

Homework handout

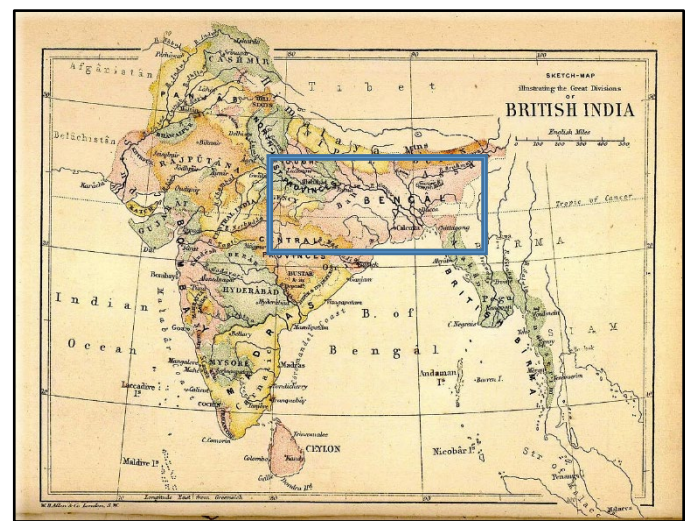
Case study: indigo cultivation in colonial Bengal

Bengal and Bihar, two major regions in north-east India, became integral to the British colonial economy during the expansion of the East India Company (EIC) in the eighteenth century. Fertile and densely populated, they were especially important for rice cultivation and export. During this period, British commercial interests rapidly expanded, driven by European demand for cash crops, particularly indigo dye, which was used in textiles. The profitability of indigo attracted British planters to the region, and both Bengal and Bihar became sites of deep colonial economic intervention. These regions offer a crucial case study for understanding how colonialism reshaped patterns of land use, labour, capital investment and rural livelihoods in India.

Before colonial intervention, peasants grew food crops on land that they managed through traditional tenancies. The EIC's support for indigo cultivation changed this.

Indigo required spring sowing, at the same time as rice, Bengal's main subsistence crop. To force its cultivation, British planters used a system of contracts backed by loans (*dadon*) that bound *ryots* (peasants and tenant farmers) to grow indigo on their best plots. The EIC and planters also took advantage of the Permanent Settlement (1793), which granted *zamindars* (landlords) full ownership rights. Many planters became *zamindars* themselves or manipulated these local landowners to force indigo onto the land. As a result, land once used for food was converted to use for indigo cultivation, often degrading the soil and reducing local food security. The most fertile and elevated plots were prioritised for indigo, leaving peasants vulnerable to famine.

The labour used to grow indigo was not enslaved, but it was far from free. *Ryots* were drawn into the system through advance payments that they could not refuse, especially during poor harvest years. Refusing to grow indigo meant losing access to credit or land, and could even lead to physical violence or lawsuits. Planters required indigo to be grown with scrupulous attention to timing and weeding, meaning that intense manual work was demanded from peasants. The crop's demands disrupted the agricultural calendar, and women and children were often pulled into the work to meet planter deadlines. This labour system did not allow peasants to benefit from their own productivity. According to testimony before the Indigo Commission (1860), *ryots* often lost money when growing indigo. One estimate found that *ryots* lost 7 rupees per area of land compared to growing food crops.



A map of British India indicating Bengal and Bihar

'The sowing of the indigo crop was not obligatory.'

Ashley Eden, Barasat Magistrate, 1859, quoted in Singh, 2017, p. 219 (this official clarification was issued only after widespread unrest)

'The indigo planter is not a man, but a devil in human form... We have no freedom. We are slaves in our own land.'

Dinabandhu Mitra, *Nil Darpan*, 1860 (*Nil Darpan* was a Bengali-language play, which, through satire, was very critical of treatment of indigo workers in Bengal)

The indigo economy also changed how capital operated in Bengal. The EIC encouraged indigo production because it was a reliable means of generating profits for export and remittances to Britain. In the early 1800s, returns on indigo investments reached up to 400%, and it became one of the most profitable exports in the EIC's trade. Planters took out large loans – often from British banks – to build factories and lease land. After the crash of the Union Bank of

Calcutta (1834), many smaller factories were taken over by larger concerns that squeezed *ryots* harder to maintain profit margins. Capital was no longer invested in improving land or productivity; instead, it was focused on extracting as much output as possible, regardless of the cost to Indian livelihoods.

British capital supported a system of debt. Advances given to *ryots* were not generous; they were a mechanism of control. They kept peasants in a perpetual cycle of dependency, unable to refuse contracts or switch to subsistence crops.

In 1859, the system reached breaking point. In areas such as Krishnagar, Pabna, Jessore and Murshidabad, *ryots* refused to accept further loans, effectively refusing to grow indigo. This resistance spread rapidly, often led by village headmen or larger tenant farmers. In Ballavpur, one missionary wrote that villagers repelled armed factory agents using bows, stones, brass plates and even kitchen utensils. In Jessore, the Biswas brothers organised villagers to fight back against the notorious planter William White. Although this rebellion was eventually suppressed, it forced the British government to act.

In late 1860, an official proclamation was made: no cultivator could be legally compelled to grow indigo. While this marked the end of large-scale indigo in Bengal, planters simply moved operations to Bihar, where the system survived until Gandhi's intervention in Champaran.

'The peasants associated indigo with swindle and oppression – and that was it.' **Sushant Kumar Singh, 2017, p. 223**

Homework task:

1. Highlight/underline and annotate any of the following in the text:

- a) anything about how land/labour/capital/infrastructure was affected
- b) evidence of accommodation/resistance

2. Write a short response to the following questions:

- a) Was indigo cultivation an example of resistance, accommodation or both?
- b) How does this case illustrate the 'drain of wealth' in practice?
- c) What does it reveal about land ownership, credit and labour under colonialism?

References:

Singh, S.K. (2017) 'The condition of the workers in indigo plantation work during the period between 1850 and 1895' in *International Journal of Applied Research*, 3, no. 6, pp. 219–223, <https://nawababdullatif.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/The-condition-of-the-workers-in-Indigo-Plantation-work-during-the-period-between-1850-and-1895-by-Sushant-Kumar-Singh.pdf>

Map taken and adapted from: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pope1880BritishIndia1.jpg>