



Manish Nai,
"Untitled (Indigo)," 2018,
indigo dyed aluminum,
48 x 48 x 4 in. On view at
the exhibition "Alchemy"
at Indigo Museum,
Ahmedabad.



THE MANY SHADES OF INDIGO

THE NATURAL BLUE DYE HAS A LONG HISTORY IN INDIA, BUT ITS MOST RECENT SUCCESS STORY HAS LED TO A MAJOR NEW MUSEUM IN AHMEDABAD

by Archana Khare-Ghose

IMAGE COURTESY ARCHANA KHARE-GHOSE

Indigo, besides being one of the most popular vegetable dyes, is inextricably linked with a revolt and a revolution in the country it is named after.

India is believed to be the oldest center of dyeing associated with this plant that produces a brilliant range of shades of blue. Yet, this simple plant turned into a powerful commercial crop at the turn of the 18th century, when the East India Company emerged as the most successful of all European outfits aiming at commercial supremacy and political power in Asia.

Driven by a high demand for the dye in Europe, the early colonizers oppressed indigo cultivators, eventually leading to one of the earliest rebellions against colonialism in South Asia. Now known as the Indigo Revolt, the rebellion arose in Bengal in eastern India in 1859. The revolt was ruthlessly suppressed, but it left its mark on the popular imagination, largely because of a play depicting the oppression of the planters, titled “Nil Darpan,” written in 1858-'59 by Dinabandhu Mitra (‘nil’ is the Sanskrit name for indigo/ blue, and ‘darpan’ means mirror).

A different kind of indigo revolution was to come more than a century later, from Gujarat, the westernmost state of India.

In March 1987, Sanjay Lalbhai, chairman and managing director of Arvind Limited (formerly Arvind Mills) of Ahmedabad, the textile hub of the country, decided to move beyond the family business of dealing in “saree, blouse and other cloth-lengths,” the traditional garments of India, to denim. He knew he was at the tip of a massive opportunity.

“But people asked me, ‘who will wear denim in India?’ Their fears were not unfounded because practically nobody wore denim in India then, except for a few who had traveled abroad, and that included only a small fraction of Bollywood

Sanjay Lalbhai, chairman and managing director of Arvind Limited, and the man behind Indigo Museum, Ahmedabad.





With the help of indigo that turned the sturdy cotton fabric into blue denim, Lalbhai triggered a revolution that transformed the way people dressed in India

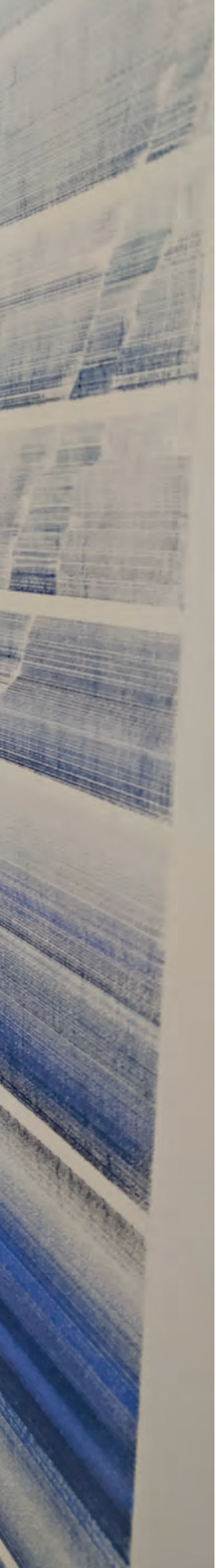
From left: Participating artist Aboubakar Fofana from Mali, who has worked in indigo for a long time; Vipul Mahadevia, creative director with Arvind Limited, against a work in indigo-dyed sandstone by Kavin Mehta.



From left: "Shyam Rang"
by Umang Hutheesing;
"Essence," by Shola Carletti,
indigo and resin on acrylic,
96 in diameter, 2018.



Tanya Goel, "Index," pigment on
wall panels, 48 x 96 in (each
panel), 2018.



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Annie Morris,
"Untitled," indigo
concrete, plaster,
sand and steel,
height 250 cm,
2019.



An installation
in indigo-dyed
threads, "Fa Juru,"
by Aboubakar
Fofana.



Left and below:
Untitled works
by Alwar
Balasubramaniam as
part of a solo project
at the “Alchemy”
exhibition of indigo
works.

too,” recalled Lalbhai at the launch of his new venture, the Indigo Museum, in Ahmedabad in late January. “But in that big question I found an opportunity. It was a challenge I wanted to take as I felt denim would click with the masses.”

With the help of indigo that is used to dye the sturdy cotton warp-faced fabric to transform it into blue denim, Lalbhai triggered a revolution that transformed the way people dressed in India. His move was followed by the country’s economic liberalization a few years later, catapulting Arvind Limited into one of the leading global producers of denim. Today, Arvind Limited is the largest manufacturer of denim in India, and the fourth largest manufacturer and exporter in the world, making India the second largest manufacturer and consumer of denim after China.

After three decades of steady success manufacturing denim for a big segment of the top global garment brands, Lalbhai decided to take his relationship with indigo a step further. “Indigo is the hero among all natural dyes and for Arvind Ltd., it’s been a very rewarding journey,” he said. “Arvind got re-invented with indigo or else, it would have suffered the same fate as so many other textile mills in Ahmedabad that had to shut down. Though indigo’s main use remains in dyeing fabrics — primarily cotton of which denim is the largest product category — I had been toying with the idea of extending it to other materials, to every other



surface possible.”

The company’s indigo experts set out to experiment under the direction of Lalbhai and Vipul Mahadevia, the creative director, pairing the dye with as many materials as they could. “We tried cement, bricks, steel, paper, canvas, resin, and so many other things,” said Lalbhai.

Added Mahadevia, “And we failed more than we

Amit Ambalal, "Birds of feather flock together," cloth and wire mesh, dimensions variable, 2019.



An installation of fabric dyed in various shades of indigo at the entrance of Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum, Ahmedabad.





IMAGE COURTESY ARCHANA KHARE GHOSE

An indigo-dyed wooden bench and batik cushion covers in indigo at the Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum, Ahmedabad.



An indigo-dyed textile on view at the museum.

“Being a natural dye, it’s almost a living being and reacts accordingly. For instance, it doesn’t fade in the sun...”

succeeded. But we kept trying and kept coming up with interesting results.”

The two met artists and artisans around the world and brainstormed on the possibilities for their work with indigo, sharing their patented processes of infusing indigo in other materials. The result was the creation of artworks whose technical brilliance cannot be overemphasized.

“All the artists we went to were highly excited. That’s because though they had been using blue in their works, they had not used a natural dye in previously unthinkable ways, such as dyeing marble with indigo, and that challenged them,” Lalbhai said, pointing out that the beauty of indigo lay in its reaction to nature’s elements: “Being a natural dye, it’s almost a living being and reacts accordingly. For instance, it doesn’t fade in the sun but gets darker over time.”

A select set of artists worked with indigo on different materials, creating works that are now on view at the museum’s first exhibition, titled “Alchemy” at the Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum in Ahmedabad. The exhibition began on January 25 as part of a series of parallel events associated with the India Art Fair, and by the end of the year, will shift to the museum’s own space; presently under construction in Ahmedabad, the facility will be spread over 15,000 square feet to start.

The artists who created works for “Alchemy” include some well-known names of Contemporary Indian art scene such as Amit Ambalal, Nalini Malani, Alwar Balasubramaniam,



Nibha Sikander,
**“Nature Construct/
 Deconstruct,”** indigo-
 dyed paper, 8.5 x 11.5
 in each, 2018.

G.R. Iranna, Manisha Parekh, Umang Hutheesing, Pandit Khairnar, Manish Nai, Swapnil Pandeya, and Kavin Mehta, to name some, as also international artists such as Annie Morris, Aboubakar Fofana, Christian Achenbach, Alicia Wade, and Gregor Hildebrandt, among others.

As Lalbhai and Mahadevia led a walk through the works at the Kasturbhai Lalbhai Museum, we saw the possibilities of indigo used stunningly in many applications, providing a sensorial, immersive experience — from an indigo-dyed sandstone sculpture by Kavin Mehta, to an indigo-dyed aluminium installation by Manish Nai, to an installation in indigo concrete, plaster, sand and steel by Annie Morris, to Alwar Balasubramaniam’s wind- and water-swept works in indigo mimicking the natural process of weathering of rocks. And of course, there were works in fabric, fashioned in previously tried-and-tested ways to newer potentialities.

While working with the dye, the artists also explored

various genres of art, from figurative to Abstract, from Minimalist to detailed and profuse.

Ambalal’s “Birds of Feather Flock Together,” an installation of birds in indigo-dyed cloth and wire mesh, became the most photographed work at the museum, even in the midst of a brilliant indigo profusion all around.

With Indigo Museum, Ahmedabad gets another textile museum to complement the Calico Museum of Textiles, promoted by the city’s renowned Sarabhai family, whose members made major contributions to the country’s freedom struggle and played the most important role in setting up two seminal institutions of the city that are known in global academic circles — Indian Institute of Management (IIM) and the National Institute of Design (NID).

Lalbhai’s next project? “An indigo menu at the museum, perhaps,” he quips. “Yes, it’s edible.” Blue tea at the museum café, anyone? ↩