

## Neel: The Blue of Bangladesh

After it had experienced a century of neglect, Aranya made the first successful effort to revive natural indigo in Bangladesh in 1984. However, the negative oral history of indigo cultivation was so deeply ingrained in the collective memory of Bangladeshi farmers that they refused to cultivate it again. Even though, this time, the economic gains would be theirs.

In the mid-1990s, Mennonite Central Committee, an NGO, successfully revived large-scale indigo by working with the Garos, an indigenous ethnic community who did not share the same history with respect to this crop. They have been cultivating, extracting and marketing indigo within the country and abroad since 2000.

In early 2000, it was discovered that farmers in north Bangladesh had been cultivating *indigofera tinctoria* as a fertiliser, and biomass for fuel, throughout the previous decades.

In 2005, CARE, another NGO, undertook a pilot project to revive indigo in collaboration with the farmers who were already cultivating it. After the initial years of experimentation, Living Blue was set up in 2008 as a community-based project, producing and marketing indigo as well as developing an outstanding range of hand-embroidered textile products in the high end an amazing development last year was Aranya's discovery that *indigofera tinctoria* is being cultivated and used as dye by the Mru ethnic community in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. Unfortunately, the correct dye extraction technique has been lost over time, yielding only a grey-blue shade. Aranya has taken up a special project to work with the community to return Mru indigo to its original blue.

Aranya provided technical support to both MCC and CARE at the initial periods. But the real heroes of this success story are the farmers, who recognised the intrinsic value of indigo, and have continued with the cultivation of this traditional crop, transforming it into what is likely to be its glorious future avatar.