

## INTERVIEW

## The revival of Indigo

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## INDIGO IN THE FACE OF COMPETITION

As a natural dye, indigo has already made its mark on the world. Ghuznavi believes as it is our own crop, it has the potential to be exported on a large scale to earn revenue. However, there is severe competition to face with well-established multinationals providing chemical dyes at a much cheaper rate. In addition, she highlighted that sometimes some negative information about natural dyes is disseminated intentionally to disrupt the market force.

"We've been fighting such issues with the quality of our product," Ghuznavi responded firmly. Some people frequently claim that indigo rubs off on the skin, however that occurs very rarely and only when the washing process is not right. She explained that when a sari or dress is being dyed, it needs to be washed well during the production process so that the excess colour can seep out. Furthermore, once bought, they need to be washed carefully with liquid soap instead of detergent (which is actually quite harmful for clothes). These are sold at Aranya at cost price and customers can also take the product back for inquiry in cases of stains.

## COMEBACK OF THE CASH CROP

According to Ghuznavi, other Asian countries like Japan, China and Taiwan are currently growing indigo by themselves, but they have a demand for much more. "The market is just at your doorstep and all you need to do is reach out and let them in," she emphasised. If the demand for indigo rises, then supply will consequently follow. Right now, Bangladesh is exporting indigo at a maximum limit, but it has the capacity to

produce more. Ghuznavi believes that if we can do so at a larger scale, it will open new dimensions for indigo on a global level. In fact, indigo recently gained international interest as many globally renowned universities are also pushing into its research. "If we cannot grab this golden opportunity, then it will be truly unfortunate," Ghuznavi sighed.

Just last year, a sister organisation of Aranya worked on an experimental project with a group of Garo farmers who were growing and using indigo for themselves. The outcome was quite successful. Ghuznavi believes such projects can help uplift the struggling works of potential producers with training and monetary assistance, so that they can repay once they are established.

Apart from this, she stressed on the importance of knowing a craft to its core before starting a business based on it. While indigo farming and production follows a complex model, it also requires certain amount of capital to start off. "Like every business, you have to keep a far-sighted, risk-taking mentality and cannot expect to start making profits immediately," she furthered and highlighted her journey with Aranya – two initial years of loss, breakeven on the third and finally, profit-making from the fourth year onward.

Ghuznavi warmly invites interested producers to come forward and contact her so that they can strengthen and help each other for the love of the craft. She cheerfully claimed, "You can just never go wrong with blue!" and asserted that all in all, every individual or organisation which wants to grow indigo can expect substantial benefits from it.

By Nafisa Faruque

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## LS PICK

## Pride in Bengal's Blue

Recently named one of the 'Cool Crusaders of Conscious Clothing' by Vogue India, Living Blue is one of the frontlining revivalists of indigo as a natural dye in Bangladesh. Besides cultivation, it focuses on producing a range of unique products involving quilting and hand embroidery.

Mishaal Aziz Ahmad, Manager of Living Blue, explained how the organisation began its journey. In its earliest stages, "Living Blue came to exist as experts travelling around Rangpur and other northern regions of Bangladesh accidentally discovered and identified the indigo plant's existence," Ahmad recalled. Soon enough, indigo became the flagship product of Living Blue.

Indigo is a legume and a nitrogen fixer which enriches the soil, Ahmad said, adding, "While the leaves are used for the dye, the stem can be used for firewood as well." Moreover, it is a native crop of choice as a buffer crop that made its return as a dye through Living Blue. They work with landless farmers as well, providing them with seed and land leased from the local government, boosting incomes during the lull

agricultural period. Living Blue also buys leaves from small individual farmers.

Extraction and cultivation of indigo in Bengal was marred by a history of cruel exploitation, but the present is starkly contrasting. Farmers, if they choose to get involved, are provided seeds by Living Blue. Hence, farmers and indigo processors become both willing partners of the organisation. Moreover, Ahmad emphasised that indigo is only a buffer crop now, so it does not clash with the farming of food crops and there is no strenuous labour involved either.

Moving on future plans, Ahmad said that Living Blue would like to expand the usage of the dye locally and internationally. "Bangladesh produces perhaps the finest indigo in the world, and Living Blue is proud to be the major producer of it," Ahmad affirmed with pride. They are aiming to increase production to meet with rising global demands and at the same time, they want to exert a positive impact on the lives of the farmers, artisans and dyers involved.

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