A Study of the Indigo Disturbances in Bengal (1)

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This is the first part of the author's planned study of the Indigo Disturbances in Bengal (1859—1862). In this paper, the history of indigo trade from the late 18th century to the 1850’s is analyzed to clarify the background of the Disturbances. In view of the fact that indigo was introduced into Bengal to provide the East India Company, their servants and free traders with a means of remittance, special attention is paid to what is called the remittance problem.

The author proposes to divide the history of indigo trade into three periods, namely, the growing (upto around 1810), the prosperous (1810’s and 1820’s), and the declining (1830’s to 1850’s) periods. It was during the second period that indigo played a crucial role in draining the wealth of India to Great Britain through remittance. It is also quite clear that emergence of indigo trade can be regarded as a typical case of development of India into a raw material producing country which was strongly pushed forward by both the East India Company and agency houses for the purpose of maintaining remittance. Adversely affected, however, by the total transformation of the colonial system in India, indigo began to lose its importance not only as a means of remittance but as a leading export commodity since the 1830’s. By the late 1840’s the decline of indigo trade appears to have become inevitable. It may safely be said that the Indigo Disturbances broke out as a necessary consequence of the ever worsening position of indigo trade.

In concluding remarks, the author suggests that since the transformation of the colonial system forms the background of the Indigo Disturbances cannot convincingly be explained by simply pointing out the oppressive character of indigo cultivation system. It would be more significant and fruitful for the understanding of the Disturbances to set them in a proper perspective of the 19th century history of India, and,
above all, to inquire into the changes in the economic and social conditions of Bengal peasantry brought about by the said transformation and their impact on indigo cultivation.