Indigo Plantations and Science in Colonial India

Prakash Kumar documents the history of agricultural indigo, exploring the effects of global processes on a colonial industry in South Asia. Kumar discusses how the knowledge of indigo culture thrived among peasant traditions on the Indian subcontinent in the early modern period. Caribbean planters and French naturalists then developed and codified this knowledge in widely disseminated texts. European planters who began to settle in Bengal with the establishment of British rule in the third quarter of the eighteenth century drew on this network of information. Through the nineteenth century, indigo culture in Bengal became more modern, science based, and expert driven. When a cheaper and purer synthetic indigo was created in 1897, the planters and the colonial state established laboratories to find ways to cheapen the cost of the agricultural dye and improve its purity. This indigo science crossed paths with the colonial state’s effort to develop a science for agricultural development and the effort by the Indian intelligentsia to develop a science for the nation. For two decades, natural indigo survived the competition of the industrial substitute. The indigo industry’s optimism faded only at the end of the First World War, when the use of German synthetic indigo for textile dyeing and printing became almost universal.

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Dedicated to the memory of my father,
Akhileshwar Prasad Sinha
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Preface

This book explores the construction of marginality for agricultural indigo via colonial conditions and global processes. The history of the dye’s development on the Indian subcontinent exemplifies colonial power and conditions. The life cycle of indigo on the subcontinent also illustrates participation of colonial India in a global order of uneven structures. The Indian peasantry’s labor for the production of indigo was appropriated for a world market. European planters were the agents of this appropriation. This cheap Bengal indigo produced with the labor of Indian peasantry pushed out Spanish and French indigo from the world markets, making dyers across the world beneficiaries of the colonial enterprise in Bengal. The subsequent marginalization of agricultural indigo by synthetic dyes was itself the product of new global rankings among major industrial powers when Germany emerged to be the leading industrial producer of hydrocarbon-derived dyes. The “global” in this study, to deploy the Africanist James Ferguson’s use of the phrase, is “globe-hopping, not globe covering.” The global emerges at certain points as processes, multiscalar in dimension, are connected in historically contingent ways. It does not efface the other forces characterized as local, colonial, national, metropolitan, and imperial but is integrated with them.
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The project on the history of indigo took concrete shape as part of my doctoral research at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. In 2000, I first found papers on indigo experiments in colonial India among agricultural files during a summer visit to the Bihar State Archives in Patna. These papers ignited my initial interest in the subject and became the core of a developing project on colonial history of indigo for my Ph.D. thesis. As my principal supervisor John Krige at Georgia Tech helped define this project, and his exceptional support was critical to the launching of this project and its development through to the very end. John was an ideal supervisor and remains a very important influence on
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