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**Sushant Kumar Singh**  
PhD candidate Centre for  
Economic Studies and  
Planning, Jawaharlal Nehru  
University, New Delhi, India

## The condition of the workers in indigo plantation work during the period between 1850 and 1895

**Sushant Kumar Singh**

### Abstract

This paper is mainly enquired into the socio-economic plight of workers in Indigo plantation agricultural activities under the British colonial rule in India, lower Bengal. An attempt has been made to analyse the interaction of the political, economic and social changes during this turbulent period and studies the intricacies of the indigo cultivation and illustrates how the technicalities created conflicts between the 'Ryots' and the planters. Paper firmly found the peasant rising grew in militancy and organisation; it also underwent changes in "leadership and alignment" This was hardly an anti-British movement in character. The peasants associated indigo with swindle and oppression – and that was it.

**Keywords:** indigo plantation, British colonial rule, exploitation, peasant rising, lower Bengal

### Introduction

"The story of the Indigo Industry is more interesting historically and more pathetically instructive that that of almost any other Indian agricultural or industrial substance <sup>[1]</sup>." Keeping the sentiments of the preceding words intact becomes seemingly important when one seeks to understand and associate with the turbulent history of the blue dye. The <sup>story</sup> of the incessant greed and atrocity of the indigo planters that roused thousands of indigo peasants from meek submissiveness to the sternest defiance imaginable is indeed an interesting one. By 1859 the peasants who for over half a century showed timid forbearance to all the atrocities meted out to them, finally realised that it would take them nowhere. This story of resistance by thousands of indigo plantation workers throughout Lower Bengal, finds its prelude in the celebrated notice issued by Ashley Eden <sup>[2]</sup>, a Barasat magistrate which clarified the fact that the sowing of the indigo crop was not obligatory.

The objective of this paper is to focus on the condition of the indigo plantation workers starting from the year 1850 to 1895 in Lower Bengal keeping the indigo disturbances during this period as the backdrop for our study. An attempt has been made to analyse the interaction of the political, economic and social changes during this turbulent period. In the first section, we trace the journey of the indigo trade right from its very inception to the years preceding the indigo disturbances in Bengal and try to find an answer to the question that why the crop was so precious to the Company. The second section studies the intricacies of the indigo cultivation and illustrates how the technicalities created conflicts between the 'Ryots' and the planters. The third section throws some light on the Indigo Disturbances. Each of the section keeps the 'Ryots' and their constant struggle as the focal point. Finally, a conclusion has been provided.

### I. The 'Blue' Trade.

Indigo, as the name signifies, has its origins in India. It was one of the rare tropical products which first attracted European traders to India and after the sea route to the Indies had been discovered by the Portuguese, they began to import Indigo in quantities enough to supply the entire European market. To begin with, indigo faced competition from the powerful, well-entrenched Word industry which obstructed its acceptance in Europe for over a considerate period since it was a temperate crop and thus easily available in Europe. However, cloth dyers preferred indigo as a dye. Indigo produced a rich blue colour, whereas the dye from 'Word' was dull and pale. Throughout the seventeenth century, the English and the Dutch competed as merchants for the finished native product. Though this trade was lost to

### Correspondence

**Sushant Kumar Singh**  
PhD candidate Centre for  
Economic Studies and  
Planning, Jawaharlal Nehru  
University, New Delhi, India

Latin America towards the close of the seventeenth century, it reappeared at the end of the eighteenth century with the English East India Company having numbered Indigo among its most profitable imports. During some of the early voyages of the English East India Company to Surat, Indigo consumed the entire investment and earned the Company a profit of over 400 per cent on its investment <sup>[3]</sup>. The Company, therefore, encouraged its servants to produce indigo, “to afford them a means of remitting their fortunes home, as well as to the benefit of Bengal as to this country <sup>[4]</sup>.”

This almost sealed the fate of Indigo cultivation in Bengal and indigo became the staple of Bengal, not because the province was particularly well adapted to its cultivation, but because monopoly had relinquished its grasp of it and European capital and energy were henceforth to be applied to its development. Thus, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the East India Company had brought to life a major plantation industry in Lower Bengal. By 1815-16, Bengal was supplying almost all the indigo required for the consumption of the world, except a small quantity that came from Mexico. As prices touched extravagant levels, Java and Madras too tried their luck in this profitable speculation. It cannot be denied that for the British Government indigo cultivation was a vehicle of remittance for the money required back home. This obviously led to the problem of discrepancy between the supply and consumption of the dye. The amount of indigo produced in Bengal was determined not by the needs of the European cloth makers but in response to the demands of this remittance trade. Both the East India Company and the private traders were interested in indigo primarily as a means of remittance. Purchasing of indigo by the Company for remittance purposes on the open market in Calcutta, artificially raised the prices, stimulated overproduction, and perplexed the private traders who could never be certain how much the Company would decide to buy in any given year <sup>[5]</sup>.

The thriving indigo industry created enough profitable reasons for its increased extension, forcing prices up to such an extent that it resulted, as is usually the case in forced productions, in the crash which occurred in 1830-33. However, indigo cultivation in Bengal was never really a profitable investment for the money. In spite of the prosperity, the indigo industry remained as unsound as ever. Indigo remained the safest bet to secure a favourable remittance to England, and thus the amount of capital invested in it had little correlation to its consumption. When a depression hit England in 1827, the indigo market collapsed causing the indigo production in Bengal to fall by 50 per cent. As a result by 1834, all the largest agency houses, which provided capital for indigo, went bankrupt <sup>[6]</sup>. In addition to this, it also led to the fall of the Union Bank of Calcutta.

The fall of the Union Bank had profound repercussions on the indigo industry, altering its financial framework and influencing the system of operation which would exist in the decade leading to the indigo disturbances. Before 1847 almost every factory had been purchased with borrowed capital; after 1847 a large number of the concerns that failed, especially in Nadia and Jessore, were bought cheaply and paid off rapidly, leaving the planters relatively independent. The number of European planters managing small marginal concerns decreased, while the remaining concerns established “local indigo seignories <sup>[7]</sup>” and

expanded their operations. The additional underpaid Indians and Eurasians hired to supervise production increased the burden of extortion on the peasants while the owners demanded greater economies and authorised less liberal advances to the cultivators. In effect, the fall of the Union Bank led to a more oppressive system of indigo planting in Lower Bengal.

In the five years preceding the indigo disturbances another new development undermined the economic position of the indigo planter of Lower Bengal. For thirty years, from 1826 to 1856, Indigo was surpassed as an export only by opium, whose trade was a Government monopoly. In the late 1850's the total value of exports from Bengal continued to rise, but the value of indigo remained much the same. The new item which pre-empted its rank as an export was food grains of which Bengal supplied over. In the decade before 1859 indigo accounted for only 10 percent of the total exports of Bengal <sup>[8]</sup>. This decline in the importance of this product led to a corresponding decline in the status of the indigo planter. When the government was no longer dependent upon a single industry for the economic well-being of Bengal, it was less hesitant to support the peasants in their struggle against the industry.

## II. The Indigo Cultivation

Two main methods of cultivation existed – *Navjote* and *Raiyati*. The first was carried out by planters on owned or rented lands using hired labour. The second depended on the use of advance payments and extra-economic sanctions to ensure that “independent” cultivators devoted certain lands to indigo. *Navjote* cultivation took place only on lands adjacent to the factory and *chars*, muddy flats formed by the changing course of the rivers. The greater part of the land given to indigo cultivation was under *Raiyati* cultivation on partially inundated highlands lying outside the factory grounds. *Raiyati* land might belong to an Indian Zamindars (*be-Alaska*), or the planter himself might be the Zamindars (*Alaska*). It was cultivated by ‘Ryots’ who had certain tenancy rights in the land and sowed indigo along with other crops.

It was when cultivated on *Raiyati* land that indigo conflicted with the interests of ‘Ryots’ and Indian Zamindars. Highland indigo was usually sown in April, watered by the spring rains, and then harvested along with *char* indigo and this April-sown indigo was of the highest quality. However, it was this spring sowing which most antagonised the cultivators who wanted to sow their rice at the same time <sup>[9]</sup>. Several other agronomical characteristics of the indigo cultivation gave fuel to the conflicts between the ‘Ryots’ and the planters. To begin with, planters allowed for crop-rotation of crops, alternating indigo with rice, tobacco and other crops. However, once a peasant had grown rice on his plot he was reluctant to return the land to indigo since Indigo had deep roots and it exhausted the soil rapidly. Moreover, after an indigo harvest, the land could not be sown with rice. This obviously gave rise to a controversy over whether a given plot was “indigo-land” or “rice-land.” Secondly, indigo required scrupulous attention to the wedding. This required immense labour and constant prodding of the ‘Ryots’. Finally, indigo cultivation called for meticulous timing.

To understand why indigo was an unpopular crop among the ‘Ryots’; it helps to analyse the cost to the Ryot of producing a *big* of indigo. The following are three sample estimates of

the cost per *bigha* of growing indigo given before the Indigo Commission of 1860 <sup>[10]</sup>.

**Table 1:** Sample Estimates of the cost per *bigha* of growing indigo.

Sample 1

	r.	As.	p.
Rent	0	10	0
Seed	0	4	0
Cultivation	1	0	0
Sowing	0	4	0
Weeding	0	8	0
Cutting	0	4	0
Stamp (for contract)	0	2	0
	3	0	0

Sample 2

	r.	As.	p.
Ploughing	0	4	0
Sowing	0	2	0
Harrowing	0	2	0
Hoeing	0	2	0
Cutting	0	5	0
Cartage	0	4	0 (1/5 cost paid by the riot)
Seed	0	8	0
Rent	0	8	0
	2	3	0 <sup>[11]</sup>

Sample 3

	r.	As.	p.
Ploughing	1	14	0
Weeding	1	0	0
Cutting	0	6	0
Seed	0	4	0
Rent	0	5	4
	3	13	4 <sup>[12]</sup>

In 1860 the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal calculated that the 'Ryots' lost 7 rupees per *began* when he cultivated indigo in place of another crop <sup>[13]</sup>. Besides incurring the cost of cultivation, the Ryots also had to pay various bribes to every factory servant with whom he came in contact, to the head Ryots who arranged with the planter for cultivation in his village, and later, contributions for lawsuits and other expenses incurred extricating himself from the indigo contract.

In spite of these obstructions, the Ryots managed to maintain himself and his family because he sowed rice and other crops in addition to indigo and because he was sometimes given his advance in spite of debts to the factory incurred in previous poor years. The balances against him on the factory books continued to mount and eventually were written off as bad debts. The planter's object in maintaining this debt was to use it as a threat to force the 'Ryots' to cultivate indigo. For the planter the only thing that mattered was obtaining as much indigo plant as was possible; rest everything was secondary.

### III. The Indigo Disturbances

The indigo disturbances began in the autumn of 1859 when the peasants in the area around Krishnagar, the capital of Nadia district north of Barasat, refused to take advances for the spring sowing. Other disturbances reported in the fall of 1859 include one in Pabna, a district northeast of Nadia. Here disturbances in the Sirajganj area were related to old Zamindars-planters conflicts. Peasants near the town of

Murshidabad refused to take advanced from Watson and Company in the autumn of 1859, and the aggressive villagers repulsed an armed attack by the planters. The early disturbances of the autumn of 1859 were followed by a quiet winter season. But with the approach of the sowing season in the spring of 1860 disturbances flared up once again, now encompassing the entire delta area. They were temporarily quelled by a criminally enforceable contract law in April 1860.

As the peasants seized this opportunity to free themselves from indigo planting, they began to look for support to the other classes in the *mussel* – the Zamindars, the petty landholders and money lenders, a group that held leases under Zamindars and in turn subleased lands to 'Ryots'. The most active and numerous groups of peasant leaders were the village headmen and substantial 'Ryots'. As spokespeople for the villagers, they were approached by the planters to contract on behalf of the cultivators to supply indigo. If they refused, they were taken hostage by the planters and confined in factory godowns.

Although the hard-pressed 'Ryots' and the minor landholders looked to the great Zamindars for their initial encouragement, not infrequently the Zamindars lost control of the movement as it progressed, and the initiative devolved to the lower classes. By the time of the rent disturbances in 1861, the Zamindars were cool toward the movement. The devolution of the initiative is illustrated in a series of disturbances taking place in February and March 1860 involving indigo concerns in the north-west corner of Murshidabad.

Resistance to indigo planters and their armed bands was often so bold, organised and militant that these forces, apparently far heavier and stronger, were on many occasions overpowered and repulsed. Rev C Boetsch, a German missionary of Krishnagar, wrote a letter to the Indian Field on 4 February 1860 about the resistance by the peasants of Ballavpur village who for some time past had been cultivating indigo for the Ratnapura factory of Nadia. When the villagers swore not to take any more advances or to enter into fresh contracts for indigo, the planter sent hundreds of *lathials* to punish this act of intransigence. The villagers, however, were not to go down that easily. Well-organized and well-armed, they divided themselves into six 'companies' each using the weapon it found handy and suitable. One company consisted of archers; others used slings, brickbats and brass plates hurled horizontally at the enemy. Even women, taking part in the battle, turned pots and palls and other kitchen equipment into veritable weapons which did 'great execution'! There were peasant *lathials* also, and the most formidable company was the one that used spears. There were only twelve of them, Bomwetsch informs us, but they were capable of combating a hundred mercenary *lethal*. The planter's force hurried back in fear, and by this show of organised violence, the peasants were able to free themselves from the "burden of sowing indigo" in their village next spring <sup>[14]</sup>.

The Biswases of Chaugacha in the Jessore District led the resistance movement which offered further insight into the militancy which the rebellion came to acquire. They became impatient with the aggrandisement of the notorious planter, William White, who was determined to make good, at the expense of the peasants, whatever losses the concern had incurred before. The determined Biswases organised the peasants of the adjacent villages preaching them about

rebellion. On the other hand, White too did everything in his power to alienate the 'Ryots' from them. This, however, did not work, and finally, when the peasants renounced indigo in bold defiance of William White, his anger knew no bounds. On 13 September 1859, he sent a formidable group of *lathials* to smother the audacity of the peasants. Meanwhile, the Biswases had managed to raise an army of *lathials* and spearmen who beat back the planter's force. The planter would not be daunted or deterred so easily. He sent far more numerous and far more heavily armed forces to rout the villages. These forces wrought great destruction, looting, killing and setting fire everywhere they went. The Biswases at the head of the phalanx sustained the struggle with the help of the *lathials* hired from Barisal. But the peasants could not bear the pressure for long, and the two Biswases fled. Hundreds of peasants were sued for breaking indigo contracts. The Biswases are said to have spent about seventeen thousand rupees towards meeting legal and other expenses.

An important mention must be made here of the Charter Act of 1833 that granted planters the right to own land. It was only in 1857-61 that a strong intervention came from Calcutta when the planter-cultivator conflict reached an explosive state. Act X restricted the rights of the landlords and planters. The instantaneous opposition of the planters to this Act led to a ruthless use of Act XI of 1860 which made cultivators completely vulnerable to planters through legal procedures. Only when the resulting resistance of the cultivators in Bengal was even more violent and threatened the British order, was it proclaimed at the end of 1860 that growing of indigo could not be imposed against the will of the cultivators.

Though this proclamation precipitated the rapid decline of Bengal indigo, the British administration was careful to

ensure that the indigo system in Bihar remained insulated from the events in Bengal. The resistance in Bihar, whenever it occurred, was treated merely as a law and order problem, like the pre-1859 treatment of Bengal resistance.

After the Bengal crisis of 1860, the entire British indigo system moved to Bihar where it expanded until as late as 1880. Even before the Bengal crisis, the production of indigo in Bihar was comparable to that in Bengal. During 1849-59, about 31 percent of the total outturn of indigo in Bengal Presidency came from Bihar, compared to 44 percent from Bengal itself (see Table 2). Though the earliest reports of planters' brutalities came from Bihar, there was no significant organised resistance to planters until 1867-ten years after the Bengal crisis when a localised conflict occurred in Champaran. In fact, it was possible for Bihar planters to contain large-scale unrest until 1907. By then, the indigo dye was being forced out of the world market by the synthetic dye and indigo demand was falling except for a brief pickup during the First World War. The last of the indigo planters in Bihar imposed exorbitant rents, which produced serious discontent. This along with the rising national movement brought Mahatma Gandhi to Champaran in 1917 to deliver the death blow to this infamous system. But at that stage indigo was dying a natural death, and Gandhi's intervention was only symbolic in an economic sense.

Thus a large scale opposition to British indigo emerged in Bihar about half a century after it had occurred and successfully achieved its results in Bengal. The system in Bihar was probably more burdensome to cultivators when compared to Bengal. Further, the anti-Raj feelings were more prevalent during that period in Bihar as they surfaced in the 1857 uprising.

**Table 2:** Distribution of the Out-Turn of Indigo in Bengal Presidency, by the region of origin during 1849-59

Year	Percentage				
	Doab and Banaras (i)	Tirhut district	All Bihar districts (ii)	All Bengal districts (ii)	Total (i)+(ii)+(iii)
49-50	19.3	19.1	28.4	52.2	100
50-51	18.5	24.2	33.2	48.3	100
51-52	28.6	14.6	23.8	47.6	100
52-53	30.2	20.4	30.9	38.9	100
53-54	35.7	17.5	25.0	39.3	100
54-55	20.5	25.7	36.1	43.4	100
55-56	31.0	17.3	28.7	40.3	100
56-57	7.2	25.3	39.0	53.8	100
57-58	18.8	21.9	30.2	51.0	100
58-59	24.5	25.2	37.8	37.8	100

**Source:** The Report of Indigo Commission Appointed under Act XI of 1860, British, Parliamentary Papers, Vol XLIV, 1861, Appendix 17.

One of the main explanations given for the failure of the British indigo system is that the market information was uncertain and a time lag and discrepancy existed between demand and supply <sup>[15]</sup>. It is not unsafe to assert that the information constraints faced by upper Indian producers and traders were no less, and probably much more than those faced by British planters. The upper Indian systems had faced large fluctuations in indigo prices in much earlier times and continued to do so during the British period. However, we have no evidence that any breakdown of the system occurred in upper India. Thus, the performance of the British system cannot be attributed to the nature of the market.

Max Weber's formal view that native values acted as impediments to economic growth in India is unsustainable in the case of indigo. A viable system of indigo production existed in upper India which, apart from being based on native values, was fully capable of responding to export needs. Further, this system remained viable despite official discrimination by a system which was based on more western motivations

### Conclusion

The Indigo Industry of Lower Bengal in the nineteenth century, in principle, represented a repressive agrarian system controlled by the European planters. The system was based on advances and debt and also extra-economic power.

It involved an alliance between the center, the trading and administrative powers, and also between village-level and external elites. Hereditary obligations played an important part in securing indigo production, so did the local and personal rather than general or public law.

The indigo revolt, in principle, began and ended as a struggle against the planters. The peasant rising grew in militancy and organisation; it also underwent changes in "leadership and alignment" [16] this was hardly an anti-British movement in character. The peasants associated indigo with swindle and oppression – and that was it. No peasant thought of the movement as anything beyond a struggle against the planters.

The case of British indigo in India seemingly appears to be one in which, the haste and expediency of empire making, an economically unsustainable chain were forged and imposed on the peasantry in Bihar and Bengal. In the process, organisational forms were created with their dynamics of growth and survival requiring increasing dependence on exploitation and decreasing dependence on fair economic relationships. However, the indigo disturbances paved way for more accountable policies on the part of the government towards the peasantry as well as an awakening awareness on the part of the Bengali liberals who soon realized that it was not possible anymore to turn their back on the peasant question altogether, imbued as they were with the Western principles of patriotism and social equality. Peasant welfare for the first time in Indian history began to be viewed with increasingly serious political considerations and broader responsibilities. It would not be wrong to assert therefore that the official concern with rural welfare which we widely witness today in the form of rural development plans and projects had its beginnings in the nineteenth century.

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