



NATURAL DYE



# Reincarnation of a lost heritage

“COLOUR” is our world. From the blue sky to vast green fields, the brown rocky mountains to the blue ocean waters colours are all around us. Drawing inspiration from nature’s colour and wonder, man has invented colour from vegetal and mineral origins for use. The vivid warm colours found in the Altamaria cave paintings or even in carefully restored fabric in different museums is evidence of mankind’s enduring qualities to use natural dyes. In this subcontinent, the history of colour on cloth goes back to Mohenjodaro and Harappa ie. at the time of the Indus Valley Civilization. The madder dyed cotton of Mohenjodaro and later, the fragments of patterned cloths excavated at Fostat present the evidence of not only the

heritage of dye but also of the expertise of Indian craftsmanship. Yellow is the colour of spring, saffron the colour of earth. Classics like the Mahabharat and the Code of Manu also refer to coloured fabrics. Evolving out of the original single colours of red and black the Indian dyer has meticulously reached perfection of processes of bleaching, mordanting and dyeing by the fourth and fifth century AD. Historical records testify the use of compound colours of black, purple, red, blue, green, various shades of pink and gold as early as the tenth century. Hence, as a material and process that is so much related to our living, vegetable dye has attained its position as an element of our heritage and tradition.



Dye is a group of complex organic compounds that are intensely mixed and utilized to colour other materials and “dyeing” is the process of imparting colour to textiles, paper, leather etc. Mordant is an intermediary agent, which combines with certain natural dyes to bind the colour to the fabric. Over 300 dye producing plants have been listed in various historical manuals while the parts of the plants from which dye are made includes root, stem, fruit, flower, leaf, rind, extract, gall of plants etc. Along with the remarkable development of indigenous textile industry during the Mughals, the use of colour and its technique reached a rather encouraging position. Names like Fakhtai, Sandali, Kafuri, Falsai, Aquilquami, Dibahar, Badshah Pasand and Jilani evoking Persian and Arabic origin and influence also speak of the heritage of vegetable or natural dyes. Indigo was one of the most valuable of all dyes originated in this sub-continent and we are aware of the indigo plantation that took place during the colonial period.

The Greeks and Romans referred it as “Indicum” being a product of India. Although Europeans did not utilize the use of indigo dye to a considerable extent, it was most sought in the 17<sup>th</sup> century gave it “the place of honour among possible exports”. The trade or export of fabrics in natural dyes had found a unique place in world trade. From Southeast Asia to the Middle East and Europe, Indian craftsmen were

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able to deliver every range of textile goods starting from apparel, bed hangings to even Altars in churches. From the writings of Tomme Pires in 1515, it is known that textile trade was very prosperous. Even before the arrival of the Europeans in this land, Indian fabrics were already established as a major trade item in the Mediterranean and Middle East, Africa and various parts of Asia. By the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century when Europeans had overdrawn a great influence over this sub-continent, the Indian fabric had become a craze and much of the west-



ern world was clothed in the finely and exclusively dyed and patterned fabrics of the subcontinent. However, this craft heritage began to lose its power after the discovery of the first synthetic dyes in 1856 and their subsequent introduction in India by the British. The use of mordants and its relation with vegetable dyes have been known since the second millennium B.C, where as the earliest reference of its use and knowledge in the west dates back only to the first century A.D. The secret of utilising the full strength of different mordants have remained the miraculous treasure of the dyer’s art and craft. Natural dyes though have been used in wooden toys, mats and basketry, ivory, pith and all kinds of paintings but the real utilisation has been in textiles, whether cotton, wool, rayon or silk. Although much of the technology by which natural dyes acquired their luster and virtuosity has been lost over time, many of the dyeing processes discovered during antiquity is still used today. Bangladesh being a part of this region shared the wealth of fauna and flora and although with the advent of pernicious influence of synthetic dyes, this indigenous craft had almost been extinct except in some tribal areas. It would be a surprise for many to know the variety of so many common plants that are scattered all over our verdant



green landscape nurturing the secret power to present a spectrum of varied colours. However, names like Piyaji, Surmai, Basanti, Asmani, Nilambari, Sonali, Abir and Dhani are some of the colours that dominated the colour spectrum of Bengal. Some of the common dye producing plants are Betel nut (nut), Sundari(Bark), Babul (Bark), Arjun (Bark), Tea (Leaf), Marigold (Petal), Onion (Scale leaf), Dhalla (Petal), Sheuli (Petal), Lemon Grass (Leaf), Basil (Leaf), Gulmohor (Flower), Henn (Leaf), Pomegranate (Rind), Eucalyptus (Leaf), Garjan (Sawdust), Madder (Stem/ Root), Jackfruit (Sawdust), Indigo (Leaf) etc. These plants did not need any special treatment, care or nurturing, but for exceptional versatility some plants like the al, manjistha, safflower and indigo came under organised cultivation. In Bangladesh, the task of revival of natural dye formally began in 1981. Considering the bright commercial prospect, the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation started by sponsoring the Vegetable Dye Project in 1982. During the initial stage of the Project, a set of fifteen colourfast dyes were found which in later years after research and cultivation of dye yielding plants have reached to a total number of 30. This number is still an increasing factor as there are no limits to the

complex range of shades that can be developed from such combinations of dyes and mordants. Vegetable dyes have the added advantage of being non-pollutant and non-allergenic and therefore speak in harmony with today’s eco-friendliness. Some of the tribal areas where the traditional use of natural dyes still exist are associated with the Koch tribe (Rangtia Hill, Jamalpur), Garo tribe (Mymensingh), Khasia tribe (Srimangal, Sylhet), Mugh tribe (Maheshkhali, Cox’s bazaar), Mrong tribe (Chimbuk Hills, Bandarban). Like heritage buildings and monuments, the history-embalmed craft of natural dye cannot be conserved or restored in that sense. But, it can revive and remain alive through its practical implementations. Bangladesh has been able to commence a successful beginning in its revival; what now demands is its prosperous growth and continuity. In today’s circumstances when people all over the world are struggling for natural or organic foods, natural fibres and natural colours against the effects of non-organic, synthetic and intoxicating chemicals and materials, it is a positive and creative potential that our country also is trying to go for it. The projects also create a lot of employment especially for women, which is also marks a positive socio-economic growth. Organisations like Arannya, Kumudini, Prabartana, MCC and many others are researching on natural dyes so as to prove its traditional value as well as commercial viability. It now requires strong support from the community to bring back lost pride. The reincarnation of natural dye would not only bring a positive role in our life, but also the long lost heritage of technique and craftsmanship that we and the world once valued.

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