

UPSC Civil Services Examination

UPSC Notes [GS-I]

Topic: Peasant Movements in the 19th Century - Indigo Rebellion **[NCERT Notes]**

The Indigo Rebellion (Neel Bidroho) took place in Bengal in 1859-60 and was a revolt by the farmers against British planters who had forced them to grow indigo under terms that were greatly unfavourable to the farmers.

Causes of the Indigo Rebellion/Revolt

- Indigo cultivation started in Bengal in 1777.
- Indigo was in high demand worldwide. Trade in indigo was lucrative due to the demand for blue dye in Europe.
- European planters enjoyed a monopoly over indigo and they forced Indian farmers to grow indigo by signing fraudulent deals with them.
- The cultivators were forced to grow indigo in place of food crops.
- They were advanced loans for this purpose. Once the farmers took loans, they could never repay it due to the high rates of interest.
- The tax rates were also exorbitant.
- The farmers were brutally oppressed if they could not pay the rent or refused to do as asked by the planters.
- They were forced to sell indigo at non-profitable rates so as to maximize the European planters' profits.
- If a farmer refused to grow indigo and planted paddy instead, the planters resorted to illegal means to get the farmer to grow indigo such as looting and burning crops, kidnapping the farmer's family members, etc.
- The government always supported the planters who enjoyed many privileges and judicial immunities.

Indigo Rebellion

- The indigo farmers revolted in the Nadia district of Bengal by refusing to grow indigo. They attacked the policemen who intervened. The planters, in response to this, increased the rents and evicted the farmers which led to more agitations.
- In April 1860, all the farmers in the Barasat division of the districts Nadia and Pabna went on a strike and refused to grow indigo.

- The strike spread to other parts of Bengal.
- The farmers were led by the Biswas brothers of Nadia, Rafiq Mondal of Malda and Kader Molla of Pabna. The revolt also received support from many zamindars notably Ramrattan Mullick of Narail.
- The revolt was suppressed and many farmers were slaughtered by the government and some of the zamindars.
- The revolt was backed by the Bengali intelligentsia, Muslims and the missionaries. The whole of the rural population supported the revolt.
- The press also supported the revolt and played its part in portraying the plight of the farmers and fighting for their cause.
- The play *Nil Darpan* (The Mirror of Indigo) by Dinabandhu Mitra written in 1858 – 59 portrayed the farmers' situation accurately. It showed how farmers were coerced into planting indigo without adequate payment. The play became a talking point and it urged the Bengali intelligentsia to lend support to the indigo revolt. Reverend James Long translated the play into English on the authority by the Secretary to the Governor of Bengal, W S Seton-Karr. The planters who were treated as villains in the play sued Rev. Long for libel. Rev. Long was pronounced guilty and had to pay Rs.1000 as compensation and serve a month in prison.

Assessment of the Indigo Rebellion

- The revolt was largely non-violent and it acted as a precursor to Gandhiji's non-violent satyagraha in later years.
- The revolt was not a spontaneous one. It was built up over years of oppression and suffering of the farmers at the hands of the planters and the government.
- Hindus and Muslims joined hands against their oppressors in this rebellion.
- It also saw the coming together of many zamindars with the ryots or farmers.
- The revolt was a success despite its brutal quelling by the government.
- In response to the revolt, the government appointed the Indigo Commission in 1860. In the report, a statement read, 'not a chest of Indigo reached England without being stained with human blood.'
- A notification was also issued which stated that farmers could not be forced to grow indigo.
- By the end of 1860, indigo cultivation was literally washed away from Bengal since the planters closed their factories and left for good.
- The revolt was made immensely popular by its portrayal in the play *Nil Darpan* and also in many other works of prose and poetry. This led to the revolt taking center stage in the political consciousness of Bengal and impacted many later movements in Bengal.