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....wings to aspirations

CLASS NOTES
BENGAL REVOLT

INDIGO REVOLT OF 1859-63

- The Company had become the Diwan in 1765, but it still saw itself primarily as a trader.
- It wanted a large revenue income but was unwilling to set up any regular system of assessment and collection.
- The effort was to increase the revenue – and buy fine cotton and silk cloth as cheaply as possible.
- Within five years the value of goods bought by the Company in Bengal doubled.
- Before 1865, the Company had purchased goods in India by importing gold and silver from Britain.
- Now the revenue collected in Bengal could finance the purchase of goods for export.
- Most Company officials began to feel that investment in land had to be encouraged and agriculture had to be improved.
- Company finally introduced the Permanent Settlement in 1793.
- By the terms of the settlement, the rajas & taluqdars were recognised as zamindars.
- They were asked to collect rent from the peasants and pay revenue to the Company. The amount to be paid was fixed permanently, that is, it was not to be increased ever in future.
- It was assumed that a regular flow of revenue into the Company's coffers and at the same time encourage the zamindars to invest in improving the land.
- Since the revenue demand of the state would not be increased, the zamindar would benefit from increased production from the land.
- The Permanent Settlement, however, created problems. Company officials soon discovered that the zamindars were not investing in the improvement of land.
- The revenue that had been fixed was so high that the zamindars found it difficult to pay.
- Anyone who failed to pay the revenue lost his zamindari.
- By the first decade of the nineteenth century the situation changed. The prices in the market rose and cultivation slowly expanded.
- This meant an increase in the income of the zamindars but no gain for the Company since it could not increase a revenue demand that had been fixed permanently
- As long as the zamindars could give out the land to tenants and get rent, they were not interested in improving the land.
- On the other hand, in the villages, the cultivator found the system extremely oppressive.
- The rent he paid to the zamindar was high and his right on the land was insecure.
- To pay the rent he had to often take a loan from the moneylender, and when he failed to pay the rent he was evicted from the land he had cultivated for generations.
- In the North Western Provinces of the Bengal Presidency (most of this area is now in Uttar Pradesh), an Englishman called Holt Mackenzie devised the new system which came into effect in 1822.
- Knowing the importance of village as a social institution, he deepened the assessment .
- Under his directions, collectors went from village to village, inspecting the land, measuring the fields, and recording the customs and rights of different groups.
- The estimated revenue of each plot within a village was added up to calculate the revenue that each village (mahal) had to pay
- This demand was to be revised periodically, not permanently fixed.
- The charge of collecting the revenue and paying it to the Company was given to the village headman, instead of the zamindar.
- This system came to be known as the mahalwari settlement.

THE MUNRO SYSTEM

- In the British territories in the south there was a similar move away from the idea of Permanent Settlement. The new system that was devised came to be known as the ryotwari.
- It was tried on a small scale by Captain Alexander Read in some of the areas that were taken over after the wars with Tipu Sultan.
- Subsequently developed by Thomas Munro, this system was gradually extended all over south India.
- Read and Munro felt that in the south there were no traditional zamindars.
- The settlement, they argued, had to be made directly with the cultivators (ryots) who had tilled the land for generations.
- Their fields had to be carefully and separately surveyed before the revenue assessment was made.
- Munro thought that the British should act as paternal father figures protecting the ryots under their charge.
- Driven by the desire to increase the income from land, revenue officials fixed too high revenue demand.

- Peasants were unable to pay, ryots fled the countryside, and villages became deserted in many regions
- Optimistic officials had imagined that the new systems would transform the peasants into rich enterprising farmers. But this did not happen
- British also realised that the countryside could not only yield revenue, it could also grow the crops that Europe required.
- By the late eighteenth century the Company was trying its best to expand the cultivation of opium and indigo.
- British persuaded or forced cultivators in various parts of India to produce other crops: jute in Bengal, tea in Assam, sugarcane in the United Provinces (Uttar Pradesh), wheat in Punjab, cotton in Maharashtra and Punjab, rice in Madras .
- The indigo plant grows primarily in the tropics.
- By the thirteenth century Indian indigo was being used by cloth manufacturers in Italy, France and Britain to dye cloth.
- Only small amounts of Indian indigo reached the European market — its price was very high.
- European cloth manufacturers therefore, had to depend on another plant called woad to make violet & blue dyes.
- Being a plant of the temperate zones, woad was more easily available in Europe.
- It was grown in northern Italy, southern France and in parts of Germany and Britain.
- Worried by the competition from indigo, woad producers in Europe pressurised their governments to ban the import of indigo.
- Cloth dyers, however, preferred indigo as a dye.
- Indigo produced a rich blue colour, whereas the dye from woad was pale and dull.
- By the seventeenth century, European cloth producers persuaded their governments to relax the ban on indigo import.
- The French began cultivating indigo in St Domingue in the Caribbean islands, the Portuguese in Brazil, the English in Jamaica, and the Spanish in Venezuela.
- Indigo plantations also came up in many parts of North America.
- By the end of the eighteenth century, the demand for Indian indigo grew further.
- Britain began to industrialise, and its cotton production expanded dramatically, creating an enormous new demand for cloth dyes.
- While the demand for indigo increased, its existing supplies from the West Indies and America collapsed for a variety of reasons.
- Between 1783 and 1789 the production of indigo in the world fell by half. Cloth dyers in Britain now desperately looked for new sources of indigo supply.
- Faced with the rising demand for indigo in Europe, the Company in India looked for ways to expand the area under indigo cultivation.
- Post famine (1770) and post permanent settlement, Bengal saw some changes in the rural power structure.
- The process of evolution of a land market and recognition of sub-letting rights through the Patni regulations of 1819 created a space for the intrusion of new elements in the rural agrarian scene (Bhaduri 1976; Chaudhuri 1975; Cohn 1970)
- The bureaucracy of the former zamindars, the revenue amlah, the urban and mercantile groups, and civil servants, etc, emerged as claimants to the land.
- From the last decades of the eighteenth century indigo cultivation in Bengal expanded rapidly and Bengal indigo came to dominate the world market
- In 1788 only about 30 per cent of the indigo imported into Britain was from India.
- By 1810, the proportion had gone up to 95 per cent
- As the indigo trade grew, commercial agents & officials of the Company began investing in indigo production
- Over the years many Company officials left their jobs to look after their indigo business.
- Attracted by the prospect of high profits, numerous Scotsmen and Englishmen came to India and became planters.
- Those who had no money to produce indigo could get loans from the Company and the banks that were coming up at the time.
- There were two main systems of indigo cultivation – nij and ryoti. Within the system of nij cultivation, the planter produced indigo in lands that he directly controlled.
- He either bought the land or rented it from other zamindars and produced indigo by directly employing hired labourers.
- The planters found it difficult to expand the area under nij cultivation. Indigo could be cultivated only on fertile lands, and these were all already densely populated.
- They attempted to lease in the land around the indigo factory, and evict the peasants from the area.
- But this always led to conflicts and tension.
- Nor was labour easy to mobilise. A large plantation required a vast number of hands to operate.
- And labour was needed precisely at a time when peasants were usually busy with their rice cultivation.
- Nij cultivation on a large scale also required many ploughs and bullocks.
- One bigha of indigo cultivation required two ploughs. This meant that a planter with 1,000 bighas would need 2,000 ploughs.

- Investing on purchase & maintenance of ploughs was a big problem.
- Till the late nineteenth century, so planters were reluctant to expand the area under nij cultivation.
- Less than 25 per cent of the land producing indigo was under this system.
- The rest was under an alternative mode of cultivation – the ryoti system
- Under the ryoti system, the planters forced the ryots to sign a contract, an agreement (satta).
- At times they pressurised the village headmen to sign the contract on behalf of the ryots.
- Those who signed the contract got cash advances from the planters at low rates of interest to produce indigo.
- But the loan committed the ryot to cultivating indigo on at least 25 percent of the area under his holding.
- The planter provided the seed and the drill, while the cultivators prepared the soil, sowed the seed and looked after the crop.
- When the crop was delivered to the planter after the harvest, a new loan was given to the ryot, and the cycle started all over again.
- Payment of advances continued only when the production with the peasant was surplus .
- The price they got for the indigo they produced was very low and the cycle of loans never ended.
- The planters usually insisted that indigo be cultivated on the best soils in which peasants preferred to cultivate rice.
- Indigo, moreover, had deep roots and it exhausted the soil rapidly.
- After an indigo harvest the land could not be sown with rice.
- The moral economy perspective has not even found space in the margins of the discourse on the Indigo movement.
- The subsistence was a factor in the Indigo movement. Customary and traditional notions of rights and legitimacy occupied important position in the minds of peasants.
- The peasant, became an agricultural labourer, merely assisting the planter in the process of cultivation, in relation to the part of land on which he grew indigo.
- This loss of status was irksome, as it caused a deprivation relative to the past.
- In March 1859 thousands of ryots in Bengal refused to grow indigo. As the rebellion spread, ryots refused to pay rents to the planters, and attacked indigo factories.
- Those who worked for the planters were socially boycotted, and the gomasthas – agents of planters – who came to collect rent were beaten up.
- In 1859, the indigo ryots felt that they had the support of the local zamindars and village headmen in their rebellion against the planters.
- In many villages, headmen who had been forced to sign indigo contracts, mobilised the indigo peasants and fought pitched battles with the lathiyals.
- In other places even the zamindars went around villages urging the ryots to resist the planters.
- These zamindars were unhappy with the increasing power of the planters and angry at being forced by the planters to give them land on long leases.
- The indigo peasants also imagined that the British government would support them in their struggle against the planters.
- After the Revolt of 1857 the British government was particularly worried about the possibility of another popular rebellion.
- Lieutenant Governor J.P. Grant toured the region in the winter of 1859. The ryots saw the tour as a sign of government sympathy for their plight.
- Barasat magistrate Ashley Eden issued a notice stating that ryots would not be compelled to accept indigo contracts, word went around that Queen Victoria had declared that indigo need not be sown.
- As the rebellion spread, intellectuals from Calcutta rushed to the indigo districts.
- They wrote of the misery of the ryots, the tyranny of the planters, and the horrors of the indigo system.
- The planters formed their own political association to establish their authority in the indigo districts. Thus, they emerged as a new element in the agrarian economy which eroded the powers and privileges enjoyed hitherto by the Zamindars.
- A growing confrontation became acute between landlords and planters on the one hand, and the planters and peasants on the other.
- Indigo Rebellion was not a class struggle in anyway as there was no struggle between the Zamindars and the peasantry; rather the real objective of the Zamindars was to oppose the encroachment of Europeans on principle and to fight for their own vested interests.
- Many of the peasants who took part in the anti-planter movement in 1859-62 were Fara'idis.
- In Bengal there was already a history of peasant resistance to the planter system associated with the Fara'idi sect of East Bengal.
- This group of people had been active in the struggle against oppression by planters in the 1830s and 1840s.
- Their role is significant in the sense that while they were addressing religious concerns they also took up the economic aspect of the problem
- By the Rent Act passed in 1859, the British government went out of its way to protect the peasants and the power of the zamindars was curtailed.
- Indigo cultivators in districts of Pabna and Nadia and in the Barasat subdivision had declared the first general strike which soon spread to Jessore, Khulna,

Rajshahi, Dacca, Malda and Dinajpur, encompassing most of Bengal.

- By 1860 the movement had gathered force in the delta region of Bengal.
- While the zamindars were also not pro-planters they did not as a rule actively support the peasants.
- Leadership to the rebellion was provided by the substantial peasantry – the class which had earlier acted as intermediaries between the planters and the small peasants.
- In his essay on Neel Darpan, Ranajit Guha however shows how the grievances of the peasants were used by various superordinate classes to press their own demands.
- The richer peasants wanted to free themselves from the oppression of the planters so that they could operate their own mahajani i.e. money-lending and usury, freely.
- The intelligentsia sought to establish themselves as the true friends of the peasants and thus their legitimate political representatives.
- In all of this the peasants' own voices were largely ignored, and in the end they gained very little from the struggle.
- Worried by the rebellion, the government brought in the military to protect the planters from assault, and set up the Indigo Commission to enquire into the system of indigo production.
- The Indigo Commission, as it came to be called was constituted of 5 members including: W.S. Seton Karr and R. Temple who represented the British government , Rev. J. Sale represented the Christian Missionaries , W. F. Ferguson represented the European planters and Chandramohan Chatterjee represented the Zamindars.
- Most importantly it was a revolt of both the major religious groups of farmers in Bengal, notably a farmer Haji Molla of Nischintapur said that he would "rather beg than sow indigo".
- The Commission held the planters guilty, and criticised them for the coercive methods they used with indigo cultivators.
- It declared that indigo production was not profitable for ryots. The Commission asked the ryots to fulfil their existing contracts but also told them that they could refuse to produce indigo in future.
- At the request of the Indigo Planters Association, Act XI of 1860 was passed which criminalized 'Breach of Contract' by the ryots.
- The planters used this law to further their control and oppression of the peasants. A huge number of suits were filed against them.
- The peasants joined together to raise funds to fight court cases filed against them
- Commission recommended few important improvements
  - ➢ The ryot should sow indigo according to his wishes and terms.
  - ➢ The contract should be simple in nature, extending not more than 12 months and
  - ➢ There shouldn't be any renewal if the peasant failed to meet his engagements to avoid the accumulation of debt.
  - ➢ Factories should pay for the stamp paper, not the ryots.
  - ➢ The selection of land for indigo should be negotiated equally by both the parties.
  - ➢ The expense of delivering the plant by cart or boat to factories should be borne by the factories, not the ryots.
- The Neel Bidroho inspired literature, music and films.
- Dinabandhu Mitra's play Nil Darpan or the 'Mirror of Indigo' remains a classic because it was written during the movement in 1859. It narrated the sufferings, oppression and struggle of indigo cultivators.
- In order to feel the pulse of the local people, following the popularity of this play, W.S. Seton-Karr, Secretary to the Governor of Bengal, assigned Rev. James to translate the work into English and circulate it among like-minded Britons
- After the revolt, indigo production collapsed in Bengal. But the planters now shifted their operation to Bihar. With the discovery of synthetic dyes in the late nineteenth century their business was severely affected, but yet they managed to expand production.
- Indigo Rebellion can be termed the first form resistance of the countryside against the British in economic and social terms.
- Unlike the spontaneous revolt of the soldiers in the Sepoy Mutiny, this countryside revolt evolved over the years and, in the process, rallied different strata of society against the British – a thread of dissent that lasted many decades thereafter.
