

Worlds Beyond Business

We work hard and have had and continue to have, consistent success and learnings in our professional lives, for which we can all be proud. However, we also aim to have a work-life balance. In this context we thought to start a quarterly issue on learning about another subject of pride, outside of business. We have selected the World of Crafts. First in the series is the little known but rising use of natural dyes, a worthy alternative to polluting chemical dyes. Read on.

Chander Swamy

A HARVEST YOU CAN WEAR



As the harmful impact of synthetic dyes on health and the environment gets more widely reported, natural dyes, the earth's oldest and kindest colourants, are making a rapid comeback. These dyes are obtained largely from renewable botanical sources - berries, bark, leaves, flowers, roots, seeds, wood, even fungi and lichen. This makes them safer than synthetic colourants, gentle on the skin and gentle on the planet.



Using natural dyes also helps to save water because harvested plants can be used directly for dyeing without the wasteful process of chemical production. Besides, natural dyes do not only avoid toxins, they don't release them either, and the residue is biodegradable.

**Almost all countries have innumerable plant (and mineral) sources of dyes.
Here are some that are native to India and popular.**



Marigold (*genda/banti puvvulone of many kinds of saamandhi*) The many varieties of this showy farm crop yield colours from orange to golden yellow to ochre, even a mossy green and a light tan.



Madder (*manjishtha/majith/manditti*) is a perennial whose roots produce a vibrant red dye. Madder has been cultivated for centuries across civilisations and has a rich history in textile dyeing



Henna (*mehndi/marudhani*) produces a dark tan tending towards red-orange on certain fibres. The dye comes from the leaves that are sun-dried and ground to a powder.



Indigo (*neel ka paudhalavuri*) A number of plants produce the deep blue colour we all know, but the age-old, most widely cultivated variety is indigofera, native to India. It is one of the oldest dyestuffs still in use. Fun fact: it was the original dye of the iconic blue of denim fabric.



Pomegranate (*anaar/madhulam*) A powder made from the rind of the fruit yields soft yellows to green-yellows. Being high in tannin, it improves uniformly the 'washfastness' of any dye with which it is mixed, and can produce pleasing hues from silvery greys to bottle and emerald green.



Myrobalan (*kadukka/harad/har itaki*) are small ribbed nutlike fruits (with uses for gut health in natural medicine.) They impart a light buttery yellow dye that is used both on its own and to tan cotton fabric evenly before overlaying with other colours.

Some enduring textiles reveal how long natural dyes can last



Muga shawl dyed with lac.
Sibsagar, Assam, 1855



Embroidered bed-hanging
with lac-dyed silk thread.
Gujarat, circa 1700, V&A



Patola saree dyed with
turmeric. Patan, Gujarat,
early 20thC



Ritual yellow 'pitambar'
dhoti, dyed with larkspur.
Varanasi, 1852, V&A



Naga man's shawl 1940s,
using osak, the leafy Assam
indigo plant