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THE RESURGENCE OF INDIGO

In recent times, fashion industries the world over have been cultivating a growing awareness of and appreciation for the beauty of the natural indigo dye. **Brinda Gill** notes.

Fragments of cloth dyed with natural indigo date back to ancient times, frescoes painted with natural indigo in ancient and medieval times, paintings and prints of natural indigo on paper and cloth go back by centuries, and fabrics woven with indigo-dyed yarn tell the story of the enduring and inextricable presence of the plant as a natural dyeing component in India. The word 'indigo' is said to have been derived from the Greek word *indikon*, meaning 'from India', conveying that the natural dye was first known to the West through India.

Over the centuries, as a spectrum of beautiful and soothing shades—from pale white to hues of black—was obtained from natural indigo, the dye came to be much sought-after by textile artisans, and later on, started being exported too. Subsequently, indigo came to be used for colouring cloth, tie-dye, block printing, and painting (kalamkari) techniques, and also for

dyeing yarn. Indigo-dyed yarn (both fully dyed and resist-dyed) has been extensively used for weaving (as best seen in patola textiles and *jamdani nilambari* saris) and embroidery.

A PLANT-BASED DYE

Indigo is derived from leaves of certain plants. In India, the primary source of the dye is the *Indigofera tinctoria* species that grows naturally in the country, and is also cultivated. Cultivating the plant and extracting indigo is a time-consuming process and this makes the dye expensive. Thus, historically, the colour was used relatively less or used for finer or more expensive textiles. Further, dyeing yarn or cloth with natural indigo is also time- and labour-intensive. This is because the yarn or cloth has to be repeatedly dipped in the dye for an increased depth of colour, with a considerable time gap between each dip to allow the colour to be oxidised and the yarn/cloth to dry.



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HISTORICAL RESONANCES

As the British rulers realised that the sale of natural indigo brought in returns, farmers were forced to grow indigo for the purpose of export. Seeing their predicament, Gandhiji took up this cause in 1917, which resulted in the Champaran Satyagraha, regarded as the first Satyagraha or non-violent resistance movement for independence.

Well into the 21st century, the beauty of the plant, its ability to provide numerous shades, the magical transformation of a green leaf into blue hues, the emotive association of indigo with India's freedom struggle, and the fact that it is a plant-based natural dye and is not harmful on the skin or environment—and that its production involves the hands and skills of artisans—has seen a resurgence of the dye.

This has led to artisans and designers increasingly working with natural indigo dyes. Customers, too, are asking for garments dyed with natural indigo or designed with motifs, prints, and embroideries worked with the same. The dye is produced in different places across the country, such as Kutch, Uttarakhand, Puducherry, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh. There is also a growing interest in the dye internationally, and it is sourced from locally grown plants in different parts of the world.

OF SACREDNESS AND INTRIGUE

Artisans who have specialised in natural dyes say that natural indigo has very interesting, sacred, and mysterious qualities. This is because unlike other natural dyes, indigo does not require a mordant to bind it to the yarn or cloth being dyed. The dye is not soluble in water, and apart from colouring the yarn/cloth, it also coats it, thus adding to its thickness. Further, due to the unusual series of chemical reactions taking place during the dyeing process, the dyer does not know the shade of indigo that will be obtained while and after immersing the yarn/cloth in the vat with the dye.



IT TAKES YEARS OF EXPERIENCE AND SKILL TO MASTER DYEING WITH NATURAL INDIGO.

The yarn/cloth has to be repeatedly dipped to get a greater depth of colour. The resulting colour is revealed only after the yarn/cloth, coloured yellow-green from being in the dye, is removed from the vat, and transforms into a shade of blue before the eyes! This attaches a sense of mystery to the dye. It takes years of experience and skill to master dyeing with natural indigo.

SYNTHETIC INDIGO

The demand for natural indigo, the cost, time, and effort to use it for dyeing the yarn/cloth led to the development of synthetic indigo in Germany, which was made available by the end of the 20th century. This led to the widespread demand for synthetic indigo, which was inexpensive and much easier to use, especially compared to its natural counterpart—with the former, the yarn/cloth does not need to be repeatedly dipped and dried to obtain the required colour. The most pervasive use for synthetic indigo was—and remains—dyeing denim fabrics for jeans. However, artisans and designers who use natural indigo-dyed yarns/fabric for their garments believe that the dye gives a beautiful depth of colour and is healthier for the wearer and environment.

THE POTENTIAL OF INDIGO

The immense scope of indigo is presently on display at an on-going exhibition titled 'Alchemy' that opened in February at Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum, Ahmedabad, as a precursor to the opening of Arvind Indigo Museum. The exhibition presents information and a variety of exhibits,

from lengths of yarn dyed with natural indigo by master dyer Aboubakar Fofana and bales of fabric in varying shades of indigo suspended from the ceiling to artworks of different mediums and garments created using natural indigo in myriad forms.

The works were commissioned by the Lalbhai family, founders of Arvind Mills, now Arvind Limited, a company synonymous with denim fabrics; India's first denim-manufacturing plant was commissioned at Naroda Road, Ahmedabad, by Arvind Mills in 1986. Interestingly, in 2015, Arvind Limited started the production of khadi denim, which is denim fabric handwoven with hand-spun and hand-dyed yarns. It is touted to be perhaps "the most sustainable denim fabric ever made: no chemicals, no electricity, no high technology, no use of depletable resources". And true to the company's association with denim and jeans, the 'Alchemy' exhibition features a collection of 61 pairs of jeans, spanning colours from pale white to almost black with a spectrum of shades of blue in between. It conveys the extensive use of indigo for dyeing denim fabrics.

INDIGO EXCHANGES

Craft Design Society (CDS) Art Foundation is a non-profit organisation based in Ahmedabad,





IT IS HOPED THAT THE GROWING APPRECIATION FOR THE ATTRIBUTES OF THE NATURAL INDIGO DYE WILL CONTINUE TO FUEL ITS RESURGENCE AND BENEFIT THE CRAFT COMMUNITY OF INDIA.

Gujarat, founded with an aim to start a movement to take beautiful, handcrafted Indian textiles to the world stage, to share space with the best global textile and fashion labels. CDS conceptualises and presents the 'Walking Hand-in-Hand' initiative, wherein artisans work with leading designers, and together, produce a line of couture garments, which is presented through a fashion show. After the fashion show, CDS Art Foundation assists artisans in participating in international craft exhibitions and connecting them to designers and buyers.

On February 9, 2019, CDS presented 'Walking Hand-in-Hand Indigo Exchanges' powered by Arvind, a fashion show that highlighted the beauty of natural indigo dyes, the multifaceted attributes of khadi, the role of the *ustaad* or master craftsman in creating textile masterpieces, and thus preserving their traditional craft and bringing pride to their community. It also shed light on the importance of collaborations between designers

and artisans to create textiles and garments with singular beauty and an international appeal.

Eight collections featuring natural indigo-dyed garments using different textile mediums, which were a result of collaborations between master craftspersons and designers, were shown along with a khadi collection by nine designers to offer a tribute to Gandhiji on his 150th birth anniversary. The artisan-designer collaborations included were *ajrak* specialist Abdul Jabbar Khatri from Kutch with designer Soham Dave, weaver Samji Vankar from Kutch with designer Paromita Banerjee, textile artist Ajit Das from Kolkata with designer Santanu Das, Avani from Kumaon, an organisation known for its natural dyes, with designer Lipi Khandker from Bangladesh, Aranya Naturals, an organisation in Munnar, known for its natural dyes, with designer Kris Lajeskie from the US (who created shibori designs with the dyes) and designer Anuj Sharma, who ingeniously created garments from fabrics using only buttons and rubber bands, designer Madhu Jain, who presented garments of beautiful bamboo-silk ikat woven with yarns dyed with natural indigo, and Asif Shaikh, who presented a collection of exquisitely stitched garments adorned with bird motifs embroidered with indigo-dyed yarn (dyed by a master dyer in India and master dyer Aboubakar Fofana). Shaikh's collection was subsequently also shown at an exhibition titled 'Confluence of Birds' at Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum on March 15, 2019, to showcase the beauty of fine hand embroidery and natural indigo.

The beauty of the wonderful spectrum of indigo hues on fabrics and their depth of colour, the eye-catching motifs and patterns of indigo created by artisans with different techniques, the easy, flowing silhouettes of the garments, and the collaboration between skilled artisans and experienced designers who tap its potential convey how far the dye has indeed come.

It is hoped that the growing appreciation for the attributes of natural indigo will continue to fuel its resurgence, while also benefitting the craft community of India. ■