Subaltern Voice and the Colonial Archive: Collective Petitions from the Indigo Rebellion

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This essay explores petitions as a crucial genre of response to colonial authority, emphasizing their role in articulating grievances without direct confrontation. Focusing on petitions submitted by villagers from the Bengal countryside during the Indigo Rebellion, it relocates the practice of petitioning beyond urban spaces and elite actors. This analysis engages with the methodological framework of Subaltern Studies to interrogate whether traces of the subaltern voice can be retrieved from the colonial archive. Central to this inquiry is a close examination of a petition submitted by ryots (peasants) of a village against an indigo planter over a land dispute. This case study sheds light on the intricate processes of mediation, appropriation, and reinterpretation that shape archival documents. Through a critical reading of the colonial archive, the essay highlights how petitions operated both as tools of resistance and as subjects of bureaucratic manipulation. Ultimately, this study reveals the inherent challenges of recovering subaltern perspectives from archival sources.

Keywords: Subaltern, Colonial archive, Indigo Rebellion, petitions, peasant, rural.

Introduction: Petitions and the Colonial Archive

One of the key challenges for historians dealing with colonial India has been navigating the archive. Among the early scholars critically dealing with the archive, Bernard Cohn showed us how the production and control over knowledge were fundamental to the project of colonialism in South Asia. This can be situated in a larger "historical turn" in anthropology, where its involvement with colonialism and the politics of knowledge production have been questioned. This has led to a critical reflection on archives as sites where

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anthropological knowledge is produced through ethnography, survey, and census.[1] Similarly, in history, the "archival turn" can be traced to Derrida's *Archive Fever*, which provided an impetus to historians to experiment with their sources, and as Ranajit Guha has warned us, sources are not "springs of real meanings" in themselves.[2] The critical engagement with archives has made us aware of archives as not just inert spaces for the storage of knowledge or material sites for a set of documents but as a proper process, as highlighted by Ann Laura Stoler.[3] This analytic shift, from archive as source to archive as subject, can be seen in Foucault's The *Archaeology of Knowledge*. For Foucault, the archive is not an institution but "the law of what can be said" and "the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. He defines the archive as a practice that determines what is filed rather than just a system of files.[4] This semantic shift in the understanding of archives influenced intellectual movements like the Subaltern Studies collective, a project of history-writing aims to recover the voice of subaltern subjects from the elite discourse of colonial and nationalist historiography.

Two contrasting but complementary methodologies are used by historians to read the colonial archives. One of them is to read the archive against the grain to extract the silenced subaltern voice, as shown by Guha in his seminal essays on subaltern studies. The other approach involves a close reading of the archive along the grain to better understand the anxieties of colonial knowledge.[5] Combining these two methods, this essay aims to undertake a critical reading of the colonial archive to find traces of subaltern voices and to grasp the complexities of archival production by looking at petitions.
Petitions constitute an interesting area of study in analysing responses of the colonised subjects to limitations imposed by colonial rule without direct confrontation. They also highlight the legal consciousness of the colonial

[1] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[2] Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Ranajit Guha, "The Proses of Counter-Insurgency", in *Culture, Power, History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1983] 1994), 336–37.

[3] Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 2002), 93, https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435632.

[4] Michel Foucault, "The Statement and the Archive" in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), 79–134.

[5] Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance", 99.

subject, as the act of writing a petition demands the writer to be aware of the complex colonial bureaucratic-legal order and several other accepted norms. Hence, the archive does not preserve a petition if it is not written in the form and style dictated by the State. It has been suggested by scholars that petitions emerged as a popular method of negotiation and platform for criticism under the colonial State. In recent years, petitions have gained popularity, as a growing body of historical scholarship has started exploring how petitions have been shaped by the necessities of their historical context. The growing historiography in recent decades has provided us with contrasting opinions regarding these petitions. For example, in her seminal work "*The Document Raj*", Bhavani Raman highlighted how petitioning developed in colonial Madras as the State tried to communicate with its subjects. She argued that the State's effort to "discipline petitions into expressions of sincerity, while managing information flow, generated the peculiar form of the colonial petition."[6] She emphasised how the Company State in Madras considered petitions as the only legitimate form of dissent, making direct resistance and protest disorderly and unacceptable.[7]

In her work on the petition archive from early colonial Madras, Aparna Balachandran showed us how petitions offer a unique way of understanding the relationship between the State and its subject. Historicising the practice of petitioning in Madras, she has looked at the petitions through the lens of the subaltern, urban communities of the city. Accepting the fact that petitions in South Asia were a product of colonial rule, shaped by the distinctive language and format of colonial legality, Balachandran has attempted to find the subaltern voice present in them through critical examinations of the legal self-understanding of the petitioners.[8] From another point of view, Majid Siddiqi has argued that, even in the politeness and the strict protocols of language, petitions present "cultural systems of concord and discord, unities and

[6] Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 161–91.

[7] Raman, *Document Raj, 161-191,* quoted in Prashant Kidambi, "The Petition as Event: Colonial Bombay, circa 1889–1914," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019), 203–39. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000555.

[8] Aparna Balachandran, "Petitions, the City, and the Early Colonial State in South India," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 150–76, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17001135.

fissures, legitimation and dissent." [9]Similarly, Prashant Kidambe, focusing on colonial Bombay, has analysed petitions as an event outside their documentary confines.[10]

In this essay, I have focused on the petitions written during the Indigo Rebellion of Bengal by villagers, especially those belonging to the agrarian countryside or mofussil, *under* British rule. Since petitioning and petitions have frequently been associated with urban spaces and their dwellers to communicate with the State, this essay takes a different approach by focusing on the petitions from the rural populace. When we look at the archive, we generally find petitions coming from a section of the educated middle class, taking advantage of their Western education and spatial proximity to the colonial administration. In contrast, the colonial State was largely distant and dependent on its zamindars and tax collectors in the agrarian countryside. This does not mean that the State was absent in rural spaces. In fact, as recent studies on agrarian history have shown, it was quite the opposite: the brunt of colonialism's extractive mechanism had to be borne by the peasants living in the village. However, the administrative apparatus of the State was situated in the city, and its physical, political, and cultural separation from the agrarian hinterland made the writing of a petition much more challenging. Thus, when one takes a preliminary look at petitions written by the inhabitants of a village from a certain district, hundreds of kilometres away from Calcutta, one cannot help but be astonished by the consciousness of the subaltern voice. However, as this essay will explore, an in-depth analysis of the archive bears quite surprising results, which make us reconsider our initial perception.

The Indigo Rebellion, the Blue Mutiny, or the *Nil Bidroho* of 1859-60, was the first major instance of mass protest confronted by the British Raj after the Crown's formal takeover in 1857. Existing historiography on the Indigo Rebellion has celebrated the movement as a pre-history of nonviolent protest and political consciousness in the countryside and among the peasantry. Many scholars such as Jogesh Chandra Bagal, Sisirkumar Ghosh, and R.C. Majumder romanticised the non-violent, Gandhian aspect of this peasant movement and

[9] Siddiqi Majid, *The British Historical Context and Petitioning in Colonial India* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2005), 17–40.

[10] Prashant Kidambi, "The Petition as Event: Colonial Bombay, *circa* 1889-1914," *Modern Asian Studies* 53, no. 1 (January 2019): 203-39, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X17000555.

compared its success to the failure of the 1857 uprising. Leaving behind the nationalist enterprise of the early 20th century, recent studies on peasant movements have focused on several aspects of resistance and insurgency from the point of view of the peasant rather than the nation-state. Here, particularly in the works of Ranajit Guha and other scholars of the Subaltern school, the aim has been to recover the voice and consciousness of the subaltern peasant from the appropriation and dominance of the elite over historical narratives. A major instrument of such a method has been critical for re-reading the official colonial archive against the grain. This essay is, in part, an exercise inspired by the methodology implemented by the Subaltern studies collective to put to trial the claim that traces of subaltern voices can be retrieved from the colonial archive. To do so, it examines a particular genre of source material — the peasant petitions to the British government for justice against the oppression of indigo planters.

Background: Indigo Cultivation in Bengal

Before we begin to analyse our source, let us first understand its context through a brief detour into the history of indigo and its cultivation in Lower Bengal. Indigo was introduced as a cash crop in Bengal by the British. Its cultivation can be located in the larger process of commercialisation of agriculture, which began in the nineteenth century.[11] The improvement of communication routes to the hinterland led to a general expansion of trade in raw materials and agricultural produce. Indigo emerged as a global commodity for dyeing after the growth of the textile industry in England. Its introduction in Bengal was based on certain factors such as its increasing demand in the market and the decline of its supply from the West Indies and America after English planters abandoned the crop in favour of more profitable alternatives such as sugarcane. The East India Company initially started growing indigo in Bengal as a medium of remittance, since the trade in cotton and textiles gradually declined. The Company helped in the growth of Bengal indigo by advancing loans to planters and by protecting them from free

[11] Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, "Growth of Commercial Agriculture in Bengal—1859-1885," *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 7, no. 1 (March 1970), 25–60. https://doi.org/10.1177/001946467000700102.

imports coming from North India.[12] In 1788, the EIC helped some planters set up plantations in order to experiment with the cultivation of the product on Indian soil. They found that indigo grown in Bengal under the supervision of European planters was of the highest quality, and soon, by the end of the eighteenth century, indigo became one of the major exports from Bengal.[13]

By 1810, the indigo industry was well established in Bengal with no rivals in the world market. The production of indigo increased drastically over the years, with short slumps linked to political developments in Europe.[14] In its formative years, the industry was well-backed by the government for remitting wealth from the colony to the metropole. The dependence of the EIC on indigo for remittance can be seen clearly, as in 1795, the Company quadrupled its advances to the planters. Until 1830, the Company bought indigo from the big merchants of Calcutta for remittance. Indigo was also very important for private traders. Several agencies of Calcutta depended on the export of the crop to earn profits and transfer them to Europe. Thus, there was no way to determine the demand for indigo. Since it was inextricably linked with the fluctuating profit made by either the Company or private traders in a given year, there was rampant overproduction.[15] The industry in Bengal was a speculative enterprise. Through the years, it saw multiple periods of decline. After 1845, the decline was largely caused by falling market prices of the crop. The result was a stagnation of prices, leading to growing conflicts between planters and the peasants.[16]

Indigo was typically an unprofitable crop and its cultivation was sustained primarily through coercive practices. This exploitation persisted even when European planters bypassed small farmers, opting instead to grow indigo on their own estates using hired labour. The system of cultivating indigo through tenant peasants was especially exploitative. Planters would provide small loans—often Rs. 2 per bigha—to peasants, which were later deducted from the

[12] B.B Chaudhari, "Eastern India II," in *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, ed. Meghnad Desai, Tapan Ray Chaudhry, and Dharma Kumar, vol. 2: 1757-1970, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 315.

[13] Blair B. Kling, *The Blue Mutiny: The Indigo Disturbances in Bengal, 1859-1862* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 15-38.

[14] Chaudhari, "Eastern India II," 316.

[15] Kling, *The Blue Mutiny,* 15-38.

[16] Chaudhari, "Eastern India II," 318.

fixed and notably low purchase price of the indigo crop. When peasants failed to meet the required output, advances were withheld. Over time, the debts accrued by peasants equalled or surpassed the advances received. Importantly, planters had no interest in settling these debts; rather, they aimed to maintain indebtedness as a means of control, bolstered by their status as landlords or estate leaseholders.[17]

The system of cultivation which developed in Lower Bengal was quite unique. An indigo company had four to five factories. The factory was the basic unit of production, and it was headed by a manager or sometimes a proprietor. A manager had the power to make decisions regarding the operation of the factories owned by him, in addition to other duties like the collection of rent from the nearby leased villages. For his services, the manager received a salary of four hundred rupees per month, in addition to five percent of the profits. During the rebellion, the manager became the most loathed figure in the mofussil. The petitions that we are going to discuss mostly talk about the atrocities committed by these managers. A major reason for this may be that the managers were always European. No Indian ever held the position as manager or even his assistant. Indians who were employed in an indigo concern were grouped into three categories: administration, police and production. The administration was managed by the *diwan*, and he looked after landholding and factory accounts. Similarly, the person in charge of production was the *gomasta.* He supervised the cultivation of indigo and induced peasants to grow the crop. Finally, the most important unit of the factory was the police or the *lathiyals.*[18] They were native mercenaries responsible for the security of the factory. Through these native elements, the indigo planter coerced the local peasantry to sow the crop.

In Bengal, there were two methods by which indigo cultivation took place. One was *nijabad,* and the other was *raiyati*. In the *nijabad* system, the factory supplied the land and hired labourers to cultivate the crop. This was, however, rare compared to the *raiyati* cultivation. Since the cost of buying and managing an estate was expensive, planters favoured the system of *raiyati* cultivation. In the *raiyati* system, the land belonged to another party, which could either be a zamindar or a landholder. This was called *be-ilaka* cultivation. Additionally,

[17] Ibid., 326.

[18] Kling, *The Blue Mutiny,* 38-63.

there was also *ilaka* cultivation, in which the planter himself was the owner of the land.[19] However, before 1829, the Company restricted indigo planters from renting or purchasing any land outside their factory grounds. Thus, to meet the high demand, the planter had to advance money to peasants and induce them to grow the crop on their own land. Thus, the ryot (an umbrella term for all types of Indian peasants) was the sole bearer of risk in this venture. If, in any season, there was a crop failure, the ryot was left with a burdensome debt and no foodgrains to sustain himself. Thus, both forms of indigo cultivation—whether through tenant farming or direct plantation—were marked by coercion, displacement, and economic exploitation.

Despite these setbacks, the trade in indigo flourished partly through the help of the Company State, which provided solid legal protection for the planters, including their oppressive and extortionate methods, as long as it bore profit and filled their coffers. In the peak year of 1842, indigo accounted for 46 per cent of the total value of exports from Bengal.[20] The booming trade of indigo attracted new investors. Earlier, the big mercantile houses of Calcutta used to provide the required capital for this industry but, by 1839, indigo plantations came to be supported by the Union Bank of Calcutta. The bank gave the planter enormous amounts of capital as an advance based on yearly produce. However, the fluctuating and volatile demand for indigo led to a massive drop in 1841, leading to two large plantations going bankrupt. The Bank, with 90 per cent of its capital invested in indigo concerns, also failed by the end of 1847. By the end of 1859, the monopoly previously enjoyed by indigo as the major export commodity from Bengal was over.

New commodities such as opium and food grains emerged as the chief exports, and the share of indigo fell as low as 10 percent. This had a significant impact. The government was no longer dependent upon the indigo industry for trade and slowly began to distance itself from the planters and their oppressive methods. The actions of the English indigo planters came under intense scrutiny back in England. The misdeeds of the white planter did not help to promote the image of the ruling race. It was necessary for the British Raj to legitimise its rule at this point, and supporting the planters no longer remained an option. Hence, it is at this crucial juncture, following the turmoil

[19] Ibid.

[20] Kling, *The Blue Mutiny,* 15-38.

of the Rebellion of 1857 and the transfer of power from a private company to the British Crown, that the petitioning reached its climax. The flurry of petitioning also had a lot to do with, as Sekhar Bandhopadhyay argues, the peasants acquiring a "greater awareness of colonial policies and laws" that made them "embrace these institutions to vent their anger or redress their existing injustices."[21] Maintaining the faith of the educated middle class in the impartiality of British law and justice proved to be extremely crucial as well. Thus, if there existed in the figure of the indigo planter a bad sahib or *abhobdro* Englishman, there also existed in the figure of the Lieutenant Governor a good sahib, or a *bhodro* Englishman.[22] As Ranajit Guha famously said:

> The only way to end oppression is for the law to assert itself. It is the Government, the true custodians of the law, who alone can restore the rule of law. Hence, in a land of superstitions, the new theology of liberalism introduces yet another superstition to fit the politics, the morality and the sensibility of a colonial middle-class: corresponding to the illiterate peasant supplicating the gods against blight and drought we now have the highly literate baboo supplicating the local magistrate, the Lieutenant-Governor, the Governor-General or the Queen—the status of the member of the pantheon addressed depending on the degree of deprivation—for relief from the 'blue monkey' overrunning the countryside.[23]

The Politics of Representation: Collective Petitions from Rural Bengal

A substantial part of the official archive on the Indigo Rebellion consists of petitions written by "certain inhabitants" and "ryots" of villages from different districts. They are addressed to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, John Peter Grant, to inform him of the oppressive measures taken by the indigo planters and the subsequent denial of proper justice from the local authorities of law and order, like the district magistrate, the *darogah*, or the

[21] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India* (Orient Blackswan, 2004).

[22] Ranajit Guha, "Neel-Darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror," *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 2, no. 1 (October 1974), 1–46, https://doi.org/10.1080/03066157408437914.

[23] Guha, "Neel-Darpan," 4.

judge. In most cases, their reply was an official proclamation by the Office of the Lieutenant Governor, which directed the concerned Commissioner or Magistrate of the particular district to provide a report and justification of the incident to the Governor. However, this should not imply that all petitions were entertained or acted upon. In fact, we know from a report that the Magistrate of Jessore, between the years 1856 and 1858, received several petitions related to indigo cultivation, none of which were either preserved or talked about in detail in the official correspondence.[24]

Thus, the petitions we find in the archives are only those with a language that accommodates "proper dissent"[25] The earliest instance of petitioning to address the problems with indigo cultivation can be seen when the first Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Halliday, went on a tour of the Bengal countryside. In August 1854, Halliday was petitioned *en masse* by the landholding zamindars, mukhtars and vakils of the Nadia district on the misconduct committed by the planters. Although the petitions were dismissed by Halliday as "vague and probably not credible," it was a significant moment for the urban intelligentsia of Calcutta. *The Hindoo Patriot* reported, "They are learning to exercise the privileges of British subjects to meet together in public, discuss questions of public importance and to convey full expression of their opinions thereupon to their rulers."[26] It shows that the liberal intelligentsia of Bengal, despite being a conquered and colonised subject, still had adequate faith in the law and justice of their rulers.

Most petitions from the Indigo Rebellion were organised in a large document titled "*Selections of the Records of the Government of Bengal*." Broadly, the petitions in this record can be categorised into individual and collective formats. For the most part, the petitions were collective and titled, referring to the name of the village or *thannah to which* they belonged. Thus, we have titles of collective petitions like "Petition of certain Ryots of Jadubpore, and other Villages in Nuddea, to the Hon'ble the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal" or

[24] Objections of Mr. A. C. MacArthur, of Mcergunge, to the Site for the Head Quarters of the Gopalgimge Subdivision Being Fixed in the Neighbourhood of His Indigo Factory; Date 1857, 1858, and 1859" in *Selection of Records from the Government of Bengal No. XXXIII Part I: Papers Relating to Indigo Cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860), 56.

[25] Raman, *Document Raj,* 182.

[26] Kling, *The Blue Mutiny*, 63-84.

individual petitions like "Petition of Sreemunt Holdar and others, inhabitants of Colliriga, Thannah Handrail, Zillah Nuddea, to the Honourable the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal."[27] What is interesting to note is the fact that even in the case of petitions concerned with individual matters, there is a sense of the collective. The petitioners used the voice of the collective in their appeal for justice from the Government. For our study, we will analyse one such petition from the Indigo Rebellion in detail.

The petition in question is titled "From the Inhabitants of Chur Ramnaggur to the Honourable J.P Grant, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, dated Moorshedabad, Chur Ramnuggur, 7 January 1860." It talks about a case of land dispute between the Messrs Watson and Company planters and the "inhabitants" of Chur Ramnuggar. The aforementioned word *chur* or *char* before the name of the village is the particular type of land in which indigo was cultivated. The *char* land was formed by the sediment deposited on riverbanks and was appropriate for the *nijabadi* type cultivation of the crop. Thus, this particular petition has a dispute quite unlike the typical disputes that characterised the Indigo Rebellion. Here, the problem was not the indigo planter's extraction of indigo from the ryot but rather his encroachment on land. This will become important later when we examine the presence of a subaltern voice.

Like their counterparts from the same period, the language and format of this petition are shaped by colonial legalities. It is moulded by the civility and submission that the colonial State demanded from its colonised subjects:

> Honoured Sir,
> We, the undersigned, most humbly beg, for the inhabitants of Chur Ramnuggur, to submit before your Honor a statement of our grievances given in, with some details below, and earnestly hope for redress through the gracious interference of your Honor.[28]

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[27] *Selection of Records from the Government of Bengal No. XXXIII Part I: Papers Relating to Indigo Cultivation in Bengal* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860), 6.

[28] "From the Inhabitants of Chur Ramnaggur to the Honourable J.P Grant, Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Dated Moorshedabad, Chur Ramnuggur, 7 January 1860," in *Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal No. XXXIII Part I: Papers Relating to Indigo Cultivation in Bengal,* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860), 335-345.

The petition is in the form of a letter. It begins by describing the "comparative ease and happiness" the village's inhabitants enjoyed under its former leaseholder Sheebsoondree Dasee. However, conditions were not so pleasant after Messrs Watson & Co., a large indigo planting concern, got the village as an *ijara* lease from the collector of Murshidabad. It is said that despite protests from the villagers, the land was granted and the managers, rather than "facilitate the business of their trade," wreaked vengeance on Sheebsoondree and the helpless ryots. The letter goes on to describe the particular instances of oppression committed by the indigo planters of the factory. They include forging the contract of a "poor illiterate" peasant called Kishun Salie and lodging a case against him when he refused to cultivate indigo. The planter lodged a civil suit against him, leading to his arrest and imprisonment. The petition also complains about the illegal sowing of indigo in lands sown with other crops and how the planter, with the help of the magistrate, has coerced the ryots to sow the indigo crop. It mentions how the police *darogah*, a supposed "good man," did not help the planter, making the *lathiyals* of the factory attack and vandalise the police *thannah*.

Finally, the petition mentions a case where a ryot named Shahamut Sekh was shot in the leg by the planter's men when he refused to grow the crop. The petition thus tries to present a case for the village residents of Chur Ramnugar by citing discrete incidents connected to exploitation by the indigo planters. The petition also shows a very clear understanding of colonial subjecthood. It frames grievances in such a way that tempts the reader to sympathise with the "helpless ryots" against the "tyranny" of the white planter: "...by tyrannizing over the indigent and helpless ryots, many of whom seeing no other hope have since found safety in flight.."[29]

It appears that the petitioner's complaints are mostly against the decisions of the Magistrate and other Government officials. Despite this, the petitioner is careful not to lay blame on them as he does against the planters. The petitioner was aware of the fact that the Magistrate was an extension of the State and, hence, was very careful in his wording. Thus, we have:

[29] Ibid.

> ...the magistrate, agreeably to the instructions of his superior, sentenced the prisoner to imprisonment and similarly disposed of the rest. Your Honor is well aware how easy it is to fabricate such documents, and to torment the poor illiterate peasantry of a village; the whole fraud will come to light on an inspection of the records of the case. [30]

Similarly, the petition further notes:

> ...and in this act the Government officials, whether consciously or not we will not aver, have lent their assisting hand.[31]

As the paragraphs show, in their protest against the Magistrate, the petitioner put the onus on the indigo planter for fabricating the document, which only misled the Magistrate in dispensing proper justice. It also opens up enough room for interpreting the Government official's action(s) as "unconscious".

If we follow the paper trail left behind by the petition, we come across some interesting findings. First, when the petition is received by the Secretary of the Governor, he notices that the signatures of the petitioners are all in the same handwriting. Noticing such consistency, he directed the Magistrate and Collector of Murshidabad, W Morris Beaufort, to look into the matter. Further, Beaufort directs his assistant, Mr Kean, to investigate the case on the spot and report his findings to the Office of the Governor. From Kean's report we get to know that the land in dispute belonged to Gour Soondur Shaha. After his death, it was transferred to his widowed wife, Sheebsoondree. It is mentioned that the indigo company Messrs. Watson & Co. outbid the Shaha's widow, by paying an additional 300 rupees. However, in the autumn of 1859, the deceased farmer's relative, Bejaikisto Shaha, incited the peasants not to take advances for sowing indigo. The disturbance escalated from that point onwards, and the peasants, under the leadership of Bejaikisto refused to fulfil their contracts. We find from the later portions of his report that the petition was probably written by an agent of his in Berhampore. Kean thus concludes his report by saying:

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

> I consider there is no doubt whatever that the ryots never signed the petition; that it was never written in their presence, and that they never saw it; on the contrary, I think it is most evident that it was really written by the other party, who is said in the petition "to have fallen out with deadly hatred against Messrs. Watson and Co." No doubt that after the petition had been written and sent, a few of the ryots were told that such a petition had been forwarded, and that their names had been affixed thereto.[32]

While it may be true that the local peasants may never have had any part in drafting or signing the petition, it cannot be dismissed that there was a presence of a network of solidarity amongst the villagers for the petitioners. So, while Kean goes to the village asking for the identity of the person who drafted the petition, he gets no positive reply from anyone. Similarly, when he confronts the peasants about their signatures or marks, (in case they were illiterate) on the petition, most of them deny having anything to do with it. Such an action is not unprecedented in a situation where a high-ranking official goes to a small village to investigate a case. It is most likely that most of the responses were given out of apprehension of retaliation from the State. However, what becomes more important is the question of voice. Does the petition voice the subaltern peasant? Or does it, like Kean's comments, voice the interest of the former landlord only to get back the lease? The answer is complex and depends on how we approach it. If one goes by what Ranajit Guha has to say, then it is not usual to see the clashing class interests of the landlord and the peasant. In his critique of the existing historiography of the rebellion, Guha says:

> The emphasis has thus been laid on the unity of interest between the village poor and their native exploiters against a common, foreign enemy. This has helped to mask the truth about two important aspects of the upper-class participation in this struggle—first, about the opportunism of the landed magnates and the fierce contest between

[32] "From W. Morris Beaufort, Esq., Officiating Magistrate and Collector of Moorshedabad, to the Commissioner of the Rajshahie Division, Beauleah (No 203), Dated Berhampore, 17 March 1860," in *Selections from the Records of the Government of Bengal No. XXXIII Part I: Papers Relating to Indigo Cultivation in Bengal,* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Office, 1860), 338.

> them and the peasantry for the initiative of the struggle against the planters, and secondly, about the feebleness and defeatism displayed by the people 'of inter- mediate means,' that is, the rich peasants and the lesser landlords.[33]

The family of Bejaikisto and Gour Soondur Saha can be associated with this group of lesser landlords that Guha mentions. The petition, which was drafted by the agent of the landlord, may seemingly plead for the case of the peasants, but the particular manner in which it is framed highlights, nonetheless, that its main aim is to get back the lease from the Government. Here, the appropriation of the peasant's voice is not a rare phenomenon because, throughout many similar petitions in the archive, we see the zamindars, talukdars, and other landed gentry rally for the plight of the poor peasants for reclaiming their own lands lost to Indigo planters or other zamindars who outbid them. Hence, the petition which, at first glance, seems to hold the collective voice and solidarity of peasants against the oppression of the zamindar and planter, on closer inspection turns out to be a dispute between the landlord and the planter.

Conclusion

The language used by the petitioner shows the trend of prevalent norms seen in colonial petitions. Like other petitions, it was framed in a deferential yet persuasive tone, addressing colonial officials with honorifics and emphasizing loyalty to the British administration. This was a strategic choice to ensure that grievances were taken seriously rather than dismissed as rebellious. It uses legal and bureaucratic language to fit within the framework of British legalism. In its narrative structure, it used testimonies and anecdotes of the helpless ryot to evoke sympathy. Unlike petitions coming from the elite, it used the voice of the collective to reinforce legitimacy of its appeal. In its language, we find the British portrayed as potential protectors against corrupt and oppressive planters, a tactic often used to avoid direct condemnation of colonial rule and yet show dissent. What turns out to be an interesting observation is the fact that the petition was written by a scribe employed by the landlord. The scribe must have translated grievances into a format

[33] Guha, "Neel Darpan," 17.

recognisable to colonial officials, altering the tone and content in the process and thus giving rise to the first level of mediation.

Navigating through the complex twists and turns of the petition, we uncover several important findings that were not evident on the surface level. In this process, both the methods of "reading against" and "along the grain" come to be useful for certain reasons. Firstly, while reading along the grain, we must ask why the petition exists in the first place. A plausible reason is that the Indigo revolt happened at a crucial juncture in India's history. Just a couple of years after the British crown took over the governance of the East India Company's possessions following the Revolt of 1857, the breakout of another serious peasant insurgency was a serious setback for the Empire. Moreover, the actions of the non-official planter community were a source of constant anxiety for the colonial state, which operated on the basis of racial and civilisational superiority over the colonised.[34] Thus, acts of violence and defiance of law were a threat to the rule of law, which was used to justify conquest.

An increasing number of complaints over the oppressive system under which indigo was cultivated began to surface in official circles of the government through petitions like the one we have examined above. While the actual rebellion lasted for quite a short while in the countryside, it evoked the sentiments of the Bengali *bhadralok,* who looked at the British crown with hope for justice. In such a situation, the government appointed the Indigo Commission to investigate the matter. Much of what is preserved in the archive on the Indigo Rebellion is thus a paper trail of this Commission. As Ann Stoler argues, colonial commissions are stories that states tell to themselves. By organising knowledge and creating categories, these commissions were creating history in the literal sense.[35] Thus, much of what we know about indigo cultivation in Bengal comes from the Report of the Indigo Commission which was, and is still, used as a primary source by historians. Thus, the petition that we read in this essay, along with numerous others blaming the ill conduct of the white planter, would not have existed in

[34] Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[35] Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," 104.

the first place if it had not been recorded as evidence by the Indigo Commission.

Secondly, reading against the grain to extract the subaltern voice shows us how it is mediated through layers of State and elite interest. Here we are reminded of Spivak's assertion that the subaltern cannot speak for themselves unless they are spoken for. The search for a pure and unmediated subaltern voice and consciousness in the archive, no matter how appealing to the historian, turns out to be an exercise of speaking on behalf of others, which can sometimes silence them further.[36] We are also faced with the problematic nature of the subaltern as a category in itself. The subaltern as a broad social category is not dependent on class, caste, or gender, but rather on its relation of subordination to the elite. It is also historical and depends on a particular context. Hence, as Guha himself says, an impoverished landlord can also be the possessor of a subaltern voice. If that is the case, then the petitioner, the landlord, can also be a subaltern subject, since he is subordinate to the colonial State and the white planter. This shows us the ambiguity of the term subaltern and the problem of using a relational category that does not account for class. In a way, the petition gives voice to one subaltern while silencing another.

Thus, a nuanced engagement with the colonial archive requires an awareness of the discourse surrounding it. A petition, which may initially appear as a collective plea from oppressed peasants, can, upon closer examination, reveal itself as a strategic instrument of landlords seeking to reclaim their rights and property. Given the multiple layers of mediation, appropriation, and vested interests that shape archival documents, studying petitions demands careful contextualisation and inquiry beyond the text itself. As this essay has demonstrated, a critical reading of such sources allows us to navigate the complexities of colonial power and subaltern agency with greater depth and precision.

[36] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "'Can the Subaltern Speak?'," in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed Rosalind C. Morris (Columbia University Press, 2010), 21–78. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/morr14384.5.

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