

Forest Satyagraha in Chhattisgarh: An Unique Feature of Gandhian Movement

Abstract

Forest Satyagraha was an unique feature of Gandhian Movement in Chhattisgarh region in 1930. Forest satyagraha was basically inspired by Civil Disobedience Movement.. This paper basically deals the novel feature of Civil Disobedience Movement was forest Satyagraha which meant violation of the forest laws. The features of the Chhattisgarh region, with its extensive forests, suggested this course of action as a form of civil-Disobedience. In the forest Satyagraha the forest laws were disobeyed in several ways, such as by leaving the cattle for grazing in the prohibited forests by collecting firewood and tree leaves from these forests without obtaining permission from the forest authorities and by social boycott of the Forest and Revenue employees of the government. The main theme was to cut grass and twigs from the forests so as protest and disobeys the government laws. The most prominent feature of this movement the Peasants, Villagers, Tribal's men and women played an active, important and role. Such was the spirit that the government was taken a back and took stern measures to curb it..

Keywords: Boycott, Reserved Forest, Picketing, Preserved Forest, Satyagraha.

Introduction

Struggle for Indian Independence was contributed by many regional movements at different times and the collective strength of various agitations lead to the consolidation of voice against the tyrant British Rule. To name a few amongst them were 'Dandi March' and 'Forest Satyagraha'. In the year 1930 a remarkable series of agitation occurred in Chhattisgarh region. Common peasants mainly tribes of Chhattisgarh dependent mainly of forest produce, minor Forest lays and callable. A sudden Change in British Policy of leaving tax on these forest produce hampered the prospects of the common people to a great extent. To protest against the tyranny of the empire. Forest Satyagraha was the integral part of Civil Disobedience Movement.

Aim of the Study

Basically the aim of the study is to bring out the impact of Gandhian Movement in regional areas like Chhattisgarh. In this paper researcher also tried to bring out the fact that in Civil Disobedience Movement (Forest Satyagraha in Chhattisgarh) a large number of Adivasis (tribes), villagers, farmers and women of Chhattisgarh actively participated. It reflects the success of Gandhian Movement particularly in various parts of Chhattisgarh.

Review of Literature

A literature review surveys books, scholarly articles, and any other sources relevant to a particular issue, area of research, or theory, and by so doing, provides a description, summary, and critical evaluation of these works in relation to the research problem being investigated.

Some important works related to this topic are,

Shukla, Ashok, Chhattisgarh Ka Rajnaitik Itihas evam Rashtriya Andolan, Yugbodh Prakashan, Raipur, 1983. As the name suggests, this book presents a comprehensive political history of Chhattisgarh and some important information and incidence of the national freedom movement in Chhattisgarh. In this book author has given a detailed political history of Chhattisgarh during Kalchuri period, Maratha period and British rule. However, as no work is complete, this book also not provides detailed or complete information about forest Satyagraha in Chhattisgarh.

Behar Ramkumar, Chhattisgarh Ka Itihas, Chhattisgarh Hindi Granth Academy, Raipur, 2009. In this book author has given detailed history of Chhattisgarh from the ancient times till Independence. This book also discussed about the freedom movement in Chhattisgarh. We can say that this book is very valuable but still there is scope for further research in



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Mishra, Ramendranath, *Britishkalin Chhattisgarh Ka Itihas*, Pustak Pratisthan, Raipur, 1981. In this book author has given detailed political, social and cultural history of Chhattisgarh during British rule in Chhattisgarh i.e. from 1818 to 1947.

Mishra, D.P., *Madhya Pradesh Me Swadhinta Andolan Ka Itihas*, Government Regional Press, Gwalior, 1956. As the name suggests, this book presents a comprehensive political history of united Madhya Pradesh including Chhattisgarh and this book also provides some important information and incidence of the national freedom movement in Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. Of course We can say that this book is very valuable but still there is scope for further detailed research in this area.

Verma, Bhagwan Singh, *Chhattisgarh Ka Itihas*(Prarambh Se 2000), Madhya Pradesh Hindi Granth Academy, Bhopal, 2007. In this book author has given detailed political, social, economic, religious and cultural history of Chhattisgarh from the ancient times till post Independence period. This book also discussed about the freedom movement in Chhattisgarh. No doubt this book is very valuable and research based but still there is scope for further detailed research on Forest Satyagraha in Chhattisgarh.

Sharma, Arvind, *Chhattisgarh Ka Rajnaitik Itihas*, Arpa Pocket Book, Bilaspur, 1999. This book mainly deals with the political history of Chhattisgarh. As this book provide detailed political history of Chhattisgarh, so it is important work done by the author but it doesn't provide much about the proposed research problem.

Varlyani, J.R. and Sahasi, Vasudev, *Chhattisgarh Ka Rajnaitik Evam Sanskritik Itihas*, Divya Prakashan, Kanker, 1997. In this book author has given detailed political, social, economic, religious and cultural history of Chhattisgarh from the ancient times till post Independence period.

While going through the books for review of literature, the researcher has noticed that most of the books related to the topic have covered mainly socio-cultural or political history and very few of them given some information about Forest Satyagraha in Chhattisgarh.

Research Methodology

The method of this research was based on both primary and secondary sources. For the purpose of collection of materials it was essential that the primary data should be collected and analyzed. The researcher visited a number of libraries, record room, archives and personal libraries freedom fighters of Chhattisgarh. The researcher visited the libraries Pt Sunder Lal Sharma library, Raipur, District Library, Raipur and National Archive of India, Delhi which is repository of Government documents. The material thus collected has been used for preparing this Research Paper.

The Lahore Congress of 1929 had authorized the Working committee to launch a programme of Civil Disobedience including non-payment of taxes. It had called upon all members of legislatures to resign their seats.¹ The Congress

Working Committee gave Gandhi the responsibility for organizing the first act of civil disobedience. The 24-day march began on 12 March 1930 as a direct action campaign of tax resistance and nonviolent protest against the British salt monopoly, and it gained worldwide attention which gave impetus to the Indian Independence Movement and started the nationwide Civil Disobedience Movement.

Gandhi led the Dandi March from his base, Sabarmati Ashram, near the city of Ahmadabad. 78 people began the march with Gandhi, who intended to walk 240 miles (390 km) to the coastal village of Dandi, which was located at a small town called Navsari in the state of Gujarat. As Gandhi and the others continued on what would become a 24-day march to Dandi to produce salt without paying the tax, growing numbers of Indians joined them along the way. On 6 April 1930, by picking up a handful of salt, Gandhiji inaugurated the Civil Disobedience Movement, a movement that was to remain unsurpassed in the history of the Indian National Movement for the country-wide mass participation it unleashed.² The campaign had a significant effect on changing world and British attitudes towards Indian sovereignty and self-rule and caused large numbers of Indians to join the fight for the first time.

While Gandhiji was marching to Dandi, Congress leaders and workers had been busy at various levels with the hard organizational task of enrolling volunteers and members. Congress leaders and workers had been forming grass-roots Congress Committees, collecting funds, and touring villages and towns to spread the nationalist message. Preparation for launching the salt satyagraha were made all over India.³ Once the way was cleared by Gandhiji's ritual beginning at Dandi, the defiance of salt laws started all over the country. A band of Satyagrahis walked all the way from Sylhet in Assam to Noakhali on the Bengal Coast to make salt. C. Rajgopalachari, led a salt march from Trichinopoly (in Tamilnadu) to Vedaranniyam on the Tanjore Coast. He was arrested on 30th April 1930 but he had collected enough volunteers to keep the campaign going for quite some time. In malabar, K. Kelappan, the hero of the Vaikom Satyagraha, walked from Calicut to Payannur to break the salt law. In North West Frontier Province, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan played an extremely active role in the Civil Disobedience Movement.

This new form of salt Satyagraha was eagerly adopted by the people, who soon made it a mass affair. Andhra region bands of village women walked miles to carry away a handful of salt, similarly in Bengal thousands and thousands of people continued to sustain the salt Satyagraha in Midnapore and other coastal pockets. The districts of Puri, Cuttack and Balasore in Odisha remained active centres of illegal salt manufacture.

Chhattisgarh caught the contagions of nationalist spirit which was inspired by Gandhiji's mass movement. Civil Disobedience Movement which was started by Gandhiji's Dandi March and breaking of Salt Laws was a national-wide movements with immense mass appeal.⁴ It was difficult to conduct Salt

Satyagraha in Chhattisgarh because of geographical locations. Chhattisgarh State being situated in the centre of India where no sea-shore is found, it was impossible to break salt law. But the spirit was however high and the people wanted to join the main stream of the movement. Since new measures had to be adopted, a new method of civil Disobediences had to be envisaged.⁵

Thus the novel feature of Civil Disobedience Movement was forest Satyagraha which meant violation of the forest laws. The features of the region, with its extensive forests, suggested this course of action as a form of civil-Disobedience. Forest Satyagraha had not been contemplated by the congress working committee in the programmes defined for the civil Disobedience movement, on 9th march 1930. Seth Govind Das, Pt. Ravishankar Shukla and Dwarka Prasad Mishra met Gandhiji on way to Dandi at Jammusa and asked for his opinion on launching of forest satyagraha.⁶

Being ignorant of full facts on the points, Gandhiji refused to give his opinion and asked them to contact Pt. Motilal Nehru the congress president for guidance in this regard. D.P. Mishra who had been a 'Trusted Lieutenant' of Motilal Nehru in the Legislative Assembly, immediately proceeded to Allahabad for consolation. Motilal Nehru was reluctant to enlarge the programme without consulting Gandhiji who was far away at Dandi. In fact, he was apprehensive that a large scale forest Satyagraha involving thousands of adivasies and villagers, cutting trees with axes, might lead to violence. After a long discussion and on the assurance of D.P. Mishra that the forest Satyagraha would be strictly in the spirit of the resolution of the Congress working committee and the principles laid down by Gandhiji, Motilal Nehru accorded permission to launching of forest Satyagraha in a very cautious manner.⁷ He realised that the forest Satyagraha stemmed from the discontent caused by the restriction on grazing rights, erosion of the traditional rights to take fuel and fodder from the forests and oppression of forest officials. His approval was restricted only to the violation of grazing law.⁸

The main objective of the forest Satyagraha was to put special pressure on the government in order to freely utilize the products of the Reserve Forest as well as that of the prohibited forests which was a daily requirement of the inhabitants. In the forest Satyagraha the forest laws were disobeyed in several ways, such as by leaving the cattle for grazing in the prohibited forests by collecting firewood and tree leaves from these forests without obtaining permission from the forest authorities and by social boycott of the Forest and Revenue employees of the government. The main theme was to cut grass and twigs from the forests so as protest and disobeys the government laws. As per the Gandhian practice Satyagraha gave notice to the British government before they penetrated into the reserve forest in small batches to cut grass. The government arrested them and prosecuted them under section 379/112 C.P.C. and Section 26 of the forest laws and imprisoned them along with fines.⁹

Thus the originator of the forest Satyagraha was D.P. Mishra through whose efforts the congress gave permission to begin it. But unfortunately D.P. Mishra was arrested and he missed the opportunity of launching it. It was M.S. Aney who inaugurated it, on 10th July 1930, at Pusad in Berar with a party of volunteers.¹⁰

In Chhattisgarh it was first inaugurated in Durg district on 3rd August 1930 under the leadership of Narsingh Prasad Agrawal.¹¹ In Raigarh district Harijan Dhaniram, Jagar Ram and Kunwar Bhan courted arrest after violating the forest law.¹² It got spread in Bilaspur and Raipur district.¹³ In Raipur district, four important cases of forest Satyagraha were registered. These cases were - (1) Gattasilli case (2) Rudri-Nawagaon case and (3) Tamora case and (4) Tanwat-Nayapara Case.

There had been a great importance of forest Satyagraha in Chhattisgarh. It became very popular in rural areas and the villagers and tribal's played an active role displaying a great courage and nationalism.

Dhamtari tahsil has played an important role in the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930-32. Gattasilli village is situated in Dhamtari tahsil in Raipur district. In the year 1930 Gattasilli village about 300 cattle were set loose for grazing in preserved forest area. The forest officials seized them and sent them to the cattle pond (Kanji House). The cattle owners reported the matter to the malguzar, Guru Goswami Lal Saheb, who approached other officers of forest-department for the relinquishment of the cattles was not successful in his efforts. Then they contacted the office bearers of the congress committee, Dhamtari to Narayan Rao Meghawale of the Congress Committee and Nathuji Jagtap.¹⁴ Both the congress leader immediately proceeded to Gattasilli with a party of Satyagrahis, namely Shobharam Dewangan, Sheobodhan Prasad, Ramlal Agrawal, Girdharilal Tiwari, Mukundrao Mane and Gangadhar Rao pandole.¹⁵

The news of the Satyagraha campaign immediately came to the notice of police. Shri Ramji, circle Inspector marched to the said village with a party of armed policemen.¹⁶ When the Satyagrahis reached the village they found that the cattle were let out for sale in decree. The Satyagrahi's requested the cattle pond authorities to release the cattle and when it was denied, they slept on the cattle pond. The policemen tried to remove them forcibly but they failed in their attempt. This made the police irrelative and then boiling water was brought and poured off on the Satyagrahis.¹⁷ But they didn't move from there at all. Looking to the seriousness of the matter finally, Govt. decided to leave their cattle and thus, it can be said that this Satyagraha of Gattasilli got success in their motives during the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Rudri-Nawagaon Case

The forest Satyagraha at Rudri-Nawagaon was inspired by the success of Gattasilli. It was decided by the Tahsil congress committee that a team of five Satyagrahi's will cut grass everyday from the reserved forest of Rudri-Nawagaon (which was about two kilometers from Dhamtari). In this way

Satyagrahi's defy the forest law. It was decided to start the Satyagraha from 22nd August 1930 and Nathuji Jagtap was appointed the team leader of the Satyagrahis.¹⁸

Before the Satyagraha could be started, Narayan Rao Meghawale and Nathuji Jagtap were arrested, so Babu Chhotelal Shrivastav became the leader. The team of first Satyagraha batch was led by Govind Rao Dabhawale which headed towards Nawagaon.¹⁹ When they reached Rudri-Nawagaon about half a mile of their destination. The police arrested them. The houses of prominent Satyagrahis and the Satyagraha Ashram were searched by the police.²⁰

The second batch of Satyagrahi's marched towards Rudri-Nawagaon on 23 August 1930. The police arrested Chhotelal Shrivastav, Ramlal Agrawal, Govind Das Joshi, Amritlal Khare and Shankar Rao Kolhatkar.²¹ The third batch of Satyagrahis starting the next day i.e. on 24 August included them. Police arrested Shyamlal, son of village headman of Nagri.²²

After the arrest of all the prominent leaders of the Tahsil, Lal Saheb Ramsingh of Dhamtari, reorganized the movement. Thousands of people and Satyagrahi's gathered to defy section 144 by proceeding for Rudri-Nawagaon. A military van pursued the crowd. While attempting to check it, the police party was heavily stoned by the crowd consequently one Sub Inspector was seriously injured on the same day 5000 people collected at Rudri for forest Satyagraha. The District Superintendent of Police was assaulted while dispersing the mob.²³

It was violent attack on Sub-Inspector received eye-injury and fell unconscious. Three constables also received injuries.²⁴ About the same event, Shobharam Dewangan writes that a lathi charge was made by the police, while Satyagrahis defied section 144 C.P.C. During the lathi charge, disorder and confusion was natural. It was nothing but retaliation that restored firing. Bhinduji Kumbhkar and Ratnuji of Lamkeni village were seriously wounded, but even in that condition, they were arrested and sent to Raipur jail, Bhinduji died in jail within two or three days of his arrest.²⁵ Dinkar Rao Hishikar, Hastamal Jain, Pt. Indra Prasad Shashtri, Nathuji Yashwant rao Jalap, Thakur Chajoo Singh, Jhuman Shah, Smt. Dayabati Bai, Smt. Drupadi Bai, Lal Saheb Ramsingh, Thakur Mahesh Singh, Chandrayyaji and an unnamed Bengali Saint were arrested on the spot.²⁶

Tamora Case

Tamora village was situated in Mahasamund tahsil. Yatin Yatanlal Jain and Shankar Rao Ganodwale launched the forest satyagraha in mahasamund tahsil. On 9th September, 1930 Yati Yatanlal Jain and Shankar Rao Ganodwale were arrested on the charge of contraband of forest goods.²⁷ Section 144 C.P.C. was promulgated on 13 September, 1930 Tamora village as well as in the adjoining areas of preserved forest. Despite this 10000 persons gathered there to defy Section 144 C.P.C. and the forest law. One day in a usual course the party of the Satyagrahi's led a teen aged girl Dayabati proceeded towards the preserved forest to

defy forest law, but she was prevented and stopped by M.P. Dube, the then sub-divisional officer and magistrate on this she slapped the Magistrate. It was rather more than enough to resort to firing or to shoot her but the kind hearted Magistrate appreciated her holdness.²⁸

Adwait Giri Goswami declined the offer and the movement still continued for about 15 to 20 days. It became the routine of the Satyagrahis to enter the preserved forest and defy the forest law by cutting grass. During the movement 50-60 Satyagrahis were confined and sentenced to 5 to 7 months rigorous imprisonment along with fine of Rs. 200/- to 700/- on 24th September 1930 Await Giri Goswami, Chouthmal Bundansab and Pal Karare were arrested.²⁹

Tanwat-Nayapara Case (Raipur District)

Encouraged by the success of the forest satyagraha of Tamora, a forest satyagraha was launched at Tanwat-Nayapara also. There had been no restrictions on grazing in the zamindari forests of Central province and Berar, only fees was being charged by the zamindars for the same. Besides this a fee of Rs.1/- was recovered from each cultivator towards firewood even though he was not collecting.³⁰

These rates were enhanced by the zamindar in the year 1930. The new rates were so high that the cultivators found it impossible to pay owing to their poverty and pitiable condition. In order to settle the matter a meeting was held at village Saliha in which the malguzars and cultivators of all the neighbouring villages participated. This meeting was attended by nearly 4,000 to 5,000 people. At the instance of the zamindar, the Circle Inspector Police accompanied by twenty five constables reached the meeting spot and started caneing the gathering. Subsequently twenty eight persons were arrested and put in jai.³¹

On 13 September 1930 forty men of the zamindar along with the police party visited Tanwat-Nayapara. They collected the cattles of the villages Salhebhata, Siyaldih, Oaresmuda, Golmul and Gotma and impounded them in the cattle pond, though the cattle were not being grazed in government forest and there was no restriction of cattle grazing in the forests of the zamindaries. In addition to this the police party committed various types of atrocities in the villages, entered their houses forcibly, assaulted them and took away their belongings and also took 'Begar' from them. Punitive tax was also collected from them. The poor villagers were thus tyrannized by the zamindars as well as by the police, and no stone was left unturned to crush any movement started against them.

In the initial stage, the forest Satyagraha was carried on by small bathches of volunteers in the government reserved forests by breaking grazing law. Subsequently, when the tempo of Satyagraha gained momentum, batches after batches followed in quick succession to offer Satyagraha and ultimately even other people swayed by the gusto of new enthusiasm and regardless of consequences joined as volunteers and made the Satyagraha a mass movement. Ten to fifteen thousand people taking part in grass cutting and courting arrest with no remorse, became a common sight.³²

The stage where forest Satyagraha was enacted was the forests and hamlets of the remotest areas of the state and the major participants were the tribal's and village folk. The lesser known villagers, peasants and tribal men and women rose up to the level of urban and often even higher than them in showing courage, enthusiasm and patriotism.³³ A later development of this mass movement was the cutting of fire wood and twigs along with grass as a token of breaking the forest law.

Besides wooing land-owners and tenants into the movement the Congress politicians spread this message among the villagers and rural laborers and enlisted their participation into the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930. By exploiting the grievances of these groups against the regulations in force in government forests, Congress workers persuaded them to break the regulations in many regional centers, generally in the presence of a large number of spectators.³⁴ These acts of Civil Disobedience caused considerable havoc in forests.³⁵ and challenged the government's ability to maintain order.³⁶ The excited bands of tribal's and villagers were seen every where cutting down and carrying off timber under the local Congress leadership who had persuaded them of believe that the "British Raj" was over and Gandhiji had given the forests to the people.³⁷

Conclusion

This ascertains the fact that not only the urban India but the rural India too was eager to win independence and was ready to pay price for it by throwing itself in the blaze of freedom struggle. The lesser known villagers, peasants and tribal men and women rose up to level of urban and often even higher than them in showing courage, enthusiasm and patriotism. Though basically involving small rural folks and tribal's the forests Satyagraha witnessed and active participation of urban population. An interesting factor we find here is the cross-sectional participation of landed proprietors vs-a-vis tenants, business classes vis-a-vis working, malguzars vis-a-vis small tenants.

One more thing to be noted in Forest Satyagraha the role of women in it. Woman of India owe her liberation in the twentieth century to Mahatma Gandhi who made her realise her real strength and brought her out of the four walls of home to the helm of politics. Gandhiji thought of making use of her in the "passive" part of the movement i.e. boycott and picketing programmes which was best suited for her temperament, but when it came to a more challenging task of "breaking a law" the women revealed the same inner strength and courage. For Indian women, the movement was the most liberating experience to date and can truly be said to have marked their entry into the public space. Gandhiji had already called for a vigorous boycott of foreign cloth and liquor shops, and had especially asked the women to play a leading role in this movement. Women who had never stepped unescorted out of their homes, women who had stayed in purdah, young mothers and widows and unmarried girls, became a familiar sight as they stood from morning to night outside liquor shops and opium

dens and stores selling foreign cloths, quietly but firmly persuading the customers and shopkeepers to change their ways.

It is often said that all the Gandhian movements were started in a non violent manner but ended up violently. The same is said about forest Satyagraha too. Whatever the reason- the police atrocities and ruthless suppression of the movement or arrest of major leaders of tired participants, the movements took a little violent turn in certain places. But it can never be called a violent movement without leadership! When local leaders got arrested spontaneous leaders came up and the tribal's and villagers too who actively participated and made the movement a success were basically disciplined.

In the conclusion we may say that forest Satyagraha spread like a wild fire throughout the Chhattisgarh state. As a matter of fact the inclusion of the programme of forests Satyagraha in the civil disobedience movement had a great importance. This was the most popular movement in the rural areas of the state. In this movement the Peasants, Villagers, Tribal's men and women played an active, important and role. Such was the spirit that the government was taken a back and took stern measures to curb it.

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