

Indigo Plantations in Bihar Under Structure of Agrarian - A Critical Review



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ABSTRACT

Present movement in Champaran contributed substantially to the birth of Indian nationality. While issues here to the level of all-India politics, there is ample evidence in the case of Champaran of discontent and protest long before the case of Champaran of discontent and protest long before the coming of Mahatma and the existence of upward pressure from the rural masses themselves. Actually, a rich body of literature exists on the several dimensions of the indigo plantation in colonial India. Much of the existing literature examines the cultivation and manufacturing of indigo as they bear on the rising tide of the national movement in India. Within that larger interpretive framework economic historians have examined the agriculture and commerce of indigo, 1 and prevailing labor relation on the plantation. 2 Political historians have focused on the revolts on the indigo tracts to make important arguments about the nature of peasant movement during the British Raj. 3 Still others have studied the participation of natives on the indigo plantation in the growing national movement in India culminating in the growing national movement in India culminating in the Gandhian Satyagrah of 1917.⁴

Keywords : Cultivation, Indigo Plantations

I. INTRODUCTION

The indigo peasant groaning under the exploitative system of indigo cultivation rose against their oppressors and the prevailing system from time to time. The riots of the indigo producing districts of lower Bengal vehemently protested against the indigo planters' tyranny in 1859 giving rise to what is known as 'blue mutiny'.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century Bihar was the most significant supplier of finest quality indigo from British India. More precisely, north Bihar or Tirhut, comprising the four districts of Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Champaran, and Saran, were the most prominent areas for the cultivation and manufacture of indigo. These four districts showed an increase in indigo acreage by 286 percent between 1830 and 1875, and by more than 69 percent between 1875 and 1894-95.

It may be noted that parallel production of indigo also took place in other parts of British India besides Bihar. yet north Bihar v. yet north Bihar or Tirhut remained the center of gravity for the export based natural dye industry. Since the early 19th century the natives in the territories to the north and west of Bihar had been engaged in indigo manufacturing. That new administrative division was formed out of the newly conquered territories in 1835 in the second half of the Punjab provinces. But the indigo from the rest of India was of an inferior quality, and was manufactured using inferior techniques. It fetched a low price and catered to the lower end of the market. In contrast the indigo from Bihar was of a high quality and was sold at the highest price. The proprietors based in England, the agency houses of Calcutta, and the large retinue of managers and assistants – all Westerners – controlled the production and shipment of indigo from Bihar. Indigo was production in Bihar under their closet supervision using the best available techniques.⁶

North Bihar/Tirhut was part of the indo-Genetic alluvial plains. The Himalayas to the north and the Ganges to the south bordered these fertile plains. The fertility of the soil was an advantageous factor for the indigo plantation. The dose population of the area also provided relatively cheap labor for the planters. much of indigo plantation in Bihar were controlled either directly by agency houses based in Calcutta or by proprietors in the indigo from Bihar was ferried down the rivers Ganges and Hughly to Calcutta for export.

There had been sporadic resistance in Champaran since the 1860s to the tinakathia leases from the big Seminars of Ramagar, Bettie and madhuban made present cultivate indigo on part of their at unremunerative prices. Although Bihar remained unscathed by the disturbances of 1860-63, the turn of organization of indigo cultivation and manufacturing in that division. Very soon Bihar became the primary exporter of indigo to the west. The major increase of indigo acreage in Bihar took place in the four northern districts. As a matter of fact the districts of Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Champaran, and saran showed an increase in acreage by 286 percent between 1830 and 1875 . The most deistic increase took place after 1860.

Here it needs to be kept in mind since the same managing agents based in Calcutta funded and sponsored the indigo plantation of both regions, the experience gained in lower Bengal was utilized to make amends in Bihar . The first major impacts came in an increase in the level of wages for the plantation workers (coolies) and procurement prices for indigo a second important change came in the field of land management the planters in Bihar and the business houses in Calcutta had come to accept the position that indigo manufacturing could only be continued through payment of more reasonable wages and remunerations to workers and peasants. a very prominent managing agency of Calcutta, gisbourne and company, wrote to their manageress in Bihar that : “A fair day’s wage for a fair days labor is the only way of establishing satisfactory relations between employers and we wish you to act on this principle.” So believing the planters generally raised the wages for the peasants.

It is, however, surprising tom note that wage increases were note brought about in isolation. The planters adopted measures to make saving elsewhere in order to make up for the increased that the final price for indigo. These additional measures ensured that the final price for indigo before and the wage increased remained same the same. Planters took initiative to increase their control over land a common refrain among many planters in the past had been that the peasant was lackadaisical, and that they did not put their best lands and efforts to obtain higher and better yield. The planters were confident that an improved supervision of the tillage, cultivation, and harvesting of indigo would bring better result.

Nonetheless in Bihar were of a “negotiated” nature as before, the last thing the administrator wanted was a restless native ; they remained watchful of the steps taken on the plantation . But a new element of the planter-peasant relationship in third quarter of the 19th century was also the stronger position of the colonial administration to monitor them. In that sense peasant power – even if it was of a mediated nature in that sense peasant power- even if it was of a mediated nature – had become a more crucial determinant of developments on the plantation.

The riots’ were not so much opposed to the cultivation of indigo as to the system under which it was cultivated. there were two main systems of growing indigo, namely zirat throne farm system) and riyati or Aasamiwar growing indigo under thought factory tenants) . much of the contract. under this system the peasants were obliged to grow indigo on six katthas out of every bigha of land that they cultivated Following peasant agitations in Bihar in 1867-68, the government intervened to reduce peasants obligation for cultivation of indigo to there katthas of land the new system so inaugurated was called the tinkathiya (there katthas) system .at the same time, however, the government also mandated that the peasants practice crop rotation peasants always preferred to give their best lands to food crop production year after year, while the planters tried to persuade them to rotate the land on which indigo was grown . the government was clearly trying to be even-handed . they intervened on behalf of the present in reducing their tillage obligation and in favor of planters by making peasants adopt crop rotation.

However, the most significant initiative by the planters beginning 1860s came in starting the neez system of indigo cultivation on privately owned lands.the planters followed an aggressive policy of buying up personal lands of smaller peasants and landlords, variously called khas nij,sir,and khas khamar lands .these personal lands that the proprietors had reserved for their subsistence and that of their family. The ownership rights to these personal lands were authenticated not by any written documents, but by the customs of the village . often the means employed by the planters to acquire peasants’ land violated local customs and conventions.

Planters used loopholes in the existing system and also took advantage of the poverty of the farmers to buy up land planters had clear motives behind starting neez cultivation . if the planter could oust the peasants from land, and the peasants, as a consequence, sank into an position of landless labourers, a class unprotected by the existing regulation, the situation would be ideal for the planters.”

Here, it needs to be emphasized that the government for its part took steps in an effort to regulate the working of the indigo plantation . after the disturbance of 1868 it made a sincere effort to promote the khuski system of contract cultivation under which then terms were relatively favorable for peasants . in this system peasants grew indigo on their own lands without planters’ supervision and sold it to them at market rate Jacques poucheпадass has called khuski a “free contract system” to draw a contrast with the other prevailing contract system, asamiwar/tinkathiya. The colonial government looked at this contract system with favor and thought that its popularization would reduce the conflict-ridden relationship between the planters and the peasants. In 1871 the officials introduced khuski in the saran district on a large scale hathwa estate, which was under the control of court of wards became the site for this trial.

It was In this backdrop that wideapread resistance devolped in the Motihari-bettiah region between 1905-1908.

The proprietors of the Murla factory were worried as the ryots had refused to sow indigo. Bad blood existed between them. The factories in ramnagar and madhuban estates were also not free from anxiety and madhuban estates were also not free from anxiety to carry on indigo plantation. In motihari, the notorious oppressive manager morton was severely beaten up by the labouurers.

Hatred against indigo and planters has reached to such a pitch that people did not hesitate to restort to violence. On 13th February, 1907, Bloomfield, the manager of the tilhara indigo concern, after being savagely beatan was done to death.

Since their very existence was at stake the planters and the Government used all their resources to quell the peasant uprising. They arrested the prominent peasent leaders like Sheikh Gulab, Sital Roy, Sheikh Rajab Ali and Radhu Mai on trumped up charges. 'However, despite the suppression of the uprising, the government recognized the seriousness of the issue and appointed the Gourlay Committee to look into the situation.¹⁴

The better off section of the peasantry continued to struggle over the next decade through petitions, cases and contacts with some Bihar Congress leaders. The Bihar Provincial Political Conference referred prominently to the Indigo issue in North Bihar. Sachidanand Sinha, the president of the Bhagalpur session of the Conference, in his speech urged the government to make a through enquiry to prevent the recurrence of oppression. Brajakishore Prasad in his presidential address to the Bihar provincial conference, recounted the manifold wrongs done to the ryots. Similarly Nandkishore Lal in his address to the provincial conference recounted the manifold wrongs done to the ryots. Similarly Nandkishore Lal in his address to the provincial conference on 3rd April, 1915, referred to the strained relations between the planters and the ryots and reiterated the demand for thorough enquiry. It was at this conference that Raj Kumar Shukla, a representative of the ryots narrated the plight of the indigo ryots.

It was not unnatural for the conscious and enlightened section of the Champaran tenantry to look around for someone who could take up their cause and obtain some tangible results. A strong contingent of delegates from Bihar, including representatives of the ryots like Raj Kumar Shukla, Sant Rout, Beer Muhammad Munis, Harbans Sahay, Ganesh Ram etc. went to Lucknow in 1916 to participate in the session of the Indian National Congress. Their eyes fell first on Tilak and Madan Mohan Malaviya, but they were too preoccupied with things of national importance. However, Madan Mohan Malviya suggested to the representatives of the ryots to contact Gandhi. However, it was the idea of Jamna Prasad to invite Gandhi to Champaran through Raj Kumar Shukla.

Conclusion

Gandhiji consciously preferred minor agrarian issues to the more fundamental questions relating to the structure of agrarian relations, the latter being potentially dangerous for vested interests and thereby divisive. Gandhiji wanted a 'controlled mass movement and thus allowing no initiative or scope for autonoumous action to the subaltern groups, and thus his main support came from the better-off sections of the peasantry – the middle peasants, whose interests the issue represented. Moreover, there was a semblance of relief and constructive work for the poor peasantry so as to prevent them from any potentially revolutionary initiative, and thus no structural changes followed and the status quo with all its exploitative features was allowed to continue.

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