

## INDIGO CULTIVATION IN BIRBHUM IN COLONIAL TIME

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*From Astadhyai of Panini we came to know about use and cultivation of indigo in India. In medieval period, western India especially Biyana&Sharkhej attained considerable fame for cultivation of a very high quality indigo. The Europeans began to plough indigo in India in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1795 Mr John Cheap started indigo cultivation in Birbhum. He was assisted by a Scottish by birth, Mr David Erskin. David Erskin was the main indigo-planter in Birbhum. He grew a company, named 'MessersErskin Company'. Besides the foreigners, a few local people were associated with this practice. Madhaipur was one of the important centres for manufacturing indigo. Nidhiram Sarkar of Surul Sarkar family was the gomasta of this kuthiror factory. At the outset the 'MessersErskin Company' purchased land from the local zamindar. For indigo cultivation they had to depend on the ryoti farmers of local areas. And they made an agreement with the indigo farmers. On the basis of the agreement farmers were paid in cash in advance or dadan. In 1830, the district magistrate briefed in a newspaper that the total numbers of 9890 indigo farmers were paid Rs 41500 in cash in advance or dadan in a year under the 'MessersErskin Company'. In spite of the indigo planters' entrepreneurship indigo cultivation in Birbhum did not get an intense shape. The scarcity of sufficient capital was the main obstruction for this practice. The oppression of the planters caused the ryots to deny to sow indigo on their land. Again the quality of indigo was inferior compared to the other parts of Bengal. With the passage of time indigo cultivation in Bengal became increasingly coercive and Birbhum was no exception to this.*

**Key words:** - Indigo cultivation, Kuthir, Dadan, Tagadadar, Zamindar, Gomasta.

The planting of Indigo and its use as a dye staff in India began at least in the time of Panini, the great grammarian (6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century B.C), as it is known from his *Astadhyai*. Again The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* informs us about the export of indigo to the 'west' from the port of Barbaricum situated on the Indus delta. In

western India during medieval times, 'Biyana' and 'Sarkhej' attained considerable fame for the cultivation of a very high quality indigo.<sup>1</sup> Indigo plantation by the Europeans began in the later half of the eighteenth century in India. With the emergence of industrial revolution in Europe, cotton industries flourished in Britain on a large scale. The blue dye material derived from the indigo plant was used for bluing cotton textiles. The colonial administrators made India the supplier of raw materials including indigo for their factories, leading to the destruction of India's cottage industries at the village level. Birbhum in modern West Bengal was one such area where indigo cultivation was taken up on a large scale.

In 1782, Mr John Cheap, a British by birth, a Bengal Civil Service officer, had arrived in Birbhum as a resident.<sup>2</sup> He first started indigo cultivation in Birbhum in 1795. He established a great *kuthir* or factory at north-eastern outskirts of the village, named Surul which was situated two miles away in west direction from Bolpur. The ruins of this huge farm are existing as an evidence till now. Presently the place abounds in Sal trees. Indigo farms were established in different parts of Birbhum, especially in Simulia, Illambazar, Khoyrasol, Supur, Sekhpur, Bharkunda, Daranda, Natungram, Gangapur, Serpur etc. John Cheap was assisted by a Scottish by birth, Mr David Erskin. He came to the district in 1789. He first set up his farm at Daranda. He was the main indigo-planter in Birbhum. David Erskin was associated with factories at Illambazar, Layekbazar, Supur, Bejura, Harmuni and Khoyrasol. Mr John, his son joined later him and then grew a company named 'Messers Erskin Company'. In Birbhum, Erskin had seven indigo-factories, where a total of hundred permanent labours and thirty-nine temporary or casual workers were attached to. In one year they used to produce 380<sup>3</sup> maund of indigo. Apart from David Erskin's initiatives, there were other European companies who were engaged to indigo cultivation in Birbhum. Their factories were at Mougram (now in Burdwan), Mayureswar, Nagari, Nangulia etc. In addition to these a few local people of the area were also involved in indigo cultivation. One of them was Sarkar family of Surul and another was Singh family of Raipur.

In 1793, David Erskin settled down at Illambazar permanently. Unlike the other indigo planters of Bengal, the 'Messers Erskin Company' had an identical character i.e., they had not been accused of outraging on ryots. Local people adored him as a 'judicious and kind hearted man'. He was also honoured by the local people for his generosity. In 1830, the district magistrate on a paper advocated this statement. Though Illambazar was the main centre of the Erskin and his company yet in the middle of the nineteenth century, to meet up the increasing demand of indigo they set up many other sub-centres in the district. At that time David Erskin was dead and his son, John was all in all. Madhaipur was one of the sub-centre. It was near about eleven km west from Suri. Nidhiram Sarkar, the successor of Surul Sarkar family was the *gomasta* of this factory. He was the chief

responsible person of this *kuthir*. According to the source it was seen that under the supervision of this factory indigo was cultivated twice a year, one in October-November, another was February-March.

Indigo was collected in two ways from the indigo-farmers. From the account book of this factory it was focused that in 1853, twenty one producers supplied indigo to this factory. Those suppliers belonged to the following castes such as: Sadgop, Bhattacharya, Bandopadhyay, Chattopadhyay, Bagdi, Kamar, Chhutar etc. This attachment proved that the whole society was engaged in this practice. Fertile land and laborious labours were essential for sowing indigo. In a '*mahal*' farmers were bound to plough indigo in their land, it completely depended on the will of the local *zamindar*. The farmers were given *dadan* or in cash in advance.<sup>4</sup> If the farmers did not produce indigo according to the settled agreement their wealth was confiscated. It was written down on the agreement paper. Besides the indigo planters and indigo farmers many other local persons played the role of inter-mediator in this practice, those who were *tagadadars* and officers of the local zamindars. Their role was very crucial in this regard. They were very loyal to their master. Like another workers they had to make an agreement also. Their prime duty was to wander field to field of village for selecting appropriate land to cultivate indigo. Their selection of land helped to prepare '*chak-nama*'. Hence *ryots* were paid in cash in advance *ordadan* on the basis of their recommendation. Risk of *dadan* or cash in advance was liable to *tagadadars*. From preparing land for sowing seeds till cutting and despatching indigo trees to factory were their sole responsibilities. Work list of *tagadadars* were too long. Yet persons like *tagadadars* were not dearth. Eventually they managed to keep themselves safe from their superior. Obviously, only the *ryots* had to tolerate entire pressure of this method.

At first the 'MessersErskin Company' bought land from the local *zamindars*. For this they had to pay rent to the *zamindar*. They had to depend on the *ryoti* farmers for planting indigo. For this they had made an agreement with the indigo farmers. According to the agreement the farmers were given *dadan* or in cash in advance in the month of October-November. According to the historian Hariranjana Ghoshal the amount of *dadan* or in cash in advance in Birbhum was higher in comparison with the other parts of Bengal, which was favourable to the farmers. In 1829, the total area of land for indigo cultivation was 14,525<sup>5</sup>*bighas*, in Birbhum under the supervision of the 'MessersErskin Company'. In 1830, in this district the total area of land for indigo cultivation was 15,125<sup>6</sup>*bighas* under the supervision of the British and the other European companies altogether. In that very year, the district magistrate briefed in a newspaper that the total numbers of 9890<sup>7</sup> indigo farmers were paid Rs. 41500<sup>8</sup> as *dadan* in a year under the 'MessersErskin Company'.

The 'Surul Records' inform us about structural organization as well as commodity production of the indigenous *kuthirs* of Birbhum. However, structural organization in comparison with the foreign *kuthirs* both

similarity and dissimilarity was noticeable feature in this connection. Factories were founded in their own estate. They engaged skill mechanics of Calcutta for making up indigo producing equipments. Local blacksmiths were not considered enough competent by them. Apart from that costs of various essential materials was cheap in market of Calcutta. Some amount of money was paid to mechanics in cash in advance. Further requirement was farmhand labourers. Number of workers depended on area of the *kuthir*. For labourers agreement was signed to headman. Headman was paid in cash in advance for labourers too. Generally, labourers had come from local scheduled caste or scheduled tribe communities. The headman had appeared from that very clan. January in 1823, Ashananda Sarkar paid cash in advance or *dadan* to Sri Golak Dhengar and Sri Badan Dhengar (both came of Konra tribe) for supplying twenty labourers for his factory. At that time, for manufacturing indigo regularly plenty amount of water supply was inevitable in the wells of factory. For rotting and beating indigo trees water was essential. So, filling up the wells with water, a typical labourers were needed. They were called '*duni-tana-majur*'. The cart and cart-driver were required transporting woods and cow dung cakes for furnace, bricks or calcium for building construction and cutting indigo trees as well as boxes of produced indigo of factory.

In spite of the indigo planters' entrepreneurship indigo cultivation in Birbhum did not get an intense shape. Practically, scarcity of sufficient capital was main obstacle in Birbhum for this practice. Except this the farmers denied to sow indigo in their land because it was not profitable to them as well as they did not get due cost of their crops. Again the production unit was full of corruption. After signing the agreement ryots became slave labour of the planters. Whoever the planters might have either white or black man. However, in Birbhum, obviously the native planters were more oppressive than their white men colleagues. Apart from, each and every stage of production unit became full of violent attitude which obstructed development of the indigo industry in the district. In 1854 the collector informed in a letter that the quality of indigo was inferior compared to the other parts of Bengal.

With the passage of time Indigo cultivation in Bengal became increasingly coercive and Birbhum was no exception to this. *Dadan* or in cash in advance at a very high interest rate was imposed on the peasants who were also deprived of the due price of the crop. The Indigo Revolt, arising out of the accumulated grievances of the primary producers, started initially in Nadia against the Indigo planters during 1859-60 and soon spread like wildfire to Birbhum and other parts of Bengal also. But it was very remarkable that the Indigo Revolt of 1859-60 did not take an intense shape in Birbhum. As in other parts of Bengal, most of the indigo planters forced the farmers to sow indigo on their land in Birbhum also, but somehow this oppression was dormant in Birbhum.

## End notes:

1. Susnata Das, (ed.), *Jukta Bange Nil Chash : Nil BidroherItihas (150 BacharerAloke)*, Nakshatra, Kolkata, 2014, P.42
2. Partha Sankha Mazumdar, (ed.), *BirbhumerItihas*, Ashadeep, Kolkata, 2012, P. 191
3. Ranjan Gupta, *RadhererSamajArthaniti O Ganabidroho*, Subarnarekha, Kolkata, 2001, P.240
4. Pulak Chandra, *Neel Bidroho* (Indigo Revolt), Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2015, P. 34
5. Ranjan Gupta, op.cit, P.241
6. Ranjan Gupta, Ibid, P.241
7. Ranjan Gupta, Ibid, P.241
8. Ranjan Gupta, Ibid, P.241

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