

Colour as Commodity: Colonialism and the Sensory Worlds of South Asia

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Figure 1: Holi Festival of Colours event, photo courtesy of Maxime Bhm on Unsplash.com

On an Instagrammable day, when the weather was warm, the skies bright and blue, and the days long, Germany celebrated the ‘first official Holi festival’ in Berlin (fig. 1). This strictly ticket-only event, quickly replicated in cities around the world on an annual basis, was the brainchild of a group of businessmen who **‘were the first to bring the idea from India to Europe back in 2012’**. They have since ‘expanded, becoming an international brand represented **in over 40 countries worldwide**’.¹ The ‘Holi Festival of Colour’ brand boasts being purveyors of the largest Holi festival (or, rather, Holi-style party) in the world, made manifest by over three million Facebook ‘fans’. Their events take place at times of year when participants will enjoy being outdoors, throwing powder colours on each other and partying. There are even franchise opportunities available where Holi festivals do not currently take place in a particular city. Within participating cities, however, celebrations take place in fenced-off areas inside public parks or other open spaces, the services of bouncers maintaining the safety of the participants. These events are ‘secular’: where local Indian-diaspora communities celebrate Holi, their presence and the performance of their rites are neither incorporated nor likely welcome in ‘Holi

¹ https://www.holifestival.com/uk/en/franchising?_ga=2.135190641.1574012020.1557309281-415465799.1557309281 Accessed 8 May 2019; bold text in the original

Festival of Colour' events. The result is something akin to a whitewashing of the bodies participating in Holi, and a 'whitescaping' – to borrow from David Batchelor – of space and culture:

There is a kind of white that repels everything that is inferior to it, and that is almost everything ... There is a kind of white that is not created by bleach but that itself is bleach ... aggressively white. ²

This washing or leaching out of the colour from the celebration of Holi is not merely ironic; it is perverse, 'a kind of denial'.³



Figure 2: Holi Festival at the Jammu Court (artist unknown, c. 1790), Victoria and Albert Museum (accession no. IS.180-1951), courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Holi is celebrated in the Indian subcontinent (with a current population of over one billion, almost 300 million of whom use Facebook as of April 2019, and the majority of whom celebrate the festival) in late February or early March. It marks the beginning of spring, not the height of summer or the depths of winter. Its origins are not singular so much as rooted in a number of Vaishnavite and Shaivite Hindu beliefs. It is celebrated privately but also, and more

² David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, Reaktion Books, London, 2000, p 10

³ *Ibid*, p 12

importantly, publicly (tickets have never been necessary); revellers spill out of homes and temples into the streets.⁴ In fact, Holi was long associated with the spiritual awakening accompanying sexual union(s). In public, the high-born came (into contact) with the low-born, sweetsellers and musicians and ascetics with courtiers and courtesans. The festival was of such importance that even non-Hindu rulers celebrated Holi alongside other Indian festivals such as Diwali and Dussehra. The nominally Muslim Mughal rulers of India (1526–1857) commissioned miniature paintings commemorating their celebrations, for example.⁵ In the eighteenth century, as the Mughal Empire fragmented into a number of successor states and regional kingdoms, miniature paintings of Holi became a staple topos of artistic patronage within the new courts, where the conventions and compositional forms of Mughal painting in the Indo-Persianate miniature tradition were inflected with regional or vernacular styles. At the court of the ruler of Jammu, for instance, a prince is seated in front of dancing girls and musicians in a painting of c. 1790 (fig. 2), surrounded by his courtiers, their clothes stained crimson and yellow from the celebration of Holi. With the rise of the East India Company, itself a Mughal successor state, as a territorial power after 1757, Indian artists working for new European patrons also depicted Holi festivities, such as those taking place in Murshidabad in Bengal (fig. 3).



Figure 3: 'The Holi Festival' (artist unknown, probably at Murshidabad or Calcutta, c. 1795–1805), Victoria and Albert Museum (accession no. IS.11:9-1887), courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London

⁴ See Sandra B Freitag, *Culture and Power in Banaras: Community, Performance, and Environment, 1800–1980*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1992

⁵ See, for example, an image from of the Emperor Jahangir (r. 1605–27) celebrating Holi surrounded by ladies at court from c. 1635, now in the Minto Album in the collection of The Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, In 07A.4a

If the paintings of Holi by artists of the ‘Company School’ reflected a departure in the style, perspective and compositional conventions of Indian visual representation, then more profound change – in terms of the manner of, and the relationship of political power to, the celebration of such festivities – was to come following the extension and intensification or deepening of colonial rule in South Asia.⁶ The failure to control information networks, mobile people and social interactions was thought to have allowed a few Indians to stir discontent and foment a rebellion against British rule in 1857. The British thus came to fear the movement and free mixing of people, taking pains to prevent certain sorts of movement, control the flow of information, and instil a harder sense of difference along lines of confession and caste and gender.⁷ At the same time, the British imposed Victorian moral values upon Indians, covering bare-breasted women and forbidding behaviour deemed licentious, for example.⁸ The celebration of festivals such as Holi, or the Shi‘a festival of Muharram, thus changed – although these could not be stamped out altogether.⁹ In fact, Holi became an exemplar *par excellence* in Orientalist representations of India, in the construction of her alterity and ‘Otherness’, especially as a sort of mirror reflection and poor relation of Britain, for whereas India and Britain had shared similar origins, the former had diverged into disorder and decay and the latter had moved toward order and progress.¹⁰ Holi thus summed up the chaotic and riotous sensory world of the subcontinent. It served as a reminder of why colonialism was necessary: to bring control over this cacophony and disorder. E M Forster chided this self-confident sense of purpose through his officious British magistrate in *A Passage to India* (1924): ‘Ronny had not disliked his day [spent preparing for Muharram], for it proved that the British were necessary to India; there certainly would have been bloodshed without them.’¹¹

I am a historian interested in the sensory world of South Asia, an interest that has developed in the course of thinking about the relationship of colour to the production of social order, the organisation of space, and long-distance trade and cultural exchange.¹² More widely, I am interested in the role that sight, smell, sound, touch and taste played in everyday life, in ritual life, in political life, and the ways in which these sensory experiences have changed over time. So far,

⁶ See Mildred Archer, *Company Paintings: Indian Paintings of the British Period*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1992

⁷ On the transformation of information flows and orders, see C A Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1999; on mobility, see Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950*, Anthem Press, London, 2006; on the (re)making and hardening of difference, see Thomas R Metcalf, *The New Cambridge History of India, III.4: Ideologies of the Raj*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 2010

⁸ See E M Collingham, *Imperial Bodies. The Physical Experience of the Raj, c.1800–1947*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2001; Deana Heath, *Purifying Empire: Obscenity and the Politics of Moral Regulation in Britain, India and Australia*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2010

⁹ For the tensions affecting colonial policy in this arena, see Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, op cit, p 188

¹⁰ See *ibid*, especially chapter 3

¹¹ E M Forster, *A Passage to India*, Penguin, London, 2005 [1924], p 88

¹² See Jagjeet Lally, ‘The moral economy of colour: Indigo, blueness, and the Indo-central Asian trading world, c. 1750–1900’ (forthcoming)

even these rather elementary issues have received relatively little attention from academics at large.¹³ By focusing on colour in South Asia, I think we can better grasp the impact of colonialism on the visual/sensory field. In turn, this will help sharpen the focus on what ‘decolonising colour’ means and entails. Did Orientalist aesthetics construct a chaotic and cacophonous India? Or is there a pre-colonial history of sensory order and disorder? Did colonialism imbue colour with alterity? Or, have colour and alterity long gone hand-in-hand, albeit in different ways and with different ends?

In this essay, I look at how academics have started to explore issues related to these questions. In the first part, I examine anthropological work and art history that draws our attention to the relationship between colonialism, on the one hand, and capitalism and commodity production/commodification, on the other. In the second part, I turn to historical work, tracing the philosophical and religious significances of colour and their mapping onto the social world of South Asia. Both this work itself, as much as the thought of the actors it discusses, tends to produce notions of tradition when discussing Indian socio-chromatic relations. In so doing, Indian societies become – if only momentarily – stable entities, rendering them consumable, a practice typical of the colonising gaze.¹⁴ By way of a conclusion, I examine alternative relations of capitalism and colour, and then consider the mobilisation of the trope of sensory chaos within and beyond and by the postcolonial Indian state.

I Indigo/Blue: Colonial Plantations, Global Commodities and Colour Violence

The organisers of the ‘Holi Festival of Colours’ events are committing a gross act of cultural appropriation. At the heart of this theft is the transformation of the Holi festival into a festival of colour, the reduction and secularisation of a historically shifting complex of religious and cultural practices and meanings into a commodity. Shorn of the problematically immobile contexts of time and place and praxis, this commodity can potentially be consumed by anyone, anywhere, any time. But enough of the Orient remains – in the alien word ‘Holi’, in the blurb mentioning its origins in India, in the sensory chaos and cacophony of the colour fight and pumping music – to give the commodity a touch of the exotic, enough of the trope of the Other to excite and incite the act of its consumption. By controlling access through ticketing, Holi – rejigged as a

¹³ Sound has received the most, and most innovative, study; see, for example, Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield, eds, *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, Open Book Publishers, Cambridge, 2015. There is also a small but growing body of work on smell; see Emma J Flatt, ‘Spices, Smells and Spells: The Use of Olfactory Substances in the Conjuring of Spirits’, *South Asian Studies*, vol 32 no 1, 2016, pp 3–21; James McHugh, *Sandalwood and Carrion: Smell in Indian Religion and Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012.

¹⁴ If colonial authorities remained anxious about Indians and Indian societies, it was because of the ambivalence and uncertainty regarding what did (not) constitute tradition, and the instability this entailed

celebration of colour – is rendered the source of profit. It is not *a* colour, but a particular composition of colours (and sounds), brought to being through the colonising gaze and the secular impulses of capitalism, that possesses this potentiality. What is the history of these entanglements of colour, colonialism and commodity capitalism? What is it that colour needs to be decolonised *from*?

In the seventeenth century, indigo dye was bought in Asia for markets in Europe. But the indigo plant itself was soon transported to the new European colonies in the Caribbean and America, where slave labour was used to cultivate the crop and produce dye. Once the East India Company had conquered their first territories in Bengal in 1757, they set about making their new Indian empire remunerative. Indigo was ‘repatriated’ to India, albeit a region that had formerly not produced the dye on any substantial scale, but where it nevertheless became one of the cash-crop commodities central to the extractive economy of the late-eighteenth century colony. Of importance to the success of the nascent indigo industry was the production of the shades of blue and the degree of colourfastness required in metropolitan markets so that Bengal indigo could compete with other sources of supply.¹⁵ The global demand for blue dye led to the Company’s invitation of European masters from the slave-worked plantations of the Caribbean and the coercion of Bengali *ryots* (peasants).¹⁶ For the *ryots*, the production of indigo necessitated cultivating a plant they considered unclean under conditions that proved unprofitable. Following the crash in indigo prices in the second-quarter of the nineteenth century, tensions came to a head during the ‘Blue Mutiny’ of 1859, when *ryots* rose up in resistance against the European planters.¹⁷

Anthropologists have taken the lead in exploring these entanglements of colour and colonialism. Christopher Pinney’s reflections on blue connect some of its transformative and violent associations in South Asia, from the indigo-blue economy of colonial-era Bihar and Bengal, to the blueprints (cyanotypes) of the Union Carbide India Ltd. pesticide plant that revealed the ‘endplan’ – that is, the likelihood of what became, in 1984, the world’s worst industrial disaster, when noxious gas clouds rolled over central India.¹⁸ In so doing, Pinney draws implicitly on the idea of *nazar* (evil eye) and its connection with blue/indigo.¹⁹ Michael Taussig’s

¹⁵ The most recent work on the indigo economy in colonial India is Prakash Kumar, *Indigo Plantations and Science in Colonial India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012

¹⁶ Anon, ‘Report on Indigo’, in *Reports and Documents Connected with the Proceedings of the East-India Company in Regard to the Culture and Manufacture of Cotton-wool, Raw Silk, and Indigo, in India*, J L Cox and Sons, London, 1836

¹⁷ See Tirthankar Roy, ‘Indigo and Law in Colonial India’, *Economic History Review*, vol 64, Special Issue no 1, 2011, pp 60–75

¹⁸ While the chromatic dimensions of the two case studies on the entanglements of indigo planters, commodity production and early photography were not addressed by Pinney himself, Eaton used these examples in her exploration of blue, discussed below; see Christopher Pinney, *The Coming of Photography in India*, British Library, London, pp 57–61, 69–75

¹⁹ On the *nazar* of indigo, see Natasha Eaton, ‘Nomadism of Colour: Painting, Technology and Waste in the Chromo-zones of Colonial India c. 1765–c.1860’, *Journal of Material Culture*, vol 17, no 1, 2012, p 68

What Color is the Sacred? moves to and fro across time and space and subject matter as the author examines not the semiotics of colour(s) but the multiple and rather magical instantiations of colour as substance, as subject of history, and as agent of sensory – not solely visual – experience. A central chapter of the book focuses on blue/indigo. Through indigo, Taussig is able to pinpoint a number of relationships: between empire and the exploitation of labour, between Caribbean plantation owners using slave labour and these same men utilising tribesmen coerced into working in the indigo industry of Bengal, between colonial collaboration as well as peasant resistance. Taussig also transports us back to the West to consider an obscene contradiction embedded within European society. On the one hand, there was the subordination of the ‘Oriental Other’ and Goethe’s distaste for the primitives’ and lower orders’ love of vivid colour; on the other, there was the (ab)use of ‘primitive’ Indians working in the fields or in the indigo vats for the production of ‘respectable’ blues and deep purples beloved in Europe.²⁰

In Pinney and Taussig’s work, therefore, the visual world is political and politicised. Their writing bears the imprint of postcolonial studies, particularly the centrality of disjuncture and their attention to the disruptive effects of colour. Inspired by this scholarship, the art historian Natasha Eaton has more recently used colour in a more expansive sense to explore colonialism in the Indian context. Her attention has ranged across dyes and pigments, textiles and artworks, and ideas about aesthetics, but also glass eyes and skin-colour charts, and theories of caste, tribe and race – moving back and forth between metropole and colony in her *Colour, Art and Empire*.²¹ In this book, and earlier work on which it is based, Eaton conceives colour as ‘nomadic’ as a way of ‘test[ing] the conventional inscription techniques founded on semiotic and representational models’, focusing instead on the ways in which different meanings were inscribed on the same or different colours.²² Thus, she returns to the subject of indigo blue and the indigo plantations of Bengal, but juxtaposes and contrasts its cruel past with the redemptive history of red.²³ In the hands of the ‘chromophobic’ coloniser, colour is an agent of violence and control, whether through the psychological subordination of Western artists’ construction of the passive Orient (and its colour palette) or through the physical oppression of the plantation economy, for example. In the hands of colonised ‘chromophiliacs’, colour is emancipatory and empowering, a substance with spiritual power, and an agent of resistance (often in response to the chromatic or

²⁰ Michael Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2009, chapter 19

²¹ Natasha Eaton, *Colour, Art and Empire: Visual Culture and the Nomadism of Representation*, I B Tauris, London, 2013; in these latter dimensions of her exploration of colour, Eaton is literally ‘colouring-in’ Christopher Pinney’s analysis in his *Camera Indica: The Social Life of Indian Photographs*, Reaktion Books, London, 1997, chapter 1

²² Eaton, ‘Nomadism of Colour’, op cit, p 62

²³ Eaton, *Colour, Art and Empire*, op cit, chapter 1

visual violence of colonialism.²⁴ Eaton's book is thus the untidy history of colonialism as the source of ruptures in the visual world of South Asia, where colour was intertwined with the disorder of colonial violence and anti-colonial resistance.

The purveyors of the 'Holi – Festival of Colours', therefore, are not chromophiliacs. They are, as David Batchelor defines it, chromophobic – in their attempts 'to devalue colour, to diminish its significance, to deny its complexity', in their imbuing it as 'the property of some 'foreign' body' as something 'to be contained and subordinated'.²⁵ Their attitudes descend from a long history of European representations of the Orient, from the ways in which chromophobic colonisers represented and controlled Indian colour. Their ambitions, likewise, are to control colour to render it as a source of profit. In fact, for chromophobics, ordering colour in this way – showing force over its unruliness – is an act born of necessity.²⁶

II Colour as Tradition, Tradition as Commodity

Founded in 1859, Chemische Industrie Basel (CIBA) was a manifestation of the new industrial age of textile production and chemical dyeing. From 1937 to 1971, CIBA published a periodical – the *Ciba Review* – dedicated to examining the history of all aspects of the textile production process, including dyeing, printing, tanning and weaving. The second instalment was a special issue edited by Ernst Hemneter and C W Turner on 'India, Its Dyers and Its Colour Symbolism', featuring Hemneter's 'The Castes of Indian Dyers' and Turner's 'Colour Symbolism in India'.²⁷ This interest in the relationship of religion and caste, on the one hand, and cloth and colour, on the other, was rather ethnographic and anthropological. This interest in the *history of colour*, more remarkably, stemmed from a modern capitalist enterprise operating outside the more common circuits of European imperialism (CIBA was a Swiss firm). But this interest also reflected a direct connection of modern chemistry in Europe to that which it had displaced in Asia, although perhaps not as sinister as the 'accord ... between nature and power by which the Bengali indigo vat was moved, so to speak, from the colonies to Auschwitz in German-occupied territory in Poland' under the aegis of I G Farben, the chemicals giant that was closely connected to the Nazi regime (and which made use of conscript and slave labour from the concentration camps) but which was also a global capitalist empire in its own right.²⁸ In contrast

²⁴ See Natasha Eaton, 'Notes from the Field: Materiality', *The Art Bulletin*, vol 95 no 1, 2013, especially p 14. Note: 'chromophobia' is the coinage and subject of David Batchelor's *Chromophobia*, op cit.

²⁵ Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, op cit, pp 22–23

²⁶ *Ibid*, p 48

²⁷ 'India, Its Dyers and Its Colour Symbolism', C W Turner and Ernst Hemneter, eds, *Ciba Review*, no 2, 1937, especially pp 51–61

²⁸ Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?*, op cit, p 219 and Part 4

to the recent work of Pinney, Taussig, and Eaton, and to the enterprise of I G Farben, Hemmeter and Turner's earlier contribution to the history of Indian colour seems to reflect modern capital's rather more benign interests. Yet, running throughout their special issue of the *Ciba Review* is the belief in ordered and unchanging relationships between social-cultural context and the production or consumption of colour in South Asia. This freezing in time of Indian society in the creation of 'tradition' is not only crucial to the construction of Oriental alterity and backwardness; it also makes possible the commodification of India.²⁹

Here, then, the study of colour comes into trouble. It would be unwise to suggest that colour assumed its disruptive potential, and that the visual world became chaotic and cacophonous, only following the transition to colonial rule. The counterpart to this notion, after all, is that ordered relationships of the chromatic to the social existed before the violent intrusion of colonialism. To make chromatic disorder and disharmony, old stabilities and certainties had to be overturned. We can only ever retrieve the political, social and economic *experiences* surrounding colour, which surely were embedded within spiritual, religious, or more broadly 'ethical' dispositions or relationships. The latter, however, ought not be reduced to static 'tradition'. This is a fine line to tread; how well have historians fared?

One strand in the (albeit rather scanty) history of colour in the Indian context focuses on aesthetics and chromatic philosophies. In his exploratory essay into the social and cultural history of colour in India, Sadan Jha asserts that 'colours come to social surface wrapped under the foil of the caste system'.³⁰ Jha proceeds to sieve Hindu scripture – such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Vishnudharmottara* – for references to colours. These references serve as the foundation to uncovering and understanding *attitudes* toward colour.³¹ This approach parallels the long-standing study of Western philosophers' treatises on art and colour, not least Goethe's *Theory of Colours* (1810). But this approach (as a methodology) also has its own history, intimately intertwined with activities of colonial-era Orientalists. In the late-nineteenth century, colonial administrators concerned with the crisis in India's craft and artisan industries authored or commissioned ethnographic enquiries into such subjects as dyes and dyeing, contextualising or making sense of information through relation to ancient texts.³² George Birdwood, keeper of the

²⁹ Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, op cit, especially chapter 3; cf David Batchelor's analysis of Charles Blanc's 1867 discussion of colour as fixed by tradition within Chinese painting, in *Chromophobia*, op cit, pp 26–27

³⁰ Sadan Jha, 'From Sacred to Commodity and Beyond: Colour and Values in India', *Journal of Human Values*, vol 22 no 1, 2016, p 5. Jha has also taken colour as a central concern, focusing largely on its symbolic potential as part of the larger construct of the *tiranga* (the tri-coloured Indian flag), in his more recent monograph, *Reverence, Resistance and Politics of Seeing the Indian National Flag*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2016). The approach in this book, as in 'From Sacred to Commodity and Beyond', also overlaps with his 'Challenges in the History of Colours: The Case of Saffron', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol 51 no 2, 2014, pp 199–229.

³¹ See Jha, 'From Sacred to Commodity and Beyond', op cit, especially pp 6–7

³² Often these inquiries were nested within wider concerns for particular industries, such as silk textile production; see, for example, S M Edwardes, *A Monograph on the Silk Fabrics of the Bombay Presidency*, Bombay, 1900; H Maxwell-Lefroy and E C Anson, *Report On an Inquiry*

India Museum in South Kensington, turned to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to trace the genealogy of Indian dye production in his *Industrial Arts of India* (1880).³³

Indians could auto-Orientalise, to conceive of themselves – much as Europeans conceived of them – as the backward and barbaric ‘Other’; this was the pernicious power of colonialism. Gandhi’s vision of the authentic India, for example, reeked of Henry Maine’s Orientalist ‘village republics’ – a land of local, rurally based and rather feudal and paternalist, or else backward and insular communities – as much as of John Ruskin’s ‘anti-industrial utopianism’, even as he engaged critically with the work of such intellectuals.³⁴ Returning to colour, Saiyid Muhammad Hadi’s *A Monograph on Dyes and Dyeing in the North West Provinces and Oudh* (1896) was typical of the type of reports into the state of the arts produced by colonial officials. But it was also typical in flattening Indian history into a singular and static ‘tradition’, ignoring distinctions of temple and elite from popular practice, or historical change. Hadi quoted from the ancient *Laws of Manu* (first translated into English by William Jones in the 1790s) to draw an unbroken line from ancient prescripts to contemporary practice regarding colour and dyestuffs, ritual notions of purity and pollution.³⁵ Around the *fin de siècle*, Indian artists and thinkers started to formulate their own philosophies of art and colour, drawing on archaic Indic, if not Hindu ideas, alongside more modern and cosmopolitan connections to the wider Asian world.³⁶ These ideas were influential to the *Swadeshi* movement of 1905–1911 that called for the consumption of only Indian (and not imported) goods as a form of anti-colonial nationalist protest. In these endeavours, however, Indian tradition had at once to be created and mobilised to distinguish what was (not) an authentically Indian commodity.³⁷

If historical actors and historians alike have tended to rebirth and reify the knowledge contained within ancient texts to manufacture tradition and render India comprehensible/consumable, they have also tended to distinguish Hindu tradition from that of India’s Muslims. A variety of Indo-Islamic texts, including recipe books and painters’ treatises on colour and pigments, contain reflections on the spiritual power of the proper performance,

into the Silk Industry in India, Government Press, 3 vols, Calcutta, 1917. See also Jagjeet Lally, ‘Crafting Colonial Anxieties: Silk and the Salvation Army in British India, circa 1900–20’, *Modern Asian Studies*, vol 50 no 3, 2016, pp 765–807.

³³ George C M Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India*, Chapman and Hall, London, 1880

³⁴ See Karuna Mantena, ‘On Gandhi’s Critique of the State: Sources, Contexts, Conjunctures’, *Modern Intellectual History*, vol 9, no 3, 2012, 535–563; Patrick Brantlinger, ‘A Postindustrial Prelude to Postcolonialism: John Ruskin, William Morris, and Gandhism’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol 22 no 3, 1996, pp 466–485. On Gandhi’s ideas about India’s traditional industries and artisan or craft production, more specifically, which was central to his conceptualisation of the ‘authentic’ India, see Abigail McGowan, *Crafting the Nation in Colonial India*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009.

³⁵ See Eaton, *Colour, Art and Empire*, op cit, pp 111, 116. Hadi, Eaton notes, argued that there had never been a Hindu chromatic theory, at the same time also drawing on Islamic laws and beliefs about colour to survey the history and present state of dyeing. William Jones, *Institutes of Hindu Law: or, the Ordinances of Menu, according to the Gloss of Culluca, Comprising the Indian System of Duties, Religious and Civil*, J Sewell, London, 1796. Scholars disagree about the date of the text, but situate it between 200 BCE and 200 CE.

³⁶ See, for example, Natasha Eaton’s discussion of Abanindranath Tagore’s chromatic and artistic ideas, in *Colour, Art and Empire*, chapter 4

³⁷ See Eaton, *Colour, Art and Empire*, chapter 4; and C A Bayly, ‘The Origins of Swadeshi (Home Industry): Cloth and Indian Society, 1700–1930’ in Arjun Appadurai, ed, *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986

production and connoisseurship of the arts. They also reveal the mystical properties of colour, complementing the insights to be gleaned from Sufi writings – such as *The Book of the Red Hyacinth* (1851) of Shakyh Muhammad Karim-Khan Kirmani – on the metaphysics of colour.³⁸ While Sadan Jha and others have acknowledged and incorporated such sources into their work, there is a tendency to seat such sources side-by-side with (if not separately from) Hindu textual prescriptions on colour. In so doing, they have reproduced the colonial impulse to ‘divide and conquer’ along communal lines.

Although Saiyid Hadi isolated a seemingly immutable Hindu ‘custom’, he did note that this custom had been brought into dialogue with Shia beliefs in Awadh, where this intermingling of chromatic beliefs produced sumptuary laws determining the colour of dress worn by different persons at different times at the royal court. In fact, this cultural dialogue was long-standing, reflecting both the artificiality of any so-called Indian tradition and the falsehood of separating bodies of Hindu and Muslim beliefs.³⁹ The Mughals, for example, employed Hindu and Islamic astrologers at court, their guidance enacted and witnessed by the emperor and his cosmopolitan court of Indians and foreigners, Hindus and Muslims. The colour of the Mughal emperor Humayun’s clothes were selected according to the day of the week and associated planets, as well as for the production of earthly effects. Tuesdays were associated with the bloodthirsty Mars and the colour of redness, which the emperor wore while dispensing justice, whereas Wednesdays were associated with Mercury, the lord of the planets, and with the colour blue, for instance.⁴⁰

III Between Decolonisation and Development: The Economic Value of Colour as Commodity

Working through the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century daily cashbooks of Bhartendu Harish Chandra, the head of a family firm of the Aggarwal merchant caste, the historian C A Bayly found evidence of ‘the family acting as a system of ritualised occupational relationships within the city and its environs’. ‘For instance,’ he noted, ‘dyers (*rangil*) appeared frequently ... because the colour of the saris of female members of these families was governed

³⁸ While dyeing was a trade dominated by Muslims in North India, neither dyeing nor painting were exclusively Muslim occupations, although there exist a greater number of texts authored by Muslims and drawing influence from Islamic bodies of knowledge; for a survey of Kirmani’s text, see Eaton, *Colour, Art and Empire*, pp 57–61

³⁹ See, more broadly, David Gilmartin and Bruce B Lawrence, eds, *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia*, University of Florida Press, Gainesville, Florida, 2000

⁴⁰ See A Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012, pp 121–122. The chart produced by Moin is worth comparing to that contained within a treatise by the twentieth-century artist, Nandalal Bose, reproduced in Eaton, *Colour, Art and Empire*, p 275. See also the discussion of the properties of colour discussed by Abu Fazl – an imperial minister and the biographer of Jahangir’s father, Akbar – in the *Ain-i Akbari*, summarised by Sadan Jha in ‘From Sacred to Commodity and Beyond’, op cit, p 7.

by peculiarly rigid conventions.⁴¹ In a subsequent essay, Bayly related the material, colour and closeness of the weave of cloth to ideas about ritual notions of purity and pollution, recognising the talismanic and apotropaic qualities of textiles. Bayly tended to distinguish rigidly Hindu from Muslim consumption, at the same time flattening his historical analysis by drawing on such sources as the *Laws of Manu* to decode elite Hindu consumptive choices, as if little had changed down the centuries and no variances existed between social groups, perhaps because he himself utilised Saiyid Hadi's report of 1896. But Bayly was also attentive to the complexities or ambiguities around consumptive choices. Silk cloth, for example, was worn by higher-caste Hindus because of the protection from pollution that came from the greater tightness of the weave relative to cotton, despite the impurity that came from silk's animal origins and the necessity of killing the larva at the cocoon stage.⁴² Bayly ultimately suggested that the economies of colour and cloth production and consumption were part of 'a' (not 'the') social order. With the improvement in material circumstances of the lower-evaluated castes and their emulation of upper-caste consumptive practices, it seems that this social order of cloth and colour was subtly subverted and transformed over the nineteenth century, despite appearing unchanged on the surface.⁴³

In other words, the transition to colonialism neither crushed completely the dynamism of Indian societies under the weight of recently fabricated tradition, nor resulted only in conflicts staged between coloniser and colonised (even if the former is the hidden figure in caste conflicts, on account of ossifying caste as a social structure to the extent of motivating caste emulation/the enforcement of casteism).⁴⁴ In some cases, colour exerted an agency and produced effects somewhat different to those described by Taussig, Pinney, Eaton and Jha. But Bayly's work also suggests something about the relationship of *indigenous* capital to colour/culture.⁴⁵ Capitalism and the profit motive were not alien to India; rather, Indian capitalism did not produce the commodification of Indian society.⁴⁶ If their existence as distinct from one another is often only implicitly acknowledged, the relationship of Indian and European forms of capitalism remains

⁴¹ C A Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770–1870*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1983, p 459

⁴² Bayly, 'The Origins of Swadeshi', op cit, pp 286–292

⁴³ For evidence from Punjab, in north India, see Tom G Kessinger, *Vilyatpur 1848–1968: Social and Economic Change in a North Indian Village*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1974, pp 147–148; Harish C Sharma, *Artisans of the Punjab: A Study of Social Change in Historical Perspective (1849–1947)*, Manohar, New Delhi, 1996, pp 107–118

⁴⁴ On the debates about the precise relationship of colonial power to caste, see Nicholas B Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2001, especially the coda. Cf Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999.

⁴⁵ Cf Taussig, *What Color is the Sacred?*, especially Part 4

⁴⁶ David Washbrook, however, might take this argument further, arguing that colonialism was less important a force than capitalism, that Indian capitalism was often more successful (and more intrusive) than British capitalism in many spheres of Indian society and economy, and that Indian capitalism led to the underdevelopment of India through its own success (that is, its not being sidelined to make space for the more modern or global form of capitalism emanating from the West); see D A Washbrook, 'Progress and Problems: South Asian Economic and Social History c. 1720–1860,' *Modern Asian Studies*, vol 22, 1988, pp 57–96

even more mysterious.⁴⁷ In turn, the impact of this clash of commercial cultures upon Indian societies certainly bears drawing out. By taking the visual as their subject, or making use of visual materials, a number of recent monographs have started to bring cultural and art histories into dialogue with economic histories. These include Manu Goswami's and Abigail McGowan's inquiries into handicrafts, craftsmen and artisans in the context of colonialism and nationalism which, necessarily, but only rather broadly, address the role of colours and colourists (painters, dyers).⁴⁸

The entanglements of British colonialism, European capitalism and Indian colour are not only evident in the residue of physical things, including the substances of colour. They are also evident in the practices of writing about Indian societies, as well as in the writing of historical actors and historians themselves. These entanglements continue to exert considerable power even today. British Indian anxieties about Holi were partly the product of the clash of a chromophobic state with a chromophilic society, to take Eaton's configuration of the chromo-political landscape. But this clash also produced an enduring Orientalist trope of its own, one that is now synonymous with selling India, or selling hedonism: that of the sensory riot and chaos of the subcontinent. Colour, as David Batchelor observes, 'is a drug, a loss of consciousness, a kind of blindness'.⁴⁹

The plumage of peacocks, both bright and iridescent, flares up around crumbling Indian monuments covered in lush tropical vegetation. Saffron-clad Hindu fakirs, frightful, process through the arches of these colonial-era erections, their robes billowing in an artificial breeze. This stunning visual clash of colours is amplified by the overlaying of percussion, with a sonorous human voice adding an extra layer of sensory experience. The global megastar, Beyoncé, appears in reds and ochres and silver, carefully (tastefully?) highlighted against the slate-coloured stone that surrounds her, in austere yet noble full profile – a compositional form so associated with Mughal portraiture.⁵⁰ All this in only twenty seconds, before the Coldplay frontman, Chris Martin, commences his 'Hymn for the Weekend' (2016), the video then proceeding through a well-rehearsed sequence of images and imagery associated with India. Predictably, bodies and buildings stained with Holi colours feature in the central section of the music video. This imagery is strung together without concern for time or place, for India is but a gaudy yet homogenous

⁴⁷ See Douglas E Haynes, *Small Town Capitalism in Western India: Artisans, Merchants and the Making of the Informal Economy, 1870–1960*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012; Maria Misra, *Business, Race, and Politics in British India c. 1850–1960*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999; Rajnaryan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–40*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994

⁴⁸ Manu Goswami, *Producing India: From Colonial Economy to National Space*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2004; McGowan, *Crafting*.

⁴⁹ Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, op cit, p 51

⁵⁰ On the Indian portrait gaze, see Elaine Wright, ed, *Muraqqa': Imperial Mughal Albums from the Chester Beatty Library*, Art Services International, Alexandria, Virginia, 2008, pp 166–168

mass, frozen in time yet moving forward very slowly, rather like a glacier. The synchrony of these sounds and sights fuses with the words, 'Got me feeling drunk and high/So high, so high', a nod not only towards the intoxication of colour, but those 'Western' tourists who set out for South Asia on the hippie trail from the mid-1950s and tripped out on opium, bhang and LSD. Indian colour has been commodified and packaged; it sits somewhere waiting to be dosed out whenever psychedelia and ecstasy are needed to entice, to excite, to sell.

But in the postcolonial Indian state, too, chromophilia (or the chromophobic's controlled interaction with colour) has been embraced and sensory chaos mobilised in this new engagement with global capitalism. In the midst of thick clouds of powder paint stand human bodies smothered in bright colour (fig. 4). The viewer is incited to 'Throw colours on people'. 'Add colour to your life', they are instructed. Then a provocation: 'Find what you seek.' Finally, a revelation: 'Incredible India'.



Figure 4: Ogilvy & Mather Delhi for Government of India, Ministry of Tourism, 'Find what you seek / Incredible India' campaign, 2013

In the chaotic, cacophonous and riotous sensory world conjured by this and other images in the Indian Ministry of Tourism's 'Incredible India' global advertising campaign, the viewer is drawn into a world where the senses of sight, smell, sound, touch and taste will be enlivened and

excited in new ways. To embrace the chaos, or to find peace within it, is to experience the 'authentic' India. The riot of the senses was, and is, a staple trope in the representation of India, whether in the writings of European travellers since the start of the age of empires or in the Indian Ministry of Tourism's 'Incredible India' marketing campaign, as part of the West's construction of the Orient and of modern-day India's and Indians' mobilisation of these Oriental tropes to lure tourists from the West. If the tables have been turned, by Indians and (nominally) for Indians, does colour need to be decolonised in such images as those constituting the Indian government's campaign targeting tourists? Or is it only the sort of cultural appropriation perpetrated by the 'Holi Festival of Colours' brand that poses a problem? Does colour need to be decommoditised? Or is it now so tied to 'Brand India' as to be an agent of economic development and cultural diplomacy? This analysis would suggest that decolonising colour cannot amount to a whitewashing or whitescaping, to a chromophobic reordering of colour, but an acknowledgement of the historical entanglements of colour with colonialism and its controlling and commodifying logics, and the ways in which they are reproduced and repackaged even today.

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