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The Ultimate NCERT Revision Guide for Class 12 English (Core)

Flamingo Prose: Indigo, 2026-27 Syllabus

Class 12 English Notes Chapter 5 Flamingo Prose: Indigo

by Louis Fischer (1896 – 1970)

Excerpt from *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (1950)

indigo class 12 notes | Biographical reportage

Theme: Gandhian leadership securing justice for the oppressed | Sub-theme: contributions of anonymous Indians to the freedom movement

Also see for this chapter: NCERT Solutions

Contents

1 Introduction and Background

Indigo is a chapter of compressed history. In about ten textbook pages Louis Fischer narrates how a single peasant from Bihar, Rajkumar Shukla, convinced Mahatma Gandhi to walk into the Champaran district in 1917 and dismantle a century-old system of indigo sharecropping that had ground the local farmers into silence. The episode looks small on the map, one district in north Bihar, a handful of months, a 25 per cent refund, and yet Gandhi himself called it the turning point of his life. For a Class 12 board student this chapter is unusually generous: it carries history, civics, biography and English-comprehension marks all in one piece, and almost every CBSE question on it can be answered if you know the sequence of events and the four or five themes that the text is built on.

1.1 About the Author

Louis Fischer (1896 – 1970) was an American journalist born in Philadelphia. He served as a volunteer in the British Army between 1918 and 1920, then made a career writing on international affairs for *The New York Times*, *The Saturday Review*

and several European and Asian publications. He later joined the faculty of Princeton University. Fischer met Gandhi in 1942 at his ashram in Sevagram, central India, and stayed close enough to him to draw a full-length biography, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (1950). *Times Educational Supplement* called the book one of the best ever written on Gandhi. The chapter in your Flamingo textbook is an extract from that book, narrated in Gandhi's own voice as Fischer recorded it.

Why this matters for the essay

The author is not Indian, not a freedom fighter, and not writing in 1917. He is an American journalist sitting in Sevagram in 1942 listening to a 73-year-old Gandhi recall an episode from 25 years earlier. This three-cornered position, outsider, journalist, working from Gandhi's direct testimony, is what gives the chapter its mix of fact-heavy reporting and almost-conversational warmth. Many board questions are easier once you remember that Fischer is a reporter, not an admirer pretending to be neutral.

1.2 The Source Text: *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*

The chapter you read in Flamingo is not a stand-alone essay. Fischer's *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* is a full biography that traces Gandhi from his birth in Porbandar through his South Africa years to his assassination in 1948. The Champaran section is one chapter inside that biography, and the NCERT editors have lifted it almost verbatim. That is why the piece begins with the words "When I first visited Gandhi in 1942" rather than with a formal historical preamble: Fischer is letting the reader walk into the story exactly the way he himself walked into it, as a listener at the ashram.

1.3 Genre and Form

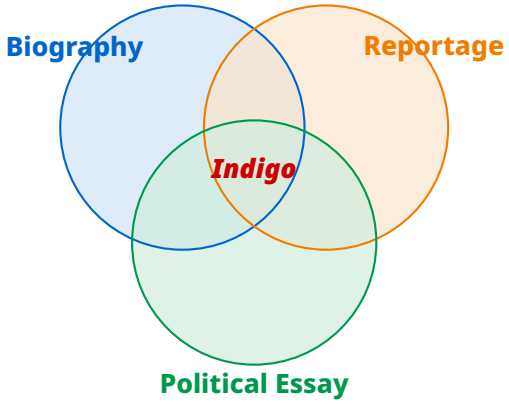
The genre label matters because CBSE often asks about "type of writing" or "narrative technique". *Indigo* is a hybrid that draws from three forms:

- **Biographical reportage.** Fischer is reporting on Gandhi's life. Dates, place names, percentages, the size of legal fees, the number of delegates at the Lucknow Congress, all are factual.
- **First-person recall.** Long passages are direct speech from Gandhi himself, quoted by Fischer. The narrative therefore slips in and out of Gandhi's voice and Fischer's voice on the same page.
- **Political essay.** Towards the end Fischer steps back from the story to draw lessons about self-reliance, the loyalty to living human beings, and the moulding of a new free Indian. The piece becomes argument as well as story.

Exam pointer: narrative style

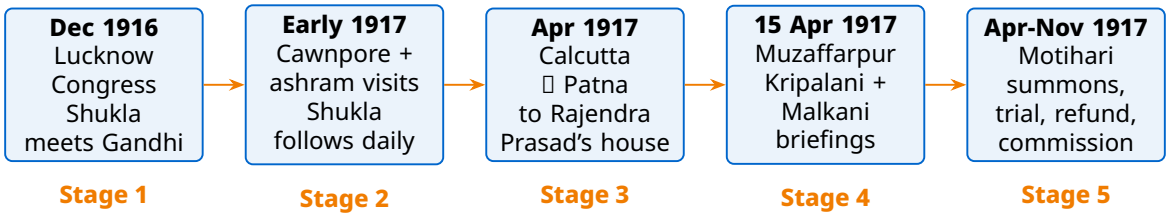
If the question asks about the narrative style, three words cover it: **biographical, first-person, reflective**. Fischer reports Gandhi; Gandhi reports the 1917 events; and at the very end Fischer reflects on what those events meant. Mention all three layers in a long answer and you will not be marked down for missing technique.

A picture of the three forms helps. The middle, where all three overlap, is where *Indigo* lives:



1.4 A Map of the Narrative

Before you read any single scene closely, you should be able to lay the whole episode out on a single timeline. CBSE almost always asks at least one question that involves the order of events, and most students lose marks because they put Calcutta before Lucknow or Motihari before Patna. The diagram below fixes the order once and for all.



Memorise this order

Lucknow Cawnpore-ashram Calcutta-Patna Muzaffarpur Motihari. If you can recite these five place-names in this order, half the chapter is already inside your head.

1.5 Title: Why "Indigo"?

The title looks deceptively narrow. Indigo is a blue dye, and the chapter is named after a crop. But Fischer is using the word as shorthand for an entire economic sys-

tem, the long-term sharecropping contract that bound Bihar's peasants to British landlords. To name the chapter "Champaran" or "Gandhi in Bihar" would have flattened it into a regional history piece. "Indigo" forces the reader to remember that the freedom struggle began not over a flag or a Parliament but over a single crop and the unequal contract written around it.

Title in one line

The title points to the cause of the dispute (the indigo sharecropping system), but the chapter is really about the effect (Gandhi's first satyagraha on Indian soil and the awakening it produced).

2 Plot Summary, Stage by Stage

This section walks through the narrative in the order Fischer tells it, with enough detail that you can answer any "What happened?" or "How did it happen?" question without re-reading the original. Each subsection lines up with one stage of the five-stage timeline above and closes with a one-line takeaway you can drop into a short answer.

2.1 Stage 1: The Lucknow Congress, December 1916

Fischer opens the chapter with a frame: in 1942, at the Sevagram ashram, Gandhi tells him "I will tell you how it happened that I decided to urge the departure of the British. It was in 1917." Gandhi then casts back to December 1916, when he attended the annual convention of the Indian National Congress at Lucknow. There were 2,301 delegates and many more visitors. During the proceedings a thin, poor, emaciated peasant came up to him and said, "I am Rajkumar Shukla. I am from Champaran, and I want you to come to my district." Gandhi had never heard of Champaran. He learned that it sat in the foothills of the Himalayas near the kingdom of Nepal. Shukla was illiterate but resolute. Someone in the Congress crowd had probably told him, "Speak to Gandhi", and that single sentence is what set the entire chain of events in motion.

Stage 1 takeaway

The freedom movement in Bihar did not start with a national leader noticing a problem. It started with an unlettered sharecropper noticing a leader. The initiative came from below, not above.

2.2 Stage 2: Shukla's Tenacity

Gandhi told Shukla he had appointments in Cawnpore and other parts of India, and could not go to Champaran immediately. Shukla refused to take no for an answer. He accompanied Gandhi everywhere. When Gandhi returned to his ashram near Ahmedabad, Shukla followed him there too. For weeks he never left Gandhi's

side. ”Fix a date,” he begged. Eventually, impressed by the sharecropper’s tenacity and his story, Gandhi said, ”I have to be in Calcutta on such-and-such a date. Come and meet me and take me from there.” This is the moment that turns a chance encounter into a promise.

Common board question on Shukla

”Why is Rajkumar Shukla described as resolute?” The answer is in this stage. He followed Gandhi from Lucknow to Cawnpore to the Ahmedabad ashram, would not leave his side for weeks, and went back at the appointed date in Calcutta. Resolute means he refused to give up. Cite the chasing as evidence.

2.3 Stage 3: Calcutta and Patna

Months passed. On the appointed day, Shukla was sitting on his haunches at the agreed spot in Calcutta when Gandhi arrived. He waited until Gandhi was free, and the two boarded a train for Patna in Bihar. There Shukla led Gandhi to the house of a lawyer named Rajendra Prasad, who would much later become President of the Congress party and the first President of independent India. Rajendra Prasad was out of town, but the servants knew Shukla as a poor sharecropper who often came to pester the master for help with the indigo problem. They let him stay in the courtyard but mistook Gandhi for another peasant. He was not allowed to draw water from the well in case some drops from his bucket polluted the source; ”how”, Fischer drily notes, ”did they know that he was not an untouchable?”

Stage 3 takeaway

Even servants in a lawyer’s household would not let a man they suspected of being low-caste draw from their well. The episode reminds the reader that Gandhi was about to fight one social injustice (sharecropping) inside a country where another (untouchability) was treated as normal. The two struggles are not separate.

2.4 Stage 4: Muzaffarpur, 15 April 1917

Gandhi decided to go first to Muzaffarpur, which was on the route to Champaran, because he wanted more complete information about conditions than Shukla was able to give. He sent a telegram to Professor J. B. Kripalani of the Arts College in Muzaffarpur, whom he had met at Rabindranath Tagore’s Shantiniketan school. The train arrived at midnight on 15 April 1917, and Kripalani was waiting at the station with a large body of students. Gandhi stayed for two days in the home of Professor Malkani, a teacher in a government school. ”It was an extraordinary thing in those days”, Gandhi later commented, ”for a government professor to harbour a man like me.” In smaller localities, ordinary Indians were afraid even to show sympathy for advocates of home rule, and Malkani’s quiet courage matters precisely because it was unusual.

Word of Gandhi's arrival and the nature of his mission spread quickly through Muzaffarpur and into Champaran. Sharecroppers began arriving on foot and by every kind of conveyance to see "their champion". Muzaffarpur lawyers, who frequently represented peasant groups in court, briefed Gandhi about their cases and reported the size of the fees they charged. Gandhi chided the lawyers for collecting big fees from sharecroppers who had nothing. "I have come to the conclusion that we should stop going to law courts. Taking such cases to the courts does little good. Where the peasants are so crushed and fear-stricken, law courts are useless. The real relief for them is to be free from fear."

Quote worth memorising: freedom from fear

"The real relief for them is to be free from fear." It answers the recurring board question on the difference between Gandhi's idea of justice and the lawyers' idea of justice. Lawyers wanted to win cases; Gandhi wanted to remove the fear that made winning irrelevant.

2.5 Stage 5: Motihari, the Notice and the Trial

Most of the arable land in Champaran district was divided into large estates owned by Englishmen and worked by Indian tenants. The chief commercial crop was indigo. The landlords compelled all tenants to plant three-twentieths, or 15 per cent, of their holdings with indigo and to surrender the entire indigo harvest as rent. This was done by long-term contract. Then Germany developed synthetic indigo, and the European market for natural indigo collapsed. The landlords, seeing the price about to fall, obtained agreements from the sharecroppers to pay them compensation in return for being released from the 15 per cent arrangement. The sharecropping system was hated, so many signed willingly; those who resisted engaged lawyers, and the landlords hired thugs. When word of synthetic indigo eventually reached the illiterate peasants who had already signed, they realised they had been deceived and demanded their money back.

Gandhi arrived in Champaran at this exact moment. He began by trying to get the facts. He visited the secretary of the British landlords' association, who refused to give information to "an outsider"; Gandhi answered that he was no outsider. He then called on the British official commissioner of the Tirhut division. The commissioner, Gandhi reports, "proceeded to bully me and advised me forthwith to leave Tirhut". Gandhi did not leave. He proceeded instead to Motihari, the capital of Champaran. At the railway station a vast multitude greeted him. He set up headquarters in a private house and began his investigation. When word came that a peasant had been maltreated in a nearby village, Gandhi set out the next morning on the back of an elephant. He had not gone far when a police superintendent's messenger overtook him and ordered him back to town. There the messenger served him with an official notice to quit Champaran immediately. Gandhi signed a receipt for the notice and wrote on it that he would disobey the order.

Stage 5 takeaway

This is the moment civil disobedience begins on Indian soil. Gandhi does not refuse to receive the order. He signs the receipt, accepts the legal document, and then writes on it that he will not comply. The English-trained barrister and the satyagrahi sit inside the same gesture.

2.6 Stage 6: The Courthouse and the Telegram

In consequence Gandhi received a summons to appear in court the next day. All night he remained awake. He telegraphed Rajendra Prasad to come from Bihar with influential friends, sent instructions to the Sevagram ashram, and wired a full report to the Viceroy. Morning found the town of Motihari black with peasants. They did not know Gandhi's record in South Africa. They had merely heard that a Mahatma who wanted to help them was in trouble with the authorities. Their spontaneous demonstration, in thousands, around the courthouse was the beginning of their liberation from fear of the British.

The officials felt powerless without Gandhi's cooperation. He himself helped them regulate the crowd, politely and amicably. He was, Fischer writes, "giving them concrete proof that their might, hitherto dreaded and unquestioned, could be challenged by Indians". The government was baffled. The prosecutor requested the judge to postpone the trial. Gandhi protested against the delay. He read a statement pleading guilty. He was involved, he told the court, in a "conflict of duties", not to set a bad example as a lawbreaker, but to render the humanitarian and national service for which he had come. He had disregarded the order to leave "not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of our being, the voice of conscience". He asked the penalty due. The magistrate announced a two-hour recess and asked Gandhi to furnish bail for those 120 minutes. Gandhi refused. The judge released him without bail.

Quote worth memorising

"Not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of our being, the voice of conscience." This single sentence captures the whole philosophy of civil disobedience: respect the institution, refuse the unjust order, accept the penalty.

2.7 Stage 7: The Lawyers' Consultation

When the court reconvened, the judge announced he would not deliver judgment for several days and allowed Gandhi to remain at liberty. Rajendra Prasad, Brij Kishor Babu, Maulana Mazharul Huq and several other prominent lawyers had now arrived from Bihar. They conferred with Gandhi. What would they do, Gandhi asked, if he was sentenced to prison? The senior lawyer replied that they had come to advise and help him; if he went to jail, there would be nobody to advise and they would go home. "What about the injustice to the sharecroppers?", Gandhi

demanded. The lawyers withdrew to consult. Rajendra Prasad later recorded the upshot: "They thought, amongst themselves, that Gandhi was totally a stranger, and yet he was prepared to go to prison for the sake of the peasants; if they, on the other hand, being not only residents of the adjoining districts but also those who claimed to have served these peasants, should go home, it would be shameful desertion."

They accordingly went back to Gandhi and told him they were ready to follow him into jail. **"The battle of Champaran is won,"** Gandhi exclaimed. He then took a piece of paper, divided the group into pairs, and put down the order in which each pair was to court arrest. Several days later, a written communication arrived from the magistrate informing Gandhi that the Lieutenant-Governor of the province had ordered the case to be dropped. Civil disobedience had triumphed for the first time in modern India.

Stage 7 takeaway

The battle was won not in the courthouse but in the moment the Bihari lawyers agreed to court arrest. Gandhi understood that the British could jail one outsider easily, but they could not jail an entire local bar that was willing to be jailed. Once that line was crossed, the legal machinery of the Raj had nothing left to hold over them.

2.8 Stage 8: The Inquiry, the Commission and the 25 Per Cent Settlement

Gandhi and the lawyers now conducted a far-flung inquiry into the grievances of the farmers. Depositions by about ten thousand peasants were written down, notes were made on other evidence, and documents were collected. The whole area, Fischer writes, "throbbed with the activity of the investigators and the vehement protests of the landlords". In June, Gandhi was summoned to Sir Edward Gait, the Lieutenant-Governor of the province. Before he went, he met leading associates and again laid detailed plans for civil disobedience if he should not return.

Gandhi had four protracted interviews with the Lieutenant-Governor, who, as a result, appointed an official commission of inquiry into the indigo sharecroppers' situation. The commission consisted of landlords, government officials, and Gandhi as the sole representative of the peasants. The inquiry assembled a crushing mountain of evidence against the big planters, and when they saw this they agreed in principle to make refunds to the peasants. "But how much must we pay?", they asked Gandhi. They expected him to demand full repayment of the money they had illegally and deceitfully extorted. He asked only 50 per cent. "There he seemed adamant," writes Reverend J. Z. Hodge, a British missionary in Champaran who watched the entire episode at close range. "Thinking probably that he would not give way, the representative of the planters offered to refund to the extent of 25 per cent, and to his amazement Mr Gandhi took him at his word, thus breaking the deadlock." The settlement was adopted unanimously.

Why 25 per cent, not 100 per cent?

The board often asks this. Gandhi himself explained: the size of the refund mattered less than the fact that the landlords had been obliged to surrender part of the money and, with it, part of their prestige. For the peasants, the symbolic crack in British authority was more valuable than the cash. A peasant who saw planters refund money would never again see them as untouchable.

2.9 Stage 9: After Champaran, Constructive Work

Gandhi remained in Champaran for an initial uninterrupted period of seven months and then made several shorter visits. The visit, undertaken casually on the entreaty of an unlettered peasant in the expectation that it would last a few days, ended up occupying almost a year of Gandhi's life. Within a few years the British planters abandoned their estates, which reverted to the peasants. Indigo sharecropping disappeared.

Gandhi never contented himself with large political or economic solutions. He saw the cultural and social backwardness in the Champaran villages and wanted to do something about it immediately. He appealed for teachers. Mahadev Desai and Narhari Parikh, two young men who had just joined Gandhi as disciples, and their wives, volunteered. Several more came from Bombay, Poona and other distant parts of the land. Devadas, Gandhi's youngest son, arrived from the ashram, and so did Kasturba Gandhi. Primary schools were opened in six villages. Kasturba taught the ashram rules on personal cleanliness and community sanitation. Health conditions were miserable; Gandhi got a doctor to volunteer his services for six months. Only three medicines were available, castor oil, quinine and sulphur ointment. Anybody who showed a coated tongue was given a dose of castor oil; anyone with malaria received quinine plus castor oil; anyone with skin eruptions received ointment plus castor oil. Gandhi noticed the filthy state of women's clothes and asked Kasturba to talk to them. One woman took Kasturba into her hut and said, "Look, there is no box or cupboard here for clothes. The sari I am wearing is the only one I have."

During his long stay in Champaran Gandhi kept a long-distance watch on the Sevagram ashram. He sent regular instructions by mail and asked for financial accounts. Once he wrote to the residents that it was time to fill in the old latrine trenches and dig new ones, otherwise the old ones would begin to smell bad. The detail is small but the point is large: a man dismantling a colonial system was also paying attention to the latrines of his own ashram.

Stage 9 takeaway

Gandhi did not stop when the legal battle was won. He turned immediately to constructive work, schools, sanitation, medicines, women's clothing, because he believed political freedom was meaningless if the people were not first freed from disease, fear and self-neglect. Champaran is therefore not just a

political victory but a model of integrated freedom.

2.10 Stage 10: The Argument with Charles Freer Andrews

Early in the Champaran action, Charles Freer Andrews, the English pacifist who had become a devoted follower of Gandhi, came to bid him farewell before going on a tour of duty to the Fiji Islands. Gandhi's lawyer friends thought it would be a good idea for Andrews to stay in Champaran and help them; he was English, and his presence on their side would carry weight with the British administration. Andrews was willing if Gandhi agreed. But Gandhi was vehemently opposed. "You think that in this unequal fight it would be helpful if we have an Englishman on our side. This shows the weakness of your heart. The cause is just and you must rely upon yourselves to win the battle. You should not seek a prop in Mr Andrews because he happens to be an Englishman." Rajendra Prasad later commented, "He had read our minds correctly, and we had no reply. Gandhi in this way taught us a lesson in self-reliance."

Quote worth memorising

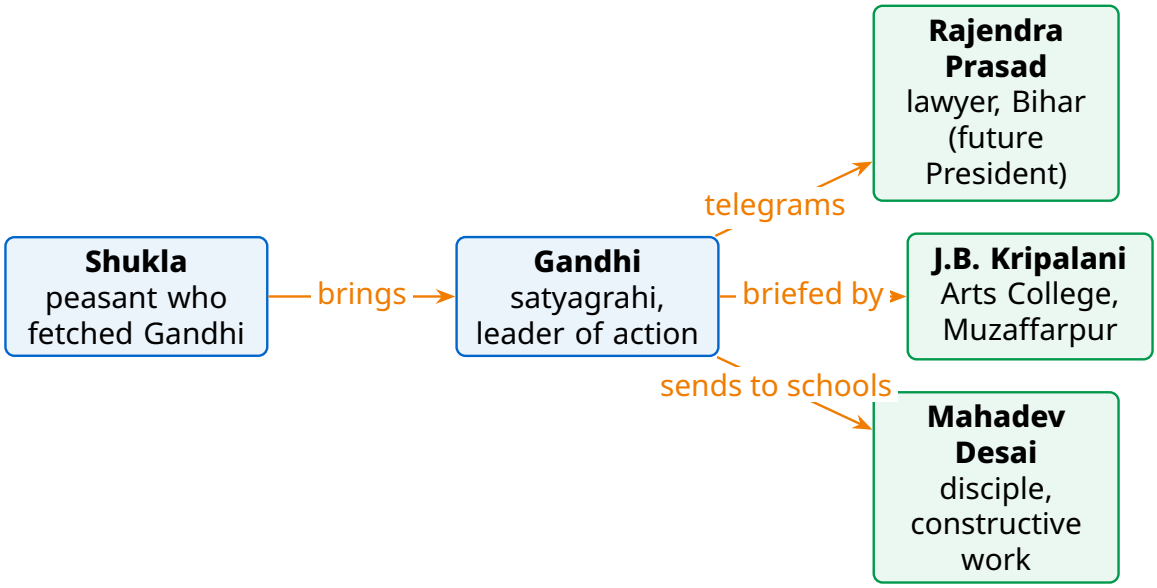
"Self-reliance, Indian independence and help to sharecroppers were all bound together." Fischer's own one-line summary, almost the closing sentence of the chapter. Use it to round off any long-answer question on themes.

3 Character Sketches

The Indigo chapter has more named figures than any other Flamingo prose piece, but only five of them are likely to appear in board questions. This section gives you the material to sketch any of them in either three lines (short answer) or one paragraph (long answer).

How the Figures Relate

Before we look at each character separately, a quick map of who is connected to whom helps lock the chapter in your memory.



3.1 Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi is the centre of the chapter, but Fischer is careful to show him not as a saint hovering above events but as a working man making practical decisions. In Lucknow he listens to a sharecropper he has never met. In Patna he is content to be mistaken for a peasant and to sit in the courtyard. In Muzaffarpur he scolds lawyers for charging fees. In Motihari he signs the receipt for the eviction notice and then writes on it that he will disobey. He telegraphs the Viceroy, manages a crowd of thousands politely, pleads guilty in court without theatrics, refuses bail for two hours, asks for 50 per cent and accepts 25 per cent. He also opens schools, organises sanitation, finds a doctor and tells Kasturba to look into the cleanliness of women's saris.

Three qualities run through every one of these scenes: **empathy** (he listens to Shukla, he answers women through Kasturba), **detail-work** (he wants more facts than Shukla can give, so he goes to Muzaffarpur), and **moral clarity** (the cause is just; the fight must be Indian).

Gandhi in one line

A leader who fought a colonial system by paying attention to a single district, and a single crop, and a single contract, and a single set of latrines.

3.2 Rajkumar Shukla

Shukla is the unlikely hero of the chapter. He is described as **poor, emaciated, illiterate, but resolute**. He is one of the 2,301 delegates at Lucknow, but the only one who notices that a single sentence to Gandhi might change his district's history. After approaching Gandhi in Lucknow he follows him to Cawnpore, to the ashram near Ahmedabad, and waits months for the Calcutta appointment, sitting on his haunches at the agreed spot. He leads Gandhi to Rajendra Prasad's

house in Patna. He does not have to say or do anything dramatic after that; once Gandhi has arrived, his job is done. Shukla is the proof of the chapter's sub-theme: anonymous Indians made the freedom movement possible.

Common board question on Shukla's role

"What does Rajkumar Shukla represent in the chapter?" He represents the Indian peasantry, illiterate, exploited and unheard, but resolute enough to fetch national leadership when it is needed. A two-mark answer should use the words *illiterate*, *resolute* and *sharecropper*.

3.3 Rajendra Prasad

In 1917 Rajendra Prasad is a Patna-based lawyer, well known enough that even his servants are used to Shukla pestering him for help with the indigo problem. He is out of town when Gandhi first arrives, but later returns and becomes one of the leading lawyers who travel to Motihari and offer to court arrest beside Gandhi. He records the consultation between the lawyers in his own words ("they thought, amongst themselves, that Gandhi was totally a stranger ..."), and the chapter therefore depends on his testimony as much as on Fischer's narration. Fischer reminds the reader, almost in parenthesis, that Rajendra Prasad later became President of the Congress party and then the first President of independent India. The detail is not decoration: it shows how Champaran trained the very men who would later lead the country.

3.4 J. B. Kripalani

J. B. Kripalani teaches at the Arts College in Muzaffarpur and had met Gandhi at Tagore's Shantiniketan school. Gandhi telegraphs him from Calcutta; Kripalani is at the Muzaffarpur station at midnight on 15 April 1917 with a large body of students. He brings Gandhi to the home of Professor Malkani, where Gandhi stays two days. Kripalani's role is small in narrative space but large in symbolism: he is the academic who is willing to host a "trouble-maker" before it is safe to do so. He, too, will later become president of the Congress.

3.5 Mahadev Desai and Narhari Parikh

Mahadev Desai is named only once in the chapter, but the name carries weight. He and Narhari Parikh are two young disciples who had just joined Gandhi and who, with their wives, volunteered to do the constructive work in the Champaran villages, the schools, the sanitation campaign, the medical relief. Mahadev Desai would later become Gandhi's personal secretary and one of his closest biographers. His presence in this chapter is the textual proof of Fischer's later remark: in everything Gandhi did, he tried to mould a new free Indian who could stand on his own feet and thus make India free.

3.6 Kasturba Gandhi

Kasturba is named in only two sentences. She arrives with Devadas (Gandhi's youngest son), teaches the ashram rules on personal cleanliness and community sanitation, and is told by Gandhi to talk to the village women about the filthy state of their clothes. The mini-scene with the woman who has only one sari ("Look, there is no box or cupboard here for clothes. The sari I am wearing is the only one I have") is one of the most quoted in the chapter. Kasturba's role illustrates that the Champaran intervention reached the women's quarters of village life, not just the courthouse.

3.7 Sir Edward Gait and the Commissioner of Tirhut

The British side is represented mostly through two figures: the unnamed British commissioner of the Tirhut division, who "proceeded to bully" Gandhi and ordered him out of Tirhut, and Sir Edward Gait, the Lieutenant-Governor, who summoned Gandhi in June and held four protracted interviews with him before appointing the commission of inquiry. The contrast between the two is sharper than the chapter spells out: the first reacts with bluster, the second with negotiation. The British system was not monolithic, and Gandhi's tactics exploited the difference.

Useful contrast: bully vs. negotiator

For a long answer on Gandhi's methods, point out that he handled both kinds of officials, the bullying commissioner and the negotiating Lieutenant-Governor, with the same politeness. He did not raise his voice in either room. The method did not change with the audience.

4 Themes and Larger Meaning

Most CBSE long-answer questions on *Indigo* are actually theme questions disguised as content questions. "Why was Champaran a turning point?", "How did Gandhi's methods differ from the lawyers'?", "What did the peasants gain that was more important than money?", all of these are asking you to argue a theme. This section gathers the four big ones together so you can pick the right one quickly.

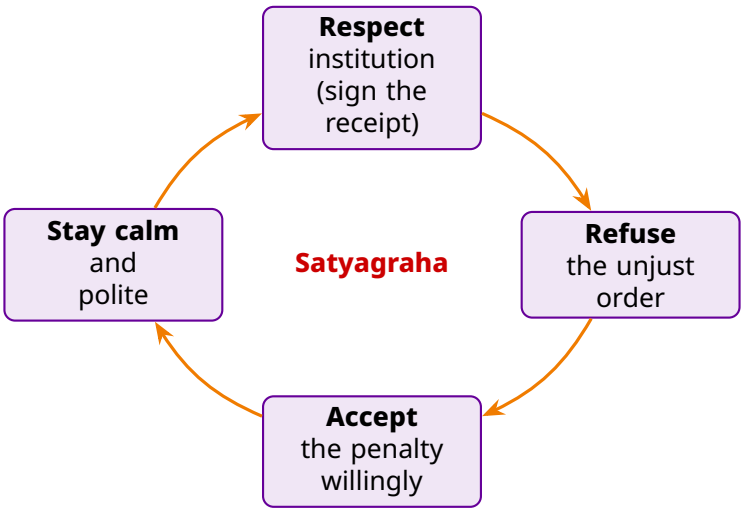
4.1 Theme 1: Civil Disobedience Born of Empathy

Civil disobedience in modern India does not begin with a manifesto. It begins with Gandhi signing a receipt for an order to leave Champaran and writing on the same paper that he will not obey. Fischer is careful to show that the gesture grows out of empathy, not abstract principle. Gandhi had listened to Shukla in Lucknow, sat in the courtyard in Patna, scolded the lawyers in Muzaffarpur, and only then refused to leave Motihari. The order of events is the argument: empathy first, defiance second.

How to use this theme in an answer

If a question asks "Why is Gandhi's civil disobedience effective?", say it works because it is rooted in actual contact with the people affected, and quote the receipt-and-disobedience moment. Empathy is what tells you which orders to disobey.

The satyagraha logic Gandhi follows in Motihari is a tight four-step loop, drawn below. Spotting the loop in the chapter is what differentiates a 4-mark answer from a 6-mark one:



4.2 Theme 2: Self-Reliance

The argument with C. F. Andrews is the cleanest illustration. The lawyers want an Englishman on their side because they believe it will balance the unequal fight. Gandhi refuses, "You should not seek a prop in Mr Andrews because he happens to be an Englishman." The point is not that English allies are bad; it is that an Indian movement that needs an English prop has already lost. Rajendra Prasad's later sentence, "Gandhi in this way taught us a lesson in self-reliance", is what Fischer wants the student to carry away.

Linked themes

Fischer himself bundles three together: **self-reliance, Indian independence and help to sharecroppers were all bound together**. If a question asks about any one of them, mention the other two as connected.

4.3 Theme 3: The Awakening of the Indian Peasant

The peasants who came to Motihari did not know Gandhi's record in South Africa. They had merely heard that a Mahatma who wanted to help them was in trouble with the authorities. Their spontaneous gathering in thousands around the court-house, Fischer writes, was the beginning of their liberation from fear of the British.

Then, after the case was dropped, the official inquiry recorded depositions from ten thousand peasants, and the landlords agreed to refund 25 per cent. The peasant who saw planters refund money would never again see them as lords above the law. He "learned courage", as Fischer puts it. The chapter is therefore a study of how courage spreads from one man to thousands.

4.4 Theme 4: Leadership That Insists on Detail

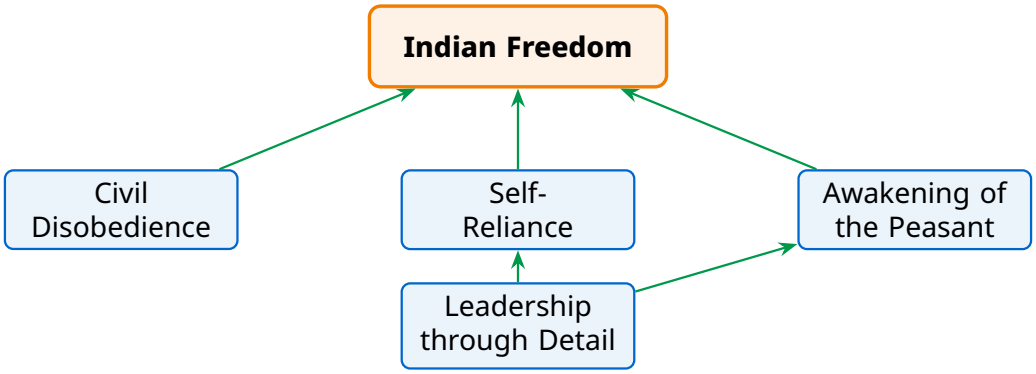
Gandhi is repeatedly drawn into the small detail: the size of lawyers' fees, the sari of one woman, the latrine trench at the ashram, the difference between 50 per cent and 25 per cent. Fischer is not collecting anecdotes; he is making an argument. "Gandhi never contented himself with large political or economic solutions". His politics, says Fischer, "were intertwined with the practical, day-to-day problems of the millions. His was not a loyalty to abstractions; it was a loyalty to living, human beings." This is the chapter's definition of leadership: not the speech, but the latrine.

The 25 per cent symbol

Modern negotiation studies cite the Champaran refund as a textbook example of a "symbolic settlement", where the exact number matters far less than the public admission that money is owed. Salary negotiations, environmental damages and consumer-protection settlements still use the same principle: once the powerful party concedes the principle, the percentage becomes secondary.

4.5 A Diagram of the Themes

Sometimes it helps to see how the four themes lean on each other. The diagram below shows what is supporting what.

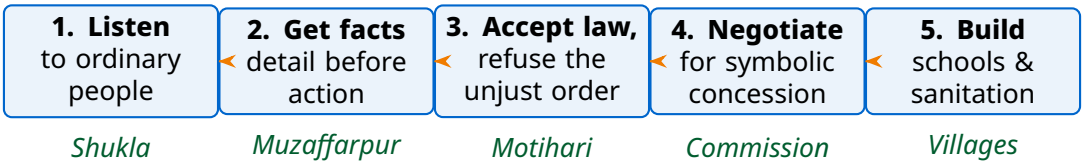


Four themes, four words

Disobey. Rely. Awake. Detail. D-R-A-D. One word per theme. If you can remember the four words, you can plan a thirty-mark long-answer on themes in under a minute.

4.6 Gandhi's Five-Step Method in Champaran

The four themes work together because Gandhi runs the same method through every stage of the chapter. The diagram below extracts the five repeating steps so you can recognise them in any board-question scenario.



5 Literary Devices and Narrative Technique

CBSE often slips a "Thinking about language" question into the paper, and a one-mark question may ask you to identify a specific technique. This section catalogues the devices Fischer uses, with one or two examples for each.

5.1 Narrative Reportage

Fischer's chosen form is reportage: factual writing with the rhythm of storytelling. He gives dates ("December 1916", "15 April 1917"), numbers (2,301 delegates, 15 per cent, 25 per cent, ten thousand depositions, six villages, three medicines), and place names (Lucknow, Cawnpore, Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Patna, Muzaffarpur, Motihari, Champaran). At the same time he keeps the rhythm of a story: he introduces characters by short physical description, lets dialogue carry argument, and only steps back at the end to summarise. The combination is what makes the chapter readable as both history and narrative.

5.2 Use of Direct Speech

Fischer quotes Gandhi, Shukla, the missionary J. Z. Hodge, and Rajendra Prasad in their own words. The use of direct speech does three things at once: it lets each speaker carry his own voice, it gives the reader the feeling of overhearing rather than being told, and it gives the writer a way to introduce evidence (Rajendra Prasad's testimony) without leaving his own narrative voice. The textbook even ends with a "Thinking about language" question asking exactly this: "Why does the author use quotations in his narration?"

Three-line answer

Direct speech makes the chapter feel like first-hand reporting; it lets each character speak in his own voice; and it lets Fischer add evidence (such as Rajendra Prasad's account) without losing his own narrative line.

5.3 Contrast and Juxtaposition

Fischer builds the chapter on a series of contrasts:

- the illiterate Shukla and the Cambridge-trained barrister Gandhi
- the bullying commissioner of Tirhut and the negotiating Lieutenant-Governor Sir Edward Gait
- the lawyers' courtroom drama and Gandhi's quiet refusal to leave
- the crowd's fear of the British and its spontaneous demonstration around the courthouse

Each contrast is also an argument. The pairing of bullying and negotiation, for example, is what allows Gandhi to choose his method without ever raising his voice.

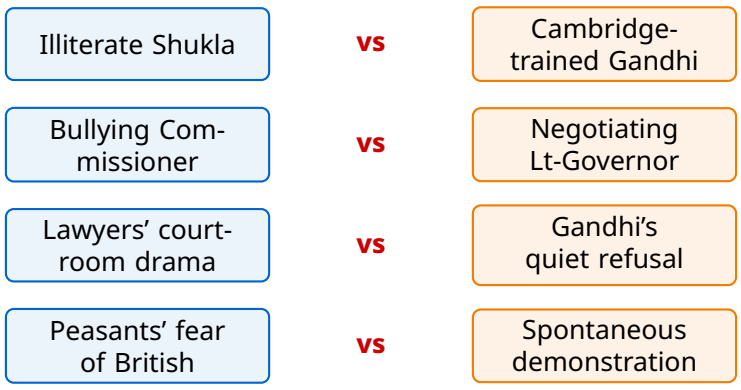
5.4 Symbolism

Two symbols carry most of the chapter's larger meaning:

- **Indigo** itself, the dye that gives the chapter its name, stands for the entire system of unequal sharecropping contracts.
- **The receipt for the eviction notice**, with Gandhi's note that he will disobey it, stands for the whole posture of satyagraha: accept the legal form, refuse the unjust order.

5.5 The Contrast Pairs at a Glance

CBSE often asks "How does Fischer use contrast in the chapter?" The diagram below puts the four central pairs in front of you in one frame:



5.6 Tone and Register

Fischer's tone is admiring but not adoring. He calls the Champaran episode a turning point, but he also lets Gandhi puncture his own halo (the joke about pollution from the bucket in Patna, the worry about the latrine trenches at the ashram). The register is journalistic, but plain: long sentences when an event has many parts,

short sentences when a single fact matters. The famous sentence "Indigo sharecropping disappeared" is four words long and ends the indigo story in a full stop you could not improve on.

5.7 Irony

There are quiet pieces of irony scattered through the chapter. The servants in Patna will not let an "untouchable" peasant draw water, and the peasant turns out to be Gandhi. The British commissioner orders an "outsider" to leave Tirhut, and the outsider replies that he is not an outsider. The lawyers come to advise Gandhi and end up being advised by him. The landlords expect to be asked for full repayment and are surprised by a demand for 50 per cent, then surprised again when Gandhi accepts 25 per cent. Each one of these reversals quietly undercuts British or upper-caste assumptions of authority.

Tone in one word

Wry. Fischer is admiring but never solemn. He keeps the chapter from feeling like a sermon by letting the small ironies do the moral work.

6 Key Quotations and How to Use Them

Long-answer responses score significantly higher when you embed a short, accurate quotation. This section lists the ones worth memorising and tells you which question they answer.

6.1 Quotations Worth Memorising Verbatim

- *"I am Rajkumar Shukla. I am from Champaran, and I want you to come to my district."* (Shukla, at the Lucknow Congress)
- *"Speak to Gandhi."* (Anonymous Congress visitor)
- *"The real relief for them is to be free from fear."* (Gandhi to the lawyers in Muzaffarpur)
- *"Not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of our being, the voice of conscience."* (Gandhi's plea in the Motihari court)
- *"The battle of Champaran is won."* (Gandhi, when the Bihari lawyers agreed to court arrest)
- *"You should not seek a prop in Mr Andrews because he happens to be an Englishman."* (Gandhi, refusing C. F. Andrews's help)
- *"Gandhi in this way taught us a lesson in self-reliance."* (Rajendra Prasad)
- *"What I did was a very ordinary thing. I declared that the British could not order me about in my own country."* (Gandhi, reflecting later)
- *"Self-reliance, Indian independence and help to sharecroppers were all bound together."* (Fischer's closing line)

6.2 Which Quotation Answers Which Question

Question type	Quotation to use
Why was Champaran a turning point?	”What I did was a very ordinary thing. I declared that the British could not order me about in my own country.”
What was Gandhi’s idea of justice?	”The real relief for them is to be free from fear.”
What is civil disobedience?	”Not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of our being, the voice of conscience.”
Why did Gandhi refuse C. F. Andrews’s help?	”You should not seek a prop in Mr Andrews because he happens to be an Englishman.”
What was the most important lesson of Champaran?	”Self-reliance, Indian independence and help to sharecroppers were all bound together.”
When did the battle change in Gandhi’s favour?	”The battle of Champaran is won.”

Misquoting Gandhi

Students lose marks by paraphrasing famous lines instead of quoting them. ”The battle of Champaran is won” is six words and Gandhi’s exact words. Do not write ”Gandhi said the battle was won”. Use the quote marks and reproduce the line.

6.3 Glossary of Tricky Expressions

The NCERT opens the chapter by pointing to four expressions and asking the student to infer meaning. The table below gives the working translation that the board accepts.

Expression	Meaning in this chapter
urge the departure (of the British)	to press for the British to leave India; to demand their exit
conflict of duties	being torn between two duties, here, the duty to obey the law and the duty to serve the people
harbour a man like me	give shelter to a person regarded as politically risky (Gandhi was thought of as a trouble-maker)
seek a prop	to look for outside support to lean on (a "prop" is a stick that holds something up)
sharecropper	a peasant who farms land owned by someone else and gives a fixed share of the crop as rent
deposition	a written, sworn statement, used as legal evidence
tin-shai / three-twentieths	the local name for the 15 per cent indigo rule (three out of every twenty units of land planted with indigo)
satyagraha	literally "truth-force"; Gandhi's method of non-violent resistance

7 The Indigo Sharecropping System Explained

To answer questions on *why* the peasants signed away their rights, and *why* the British landlords suddenly wanted to be released from the arrangement, you need a clear picture of the indigo sharecropping system itself. This section reconstructs it from the textbook details and from the standard CBSE explanation.

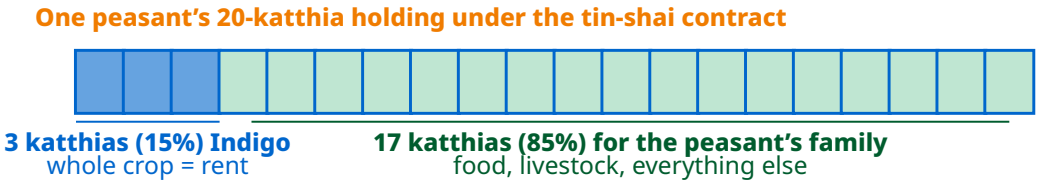
7.1 The Three-Twentieths Rule

Most of the arable land in Champaran was divided into large estates owned by Englishmen and worked by Indian tenants. The contract that bound the tenants to the landlords was simple and brutal: every tenant had to plant **three-twentieths** of his holding (3 katthias out of every 20, or 15 per cent of the land) with indigo, and surrender the **entire indigo harvest** as rent. This was a long-term written contract, and the local name for the arrangement was the *tin-shai* or "three-share" system.

Why 15 per cent was a bad deal

The peasant got nothing back. The indigo crop he raised on 15 per cent of his land was not paid for; it counted only as rent. He had to feed and clothe his family from the remaining 85 per cent. If the rains failed, the indigo land still had to be planted, because the contract did not bend with the weather.

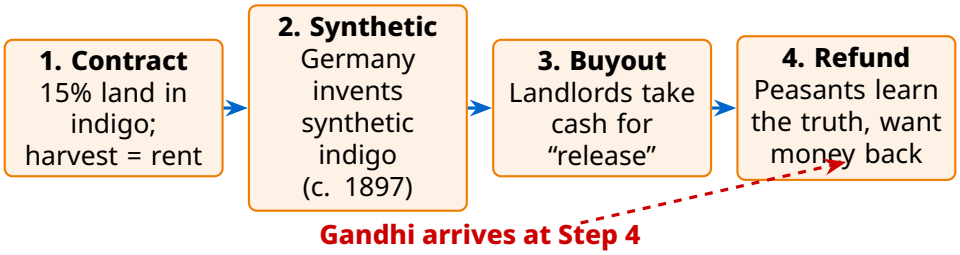
7.2 A Diagram of the 15 Per Cent System



7.3 The Synthetic Indigo Shock

The system held for decades because indigo had no substitute on the world market. Then Germany developed synthetic indigo. Natural indigo prices were about to crash. The landlords, sensing the change before the peasants did, moved fast. They obtained agreements from the sharecroppers to pay them **compensation** in cash in return for being **released from the 15 per cent obligation**. Because the contract was hated, many peasants signed willingly. Those who resisted engaged lawyers; the landlords hired thugs.

The diagram below shows the four economic steps that brought Gandhi to Champaran:



Why this matters

The landlords were buying their way out of a doomed contract using the peasants' own money. The peasants, being illiterate, did not know yet that synthetic indigo had made the natural-indigo contract worthless.

7.4 The Refund Demand

Word of synthetic indigo eventually reached the illiterate peasants. They realised they had been tricked: they had paid the landlord compensation to be released from a contract that the landlord could no longer have enforced anyway. They wanted their compensation back. This is the moment Gandhi arrived in Champaran. Without the synthetic-indigo collapse, there might never have been a refund demand; without the refund demand, there might never have been a Champaran satyagraha.

A four-step economic timeline

(1) Long contract: 15 per cent of land, whole harvest as rent. **(2)** Germany invents synthetic indigo. **(3)** Landlords take cash from peasants to "release" them from the contract. **(4)** Peasants learn the truth and demand their cash back.

7.5 The 25 Per Cent Settlement and Why It Mattered

The official commission's inquiry assembled overwhelming evidence against the planters. They agreed in principle to refund, and asked Gandhi how much. He demanded 50 per cent. The planters' representative offered 25 per cent, expecting Gandhi to bargain harder; Gandhi instead accepted, breaking the deadlock. The settlement was adopted unanimously. Within a few years the British planters abandoned their estates, which reverted to the peasants. Indigo sharecropping disappeared.

The cash was secondary

For the peasants, the amount of money refunded was less important than the precedent: planters had been obliged, on the record, to return part of what they had taken. The peasant who saw an Englishman refund money would never again see him as untouchable. This is what Fischer calls the symbolic crack in British prestige.

8 Common Board Questions and Model Answers

This section gathers the question types that the CBSE Class 12 board paper has actually asked on *Indigo* (or that it is likely to ask, given the chapter's themes), with one-line and short answers you can adapt.

8.1 Short-Answer Questions (3 marks each)

Q1. Why is Rajkumar Shukla described as resolute?
Shukla was an illiterate sharecropper from Champaran. He approached Gandhi at the Lucknow Congress in December 1916, then followed him to Cawnpore and to the Ahmedabad ashram, never leaving Gandhi's side for weeks. When Gandhi suggested they meet later in Calcutta, Shukla waited at the agreed spot on the appointed day. This determined refusal to give up until Gandhi visited Champaran is why Fischer calls him resolute.

Q2. Why did the servants think Gandhi was another peasant?
Shukla was known to the servants as a poor sharecropper who often came to pester Rajendra Prasad about the indigo problem. Gandhi was dressed simply and arrived with Shukla, so the servants assumed he was a fellow peasant who had come with Shukla on the same errand. They did not let him draw water from

the well in case he was an untouchable.

Q3. What was the ”conflict of duties” Gandhi cited in the Motihari court?
Gandhi told the court he was caught between two duties. On the one hand, the duty not to set a bad example as a lawbreaker; on the other, the duty to render the humanitarian and national service for which he had come. He had disobeyed the order to leave Champaran not because he had no respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of conscience.

Q4. Why did Gandhi agree to a settlement of 25 per cent refund?
Gandhi had asked for 50 per cent. When the planters' representative offered 25 per cent, Gandhi accepted because, for the peasants, the actual amount was less important than the principle. The planters had been obliged to surrender part of the money and, with it, part of their prestige. The peasant could now see that he had rights and defenders. He ”learned courage”, which was worth more than any number on the cheque.

Q5. How did the episode change the plight of the peasants?
For the first time, the British planters had been forced to refund money to Indian peasants. Within a few years the planters abandoned their estates, which reverted to the peasants. Indigo sharecropping disappeared. Beyond economics, the peasants lost their fear of the British and learned that they could challenge ”hitherto dreaded and unquestioned” authority. Schools, sanitation drives and a doctor's services followed.

8.2 Long-Answer Questions (6 marks each)

Q6. Why did Gandhi consider the Champaran episode a turning point in his life?
Gandhi himself said, ”What I did was a very ordinary thing. I declared that the British could not order me about in my own country.” Champaran was a turning point because it was the first time Gandhi practised satyagraha on Indian soil. He signed the receipt for the eviction notice and disobeyed it; thousands of peasants gathered spontaneously around the Motihari courthouse; a British prosecutor asked the judge for a postponement; the Lieutenant-Governor ordered the case dropped; an official commission was set up; a refund was secured; indigo sharecropping ended. None of these outcomes had ever been won by an Indian leader on Indian soil before. Most importantly, Champaran taught Gandhi the method, listen to ordinary people, gather facts in detail, accept the legal form, refuse the unjust order, do constructive work in the same place, that he would use for the next thirty years.

Q7. How was Gandhi able to influence the lawyers? Give instances.
Gandhi influenced the lawyers in three stages. First, in Muzaffarpur, he chided them for charging big fees from sharecroppers who had nothing, and convinced them that ”where the peasants are so crushed and fear-stricken, law courts are useless”. Second, in Motihari, when he asked what they would do if he were sentenced, the senior lawyer answered that they would go home; Gandhi's single counter-question, ”What about the injustice to the sharecroppers?”, shamed them into agreeing to court arrest. Third, by refusing C. F. Andrews's help, Gandhi

taught them, in Rajendra Prasad's words, "a lesson in self-reliance". In each case Gandhi changed the lawyers not by argument but by example.

Q8. What was the attitude of the average Indian in smaller localities towards advocates of "home rule"?
Fear, not hostility. Ordinary Indians in smaller towns were afraid even to show sympathy for advocates of home rule, because association with such men carried risk under British rule. Gandhi remarks that it was "an extraordinary thing in those days for a government professor to harbour a man like me", referring to Professor Malkani's quiet courage in giving him shelter in Muzaffarpur. The fear was so deeply set that even silent sympathy was unsafe; the courage to host Gandhi openly was therefore rare. This is also why the spontaneous demonstration of thousands of peasants around the Motihari courthouse mattered: it was the moment the ordinary Indian's fear broke in public.

Q9. How do we know that ordinary people too contributed to the freedom movement?
The clearest evidence is Rajkumar Shukla himself, an illiterate, emaciated sharecropper who walked up to Gandhi at the Lucknow Congress and would not leave him until he agreed to come to Champaran. Without Shukla, there is no Champaran chapter in the freedom movement. The peasants who came to Motihari on foot and by every kind of conveyance, the ten thousand who gave depositions to the inquiry, the woman in the village who had only one sari, all of them are anonymous Indians who pushed the movement forward. The chapter ends with Gandhi calling them his "fellow workers" rather than his followers; the freedom movement was always a chorus, not a solo.

Q10. Discuss the qualities of a good leader as illustrated by Gandhi in *Indigo*.
Five qualities stand out. **(a) Empathy**: he listens to a single illiterate peasant at a Congress of 2,301 delegates. **(b) Fact-finding**: he goes first to Muzaffarpur for "more complete information" instead of straight to Champaran. **(c) Moral clarity**: he signs the receipt for the eviction notice and writes on it that he will disobey. **(d) Courage that spreads**: thousands of peasants gather around the courthouse because they sense, without knowing his record, that someone is willing to stand for them. **(e) Insistence on detail**: he organises schools, sanitation, medicines and women's clothing as part of the same campaign. A leader, for Gandhi, is someone who attends to the latrines as carefully as to the law.

> **Long-answer template**
>
> For any "qualities of a leader" question on this chapter, use the five-word skeleton **empathy, facts, clarity, courage, detail** and give one instance for each from the text. The marker is looking for both the quality and the textual evidence.

9 Quick Reference Summary

This last section is a one-glance revision pack: a timeline, a who-is-who, the theme list, the must-memorise quotes, and a short list of common mistakes. If you only

have ten minutes before the board exam, read just this section.

9.1 Timeline at a Glance

Date	Place	Event
December 1916	Lucknow	Congress session; Shukla approaches Gandhi.
Early 1917	Cawnpore, ashram	Shukla follows Gandhi everywhere; Gandhi fixes a Calcutta date.
April 1917	Calcutta Patna	Gandhi and Shukla travel together; halt at Rajendra Prasad's house.
15 April 1917	Muzaffarpur	Kripalani receives Gandhi at midnight; two days at Prof. Malkani's.
April 1917	Motihari	Eviction notice served; Gandhi writes "will disobey" on the receipt.
April 1917	Motihari court	"Conflict of duties" plea; case postponed; judge releases without bail.
Days later	Motihari	Lawyers agree to court arrest; case dropped by Lt-Governor.
June 1917	Bihar	Sir Edward Gait appoints official commission of inquiry.
1917 (late)	Champaran	25 per cent refund settlement adopted unanimously.
Within a few years	Champaran	Planters abandon estates; indigo sharecropping disappears.

9.2 Who Was Who

Person	Role in the chapter
Mahatma Gandhi	Leader of the satyagraha; centre of the chapter.
Rajkumar Shukla	Illiterate but resolute Champaran sharecropper who brought Gandhi to Bihar.
Rajendra Prasad	Patna lawyer who later became the first President of India; led the Bihari lawyers in agreeing to court arrest.
J. B. Kripalani	Muzaffarpur professor; received Gandhi at midnight on 15 April 1917.
Professor Malkani	Government-school teacher who gave Gandhi shelter in Muzaffarpur.
Mahadev Desai & Narhari Parikh	Young disciples who, with their wives, ran the constructive work in Champaran villages.
Kasturba Gandhi	Taught village women cleanliness and sanitation.
Sir Edward Gait	Lieutenant-Governor of the province; appointed the inquiry commission.
Commissioner of Tirhut	British official who ”proceeded to bully” Gandhi to leave Tirhut.
J. Z. Hodge	British missionary in Champaran who recorded the deadlock-breaking scene.
Charles Freer Andrews	English pacifist whose help Gandhi refused, to teach self-reliance.

9.3 Themes in One Line Each

- **Civil disobedience born of empathy** | Listen first, defy second.
- **Self-reliance** | Do not lean on an Englishman to fight the English.
- **Awakening of the peasant** | Spontaneous demonstrations and lost fear.
- **Leadership through detail** | From the courthouse to the village latrine.

9.4 Five Must-Memorise Quotes

1. ”The real relief for them is to be free from fear.”
2. ”Not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of our being, the voice of conscience.”
3. ”The battle of Champaran is won.”
4. ”You should not seek a prop in Mr Andrews because he happens to be an Englishman.”
5. ”Self-reliance, Indian independence and help to sharecroppers were all bound together.”

9.5 Common Mistakes to Avoid

Wrong sequence of places

Many students reverse Patna and Muzaffarpur in their answers. The correct sequence is Lucknow Cawnpore Calcutta Patna Muzaffarpur Motihari. Patna comes before Muzaffarpur because Gandhi only went on to Muzaffarpur to gather more information than Shukla could give.

Saying Gandhi "won" in court

Gandhi did not "win" the trial. He pleaded guilty. The case was eventually dropped on the Lieutenant-Governor's orders. Saying Gandhi was acquitted is factually wrong and will cost you marks.

Confusing the 15 per cent and the 25 per cent

The 15 per cent (or three-twentieths) is the share of land that had to be planted with indigo under the original contract. The 25 per cent is the share of compensation money the planters refunded after the inquiry. The two numbers are unrelated, and mixing them up changes the meaning of the chapter.

Calling Fischer an Indian author

Louis Fischer was an American journalist born in Philadelphia. He is not an Indian writer and he is not a freedom fighter. The chapter is an outsider's biography of Gandhi, not an Indian's first-hand account of the satyagraha.

9.6 Memory Aid for the Five Stages

Five places, five letters

L-C-C-M-M: **L**ucknow (where Shukla finds Gandhi), **C**awnpore-ashram (where Shukla follows him), **C**alcutta-Patna (where Rajendra Prasad lives), **M**uzaffarpur (where Kripalani briefs him), **M**otihari (where the eviction notice is served). Two L-C-C and two M-M: easy to recite in five seconds.

Champaran today

The village of Bhitiharwa, where Gandhi opened one of the primary schools described in the closing pages of the chapter, still has the original ashram building, and 2 October (Gandhi's birthday) is observed there each year. The site is a small but live reminder that the Champaran story did not end in 1917; the constructive work outlasted the satyagraha.

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- Ch 6: Flamingo Prose: Poets and Pancakes
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