



A Subaltern View of the Salt Satyagraha in Muzaffarnagar

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One of the most prosperous districts of the Upper Ganges-Yamuna Doab is Muzaffarnagar in the west of Uttar Pradesh. The people of the district took an active part in the Salt Satyagraha with a great zeal. Geographically, the district has its proximity to Delhi. So, the people had more political awareness from the beginning of the movement. Every stir of the national politics influenced the people of the district very soon. Since the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920, the people were participating aggressively in the activities of the congress. Thus, when Gandhiji made a call to break the Salt Act in 1930, the people of the district took a part in the movement with a great enthusiasm. The people were so excited that violent incidents also occurred at some places of the district in 1930.¹

After the Lahore Session of the Indian National Congress in 1929, there was a zealous atmosphere in the whole nation. In the session, it was decided to celebrate the first Independence Day on Jan 26, 1930 and to unfurl the National Flag throughout the nation.² The people of Muzaffarnagar were overexcited about this programme of the Congress. On January 26, 1930 alongwith the whole nation, the first I-Day was also celebrated in Muzaffarnagar district with great pomp and show. On this day in the morning, the national flag was unfurled in the National School, Muzaffarnagar under the leadership of Vishnu Chand and Raghunandan Swami.³ After it, a grand meeting was organised in the National School, where Amba Prasad and Dwarika Prasad made fiery speeches and appealed to the people to be ready to participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement in future.⁴ In the evening, a great procession was marched out through the main roads and markets of the city. There was a great zeal in the people. Some young volunteers were riding on the horses and the bicycles and marching ahead of the procession. The men were calling patriotic slogans and the women were singing the National Song. Having reached at the Ramleela ground, the procession turned into a general meeting where Amba Prasad, Radha Raman advocate and Gurudutt Khanna made speeches full of national theme.⁵

In the real sense, even after the Lahore Congress of 1929, the common men of the Muzaffarnagar district were fully awakened about the national incidents. Gandhiji was given the authority to start the movement in the Lahore Congress of 1929 after passing a resolution of total Independence. He decided to oppose the Salt Tax levied by the government and to

¹ Muzaffarnagar Distt. Gazetteer, Govt. Press, 1965, Allahabad, p. 41.

² The Hindustan Times, 1st Jan., 1930.

³ See the Dairy of Raghunandan Swami.

⁴ Parivartan, 28th Jan., 1930.

⁵ Ibid., 28.01.30.

begin a movement against its unlawfulness. He wrote a letter to Viceroy Lord Irwin on March 2, 1930 and informed him of beginning 'The Civil Disobedience Movement' by breaking the Salt Act alongwith his 75 associates of the Sabarmati Ashram.⁶ Gandhiji started the historical Dandi March on 12th March, 1930 from the Ashram.⁷ There was a stir in the country with the beginning of this March. Muzaffarnagar district was also no exception to it.

Having travelled for 240 kms., Gandhiji reached Dandi on April 5, 1930 and broke the Act before thousands of people at 8.30 A.M. on 6th April, 1930.⁸ The Movement, started by Gandhiji, resulted into a chain of movements throughout the country. Inspite of the resistance and oppression of the government, the Salt Act was disobeyed at several places of the Muzaffarnagar district.⁹

Prior to the beginning of the Movement, the volunteers were recruited to strengthen the Congress organisation. Many educated and respected persons of the district got themselves enrolled for becoming the Congress volunteers. Among them were Amba Prasad, Babu Gurudutt Khanna, Braham Prakash Sharma, Madan Mohan Mittal, Babu Radharaman advocate, Babu Chandra Muni, Pandit Sher Singh Kashyap and Dr. Balbir Narain Sharma.¹⁰

A grand conference was organised in Muzaffarnagar on 12th March, 1930. Thousands of people assembled from the nearby places in it. The main participants from the district level were R.N. Swami, Thakur Amir Singh, Master Vishnu Chandra and Lala Ugra Sen etc. The president of the conference was R.N. Swami. In the meeting, the people were informed about the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Salt Satyagraha. A resolution was also passed to establish a Congress Committee in every village.¹¹ After this Congress, the meetings were organised in some village everyday to make an awareness about the programme of the Movement. R.N. Swami was appointed 'the dictator' of Muzaffarnagar district for the smooth functioning of the movement¹² Special efforts were made to arouse the interest in the movement among the illiterate rural folk of the district.¹³

A procession was made out in Shamli on April 6, 1930. Thousands of people participated in it and shouted the slogans like 'Bharat Mata ki Jai', 'Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai'.¹⁴ The procession was led by R.N. Swami. It was halted at several places where general meetings were held. In these meetings, Gangaram, Jai Prakash, Chatar Sen, Dalel Singh and Mussaddilal made lively speeches.¹⁵ Similarly, the processions and meetings were held in Charthawal, Muzaffarnagar, Purkaji, Manladi, Jalalabad, Shamli and Bhalendi where the people were encouraged to be active in the Salt Satyagraha.¹⁶

Also on April 6 from Shamli, group of volunteers marched on feet for Muzaffarnagar under the leadership of R.N. Swami. The people of Shamli bade a farewell to the jatha with great zeal and respect and offered thousands of rupees as charity. In the villages falling on the way, the local people made the jatha stop and offered garlands to honour them. At this time,

⁶ Parivartan, 8th March, 1930.

⁷ Ibid. 8th March, 1930.

⁸ Parivartan, 8th April, 1930.

⁹ The Hindustan Times, 9th April, 1930.

¹⁰ Interview : Sardoo Singh Bajaj as quoted by Kamla Sareen, Meerut Mandal mein Savinay Avgya Andolan, research thesis, 1985, Meerut.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See the Diary of Raghunand Swami.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ The Hindustan Times, 8th April, 1930.

several meetings were organised on the way of Shamli to Muzaffarnagar. Gopichand Goyal and his associates were responsible for the successful functioning of these meetings. These meetings were totally successful in their objectives.¹⁷

After breaking the Salt Act by Gandhiji on April 6, 1930, the Congress working committee decided to celebrate a 'National Week' from April 6th April to 13th, 1930 to expand and advertise the Salt Satyagraha among the people of the whole nation. Like the other districts of the 'Ganges-Yamuna Doab', even in Muzaffarnagar the people celebrated the 'National Week' with great enthusiasm from 6 to 13 April, 1930. Everyday, in Muzaffarnagar, the district congress committee marched processions and organised the meetings in relation to the Civil Disobedience Movement.¹⁸ In these meetings more and more people were inspired to take a part in the Salt Satyagraha.

The district congress committee of Muzaffarnagar decided to disobey the Salt Act in a village named Jalalabad on 13th April 1930. The village was nearby to Muzaffarnagar and had the saltish soil to prepare salt easily.¹⁹

Thus, in the district, the Salt Satyagraha was started on 13 April 1930, as pre-decided programme. A group of volunteers (jatha) from Shamli reached Jalalabad village on 13th April having a number of thousand residents of Shamli. The jatha marched in a procession from the office of the Muzaffarnagar congress and moving through the main markets reached Jalalabad.²⁰ At the Post Office, the people welcomed the jatha with sweets, fruits and flowers. Having reached Jalalabad, a meeting was addressed by Master Vishnu Chandra.²¹ Many nationalist speakers appealed to the people to break the Salt Act and to boycott the foreign clothes. In the presence of thousands of people, the jatha of Shamli prepared salt at Jalalabad on 13 April. Small packets of the salt were made and sold to the people who bought them with interest. Master Vishnu Chand and 14 other satyagrahis were arrested for preparing the salt.²² The thousands of people who were present there shouted patriotic slogans like 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' and 'Gandhiji Jindabad'.²³

After sometime, another jatha from Muzaffarnagar city, led by Lala Ugrasen and R.N. Swami reached Jalalabad. The police arrested these people also for violation of the Salt Act. This jatha, too, made the salt even in the presence of the police.²⁴

Arresting these volunteers, the police brought them to the station and locked them up in a narrow cell. In spite of hardships, they were happy. After some days, these Satyagrahis were sent to Muzaffarnagar Jail. In the district court, they were prosecuted under section 447 of the I.P.C. Master Vishnuchand, R.N. Swami and Lala Ugrasen Sarraf were sentenced for 6 months in a jail and penalised for Rs. 50/- for violation of the Act.²⁵

¹⁷ See the Diary of Raghunandan Swami.

¹⁸ The Leader, 12th April, 1930.

¹⁹ The Leader, 15th April, 1930.

²⁰ Ibid. 15th April, 1930.

²¹ Ibid., 15th April, 1930.

²² The Hindustan Times, 24th April, 1930.

²³ Ibid., 24th April, 1930.

²⁴ See the Diary of Raghunandan Swami.

²⁵ Ibid.

After violating the law at Jalalabad on 13 April, the Salt Movement was started in all the Muzaffarnagar district. The salt was made at number of places like Budhana, Shamli, Bahsuma, Bhopa, Kandhla etc.²⁶ Picketing was done at the wine shops and the foreign clothes were boycotted also by them. Burning a holi of these clothes and staging a dharna (sit-up) on the shops became a general order of the satyagrahis.²⁷ Even the women staged dharnas on the liquor shops. Alongwith the salt movement, the work of Khadi advertisement was going on swiftly. At this time, the national spirit was much aroused among the women of Muzaffarnagar district. The spinning-organisations or the 'Charkha Sammelens' were held in Sanatan Dharamshala and Vedic Pathshala, where hundreds of women took part happily. In Muzaffarnagar, hundreds of women led by Tarawati and Gyan Devi, took part in the meetings of the congress.²⁸ For the advertisement of the salt satyagraha, these women would visit villages. For taking part in the Salt satyagraha, Smt. Gyan Devi was sentenced for 6 months in a jail in 1930.²⁹ They were not second to anyone in boycotting the foreign clothes.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Home Political File No. 257-13/1930, N.A.I., New Delhi.

²⁸ Interview : Tarawati as quoted by Kamla Sareen, op.cit.

²⁹ Swatantra Sangram Ke Sainik, Distt. Mzuaffarnagar, Information Deptt., 1969, Lucknow, U.P., p. 93.