Cesar Chavez (1927-1993)

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20 May 2019

Cesar Chavez was an American farm worker who was known as the champion of Human Rights. He devoted his whole life to serve the marginalized farm workers. He was born on 31 March 1927 in Yuma, Arizona and grew up there as well.Early in his life, he was taught about justice and humanity. His parents were much concerned about their children education and brought up. As a child, he was subjected to discrimination in the school because he would speak Spanish. In mostly schools Spanish was banned, and the teachers were only allowed to speak English. Cesar would be usually punished for violating the rule with a ruler to his knuckles. He also recalls the racial segregation in some schools where he would listen to racist remarks on a daily basis. There were only white-reading signs where the Whites were more dominant. He and his brother, Richard studied in thirty-seven different schools and believed that his farm worker background had nothing to do with education. In1942, Cesar’s father died in an accident, thus he took a break from studies in 8th grade and started working in the farms (Levy 2013). Although, his early education wasn't sufficient but it didn't restrict him from his passion of getting higher education later. Besides education, he has been obsessive about helping others and believed that *“The end of all education should surely be service to others,”* and executed this belief throughout his life (Beddow 2012).

***The Beginning***

Cesar worked in his farms in Arizona where the fraudulent Anglos would cheat the small farm workers. They would use illegal means to capture their farms. Cesar's father tried to safeguard his farms by giving 80 acres of land to the powerful groups and in return took 40 acres of land adjacent to their home. The agreement was immediately called off and a dominant group sold the land to others. Cesar's father again decided to regain his lost land and borrowed money to buy the land back. However, the amount was not enough and the land was sold to someone else. It made the situation further worse because Cesar's father couldn’t pay the loan and interest back. Cesar was highly disappointed with the injustice due to which his whole family suffered. Due to increasing hardships, he shifted to California in 1938 along with his family. Cesar strongly believed that education is the powerful medium to get out of poverty trap and thus decided to give quality education to his children. They worked in several cities to finance the schooling of their children. He was only 19 years when he decided to join the Navy. Navy was then segregated on racial basis and he could only serve there for two years. After quitting his job in Navy, he married Helen Fabela and settled down in Delano (Flores 2016). He then came back to San Jose and accidently met Donald McDonnell. It was the turning point in Cesar’s life where he got the strength of struggling for farm workers. He started strikes on the farm to hear the voices of small landowners. The struggles and nonviolent nature of Gandhi also influenced him for nonviolent strikes. He then worked together with Fred Ross, and was appointed as an coordinator for the Community Service Organization (CSO), where initially they worked for getting the marginalized communities to register for voting (Pawel 2014).

***The Struggle for United Farm Workers***

Cesar become more hopeful with the help of CSO and founded the National Association of Farm Workers in 1962. The association was later described specifically as the United Farm Workers (UFW). He was joined by other powerful personalities such as Dolores Huerta and Richard Chavez to form the workers union. They designed the UFW Eagle for which they chose combination of black and red colors. Cesar described the formation of the eagle's symbol and appointed Richard to do the designing of the flag. Everyone was assigned different roles and finally, an eagle was crafted on wrapping paper. The design was easier for union members to copy and made them on flags. The eagle reflected a powerful symbol of power, confidence and courage to the farm workers (Krull 2003). Cesar refer to the symbol as, *“An Eagle is an important thing that gives pride . . . When people see it they know it means dignity.”*(Wilson 2013)*.*

The prominent challenge was to fund the union. There were only few members who were capable of paying the high amount of union dues. In 1970, Cesar fundraise for the union due to which the UFW received some funds and contracts. This helps the organization to get organized and work properly. Soon the members increased up to 50,000 for paying the dues that shows the tireless efforts of the leadership and their nonviolent tactics. Cesar also articulated the idea of fasting to draws State attention towards the issues of farm workers. They also decided to perform a 340-mile march in 1966 from Delano to different cities. The strikes also captured a lot of attention in which the most famous was the Huelga (strike) (Ontiveros 2010). Another major event was the Viva La Causa that focuses on the major theme of the cause ‘long live our causes’. The farm workers and the supporters of the cause held the flags during the strikes that become popular quickly. The marchers wanted the authorities of the state to execute laws that allow the farm workers to work under a union. That will help them to get organized and collectively asked for state bargaining contract. Cesar stresses the fact of secure working conditions for the farm workers where they are able to hold the right of their lands. He also made the farm workers aware of their land rights and better pay for their work. He took all this procedure under non-violent processes such as boycotts and strikes with no harm to the public. Cesar got succeeded in his efforts and got recognition for the union. He compelled the farm workers to work with honesty and dignity. The cause was supported by all groups and people belonging to different walks of life such as students, religious groups, and minorities (Shaw 2010).

Cesar was well-known with the fact that these farm workers require trainings and knowledge about their rights. He trained these workers and send them to different cities to get the attention of maximum people. Cesar also agreed to sacrifice his life in order to continue the union without indulging in any violent activities. In 1968, Cesar fast for 25 consecutive days to gain attention for their hardships. He again fasted for 24 days in 1972 and repeated the same strategy in 1988 and fasted for 36 days. He had a strong objective behind observing the fast. Many workers were compelling him to take violent actions against the injustices. So, he gone too far by keeping his followers calm and fasted for so many days. He believed that strong actions would results in transformation instead of creating violence. His continuous struggle proved him right. He was willing to sacrifice everything. His firm believe in his actions proved that one can achieve anything with self-respect. The support from his union members also played a major role in the success for nonviolent struggle for justice (Garcia 2012).

**The Fast**

The strategy of fasting was also adopted by the union workers. It was in response to the sufferings of farm workers who were highly subjected to injustices. Cesar believed that fasting is a quick option, it not only to purify body, mind, and soul but reinforce for all those working in the struggle of workers. He further stated that the fast proves as an act of self-punishment for the unjust authorities (Bardacke 2012). The fasting resulted in a declaration of non-cooperation with the large land owners and supermarkets. It started promoting and selling California table grapes produced by the minorities and got profit from them. Cesar also studied the epidemic caused by the excessive use of pesticides on their land. He concluded that the effects were much greater than his observations and it threatens people's lives. He suggested that we need to work in solidarity for these harmful acts to protect the helpless people. On August 21, 1988, Cesar completed the long fast of 36-days; however, it didn’t ended here and was picked up by Reverend Jesse Jackson and followed by other big celebrities and leaders as well (Pawel 2009).

***The Champion of Human Rights***

The UFW lawyers filed cases to preserve the rights of farm workers. They defended the union from a lawsuit and asked for compensations. The Church also declared to provide the helpless people with compensations regarding to the losses incurred as a result of boycotts. The church protected the union workers for paying high amounts for state law cases and formed a lawsuit along with the New York, Church to help the marginalized people and provide them with friendly decisions that pay for their losses. Cesar also provided support in this case to defend the farm workers. He believed in his followers and knew they were right. Even in the decision to boycott Bruce Church Inc, Cesar stood firm with his workers. He was also determined to challenge the lettuce decision in the court in 1980s and proved the workers correct (Pawel 2009). Cesar fought courageously for his workers that bring out the First Amendment. He fought continuously in court for so many years to protect the farm workers of injustices. However, due to constant struggle, he became weak and died in April 1993 in Arizona.

***Followers Last March***

People from different parts of United States came to pay the last tribute to their hero. More than 50,000 people joined the mourning of their leader. It was stated to be the largest funeral of any labor leader in the history of the United States. People gathered to pay respect to the charismatic leader who will stay in their hearts forever. He led a simple life and devotedly worked for others. Many celebrities also joined the guard of honor payed to the hero. During his chaotic years in America's vineyards and farms, many mourners marched by his side. They have learned the basic ethics from this Man, he taught people to fight for their rights in a peaceful manner. He didn’t indulge in any harm. Cardinal Roger M. Mahoney, called Chavez *"a special prophet for the farm workers of the world*.” (Levy 2013). Chavez's death marked an era of transformation in American farming. His offerings are appreciated largely and the burden of his work needed to be borne by others. Cesar, will be always remembered in high spirits among the people of United States who changed their lives.

***Recognition***

Cesar Chavez body was taken to La Paz, the headquarters of the UFW in California. He was laid to rest in front of his office near a bed of roses. His widow, Helen Chavez received ‘the Medal of Liberty’ as a sign of honor for her late husband. While giving America’s highest Civil honor, President Clinton lauded Chavez for having *"faced with dignity and nonviolence formidable, often violent opposition.”* He further stated that he's been victorious, who have got succeeded in his mission. The president further stated that Cesar left a better world for others and his heritage still inspires us. He was a figure of Moses for his followers and his faith and discipline had encouraged him to lead a very courageous life (Hammerback and Jensen 2003).

Chavez earnings were less than $5,000 a year throughout his lifetime. Late Senator Robert Kennedy called him *"one of the heroic figures of our time."* His UFW successor stated that Cesar lives in their hearts every day and inspires Americans to work for social change without violence.

***Conclusion***

Cesar was considered as a transformational leader who changed the fate of farm workers. He transformed their poor working conditions into profitable ventures. He was born in an unfortunate family and had faced many hardships. However, he not only fought for his own rights but he considered others important as well. His family and neighbors would be routinely exploited by the dominant groups, but he still never got violent towards them. The working wages were poor with less amount for their work. Also there were no medical facilities for the farm workers that badly impacted on their health conditions. They had no way to improve their position without a united voice. Cesar changed that by dedicating his life to gain the worthy position for the farm workers. He keenly organized the helpless people in groups, provided them with trainings and then asked for their rights through proper channel. He trustworthy and dedicated nature has inspired the people to work under the umbrella organization of the United Farm Workers. Through peaceful ways of marches and fasting, Chavez enforced the managers to pay adequate wages to the workers and also provide additional benefits under the working laws. He pinpoints the accurate legislation for workers and enacted the first Bill of Rights for farm workers. He was awarded with the highest civil honor for his immense struggles towards transforming the lives of people and bringing out the social change.

Cesar quoted that *“Once social change begins; it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducated the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. You cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore. We have seen the future, and the future is ours.”*(Chávez 2002)*.*

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