

[No. 72.]

*Letter, dated Bettiah, 13 May, 1917, from M. K. Gandhi to Chief Secretary to Government of Bihar and Orissa, Ranchi.*¹

In accordance with the suggestion made by the Hon'ble Mr. Maude,² I beg to submit herewith the preliminary conclusions which I have arrived at as a result of the inquiry being made by me into the agrarian condition of the *raiyats* of Champaran.

At the outset I would like to state that it was not possible for me to give the assurance which Mr. Maude would have liked me to have given, viz, that the Vakil friends who have been assisting me would be withdrawn. I must confess that this request has hurt me deeply. It has been made ever since my arrival here. I have been told, that is, after the withdrawal of the order of removal from the district, that my presence was harmless enough and that my *bona fides* were unquestioned, but that the presence of the Vakil friends was likely to create 'a dangerous situation'. I venture to submit that if I may be trusted to conduct myself decorously, I may be equally trusted to choose helpers of the same type as myself. I consider it a privilege to have the association, in the difficult tasks before me, of these able, earnest and honourable men. It seems to me that for me to abandon them is to abandon my work. It must be a point of honour with me not to dispense with their help until anything unworthy is proved against them to my satisfaction. I do not share the fear that either my presence or that of my friends can create 'a dangerous situation.' The danger, if any exists, must lie in the causes that have brought about strained relations between the planters and the *raiyats*. And if the causes were removed, there never need be any fear of a dangerous situation arising in Champaran so far as the *raiyats* are concerned.

Coming to the immediate purpose of this representation, I beg to state that nearly four thousand *raiyats* have been examined and their statements taken after careful cross-examination. Several villages have been visited and many judgements of courts studied. And the enquiry is, in my opinion, capable of sustaining the following conclusions:—

Factories or concerns in the district of Champaran may be divided into two classes—those that have never had indigo plantations, and (2) those that have:—

- (1) The concerns which have never grown indigo have exacted *abwabs* known by various local names equal in amount

¹. Political (Special) Department file No. 1571 of 1917.

². *Vide* No. 71 ante.

at least to the rents paid by the *raiyats*. This exaction, although it has been held to be illegal, has not altogether stopped.

- (2) The indigo-growing factories have grown indigo either under the *tinkathia* system or *khuski*. The former has been most prevalent and has caused the greatest hardship. The type has varied with the progress of time. Starting with indigo it has taken in its sweep all kinds of crops. It may now be defined as an obligation presumed to attach to the *raiyat's* holding whereby the *raiyat* has to grow a crop on 3/20th of the holding at the will of the landlord for a stated consideration. There appears to be no legal warrant for it. The *raiyats* have always fought against it and have only yielded to force. They have not received adequate consideration for the service. When, however, owing to the introduction of synthetic indigo the price of the local product fell, the planters desired to cancel the indigo *sattas*. They therefore devised a means of saddling the losses upon the *raiyats*. In lease-hold lands they made the *raiyats* pay *tawan*, i.e., damages, to the extent of Rs. 100 per bigha in consideration for their waiving their right to indigo cultivation. This the *raiyat's* claim was done under coercion. Where the *raiyats* could not find cash, hand-notes and mortgage-bonds were made for payment in instalments bearing interest at 12 per cent per annum. In these, the balance due has not been described as *tawan*, i.e., damages, but it has been fictitiously treated as an advance to the *raiyat* for some purpose of his own.

In *mukarrari* lands the damage has taken the shape of *sharah-beshi sattas* meaning enhancement of rent in lieu of indigo cultivation. The enhancement according to the survey report has in the case of 5,955 tenancies amounted to Rs. 31,062, the pre-enhancement figure being Rs. 53,865. The total number of tenancies affected is much larger. The *raiyats* claim that these *sattas* were taken from them under coercion. It is inconceivable that the *raiyats* would agree to an enormous perpetual increase in their rents against freedom from liability to grow indigo for a temporary period which freedom they were strenuously fighting to secure and hourly expecting.

Where *tawan* has not been exacted, the factories have forced the *raiyats* to grow oats, sugarcane, or such other crops under the *tinkathia* system.

Under the *tinkathia* system the *raiyat* has been obliged to give his best land for the landlord's crops; in some cases the land in

front of his house has been so used; he has been obliged to give his best time and energy also to it, so that very little time has been left to him from growing his own crops—his means of livelihood.

Cart-hire *sattas* have been forcibly taken from the *rai'yats* for supplying carts to the factories on hire insufficient even to cover the actual outlay.

Inadequate wages have been paid to the *rai'yats* whose labour has been impressed, and even boys of tender age have been made to work against their will.

Ploughs of the *rai'yats* have been impressed and detained by the factories for days together for ploughing factory lands for a trifling consideration and at a time when they required them for cultivating their own lands.

Dasturi has been taken by the notoriously ill-paid factory *amlas* out of the wages received by the labourers, often amounting to a fifth of their daily wage, and also out of the hire paid for carts and ploughs.

In some villages the *chamars* have been forced to give up to the factories the hides of dead cattle belonging to the *rai'yats*. Against the carcasses the *chamars* used to supply the *rai'yats* with shoes and leather straps for ploughs and their women used to render services to the latter's families at child-birth. Now they have ceased to render these valuable services. Some factories have for the collection of such hides opened hides godowns.

Illegal fines—often of heavy amounts—have been imposed by factories upon *rai'yats* who have proved unbending.

Among the other (according to the evidence before me) methods adopted to bend the *rai'yats* to their will, the planters have impounded the *rai'yats*' cattle, posted peons on their houses, withdrawn from them barbers, *dhobis*, carpenters, and smiths' services; have prevented the use of village wells and pasture lands by ploughing up the pathway and lands just in front of or behind their homesteads, have brought or promoted civil suits, or criminal complaints against them, and resorted to actual physical force and wrongful confinements. The planters have successfully used the institutions of the country to enforce their will against the *rai'yats* and have not hesitated to supplement them by taking the law in their own hands. The result has been that the *rai'yats* have shown an abject helplessness such as I have not witnessed in any part of India where I have travelled.

They are members of District Boards and Assessors under the Chaukidari Act and keepers of pounds. Their position as such has been felt by the *rai-yats*. The roads which the latter pay for at the rate of half an anna per rupee of rent paid by them are hardly available to them. Their carts and bullocks which perhaps most need the roads are rarely allowed to make use of them. That this is not peculiar to Champaran does not in any way mitigate the grievance.

I am aware that there are concerns which form exceptions to the rule laid down, but as a general charge the statements made above are capable of proof.

I am aware, too, that there are some Indian *zamindars* who are open to the charges made above. Relief is sought for in their cases as in those of the planters. Whilst there can be no doubt the latter have inherited a vicious system, they with their trained minds and superior position have reduced it to an exact science, so that the *rai-yats* would not only have been unable to raise their heads above water but would have sunk deeper still had not the Government granted some protection. But that protection has been meagre and provokingly slow and has often come too late to be appreciated by the *rai-yats*.

It is true that the Government await the Settlement Officer's report on some of the matters covered by this representation. It is submitted that when the *rai-yats* are groaning under the weight of oppression, such as I have described above, an inquiry by the Settlement Officer is a cumbersome method. With him the grievances mentioned herein are but an item in an extensive settlement operation. Nor does his inquiry cover all the points raised above. Moreover, grievances have been set forth herein which are not likely to be disputed. And they are so serious as to require immediate relief.

That *tawan* and *sharahbeshi satta*s and *abwabs* have been exacted cannot be questioned. I hope it will not be argued that the *rai-yats* can be fully protected as to these by recourse to law. It is submitted that where there is wholesale exaction, courts are not a sufficient protection for the *rai-yats* and the administrative protection of the *Sarkar* as the supreme landlord is an absolute necessity.

The wrongs are twofold. There are wrongs which are accomplished facts and wrongs which continue. The continuing wrongs need to be stopped at once and a small inquiry may be made as to past wrongs, such as damages and *abwabs* already taken and *sharahbeshi* payments already made. The *rai-yats* should be told by proclamation and notices distributed broadcast among them.

that they are not only not bound to pay *abwabs*, *tawan* and *sharah-beshi* charges but that they ought not to pay them, that the *Sarkar* will protect them if any attempt is made to enforce payment thereof. They should further be informed that they are not bound to render any personal service to their landlords and that they are free to sell their services wherever they choose and that they are not bound to grow indigo, sugarcane or any other crop unless they wish to do so and unless it is profitable for them. The Bettiah Raj leases¹ given to the factories should not be renewed until the wrongs are remedied and should, when renewed, properly safeguard the *raiyats*' rights.

As to *dasturi* it is clear that better paid and educated men should substitute the present holders of responsible offices and that no countenance should be given to the diminution in *raiyats*' wages by illegal exaction of *dasturi*. I feel sure that the planters are quite capable of dealing with the evil, although it is in their language 'as old as the Himalayas'.

The *raiyats* being secured in their freedom, it would be no longer necessary to investigate the question of the inadequacy or otherwise of the consideration in the indigo *sattas* and cart-hire *sattas*, and the wages. The *raiyats* by common agreement should be advised to finish indigo or other crops for the current year. But thenceforth, whether it is indigo or any other crop, it should be only under a system of absolute free-will.

It will be observed that I have burdened this statement with as little argument as possible. But if it is the desire of the Government that I should prove any of my conclusions, I shall be pleased to tender the proofs on which they are based.

In conclusion, I would like to state that I have no desire to hurt the planters' feelings. I have received every courtesy from them. Believing as I do that the *raiyats* are labouring under a grievous wrong from which they ought to be freed immediately, I have dealt, as calmly as is possible for me to do so, with the system which the planters are working. I have entered upon my mission in the hope that they as Englishmen born to enjoy the fullest personal liberty and freedom will not fail to rise to their status and will not begrudge the *raiyats* the same measures of liberty and freedom.

I am sending copies to the Commissioner of the Tirhut Division, the Collector of Champaran, the Subdivisional Officer of Bettiah, the Manager of the Bettiah Raj, the Secretaries respectively of the Bihar Planters' Association and the District Planters' Association. I am circulating them also among those leaders of public opinion in the country who have kept themselves in touch with the work being done by my colleagues and myself. The copies

¹ *Vide* Introduction.

are being marked not for publication, as there is no desire to invite a public discussion of the question unless it becomes absolutely necessary.

I need hardly give the assurance that I am at the disposal of the Government whenever my presence may be required.

[No. 73.]

*Letter, dated Bettiah, 14 May, 1917, from M. K. Gandhi to W. Maude, Member of Executive Council, Government of Bihar and Orissa*¹.

MY DEAR MR. MAUDE,

As promised by me, I have sent to-day my representation to the Chief Secretary. I do hope that it will receive urgent consideration.

I am making arrangements as fast as possible to alter the method of enquiry also in terms of my undertaking.

I am,

Yours sincerely,

M. K. GANDHI.

[No. 74.]

*Diary of Police Superintendent, Champaran, dated 16 May, 1917*³.

Mr. Gandhi has returned from Bankipur, where he had an interview with the Hon'ble Mr. Maude, at which the District Magistrate of Champaran and the Subdivisional Officer, Bettiah, were present. There is much speculation as to what orders Government have given, or will give, as to whether Mr. Gandhi's mission will be allowed to continue indefinitely...If Mr. Gandhi is allowed to remain in the district, or his assistants, there will be a paralysis of labour which may lead to serious or petty disturbances. People are hoping for and expecting some extreme orders from Mr. Gandhi, especially as regards factories. He is looked on as a great and benevolent 'Reformer'. I am watching the situation carefully and moving about the district and learning all I can as to what is going on, or being said—there are many rumours of an absurd nature; one is that Gandhi is merely a Government spy and is trying to collect recruits for the Native Army⁴...

G. M. MARSHAM.

16-5-1917.

¹ Political (Special) Department file no. 1571 of 1917.

² Vide no. 72 ante.

³ Political (Special) Department file no. 1571 of 1917.

⁴ Mahatma Gandhi actually supported British war efforts in India as will appear from documents in the Supplement of this volume as well as from other evidences.