Explorers, Traders & Immigrants
Tracking the Cultural and Social Impacts of the Global Commodity Trade

A Curriculum Unit for Grades 9 – 12
EXPLORERS, TRADERS & IMMIGRANTS
TRACKING THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS
OF THE GLOBAL COMMODITY TRADE

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INTRODUCTION

Explorers, Traders & Immigrants: Tracking the Cultural and Social Impacts of the Global Commodity Trade is based in part on the 2003 Hemispheres Summer Teachers’ Institute “Explorers, Traders & Immigrants: Tracking Cultural Contact through Food.” That four-day workshop examined aspects of cultural contact that have left trace evidence on the food that we eat. In seeking to expand the workshop’s scope as we developed this unit, we have moved beyond looking only at foodstuffs and incorporated a number of other commodities that have had significant global impact.

This unit examines eight global commodities from their points of origin and the social, cultural, political, and economic changes they have wrought along their way. Each case study encompasses four “stops” along the commodity’s journey: its initial discovery and/or access; its progress from local good to international trade; the ramifications of large-scale production; and the drama of its boom-and-bust cycles through the years.

We have sought to address the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and National Geography Standards that cover spatial and cultural diffusion. This unit draws on primary source readings, images, and maps so that students can both track and assess commodities as they have traveled the world. Each case study is laid out in a Document-Based Question (DBQ) format so that students can cite, interpret, and evaluate sources; consider point of view; and use historical evidence to develop and support a thesis.

In addition to responding to specific questions about each commodity, students can compare commodities by placing the following set of questions and their answers into a graphic organizer:

1. What role did _____ play in people’s lives?
2. How were people’s lives affected by _____?
3. To what extent has _____ been harmful or beneficial to society?

Each case study may also be used as a mapping activity in which students can trace on a world map each commodity’s journey from origin to global impact. Toward that end, a blank world map is included on page xiii for you and your students to use.

We have also sought to include images among the primary source documents included in the DBQs. To help your students analyze these images as documents, we have included an image analysis worksheet, which can be found on page xv.

It is our hope that with Explorers, Traders & Immigrants students will be able to better appreciate the long-term effects of intercultural contact and population movements by relating them to the presence of various commodities that they see and use every day.

We welcome feedback and comments on the unit and your experience using it in the classroom. Please do not hesitate to contact us at hemispheres@austin.utexas.edu.
Standards Alignment

This unit is designed to address the following standards in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS):

**Culture**
18) The student understands the ways in which cultures change and maintain continuity.
   The student is expected to:
   A) describe the impact of general processes such as migration, war, trade, independent inventions, and diffusion of ideas and motivations on cultural change.
   *(113.34 World Geography Studies)*

**Economics**
12) The student understands the economic importance of, and issues related to, the location and management of key natural resources.
   The student is expected to:
   A) compare global trade patterns at different periods of time and develop hypotheses to explain changes that have occurred in world trade and the implications of these changes;
   B) analyze how the creation and distribution of resources affects the location and patterns of movement of products, capital, and people.
   *(113.34 World Geography Studies)*

**Geography**
6) The student understands the types and patterns of settlement, the factors that affect where people settle, and processes of settlement development over time.
   The student is expected to:
   B) explain the processes that have caused cities to grow such as location along transportation routes, availability of resources that have attracted settlers and economic activities, and continued access to other cities and resources.
   *(113.34 World Geography Studies)*

**History**
1) The student understands how geographic contexts (the geography of places in the past) and processes of spatial exchange (diffusion) influenced events in the past and helped to shape the present.
   The student is expected to:
   B) trace the spatial diffusion of a phenomenon and describe its effects on regions of contact such as the spread of bubonic plague, the diffusion and exchange of foods between the New and Old Worlds, or the diffusion of American slang.
   *(113.34 World Geography Studies)*

5) The student understands causes and effects of European expansion beginning in the 16th century.
   The student is expected to:
   A) identify causes of European expansion beginning in the 16th century; and
   B) explain the political, economic, cultural, and technological influences of European expansion on both Europeans and non-Europeans, beginning in the 16th century.
   *(113.33 World History Studies)*
STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHY STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

This unit addresses the following standards in the National Geography Standards:

Standard 5: Places and Regions: That People Create Regions to Interpret Earth’s Complexity
   By the end of the eighth grade, the student knows and understands:
   3. The connections among regions

   By the end of the eighth grade, the student knows and understands:
   3. The types and historical patterns of human migration
   4. The effects of migration on the characteristics of places

Standard 11: Human Systems: The Patterns and Networks of Economic Interdependence on Earth’s Surface
   By the end of the eighth grade, the student knows and understands:
   2. The basis for global interdependence
   3. Reasons for the spatial patterns of economic activities
   4. How changes in technology, transportation, and communication affect the location of economic activities

Standard 16: Environment and Society: The Changes that Occur in the Meaning, Use, Distribution, and Importance of Resources
   By the end of the eighth grade, the student knows and understands:
   1. The worldwide distribution and use of resources
   2. Why people have different viewpoints regarding resource use
**IMAGE ANALYSIS WORKSHEET**

Select and analyze an image from this case study using the Image Analysis Worksheet. Compare your findings with those of your classmates.

**A. Observations**

Study the image for 2 minutes. First, consider any written information that accompanies the image (including title, date, source, comments). Next, form an overall impression of the image and then examine individual items in the image. Divide the image into four sections and study each to see what new details become visible. Use the chart below to write down your observations. List people, objects, and activities in the image.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PEOPLE</th>
<th>OBJECTS</th>
<th>ACTIVITIES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**B. Deductions**

Based on your observations above, list three things you might deduce from this image.

1.

2.

3.

**C. Questions**

What questions does this image raise in your mind? List two.

1.

2.

How might you go about finding answers to your questions?
Indigo
From the Devil’s Dye
To Denim
Introduction

Indigo plants originate from different parts of the world and produce a colorfast, deep blue dye. The plant was first domesticated in India during the Indus Valley period between the fourth and the second millennium B.C.E. Many varieties of the indigo plant exist throughout the world. One species originates in east and southern Africa, another from tropical America. This unit focuses on *Indigofera tinctoria*, believed to be native to Asia and now widely distributed and naturalized all over the tropics. *I. tinctoria* is the species that was first domesticated in India and predominantly cultivated over the centuries for commerce.

Indigo is mentioned in manuscripts dating as far back as the fourth century B.C.E. The historical record of indigo is patchy, but references were made by Marco Polo, who saw indigo during a visit to the southern tip of India in 1298. Around this time, Arab traders introduced indigo to the Mediterranean region, where it became available in small quantities. The cultivation of indigo on a large scale started in the sixteenth century in India, particularly in the north.

During the Middle Ages indigo moved through established caravan routes, like other valuable articles of trade, primarily overland from India through Baghdad into Europe. By the sixteenth century the Portuguese, and later the Dutch, had established trade routes by sea to India, making indigo much more accessible to the average European. By 1516, the Portuguese were importing large quantities of indigo (along with spices and other valuable goods from eastern ports) by ship into Europe.

Source: Description of indigo processing

As part of their preparation, the leaves of indigo must go through a process of fermentation and then oxidation to yield the blue dye. Traditionally fermentation is carried out naturally by bacteria. The harvested plants are packed into tanks and covered with water. After a few hours, the leaves become saturated and fermentation begins. A thick layer of bubbles and scum forms at the top of the tank. The process can be so vigorous that planks are placed on top of the vat to keep the plants in. This process can take up to a day and a half to complete, but must be finely timed. The indigo makers will smell and taste the fluid to check. Even an hour too long could ruin it. As soon as the liquid tastes sweet and is a dark blue colour, it is siphoned into another vat at a lower level, leaving the plants behind. The liquid now contains indoxyl.

The liquid is then stirred continuously for several hours because it needs oxygen from the air to stimulate oxidation of the indoxyl. Alternatively people will get into the vats and tread up and down to stir it up. Eventually the liquid turns a yellow-brown colour with floating dark blue patches. The solution is left to rest and the insoluble indigo settles to the bottom of the tank as a blueish sludge. The water is drained and filtered to remove impurities and to stop the enzyme reaction which made the indigo. The sludge is dried to produce indigo ‘cake’ which is cut into cubes or made into balls.


Comprehension Exercise:
1. Describe the process of making dye from indigo plants. Do you think it is an easy or complicated process? Explain your answer citing the text.
SECTION 1: INDIGO ARRIVES IN EUROPE BY SEA TRADE

Soon after its appearance in European ports, the trade of indigo was inhibited by powerful guilds in many European countries. Until indigo, the primary European source for dye was the indigenous woad plant. Woad had been cultivated extensively in France, Germany, and England since the Roman Empire. European woad growers and merchants saw indigo as serious competition, since it was a better dye producing deeper, more colorfast blues.

Nevertheless, bans did not stop the flow indigo into Europe. Soon after the establishment of Portuguese trade routes, Spain began cultivating indigo in its new world colonies in response; first setting up plantations in the mid-1500s along the Pacific coast of Central America. By the close of the seventeenth century, indigo was moving into Europe from the east—traded by the Portuguese, Dutch, and English—and the west—imported by the Spanish. At this time, the French joined the fray with the establishment of indigo plantations on the eastern part of modern day Haiti in 1697. When the German woad industry eventually collapsed, a large population, whose livelihood depended on woad, was plunged into abject poverty.

Source 1: Prohibition against the use of indigo and other exotic dyes in England by Queen Elizabeth I, 1581

Whereas of late years there hath been brought into this Realm of England, from beyond the seas, [indigo] ... and the colors made from the said stuff is false and deceitful, and are not onely sold and uttered to the great deceit of the Queens loving subjects, within this realm of England, but also beyond the Seas, to the great discredit and slander … of the Merchants, as the Dyers of this Realm ... be it ordained, enacted, and established, that all such [indigo] in whose hands soever shall be found ... shall be forfeited, and openly burned by the authority of the Mayor … and upon pain that the Dyer of every thing so dyed, shall forfeit the value of the thing so dyed … and the party offending … to remain in prison without bail … till he have satisfied the same value.


Source 2: A decree issued in Dresden, 1650

By the Grace of God … it is known to each and all of you that our province of Thuringia has been blessed by the Almighty above all other countries and provinces with the Woad Plant … Cloths and other fabrics of good quality were dyed [in woad], everyone being satisfied with both their quality and durability. On the other hand there is clear proof that indigo not only readily loses its colour but also corrodes clothes and other fabrics, thus causing serious loss to many worthy persons … We therefore command you … to prohibit under pain of confiscation, the sale of any cloths and other similar articles which are not dyed with Woad, but other injurious dyes … We also publish this express Commination that, if any person shall deal in such deceptive dyes or other similar wares or import the same, we shall severely punish him. …


Comprehension Exercises:
1. What was the general attitude toward indigo in Europe at this time? Explain your answer citing the texts in this section.
2. Make a list of the qualities attributed to indigo in these passages.
Although Nil or Indico be not in forme like Woade, yet for the rich blew colour sake I think good to mention of it here, not only to show you what it is, and how made, but to incite some of our nation to be as industrious therein as they have beene with the former Woade, seeing no doubt that it would bee more profitable.


### Source 4: Timelines of indigo prohibitions in Europe

**France**
- 1598: Importation of indigo banned
- 1609: King Henry VI's edict sentencing to death any person found using “the deceitful and injurious dye called inde (indigo)”
- 1737: French dyers officially free to use imported indigo

**Germany**
- 1557: First prohibition banning indigo “the devil's dye” on grounds that it was “pernicious, deceitful, eating and corrosive”
- 1650: Dresden decree against indigo
- 1661: Prohibition of “corrosive” dyes, especially indigo
- 1664: Prohibition of indigo by the government of the Duchy of Wurtemburg
- 1700: Nuremberg magistrates still forcing dyers to swear annually, under oath, not to use indigo under threat of the death penalty
- 1800: Nuremberg edict rescinded

**Britain**
- 1532: Imported indigo denounced as “food for the devil” and subject to various prohibitions
- 1581: Queen Elizabeth I authorizes use of indigo only in addition to woad. Indigo used for other purposes is to be confiscated and burned. Soon after, indigo is declared to be poisonous, and any use of it is forbidden
- 1640: Dyers are encouraged to switch to indigo, as it is believed to produce a better dye than woad
- 1660: Ban forbidding use of indigo lifted
- 1664–94: During this period, the British export 1,241,967 lbs. of indigo from Bombay and Surat alone through the English East India Company

### Comprehension Exercises:

3. How do the attitudes of France, Britain, and Germany toward indigo differ during this time period? Explain your answer citing the documents in this section.

4. How do attitudes toward indigo change over time? Consider factors that might account for differences and changes in attitudes. Explain your answer citing the documents in this section.
Captions underneath are linked to numbers in the illustration. Equipment and procedures used in indigo production are shown (6, 7, 8, 9, 13, 14). Also depicted are plants (1, 4, 12 [indigo]) and trees (2, 5); the dye plant annatto (rocou) is being crushed in a mortar (3).

Source 6: Illustration of a German woad mill in Thuringia, 1752

Published by German botanist Daniel Gottfried Schreber in his book on woad in 1752.


**Comprehension Exercises:**

5. Compare and contrast the two images depicting indigo production and woad production. What similarities and differences can you glean from the images about the way these two dyes are made?

6. Who is doing the labor for producing each dye? What differences can you find in the depiction of people and their relationship to each other within each industry?
**Section 2: Indigo Plantations in the New World**

By the late 1600s indigo was marketed legally in most European countries. Until this time, India was the main source of indigo for the British, who resented the monopoly on the dye held by Indian traders and merchants. The British faced difficulties ensuring a regular supply of indigo and controlling quality. The price of indigo also fluctuated drastically. Britain soon joined Spain and France, who were already cultivating indigo on plantations in the new world. The British first established indigo plantations in their West Indian territories (Jamaica) and then in their colonies in North America, most notably in South Carolina, as a new source for the dye. Producing indigo was labor intensive and, in the West Indies and American colonies, only possible through a system of slavery. Contemporary accounts indicate that when prices were high, indigo dyestuff could be exchanged for slaves; it is said that a planter in South Carolina could fill his bags with indigo and ride to Charleston to buy a slave with the contents, “exchanging indigo pound for pound of negro weighed naked.”

### Source 1: Indigo exports from South Carolina, 1745–1775

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Pounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1745</td>
<td>5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1748</td>
<td>134,118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1750</td>
<td>120,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1754</td>
<td>216,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1755</td>
<td>193,803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1756</td>
<td>232,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1757</td>
<td>894,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760</td>
<td>475,725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1765</td>
<td>467,725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>483,094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1773</td>
<td>794,150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1775</td>
<td>1,107,660</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(By 1850 indigo had disappeared from the lists of exports of Charleston and was replaced by cotton.)


### Source 2: Price of indigo in South Carolina, 1747–1775

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Price per pound in shillings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1747</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1750</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1755</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1760</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1765</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1770</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1772</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1775</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comprehension Exercises:

1. Analyze the information in the two charts above. What years were most productive for the indigo industry in South Carolina 1745–1775? Least productive?

2. What were the most profitable years? Least profitable?

3. What factors might account for the changes in productivity and profitability from year to year?
Source 3: Excerpt from Voltaire, “Essay on Morals and Customs,” 1756

One hundred thousand slaves, Black or mulatto, work in sugar mills, indigo and cocoa plantations, sacrificing their lives to gratify our newly acquired appetites for … things unknown to our ancestors.

Source 4: Except from James Glen, Governor, “A Description of South Carolina,” 1761

An acre of good land may produce about eighty pounds weight of good indigo, and one slave may manage two acres and upwards, and raise provisions besides, and have all the winter months to saw lumber and be otherwise employed in. …

But I cannot leave this subject without observing how conveniently and profitably, as to the charge of labour, both indigo and rice may be managed by the same persons; for the labour attending indigo being over in the summer months, those who were employed in it may afterwards manufacture rice in the ensuing part of the year, when it becomes most laborious; and after doing all this they will have some time to spare for sawing lumber, and making hogshead and other staves to supply the Sugar Colonies.


Source 5: African-American soldier James Roberts in his autobiography, 1858

Jack Gillespie went to the eastern shore of Maryland, to buy up more slaves, leaving his brother James Gillespie to take care of the plantation till he returned, Mr. Coonrood being the overseer. Jack Gillespie gave Coonrood orders not to whip Joe, his waiting servant. On the Sabbath morning after Gillespie went away, Coonrood ordered all the hands to the lower plantation, to work in the rice and indigo. He there commenced to whip Joe early in the morning, and whipped him all day, every few hours. …

From fifty to sixty hands work in the indigo factory; and such is the effect of the indigo upon the lungs of the laborers, that they never live over seven years. Every one that runs away, and is caught is put in the indigo fields, which are hedged all around, so that they cannot escape again.


Comprehension Exercises:

4. Describe the lives of slaves who worked on indigo plantations, citing documents in this section to support your description.

5. How does the relationship between slaves and indigo differ from that of Europeans/American colonists and indigo?
This engraving shows slaves engaged in various jobs associated with indigo production. The steps are identified by number in the engraving: number 8 is a slave who carries the indigo plants into the storage tank or steeping trough; number 9 depicts slaves who agitate/stir the indigo plants in the steeping trough with baskets attached to the ends of poles; and number 10 is a plot of indigo plants.

This illustration shows in the background two male slaves skimming off water from an indigo vat, leaving the remaining indigo to thicken into a paste that will be later removed and dried in blocks; in the foreground, a slave is dividing the indigo into blocks or cubes for shipment in barrels, also seen in the illustration.

William DeBrahm, *A Map of South Carolina and a Port of Georgia*, 1757.

**Comprehension Exercises:**

6. Compare the images in this section, dated from the 1760s, with Source 5 in Section 1, which dates from 1667. What technological advances, if any, have changed indigo production during that time?
Eliza Lucas Pinckney is credited with making indigo the largest export crop in South Carolina during the mid-1700s. At age eighteen, Eliza moved from the West Indies to South Carolina to manage the family estate on her own. Soon after arriving, she asked her father, then Governor of Antigua, to send indigo seed and a slave to set up the farming of indigo plants and oversee the manufacture of indigo dye. After a few years of unsuccessful crops, Eliza harvested a good crop seed in 1744, which she gave to other planters in South Carolina. This excerpt comes later in her career as an indigo planter in South Carolina, from an edited collection of her letters.

To find you alive and well, my dear Madam, gave me great pleasure, a Sensation I have been little aquainted with of late as you will perceive when I tell you I have been robbed and deserted by my slaves; my property pulled to pieces, burnt and destroyed, my money of no value, my Children sick and prisoners. …

Such is the deplorable state of our Country from two armies being in it for nearly two years; the plantations have been some quite nearly, ruined—and all with very few exceptions great sufferers—their Crops, stocks, boats, Carts gone, taken or destroyed; and the Crops made this year must be very small by the desertion of the Negros in planting and hoeing time. Besides their losses the Country must be greatly impoverished by the death of slaves, as small pox with in the British camp.


**Comprehension Exercises:**

7. How did the American Revolution impact indigo cultivation and trade in South Carolina? Explain your answer citing the documents in this section.
SECTION 3: BACK TO INDIA

Soon after the loss of the American colonies and the drying up of French supplies of indigo, Britain pressed for a return to India as a source. However, this time they sought to control production. In the nineteenth century, Bengal in northeastern India became the world’s main source of indigo, by then in great demand to supply the textile industries of the Industrial Revolution and to dye many European service uniforms.

Throughout the century natural indigo was far more valuable than any other dyestuff and Bengal’s indigo production far outweighed that of the rest of the world. During the earlier part of the nineteenth century it may be fair to say that the industry created gainful employment for Indians. But, after the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Indians were generally forced to cultivate indigo on their best land and faced exploitation and cruel maltreatment by British planters.

Source 1: Timeline of the establishment of indigo plantations in Bengal, India

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1751</td>
<td>Clive conquers vast territories of Bengal, which come under British control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1782</td>
<td>The East India Company imports 25,000 pounds of indigo into London from Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1788</td>
<td>The East India Company brings indigo planters from the West Indies to Bengal to establish factories. The quality of Bengali indigo soon equals the finest West Indian product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1795</td>
<td>The East India Company imports 4,368,000 lbs. of indigo into London, the bulk of it from Bengal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1802</td>
<td>The East India Company withdraws from direct control over factories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1815</td>
<td>Bengal alone exports 7,650,000 lbs (more than 3,500 tons) of indigo (valued at 6 shillings/lb.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1829</td>
<td>The Governor-General of Bengal recommends that planters be allowed to take long leases on land in their own names</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1834</td>
<td>Beginning of most prosperous years for indigo industry in Bengal when consumption of indigo in Britain and America doubled and indigo accounted for almost half the value of all goods exported from Calcutta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1847</td>
<td>Sharp declines in indigo market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>Formation of the Indigo Planters’ Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1854</td>
<td>Start of five years of bad weather, which reduced yields so that peasants were unable to recoup their advances on indigo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1859</td>
<td>Peasant uprisings in Bengal with demonstrations protesting Planter’s unfair treatment of peasants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Source 2: Sources of the supply of indigo, 1846

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bengal provinces</td>
<td>34,500 chests or 9,000,000 lbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other countries, including Guatemala and Madras</td>
<td>8,500 chests</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source 3: Consumption of indigo, 1846

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>chests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>11,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany and the rest of Europe</td>
<td>13,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persia</td>
<td>3,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>2,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other countries</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>43,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total or more than 11,000,000 lbs


Comprehension Exercises:

1. Which country produced the greatest amount of indigo? Which countries consumed the most indigo?
2. Based on the documents, what predictions can you make about the fate of the indigo industry in Bengal, India?
Source 4: E. De-Latour of the Bengal Civil Service, Magistrate of Faridpur, giving evidence before an enquiry committee, 1848

Not a chest of indigo reached England without being stained with human blood … I have seen several Indian peasants sent unto me as a magistrate, who have been speared through the body. I have had Indian peasants before me who have been shot down by the planters. I have put on record how others have been first speared and then kidnapped; and such a system of carrying on indigo, I consider a system of bloodshed.


It contains songs, which have been sung far and wide among the natives set to music. The drift of some of those songs is the following: that the interest of the planter’s advances accumulates for three generations; that the people sell their leases, they do not get free from the planters [even in death]; that when the planter first applies the Indian peasant to sow indigo, he becomes like a beggar, but at last he makes grass grow on the Indian peasants’ bones; the indigo planters come in like a needle and go out like a plough, and are desolating Bengal like flocks of locusts; the king looks on while the subjects are drowned; all is gone; to whom shall we apply but to Almighty God; should we shut our eyes at night, we see the white faces before us, and, through fear, our lives fly away like a bird; our souls are burning in the strong flames of pain.


Two of the principal staples which India produces for exportation are opium and indigo. In one respect, and in one respect only, opium and indigo resemble each other. They are both cultivated by a system of advances, which presents some features absolutely identical.

In all other respects these vegetable products can only be compared to be contrasted. Opium is a drug which is grown for traffic with China, and is that “foreign medicine” which now passes through the Chinese custom houses at a settled duty; indigo is a harmless dye, which is very welcome at Manchester, and exercises only beneficial effects upon our relations with the rest of the world.

Opium is the result of “a system of poppy cultivation under a Government monopoly.” Indigo is produced by independent “British settlers, in whose future increase lies the only permanent prosperity of British India.” Opium is produced under a coercive system of such an unrelaxing character that the remuneration to the [Indian peasant] has in a quarter of a century scarcely varied, while the remuneration for indigo has kept pace with the increased value of labour, which it has itself tended to create, and is now three times the amount which was thirty-five years ago.

Indigo has cleared the jungle and turned the wilderness into corn-fields, and the lair of the wild beast into villages; while opium has only covered rich arable lands with poppies, and fixed a system of forced labour akin to slavery upon the people.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The numerous indigo … factories … impart an air of civilization to and greatly enliven the scenery whenever they appear … There is an appearance of solid and unmistakable comfort about them generally, that is exceedingly refreshing and delightful. Always built in the most open spots, they stand boldly out after and offer striking contrast to the neighboring Bengalee habitations, which are so buried in jungle as to be barely visible until arriving within a few yards of them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Comprehension Exercises:**

3. Describe the attitudes of the British toward the indigo industry in India. Do the British all share the same attitude? Explain your answer citing the sources.
Bengal’s indigo industry was plagued by many abuses. European planters were forbidden to lease or buy land next to their factories, and instead offered advance money, thru corrupt middlemen to reluctant local peasants to grow indigo. The system was deeply unpopular with Indian peasants, who rarely benefited from growing indigo, as it reduced their rice cultivation. Furthermore, the advances, forced upon them by the planters, often put them into permanent debt. In theory the Indian peasants were free, but in practice there were locked into a system akin to slavery—one British governor even compared their situation with that of Carolina slaves. By the 1860s, the indigo issue had become headline news in London. This was partially due to a socio-political Bengali play called Nil Darpan, or, The Indigo planting Mirror, which satirized the bad behavior of the planters and their wives and gave voice to the new Western-educated Indian rural middle-class which was sympathetic to the plight of the peasants. This excerpt comes from the play, written in Bengali by an Indian author and first published in 1861. Protestant missionary James Long (quoted in Source 5 above) championed the play, which resulted in his indictment for disseminating a “libelous work.” The high profile trial ended in his temporary imprisonment. The play was later banned by the British through Lord Lytton’s Dramatic Performances Act of 1876.

Goluck: O, my son, what has been done?

Nobin: Sir, does the cobra shrink from biting the little child on the lap of its mother on account of the sorrow of the mother? I flattered him much, but he understood nothing by that. He kept to his word and said, “Give us sixty bighas, secured by written documents, and take 50 rupees, then we shall close the two years’ account at once.”

Goluk: Then, if we are to give sixty bighas for the cultivation of the Indigo, we cannot engage in any other cultivation whatever, then we shall die without rice crops.

Nobin: I said, “Saheb, as you engage all our men, our ploughs, and our kine, everything in the indigo field, only give us every year through, our food. WE don’t want to hire.” On which he laughed …

Sadhu: Those whose only pay is a bellyful of food are, I think, happier than we are.

Goluk: We have nearly abandoned all the ploughs; still we have to cultivate Indigo. We have no chance in a dispute with the Sahebs. They bind and beat us, it is for us to suffer. We are consequently obliged to work.

Later in the play….

Planter Rogue: To speak to me is throwing pearls at the hog’s feet. Ha, ha, ha, we Indigo Planters, are become the companions of Death. Right in our presence our men have burnt down villages. Women died in the fire with babies at their breasts. Have we ever shown any compassion? Can our factories remain, if we have pity? By nature, we are not bad; our evil disposition has increased by indigo cultivation. Before, we felt sorry in beating one man; now, we can beat ten women with the leather strap, making them senseless; and immediately after, we can, with great laughter, take our dinner.

Source 9: Illustration from *The Graphic* depicting indigo cultivation in Bengal, 1881

Comprehension Exercises:

4. Use the documents in this section to describe the experiences of plantation workers in 19th-century India. Explain your answer citing the sources in this section. Compare the experiences of Indian peasants with the slaves of Carolina from a century earlier.

5. Describe the impact of the indigo industry on the relations between colonial British planters and Indian peasants. Cite evidents from the sources to support your answer.

6. Compare the images in this section, dated from the 1880s, with those in Section 2, which date from the 1760s. What technological advances, if any, have changed indigo production during that time?
**Section 4: Denim and the Invention of Synthetic Indigo**

Starting in the 16th century, India began to export the earliest known precursor to jeans, a thick cotton cloth dyed in indigo, in the 16th century, known as dungaree. Sailors of the time frequently used the fabric to make clothing. For the past century, almost all indigo used in denim manufacturing has been man-made. Synthetic indigo was first produced for commercial use in 1897, when the German chemical company BASF (Badische Anilin und Soda Fabrik) introduced a dye based on the findings of the Berlin chemist Adolf von Baeyer. BASF called its new product “indigo pure.” Soon other European companies, including dyeworks in France and Switzerland, began producing their own synthetic indigo, and natural indigo entered its final irreversible decline on the international market. The situation of the peasants of India grew even worse with the chemical replication of indigo. The pressures on the “planters” (British estate owners) to make a profit and survive in these circumstances increased the pressure on those involved in indigo cultivation, extraction, and processing.

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**Source 1: Indigo exports from India**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Weight in Tons</th>
<th>Value in British Pounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1895–1896</td>
<td>9,366</td>
<td>3,566,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910–1911</td>
<td>846</td>
<td>233,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Source 2: Number of indigo factories in Bihar, India**

- 1890: 2,800 large factories / 6,000 smaller works producing Indigo
- 1911: 121 total remaining factories


**Source 3: Excerpt from “The Rise and Fall of the Indigo Industry in India,” 1912**

The modern indigo industry was created by the East India Company. It was fostered and developed by the Company’s servants, and attained the zenith of its prosperity under the management and care of British capitalists, planters, and traders. Many of the planters attained great wealth, owned large estates, and settled down to live the lives of country gentlemen in the tropics. They rode hounds, kept racing studs, reveled in pig-sticking, and entertained their friends on a princely scale. They were splendid riders, and formed the smartest volunteer corps in Upper India. For nearly a century they had almost the monopoly of the production of one of the most valuable and essential dyes known to commerce.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the monopoly was challenged by the invention of a German chemist, who placed synthetic indigo on the world’s markets. Since that date the indigo industry of India has rapidly declined, and the export trade has shrunk to such small dimensions that its complete extinction seems likely, if not inevitable. With its extinction the British planters must find new fields for their energies, or develop new industries on its ruins. Some of them have already begun to do so. Others have left the country or drifted into the towns … and the country districts…are poorer owing to the departure of so many sporting planters, who upheld British prestige in places remote from great towns.

Denim and Synthetic Indigo

Source 4: Excerpt from H.E. Schunk’s presidential address to the Society of Chemical Industry, 1897

This critique of the industrialization of indigo dye production compares the production of natural indigo on farms in India with the manufacture of a chemical version of the dye in factories in Europe.

To replace a manufacture depending on an interesting organic process carried on under healthy conditions in the open air, a manufacture which brings wealth into poor districts, and introduces system and order and civilization among uncultured people, by one carried on perchance in some dingy sepulchral cave in a chemical works by some fixed and unalterable process, might … be a doubtful advantage.


Source 5: Excerpt from Christopher Rawson’s writings in the *Journal of the Society of Chemical Industry*, 1899

From a scientific point of view, the production of artificial indigo is undoubtedly a grand achievement, but if it can be produced in large quantities at such a price as to render indigo planting altogether unprofitable it can only be regarded as a national calamity.


Comprehension Exercise:

1. How did the introduction of synthetic indigo impact the indigo industry in India? Support your answer citing data from the documents in this section.

2. How did the introduction of synthetic indigo change the lives of British planters? How might it have changed the lives of Indian peasants? Explain your answers citing the sources in this section.

3. Compare the feelings of 19th-century British indigo planters in India at the advent of synthetic indigo to those of 17th-century woad producers in Europe when indigo first began appearing in Europe in greater quantities. Explain your answer citing documents in Sections 1 and 4.

4. Make a chart comparing the similarities and differences in claims about the three dye products (woad, natural indigo, synthetic indigo). Explain your answer citing sources in Sections 1 and 4.
Source 6: Beating wheel at an indigo factory in Bengal, 1900

Christopher Rawson
Comprehension Exercises:

5. Compare the images of indigo production in this section with those in Section 3. Do the photographs reveal things that the drawings do not?

6. Compare the photograph of the production of natural indigo in an Indian factory with the photograph of the production of synthetic indigo in a German factory. Do you notice any changes in the technology of the two industries? Describe differences in the people who are doing the labor.
Comprehension Exercise:

7. Who was able to wear indigo dyed fabric in the 1910s? How did the introduction of synthetic indigo affect who was able to afford fabric dyed with it?
**Graphic Organizer I**

Fill in the following chart for each stop along indigo’s route from India to global trade. How did indigo move from one stop to the next?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>How was it used?</th>
<th>When did it arrive?</th>
<th>With whom did it arrive?</th>
<th>Where is indigo found?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>(1) Indigo in 17th Century Europe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>(2) Indigo in 18th Century South Carolina</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>(3) Indigo in 19th Century India</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>(4) Advent of Synthetic Indigo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**GRAPHIC ORGANIZER 2**

*Fill in the following chart for each stop along indigo’s route out of India and into global trade.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>To what extent has indigo been harmful or beneficial to society?</th>
<th>Have people’s lives been affected by indigo?</th>
<th>What role did indigo play in people’s lives?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Indigo in 17th-Century Europe</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Indigo in 18th-Century South Carolina</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Indigo in 19th-Century India</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Advent of Synthetic Indigo</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About Hemispheres

Created in 1996, Hemispheres is the international outreach consortium at the University of Texas at Austin. Hemispheres utilizes University resources to promote and assist with world studies education for K–12 and postsecondary schools, businesses, civic and non-profit organizations, the media, governmental agencies, and the general public.

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