Moral Economy and the Indigo Movement

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During 1859-61, a large portion of colonial Bengal became a site of contest between the indigo peasants and English planters, with the Bengali bhadralok and British officialdom as important stakeholders. On the face of it, the Indigo movement was against the oppressive and unremunerative system of indigo cultivation. It was perceived by the ryot as a threat to his security of subsistence, but there was much more to it than that. It was an affront to the use of customary rights held by the peasant and was a constriction or denial of choice where earlier there was complete freedom to choose the crop for cultivation. For an adequate understanding of the Indigo movement and perhaps for the historiography of the Indian peasant movements in general, both political and moral economy approaches need to be taken into consideration.

Unlike the 150th anniversary of the 1857 uprising in 2007, that of the Indigo movement last year was greeted with conspicuous silence. During 1859-61, a large portion of colonial Bengal became a site of contest between the indigo peasants and English planters, with the Bengali bhadralok and British officialdom as important stakeholders in the ensuing contest. It was the first major uprising in the post-East India Company era. Jolted by the 1857 event, the British were keen to know the causes of the disturbance and therefore set up a commission of enquiry under Act X of 1860.

Although the historiographic interest in the Indigo movement has been considerable, it, nonetheless, is completely devoid of the moral economy aspect of action. The moral economy perspective has not even found space in the margins of the discourse on the Indigo movement. The political economy perspective covers almost the entire historiographic spectrum of this movement. The search begins and ends, with slight variations in emphasis, with the detection of the hard grievance – the oppressive planter and the unremunerativeness of indigo cultivation. This is true not only for the historiography of the Indigo movement but also for the historiography of Indian peasant struggles in general. An attempt has been made here to give the moral basis of the action of the indigo peasant.

Before we attempt to elucidate the moral economy perspective, a brief account of the domination of the discourse by the political economy perspective would be in order. The pattern has been set by the Report of the Indigo Commission (RIC) and the subsequent historiography has been a pastiche of the RIC. The report has been the most, often almost solely, used piece of evidence for the construction of the history of the event. As the RIC is primarily an exercise in political economy so is the historiography of the movement. This can be ascertained from the following verdict on the root cause of the trouble:

All the defects of the system, inherent and incidental, all the faults which justly are to be laid at the door of either planter or ryot, by their respective opponents, may be traced originally to one fact, the want of adequate remuneration (RIC: paragraph 70, emphasis added).

Dominance of Political Economy

The argumentative tone of the RIC and other colonial official discourse has been reiterated in the historiography of the movement. Kling’s (1966) work, the first detailed historical construction of the event, is in consonance with the RIC. The seeds of contention, Kling contends, are located in the organisation of production – land, labour and capital and certain agronomical and environmental factors (1966: 15-37). B B Chaudhuri, like Kling, explains the raison d’etre of the conflict in terms of the...
antagonism of the relations of the productions (1964: 159). For Palit enhancement of rent, rising prices and struggle over landholdings were the main reasons for the Indigo movement (1975: 123-51). Various other historians contributed to the discourse though none have touched upon the moral economy rationale of action (Bhattacharya 1977, 1978; Biswas 1970; Chattopadhyay 1973; Chattopadhyay 1975; Chaudhuri 1973; Chopra 1985; Choudhury 2001; De 1963, 1984; Ghosh 1958; Guha 1974 (1993); Guha 1983; Kaviraj 1984; Natarajan 1953; Palit 1975; Sah 1980; Sen 1997; and Sen 1979, 1982).

The historiography of the Indigo movement, embedded in the Weberian concept of rational action, has been devoid of the moral economy perspective of action. As Scott puts it:

A study of the moral economy of the peasants can tell us what makes them angry and what is likely, other things being equal, to generate an explosive situation. But if anger born of exploitation were sufficient to spark a rebellion most of the third world (and not only the third world) would be in flames. Whether peasants who perceive themselves to be exploited actually rebel depends on a host of intervening factors (Scott 1976: 4).

Scott (1976) opines that subsistence ethic and “safety first”, i.e., peasants shy away from the market for the security of their subsistence concerns and adequate and secure income come prior to risks of higher but unsafe income, are vital determinants of the action. Behind every such popular direct action, Thompson (1968: 73) avers, some legitimising notion of right is to be found. Greenough (1983: 848), perhaps the first historian to apply Scott’s thesis with reference to the Indian peasantry, writes in relation to the peasantry of Bengal: “Scott’s discussion of peasant subsistence is incorrect at every step when Bengal is taken as a case in point: abundance rather than scarcity is considered a natural state of affairs; all are enjoined to extend cultivation and enhance their authority rather then adapt themselves to minimal consumption and humiliating dependence...”. Mridula Mukherjee (1988: 2176-77) opines that though Indian peasants resisted in various ways when their subsistence was threatened, the right to subsistence does not seem to have been a part of the Indian peasant’s consciousness. It is interesting to note that Sugata Bose sees the resistance activity in terms of contest and compromise between the state-land-capital controlling sections versus the smallholding and labouring section. Subsistence ethics, though not elaborated upon, has been recognised as an important factor: “The demands of smallholders and labourers for subsistence, security and social conditions reflective of their notion of human dignity sought to resist and restructure relations governing access to land, work, consumption and production imposed upon them” (Bose 1993: 140). However, as we shall see, 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 basis of decision-making, to use Herbert Simon’s (1957) terminology, is “satisficing”, i.e., part factual and part value. And customs determined the value basis of action taken by the peasantry.

**Threat to Customary Rights**

There was much in the system of indigo cultivation that was an affront to the customary notions of legitimacy held by the peasant. With respect to indigo cultivation, the peasants faced a constriction or denial of choice. Whatever other restrictions were there on the peasant, s/he was free in the domain of crop selection. Even sharecroppers held the right to choose the crop for cultivation (Chaudhuri 1982: 163). RIC (paragraph 40) recognised this traditionally held right of the peasant: “Ordinarily he (i.e., zamindar) does not exercise, and ought not to exercise, any interference with the cultivation of the ryot, and provided he receives his due rents, it can matter little to him what kind of produce is grown on the land”. Planters, on the contrary, forced them to cultivate indigo. As Eden in his evidence before the Indigo Commission observed: “I never heard of any zamindar (sic) insisting upon a ryot sowing a particular crop unless that zamindar (sic) was also an indigo planter” (RIC: e 3621). The peasant, to all intent and purposes, 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. It is with this sense of deprivation that Deenbandhu Mitra’s Neel Darpan begins.6 Sadhu Charan, a peasant, suggests Golak, a petty landlord, to leave the village as the intrusion of indigo planter has ruined it (Act 1, Sc 1, Rao and Rao Tr 1992: 185). The denial or constriction of choice with regard to crop selection was inextricably linked to the subsistence concerns of the peasantry.

Indigo cultivation was perceived by the ryot as a threat to his security of subsistence. Sadhu Charan, laments “...we better hang up our pots and pans” (Act 1, Sc 1, Rao and Rao Tr 1992: 187). These words reveal that the fear of starvation was looming large before the peasants. And, as Scott has argued, the primary concern of most peasants is avoiding the risk of going hungry. “I shall have something to eat”, was the reason offered by the peasant Chander Ghosh of Nadia’s Changuri village (RIC 1860: e3283) for his preference to stay in jail. Similarly, Astul Mandal, another peasant, of Nischindipur, said, “I have become a fakir” (RIC 1860: e3228). That the peasants were thinking in terms of subsistence ethics can be seen in the following conversation between Golak, the landlord, Nabinmadhab, his son, and the peasant Sadhu Charan:

Golak: If all the sixty bighas are put under indigo, where shall we grow other crops? We shall starve to death that’s all.

Nabinmadhab: I even said, ‘Saheb, you use our men, our ploughs, our cattle to raise your indigo, you don’t have to pay us for that; all we ask is that you give us our food all the year round…’

Sadhu Charan: These days even those who work only for their food are more fortunate than us (Act 1, Sc 1, Rao and Rao Tr 1992: 187).

That peasants were suffering a dual loss – of status and subsistence – can be seen when Golak, the landlord, laments “loss of honour” (Act 1, Sc 1, Rao and Rao Tr 1992: 187) and when a peasant recites,

> Your caste is robbed by the padri.
> Your rice is robbed by the indigo monkey (Act 11, Sc 1, Rao and Rao Tr 1992: 205).

Here loss of jaat (caste) represents the breakdown of customary notions of rights and expectations. Colonial intrusion disturbed the patterns of customary rights, work and leisure without replacing it with something more just and humane. The importance of rice cultivation for the Bengali peasant has been
expressed by Greengough (1983: 848) in these words: “...the fact that they revere paddy as a form of the deity, that possession of paddy is valued above money and gold, that the sharing of rice is the premier demonstration of indulgence – these may all be regarded as clues pointing to the essentially religious nature of subsistence activities in Bengal”. Greengough argues that since in Bengal “abundance rather than scarcity is considered a natural state of affairs” (1983: 848) and since “moral economy of rice in much of Asia is more truly moral, more pregnant with implications, than economic and political historians have been ready to admit” (1983: 848), Scott’s thesis is incorrect in the context of Bengal. However, the indigo cultivation and its impact on peasants of Bengal was definitely not a natural state of affairs. Besides, and more importantly, is not moral economy an ideology, a mentality of people, their world view of how things work and how they ought to be? (Bohstedt 1983: 11). Thus viewed, the substitution of indigo for paddy, for a substantial portion of cultivable land, was more consequential than mere loss of subsistence.

New Intruders

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-lettings through the Putni 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. The indigo zamindar was one such intruder into the mofussil. This state of affairs disturbed the rural moral economy by creating strains in the traditional patron client order. As Rao and Rao opine:

the gulf between the peasant and his original zamindar grew wider and wider to become an ocean; the relationships that had grown over generations between him and his feared but accepted ‘oppressor-cum-protector’ ceased to exist. Assured of good income, some of these men (i.e., new zamindars) lived in their estates managed by their agents or tenure holders. The new relationship transgressed the old system of moral economy, and was now reduced to that between a ruthless employer and resentful employee (1992: 37-38).

This, perhaps, is the only clear and unequivocal recognition of the role of moral economy in the context of the Indigo movement. Kling (1966) has recognised, in concurrence with the RIC that the zamindars felt their rank and authority in society crumbling and were jealous of the planters on that score (1966: 55). By 1860, Kling states, two-thirds of the land in Nadia was in the control of the planters. He, however, does not say a word about the implications of this intrusion on existing social networks. “Accounts of oppression by the planters”, Kling says, “should be viewed in relation to mofussil morality”. No elaboration or elucidation of this is found in Kling’s work. He focuses instead upon the fringe benefits, e.g., dispensaries, schools, etc, that the European settlement brought to the ryoit. No mention is made of the disruption of old ties.

Besides, custom provided the peasant with at least a minimal bargaining power in the old set-up. Elements like jail and eviction were not part of social reality. It is interesting to note how the planters used traditional social networks to ingeniously extract relevant information for exploiting the available resources. Cockburn’s (1860: 232-33) evidence gives an insight into this:

The planter knowing that he would not be able to exact information through his servants adopts a certain and satisfactory means of obtaining the information required by at once seizing and bringing into the factory the village blacksmith. He, of course, has had the making and repairing of every ploughshare in the village, is paid annually a certain sum by each ryoit (in money or grain) for every plough in use throughout the year and can tell exactly how many he has.

Another person sent in for at the same time is the village barber, but this is merely to bind him down to report the marriages which occur in the village, as on the marriage of a girl the izzadar gets a nuzzar called ‘Bateesalamee’ of three rupees and on that of a boy one rupee; however this has nothing to do with the cultivation of indigo plant, and is exacted by all zamindars (sic).

The payment of nuzzar to an old indigenous zamindar was sanctified by the ties of custom and religion, i.e., it had some basis of legitimacy. Exactions by the planter had no such basis, as he was an alien to the social order of the peasant.

The idea of “improvement” was, from the perspective of the coloniser, the moral basis of colonialism. It was not a neutral denotation linked as it was to the culturally hegemonic discourse. In it, the identity of the peasant, to use Inden’s terminology, was that of a “patient”, i.e., one “who had to be variously pacified, or punished, saved, reformed or developed” (1990: 23). In other words, the peasant was a sort of dehumanised entity. As the missionary, Long portrayed him/her in his defence against libel charges: “the ryoit was a dumb animal”. This complete denial of human identity is common to, in varying forms and degrees, the planter’s and colonial bureaucracy’s perception of the ryoit. In RIC we frequently find the differences being made in Saidian self/other terms. The want of adequate remuneration, RIC (para 70) contends,

brings out into strong relief the well-known defects of the national character of the Bengali; that sharpens his cunningness, aggravates his indolence, tempers him to procrastination, and fosters his prounceness to concealment; it is this, in short, that renders the whole relation between the two parties, one prolonged and unhappy struggle in which Anglo-Saxon energy, promptitude, and pertinacity, are often almost baffled by that subterfuge and evasion which was the proverbial resources of the week.

The ‘Other’ and ‘Self’

The aforesaid contention is a neat echo of what the planters had to say about the cause of the conflict: “The planters all urge that strict supervision over each successive agricultural operation is rendered necessary by the incidence, supineness, procrastination and faithless character of the Bengali” (RIC: para 59). It is interesting to note that want of adequate remuneration/just price was as much an issue of moral economy as that of political economy.

Throughout the RIC this self/other dichotomy achieves a subtle dislocation of the real cause of conflict. The moral basis of the conflict manifests itself not in oppression as such, since both the zamindar and planter were equally oppressive, but in the reaction of the “other” to the “self”. This can be seen in the following observation of the colonial officialdom: “Experience teaches us, in every department, phase and period of Indian history, that the lower orders will endure patiently at the hand of one of their own colour or creed 10 times the oppression which
they would at the hands of a foreigner” (sic: para 66, emphasis added). Thus, a sweeping generalisation has been made by the “self” (i.e., the coloniser) about the entire history of the “other” (i.e., the colonised).

The core idea of improvement had been accepted by the Bengali bhadralok. Bentinck claimed, “I am assured that much of the agricultural improvement which many of our districts exhibit may be directly traced to the indigo planters settled therein” (quoted, Palit 1975: 99). In a similar vein men like Rammohan Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore, in fact, considered indigo cultivation beneficial for rural Bengal. Rammohan Roy, the father figure of the Indian Renaissance, declared:

The greater our intercourse with the European gentlemen, the greater will be our improvement in literary, social and political affairs; a fact which can easily be proved by comparing the condition of those of our countrymen who have enjoyed this advantage with those who have unfortunately not had that opportunity (quoted, Rao and Rao 1992: 62).

Roy favoured the settlement of the English in the mofussil and found indigo cultivation resulting in “better clothed” and “better conditioned” peasantry (Natarajan 1953: 44-45). Dwarkanath Tagore held similar views regarding the indigo cultivation in 19th century Bengal. He opined that “the cultivation of indigo and the residence of Europeans have considerably benefited the community at large” (quoted, Natarajan 1953: 45).

**Bhadralok and Colonisers**

The 1850s showed a slight shift in the position of bhadralok vis-à-vis indigo cultivation. They turned out to be active sympathisers of the cause of the indigo peasantry. They, nevertheless, had full faith in the British ideals of rule of law and fairness of government. Sisir Kumar Ghosh, an active sympathiser, who reported, through his weekly correspondence in the Hindoo Patriot, the atrocities on ryots, wrote:

Rise, Rise, Ye countrymen with supplicating hands, fall prostrate before the governor, catch his feet, and do not let him go, unless he has granted your requests (14 April 1860, Hindoo Patriot, Letter 11 in Bagal 1953).

Guha (1993: 64) in his seminal paper Neel Darpan (1993), has aptly commented:

...in a land of superstition, the new theology of liberalism introduces yet another superstition to fit the politics, the morality and the sensibility of a colonial middle class: corresponding to the illiterate peasant supplicating the gods against blight and drought we now have the highly literate bahoo supplicating the local magistrate, the Lieutenant-Governor, the Governor General or the Queen – the status of the member of the pantheon addressed depending on the degree of deprivation – for relief from the ‘blue monkey’ overrunning the countryside.

It has been opined by Rao and Rao that the near identity of the views of the bhadralok and of the coloniser had been possible because of a very conscious and committed effort on the part of the colonisers (1992: 63). The author of Neel Darpan, belonging to the Bengali bhadralok, in the prologue of the play, shows full faith in the British administration. In the entire play, neither the colonial law nor the State has ever been put into question. The various characters of the play show faith in the British rule.

For instance, Torap, a peasant, in conversation with another peasant says:

Torap: Absurd – how can a governor have a share in indigo business? He wanted to be popular; if God blesses our present governor with long life, we shall have food to eat and the indigo devil of the bastards won’t be sitting on our backs (Act 11, Sc 1, Rao and Rao Tr 1992: 205).

The complex nature of the peasants’ sense of legitimacy was manifest throughout the course of the struggle. His sense of legitimacy was derived both from customary legality and the modern bourgeois legality. The larger areas of relationship between the peasant and the indigenous zamindar were determined by customary legality, which put restraints on both. As Benoy Chaudhuri mentions: “The zamindar did not usually invade ryots’ customary rights. But when the planter zamindars found that their ryots combined against them, they very naturally exploited the legal flaws in ryots rights” (1964: 135). The modern bourgeois law did not recognise the customary laws. As Kling points out,

It (Act x of 1859) placed a premium on written proof of tenure, and those ryots fortunate enough to have records had a status guaranteed by law (i.e., bourgeois law). But those ryots who had been protected in their customary tenures by the traditional vague laws and had no proof of their length of tenure were left unprotected, and Act x contained no provision protecting customary rights. In clarifying the rules for enhancement it implied the right of zamindars to enhance rents, which had hitherto been fixed by custom (1966: 176).

**Favourable Magistrates**

The colonial law and its administration were both against the indigo peasant. Various regulations, e.g., regulation 5 of 1830, the breach of civil contract that sent a peasant to jail as a criminal, made peasants’ existence precarious. The very thought of going to the court was unnerving for the peasant. “The courts were frequented”, Kling observes, “by the most venal members of the mofussil society, semi-literate mukhtars, vakils (pleaders) and court clerks. Respectable Indians considered it disgraceful to attend the courts and avoided it whenever possible” (1966: 51). It, nevertheless, is interesting to note how the peasant used the modern law for consensus mobilisation and for legitimising his actions. Sisir Kumar Ghosh records an incident of peasants’ awareness and resoluteness: When magistrate Skinner advised the ryots to sow indigo, the peasants refused. Skinner was exasperated and told them, “do (sic) you obey the government?” “Yes Saheb, that we do” answered the ryots, “well (sic) then you must sow for the government says so” (Skinner). Peasant’s answered, “No Saheb, the government does not say so, it is optional with us. So long we have cultivated indigo, and now we are tired of it, we won’t sow indigo any longer” (26 May 1860, letter in Bagal 1953: 10).

Whenever the peasants saw a fair magistrate they sought refuge in the courts. An instance of this can be seen in the complaint against the pro peasant, deputy magistrate of Kalaroa, Abdul Latif, by the proprietor of the Jingergattcha Concern: “that though never before had there been any complaints in any of the concern’s ninety villages, no sooner does Abdal Lateef (sic) obtain power than the ryots in the whole of that part of the country refuse to sow and to fulfil their contracts” (Kling 1966: 68). Similar reaction
was witnessed when the peasants got the most favourable decree by the magistrate Ashley Eden regarding indigo cultivation:

... send policemen to the ryots' lands, to prevent any disturbances that are likely to ensue from any compulsory cultivation of their lands, and instruct them not to allow anyone to interfere with that, if the land is really that of the ryots. If the ryots wish to sow indigo, or anything else, the policemen will see that there is no disturbance (quoted, Kling 1966: 71).

The jacqueries against the planters in the indigo districts of Bengal drew some of their considerable striking power from the belief then widespread among the rural masses that the queen of England herself was on their side (Guha 1983: 113).

Favourable magistrates and decrees played a crucial role in enhancing the political opportunity structure. For consensus and action mobilisation for the movement the peasants made ingenious use of such occasions. An example of such an ingenious use can be seen in Eden's testimony before the Indigo Commission, regarding the impact of the aforementioned decree:

Ryots came from Jessore and Kisnaghur and took authenticated copies of my order, knowing that the effect of the intimation would be, to spread gradually throughout the Bengal, knowledge of the fact that it was optional with ryots to enter into contracts or not, as they thought fit (RlC 1860: e 3626).

Each time a favourable decree came along the peasants' way the moral economy was reinforced both as an incentive for further action and for and as a basis of legitimation to be used in consensus and action mobilisation against the planters.7

John Peter Grant's appointment as lieutenant governor of Bengal on 1 May 1859 was perceived by the peasantry of Bengal as a favourable event. Grant's immediate action on the peasants' petition furthered their longing to seek justice. The editorial of Hindoo Patriot reflected this feeling thus: "He has given ample evidences of a vigorous understanding, strong will, independence of character and thorough appreciation of the duties of an Indian statesman" (12 May 1859, quoted, Rao and Rao 1992). These issues have been whisked away in indigo historiography. We find some tentative statements on the legal awareness of Bengal peasantry, such as: "The peasantry had grasped the concept of lawful rights" (Chattopadhyay 1973: 178); "The peasant also developed a strong awareness of his legal rights and asserted them in and outside courts" (Chandra et al 1987: 59).

Prima facie, the Indigo movement was against the oppressive and unremerative system of indigo cultivation in 19th century Bengal. The historiography of the Indigo movement has been based overwhelmingly on the assumption of the peasant as a rational actor. The rational peasant, therefore, reacted against the oppressive system of indigo cultivation. The indigo conflict, nonetheless, was inextricably linked to the subsistence concerns and lebenswelt (lifeworld) of the indigo cultivator. For an adequate understanding of the Indigo movement, and perhaps for the historiography of the Indian peasant movements in general, both political and moral economy approaches need to be taken into consideration.

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The RIC is divided into three heads dealing with (i) the truth or falsehood of the charges made against the system and the planter; (ii) charges required to be made in the system as between manufacturer and cultivator; and (iii) charges in the laws or administration.

The Political Economy approach, drawing heavily on economic theory, especially the macroeconomic theory, visualises an actor as rational decision-making entity. Individual and collective behaviour is a function of economic structures. This, inevitably, marginalises traditional culture and patron-client relationships.

Mayer N Zald distinguishes between hard and soft grievances. “Hard grievances are those in which a large fraction of some population is exposed to a clear change or chance of change in their living conditions... soft grievances occur or develop over time and their impact, more prone to changing social definitions” (Zald 1991: 349).

Kling’s work on Indigo Disturbances in Bengal was the first doctoral dissertation on the peasant movements in colonial India. It was completed in 1960 at the University of Pennsylvania, USA. Part of the K K Datta’s doctoral dissertation (1937) was devoted to the Santhal insurrection of 1855-56; the major portion being devoted to Alivardi and His Times. Various dissertations were devoted to the study of 1857 movement. However, they were not studies of 1857 event in terms of peasants’ perspective.


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