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Introduction to Indigo

"Indigo" is a chapter taken from the biography of Mahatma Gandhi written by Louis Fischer, who was an admirer of Gandhiji. The chapter focuses on Gandhiji's visit to Champaran in 1917, which marked a significant turning point in both his life and the history of India. At that time, the British government had a strong hold over India, and the Indian peasants lived in fear of British landlords.

The chapter highlights the plight of the illiterate peasants, especially Rajkumar, who was deeply troubled by the injustice inflicted upon them by British landlords. The landlords owned large estates in Champaran and forced the peasants to grow indigo on 15% of their land and surrender the entire produce as rent. Indigo harvesting was a difficult and unpleasant task.

However, the development of synthetic indigo in Germany led to a decline in the price of natural indigo, making its cultivation unprofitable. The landlords then offered to release the peasants from this obligation in exchange for compensation. Many peasants, unaware of the landlords' true intentions, agreed, while others resisted. When the peasants discovered the truth, disputes arose, leading to legal battles and violence.

Gandhiji arrived in Champaran to support the peasants. He believed that legal proceedings alone would not solve the problem and aimed to free the peasants from their fear of the British. Through his fearless and dedicated leadership, Gandhiji campaigned for justice and ultimately succeeded.

Theme

The main theme of "Indigo" is the power of effective leadership to overcome injustice. Gandhiji's leadership demonstrated how conviction, negotiation, and fearlessness can secure justice for the oppressed. The chapter also emphasizes the contributions of many unsung Indians to the freedom movement and teaches that struggles for noble causes are ultimately rewarded.

Message

The chapter exposes the unequal economic system under British colonial rule, which exploited Indian peasants. It highlights Gandhiji's crucial role in challenging this system and securing justice for the indigo sharecroppers.

Title Significance

The title "Indigo" is apt and focused, drawing attention to the central issue of exploitation faced by indigo sharecroppers at the hands of British planters. It also reflects the broader social, economic, and political struggles addressed in the chapter.

Practice Set

- **Level 1 – Easy:** Who was Rajkumar and what was his concern?
- **Level 2 – Moderate:** Explain why the British landlords forced peasants to grow indigo and how the development of synthetic indigo affected this system.
- **Level 3 – Challenging:** Discuss the significance of Gandhiji's leadership in the Champaran indigo movement and its impact on the Indian freedom struggle.

Answer Key

- **Level 1:** Rajkumar was an illiterate peasant who was deeply troubled by the injustice faced by Indian peasants under British landlords.

- **Level 2:** British landlords forced peasants to grow indigo because it was profitable. The development of synthetic indigo in Germany reduced the price of natural indigo, making its cultivation unprofitable and leading landlords to seek compensation from peasants.
- **Level 3:** Gandhiji's leadership was crucial as he fearlessly stood for the peasants' rights, challenged the British authorities, and inspired self-reliance and courage among the oppressed, marking a significant step in India's freedom movement.

Quick Reference

- Indigo cultivation was forced on peasants by British landlords.
- Development of synthetic indigo led to economic exploitation.
- Gandhiji's visit to Champaran was a turning point.
- Leadership, courage, and self-reliance are key themes.

Glossary

- **Indigo:** A blue dye obtained from plants, used in textile coloring.
- **Sharecropper:** A tenant farmer who gives a part of the crop as rent.
- **Synthetic Indigo:** Artificially produced indigo dye developed in Germany.
- **Landlord:** A person who owns land and rents it to others.

Summary of Indigo

The chapter begins with the Indian National Congress convention held in Lucknow in December 1916, where a poor, illiterate peasant named Shukla approached Gandhiji to complain about the injustice faced by peasants in Champaran. Although Gandhiji was initially unaware of Champaran and had many commitments, Shukla's persistence led Gandhiji to fix a meeting in Calcutta.

Gandhiji and Shukla traveled to Patna and then to Muzaffarpur, where Gandhiji stayed with Mr. Malkani, a government school teacher who courageously supported him despite the risks. News of Gandhiji's mission spread, and peasants and lawyers came to meet him.

Gandhiji criticized lawyers for charging high fees and emphasized freeing peasants from fear.

The British landlords had forced peasants to grow indigo on 15% of their land and surrender the produce. With the advent of synthetic indigo, landlords offered to release peasants from this obligation for compensation. Some peasants agreed, others resisted, leading to disputes and violence.

Gandhiji sought information from British officials but faced resistance. He made Motihari his headquarters and began investigations. When ordered to leave Champaran, Gandhiji refused and was summoned to court. Thousands of peasants showed support, and Gandhiji pleaded guilty but explained his moral duty. The judge released him, and the case was eventually dropped.

Gandhiji and his lawyer friends conducted an inquiry, recording thousands of peasants' statements. The Lieutenant Governor formed a commission including Gandhiji to investigate. The commission found evidence against landlords, who agreed to refund the peasants. Gandhiji negotiated a 25% refund, a moral victory that restored peasants' rights and dignity.

The landlords abandoned their estates, ending indigo sharecropping. Gandhiji then focused on social and cultural upliftment, opening primary schools and promoting hygiene. Despite initial plans for a short visit, Gandhiji stayed seven months, overseeing reforms and encouraging self-reliance without foreign help.

Key Terms

- **Convention:** An assembly or meeting.
- **Law-breaker:** A person who breaks the law.
- **Volunteer:** A person who offers to take part in a task willingly.
- **British Landlords Association:** An organization of British landlords in India.

Practice Set

- **Level 1 – Easy:** Who was Shukla and what did he want from Gandhiji?
- **Level 2 – Moderate:** Describe Gandhiji's approach to helping the peasants in Champaran.
- **Level 3 – Challenging:** Analyze the significance of the commission formed by the Lieutenant Governor and Gandhiji's role in it.

Answer Key

- **Level 1:** Shukla was a poor, illiterate peasant who wanted Gandhiji to help the peasants of Champaran against British landlords.
- **Level 2:** Gandhiji investigated the situation personally, refused to leave despite orders, pleaded in court, gained peasants' trust, and led a moral and legal campaign for their rights.
- **Level 3:** The commission was significant as it officially investigated the peasants' complaints. Gandhiji's presence ensured fair representation, leading to a moral victory and reforms.

Quick Reference

- Shukla's persistence brought Gandhiji to Champaran.
- Gandhiji's fearless leadership challenged British authority.
- Legal and moral victory ended indigo sharecropping.
- Social reforms followed economic justice.

Glossary

- **Commission:** A group appointed to investigate and report on a matter.
- **Lieutenant Governor:** The British official in charge of a province.
- **Inquiry:** A formal investigation.
- **Sharecropper:** A tenant farmer who gives a share of the crop as rent.