When Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915, he first undertook a year’s wandering to get acquainted with the country on the advice of his mentor Gopal Krishna Gokhale. Towards the end of that period, he was drawn into the problems faced by the peasants at Champaran with the English planters for whom they cultivated the indigo plant. Historiography has firmly established his efforts at Champaran as his first demonstration of the efficacy of satyagraha launching him into national prominence. Thus, the Champaran struggle has become part of the larger Gandhian literature in analyzing his role as a political strategist, freedom fighter and social reformer.

This article takes a different perspective. Apart from developing his concept of satyagraha in South Africa, Gandhi had also practised various techniques to manage and implement a satyagraha campaign. Champaran sees him systematically applying those techniques, and very different from the way peasant struggles took place. Thus, I frame the Champaran struggle as a project and attempt to apply a managerial perspective to his execution of this project. I first provide a brief overview of the Champaran peasant struggle. I then apply a project management perspective to the methods that Gandhi used to execute his leadership of the struggle. I show that a separation of the philosophy and morality from the methods in the execution of the struggle helps in a better understanding of Gandhi’s approach. I conclude by arguing that embedded within the broader philosophy of satyagraha, Gandhi followed some rational and systematic project management practices that ensured a successful outcome of the struggle.

THE CHAMPARAN STRUGGLE IN BRIEF

Champaran is a district in north Bihar at the Himalayan foothills. Around 1790, various zamindaris, such as Bettiah, Ramnagar and Madhuban, were created in the area for revenue generation and control. The initial lease on plots were taken by Indians who lived there from much earlier times. Gradually by 1911, about 88
per cent of the plantations had passed on to Europeans (Pouchepadass, 1999) who promoted indigo and sugar cane cultivation and also established factories for their processing. Over time, indigo replaced sugar cane due to higher profit margins.

The two major systems of cultivation prevalent in the area were: *zerait*—that is, directly cultivated by the landowner, although tenants were obliged to work on these lands or provide their oxen for a fee; and *asamiwar*, or cultivation by tenants. Under the *asamiwar* system, which accounted for about three-quarters of the land, the dominant method was called the ‘*tankathia*’. Under this method the tenant was obliged to grow indigo in three *kathas* (hence *tin kathia*) per *bigha* (or 15% of the land). Written contracts that could range from 20 to 30 years were entered into. If the crop was good, the tenant would get a fixed price per *bigha*. For a poor crop, the price would be reduced. If the tenant did not grow indigo, he was liable to pay heavy damages (Prasad, 1928).

An agitation in Bengal around 1859–1860 about indigo cultivation and the suffering of the farmers led to a Commission appointed by the government to look into the matter. The Commission found that the farmers were being forced to grow the crop despite more profitable alternatives. There was uncertainty about the price of indigo, and factory owners often used physical violence against farmers. It found that most of the complaints were well-founded and recommended relief for the farmers that included more freedom in how much to grow and how to pay for it. However, these recommendations were only applicable to Bengal. This resulted in indigo planters shifting to Bihar.

Since the 1860s farmers in Bihar too were protest ing against various aspects of the indigo cultivation system. Forewarned by the reforms instituted in Bengal, the planters established the Bihar Planters Association in 1877. The Association took decisions such as raising the price of indigo and moderating practices that were considered oppressive. Yet, since the association’s membership was voluntary and its decisions could not be enforced, many planters did not comply.

Indigo dye is extracted by processing the leaves of the plant and made into cakes in factories usually located close to the farms. From the late 19th century, the industry was going through a period of disruption. The development of a synthetic dye in Germany in 1897 at much lower costs reduced the demand and depressed the price of natural indigo. The planters were looking to keep costs down. However, the World War I (WWI) affected supplies from Germany, and the demand for natural indigo saw a revival. The profits from indigo were high. The returns for a good and bad year ranged from 25 per cent to 100 per cent (Pouchepadass, 1999).

Meanwhile, a shortage of food grains had raised the price of the other crops and thus, the opportunity cost of growing indigo was quite high for the farmers. When the tenants refused to grow indigo, the planters enhanced their rent (called *sarabeshi*) in the range of 50 per cent to 70 per cent and made them sign contracts to that effect. Apart from raising rents, the planters began to look for other ways to raise revenues. These included *abwabs* (or illegal charges). For instance, charges for water supplies, a cess that the farmer had to pay if there was a marriage in the family or on the birth of a child, or even for inheriting land. Some planters even levied charges to bear the costs of the planter’s family taking a holiday. The planters would regularly visit the farms appropriating the best parts of the land for growing indigo impacting the farmers’ output of other crops. In addition, *amlas*, or agents/employees of the planters would demand a commission (called *dasturi*) from the farmers, and even from manual labourers who worked in the factories, at the time of payment. (See Prasad, 1928 and Pouchepadass, 1999 for more details of the peasant economy).

For quite some time, the farmers of Champaran had been trying to get relief through representation to the authorities and also through court cases without much success. One of them, Rajkumar Shukla, attended the Indian National Congress (INC) meeting at Lucknow in December 1916. Shukla wanted Gandhi to move a resolution condemning the treatment of the farmers. Gandhi declined saying, ‘I can give no opinion without seeing the condition with my own eyes’ (Gandhi, 1927). Shukla arranged for Gandhi to travel to Champaran with him in April 1917. Gandhi first met the two lawyers representing the farmers, Braj Kishore Prasad, and Rajendra Prasad (later, the first president of the country). He also met with the Secretary of the Planters Association and the Division Commissioner.

The Division Commissioner informed him that the government was already looking into the matter. The Commissioner also advised him to leave the area and not get involved as he was an outsider. Gandhi told him
that he had been asked by the farmers to look into the matter. Subsequently, while on the way to visit a villager, he was served with an order under Section 144 of the Penal Code that his presence was likely to cause a law and order problem and that he should leave the area by the next available train. Gandhi responded with a letter stating that his intention was not to disrupt peace and that he would proceed with his activities. He was asked to appear before the Sub-Divisional Magistrate for violation of Section 188 (disobeying an order to leave). When the case went into hearing, Gandhi pleaded guilty. He made a detailed statement explaining his motives and actions, and when released on bail, refused to pay it. He was then released on his own cognizance pending judgement.

The magistrate got in touch with the government which withdrew the case against Gandhi and allowed him to continue his investigation. Gandhi began visiting affected villages, talked to the poor peasants and their families. He and his co-workers interviewed the farmers and noted down their statements.

The planters undertook psychological campaigns by spreading false reports and influencing the local officers reporting to the government. They had cause for concern since Gandhi was becoming a hero to the farmers, and many of them were turning up to provide statements, and hundreds followed him wherever he went.

By 12 May 1917, Gandhi prepared and sent a 2,250-word report to the government and planters’ representatives, as well as public opinion leaders. The report, based on interviews with about 4,000 farmers was marked not for publication. He was invited to meet the Lt. Governor, Sir Edward Gait, on 4 June. The government decided to set up an Agrarian Enquiry Committee and nominated Gandhi as a member of the Committee. The other members included government officials and planters’ representatives. By then, Gandhi’s team had recorded more than 8,000 statements. The Committee submitted a report largely favouring the peasants. Among the major recommendations: The tinkathia system was to be abolished, and the farmer was to operate in a free market; the produce was to be paid by weight and not sown area; the sarabeshi was to be reduced by 26 per cent; 25 per cent of the tawan or fines were to be refunded; the abwabs were declared illegal. The government accepted the recommendations and passed the Champaran Agrarian Act on 4 March 1918.

A PROJECT MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVE

A project is often used as a term to describe an activity that is neither routine nor repetitive, and so is unique. The scope of work and its goals help delineate the beginning and end of the activity. Thus, in a generic form, the term project can be applied to a wide range of activities that may be performed across several professional fields such as by lawyers, doctors, teachers and community activists, apart from commercial organizations.

Project management evolved within the field of management to provide a systematic way to apply a managerial perspective to the design and execution of projects. It comes with a set of tools to help plan, implement, and accomplish the specific actions within the scope of the project.

Gandhi’s involvement in dealing with the problems at Champaran lends itself to taking a project management perspective. Gandhi helped to give a common scope to disparate protests, managed the activities, concluded them, and then left the area. Larson and Gray (2014) describe four stages that we can apply to the Champaran project: defining, planning, executing and closing. While these stages form a logical sequence, they can also be seen as representing aspects of the project that need to be taken care of. Thus, rather than be linear, they may be iterative; for instance, although all aspects may not be planned entirely at the beginning, as execution takes place, the emergence of interference or disruption may require revisiting the plan.

Gandhi described his method as satyagraha, which is a technique that gave ‘practical expression to the religious and ethical ideals of truth and non-violence’ (Richards, 1982). It is often represented as truth force. Parekh’s description of the basic principles of satyagraha is quite parallel to what we see as project management: ‘They (satyagraha) were preceded by a careful study of the situation, a patient gathering of facts, a reasoned defense of the objectives, a popular agitation to convince the opponent the intensity of the satyagrahi’s feeling, and an ultimatum to give him a last chance for negotiation’ (1997, p. 56). Thus, we should be able to separate the managerial aspects of satyagraha from its moral intent to examine its efficacy.

We will now review the peasant struggle at Champaran through the four stages of a project.
Defining Stage

This first phase includes understanding the problem, clarifying the approach, forming teams, setting objectives and assigning responsibilities.

Gandhi declined to be associated with the issue at the Indian National Congress session at Lucknow since he wanted first to understand the nature of the problem. This was unlike a typical politician’s response, which would be to quickly get behind an issue of concern to the public. Apart from the briefing from Shukla (a farmer) and listening to some first accounts from the farmers, he discussed it with the lawyers who represented the farmers, he met the secretary of the Planters Association, and also the government official to gather different perspectives to the problem.

This initial round of discussions with all the parties involved helped him understand the problem as not just one of high rents, or illegal contracts, but as an unfair system governing the farmer-planter relationships. Previous disputes between the farmers and planters on various other issues had contributed to the prevailing distrust. Thus, having redefined the problem, he concluded that the resolution could not come from court actions. He verbalised the core issue as the need to resolve the relations between the farmers and the planters. He wanted to do that in a manner equitable to both. His two-fold goal was to rid the abuses of the indigo system in the short term and to drive out fear from the minds of the farmers who were unable to stand up for their rights in the long term.

He also began to put together his team that comprised mostly of local lawyers familiar with the region and language and were fighting the case. The young Indian lawyers who wanted to assist were asked not for legal but clerical assistance and help in translating from the local Bhojpuri language.

Planning Stage

This stage involves drawing up plans, scheduling activities, staffing, gathering resources, preparing a budget, and standards to be used.

Anticipating that he would be jailed when he was first charged, Gandhi began making arrangements for his co-workers to continue the work in his absence. He designated pairs of individuals who would be responsible and the order in which the pairs would take charge. He wrote letters to the planters association and the government explaining the grievances and suggesting measures of resolution that were to be sent only after he was jailed, ensuring continuity of action to meet the project’s objectives.

He chose to set up an office at a dharmasala at Motihari, the district headquarters over the hospitality of residences. Gandhi’s plans involved collecting data from the farmers about their complaints against the system.

Since the project was to resolve the problems of the farmers, official concerns that he was there to create problems required to be addressed. He carefully planned to keep the project as a local and non-political issue. He instructed that the Indian National Congress (INC) should not be involved nor should any reference be made to the INC. Gandhi felt that public criticism or comments about the situation would jeopardise progress towards a resolution. So he wrote to the editors of major newspapers asking them to not send reporters to Champaran. He said that he would keep the editors informed of the progress by sending reports and requested that they should not be published until he cleared them.

He delineated the scope and guidelines for data collection. His initial estimate that his visit to understand the problem would take a couple of days was revised. He began to organise for a longer duration for the project. This included funding as expenses would be incurred for the investigation. He told his associates that they would not be paid and he expected them to volunteer their services. In the spirit of his satyagraha method, he asked those who had personal attendants and cooks to dismiss them and live simply, which they did. A common vegetarian kitchen was opened. At the same time, he began to seek funding to meet expenses. He decided not to take money from the farmers who were to be helped since it was liable to be misinterpreted. He also did not want to appeal to the country at large for funds as it would give it an all-India colour and declined an offer of Rs.15,000 from friends in Bombay. He decided to seek help from well-to-do Biharis living outside Champaran, and from his friend in Rangoon if needed. His team also decided to exercise
care in expenses. The team estimated the expenses to be approximately about Rs. 3000 (Gandhi, 1927).

**Executing Stage**

This stage is the bulk of the time involved in the project when the work is undertaken, forecasts are made, quality maintained and revisions made to plans.

The local official he met initially told Gandhi that he was an outsider intervening in an issue on which the government was conducting an inquiry. So, to establish his credibility, Gandhi obtained letters from the local community inviting him and also wrote to the Tirhut District (which included Champaran) Commissioner informing him of his plans to visit Champaran. Gandhi maintained this level of openness and transparency through all the execution to assuage the concerns of the administration that he may create a law and order problem (a concern since it was a time of war), and to maintain the project as a non-political event.

Gandhi designated individuals who would record the farmers’ statements. Local leaders who had in the past led local agitations were involved in spreading the word among the different villages. He also travelled to different parts of the area. Apart from meeting farmers, he made it a point to meet the planters or managers of the factory in the area he visited, as well as the local government official. He continued to affirm to the authorities his intent to abide by the law and minimise the threat to public peace. He refused to speak at political meetings to which he was invited to maintain the apolitical objectives of the project.

Before recording the statement, the farmer was told he must tell the truth. Each farmer was closely cross-examined, and the statements of those who did not satisfy the interviewer were rejected. The local administration had assigned a police officer to watch over the activities, and Gandhi welcomed those attached to this activity and voluntarily kept them informed of his plans and actions. He turned the police presence to his advantage. He felt that the presence of the police officer made the peasants more fearless of the police and also exercised a ‘natural restraint’ on exaggeration (Gandhi, 1927, p.315). The rigour of his methods of execution and data collection was affirmed by the colonial administration. A letter from Mr. Lewis, the Sub Divisional officer of Bettiah to the Collector, Mr. Heycock on 29 April 1917 stated that Gandhi ‘wishes his investigation to be impartial....Each witness is subjected to severe cross-questioning as Mr. Gandhi is determined to get his facts on an incontrovertible basis’ (Nanda, p. 159).

In the initial phase, about 8,000 statements were recorded representing about one-third of the district’s villages. It was considered representative of the district, at large. Previous efforts by lawyers and the council representative who frequently raised the farmers’ issues were not widely known to the farmers, unlike Gandhi’s project. Gandhi’s efforts of visiting villages, his simplicity and involvement at the grassroots, and reputation about work supporting Indian causes in South Africa spread across all the villages and made him more believable. As villagers turned up to provide their statements at the project office, they were interviewed and statements noted by the associates. At the discretion of the interviewer, depending on the issue and the statement, the farmer was taken to meet Gandhi. Since many started coming for a darshan (sighting) of Gandhi, he regularly appeared outside the offices to meet that need.

Knowing that the police officials were tracking his activities, Gandhi informed them of his movements. This further established his credibility.

Gandhi participated in all the activities of the Agrarian Enquiry Committee during July and August 1917. He, however, did not stay with the rest of the committee members in the accommodation arranged for them. At the time of the formulation of the recommendations, he did not insist on the abolition of the sarabeshi instead he sought a reduction as a compromise where the planter did not completely lose out.

**Closing Stage**

This stage involves delivering the results, training people, post-project review and reporting.

Although the local officials kept the colonial government in Simla informed, Gandhi independently sent his report to the Viceroy about the events at Champaran and the activities of the Committee.

On the completion of the report, Gandhi felt that part of the reason for the farmers’ misery was their ignorance and lack of cleanliness. So he arranged for volunteers (which included his wife and son) from other parts of the country to visit the area and help start schools. He even asked planters to donate land and found other donors when the planters refused.
The immediate success at Champaran was the Champaran Agrarian Act that helped reform the system. Most indigo plantations had closed by 1930. Some commentators note that the changing market for indigo caused this closure and wonder whether the struggle was a pyrrhic victory. But apart from unfavourable market conditions, a newly awakened peasantry that would not allow exploitation left the planters with little choice but to wind-up. ‘The new faith possessed by the peasants was seen in the astonishing assurance which they now showed in their encounters with the planters, the government officers and the police’ (Pouchepadass, 1999, p. 221). Thus, Gandhi achieved his larger goal of removing the fear from the minds of the peasants through demonstrable actions and results, and not through haranguing them about it.

Kripalani, who was one of Gandhi’s associates at Champaran notes that ‘The success in Champaran was an object-lesson to the whole country on the potency of satyagraha’ (1970, p. 69). We may add that the methods of project management that he used to implement his satyagraha method must also lay a claim as a cause for his success.

The peasants in the area had been protesting their conditions for some time even prior to Gandhi’s arrival. As Pouchepadass (1999) notes, rural agitation before 1917 in Champaran was sporadic and usually restricted to the plantation where the dispute arose. Actions took the form of submitting petitions, fighting individual cases in court, arson, and resistance at low levels, such as refusing to work in the factory or refusal to provide manual labour to the planter. When violence erupted, it was seen as a law and order problem and action was taken accordingly. The local government would intervene at times and arrange arbitration in the case of disputes. Court cases were expensive. At times, as in Bengal, the disputes were wrapped with nationalism and distracted the response of the government. By keeping politics and nationalism away and focusing on the substantive issues of the system that dictated the peasant-planter relations, Gandhi’s focused on the project objectives.

The oppressive system that prevailed could not be attributed to the English planters alone. They, as Pouchepadass (1999) points out, inherited an Indian operated zamindari system that too was oppressive. Gandhi acknowledged that many Indian zamindars who were also indigo planters indulged in the same abuse as the English planters. Thus, Gandhi did not treat it in nationalistic terms, as an English planter versus Indian farmer dispute. He framed the issue as a problem with the system that prevailed.

Thus, from a managerial perspective, Gandhi may be said to have taken on the issue of farmers’ ill-treatment at Champaran as a project. Before lending support or undertaking to lead the project, he wanted to be personally aware of the issues involved. Through actions and statements, he made his objectives clear to everyone – the planters, farmers and the government. He wanted a peaceful resolution of the problems and for the farmers to enjoy the same level of liberty and freedom as the planters did. He created a temporary organizational structure of volunteers, clarifying what was expected and the standards to be used. The strength of his arguments were based on a detailed examination of the data collected through personal interviews, classified and cross-checked. To keep the focus on the project rather than his personal leadership, he had planned a back-up process of leadership of the project. He maintained transparency in the process and kept all parties informed through regular communication.

LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICA

During his 21 years in South Africa (between 1893 and 1915), Gandhi fought court cases to challenge discriminating laws, formed community associations, set up settlements, and ran publications. He moved from being a successful lawyer working for the rich Indian merchants to an activist fighting the government and the dominant white community on behalf of all Indians, merchants and indentured labourers. Several studies have documented his transformation during this period (Di Salvo, 2013; Guha, 2013; Swan, 1985). His deep involvement in all these activities required him to undertake fundraising, recruiting people to lead varied efforts, negotiate conflicts, and maintain public support.

The government and the white settlers constantly rebuffed his efforts, and many of his initiatives failed. His perseverance led him to revise his strategies constantly and to experiment with different execution initiatives. When submitting a petition to the local government did not produce a response, he appealed to the colonial power in London and to the British government in India to influence the South African authorities broadening the platform from a South African issue to one that was affecting British subjects. If a piece of legislation was patently discriminatory, but
the government did not immediately implement it, he would test the government’s intent with a trial violation to instigate a response.

These tactics allowed Gandhi to build his managerial skills. And it is important to recognize the underlying managerial skills explicitly and not allow them to be subsumed in the larger political narrative. A clear indication that he was learning from his experiences and building these skills is evident from his advice to an associate, Albert West, who wished to launch a protest. Gandhi suggested that West should not advise people to refuse to pay the tax. Instead, he should initiate a sequence that started with a petition requiring about 15,000 signatures to the Prime Minister, await a reply, then send the petition to Parliament, and then to the Imperial Government, and only then refuse to pay the tax. Gandhi cautioned West on the possible repercussions, and how to prepare to support the families of those who are jailed, and so on. He points out that the matter cannot be dealt with ‘haphazardly’ and there is a need for ‘at least one person to devote his whole time to the matter.’ Thus, his approach was not that of a passionate protestor carried away by his emotions but that of a manager planning and executing an activity after thinking through the various implications and possible repercussions (quoted by Guha, 2013).

Sharp (1960), who analyzed Gandhi’s non-violent approach to the political struggle, argued that the methods or technique can be separated from the moral philosophy of ahimsa. From his days in South Africa, Gandhi stressed his moral philosophy and also presented the practicality of the use of satyagraha even by those who may not subscribe to the moral arguments. Gandhi sometimes used terms such as nonviolence of the weak and nonviolence of the brave to attempt at making distinctions. Yet, the dominant understanding among Gandhi scholars has been to treat the philosophy and practicality as being inter-related (Nanda, 1958). Sharp (2005) attempts to distinguish between the two and shows how the practicality can stand separate from the philosophy. Building on this, he identified 198 methods to implement a nonviolent intervention that have been widely used in political struggles around the world. Thus, separating the method from the philosophy and spirituality has not diminished its understanding and spread. Likewise, we find that trying to break down his execution of satyagraha in the language of project management helps us better understand the grounding of his philosophy and possibly explain the success of his approach.

Although I have focused on the Champaran struggle in identifying the managerial qualities that Gandhi displayed, these were not unique to this project but part of what may be termed his generic style. An examination of his approach to his constructive programme, or to the Salt Satyagraha reveal a similar pattern. The detail with which he planned and executed his salt march to Dandi (as can be seen in the in-depth study of that project by Weber, 2009) further reinforces our explication of his managerial skills.

Unlike political protests which are emotional in arousing the participation of followers, and often spontaneous in their execution, allowing little time for rational examination, Gandhi stands out as an early adopter of a systematic management style.

‘Gandhi had succeeded in demonstrating, in any area and in an issue of his choosing, the applicability to any part of India of the instrument [satyagraha] which he had created in South Africa’ (Erikson, 1969 p. 295). The application of satyagraha through project management principles continued through his many campaigns.

CONCLUSION

Gandhi’s life and activities have been analyzed extensively to understand his moral compass, the leadership of the freedom struggle, and social reform. Gandhi’s experience in South Africa prior to his return to India gave him not just leadership qualities about which much has been written (Nair, 1994; Nazareth, 2007) but also allowed him to hone his managerial skills. In this article, I take a managerial perspective to his actions to illustrate how his systematic approach to detail and shrewd execution have contributed as much to his success as his leadership. This is illustrated by revisiting the well-known satyagraha struggle at Champaran. Viewed as a project and using the broad perspective of project management shows how Gandhi effectively managed the peasant struggle. Thus, this analysis also brings out a dimension of Gandhi that has been largely ignored—as a manager.

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NOTES
1. The land administered by a Zamindar (landlord).
2. Katha is a unit of measurement for land. Roughly 20 kathas equal a bigha.
3. A unit of measurement for land. The measurement of bigha varies from region to region. In Bihar, one acre equals to about 1.6 bighas.

ORCID ID
C. Gopinath https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6352-9257

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C. Gopinath is Associate Professor and Chair of Strategy and International Business Department at Suffolk University, Boston. He has previously served as Dean and Professor at Jindal Global Business School, Sonipat, Delhi NCR. His qualifications include: MA (Delhi School of Economics), PGDBA (IIMA) and PhD (University of Massachusetts Amherst).

His papers in the areas of strategy, international business and pedagogy have appeared in several academic journals. His books include: Globalization: A multidimensional system. (Edward Elgar, 2018); and Strategize! Experiential exercises in strategic management (with J. Siciliano; Cengage, 2014). He is a regular columnist for the business daily, Business Line.

e-mail: cgopinath@suffolk.edu