



Thumb Printed: Champaran Indigo Peasants Speak to Gandhi

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Abstract:

M.K. Gandhi arrived in Champaran, Bihar in April 1917, to inquire into the conditions of peasants growing Indigo for European planters. For this, he required his local associates to go out and record what the peasants had to say about their plight. The enthusiasm generated by this novel move resulted in a vast storehouse of peasant-speak, untouched by scholars so far. Translated on the spot from local Bhojpuri into English, these remarkable first-person narratives, preserved in India's National Archives, have now been edited with explanatory notes by Shahid Amin, Tridip Suhrud and Megha Todi. 'Thumb Printed' is a rare collection of what ordinary peasants experienced, recalled and authenticated, by affixing their thumb impressions as a sign of veracity. When peasants speak, an entire world speaks. The fine weave of stories in this volume enable us to visualise these peasants working the indigo fields in flesh and blood, tilling, weeding, watering, carting their indigo crop to factories, getting shortchanged, fined...literally pilloried and beaten into submission. An exemplary work of scholarship and editorial craft, this volume would be long regarded as opening a new window on to the world of peasants. not as an abstraction but through the

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Abstract

M.K. Gandhi arrived in Champaran, Bihar in April 1917, to inquire into the conditions of peasants growing Indigo for European planters. For this, he required his local associates to go out and record what the peasants had to say about their plight. The enthusiasm generated by this novel move resulted in a vast storehouse of peasant-speak, untouched by scholars so far. Translated on the spot from local Bhojpuri into English, these remarkable first-person narratives, preserved in India's National Archives, have now been edited with explanatory notes by Shahid Amin, Tridip Suhrud and Megha Todi. 'Thumb Printed' is a rare collection of what ordinary peasants experienced, recalled and authenticated, by affixing their thumb impressions as a sign of veracity. When peasants speak, an entire world speaks. The fine weave of stories in this volume enable us to visualise these peasants working the indigo fields in flesh and blood, tilling, weeding, watering, carting their indigo crop to factories, getting shortchanged, fined...literally pilloried and beaten into submission. An exemplary work of scholarship and editorial craft, this volume would be long regarded as opening a new window on to the world of peasants, not as an abstraction but through the articulation of their lived experience. This is an edited excerpt from *Thumb Printed: Champaran Indigo Peasants Speak to Gandhi* ([link](#)).



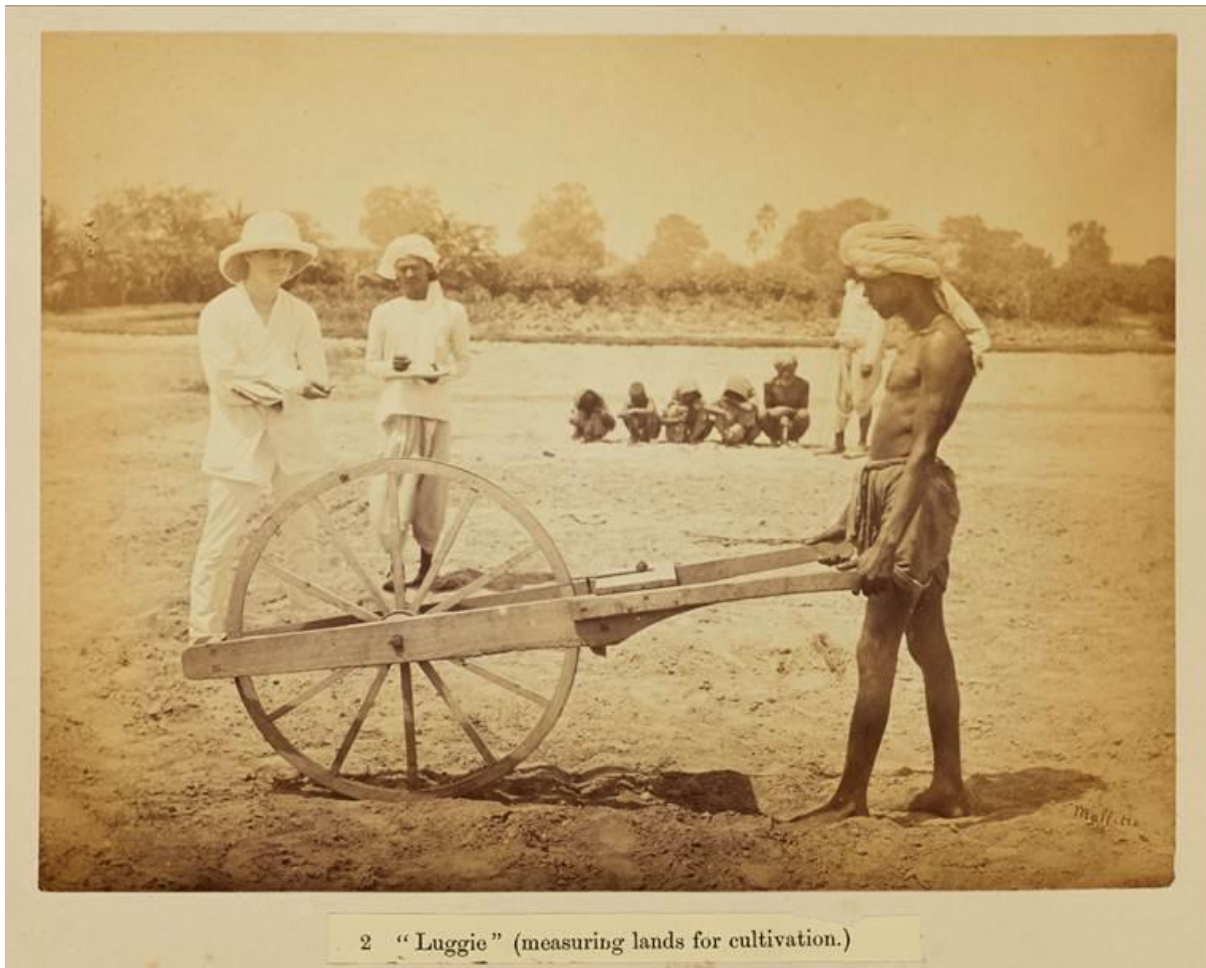
Thumb Printed

Not a chest of indigo reached England without being stained with human blood.

E. W. L. Tower¹

To give a full account of the Champaran Inquiry would be to narrate (for the period)² the history of the Champaran ryot...’.

M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography Or the story of my experiments with Truth, Critical Edition*, (2018, 641)



¹ E. W. L. Tower, one time Magistrate, Faridpur, in a statement before the Indigo Commission, 1860.

² Added in the English Translation by Mahadev Desai.



Neel. Certain words carry within themselves a universe of meanings, both ancient and contemporary, which allude to myth, magic, science, art, commerce, beauty and oppression. They are simultaneously divine and earthy, of the skies and the seas, of joy and melancholy, of light and dark, of mourning and celebration, of leisure and work, of power and helplessness, of freedom and bondage, of hand and machine, of authority and rebellion. *Neel*, indigo, is one such word.

This book however is not the story of the luminescence of the indigo hue, or of the women and men whose dark stained fingers and feet have the capacity to contain both the blue sky and the blue god in and through their creations. It is also not about our unyielding attraction for this dye that is as ancient as the hills and yet survives today despite our adoption of synthetic colours.

This is also not the story of the great Indian leader Mohandas Karmachand Gandhi, although he is ever-present. This is the story of the *raiyat*, the peasants of Champaran, in present-day Bihar in India. They laboured on their lands or on the lands of others and produced indigo, their cattle and carts ferried the produce to and from the factory; their blood stained the indigo, they rebelled, agitated, pleaded, refused to yield. They called Gandhi in their midst, invited him to their homes, and when he came, clad as one of them and listened, they made Gandhi *Naya Malik*³, a *Mahatma*⁴, and gave him the capacity to reside in the hearts of all, *sada jananam*, as the Upanishad promised. It was “nothing less than the birth of freedom.”⁵ In this moment the peasantry spoke, and their words carried the resonance of testament.

This is a record of their testimonies.

They were not given in a court of law, although the procedure through which they were uttered and recorded resembled a legal testament. Their utterances, recorded in a language alien to most of them, carry within them a capacity for Truth that often eludes procedural evidence. This was *zubani*⁶ given with an awareness that *Khuda* was *hazir* and *nazir*⁷. These testimonies rooted in their present carry within them the

³ New leader

⁴ Great soul. Mohandad Karamchand Gandhi was often referred to by the sobriquet *Mahatma* in his later years.

⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, ‘The Call of Truth’, in *Truth Called Them Differently*, (eds.) RK Prabhu, Rabindra Kelkar (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1961), p. 56.

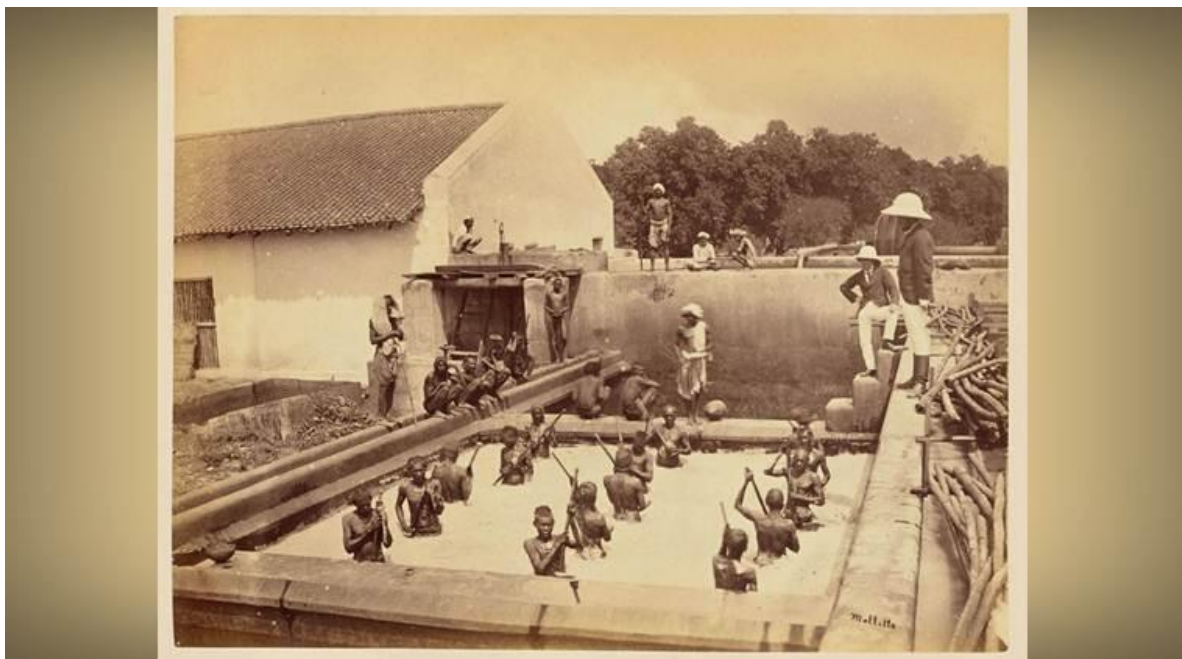
⁶ Oral testimony.

⁷ An awareness that God was omnipresent.



memories of generations, seared in their minds like the deep furrows in the land that they ploughed.

And for that reason, these testimonies have to be read with the awareness of the indelible link that India has with the universal story of indigo. The very name indigo is derived from the Greek 'indikon', Latinised to 'indicum'. The Sanskrit *neel/ nil* is carried into Arabic as 'an-nil' and the modern aniline convey this linguistic journey⁸



Gandhi's Inquiry consisted in getting the testimonies of peasants, spoken in local Bhojpuri, translated and transcribed into English by his lawyer assistants. The Inquiry collected, along with the signature of the recorder– transcriber, formalizing the averment. In a good many cases, peasants actually wrote up their signatures in the local kaithi script. There is even the solitary case of Gajadhar Mahton of Khadda village signing his name in English as Gajadhar.

In his own words, Gandhi described his intentions to the Magistrate in Motihari, “I have entered the country with motives of rendering humanitarian and national service. I have done so in response to a pressing invitation to come and help the raiyats who urge they are not being fairly treated by the indigo planters. I could not

⁸ Jenny Balfour-Paul, *Indigo: Egyptian Mummies to Blue Jeans*, (London: The British ⁸ Museum, 1998, 2006, 2011), p. 7.



render any help without studying the problem. I have, therefore, come to study it with the assistance, if possible, of the administration and the planters.”

Sample Testimony

Mangra Chamar, Village Man Karania, Thana Gobindganj, Factory Khairwa

Bettiah
9.5.1917

Statement of Mangra Chamar, son of Khubhari, aged 15 years, resident of Mowza Man Karania, Thana Gobindganj, under the Khairwa concern.

I am a Chamar by caste. My holding is in the name of Jagroop Chamar, my grandfather. I am now in possession of only 2 ½ bighas of land in Man Karania and another 2 ½ bigha in Balua. I corroborate the statement made by Mahadeo Rai and others as regards compulsory execution of sarahbeshi.

My further complaint is that from time immemorial it has been the custom, that when any cattle died in the village, it was the duty of the members of my family to remove the dead cattle and we were entitled to its skin. We had to supply in its stead country-made shoes to my co-villagers, free of cost, and to do other sundry works for them. We had also to pay Rs. 7/- only per year to the Kothi for this monopoly. For the last seven years, after the dead cattle is skinned by us, it is forcibly taken to the Kothi, and we get nothing in return for our labours. I am told, the Kothi sells these skins. The Kothi does not charge me Rs.7/- per year since it takes the skins from us.

I am in great difficulties these days, as I can't supply shoes to my co-villagers, which my family had been doing.

The rent of my holding viz. 5 bighas used to be Rs.20/- only, now I have to pay Rs.25/- only according to the Sarahbeshi.

Thumb Impression

Raghunandan Prasad



Bettiah 45
1817

Statement of Mangra Chamar, son of
Khubhari, aged 18 years, resident of
Mouza Amankaria, S. Thana Gobindpur,
under the Khairwa conservancy.

I am a Chamar by caste. My holding
is in the name of Jagroop Chaman,
my grand-father. I am now in
possession of only 2 1/2 Bighas of land in
Amankaria and another 2 1/2 B in Bahar.
I corroborate the statement made by
Anahad Rai and others as regards
Compulsory execution of Parah-bashi.

My further complaint that
from time immemorial it has been
the custom, ~~in the villages~~ that when
~~any~~ any cattle died in the
village, it was the duty of the
members of my family to remove the
dead cattle and we were en-
titled to its skin. We had to sup-
ply instead country-made shoes to
any co-villagers, free of cost,
and to do other sundry works for them.
We had also to pay B 7/- only per year
to the Kothi for this mouza-poly.

For the last seven years, the
Kothi has ~~been~~ taken
the ~~skin~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~dead~~ ~~cattle~~ ~~and~~ ~~the~~ ~~skin~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~dead~~ ~~cattle~~ ~~is~~ ~~forcibly~~ ~~taken~~ ~~to~~ ~~the~~ ~~Kothi~~ ~~and~~ ~~we~~ ~~do~~ ~~not~~ ~~get~~ ~~anything~~ ~~in~~ ~~return~~ ~~for~~ ~~our~~ ~~labour~~.

P.T.O

In the last seven years, after ~~the~~
the dead cattle ~~is~~ skinned by us,
it is forcibly taken to the Kothi, and
we do not get anything in return for our
labour. I am told, the Kothi sells
these skins. The Kothi does not charge
me B 7/- per year since it takes the
skins from us.

I am in great difficulties
these days, as I can't supply
shoes to my ~~own~~ co-villagers, which
I my family had been doing.

The rent of my holding is B 8 Bigha
used to be B 25/- only now, I have
to pay B 25/- only according to the
Parah-bashi

Rajmohanlal
9.11.17

This is an edited excerpt from Thumb Printed: Champaran Indigo Peasants Speak to Gandhi | Edited by Shahid Amin, Tridip Suhrud and Megha Todi | Navajivan Trust and National Archives of India | 360 pages | ₹ 500



About the Author

Shahid Amin is an Oxford-trained historian who currently lives in New Delhi, India. Tridip Suhrud is a translator, cultural theorist, and one of the world's foremost scholars of M.K. Gandhi. He is currently Provost, Cept University, Ahmedabad, India. Megha Todi has been engaged with archival research for a decade now and this is her third publication as an independent researcher.