



## IDENTITY POLITICS AND MUSLIM PARTICIPATION AGAINST BRITISH IMPERIALISM: CHAMPARAN SATYAGRAHA

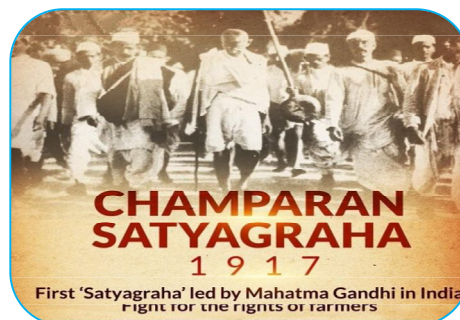
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### ABSTRACT:

*This article focuses on the identity politics and its impact on Indian freedom struggle. Identity politics and its impact on social, political and economic sphere is most debatable notion from very long period. This article is divided into three parts. The first part gives the brief information about the identity politics. Next section explains the origin of the Champaran Satyagraha in Bihar. This movement is known as the first popular protest movement in which leaving aside caste, community and religion based identities all sections of people participated against British colonial policies. With the brief information of geography of Champaran district it underlines that why British Textile industry chose this part of Bihar for indigo cultivation. It also analyses that how the Champaran satyagraha movement was a part of the global resentment against the British colonial system. It also highlight role of Gandhi and local leader to raise the voice against the forced indigo plantation. Champaran satyagraha was the first experiment of 'Satyagraha' (Protest based on Truth and Ahimsa) which initiated a process of civil disobedience that played a remarkable role in future Gandhian movement. The third section which is in continuation of the second section highlights the role of Muslims in the Champaran Satyagraha. The 'politics of identity' by British colonial apparatus such as Modernization, Education, Law, Census, Electoral politics was contested in the Champaran movement. Muslims participated in this movement with an identity of indigo farmers and oppressed people under British rule. Collective efforts of Hindu and Muslim lead to the success of Champaran movement in which national identity prevailed over religious identities.*



**KEY WORDS:** Identity politics, Champaran Satyagraha, Tinkathiya system, Global Process, Muslim Participation, Communalism.

### IDENTITY POLITICS

Identity politics is one of the most debatable notions in these days. The most vital global political affair since the fall of communism is the rise of a new kind of politics, and it has spread across many democratic countries. This led to the two notions. One is a group of angry or radical citizens, who classify with the nation and are suspicious of immigration as well as the political establishment; the other facet is populist, radical-right politicians who have shaken up existing party systems and pushed an anti-immigration agenda (Timothy Besley and Torsten Persson, 2021). These classifications on the

basis of religion and other identity led with radical politics. India is one important country on world map where very diverse religions are present. These religious identities are sometimes used in political agenda as well. Identity based politics was a result of restructuring of caste and religious identities by British colonial state. However at the time of the colonial period all Indians have raised their voices against the British imperialism in India and its negative impact were protested by all people from different religions, castes, and communities. Indian freedom struggle witness a mass participation from every community. National movement in Bihar has its own significant place in Indian History. Champaran Movement was the first experiment of Satyagraha by Gandhi in the land of Bihar. Success of this movement prompted Gandhi to mobilise the masses into Non-cooperation, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement. Hindu and Muslim unity was a common feature in all these movements which reflects that divisive 'identity' engineered by the colonial administration was reformulated and reorganised to produce a united fight against British rule.

### CHAMPARAN SATYAGRAHA

The Champaran Satyagraha was a peaceful and mass movement against the forced cultivation of indigo, a dye of the British Textile industry. As peasants were suffering much because they could not crop food as they needed nor do they get adequate payments for indigo cultivation (Chandra, et al, 2000 & Chandra, 1987 ). In British India, Champaran was situated in the north- western part of the Province of Bihar and Orissa. The Gandak river flowed in the Champaran district and the water from this river was generally used for cultivation specifically indigo cultivation as water of this river is not drinkable (Prasad, 1949). Soil (specifically bangar soil) of this area was very good for paddy cultivation. As well as some of area's soil was very good for maize, wheat and indigo too. Initially the indigo factories were established only in those places in the district of Champaran where the soil is fit for indigo and sugarcane cultivation, also the cultivation of paddy was not much possible there. But after some time European planters established their factories in north-western part of the Champaran also. The agricultural land of this part was basically fit for paddy cultivation not for indigo cultivation (Prasad, 1949).

The system of Tinkathiya was started by the indigo planter in Champaran. According to this system every peasants had to cultivate indigo in some portion of their crop land and this ratio was fixed as three kathha per bigha of total cultivated land. Under the Tinkathiya system British indigo factory owners used to pay some fixed advance amount to peasants and forced them to cultivate indigo on their crop land.

The Champaran Satyagraha was not the first agitation against the indigo cultivation. In 1860 there was a very big agitation emerged against the indigo plantation in Bengal. Tenant of Champaran also disliked the cultivation of indigo as this was forced upon them and was against the cropping patterns of the area. They were unwilling to grow indigo on their fields because it was unprofitable as well as they suffered from famine and want to crop the paddy. In 1906, peasants undergone a heavy loss as their paddy crop were destroyed due to heavy flood in Champaran and they suffered from pecuniary difficulties (Prasad, 1949). Without consolidating peasants planter of indigo were insisting them for the cultivation of indigo. These difficult circumstances agitated some tenants and they had file petition against the planter and request to Magistrate for relief.

Gandhi's arrival and appearance in Champaran in 1917 must be viewed as a context of global process that started as a reaction to the interference of colonial system with the life of the local people. Indigo plantation was important for the British colonial economy. But the peasants of Champaran were forced to plant indigo according to Satta agreement and they were not free to cultivate any other crop than indigo. As indigo was the un-remunerative crop for peasants, in such conditions the peasants violates the agreements many times. Although the government repeatedly asked to planters that conciliate to the peasantry and not to do anything which would unduly excite the minds of peasants (Tuteja, 1993).

In addition to the forced indigo cultivation, peasants have to pay a repressive tax called Abwab (cesses) which was forcefully collected by the planters from the peasants. This tax was to compensate

there loss due to decline in demand of indigo or any other external factors. After invention of German synthetic dye the demand of Indian indigo was declined in international market and to compensate this loss Abwabs was levied on the peasants. These atrocities caused peasant unrest in the district of Champaran against British indigo planters.

### **DELIBERATIONS ON CHAMPARAN SATYAGRAHA**

The ryots of Champaran in 1917 had always viewed indigo plantation as forced cultivation and resented against the evil of the “tin kathha” system which was imposed by the European indigo planters but had “only yield to force”. Although the Champaran satyagraha was known as the very big initiative for the rights of peasants but the condition of the poor people has not much changed in their favour (Bandyopadhyay, 2006). Some scholars argued that Champaran satyagraha had limited success as after this movement socio-economic conditions of peasants of this area had not improved significantly.

With the inception of Champaran satyagraha Gandhi evolved a new technique of political work which helped to establish close contact with the masses and this struggle made Gandhi popular all over the country (Tandon, 1984). Undoubtedly leadership of Gandhi was important but it was the initiative of the local peasants that compel Gandhi to start a mass movement and with the support of local leaders the movement spread in the region.

The peasants unrest in nineteenth centuries was not a new phenomena as peasant raised their voice in various part of the country. The Champaran ryots was different from other peasants unrest, as in other region ryot revolted against the talukdaar. Champaran movement was directed against the colonial agrarian policies and tax regime. Also the participation of peasants and other people from all sections of the society in this movement was the sign of outburst against British colonial rule. Different sections and caste of peasants were come together cutting across all barriers of caste and community as well as class and region (Tuteja, 1993).

### **PARTICIPATION OF MUSLIMS IN CHAMPARAN SATYAGRAHA**

Champaran Satyagraha was a mass movement of local people under the leadership of Gandhi, who was an outsider. Gandhi was invited in 1916 by the local delegates of Champaran to lead the peasants against British indigo planters. Gandhi had a successful experience of Satyagraha in Africa and he found the situation of Champaran in favour of a mass movement. Resisting summons of British government of denying entry to the district of Champaran, Gandhi travelled and started to connect with the peasants and record their grievances. Gandhi lead the movement with the support of local leaders who were raising the concerns of peasants before the advent of Gandhi.

Although Champaran Satyagraha is not consider as a freedom struggle movement. However, this is one of the significant efforts of local people to raise very strong voice against imperialist exploitation. After revolt of 1857, British colonial policies such as Caste census, Morley Minto reform, education and law reforms were creating rift between the Indians on the line of caste and religion. Champaran satyagraha witness a formulation of national identity leaving aside the community based identity. In this movement Muslim participation was much significant than any other previous mass movement against British government. Muslim leaders lead this movement Such as Pir Muhammed Munis (1882-1949), who was arguably the most significant leader of the Champaran peasants in the third phase of the struggle in 1917. His role was to expose the exploitation of peasant and farmer which was taking place under the garb of indigo cultivation. He was a leader best known for his contributions as a writer and activist (Sajjad and Alam 2017).

This participation were mentioned by many great scholars. For instance, Rajendra Prasad's in his *Autobiography* (1957) extensively discussed about this Satyagraha also in his book *At The Feet of Mahatma* (1956, p 9) highlights the contribution of Peer Muhammad Munis. As well as number of other primary and secondary sources underlined and mentioned the delegation that went to Lucknow and discussed about forceful indigo cultivation and draw the attention of the political leaders noteworthy in Congress Session in December 1916. Here these delegates share the details of Teenkathiya and pathetic

condition of the peasant of Champaran. This group of delegates comprised of Pir Muhammad Munis, Rajkumar Shukla and Haribansh Sahay (Sajjad and Alam 2017).

This delegates trip was funded and supported by Haji Deen Mohammad Ansari (1883-1961) as he is very much concerned about the pathetic condition of the indigo peasant. Pir Munis had already actively engaged in writing this issue in news reports and columns. With these writings he exposed the exploitative character of indigo planters and stated about the wretched subjugation or oppressive condition of the Champaran peasant and farmers in the Hindi daily, *Pratap* (of Kanpur). These writeups were supported by the Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi as well. Pir Munis was a local correspondent or writer in the district and actively engaged to cover this subjugation condition of peasants and farmers. Pir Munis's columns in *Pratap* played a very important role and due to his write ups, this agrarian crisis of Champaran had gain national attention. Numerous local and regional historians have also mentioned in many sources that it was Pir Munis, who was the original author of the letters related to Champaran Satyagraha which were sent to Gandhi in Shukla's name (Sajjad and Alam 2017).

Before the Satyagraha of Gandhi, Muslim peasants were resisting the indigo planters under the leadership of Shaikh Gulab (1858-1943) of the Chand Barwah village and Shaikh Rajab Ali. The agitators were united in their opposition to the European planters irrespective of caste, creed and religion (Sajjad and Alam 2017). The mobilization of muslim peasants against British planters had helped in success of a mass movement as Champaran Satyagraha.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is to be noted, that Bihar is one of the important place where identity politics still became a matter of discussion. Politics based on religion and caste is present across the country. At the time of the British colonial era Hindu and Muslim unity was one of the significant idea of Gandhi. And he believes that without the collective effort from different religions, castes and creeds India cannot become free from colonial rule. In Bihar, 1857 revolt was lead by Pir Ali in Patna and many more Muslims leaders actively participated in this revolt. Champaran Satyagraha was also collectively initiated by Hindu and Muslims. Identity politics on the basis of religion was not very much entertained by the people of Bihar and they collectively fight against the British imperialism. Identity politics were overridden by the communal harmony and these identities were used in the nationalist mobilisation process in Bihar. Champaran Satyagraha became one of the most significant struggle in the history of Indian national movement.

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