiction of factory. The action of the Assistant Magistrate of Bettiah added fuel to the fire. Ruddock snatched the wheat seeds from a raiyat who was going to sow indigo land with it. Village after village joined together and a powerful group of raiyats emerged.

In Muzaffarpur also a few cases of tenants' resistance were noticed by the government. In the indigo concern of Deen Chapra and Amwa (Belsand Thana) which belonged to the Hicky, indigo contracts had been violated. In some cases, the raiyats resorted to violence and sowed the land with cheena instead of indigo. The raiyats of Jorangi, two miles south of Surpuddinnagar, made a strong protest to the government against the Manager, Swaine of Atter Factory.¹⁷

In 1907, there was a great feeling of uneasiness in the Sathi Dehat. Continued meetings of the raiyats began to take place under the leadership of Shaikh Gulab and Sital Rai. The tenants of Sathi and other factories like Parsa, Mallahia, Bairia and Kundia stopped indigo cultivation. A rich Marwari named Radhamal and his gumastas who were guiding the movement, were arrested on 26th October 1908. Sital Rai was arrested and lodged in hajat. In protest against his arrest some four thousand raiyats followed him to Bettiah where he was put up in the lock up.¹⁸ The planters fully supported by the local officials and the Kothials did their best to curb

the movement. The Subdivisional Officer of Bettiah issued warrants of arrests to 200 leading raiyats for no offence of other than refusing to sow indigo. The Dainik Chandrika of 4 November 1908 aptly commented that the change of spirit had affected all classes of people in the country. It reported that new national awakening was taking place in Bihar and the zabardast measures of the government were unable to put an end to the trouble.¹⁹ The Hitavadi of 5 November 1908 even demanded that the agrarian tension and atrocities committed by the alien rule should be taken up by the Indian National Congress.²⁰ The Movement became so powerful at the grassroot level that the government tagged it with the revolutionary movement of the country, although this charge of the government was refuted by the Hindustan of 7 November 1908.²¹ The fact was that it was a general awakening of the people of Champaran at a sense of their rights and privileges. Although the disturbance was crushed by the alien authorities, still the raiyats remained restless.

Pressurized by the movement, the government appointed Gourlay, the then Director of Agriculture, to make an official inquiry into the agrarian trouble. After making an enquiry, Gourlay submitted his report in April 1909, but his report was kept secret. In 1911, a large body of agitators assembled at Narkatiaganj Railway Station to narrate their grievances to George V who was on his way back to Nepal. In 1912, the raiyats of Champaran sent their representatives to Calcutta to submit a memorandum containing their grievances against the planters.

Thus, a perusal of the primary sources enables us to say that the tenants of indigo growing districts of Bihar were not only directly involved in the production of indigo cultivation, but they were also the instruments of social and economic changes in an agrarian society. The restless resistance of the raiyats clearly proves that they were fighting against the indigo planters, landlords and the government not only for the sake of individual gains and self-aggrandisement, but also for the peasant community as a whole. The number of petitions sent to the authorities against the planters clearly indicates that they possessed immense potentiality to bring about social and economic change. The combination of the raiyats was not based on the identity of an individual group as caste or religious community as the Sociologists and Colonial historians have often found; they were united in a body to fight for a common cause affecting their livelihood. The allegation of the government that the disturbance was inspired and engineered by a section of the affluent peasantry is equally untenable. Of course, in the 19th century historical development it would be futile to expect indigenous movement against the planters to the complete exclusion of a relatively well-off tenants. Clearly ground had been prepared for the participation by the masses for political action in Bihar, i.e. Gandhi's Champaran Satyagraha and others.

¹ Bengal Judicial Criminal Proceedings, No. 167, 22 January 1830, from the Acting Magistrate of Tirhut to the Government of Bengal.

² Ibid, No. 174, from the officiating Magistrate of Bihar (Patna) to the Government of Bengal, 30 January 1830.

³ Bengal Criminal Judicial Proceedings, No. 26, 27 December 1839, from the representatives of the indigo Planter of Tirhut, Saran and Munger to the Secretary, Government of Bengal, 20 May 1839

⁴ Bengal Judicial Proceedings, No. 352, 10 July 1856, petition of Tekhand Mondal and others, inhabitants of Pargana Bhagalpur to the Junior Secretary, Government of Bengal, Fort William, 10 April 1856.

⁵ Bengal Judicial Proceedings, No. 151, November 1864, from the Secretary to the Landholders and Commercial Association, Calcutta to the Government of Bengal.

⁶ Bengal Judicial Proceedings, No.49, February 1867, from D.M.Barbour, Assistant Magistrate of Madhubani to the Officiating Magistrate of Tirhut , No. 15, 1 January 1867.

⁷ Ibid; from A.T.Maclean, Officiating Magistrate of Tirhut to the Assistant Magistrate of Madhubani, No.11, 19 January 1867.

⁸ Ibid; from A.T.Maclean, Officiating Magistrate of Tirhut to the Commissioner of Patna Division , No. 13, 21 January 1867,para 1.

⁹ Ibid. No.33, from A.T.Maclean, Officiating Magistrate of Tirhut to the Commissioner of Patna Division , 19 February 1867.

¹⁰ Ibid, No. 53, from A.T.Maclean, Officiating Magistrate of Tirhut to the Commissioner of Patna Division , 4 February 1867.

¹¹ Ibid. No.129, from J.W>Dairympyle, Commissioner of Patna Division to the Secretary, Government of Bengal, Letter No.50, 7 February 1867.

¹² Ibid, No. 38, Demi-officail Letter from A.T. Maclean, 22 February 1867

¹³ Bengal Judicial Proceedings No.25, May 1868. The Commissioner of Patna was on a tour to Motihari.

¹⁴ Bengal Judicial Proceedings No.34, July,1868. (This petition was transferred to the Government of Bengal, Home Department, No.50, 6 July 1868 for disposal)

¹⁵ From C.T. Metcalfe, Officiating Collector of Champaran to R.P.Jenkins, Commissioner of Patna Division, 19 February 1868.

¹⁶ Bengal Judicial Proceedings No.210, para 2, from H.L. Dampier, Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Commissioner of Patna Division,15, December,1867.

¹⁷ Worsely, the Magistrate of Muzaffarpur, he recorded this incidence in his diary on 19 October 1876, quoted in K.K.Dutta, Freedom Movement in Bihar,Vol.1, Government of Bihar, Patna,1957,P.175

¹⁸ Report on Native Newspaper of Bengal, September-December 19008, Amrit Bazar Patrika

¹⁹ Ibid., The Dainik Chandrika,4 November 1908.

²⁰ Ibid., The Hitavadi of 5 November 1908.

²¹ Ibid., The Hindustan of 7 November 1908.

