



## INDIGO NARRATIVES : AN ODE TO NEEL DARPAN (2009-17)

by Shelly Jyoti

*Indigo holds a sustained presence in the post-colonial identity of India.*

### INSTALLATION1



Shelly Jyoti

Indigo Narratives (2008-17)

Homage: To the Farmers of  
champaran

**Image:** Chicago Cultural Centre, IL,  
USA, 2013

The above installation titled 'Homage: To the Farmers of champaran' is a variable site-specific textile hanging installation made of sculptural discs with Ajrakh prints on handspun handwoven fabric'. The installation maps the story of ryots of Champaran suggesting of their sorrowful tales inscribed in each circle also representing multiple voices enabling multiple sets to talk the sordid blue farmer story into the sculptural whole. There are 300 or more indigo dyed disks installations hanging are attached to one another, suggesting hundreds of years of subjugation. The parallels of circles hanging with different placement of traditional and contemporary prints also explores the manipulation of visual effect and aesthetics.

## INSTALLATION 2

Shelly Jyoti

*Indigo Narratives (2008-17)*

***Homage: Ballad of blue farmers of Champaran***

2009



Installation shot at Diana Lowenstein Gallery Miami USA 2010

17

The above installation ***Homage: Ballad of blue farmers of Champaran 1917-18*** is about 8ft high site specific -displays 16 human structures of 15" height, corded in twisted indigo cotton rope with metallic chains perched on black acrylic painted wooden buttons convey how the native farmers were oppressed for Eurocentric need by colonizers in eastern India. The indigo plantation became deltaic obsession with Britishers after World War 1. The sculptures hanging from top to bottom at different levels suggest their persistent demands to free them from land revenue system as that was leading the native farmers/ families in debts and eventually deaths. The metallic chains around the farmer is suggestive of slavery and oppression and exploitation.



### INSTALLTION 3

*Indigo Narrative: An Ode to Neel Darpan*

*Acrylics on canvas, triptych*

*30x23 inches each, 2009*



Each panel of the triptych exhibits the images of hawks that are metaphorical to the British who twisted the indigo farmers with their razor sharpened beaks with lotuses in their beaks rising over a ground with worms. The hawks, representing the British colonizers, twist and manipulate lotuses in their beaks. The lotuses signal planters, British and Indian individuals who acted as intercessors and translators between the British colonizers and the indigo farmers, here represented as the hardworking and severely underappreciated. **The question that I am raising here is as how are the farmers today different than the Indigo farmers of 19<sup>th</sup> C ? Do we need another Mahatma to fight with the 21<sup>st</sup> century farmers?**



*Above image is an excerpt and the close up of the above artwork*

## INSTALLTION4

*Indigo Narrative : An Ode to Neel Darpan 2009-17*

*Indigo: The Blue Farmers*

**Multimedia spoken word poetry, 52 lines**

2009

### **Indigo: The blue farmers** Multi Media spoken poetry

This work is a multi media narrative of the play 'Neel Darpan' in the form of spoken poetry performance which portrays the eco-political exploitation by the colonizers in early 19th century .



This poem delves into the politics of indigo , the first national freedom movement in *chamaparan* led by Mahatma Gandhi in 1917-1918 and the unfortunate state of farmers even today.



### **Indigo- The blue farmers**

The blues of indigo!  
Or the moods of indigo!

The turbulent blue waters...  
Stormy skies and stormy  
weather...  
Under the sky and over the sea  
Farmers blue... on meadows  
green  
Toiling and sweating...  
Ploughing and cultivating  
Terra firma-the soil  
Die of hunger  
No food to eat... But grow  
indigo!

Why!! Says a farmer's child!  
Innocently...I am hungry!!  
pleads Father!  
let's go and plough the field ..  
And bring food for my dying mother...  
she is dying of hunger.. Father! I am  
hungry !!



Indigo Narratives: Works by Shelly Jyoti  
2009-14



## INSTALLTION5

*Indigo Narrative : An Ode to Neel Darpan*

*Indigo Narratives: Narration in resist (a section)*

2009



Shelly jyoti,  
indigo Narratives:  
Narration in Resist  
Ajrakh printing and  
dyeing and painting on  
khadi  
2009



## ***Installation 6***

***Shelly jyoti***

*Indigo Narrative: The paper boat*

*Newspaper Origami*

*6x18 inches each, 2009*



### ***Not a chest of indigo reached England without stains of human blood***

This origami boat is representative of media, translation of story of indigo farmers written by Deenbandhu Mitra (1860). The translated copy from vernacular to English by Madhusudan was sent to British parliament and became a media discussion with elite of Calcutta of bringing awareness of the plight of farmers.

*Installation 6*

**Shelly jyoti**

*Indigo Narrative: The neel coolie jacket*

*Acrylics on canvas*

*30x23 inches each, 2009*



*The installation sculpture Indigo narratives: Neel coolie jacket is fully structured and fully finished ready to wear, size medium, painted canvas with army print lapels investigating the Eurocentric need of indigo color during the World War I with a brass identification of the porter/coolie on the arm.*

*The jacket is constructed signifying the oppression and forced labor symbolically and further investigate the presence of indigo as dye/color that brings together natural history, science, technology, global economics, politics, spirituality and art in the past with the present.*



## **Indigo Narratives: An ode to Neel Darpan (2009-17)**

### **Over view:**

***Indigo holds a sustained presence in the post-colonial identity of India.***

These works draw upon India's history, literary accounts of oppression on farmers of the *Chamapran* movement in 1917-1918. These narratives are inspired by the social, economic and political, historical references and situations affected by the tyranny of British colonial indigo planters on native farmers and Mahatma Gandhi's subsequent intervention in Bihar, the first *satyagrah* led by Mahatma Gandhi on the Indian soil after his South African experience of fight against racialism. In the 19th century, Bengal was the world's biggest producer of indigo but today, the deep blue color of indigo is synthetically created in a lab and is associated, in the West, with blue jeans more than its torrid colonial past.

*Neel Darpan* (1860) was written by Dinbandhu Mitra on the plight of indigo farmers. The play portrayed the eco-political exploitation by the colonizers in early 19th century. "An Ode to Neel Darpan" is a narrative retold in site-specific installations. The installations re-contextualize with tapestry of designs and are a tribute to indigo farmers of Champaran. The block printed disks are inscribed with 15 different traditional and contemporary indigo prints which map the story of *ryots of Champaran* suggesting of their sorrowful tales inscribed in each circle.

### **Artist statement:**

The works engage textile reference of *ajrakh* printing and dyeing of coastal Gujarat, literary texts such as *Neel Darpan* through the history of India's colonial past along with references to indigo plant/color/dye. The use of *ajrakh* printing on *khadi* in my works is examining the immigrants with indigo technique which came along with them. I examine the implication of personal, political and cross cultural choices of communities that migrated from Sindh and Baluchistan with the craft of indigo, with a strong narrative element to create and yet preserve their identities. I create a cultural context of my work by narration of '*Neel darpan*' through visual medium. I went and worked with 9th generation *Ajrakh* artisans in *Bhuj* in interiors of Gujarat on *khadi* fabric with ancient indigo resist printing technique with contemporary prints and ideas of 2009. My works interpret the politics of indigo with objects, sculptures, installations and paintings within my Indigo narrative 2009-2017 series.

*As an artist, my work centres around the iconographic elements within the cultural context of modern Indian history and contemporary times. My art practice has two components, one is the study/ research on Gandhian philosophy that has nationalist narratives of colonial past by connecting with the present, examining the relevance of Gandhi's philosophy of *swadharma* in 21<sup>st</sup> century and other is contemporary artistic production through a textile tradition called *Ajrakh* that historically dates back to Indus Valley civilisation.*

*I collaborate with *Ajrakh* artisan to create my art scrolls. *Ajrakh* is 2500 textile printing/ dyeing technique that was said to be practiced by Indus Valley*



*civilisation. I work with ninth and tenth generation Ajrakh craftsmen living in Bhuj, Gujarat. Textiles become my canvas and Ajrakh processes become my visual language.*

*My present works are on hand spun hand-woven fabric khadi, exploring as how can textiles, both as material objects and because of their artistic form, be used to stitch together communities and may be useful in considering the globalised economic challenges that confront India and many other parts of the world today My work features textile installations , Ajrakh artworks on khadi textile, essays and poetries*



Shelly Jyoti , Salt: The Great March 2013-14



Omnipresent 2  
Ajrakh printing dyeing and needle work on khadi  
2013



Shelly Jyoti , Salt: The Great March 2013-14  
Omnipresent,  
Ajrakh printing dyeing and needle work on khadi

2013

## EXHIBITION & LECTURE SCHEDULES: 2009-17

Between 2009-14 these works in this series traveled to seven venues in India and the U.S. as part of a two-woman show 'Indigo: Shelly Jyoti and Laura kina' including Chicago Cultural Centre, IL. It recently re- opened in India at the Museum of National Archives of India, New Delhi

April-may 2017: The Museum of National Archives of India  
2013 November-Gandhi Memorial Centre, Washington DC, USA  
2013 January -until April 27 2013 – Chicago Cultural Center – IL USA  
2011 May Diana Lowenstein Gallery Maimi USA  
2011 January Art exchange Gallery Seattle USA  
12 -18 January, 2010 Nehru Center Worli, Mumbai, India.  
23-28 December, 2009 Open Palm Court Gallery, India Habitat Centre New Delhi India  
15-16 December, 2009 Red Earth Art Gallery, Baroda, Gujarat India.

### LECTURE & TALKS Indigo:Shelly Jyoti & Laura kina 2009-14

January 30, 2013 Artist Talk *Quilting , Art history and Metaphor* DePaul University students With Prof Jean Bryan Chicago Rooms, Chicago Cultural Center,IL,USA

January 31,2013 Public Lecture Artist talk *Indigo:Shelly Jyoti & Laura kina* Shelly Jyoti, Laura kina and Pushpika Frietas ,Chicago Rooms, Chicago Cultural Center,IL,USA

February 11,2013 Artist Talk- *Indigo:Shelly Jyoti & Laura kina* Art Institute of Chicago, students with Prof Nora Taylor- Asian Art Now , Chicago Cultural Center,IL, USA

February 20,2013 *Artist Talk*: Art Institute of Chicago,Textile Society, Chicago Cultural Center,IL, USA

2011Lecture &Talk *Collaborations :Indian and US Artist* WomanMade Gallery,IL,USA

2009 Lecture & Talk 31st December -Forum for Contemporary Theory Baroda, Gujarat, India

Lecture *The Politics of Indigo : Revisting India's Torrid Colonial past*

### IMPORTANT LINKS:

<http://www.shellyjyoti.com/video-indigo-narratives/>

<http://www.shellyjyoti.com/indigo-narratives/multimedia-spoken-poetry-indigo-narratives/>

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