

INTERVIEW

The Revival of Indigo

Even today, the story entailing indigo farming in the region of Bengal is one of indomitable tyranny and ruthless oppression. When the British rule collapsed, the cash crop almost vanished, leaving behind numerous dilapidated 'Neel Kuthis' (indigo extraction centres). However, the raw potency of indigo was what made its extinction far from possible in this region.

Ruby Ghuznavi, Craft Researcher, Writer and Executive Chairman of Aranya, illustrated the intriguing tale of the rewarding reversal of a remorseful history – indigo's comeback in Bangladesh in the late 1990s.

When Ghuznavi first started learning how to cultivate indigo, at that time in India, the Botanical Garden provided an acre of land for the work. Naturally, owing to the bitter past, the farmers' attitude was resentful towards indigo farming in the primary stages of revival. "I spoke to them and explained that this time, you will not work for the tyrants, you will do it for yourself," recounted Ghuznavi. Instead of being shackles of oppression, this time it would be an opportunity for them to reap the benefits.

The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) came forward with an interesting initiative – they wanted to involve the Garo community in areas like Tangail in the farming of indigo. Unlike Bengali farmers, they had no such dark history and were quite keen on participating. Thus the MCC went on with the project, and soon began commercial extraction and cultivation of indigo. From then on, Bangladesh started producing and using its own indigo.

Ghuznavi recalls accidentally discovering indigo plantation while working in Kurigram around that time. "Although I didn't have a botanist's knowledge, I was quite intrigued to see such similar plants there and sent some samples to the Botanical Garden," she explained. Soon the results declared that they were indeed the original 'indigofera tinctoria.' The farmers who grew the plants were aware that indigo plants were excellent natural fertilizers (contrary to the common misconception that they make the land infertile). Gradually, MCC and Care were able to approach these farmers and pique their interest to be involved. This time, they were more receptive to the opportunity and with the initiation of Living Blue, indigo farming took off with a renewed zeal.

SIGNIFICANCE OF INDIGO TODAY

As a cash crop, indigo still retains its intrinsic value. Apart from that, it is an 'intercrop', grown in between staples and vegetables, so farmers too can rest assured that it will not take up their entire land throughout the year. Moreover, unlike the production process of synthetic dyes, the one of natural dye's is more labour-intensive, thus generating more employment in the country.

Several countries in Central and Southern America and some regions in India are growing the prized crop, but the harvest is only enough for their own domestic usage. Subsequently there is a huge visible demand for indigo in the worldwide market. "In Bangladesh, we are now growing more indigo than we can use, so it's time we start looking for potential markets," informs Ghuznavi. She further said that so far, Living Blue has been successfully marketing its products and with a more proactive strategy that involves demonstrating the quality of the products, it can gain significant international recognition.



Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed
 Model: Meghla
 Make-up: Farzana Shakil's
 Makeover Salon
 Styling: Sonia Yeasmin Isha
 Wardrobe: LS Desk