



LIVING BLUE

Best of Bangladesh



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The brand **LIVING BLUE** stands for high quality, hand-made products, made by artisans in Bangladesh, based on optimum technical recall, meant for high end markets.

It is about fair trade where the artisans not only get a fair wage and democratically manage and run their own businesses, but also have total control over profits. The surplus generated by these various social enterprises contribute to the general well-being of local communities and help to create sustainable social, cultural and economic life.

Khetas or Kanthas

Quilts made in Bengal are known as *kanthas*, but in rural areas they are simply known as *khetas*. In the neighboring region they are also known as *sujni*. Made for one's own use, they are simple, coarse and robust in nature. They are used and abused daily, cycled and recycled, become frail with age, are mended and repaired, get thinner and thicker with time, and contain the history of the users and their families. They have a life.

In Bangladesh, almost everyone owns a *khetas* and almost every woman – young, old, poor, rich, rural, urban – seems to know how to make one and has her own individual interpretation. Generally, *khetas* are made for multiple purpose use from old, worn, torn and frail saris that are quilted together to give them a new lease of life. They can be made for simple daily use or for special occasions, like the birth of a child. Almost everyone receives their first *khetas* when they are born and the thick, quilted layers and the soft, absorbent cloth keeps them happy and dry.

Today, there is no equivalent to rural *khetas* present in the market. The notion of robust quilting has disappeared and got separated from the *khetas* stitch and lost its primary function and meaning. The *khetas* stitch – a simple running stitch – is now being used on even a single layer of cloth as value addition. Or where the quilt remains, it is a product of many factors: play of colored threads rather than 'well-done' quilting, NGO shift-based production centers, use of tracing paper, and multiplication of old designs (often of East India Company scenes). The women provide labor, but have no creative input or the ownership of the final creation. In urban areas, these are generally referred to as *kanthas*.

Dheu Khetas or Lohari Khetas Khadi Quilts

The **LIVING BLUE** collection of textiles represents the best of Bangladesh *khetas*. The *khadi khetas* quilts are authentic and real. In these original and contemporary quilts, Bengal

tradition continues to make its presence strongly felt through a variety of quilting expressions, distinct skills and techniques, patterns and designs that reflect local geographies. These *khetas* have been dyed with Bengal 'true' natural indigo, made by women who can be considered master artisans. The distinct feature of these *khetas* is the texture, known as '*dheu*', that has virtually disappeared from both sides of Bengal. The *dheu*, or the 'wave', creates a ripple effect, which comes into being by using increased layers of khadi fabric and the application of the *jod* and *bejod khetas* stitches, thereby creating the unique, undulated surface texture that brings to mind flowing water. These *khetas* characterize regional specialties belonging to communities from Dinajpur, Gaibanda, Lalmonirhat, Rangpur districts of the Northwest and Potyia district of the Southeast of Bangladesh.

The Artisans and their Individuality

These *khadi khetas* epitomize and celebrate 'hand-made', where the women artisan's creativity – mind and understanding, eyes and hands, heart and soul – have worked in conjunction over a period of several months to create these individual textiles that are worthy of a serious textile collection. The rendering of the *dheu* quilting technique and the resultant textural rippled effect on handspun and woven khadi cloth, express the individual's sensibilities and illustrate her method of conceptualization. Be it as a spontaneous or a planned exercise or the quilting starting points in the *khetas*. The multiple directionalities and the division of the *khetas* surface that create random, deliberate, or abstract patterns speak to the individuality of the artisan and the innovation required to work in the spatial constraints of living conditions in rural Bangladesh.

The Khetas-kume

The '*khetas-kume*' range, as we call it, represents the meeting of the Bengali and Japanese cultures through experimentation, exploration, and innovation with two different techniques: the *dheu khetas* and *nui shibori*. The *nui shibori*, or

stitched *shibori*, works through the application of stitches to the fabric, pulling threads, tied tightly, and immersed in a dye bath. This achieves the *mokume*, or ‘wood, or the curly grain’ pattern. It is visually similar to waves or ripples. By applying threads once again through the *dheu kheta* technique, the quilt becomes three-dimensional and tactile in nature, reinforcing the *dheu* and also the *mokume* effect.

The best examples of this syncretism are the experiments that bring together the *arashi shibori* and *dheu kheta* techniques. The stripes rendered through the use of the *arashi shibori* represents intersecting linear patterns ‘of color in the sky through the interplay of wind and rain following a storm’. A similar interplay takes place when the ‘*dheu*’ quilting superimposes on the *arashi* pin stripes with use of similar or different colored quilting threads.

The Kheta-ori Stoles and Shawls

The uniqueness of the stoles and shawls is achieved through the use of *nui shibori*, this time exploring the possibilities of folding the cloth (*ori* as in origami) in various ways and applying the stitches and dyeing it. When unfolded, various designs emerge which represent a new way of approaching the patterning of the fabric. One can look at this as a syncretic exercise in design or product innovation and development. The materials used in the stoles and shawls is silk from the famous silk-producing Rajshahi region of Bangladesh. These shawls and stoles once again use multiple layers of fabric, the *kheta* stitches helping to bind the various layers of cloth to make it thicker. The types of silk used are Motka, Endi-, and Mulberry soft silk. These materials have been used for texture and their ability to take on the indigo dye. There are also Merino shawls made from pure lamb’s wool, especially imported from the higher altitudes (up to 8,000 ft) of the Himalayas

Over-dyed Khetas

These *Khetas* are an attempt to re-look at the manner in which needlework and embroidery is approached in the sub-continent. Normally, the function of the embroidery is

the application of a decorative pattern on the surface of the fabric by use of different techniques and stitches and multi-colored threads. This can be called ‘superficial’ or ‘overplay’, as the decorative pattern that emerges from embroidery happens to be on the top of the material surface.

These *khetas* integrate the colors used in the quilting and pattern making and by the use of over-dyeing technique ‘underplay’ the notion of embroidery. These *khetas* have been made using white khadi fabrics and applying black or red colored threads through the *kheta* pattern – *kaidar dar* – and stitches – *fota fota* and *talai muri*. These *khetas* then have been over-dyed, in natural indigo, multiple times so that the indigo dye not only penetrates these various layers but also superimposes and overpowers the needlework pattern on the top. The effect of the embroidery becomes more subtle and results in a range which is synchronic with universal and modern tastes and preferences. With time, as indigo fades and changes color, there is a possibility of the re-emergence of the embroidery patterns.

Popular Kheta Expressions

This range is a celebration of color, patchwork, materials – striped Tangail and Ranirbander fabrics, multi-colored gamchas, and colored khadi and poplin. Each individual quilt is different than the other in this vibrant collection. The striking feature of these quilts is the variety of *kheta* patterns that come into being in the borders or as stripes in the ground.





The 'Living Blue' Indigo – Bengal Indigo or 'True' Indigo

All the indigo used for dyeing purposes in this textile collection has been produced in Bangladesh and is of the highest quality, with the indigotin content of **LIVING BLUE** indigo being unmatched in the subcontinent. This comes from *indigofera tinctoria*, in dictionary terms 'true indigo', native to the northwest of Bangladesh, the famous indigo producing region of Bengal and a modern scientific approach to production. *Nilpharmari*, named by the British for its 'nil farming' and Rangpur are the key areas where this superior indigo is grown.

Even in present times, the indigo story of Bengal and the tyranny associated with the cultivation and extraction – the death of 15 million people through starvation – has a social and cultural stigma. Trade of indigo was about extracting surplus with all the mechanisms so familiar to scholars of subaltern histories – advances for high priced seeds and food, exorbitant and hidden rates of interests, forced labor and production, intimidation and physical torture by *lathiyals* and *mastans*. With the rebellion of 1859-1860 and the crop failures of that year, production collapsed. Later with the invention of synthetic indigo, natural indigo virtually ceased to be.

However, the indigo plant survived due to its intrinsic value, known to local cultivators. Even today, it is grown as a rotation crop that adds nitrates and yields valuable biomass (stems for fuel). It is grown on depleted land to replenish micro-nutrients for food cultivation.

This enterprise is about tapping the value of this renewable resource in the existing micro-ecology and taking advantage of the ever-growing demand for natural dyes that contributes to more environmentally conscientious production systems, as well as sustainable local communities. Indigo production can be integrated into the agricultural cycle and does not have to replace food, rather it can be expanded and complement existing cropping systems and contribute to increased yields. For instance, the discharge from the indigo fermentation tanks is being used to replace chemical nitrogen fertilizers.

LIVING BLUE is an attempt to learn from history. The benefits of growing, extracting, dyeing and trading this indigo dye will directly accrue to the stakeholders of this enterprise. The indigo initiative has already created numerous vocations and jobs – plant harvesters, indigo dye extractors and manufacturers, dyers, shibori and kheta artisans. Each of these activities adds value and these producer groups are cross connecting and collaborating with each others' specialties, thereby creating a foundation for small enterprises, textile-related manufacturing and regional economic development. In this social enterprise, the monetary benefits go to savings, insurance, medical expenses, employment creation, education, homestead repairs and repaying debts, to ultimately exit the cycle of poverty.

'Nijera Cottage and Village Industries Pvt. Ltd', a Social Enterprise in collaboration with CARE Bangladesh

The distinction of the products described earlier, namely the textiles and the indigo, spring from the ground-breaking accomplishments in the social and political realms, achieved by the producers and their peers in rural communities. This work could not have been achieved without the solidarity and trust within localities that has been created through social action.

The producers have set up an umbrella organization – Nijera Cottage and Village Industries (NCVI) – that represents various social enterprises which they own as autonomous financial entities. The Board of Directors has been elected by all stakeholders of the individual enterprises or the general assembly of NCVI. These people have been elected based on their leadership and ability to inspire others, their expertise and contribution to skill development and the trust they command within their communities.

Each enterprise is artisan-owned and follows the principle of 'one member – one vote' and participatory and democratic decision-making in terms of management and day-to-day to operations. It is based on recognizing labor power as the capital, which along with skills, is the only asset available to the poor and offsets the lack of monetary capital that can be hired or tapped through various other channels, for example, asset transfers. This monetary capital is used to access raw materials in wholesale markets and purchase or hire capital goods (machinery, land, buildings) and pay for production and wages. The thumb rule of NCVI is to generate 51 percent of income through manufacture and trade and to work towards self-sustainability.

A percentage of the profits is channeled into dividends, bonuses, but also into medical insurance, savings funds, educational institutions to meet the social and economic needs of the communities in which these enterprises are based. NCVI strengthens democratic practices at the local level through economic activities. It is an attempt to build

a social economy where citizens can be directly involved in regional economic development, where the village is not just a residential space, but an economic hub with specialty skills that has the potential to grow.

Many of the members of the general council and the Board of Directors are leaders who have emerged through various social and political initiatives, under CARE Bangladesh' Social Development Unit and the project *Nijeder Janyia Nijera* (We, For Ourselves). They have triggered and led community activities that have been instrumental in visible social change. Through the spirit of collective actions that address the many forms of discrimination (cultural and economic), exploitation (by middlemen and moneylenders), and exclusion (by powerful actors), these individuals have transformed social and power dynamics in their respective localities.

The ability to seize opportunities has led them into synergizing locally appropriate approaches leading to total sanitation of over 100 communities involving 7500 families without external subsidies, increased agricultural wages for 2,435 people, and reduction in hunger or monga for 1,415 families in 121 communities, through alternative agriculture – vine potatoes, turmeric and ginger cultivation – collective savings of rice and cash, negotiating access to public lands and water bodies, and ensuring the functioning of state-funded entitlement schemes.

In 2007, this remarkable spirit saw more than 2,000 people coming together just before the coming monsoon season, fearing impending floods, and over a period of 20 days repair five serious breaches of an embankment caused due to neglect of the local contractor and responsible agencies. This local initiative to repair severally damaged parts of this 30 km embankment saved three unions with a population of over 200,000 from inundation and prevented taka 60 million in damages.

All these achievements have been possible through the realization and the consensus of the people involved that it is possible to take control over one's own life and surroundings and thereby initiate positive and long-lasting changes. Through one's own insight, experience and perspective, collective analysis is channeled towards social action. A conscious decision has been made to break out of the cycle of poverty

and generate surpluses and wealth. The 'Nijera Cottage and Village Industries' addresses the lack of economic opportunities – under-employment and landlessness – in this socially and culturally rich, yet economically 'backward' region of Bangladesh.

Amazingly, these people – the pioneers – include women and men, socially and economically most marginalized, who have time and again demonstrated their abilities to overcome and take on the enormous challenges that hold them behind, their ingenuity and willingness to learn and teach and take on enormous risks and work hard to survive. The 'Nijera Cottage and Village Industries' is a manifestation of this spirit and the products represented by the Living Blue label are a testimony to that.

Brief Profile of the Board of Directors, NCVI



MST. SALMA BEGUM
Age 25

Salma Begum is a local champion in Botlagari Union. She leads and is involved in multiple social actions and presently, she works with 30 women to maintain control over a government owned pond used for fish culture. Educated up to class 9, she is also part of parent group that manage an informal school to work with 'drop out' children. Salma Begum has been selected as Managing Director of Nijera Cottage and Village Industries Pvt. Ltd., a recognition of her leadership qualities and commitment to community led development. Her husband is a rickshaw van puller.



SUMANTA KUMAR BARMAN:
Age 24

Sumanto Kumar Barman, the Chairman of NCVI, is one of the youngest leaders of the Rajendrapur Samaj Unnayan Sangothon (Social Development Organization), a local organization that has been

formed to work towards poverty eradication. Mr. Barman has contributed to spread 'community led total sanitation' in 18 communities. Mr. Barman's curiosity, strategic thinking, attention to detail, and enthusiasm to put ideas into practice, have been instrumental in the success of the apiculture activity and indigo production. He is presently managing the finance and accounting of Nijera Mouchashi Sangothon (Bee Farmers' Organization), Rajendrapur Nil Utpadonkari Sangothon (Indigo Producers' Organization) and Rajendrapur Samaj Unnayan Sangothon.



SONA RANI ROY
Age 35

Sona Rani Roy is a master quilter. She has created a unique identity through her work, and has taken her locality to become one of the best regions in North West Bangladesh for producing high quality Khetas. She knows unique and complex Kheta pattern making techniques especially the jor booti that she has taught to other women of Adhikari Para of Saitara Union. She is an active member of the local 'Natural Leaders Federation' that works towards eradicating extreme poverty. Her husband is a rickshaw mechanic.



MD. ABU BAKKAR SIDDIQUE
Age 36

Abu Bakkar is a natural leader who has successfully led the process of sanitizing his entire hamlet. He has learnt the art of Apiculture and teaches others from his and nearby communities how to raise bees and produce honey. He is currently the secretary of 'Durarkuthi Bee Farmers Samity'. Mr. Bakkar labors for daily wages in the agricultural sector, pulls a rickshaw van, and produces and sells honey. He works to eradicate extreme poverty from his locality.



MST. SAKINA BEGUM
Age 40

Sakina Begum is a leader in her community and is actively involved in social development work. Through her leadership qualities she has gained the status and recognition to participate in local shalish or dispute arbitration, an activity that typically lies in the male domain. She is considered as a champion in terms of serving the interests of other poor women and men. Mrs. Begum is also a master quilter. She has led the process of organizing the kheta artisans of Lalmonirhat. In the past, she used to sell clothes and steel utensils door-to-door. She is a trained tailor, a mid-wife and, sells labor in the agricultural sector.



RASHIDA BEGUM
Age 45

Rashida is leading women empowerment processes in the Jalagari area of Gaibanda district. She has mobilized the poorest women of her hamlet to successfully eradicate extreme poverty through indigenous technologies, such as vine potatoes, and collective cultivation of cash crops, such as turmeric and ginger, on private and public lands. She, along with other community leaders, has successfully demonstrated how to use local knowledge, resources and opportunities to enhance income. She is a kheta artisan and is leading the solidarity building process within the artisan community. Mrs. Begum is the main wage earner in her household and cares for her ailing husband.



MST. MOMOTAZ BEGUM
Age 52

Momotaz Begum is a leader in Hossainpur Union of Gaibanda district. She works with the poorest and marginalized households to generate income through multiple activities, including tailoring,

livestock and poultry rearing. She played an important role in a large community scheme to re-build an embankment that prevented major flooding in the area. Mrs. Begum is a master kheta artisan and the leader of the Kheta group in Hossainpur. She works with local government to ensure that the interests of poorer households are upheld in the distribution of safety net schemes meant for the poor.



JELEKA BEGUM
Age 26

Jeleka Begum emerged as a natural leader from community led total sanitation initiative. She mobilized and assisted her neighbors to construct low cost toilets and stop the practice of open defecation. She is a khaita artisan and quickly learnt the art of Japanese shibori technique and is presently leading this work of NCVI. She is also actively engaged in organizing other artisans to learn from each other. Mrs. Begum is calm, steady, and strong in tense situations. She is one of the leaders of the solidarity building process within her community.



NCVI Stakeholders

- 1.A. Rashid
- 2.A. Samad
- 3.A. Sobahan
- 4.Abeda Khatun
- 5.Abubakkar Siddique
- 6.Abul Hossain
- 7.Afroza Begum
- 8.Ahejan Begum
- 9.Ahela Khatun
- 10.Ajimuddin
- 11.Akter Banu
- 12.Alema Khatun
- 13.Alo Bala
- 14.Ambia Begum
- 15.Amena Begum
- 16.Amena Khatun
- 17.Amir Hossain
- 18.Anil Chandra
- 19.Anil Rishi
- 20.Anjuara Begum (1)
- 21.Anjuara Begum (2)
- 22.Anjuara Begum (3)
- 23.Anowara Begum
- 24.Apia Begum
- 25.Arobindu Bormon
- 26.Aroti Rani
- 27.Asia Begum
- 28.Asma Begum (1)
- 29.Asma Begum (2)
- 30.Basiton Begum
- 31.Beauty Begum
- 32.Beauty Roy
- 33.Bhulu Miah
- 34.Bilkis Begum
- 35.Bithi Rani
- 36.Bokos
- 37.Buli Begum
- 38.Chitra Roy
- 39.Chitta Ranjon
- 40.Delowara Begum
- 41.Dharoni Chandra
- 42.Dulali Begum
- 43.Dulali Rani
- 44.Durjadhan Bormon
- 45.Ershad Ali
- 46.Eyakub Ali
- 47.Faizar Ali
- 48.Fatema Begum (1)
- 49.Fatema Begum (2)
- 50.Fatema Begum (3)
- 51.Fatema Begum (4)
- 52.Firoza Begum (1)
- 53.Firoza Begum (2)
- 54.Fojila Khatun
- 55.Fulmoti Rani
- 56.Gita Rani
- 57.Golapi Begum (1)
- 58.Golapi Begum (2)
- 59.Golapi Rani
- 60.Goleja Begum
- 61.Halima Begum (1)
- 62.Halima Begum (2)
- 63.Hamida Begum
- 64.Hashi Begum
- 65.Hashu Rani
- 66.Hori Chandra
- 67.Irani Begum
- 68.Jahanara
- 69.Jahanara Begum
- 70.Jalodhar Roy
- 71.Jamuna Rani
- 72.Jelekha Begum
- 73.Joshimuddin
- 74.Joshna Begum
- 75.Josna Rani (1)
- 76.Josna Rani (2)
- 77.Joyanta Bormon
- 78.Joysree Roy
- 79.Joyton
- 80.Joyton Begum
- 81.Kalpona Rani
- 82.Khuki
- 83.Khushi Begum
- 84.Kohinur Begum (1)
- 85.Kohinur Begum (2)
- 86.Kohinur Begum (3)
- 87.Laiju Begum
- 88.Laili Begum (1)
- 89.Laili Begum (2)
- 90.Latifon Begum
- 91.Lucky Begum (1)
- 92.Lucky Begum (2)
- 93.Madhobi Rani
- 94.Mahamuda Begum
- 95.Maleka Begum (1)
- 96.Maleka Begum (2)
- 97.Manikjan Bewa
- 98.Masud
- 99.Masud Rana
- 100.Mister Rahaman
- 101.Mojeda Begum
- 102.Moksed Ali
- 103.Momeja Khatun
- 104.Momena Begum
- 105.Mominul
- 106.Momotaj Begum (1)
- 107.Momotaj Begum (2)
- 108.Monju Rani
- 109.Monjuara Begum
- 110.Monsur Ali
- 111.Morefa Begum
- 112.Moriom Begum
- 113.Morzina Begum (1)
- 114.Morzina Begum (2)
- 115.Morzina Khatun (3)
- 116.Mosarraf Hossen
- 117.Mukti Begum
- 118.Mukul chandra
- 119.Namita Rani
- 120.Nanuram Barmon
- 121.Nargish
- 122.Nasima Begum
- 123.Nazrul Islam
- 124.Neltu Rishi
- 125.Nirmola Rani
- 126.Nur Alam
- 127.Nur Banu
- 128.Nurjahan Begum
- 129.Omeza
- 130.Padma Rani
- 131.Purni Rani
- 132.Putul
- 133.Rahima Khatun
- 134.Rashida Begum
- 135.Raton Rishi
- 136.Reba Khatun
- 137.Rehana Kathun
- 138.Renubala Roy
- 139.Ripon Begum
- 140.Rohima Khatun
- 141.Roket Ali
- 142.Rokon Ali
- 143.Roshida Begum (1)
- 144.Roshida Begum (2)
- 145.Roshida Begum (3)
- 146.Rotna Rani
- 147.Rozina Begum
- 148.Rubi Begum (1)
- 149.Rubi Begum (2)
- 150.Sabina Yasmin
- 151.Saiba Begum
- 152.Salma Begum
- 153.Sandha Rani
- 154.Sanowara Begum
- 155.Saya Rani
- 156.Sayda Begum
- 157.Sefali Begum
- 158.Selim Miah
- 159.Shabitri Rani
- 160.Shanaz Begum
- 161.Shananur
- 162.Shaheb Ali
- 163.Shaheda Begum
- 164.Shahinur
- 165.Shamoli
- 166.Shamoli Begum
- 167.Shefali Rani
- 168.Shopna Rani
- 169.Shopna Roy
- 170.Shudir Chandra
- 171.Shuk Sagor Bormon
- 172.Shuku Rani
- 173.Sohida Begum
- 174.Sohorab Ali
- 175.Sokina Begum
- 176.Sona Rani Roy
- 177.Sumonta Bormon
- 178.Surzaton Begum
- 179.Taposhi Roy
- 180.Zahela Begum
- 181.Zayda Begum
- 182.Zikrul



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*For further information on products and the LIVING BLUE range, please contact Nijera Cottage and Village Industries, Pvt. Ltd. at livingblue.nijera@gmail.com.
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