Blue Gold

Text
Payal Uttam

Once known as 'blue gold', indigo has a storied history spanning centuries and continents. Derived from plants native to Asia and Africa, it's the world's oldest natural dye, long revered for its rich colour and medicinal properties. Tutankhamun of Egypt was wrapped in indigo-infused linens before being buried, Japanese samurai warriors wore indigo garments under their armour to help prevent bacteria from infecting wounds, and in India textiles dyed with the deep-blue pigment continue to be treasured and passed down through generations.

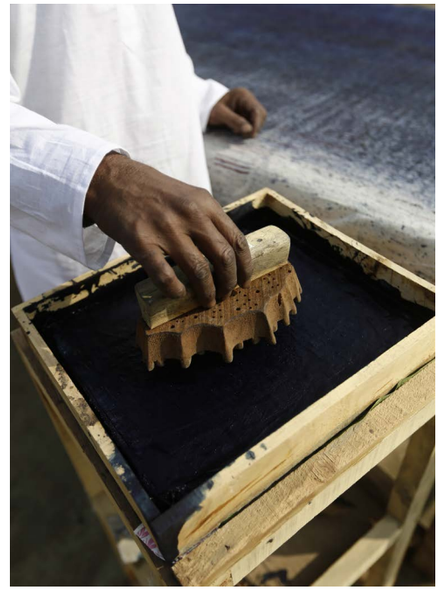
'For many communities in India, indigo was sacred. Some would perform a prayer when setting up the dyeing vat because indigo was seen as a living being that provided people with colour and a livelihood,' says Anuradha Singh, head of Nila House, a craft centre in Jaipur that's reviving the ancient practice of indigo dyeing. 'Historically, craft was integrated into people's lives, but today we just think of craft products as commodities,' she adds. But Nila House is one of many spaces cropping up around the world that are restoring value to the ancient dye and using it to create art, clothing and furniture.

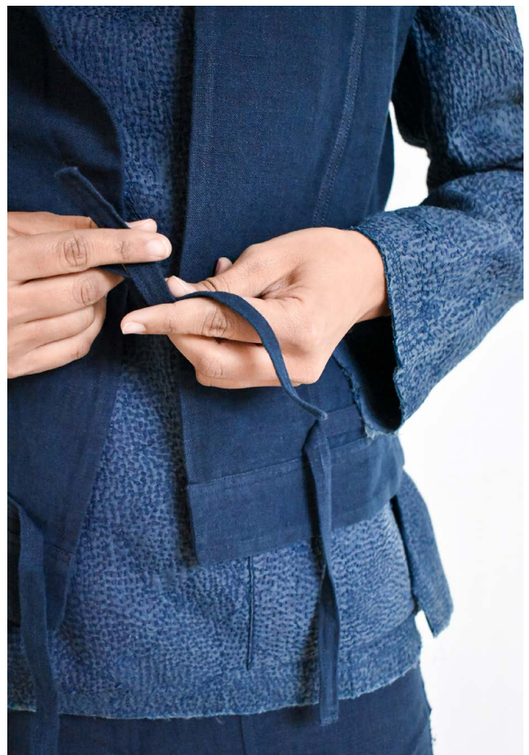
Extracting the precious blue pigment in the traditional way is a laborious process that begins with soaking the leaves of the indigo plant to extract the pigment, then fermenting it and creating a paste that is diluted with water and other ingredients to produce the dye. Fabric submerged in the dye emerges greenish-yellow before oxidisation slowly transforms the fibres into a violet hue that intensifies depending on the number of dips.

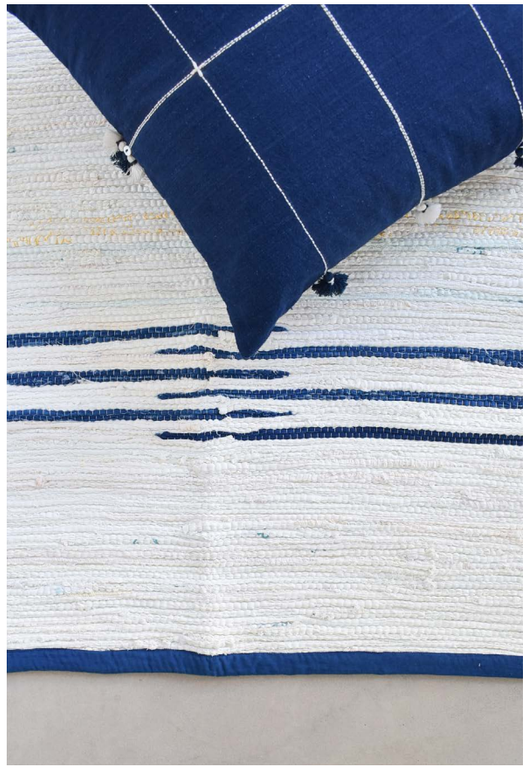
In the 19th century, a synthetic alternative was developed involving a less labour-intensive process that continues to be used today — often in denim production — leading to the decline of the traditional method. For the team at Nila House, though, tradition is key, natural dyeing included. And through this mission, the organisation has become a platform for a community of craftspeople, biologists, designers, researchers and farmers to create handspun clothing and homeware items, conduct research and hold workshops.

While some of Nila House's production takes place elsewhere in the community, other studios such as Tian Taru in Bali are physically involved in the full process. About 15 years ago, Dutch textile designer Sebastian Mesdag began cultivating an indigo plantation deep in a jungle near Ubud. For Mesdag, it was a labour of love. 'The indigo plant only grows under shade, so we started a forest to shelter the plants and only got a cutting ten years ago,' he explains. Tian Taru now holds regular indigo dyeing workshops and collaborates with artists looking to experiment. 'This pushes us to try using indigo on different materials like wood or to add paste to a lime wash for building,' says the designer, whose team also produces a limited range of clothing. Recently they collaborated with a Spanish artist who used indigo paste and indigo-infused string in his work, and a Japanese creative who used laminated paper stained with indigo to create a monumental wall in a local villa.

Elsewhere in Asia, Tokyo-based Ao. studio explores the possibilities of indigo and furniture, producing wooden chairs, tables and even tableware coloured with the pigment. Each piece is unique, as the dyeing process is unpredictable. For designers like Mesdag, this is part of the appeal. 'It's not like you have a fixed recipe and it always turns out the same,' he says. 'I see it as a meditative practice and a lifetime journey.'







First page
Among the individuals and organisations working to preserve the ancient technique of indigo dyeing is Jaipur-based Nila House, which aims to revive and preserve traditional Indian crafts by working with grassroots organisations

Previous page
Nila House works with local artisans, including traditional block printers in Kaladera, Rajasthan, who use indigo dye to create beautiful prints and textiles
Images by Gourab Ganguly

This page
Ancient as it may be, indigo dye features in all manner of contemporary wares, such as Nila House's zero-waste rice bag (top left), the Nila × Anna Valentine Apostrophe waistcoat (top right) and the Criss Cross cushion (bottom)
Images by Damini Rathore

Facing page
Named after the Japanese word for 'blue', Ao. produces locally sourced timber furniture dyed with indigo, each piece crafted by hand in Tokyo
Images by NOJYO