

Champaran Satyagraha

[UPSC Notes]

What was the Champaran Movement?

The Champaran Satyagraha was a farmer's uprising that was observed in the year 1917. This was the first movement led by Mahatma Gandhi in India after his return from South Africa. It is deeply important in the Indian independence struggle as it not only marked Gandhi's entry into the struggle but also marked the beginning of a successful chain of farmer uprisings in the country.

The discontentment and disaffection towards the British colonial rules around the plantation of Indigo grew among the farmers. Indigo is an expensive crop to grow. It not only leeches away the soil's nutrients, rendering it almost useless for further plantation, but it is also extremely delicate and hard to grow. The chances of crop failure are really high. The risk-to-reward ratio was nil. However, the farmers were still forced to grow Indigo as it was a highly profitable crop for the East India Company, which had established a wide trade over the crop.

Historical Background of the Champaran Satyagraha

There is a long history of the discontentment of the farmers, which eventually climaxed in farmers' uprisings in Champaran and other parts of the country subsequently. The crop that sits at the centre of it all, Indigo, finds its plantation history dating back to the late 18th century.

- The Indigo cultivation was started in the state of Bengal in 1777. Indigo is a natural dye that had great demand all across the globe. The demand for blue dye in Europe made it a very lucrative idea for traders.
- European planters enjoyed a great monopoly over the indigo plantation as they forced the Indian farmers to grow Indigo for them by tying them down with fraudulent contracts and deals.
- The Tinkathia System, which literally translates to three parts, was an economic policy introduced by the East India Company in India. It was limited to the states of Eastern India, such as Bihar.
- Food crops were replaced with cash crops like indigo which took a massive toll on the farmers.
- The farmers were lured with advance loans to grow their crops, and once they entered this arrangement with the Britishers, it became an inescapable loop of debt as the interest rates were very high. On top of this, the taxes were very exorbitant for the farmers that already earned little to no money.
- Brutal oppression and practices were undertaken to extort rent payments or if the players were simply told no by the farmers.
- The farmers sold the hard-grown indigo at rates that didn't make through the break-even point to maximise the European profits and satiate their greed.
- If paddy crops took the place of indigo crops, the planters would go to great extents, mostly illegal, to get their wish. These practices included but were not limited to kidnapping the family members, looting, and even burning the crops.

- These illegal practices of the planters were largely supported and shrouded by the government, which gave them immunities in judicial proceedings.

Champanan Satyagraha: Indigo Rebellion

The Champanan Satyagraha is a farmer uprising that happened in 1917. The farmers protested the forced cultivation of Indigo, a cash crop that required extensive care and left the land it grew on nutrition-less.

- The rebellion was inspired by the Indigo Rebellion that occurred in Bengal in 1860. Indigo, as a natural blue dye, had a great market overseas, which the European monopolised on the backs of poor farmers of India.
- There was a lot of pressure on the farmers to cultivate Indigo even though it was sucking them bone-dry. There were no profits, and rents and taxation made it hard for them to break even on the cost of its cultivation.
- There were several instances of illegal extortion methods that the landlords undertook, and numerous lawyers highlighted them. Ganesh Shankar Vidyarthi and Peer Muneesh are one of them.
- The efforts of Raj Kumar Shukla and Sant Raut got Mahatma Gandhi to Champanan in 1917. This movement had great active participation from the lawyer community of India.
- India's first basic school was established by Gandhi at a small village named Barharwa Lakhansen, 30 kilometres away from East Champanan.
- 13th November 1917 saw him organising a team of experienced lawyers to organise a detailed survey of the village to assess the denigrated level of living that the residents were subjected to here. This team included lawyers like Rajendra Prasad, Anugrah Narayan Sinha & Babu Brajkishore Prasad.
- Mahatma Gandhi was arrested on 16th April 1917 on the charges of creating deep unrest and was ordered to evacuate the province. Upon being asked to pay a fine of Rs. 100, he simply refused. His arrest saw thousands participating in protests, and the court had let him out. The case was subsequently taken back as well.
- There were organised strikes against the landlords under the leadership of Gandhi. This agitation was where the terms 'Bapu' and 'Mahatma' were used to him for the first time ever.

Significance of the Champanan Movement

The Champanan Movement, though limited to a small district of Bihar, turned out to be a watershed moment in the history of the Indian struggle for independence. Its significance has been broken down into points concisely below;

- **Civil Disobedience:** This was the first instance of the civil disobedience movements that would be carried out in the rest of the country later. Gandhi was arrested but simply refused to pay the fine imposed on him and follow the orders that wanted him out of the province. His arrest sparked protests with thousands of participants. This resulted in his release, and the case, too, was taken back by the British.
- **Mass Movement Era:** This movement marked the start of mass movements that were integral to Indian gaining its independence in the year 1947. Mass participation was noted for the first time here as the INC was always reluctant to organise them. This was continued in other movements.
- **The emergence of a Messiah:** Mahatma Gandhi garnered a huge population amongst the local folk of the country. The Indian intellectuals were aware of his achievements in

South Africa, but the Champaran Movement catapulted his fame to every household as a messiah for hope and change.

- **Non-Violence as a tool:** The Champaran movement was so popular with the masses because it was non-violent. Protests like these have a higher reward-to-risk ratio, making people show up for the cause. The success of the Champaran Satyagraha proved the efficacy of non-violence as a protest technique

Result of the Champaran Satyagraha

The Champaran Satyagraha was mostly a success. Upon the movement's conclusion, the Champaran Agrarian Bill was introduced by W. Maude, a Member of the Executive Council in the Government of Bihar and Orissa.

- This bill consisted of all the recommendations Mahatma Gandhi suggested and became the Champaran Agrarian Act of 1918. This marked the first instance ever of the British correcting their attitude towards the Indian populace.
- The non-violent approach of the movement confused the British. With their modern rifles and artillery, the British were far superior to the Indian masses in terms of brute strength.
- Mahatma Gandhi's moral superiority was established by the end of this movement, giving the masses hope for change. This was important because this triggered greater participation.
- The Tinkathia System, which had existed for about a century, was abolished. This stopped the oppression of the planters to a great extent.
- The win at Champaran helped Mahatma Gandhi do more for society eventually. Clean-ups, establishing schools and hospitals, undoing the purdah system and untouchability were some of the things he was able to achieve.