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Historical Background of Indigo Cultivation in India: At a Glance

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Abstract

From times immemorial cultivation of indigo was in vogue in India. From (5-6th century B.C) indigo was the main exporting commodity of India. Indigo was exported to the 'West' from the port of 'Barbaricum'. In medieval period indigo was also chief exporting commodity of India. Both the European and Asian merchants were associated with this trade. During this period indigo of two places like Biyana and Sarkhej attained considerable fame. In the middle of the 17th century power of the Portuguese traders gradually decayed in the Indian Ocean. On the other hand, the British traders steadily became more powerful in indigo trade. With the emergence of industrial revolution during the 18th century in England accelerated indigo cultivation in India to fill up the demand of cotton industry. In the second half of the 18th century Bengal became the main centre for indigo cultivation. Louis Bonnard, a Frenchman was the first European indigo planter in India as well as Bengal too. Carrole Bloom, an another indigo planter who convinced the East India Company about the scope of profitable trade in indigo cultivation in Bengal. However, in Bengal, among the European indigo planter mostly were the British. In 1837 indigo planters founded 'Nil Sangha' to mitigate contradiction among them and became united. In the beginning of the 19th century more or less every district of Bengal became full of nilkuthis. Indigo of Nadia & Jessore were considered as high in quality. Besides, the following districts of Bengal were closely associated with the indigo cultivation: Birbhum, Burdwan, Rajshahi, Ducca, Rangpur, Malda, 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Kishorgong, Pabna, Faridpur, Dinajpur, Khulna etc. There were two folds method in which indigo was cultivated in Bengal viz, nijabad and ryoti.

Key Word: Indigo-Cultivation, Commodity, Traders, Dadan, Nilkuthis, Nijabad, Ryoti, Shukhdadan.

From times immemorial use and cultivation of indigo prevailed in India. It gets fame as a product of India. In past, other than Indian, there was no historical evidence for ploughing as well as using indigo. Ancient writers, Plini and others used 'Indicum' instead of indigo. The scientific name of indigo tree was 'Indigofera Tinctoria'. According to ancient writer the word 'indigo' was related with 'Inda' or 'Hindustan'. The word 'Indigo' was the

English version of 'Ind' or 'Hindustan'. Later indigo began to be used in Europe as a dye stuff as well as a trading commodity of India. From (6-5th century B.C) indigo was the main exporting commodity of India. Even then in Egypt dresses of 'Momi' were dyed by indigo. Before, 2000 B.C. India had known the system of dyeing. The inhabitants of ancient Rome and Greece were fond of Indian indigo. Again 'the Periplus of the Erythraean' sea intimated us about the export of indigo to the 'West' from the port of 'Barbaricum' situated on the Indus delta. Through Alexander's invasion Indian indigo reached Europe.

In medieval age indigo was also chief exporting commodity of India. Trading relation between Mediterranean and India informed us about this. At that time Alexandria and Venice were the chief trading centers of indigo. During this period Indian indigo was the main trading commodity to the traders like the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Spanish and the English. The Asian Merchants such as the Indian, the Persian and the Armenian were associated with this trade. Later indigo came to be known in America, West Indies, Carolina etc. Besides China, Japan, Java and Madagascar, use of indigo was in vogue. The European traders preferred Indian indigo very much because indigo was very essential for cotton industry in Europe. The British East India Company exported indigo from India. For trade between India and Europe, the European merchants were very much dependant on indigo and that's why Sir Thomas Roe signified indigo as the "chief trading goods."¹

In the sixteenth century India indigo was cultivated on a large scale for exporting it abroad. At the beginning of the 17th century A.D in Europe demand of Indian indigo increased significantly for dyeing cotton textile.

Naturally the indigo traders of Europe keenly vied for indigo as this trade was very profitable to them. During this period indigo was cultivated in various places of India. Initially the exporters were familiar with the indigo of two places such as 'Sarkhej' and 'Biyana'. The term 'Sarkhej' did not signify the place Sarkhej rather it denoted trading of indigo of the places like Sarkhej, Ahmadabad, Surat in Gujrat. On the other hand indigo of 'Biyana' and adjoining district of Agra was known as 'Biyana'. Indigo of 'Biyana' was described as 'Lahori Indigo', because indigo of this particular region was exported in Europe on road through Lahor.² This is clearly seen from the account of Pelsaert during the reign of Jahangir in seventeenth century. In this period like other regions of India, indigo was cultivated in Bengal, too, but the quality, in respect of others parts, was ordinary. In Europe demand of indigo hiked resulted price increase as well. During this period the Dutch and the English merchants was the purchaser of Indian indigo. The European traders invested huge amount of capital to buy indigo. The Dutch and the English traders paid cash in advance or 'dadan' to the Indian farmers for buying indigo.³ Hence, the European traders appointed local agents for buying indigo from the farmers. Therefore, the indigo farmers had to face many difficulties. In seventeenth century, the Dutch and the English jointly attempted to reduce the price of indigo and tried to spread command on indigo trade in India. Obviously this joint venture was for the time being. There was a severe competition on indigo trade between the merchants of Dutch and English.

In the middle of the 17th century power of the Portuguese traders gradually deteriorated in the Indian Ocean. Taking advantage of the situation, the English traders steadily became more powerful in indigo trade. The British Company sent indigo to London from India. In turn this indigo from London was exported to many other markets of Europe. By the year 1651 in the market of England as well as Europe the demand of Indian indigo considerably decreased. It had two reasons. First the Indian indigo farmers produced impure quality of indigo. Secondly the British colonialists initiated good quality of indigo cultivation in West Indies and America which was profitable to them. Besides, the French, the Dutch and the Portuguese started indigo planting in their colonies. The Negro slaves were engaged in these colonies of planting indigo. By the year 1660 in the markets of Europe demand of indigo of West Indies and America increased highly, In addition to these the Dutch merchants sent indigo in the European market from Syam, Java and Formosa.

With the emergence of industrial revolution during 18th century in England the modern cotton industries flourished on a large scale. The blue dye stuff from the indigo plant was used for bluing cotton textiles as well as the British naval costumes. On the contrary, the British Indigo planters of Jamaica and West Indies invested capital on sugar, cotton and coffee instead of indigo, as it was more lucrative. Therefore, by the middle of the 18th century, the British colonialists of that region stopped indigo cultivation and invested capital on sugar, cotton and coffee. In the meantime, due to the American War of Independence, the transportation of indigo from America to England was disturbed. Even then a high quality of indigo was produced in colonies of Spain and French and sent to European market. But the results of the French Revolution emancipated the Negro slave in French colonies particularly in Santio Domingo. As a natural consequence, indigo trade declined sharply. Under this circumstance, the British held supremacy over India and by the end of the 18th century the East India Company augmented cultivation of quality indigo in India. As a consequence again the demand of Indian indigo grew up which opened up new vista in the history of agricultural economy of India.

In the second half of 18th century, Bengal became the main centre for indigo cultivation. In Bengal, extracting blue from *niltaru* was in vogue. This dye was not that good in quality. However, indigo cultivation and extracting of dye from tree were initiated by the Europeans, As a matter of fact, Louis Bonnard, a Frenchman was the first European indigo planter in India as well as in Bengal too. Before coming to India he gathered experience about indigo planting and trade in West Indies. In 1777 he reached Calcutta, first set up *nilkuthi* at Taladanga in the district of Hooghly for starting indigo plantation, but not getting required land, shifted to Gonadalpara near Chandannagar, there he finally established *nilkuthi* and began indigo cultivation. In 1778 Carrole Bloom, an indigo planter, contemporary of Louis Bonnard, set up a factory at Tankfolla near Hooghly, 25 miles away from Calcutta for planting indigo. This factory was known as 'Indigo Castle'. In 1779 a few new factories were set up near Chinsura. In this way the European methodology of indigo cultivation was launched in Bengal. In this context, Carrol Bloom sent a letter to Lord Cornwails, the Governor General of Bengal claiming that he convinced the East India

Company about the scope of profitable trade in Indigo cultivation in Bengal which would increase the income on this account considerably. From 1778 to 1790 he spent an amount of Rs 4 lac sikka as a *dadan* or cash in advance to the peasants of Bengal constructing *nilkuthis* and indigo planting, Mr. F. Grand, the Collector of Tirhut introduced European method of indigo cultivation in Bihar. He, in his own expenses, between 1782-1785 constructed three *nilkuthis*. On the other hand, Mr. Bonnard set up many other *nilkuthis* in Malda, Khulna, Jessore and Nadia etc. Few adventurer traders of Europe as well as workers of East India Company started investing capital in indigo trade. This endeavour augmented productivity of indigo in Bengal. The Court of Directors took necessary steps to ameliorate production and quality of indigo.

On this purpose, the Board of Trade during 1779-1780, made a contract with J.T. Princep, an indigo planter for supplying indigo in a fixed rate to the Company. He (Princep) was engaged in this practice for a long time in Bengal. At the outset, in Bengal, Princep held a remarkable position in indigo cultivation and trade. According to the contract of the British Company, Princep was paid Rs 220 for a maund (40 kilos) of indigo. The Company helped the entrepreneur planter for developing indigo cultivation in Bengal. For this the Company gave one lac rupees in cash in advance to Princep. From 1779 to 1784 he was the only supplier of indigo. He began to profit in indigo trade. The production was not sufficient in Bengal, so he collected indigo from Delhi and Agra. He sent both good and bad quality of indigo in market which was very profitable knowingly that the other European merchants were also engaged in this trade. In addition to that the workers of the East India Company extended their helping hands unanimously to establish *nilkuthis*. During 1784 to 1787, besides J.T. Princep there were other contractors who contracted with the company for supplying indigo in fixed rate viz, Douglas, Woodnee, Fargans, Baretts, J.P. Skot and Henri Sket. As a result few new factories were founded.

But at the outset this endeavour of East India Company was not satisfactory. Nevertheless, gradually this scenario has been changed. By 1790, a huge amount of indigo was exported from India to England. In 1795, England imported 2,95,5862 pound of indigo from Bengal. In 1800, England imported 40,000 maunds of indigo from Calcutta. The volume of exporting indigo increased from India to England. The British Company never directly involved in indigo cultivation or preparing dye stuff, even they always tried to spread out indigo plantation. By 1801, the company gave cash in advance to the indigo planters. After that they stopped this financial support. The indigo cultivation in European method in Bengal was introduced for economic reason. There was an indigo market in Calcutta in 1806. When the Company closed to provide cash in advance, the European planters became dependent on the agency houses of Calcutta for money. These agency houses had played significant role in trade and commerce. In 1790 there were 15 agency houses in Calcutta associated with this practice.

In Bengal, however among the European indigo planter mostly were the British. A few numbers of Frenchmen and the Anglo-Indian indigo planters were engaged in this industry. With the passage of time this practice became lucrative to the European planters, so a tough

competition was seen. In 1837 the planters founded “*Nil Sangha*” to mitigate contradiction among them and became united. In the beginning of 19th century more or less every district of Bengal became full of *nilkuthis*. A few independently opened factory. In this way indigo trade became monopolized. By dint of the European planter, the opulent indigenous *zamindars* set up many *nilkuthis* like Dwarakanath Tagore, Raja of Naldanga etc. But finally they did not get success competing with the Europeans.

In 1795 Mr. Bond founded a farm in the district of Jessore. Indigo of Nadia and Jessore were considered as high in quality. In 1795 John Cheap started indigo cultivation in Birbhum. Besides, the following districts of Bengal were closely associated with the indigo cultivation: Burdwan, Rajshahi, Ducca, Rangpur, Malda, 24 Parganas, Murshidabad, Kishorgong, Pabna, Faridpur, Bagura, Khulna, Mymansigh and Dinajpur. In the year 1830 near about 1000 indigo farms were established in Bengal.⁴

There was a twofold method in which indigo was cultivated in Bengaladesh; viz the land which belonged to the indigo planter was called ‘*nijabad*’.⁵ In this land the planters engaged landless labourers according to needs. Those labours came from the forest tribal people of ‘*singbhum-manbhum*’ region and the landless labour of Bankura and Midnapur. On the contrary, the planters made agreement with the farmers for planting indigo in their land, called ‘*ryoti*’.⁶ The planter paid Rs 2(two) cash in advance or *dadan* per *bigha* to the farmers for sowing indigo in their land. In most of the portion of Bangaladesh this method was fashionable. This system was acceptable to the planters, because farmers were bound to bear all responsibilities of farming. Except these two methods, another method named “*shukadadan*”⁷ was in vogue in Dinajpur, Rangpur, Purnia and Shahabad.

End-notes:

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3. Chandra, Pulak, *Neel Bidroho* (Indigo Revolt), Dey’s Publishing, Kolkata, 2015, p. 34
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5. Palit, Chittabrata, *Tension in Bengal Rural Society*, Progressive Publishers, Calcutta, 1975, p. 110
6. Palit, Chittabrata, *Ibid*, p. 110
7. Palit, Chittabrata, *Ibid*, p. 98

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