

## Indigo – The Blue Gold of India

By

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### Abstract

Indigo, the blue gold of India has an interesting history and stands tall as one of the most enduring cultural stories of India. This article traces the history and relevance of Indigo, the Blue Gold of India through the ages. It was a powerhouse of economic revival and then had a turbulent history that tarnished its image. There are highlights of the past, present, and future status of Indigo. The future looks promising as the indigo plant is eco-friendly and sustainable for the environment. It has seen a revival in its cultivation which bodes well for the farmers and the fashion industry. This article explores this mysterious plant, which has fascinated historians as well as environmentalists.

### Keywords

Indigo, Blue gold, India, East India Company, Nil Darpan.

### Introduction

Natural indigo has been prized throughout the world for centuries, and it is thousands of years old. Indigo is indigenous to India and it finds mention in ancient works like the Atharva Veda and the Ain-i-Akbari.

"The word indigo itself derives from the Greek *indikon*, Latinised *indicum*, meaning a substance from India, indicating the import of indigo pigment by the Graeco-Roman world. The Sanskrit word *nila*, meaning dark blue, spread from India eastwards into Southeast Asia and westward to the Near and Middle East, probably both through the pre-Islamic trading

routes and subsequent trade diffusion of the product in the Islamic era." Jenny Balfour-Paul writes in her book *Indigo: Egyptian Mummies to Blue Jeans*.

Indigo plantations have been present in India since 1777 when Louis Bonnard introduced the crop to Bengal in eastern India. He started cultivation at Taldanga in Bankura district and Goalpara in Hooghly district. In the early 19th century, British merchants took advantage of the high demand for indigo in Europe and developed several indigo plantations across India, which increased production.

### **History and the Turmoil**

The history of indigo cultivation in India has a dark side to it. Over 175 years ago, indigo symbolized colonial oppression.

The East India company ploughed in money and incentives into the cultivation of indigo, promising to write off any losses. This attracted businessmen from Europe who established factories here. Imports of indigo saw a rise, most of them being from Bengal. Four million people were employed in the production and manufacture of indigo in Bengal alone. Indigo plantations were a hugely profitable enterprise. Its color was gold as the future was bright.

As the profitability of the indigo business grew, so did the greed of the businessmen. It led to ostentatious lifestyles and as a result, none of the profits were shared with the farmers, which led them to get into debt. Indigo planters were forcing farmers to grow indigo instead of food crops. Farmers were never paid back for their loans, which kept them in debt for their entire lives passing on to their successors.

According to historical records, under the tyranny of the British East India Company in Bengal, farmers turned to revolt. The Indigo Revolt against the planters in Bengal started in 1859 at a village in Nadia district, led by Bishnucharan Biswas and Digambar Biswas. Gradually, it spread like a wildfire in eastern India. Indigo depots were burned down and several planters were given a public trial and executed.

Dinabandhu Mitra wrote a play called “Nil Darpan” that depicted the situation of indigo farmers in India. Nil Darpan caused an uproar in the British Parliament. This led to the decree that one could only cultivate the land if one was a landowner. This led to an exodus of the British planters from India as they were using leased land.

In his biography of Mitra, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay wrote: "Nil Darpan is to Bengal what *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is to America's slave movement.

Another blow to the status of Indigo was the invention of synthetic indigo by a German chemist. Adolf Von Baeyer towards the end of the 19th century. It was cheaper and it made natural indigo irrelevant. All this led to indigo having a tainted reputation, The Blue Devil, representative of villainy and poverty.

From gold, indigo had taken another color that of black, synonymous with misery and ruin.

### **The Present Scenario**

Today, indigo is cultivated in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Rajasthan. The majority of them are small farmers or traditional growers who have been in business for generations. Indigo acclimatizes very well to the weather of the Himalayan region as well as the southern states. Different varieties of indigo, ranging from the most common *Indigofera tinctoria* and *Indigo heterantha*, a Japanese species, are being experimented with. Indigo is leguminous; therefore is good for agroforestry and intercropping with kharif crops.

Indigo is changing the economic landscapes of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Uttarakhand where more than 200 farmers have taken up cultivation of the crop, and the Tibetan plateau also.

Indigo is a cash crop and provides an important source of supplementary income to farmers especially women farmers who have taken to the cultivation of indigo in large numbers. It fetches them good returns and savings when it is planted in the months when other crops do not grow and in small plots that do not require maintenance. They are happy to experiment as the ecological and monetary benefits are good for them and nature too.



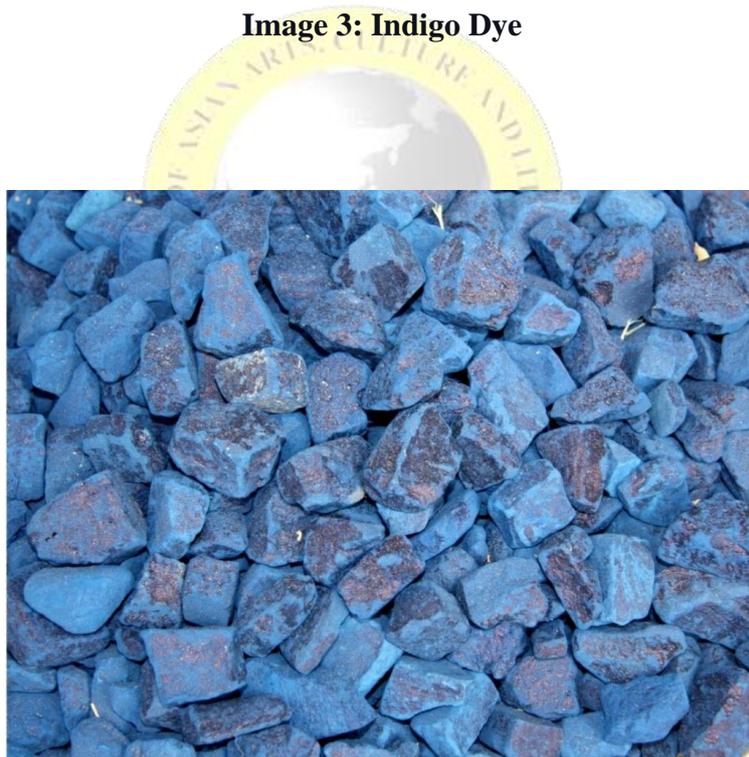
**Image 1: Indigo Leaves**



**Image 2: Process of Extraction & Dyeing**



**Image 3: Indigo Dye**



**Image 4: Natural Indigo Dye Cake**



**Image 5: Dyeing Process**



**Image 6: Ajrakh Dyeing**

Many organizations like Avani Society, a non-profit based in the region are working on instituting an indigo supply chain in the area. They help women farmers by buying the dyed fabric from them and providing market visibility to their crops and well their final creations.

They support them with the idea of building a sustainable “farmer to table model” called as the “seed to scarf” model too. This is instrumental in reaching consumers across the country.

### **The Process of Extraction**

The process of creating natural indigo is complex and requires immense skill. Traditionally, in the Southern Indian states of Tamil Nadu, the process begins with the first day of “thotti podurathu”, when the traditional tanks are set up to extract the dye from the indigo plants. A simple prayer is said to invoke the blessings of Neel Atha (or the Blue Mother) – the sacred name the villagers have for indigo – and presents an offering of bananas and coconut. Indigo is perceived as a Blue Goddess in Indian mythology and it also represents the color of the cosmos.

The work of getting dye from indigo happens in stages. First, the leaves are harvested from neighboring farms; then they are gathered together and immersed in a huge tank filled with water, where they are weighed down and allowed to ferment. After the fermentation, the leaves are removed, and the water is drained into another massive tank where the solution oxidizes and sediment settles at the bottom of the tank; finally, the sediment powder is dried and packed into cakes. Unlike other textile dyeing processes, the fabric does not turn blue in the dye pot; it is exposed to air for several days, which slowly turns drying pieces of dyed fabrics from yellow to green and eventually into deep dark blue.

It is an eco-friendly and sustainable crop with many benefits. The extraction process is zero waste as the spent indigo leaves from the first tank are taken back to the fields for composting and the water from the second tank is used for irrigation. It is a great nitrogen fixer for the soil and helps in increasing fertility. In the bygone days, the leftover indigo leaves were the only fertilizer used for other crops like millets or paddy.

### **Conclusion**

Despite continuous efforts to increase the monetary benefits of the cultivation of natural indigo, many farmers in India are finding it difficult to compete with cheaper synthetic indigo from China which has flooded the markets. Synthetic indigo is much cheaper than natural indigo. Farmers do not get a fair price for their produce due to the high price difference.

Adulteration and loss of confidence in production and extraction system are the by-products of this scenario. Farmers need to be given priority by continuous efforts on the part of the government agencies and organizations working in this field.

Given the current scenarios of climate change and sustainability, indigo has a major role to play. It is an eco-friendly crop with minimal cost to the farmers and the environment. It is an excellent soil binder and hence contains soil erosion. The indigo dye is non-polluting with no contribution to soil and water pollution.

It benefits the livelihoods of farmers and gives a boost to the preservation of the heritage crafts and arts in apparel, and textiles. Even today, natural indigo is highly prized by fashion designers who use it to create patterns called Ajrakh on clothes and accessories. Indigo dyes are also used in making herbal colors and crayons which are in great demand these days. It can become the green gold crop that nourishes both man and nature. It is a labor-intensive industry and can only be fully revived by continuous efforts, support, and financial aid. It is an important part of the history of India, indigo has come full circle in the annals of time, having been painted in the colors of gold to black to its original glorious blue nowadays. The blue color is now representative of empowerment and regeneration.

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## About the Author

Ms. Komal Gupta is an award-winning Indian poetess and writer. She is a published author of two poetry books, Verses of Time (2019) and Of Silhouette Words and Moonflowers (2017). She is the State President of WICCI Haryana Arts Leadership council. A keen

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