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The Indigo Revolution and its Rebels: Pioneers of the Indian Nationalist Movement (1859 - 1860)

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Abstract:

The Indigo Rebellion of 1859 was the first decisive blow to British colonial rule. Realizing that the cultivation of indigo by the uneducated, poor farmers of Bengal was a profitable business and through this they could be financially and socially empowered, the British wanted to make India, especially Bengal, their new economic capital. Cultivation of indigo was profitable only to the British and the farmers of Bengal were becoming poorer and poorer so they did not want to grow indigo. If the farmers of Bengal did not agree to grow indigo, they were brutally tortured. The forced cultivation of Bengal's peasantry by the English Nilkar Sahibs and the brutal torture they inflicted on them formed the background of this revolution. When the level of oppression exceeded the limit, the peasants were forced to declare revolt. Vishwanath Sardar, Digambar Biswas, Vishnucharan Biswas, Meghai Sardar, Krishnaram Sardar etc. were the main leaders of this revolution. Here we will once again discuss Blue Mutiny in the light of history, especially the role of the heroes of the revolt. The courage, struggle, sacrifice and self-sacrifice of these great revolutionaries will be highlighted, which motivates us even today to speak out against injustice.

Keywords: Indigo, Bengal, Cultivation, Revolt, Leaders

Introduction:

It is known that indigo cultivation started in India in 1777 by Louis Bonnaud, a French merchant. In 1778, an English employee named Carolblum introduced indigo cultivation in Bengal. In the early 19th century, the demand for indigo increased in England to paint the textiles produced, to meet that demand, they began to cultivate a large amount of indigo in Bengal. And as it was profitable, the retired employees of the company also started cultivating indigo. In 1976 John Reeves and C. W. Sheriff jointly set up a Nilkuti at Sinduria in Chuadanga. And later, at the initiative of James Hill, Nilkuthi was established at Nischintapur in the early 18th century. The districts of Bengal were rich in silt and situated on river banks. There were also river routes for transportation. In the mid-eighteenth century, nothing but indigo could be cultivated here. In Bengal, specially Nadia

district became the main center of indigo cultivation. By 1757, 9 of the 143 large indigo factories were established in Nadia district.

Indigo cultivation methods were two types. One was Abadi Cultivation and the other was Raiti Abadi Cultivation. In the first method, a Neelkar had to cultivate indigo on his own responsibility. Which was not profitable for them. So they used to cultivate in the second way, here they assigned a farmer from Bengal to do the cultivation. In this method, the farmer used to borrow some money from the British owner to cultivate indigo on his own land in exchange for certain conditions, known as Dadan. Farmers were forced to sell the crop in the British hut at the measure and price they had. Farmers could not earn profit in this cultivation. At the time of taking the money, the farmers had to sign the contract made by Saheb. In this contract, it was written that I promise to pay a certain amount of money from you to cultivate indigo on a certain amount of good land till a certain year and deliver it to you, failing which I and my heirs will be responsible for the loss that you will suffer. At the time of the sale of indigo, the farmers had no freedom in terms of weight and bargains, but they were obliged to sell the Indigo at the amount and price fixed by the brokers. Farmers were obliged to give 4/6 or 8 bundles of indigo for one rupee. A bundle was caught with as many as could be caught on a 6 foot chain. Again, while giving the price to the farmer, the payment amount (Dadon), the stamp price of the contract, the price of the seeds were deducted from the total price. Therefore, it can be easily estimated how much the farmers used to make profit by cultivating indigo through this. Sometimes it was also seen that according to the contract he was asked to cultivate seven bighas of land but actually it was eleven bighas.

Research Objectives:

1. To examine the causes and consequences of the Blue Mutiny.
2. To highlight the role of key leaders in the movement.
3. To analyse the strategies employed by the indigo farmers.
4. The impact of the revolt on future agrarian movements in India.
5. To explore British responses to the resistance.

Research Findings:

1. Digambar Biswas and Bishnu Charan Biswas – These two leaders from Nadia played a central role in organizing resistance against European planters, using petitions and protests.
2. The Role of Local Zamindars – Some landlords, like Harish Chandra Mukherjee, supported the peasants, exposing the planters' cruelty through newspapers.
3. Peasant Mobilization – The revolt spread across Bengal, leading to violent confrontations in some areas and mass refusals to grow indigo.
4. Government Intervention – The rebellion led to the formation of the Indigo Commission (1860), which acknowledged the exploitation and gradually led to the decline of forced indigo cultivation.

Background of the Rebellion:

It could be seen that a farmer is earning more money growing indigo on his land than he is earning by growing any other crop. Moreover, as a result of the unjust policy of the Saheb they could never repay the debt they had taken from them. So naturally they no longer wanted to cultivate indigo. If the farmers refused to grow indigo, they were brutally tortured, tied up, beaten with canes, crops burned, houses burnt, etc. As a result, they started protesting. The result of their protest was the Blue Rebellion of 1859. The reasons that generally worked behind this revolt were:

1. Forced Indigo Cultivation:

Indigo planters forced peasants (ryots) to grow indigo on their land instead of food crops. The Tinkathia system required farmers to dedicate a portion of their land (often three-twentieths or more) to indigo cultivation, reducing their ability to grow essential crops like rice and wheat.

2. Exploitative Contracts:

Planters used fraudulent agreements that bound peasants to grow indigo at extremely low, unprofitable rates. The farmers were often tricked into debt, making it impossible for them to escape the cycle of indigo cultivation.

3. Physical and Economic Oppression:

If farmers refused to grow indigo, they were subjected to severe punishments, including physical violence, destruction of property, and illegal fines. Planters employed private armies to intimidate and assault resistant peasants.

4. Financial Ruin of Peasants:

Indigo exhausted the soil, making it unfit for food crops. Farmers struggled to sustain themselves as indigo cultivation provided little financial return. Peasants were given loans (Dadon) at high-interest rates, trapping them in debt and dependence on planters.

5. Lack of Legal Protection:

The British administration, heavily influenced by indigo planters, often ignored peasants' complaints. Courts and police sided with the planters, leaving farmers with no legal recourse.

Heroes of the Rebellion:

The farmers and the common people of Nadia district were fed up with the torture of Neelkar. As a result, they became vocal in protest. They decide that they will protest against this injustice. As a result, protest movements were formed in Bengal, especially in Nadia district, and were led by various people. Under whose leadership this protest movement gradually became rebellion and revolution. The leaders who led them in this rebellion are discussed below.

Viswanath Sadar and Baidyanath:

They, Baidyanath and Vishwanath Sardars of Nadia are the first founders and pioneers of political murders and political robberies. These revolutionary Baidyanath and Vishwanath Sardar

have been humiliated by Nilkar Saheb as 'Bade-Bishe Dakat'. Vishwanath continued to fight in his own way to save the peasants of Nadia from oppression of Neelkars, that time a man named Samuel Fedy's tyranny reached its peak. Vishwanath decided that he would give him a befitting punishment, so he attacked and looted Fedy's kuthi at night with his gang and took him to a nearby forest. At first they decide that they will kill Fedi but Fedi begs them for his life and then Vishwanath releases him on the condition that he will not tell anyone. British government sent an inbox commander named Black war to suppress Vishwanath Sardar. When Vishwanath attacked Black War's army, the English soldiers fled for their lives. One day, on receiving a wrong news, Vishwanath and his troop were resting in a forest when suddenly Black war with his troops captured the forest and arrested Vishwanath Sardar along with his companions. After encircling the forest, when a fight broke out with the armed forces, Vishwanath, fearing the loss of life of his unarmed companions, stopped the fight and surrendered himself to District Magistrate Elliot. The British rulers of that time were so afraid of Vishwanath that they ordered the execution of Vishwanath in the name of farce in the name of justice. Vishwanath along with some of his companions were hanged on the banks of the Ganges and their bodies were later placed in an iron cage, hung from the branches of an Peepul tree in a field in Asanagar, and fed on chill vultures. This was the fate of the heroic revolutionary Bishwanat Sardar of Bengal's Blue Rebellion. Since this incident, the ground of Asannagar is known as the hanging ground. The great revolutionary Biswanath Sardar, the glory of Nadia and Bengal, was called by the British as 'Bishe Dakat', through which they tried to discredit him to the people. So Vishwanath Sardar is known as Bishye Dakat to many people. Helping the poor was Vishwanath's life vow. With the money given by Vishwanath, many poor families have been raised. As Vishwanath used to steal money from the rich, he also donated a lot of money to the poor. For this reason he was also popularly known as 'Vishwanath Babu'.

Bishnucharan Biswas and Digambar Biswas:

Digambar Biswas of Poragacha area near Krishnanagar and Vishnucharan Biswas of Chowgacha are the one of the main leaders of this revolution. They started the rebellion. They called for the declaration of armed rebellion against the indigo miners. The farmers of Govindapur village of Hanskhali first responded to their call. William White sent hundreds of Lathials to attack Govindpur rural to suppress this rebellion in Govindpur but they were defeated by the people of Digambara Biswas. A few days later, the people of Nilkar Saheb attacked his house in Digambar Biswas' village. But he could not be suppressed like this. Vishnucharan and Digambar Biswas sent women and children to other villages and nearby villages for safety reasons. Skilled Lathial was brought from Barisal. Farmers began to learn from them. Digambar Biswas sold all his possessions and formed an armed resistance force with that money, even he himself spent 17 thousand rupees in those days to repay the debts of the poor farmer's neighbors. In this fight, Digambar Biswas and his

family were helped by SriGopal Palchoudhury, the zamindar of Ranaghat. From here he continued to fight against the tyranny of Nilkar Saheb till the last days of his life. He was determined to save the farmers from the oppression of indigo miners. For that he sacrifices all his money - life. Digambara Biswas had many people on his side in this struggle, but among them were three - Sri Gopal Palchoudhury, the zamindar of Ranaghat, Baidyanath and Vishwanath Sardar.

Meghai Sardar:

Asannagar, an area near Krishnanagar, was also led by the revolutionary Meghai Sardar where there was a storm of protest against the Blue Revolution. Under the leadership of Meghai Sardar, the farmers there united and started a massive movement. The British therefore killed the Meghai Sardar in the dark of night to stop him. After his tragic death, his widow wife wanted to build an armed resistance against the tyranny of the British and he used to travel from village to village. Although the exact name of Medhai Sarkar's wife is not known, it is assumed that her name was Himangini. In the history of India's freedom movement, the names of all these brave women are written in golden letters. Himangini is one of them.. She was a brave fighter and worthy wife of her husband.

Three Rebellious brothers:

Three brothers - Ramratan Mallik, Rammohan Mallik and Girish Mallik of a Brahmin family of Jairampur village in Chuadanga led the movement against the Nilkars. They once leased indigo lands to the Loknathpur concern and worked as Dewans in Kuthi. Girish Mallik was Dewan of Birkistapur Kuthi till his dismissal. George Meyers, manager of the Loknathpur concern, filed a case against the three brothers for inciting the ryots against indigo cultivation and at trial warrants were issued against them. In a letter to the Hindu Patriot, Girish Mallick described harassment by the magistrate and mayors. On the orders of the Magistrate of Nadia, Girish Mallikl was arrested and taken to Krishnanagar and a deposit of four thousand rupees was collected. He was accused of being an agitator, but his two brothers were acquitted. Later, the elder brother Ram Ratan Mallick became known as the 'Neelkuthi Destroyer' and 'Nana Saheb of Bengal'.

Bademajur Piar Biswas, Jalaluddin Sekh from Goswami - Durgapur, Foyejuddin Mondal from Ghoshbila, Jamiruddin Mondal from Govindapur led this revolt in Alamdanga region. With the help of these brave farmers, Mahesh Chandra Chattopadhyay formed the movement. Mahesh Chandra mobilized the peasants and resisted the Nilkar sahebs through this force.

Role of Zamindars in Rebellion:

Chuadanga, a region in the undivided Nadia district, was one of the centers of the rebellion. The revolt at Chuadanga was led by Shri Hari Roy, the zamindar of Chandipur. Revolutionary Hari Roy united the farmers of Chuadanga - Meherpur and formed a powerful movement. It is known that he could assemble more than thousand armed peasants at one place

within an hour, despite the difficulty of transportation of those days.

Nafar Chandra Pal Chowdhury, the zamindar of Natudah, was evicted by the British from a large area of his zamindari. Later farmers and indigo farmers organized under the leadership of local farmer Osman Mandal. Nafar Chandra started his struggle. He was able to recover most of his zamindari by relying on the power of the peasants.

Armed Uprising:

Although the year 1859 is regarded as the period of the Indigo Rebellion, its preparations had been going on long before. Even before 1859 there were rebellions in many parts of Nadia, for example in 1856 there was a successful armed uprising at Kanainagar Nilkuthi in the vicinity of Chuadanga. The fire of rebellion in Nadia started to spread quickly. How revolutionary it took, and how well the peasants went to the rebellion with a masterful plan is known from an article published in the 'Indian Field' of a priest in Krishnanagar, Bomvites. There he mentioned that the farmers of the time had divided themselves into six companies. They divided into different groups choosing arrows, bows, bricks, stones, brass, bronze plates, earthen vessels, stone vessels etc. as their tools. There was also a group of women in their company or team. They also had a reserve force called 'Yudhisthira's Army', which was an armed force.

Blue Commission:

Nadia's rebellion spread throughout Bengal including Jeshor, Khulna, Pabna, and Malda. As a result, the Governor of Bengal thought of investigating the deficiency complaints of indigo growers. And that is why the Blue Commission was formed by the English government in 1860. In 1860, this commission formed by the Secretary of the Government of Bengal, Mr. Setankar, took the testimony of a total of 134 persons, of which 15 were government employees, 21 Nilkars and missionaries, 13 Zamindars and 77 Royots. All of them, except Nilkar Sahebs talk about the inhuman torture of Nilkar Sahibs on the farmers. One of the witnesses was Jaichand Pal Chowdhury, the zamindar of Ranaghat. During his testimony, he accused Nilkar Sahebs of coercion, false deals, embezzlement of money, low price of plough and indigo, illegal weight and above all the killing of indigo farmers. But even after the formation of the Blue Commission, the oppression of the farmers has not decreased. In this case, their helpers were the tyrannical British magistrates and the police of the police station.

Conclusion:

The organization, leadership and management of this movement was in the hands of the Peasant class, so it was all a Peasant revolt. This movement was developed as a protest against the oppression of the farmers. The atrocities against them are described in the play 'Neeldarpan' written by Deenabandhu Mitra. As this rebellion is limited to a certain class of society, many do not want to include it as a national rebellion. But this rebellion was India's first armed peasant revolt, which later paved the way for a larger mass struggle.

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