

## Indian struggles in 1917: On the eve of the Russian Revolution

Seldom in history do things happen suddenly; they are often years in the making.

It is known that during his South Africa years [Mahatma Gandhi](#) had corresponded with Leo Tolstoy, described by Lenin in 1908 as the mirror of the Russian Revolution. This correspondence was three or four years prior to Gandhi's last major agitation in South Africa, in which tens of thousands of Indian mine workers and plantation workers and other indentured workers struck work.

By the time the Russian Revolution took place in 1917, Gandhi had already been back in India for two years, barely a month before the death of one of two leading statesmen who had guided Gandhi's politics in his South African life, Gopal Krishna Gokhale. The other, Dadabhai Naoroji, the Grand Old Man of India, would pass away shortly in the midst of the coming struggle in Champaran, Bihar.

The Marxist Socialist Narendra Deva, a keen student of Lenin's life and writings, would observe that the Bolshevik Revolution placed the masses at the centre-stage of history for the first time.

In India, too, 1917 was a curtain-raiser to events two years later that would mark the beginning of mass involvement in the movement for freedom. As Gandhi's critic M N Roy acknowledged in his memoirs, Lenin looked upon Gandhi "as the inspirer and leader of a mass movement" and "a revolutionary".

But what is significant is that while 1917 saw Gandhi devising methods of struggle to bring about institutional changes that would also lead to self-government, or swaraj, each of the four struggles preceded the climax of the Russian Revolution and was connected with the peasantry as well as labour.

### The Indentured Ultimatum

One of Gandhi's earliest ultimatums to the Government was to end indentured emigration from India. Recruitment of indentured labour for South Africa's Natal province had ended in 1911, but continued for Fiji and some other places. In 1915, Viceroy Charles Hardinge had himself urged abolition, but the authorities in London were reluctant. They wanted the Colonies utilizing such labour "(to have) reasonable time to adjust themselves to the change", hoping to delay the inevitable as long as possible.

On February 26, 1917, Gandhi gave an ultimatum to end indentured recruitment by May 31, failing which he would advise a passive resistance struggle. If the request was not acceded to, he said, "all practical steps should be taken to prevent Indians from leaving the country for labour in Fiji." The pressure had its effect. Recruitment of indentured labour from India was stopped on March 12, 1917.

### Champaran

His confidence in passive resistance strengthened, Gandhi now turned his attention to the grievances of peasants in Champaran. By April 15, he had reached Bankipore, Patna and from there, later the same day set out for Motihari in Champaran district.

India and Russia were moving, almost step for step, even if they were to different beats. Gandhi's country was under colonial rule, while in independent Russia the Tsarist monarchy had abdicated

more than a month ago. The day after Gandhi reached Champaran, Lenin, who had been in Switzerland till then, reached Petrograd, (now St Petersburg). On April 16, 1917, Gandhi sent instructions that his Kaiser-i-Hind medal be returned to the British regime; an order to leave the district, meanwhile, had been served on Gandhi and he had refused to obey. He had been arrested on his way to a village to inquire into the condition of indigo workers.

After struggles, surveys, and enquiries in the district, the Champaran Agrarian Act followed. The legislation abolished the Tinkathia system under which ryots had to set apart a certain proportion of their best land for the landlord's crops.

In retrospect, some historians have argued that the amendments then made did not go far enough. This somewhat Trotsky-like criticism may well be valid; yet the relevant question to ask would be what, if anything, the later Kisan Sabhas that emerged in Bihar in the decades before India's independence and which are believed to have been active and radical, did to take the Champaran struggle forward.

Fact is, Champaran initiated a wider engagement of the national movement with peasant struggles. It did not come about entirely as a matter of chance. When Gandhi was still in South Africa in 1908 there had been indigo-related disturbances in Champaran. This had revived memories of similar struggles in some Bengal districts from the 1860s. On January 8, 1910, Gandhi's South African journal Indian Opinion had devoted its entire front page to an account from the Calcutta press on this 19th century struggle which referred to the courage and self-sacrifice of the indigo ryots of Bengal as being without parallel in the world. Gandhi's journal had described that struggle as "thrilling" and commented that passive resistance "can have no better illustration". It had thus become an inspiration for and vindication of the passive resistance then being conducted in South Africa.

### **Internments in the Home Rule agitation**

In the year following Gandhi's return to India, two Home Rule Leagues had been founded by Annie Besant and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, respectively. In June 1917 Annie Besant and some of her associates were interned in Ootacamund. At this juncture Gandhi, who was in Motihari, Champaran, again advised passive resistance. In a letter at the end of June to J B Petit of Bombay, an early supporter from his South Africa days, Gandhi wrote : "The descent at the present moment upon the villages by you, Mr Jinnah and such other leaders cannot but end in arrests. This propaganda must be carried on in spite of Government prohibition and to that extent it may be considered illegal but for a passive resister not unlawful. There are various other methods which I am unwilling to advise until passive resistance in its present form has soaked into us a bit."

There are two noteworthy features about Gandhi's advice to J B Petit from Champaran. Firstly: go to the villages. In this attempt to reach out to the peasantry, Gandhi seems to anticipate the later emphasis on the peasantry within international Marxism which would come with Dimitrov in Bulgaria and Mao in China; he was reflecting also an obvious compulsion of India's social formation of the time, in that the peasant-based population was overlaid with a further layer of a full-blown foreign colonialism.

In the two scenarios, Lenin had gravitated towards the workers and soldiers. Gandhi moved toward the peasantry, which was drawn to the national movement as never before. Secondly, there is in Gandhi's communication to Petit evidence of an attempt at some planning of the sequence of the moments of passive resistance.

There were countrywide protests against the internments leading to withdrawal of the orders

against Annie Besant and her associates by September 1917.

## The Social Struggles of 1917

Perhaps the most fascinating of the four major Indian struggles of 1917 was the one against untouchability and the way this was reflected in the political and social conferences held in Godhra, Gujarat, from November 3, 1917, some four days before the climax of the Russian Revolution. The political conference was attended also by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, whose trial and sentence had been followed and commented on by Lenin in 1908.

Echoing the underlying message of the other struggles embarked on during the year, in his presidential address, Gandhi told the Political Conference on November 3, "We have to demand swaraj from our own people. Our appeal must be to them. When the peasantry of India understands what swaraj is, the demand will become irresistible."

He called for the entire law on indenture to be repealed: "It is no part of our duty to look to the convenience of the Colonies." The inter-religious question and the social inequalities prevailing in India had characteristics not known in many other countries, including Russia. Repeatedly, in 1917, Gandhi spoke for Hindu-Muslim accord. In the Godhra conferences he lashed out against the practice of untouchability. At least since September 1915, when he had taken in a Dalit and his family into his settlement in Ahmedabad and encountered some resistance over it, he had been considering "the efficacy of passive resistance in social questions" such that this would "embrace swaraj."

The Social Conference at Godhra, which was presided over by Gandhi, on November 5, 1917 included persons from the so-called untouchable communities and was attended by, among others, Abbas Tyabji and Vithalbai Patel. "Do not suppose", Gandhi told his listeners, "that that community belongs to a lower status; let the fusion take place between you and that community, and then you will be fit for swaraj."

Two days after the extraordinary Social Conference held at Godhra, precisely a century ago, the Bolsheviks seized power in Petrograd and inaugurated the Russian Revolution that would affect the course of history by creating a state that became for more than 70 years a countervailing force to the old colonial powers.

Along with the forces of nationalism that swept across the world in the 20th century, the new countervailing power too contributed, even by its mere existence, to the demise of colonialism. At the same time it also unleashed forces which both strengthened and through premature zeal, weakened the nationalist movements and sometimes even contributed to dividing them.

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