

Indigo Cultivation in Nineteenth Century Bengal

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Abstract

Indigo cultivation was a classic case of forced cash crop cultivation in Bengal during the nineteenth century in colonial India. A detailed and analytical account of indigo cultivation has been provided to show what it entailed for the raiyat who was forced to cultivate the blue dye for white planters in Bengal. The paper explores various coercions and oppressions applied on raiyats which were intermeshed with the cultivation of indigo at the ground level. Indigo was an unremunerative crop for the raiyats who had to hypothecate their produce to the planter at a pre-determined price. Indigo cultivation was based on a written contract against advances taken by the raiyats. This contract in turn maintained a complete stranglehold over the agricultural operations and harvest cycle of the raiyat. Once the raiyat entered into a contract with the white planter, he was never a free agent. Indigo cultivation was perpetuated from generation to generation as the raiyat was not allowed to even out his balances with the indigo factory, and free himself from the obligation to sow.

Keywords: Indigo, Planter, Raiyat, Nij, Raiyati, Cash crop, Coercion, Export

Colonization of India and establishment of the British empire in India between 1757 to 1857 coincided with the first Industrial Revolution in Britain (1780s) and the American War of Independence (1776-1783). The first industrial revolution took place in precisely the same commodity which India exported in large quantities to the entire world, viz. cotton textiles. Once India became a colony, it was used as a captive market for British machine-made goods and supplier of raw materials. This gave a push to cash crop cultivation.

The East India Company (EIC) monopoly trading rights were ended in India in 1813 and in China in 1833. From 1813 we have the period of free trade in India. During this period a major change took place in the trading pattern between India and Britain. Between 1814-1850 India had four main exports. Raw cotton, raw silk, indigo and opium

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