

Role of Christian Missionaries in Indigo Movement in Nadia district

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Abstract: The social upheaval that prevailed in nineteenth-century Bengal occurred mainly due to the extensive cultivation of indigo in the rich soil of the province by the European colonizers. The colonial ruling millocracy was forced to retreat at that time owing to an overwhelming dominance of the peasants of Bengal. The most important role was played by the peasantry, inflicted in general, during that rebellion most of whom were the inhabitants of undivided Nadia district. Christian missionaries had played an active role in this movement, though their deeds were a bit controversial and argumentative. A brief account of the activities of the missionaries, especially the missionaries of the Church Missionary Society in this "Blue mutiny" in Nadia district, is given. A search of involvement with the Indigo movement and their motives behind it has been tried here. Attempts have been made to highlight their relationship with the common peasants and English officials during this period. The activities of their various organizations in this movement have been described. Attempts have also been made to present their views on the Indigo movement through their submissions to the Indigo Commission.

Keywords: Indigo Cultivation, Commercialisation of agriculture, Tortured Ryot, Social Activists, Christian Missionaries, Indigo Commission.

The revolt which shook the British rule during the 19th century was an uprising of indigo farmers against the indigo planters is popularly known as 'Nil Bidroha'. Indigo planting in Bengal started back in 1777 when Louis Bornand, a Frenchman introduced it in India. He was the first indigo planter of Bengal. He started cultivation at Taldanga and Goalpara near Chandannagar.¹ The indigo plantation enhanced under a changing political scenario when the powers of the Bengal Nawabs weakened gradually leading to a simultaneous rise of British imperialist power. The indigo plantation on the other hand became commercially profitable because of the huge demand for blue dye in Europe. Before Bengal, indigo was cultivated in western India, particularly in Gujrat. In Bengal, it was introduced in large parts of Bardhaman, Bankura, Birbhum, North 24 Parganas and Jessore (Present Bangladesh). After the battle of Plassey, Bengal became the main centre of

indigo planting as the Nawabs of Bengal became puppets under the British power. During that period undivided Nadia became the main centre of indigo cultivation. In the uprising of peasants against the indigo planters, the farmers of undivided Nadia played the most important role.² Dewan Kartikeo Chandra Roy wrote that in the initial stage indigo plantation was confined to local business however with the East India Company acquiring the Deewanee rights, few Englishmen started indigo cultivation at Nabadwip and as it proved profitable the area of plantation increased gradually.³ Nadia was the main centre of indigo cultivation is opined by Kantichandra Radi in his book "Nabadwip mohima".⁴ In Nadia indigo cultivation was initiated by the natives but gradually the Europeans bought those. Babu Girish Chandra Basu who worked as a 'Daroga' from 1853-1860 at Nabadwip, Shantipur and Krishnanagar of Nadia district and also appeared as a witness before the Nil commission to express the vastness of nil cultivation wrote, 'If anyone flew in a plane above the district of Nadia and looked down, the nil kuthis would seem to him like 'Bodi' (Little balls of split pulses), laid down upon a sheet of cotton.'⁵ Numerous nil kuthis were established on the fertile soil of Nadia, which was followed by inhuman torture to the indigo planters in this district that was beyond description. The farmers of Nadia protested unitedly against this exploitation. Their protest became violent and people from every class participated in it. Not only the farmers but also some landlords supported the uprising. As a result in 1860 when Indigo Commission came into force the members of the commission paid special attention to the crisis of the Nadia district. Other than Kolkata, Krishnanagar was the only city where the witness was taken from 9-18 July, 1860 by the Indigo Commission. The maximum number of people who appeared as a witness before the commission from Nadia.⁶

Merchants of East India company realised that they would earn huge profits through the cultivation of indigo. As a result, they started establishing Nil Kuthis in Bengal. Their approach to some extent changed the nature of India's agriculture which was to a certain extent self-sufficient in nature. They expose it to the world economic system to earn more profit. In the social and political context of colonialism multifaceted changes could be witnessed during the said time. Linking the agriculture of the Indian sub-continent with the ongoing world capitalist force was a significant change. The commercialization of agriculture also affected the social structure of the village.⁷ In this respect Dewan Kartikeo Chandra Roy wrote, '...the way the socio-economic condition of the people changed due to the advent of nil cultivation was incomparable; no other factor had so much effect.'⁸ In pre-British India villages were self-sufficient and had little contact with the outside world. Social scientist Karl Marx described Indian village society as an unmoved and deeply rooted one.⁹ This concept is debated.¹⁰

Implementation of various land reformation rules by the then East-India company did try to change the feudalised system of agriculture to capitalist

form. They adopted new settlement rules, reformation of land, cash payment system, etc. Those new regulations increased economic pressure on the farmers. But the English educated the new bourgeoisie class of India whose representatives were Rammohan Roy and Dwarkanath Thakur supported that new system. They opposed the monopoly of East India Company. They supported free cultivation and commercialization of indigo because they firmly believed that the free trade of indigo would benefit the farmers and Indian society would be benefited financially.¹¹

But practically there was an adverse effect. Indigo farming ruined the farmers and the number of food crops decreased. Excessive cultivation of indigo led to depreciating the profit margin of the farmers. They were unwilling to cultivate indigo instead of food crops. When they objected, they were brutally tortured; such as destroying and burning the houses of the unwilling planters. 'The Bengal Hurkaru' mockingly wrote the formula of indigo production –

Human Blood 68.15
Unhallowed Connection 12.97
Violence and Fraud 10.13
Old Balances 8.47
Cash 0.25
Honesty a frace
Total 99.97¹²

'The Hindoo Patriot,' the popular magazine of that time also expected that the Indigo Commission's findings would prove the statement of Hurkaru and report about the inhuman torture unleashed on the cultivators which raised the question of whether there was any law and order in the country.¹³

A host of people across the society from the educated middle class to social and religious organizations came in support of the cultivators. Amongst them, the Christian Missionaries played a significant role. They sided with the oppressed farmers. It was said that every box of indigo that reached England was drenched by the blood of the cultivators.¹⁴

The Christian Missionaries undoubtedly played an important and controversial role in the revolt of the farmers against the indigo planters. After winning the battle of Plassey, the East India Company had acquired the Dewani rights settled firmly in India. Not only the merchant from various European countries but also the Christian Missionaries started coming to this country to spread Christianity among the Indians. At the very beginning, the Jesuit came to Bengal. In the year 1599 Pratapaditya, the king of Jessore, permitted the Jesuit community to establish a church.¹⁵As the English East India Company gradually increased their power and judicial control in India, Christian Missionaries from different European countries arrived here and

started their evangelical work in Bengal. As they had to mix with the poor farmers and other fellows of villages for their evangelical work, they eventually had to feel the problem of the poor farmers. Ultimately, they got involved in indigo-related problems. They started protesting against the immoral torture of the indigo planters.

Missionary organizations such as Baptist Missionary Society, London Missionary Society, Church Missionary Society, Free Church of Scotland Mission, Cathedral Mission, etc raised their voice against the ruthless torture of the indigo planters. They also played an important role to stop that inhuman act of indigo planters. An inner conflict did arise within the Missionaries.¹⁶ The question was whether they would support the farmers or not. On 6th September, 1855 Frederic Schurr, a member of Church Missionary Society's Krishnanagar Mission in a conference of Bengal Protestant Missionaries submitted an article entitled 'Influence of the system of Indigo planting on the spread of Christianity' where he described the condition of indigo cultivators. In this article, he did describe every aspect of indigo cultivation. Forty-two persons attended the conference, many among them supported Frederic Schurr. He also proposed that the Government should appoint a commission to discuss the problems of indigo cultivation. The formation of the Indigo Commission was such a proposal. Priest Schurr also presented a report prepared by the ryots of Krishnanagar, in which they described their plight in detail. Their description was almost similar to Schurr's. Their conference was no doubt a milestone to the Indigo movement. After this conference, the missionaries became more conscious about the rights of the farmers and they began to take a more active part in their movement.¹⁷

To decide what should be the exact role of the missionaries regarding indigo cultivation another general meeting of the Calcutta Missionary conference was held on 5th April 1860. A sub-committee consisting of Messrs Sel, Hill, Alexander Duff and James Long was created to analyze critically the proposals of the Government's enquire committee. In the meeting, held on 8th May, 1860, the members were informed of sending the memorandum accepted by the committee to the Lieutenant Governor. The proposal of the memorandum was accepted unanimously in the third meeting, held on November 6, 1860. Members of the sub-committee were congratulated and Messrs Sel was thanked for playing an important and positive role as a member of the Indigo Commission. During that period Bengal Hurkaru supported the farmers.¹⁸

James Long led from the front in this farmer's movement which was against the Indigo planters. James Long appeared before the Parliamentary committee on colonization in India and briefed in detail the torture of the farmers by the indigo planters. To stop that ruthless torture, he wrote a letter to the central office of the "Christian Missionary Society" in London clarifying

the reason to support the cultivators which was the question of morality. To save the farmers he used to send letters to the influential people of England and also supplied them with information. In the conference of the missionaries, he proved how the inhuman torture of the planters hurt their missionary activity and submitted an article entitled 'The Ryot-His teacher and torture'. The way the missionaries of India, Europe particularly of England, raised their voice and tried their best lobbying against the planters to the influential people, was enough to prove their stand against the indigo planters. Their stand was undoubtedly a hurdle to the profit-earning indigo cultivation business of the Planters. So, they approached the Bishop of Kolkata to curb the power and influence of the village evangelists but their appeal had no effect. Being annoyed the planters started taking tough measures against them. In some cases, the missionaries were humiliated physically and in other cases, they were maligned. The majority of the baptised Indians were poor farmers and common people whose well beings were also the moral responsibility of the missionaries. The most affected class was the indigo cultivators. The Indigo Rebellion comprised wide-spread peasant uprisings in Bengal from 1839 to 1860 against rapacious planters of the indigo crop. The Christian missionaries stood firmly in support of the protesting farmers.¹⁹

Among the evangelical organisations Church Missionary Society earned maximum success in Nadia. In spreading Christianity Mr. Deer of the church Missionary Society played an important role. He is credited with establishing schools in Krishnanagr, Nabadwip and later in Kapasdanga, Chapra, Ratanpur and Solo.²⁰ One of the remote places in Nadia was Solo where evidence of conversions could be found from the writing of James Long.²¹ In those days it was an important achievement no doubt. Maximum members of that society were Germans who were in charge of spreading Christianity. The majority of the indigo planters were either English or Irish, as a result some German ego certainly worked among them. Sometimes tortured farmers did approach Christian missionaries to save them from torture.

From the very beginning of indigo cultivation, the relationship between the farmers and the planters was a strain. The planters used their power without paying any respect to the role of the land. Their only motive was profit and more profit. To reach their goal they adopted all sorts of inhuman methods, though the company was well aware of it. The planters had a very cordial relationship with many high-level officials and judges. When Christian priests complained about any planter, the judge used to disbelieve him such as the relation between them. Kangal Harinath a social activist and writer of Kumarkhali, Nadia and a well-known personality of the then Bengal wrote in his "Grambarta Prokashika" which was a pro farmers Patrika reported that the officials thought that the planters were Christians, civilized hence could not torture the ryots. The root of unrest was the ryots, which were upheld by the government officials. The report of the magazine even requested the judges at least to believe the Christian missionaries.²²

The Christian missionaries not only listened to the painful story of the ryots but also tried their best to help them in their crisis. As a result, the oppressed farmers started to become their followers. They started believing that missionaries could solve their problem. The poor peasants of Bengal could not face the powerful European planters. The more the missionaries penetrated amongst the farmers and started fighting against the oppression of the planters, they became unpopular with the planters. Even in some cases, they were threatened. The members of the Church Missionary Society of Nadia took leading part in the movement against the European planters. As a result, the oppressed farmers became their followers and it helped the missionaries to spread Christianity. People like James Long stood firmly for the farmers. The Anglo-Irish priest fought bravely against the indigo planters. The condition of the farmers was like slaves. James Long published and circulated the English-translated copies of "Nil Darpan" among the influential persons. The play had a tremendous impact upon the society at large in arising hostility against the planters.²³

The missionary's activity helped them to spread Christianity amongst the poor cultivators but their contribution to the indigo movement cannot be denied. Priest Kuthbert who was in charge of the solo mission in Nadia said that their motto was to help the downtrodden people hence got involved in the indigo cultivation problem. He also appeared as a witness, being the secretary of Church Missionary Society, to Indigo Commission and told that in some cases the missionaries played important role in organising the peasants; particularly in appearing as a witness before the Indigo Commission. As a witness, he reported about the plight of cultivators due to the torture of the planters.²⁴ When Frederrie Schurr was in charge of Nadia's Kapasdanga mission he witnessed the plight of the indigo farmers as they were discouraged to cultivate anything other than indigo. However, Priest Schurr advocated a peaceful movement to the protesting farmers. For outrageous protest was considered as illegal and an act of sin.²⁵

Father Linke as a witness appeared before the Indigo Commission. He said that there was no shortage of examples of torture upon the farmers by the indigo planters. After 1856 the oppression of the planters knew no bounds, as a result of their inhuman torture, the farmers did not get sufficient time to cultivate food crops like rice. For example, he told, -"About 3 or 4 years ago, either in 1856 or 1857, many cattle had been taken away belonging to Christians in the neighbouring village during the day time; the people came and complained to me, and I wrote to the planter remonstrating. He in reply said, I had been misinformed, whereupon I replied with a statement of the names of the people who had taken cattle away, such as factory servants and lattials." He also said- '...there is injustice in this, in fact, injustice on the indigo proceedings from beginning to end...'. He even complained that the magistrates did not take proper steps based on the complaints lodged by the

ryots.²⁶

Charles Henry Blumhardt while disclosing the relation between 'Daroga's and 'Planter's told, 'I cannot see what motive they could have had in instigating the ryots against the planters, especially as the darogas are generally kept on good terms with the planters.' The terms and conditions between the ryots and the planters also mentioned the amount that the peasants lose per bigha of land and wondered how they were still patient.²⁷ J. H. Anderson, a Baptist missionary reported before the Indigo Commission that the ryots complaint about the unjust behaviour meet to them by the planters and in two villages people were willing to get converted if the missionaries rescued them from the untold miseries and oppression of the planters.²⁸

Among the priests of Nadia district Church Missionary Society's German Priest, Bomwetsch played the most important role in organising the oppressed farmers. The planters lodged various complaints against him but his only offense was that he stood firmly in favour of the toiling farmers. 'The Dhaka news', a pro-planters Patrika defined him as a 'political Missionary, 'Father of Lies, 'Wrecked Missionary'.²⁹ In a letter published in 'The Indian Field' Magazine he defended himself against the fabricated allegations.³⁰ Priest Bomwetsch wrote in the Indian Field Magazine – "...when the farmers of Nadia's Ballavpur declined to cultivate indigo the planters threatened them to attack their village with lathials. But the villagers got themselves prepared to retaliate against the attack. The planned attack of the planter proved futile as the lathials got frightened seeing the iron-willed determination of the ryots...".³¹ Father Bomwetsch wrote in 'The Hindoo Partiot' about his experience while he was in Shantipur Mission. His descriptions suggest how the planters were eager in gaining control over the looks by force over and even punished those who were unwilling to cultivate Indigo. Further some of the farmers from the villages of Meliaputta, Pathorghata, and Gobindopore area had never cultivated indigo hence begged protection from Father Bomwetsch. The people of Meliaputta were threatened to cultivate indigo.³²

Various causes were leading to the revolt of farmers. The indigo planters persuaded the peasants to plant indigo instead of food crops on their own lands. They provided loans, called 'dadon', at very high interest. Once the farmers took such loans he remained in debt for his whole life before passing it to his successors. The price paid by the planters was meager, only 2.5% of the market price. The farmers could make no profit from farming indigo. They were unprotected from the indigo planters, who resorted to mortgages or destruction of their property if they were unwilling to obey them. Government rules favoured the planters only.³³

The imprisonment of James Long has been discussed. Not only the planters but also some of the missionaries opposed him. Being encouraged by the punishment of James Long, the planters lodged complaints against many

missionaries who opposed them and supported the farmers. One such incident happened in Nadia. It was an abduction case in which a young girl, named Harmoni was abducted. This incident of kidnapping raised a hue and cry in Indigo Commission. Bomwetsch was involved in campaigning for the farmers. He appeared before the Indigo Commission as a witness on subsequent two days i.e., on 31 May and 1st June 1860. He narrated a few incidents of torture upon the ryots by the planters. In this, he narrated the incident of abduction of two women. While fetching water two women were abducted by the servants of the planters. One of them was let free but charmed by the beauty of the other woman, taken to a factory. He further added that after abduction the girl was taken to different nil khutis. After that, she was taken to one of her relatives from where she was able to reach her home. He believed that the girl was forced to spend three days out of her home. The incidents of abduction became a common feature. Hearing such a serious complaint from a devoted Christian the President of Indigo Commission ordered Mr. Harsel, the then-District Magistrate of Nadia to conduct an enquire. On 10th March 1860, Harimoni confessed that she was confined in a room of Kachikata Nil Kuthi, after three hours she was taken to another place by palanquin bearers. She also claimed that she was abducted by the order of a saheb and she was confined in a room and was physically harassed. That Kachikata Nil Kuthi was 38 miles away from Krishnanagar, near Karimpur village. The infamous Archibald Hills was the indigo planter. He abducted beautiful Harimoni and sexually tortured her. Harishchandra Mukhopadhy did write an article blaming Archibald for that heinous crime. The basis of the article was the report of Nadia's District Magistrate and his source. He directly raised his finger at the planter Archibald. In spite of all the proofs, the District Magistrate of Nadia Mr. Harsel gave a clean chit to Archibald Hills. Appearing before the Indigo Commission Archibald said that he knew nothing about the abduction and when he realized the mistake, he arranged for her return to hand safe and sound with full respect.³⁴

Indigo cultivation had created uncertainties amongst the farmers. Before the introduction of the indigo plantation, they did work under the local landlords but when indigo cultivation started, they worked for the indigo planters. It was true that the zamindars also exploited them but there was a difference between the zamindars and planters. Priest Linke compared the situation by saying-"I have observed no difference, but in the Burdwan district I think the villages are much better; there is more pukka house than in Krishnagar. In Krishnagar you must go a long way to see a pukka house, except what belongs to zemindars, a Government served, or the servant of a factory."³⁵ Common people started believing that the British had already gained control over the country. They did not like those foreign indigo planters. Generally, indigo and rice were cultivated at the same time. The farmers were unwilling to cultivate indigo instead of food crops. Farmers also did not derive any profit from indigo cultivation. The torture the farmers had

to face was beyond description if they refused to cultivate indigo. Sometimes the farmers did lodge complaints against the planters but without any effect because the planters were favourites of the administrators. Law and order became a mockery. The judges were friends of the planters. The police had nothing to do even as they feared the planters. If any planter complained against any daroga the magistrate would suspend him – there were many examples of such incidents. The planters were good friends of magistrates so they became extremely powerful.

The missionaries organised meetings, the movement used their contact with the influential people which created a favourable public opinion for the farmers both in India as well as in England. At first, they failed but ultimately Government was forced to form the Indigo Commission in 1860 and even included Baptist missionary G. Sel as one of the members of the Commission through the planters were against it.³⁶ They told, "Missionary body ought not to have a seat at this board."³⁷ On 27 November 1860 a conference was held by the Church Missionary Society in Calcutta in which missionary societies of Bardhaman, Krishnanagar and Calcutta participated. In this conference they agreed with some positive notes regarding the Indigo Commission and took the under mentioned proposal – 'Much time has been occupied in previous meetings of the conference in discussing questions connected with the oppression suffered by the peasantry of a large portion of the century through the operation of the prevailing system of indigo planting. Recent events, however, the appointment by the Government of a special Commission to enquire into the matter, and the results attending upon the step, have already affected considerable relief. The brethren, therefore, record on the expression of their thankfulness to the great ruler of all things who through the ruling of His providence has brought these events about and they earnestly pray that the good which has been produced may be permanent and that a cause of just complaint against the proceedings of European Christians may thus be done away and a hindrance to the progress of the gospel removed.'³⁸

The East India Company in remote villages had to depend upon the indigo planters to establish its rule as till then they were not the sovereign rulers. The company also used the planters against the landlords who were against British rule. Naturally, the government was unwilling to take any firm decision against them fearing adverse effects. On the other hand, the missionaries from their practical experience realized that the simple village fellows who were tortured ruthlessly by the indigo planters did not make any difference between them and the planters. The ryots thought that they were in the same boat as their religion and culture were similar. As a result, the missionaries realised that the planters posed a hindrance in their evangelical activity. As a priest, Father Frederrie Schurr faced such a problem. He narrated that the ryots did treat every European equally. Even those who did

not know Frederrie Schurr thought that he was appointed by the planters to spread Christianity. The farmers refused to go to heaven as they hated the idea of residing in heaven with the wretched planters.³⁹ In spite of that situation, they prayed to the missionaries to help them against the torture of the planters because they lost faith in the judiciary and in some cases, they did get some positive results as the Government officials honoured the missionaries' approach. The evangelists feared that if all the farmers of the land revolted unitedly against the planters it would have an adverse effect on British imperialism. As Christianity never tolerates torture of innocent, poor people or any kind of inhuman act hence it was quite natural that the missionaries would not support the planters. This religious tolerance was not true in every case. In some places, some missionaries themselves became the owner of Nil Kuthis such as Willam Kery, Thomas themselves owned Nil Kuthis at Malda.⁴⁰ They wanted to use the profit, coming out from indigo cultivation, in the cause of spreading Christianity to different districts of the Bengal Presidency. The missionaries had a multifaceted reason for supporting the cause of the indigo farmers. Whatever their motto might be the fact was that they did support the struggling farmers.

Missionaries were praised in the report of the Commission. It declared that it was quite natural that the farmers knocked at the doors of the missionaries because they had no other option. The missionaries on their part patiently listened to them, realised their problem and got more involved in their problem compared to other Europeans although there was a language problem. In supporting the oppressed farmers, they had no personal and political interest was the opinion of the Commission. Though the statement of the Commission could be questioned as the missionary's involvement with the indigo movement was not free from interest. It could be concluded that the missionaries did play an important role in safeguarding the interest of the struggling poor farmers in spite of fierce opposition from the planters, fellow Europeans and some local zamindars also. The indigo revolt proved successful as the Government was forced to introduce the Indigo Act of 1862.⁴¹

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