

Indigo Rebellion of 1859 - 1862

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Abstract

The indigo rebellion (neel bidroha) of 1859-62 of Bengal is one of the most celebrated peasant rebellions of colonial India. Aimed against the oppressive forced cultivation of indigo, the rebellion was a massive peasant revolt against the colonial system which perpetuated it. The paper focusses on the entire range peasant actions and methods of resistance adopted by the rebels against this forced cash crop cultivation. The seeds of the rebellion were in the coercive ways adopted by indigo concerns owned by white planters to compel peasants to grow indigo. Indigo cultivation contracted significantly in Bengal after the rebellion.

Keywords: Indigo, Rebellion, Peasant, Planter, Bengal, Force

As India was converted into a British colony, it had to supply raw materials to the mother country and become a large market for British manufactured products. Indigo from Bengal was a major agricultural commodity which was exported out of India in the first half of the nineteenth century. With the advance of the industrial revolution in the cotton textile sector in Britain, and revolutionary wars on the continent in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, white planters were attracted to Bengal to benefit from cultivation and export of this profitable blue dye. However, Europeans were allowed to own lands in British India after the Act of 1833.¹

Indigo was an export-oriented crop in a fluctuating international market. Crisis in the international market translated into crisis for Bengal indigo. Indigo was used for remittance of incomes and profits made in India to Britain. By 1810 indigo supplies from Bengal dominated the European market. White planters were financed by Calcutta based European agency houses which were involved in shipping and export of indigo. The fortunes of the indigo industry faced fluctuating international demand and went through periods of decline in 1826-1830, 1833-34, 1836-38 and 1845-46.² Many agency houses collapsed between 1830-33, and finance was provided by Managing Agency Houses which also managed indigo concerns. In 1847 the Union Bank collapsed and many indigo

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