



A vat of indigo dye

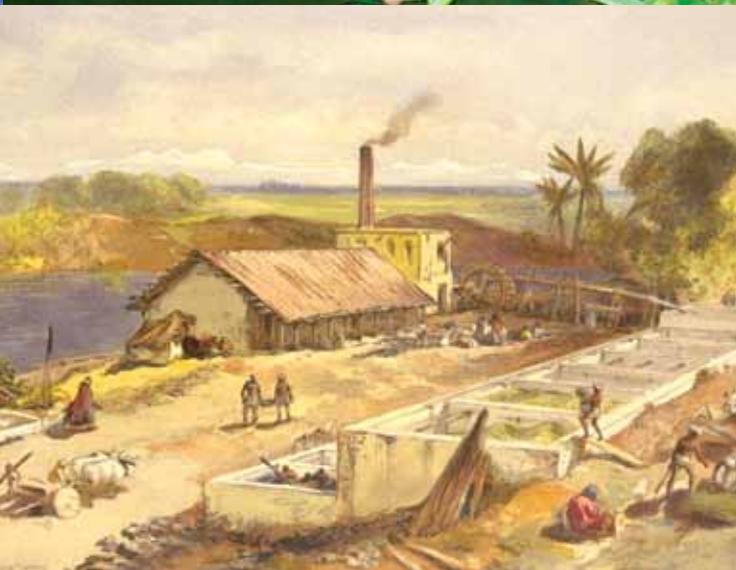
by Pamela D. Toler

# The Ryots 'Revolt'

**I**t was the fall of 1859, and thousands of *Ryots* ("peasant-farmers") in the Indian province of Bengal were refusing to accept cash advances to plant indigo crops in the spring. Their act of resistance became known as the Blue Mutiny.



**TOP:** A close-up look at *Indigofera tinctoria*, a plant that was one of the original sources of indigo dye.  
**BOTTOM:** Workers at an indigo factory in Bengal, India, in 1867, carry the plants to the processing tanks where they will be made into dye.



violence to force unwilling *Ryots* to plant indigo. Some forged contracts. Others resorted to beatings, looting, arson, kidnapping, and even murder to make *Ryots* accept cash advances.

Once a ryot had accepted an indigo contract, willingly or not, he received a cash advance in the fall to plant indigo the following spring. In theory, he would repay his advance and make a small profit after harvesting his indigo. In bad years, expenses exceeded advances and *Ryots* owed the planters money. Many planters then used the threat of unpaid debts to force *Ryots* to continue planting indigo year after year. Even in good years, planters often did not pay *Ryots* what they were owed at the end of the growing season.

*Ryots* had little recourse against the planters. The latter were supported, both officially and unofficially, by officers of the East India Company, which ruled parts of India from 1757 to 1858. Isolated outbreaks of violence against planters and indigo factories occurred as early as 1809. They were, however, quickly suppressed by the police. On the rare occasions when *Ryots* took the expensive and difficult step of going to court, magistrates generally supported the planters.

Property laws in Bengal put European indigo planters in conflict with *Ryots*. This had been true ever since commercial indigo growing was introduced to Bengal little more than 60 years earlier. In the Americas, planters grew indigo on their own land using hired labor or slaves. In Bengal, Europeans were not allowed to own land, so planters had to contract with *Ryots* to grow indigo for them in the *Ryots'* fields.

### **Forced Planting**

From the first, *Ryots* were reluctant to grow indigo. This was because indigo was sown and harvested at the same time as rice, their primary food crop. Planters used both trickery and

### **A Difficult Market**

The system was, by nature, unstable: Profits depended both on prices on the world indigo market and on good crop yields. In the 1830s



**Jeans! Jeans! Jeans! Most everyone wears them, but how many connect indigo with them? And, for a while, much of the indigo dye produced went into coloring the denim cloth used to make jeans?**

### **Court Case Overload**

Over the course of the next two years, violent responses to planter oppression spread throughout Bengal. Both planters and *Ryots* appealed to the government for aid. *Ryots* flooded officials with petitions for relief from specific abuses. Planters called for laws that would make breaking an indigo contract a criminal offense. The courts overflowed with indigo cases.

In 1860, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal appointed a commission to investigate conditions in the indigo industry. For four months, members of the Indigo Commission heard testimony in public hearings from every group with an interest in indigo.

The Commission's final report described an industry built on violence, coercion, and oppression. The Commissioners, however, were not able to agree on solutions, and the government took no action.

### **Peace—Then Protests—Then Gandhi**

By the middle of 1863, uneasy peace had been restored to the indigo districts. This peace was largely due to the resolution of hundreds of indigo cases in the courts that exposed planter abuses and clarified *Ryots'* rights. Pressured by public opinion, some planters re-negotiated their relationships with *Ryots*; others gave up indigo entirely.

Improved relations between planters and *Ryots* were not permanent. When synthetic dyes threatened to destroy the indigo industry, planters put new pressures on their workers. In 1916, Indian indigo workers once again protested the conditions under which they lived and worked, led by the young activist Mohandas Gandhi. ❏

and 1840s, crops were good and “Bengal blue” dominated the world indigo markets. From 1847 through 1858, bad weather reduced the average annual indigo crop yield by 23 percent compared to the previous decade. While indigo profits dropped, market prices for jute, linseed, and rice rose, making indigo contracts even less appealing to *Ryots*.

At the same time, the relationship between government officials and planters was disrupted. In 1858, following the violent uprisings known as the Indian Mutiny, the British Crown replaced the East India Company as India's ruler. Crown rule brought administrative changes at every level of the government. Smaller district divisions made it easier for *Ryots* to bring their complaints to court. More important, young magistrates, hired under a system of competitive examinations, occasionally ruled in favor of *Ryots* in disputes between *Ryots* and planters. In addition, word spread that the government would not force *Ryots* to grow indigo.

When *Ryots* refused to accept indigo advances in 1859, planters reacted the way they had in the past. They led armed bands of thugs to force *Ryots* to accept the payments. This time, some villages fought back.