

The Mastery of Natural Dyes in South Asian Textiles

Image no: 1

Caption: Edwin Weeks, Detail, *Outside An Indian Dye House*, 1885, Oil on Canvas, 54.9 x 64.9 cm, Private Collection, Wikimedia Commons.

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Weeks_Edwin_Outside_An_Indian_Dye_House.jpg

Image no: 2

Caption: Detail, *A mullah (muslim scholar) reading a book*. Gouache painting by an Indian artist, 1800-1899, Gouache painting with Watercolour, 15.1 x 10.4 cm, 582547i, Wellcome Collection, London.

Link: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/m7bwzs2n>

Image no: 3

Caption: Detail, *Three musicians sitting with their instruments*, 1800-1899, Gouache painting, 24.5 x 20.2 cm, 582277i, Wellcome Collection, London.

Link: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/qcje3jrk/images?id=htnveruu>

Image no: 4

Caption: Detail, *Two men riding on an elephant, along with the mahout, as a guard walks alongside*, 1800-1899, Gouache painting, 26.3 x 21.2 cm, 582756i, Wellcome Collection, London.

Link: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/ze8cuk7s>

Image no: 5

Caption: Detail, *Man Dyeing Cloth*, early 1930s, Ink and color on paper, 22.2 x 15.9 cm, 1992.142,

Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio. Seventy-fifth anniversary gift of William E. Ward in memory of his wife, Evelyn Svec Ward.

Link:

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:India, Company School, Lucknow, 19th century - Man Dyeing Cloth - 1992.142 - Cleveland Museum of Art.tif>

Image no: 6

Caption: Detail, *A man engaged in block printing a piece of cloth*, 1800-1899, Gouache, 24.6 x 20 cm, 582297i, Wellcome Collection, London.

Link: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/jhj4s5d8>

Image no: 7

Caption: Briana Blasko, Detail, *Handspun Noile silk yarn immersed in a Marigold dye bath*, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, September 2016, Photograph, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: N/A

Image no: 8

Caption: Megspl, *Pomegranate fruits sliced*, 2013, Photograph, Pixabay.

Link: <https://pixabay.com/photos/pomegranate-fruits-food-sliced-3383814/>

Image no: 9

Caption: James St. John, *Lapis Lazuli*, 2010, Photograph, Public Display, Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago. [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/).

Link: <https://flickr.com/photos/47445767@N05/49166032336>

Image no: 10

Caption: Vahe Martirosyan, *A female of Armenian Cochineal*, 2010, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Porphyrophora_hamelii_female.jpg

Image no: 11

Caption: Tamanna Rumeel, *Turmeric*, 2020, Photograph, Unsplash.

Link: <https://unsplash.com/photos/RoGdv1kk5XM>

Image no: 12

Caption: Evan Izer, *Piece of Indigo Plant Dye from India*, 6.35 cm², Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY SA.2.5](#).

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indian_indigo_dye_lump.jpg

Image no: 13

Caption: *Henna for hair*, 2005, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Henna_for_hair.jpg

Image no: 14

Caption: Bellelay, *Madder Root*, 2013, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY SA.2.5](#).

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Krapp_wurzel.jpg

Image no: 15

Caption: Gagan Kaur, *A woman cooking Indian food*, Photograph, Pexels.

Link: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/a-woman-cooking-indian-food-3531700/>

Image no: 16

Caption: Marco Verch, *Top view, a cup of tea with fresh turmeric root and slices on a black background*, 2020, Flickr, [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/).

Link: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/30478819@N08/49577713422>

Image no: 17

Caption: Khadija Dawn Carryl, *Henan on Shazia*, 2011, Photograph, Flickr. [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/).

Link: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/hennasooq/5659312141>

Image no: 18

Caption: Donchili, *IMG_8402_Mumbai*, 2016, Photograph, Flickr. [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/).

Link: <https://flic.kr/p/GWhk5>

Image no: 19

Caption: Ruby Goes, *Detail, Bandhani Dupatta*, 2010, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/).

Link: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bandhani_Dupatta_\(7034542551\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bandhani_Dupatta_(7034542551).jpg)

Image no: 20

Caption: Detail, *Textile with Sacred Goose (Hamsa) Design*, 15th–early 16th century, Cotton, block-printed and mordant-dyed, 103.5 × 481.3 cm, 2012.445, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Robert T. Coffland, in memory of Mary Hunt Kahlenberg, 2012.

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MET_DP267815.jpg

Image no: 21

Caption: Rajaraman Sundaram, Detail, *Kalamkari Hand Painted Cloth Srikalahasti AP*, 2013, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).

Link:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:KALAMKARI_HAND_PAINTED_CLOTH_SRIKALAHASTI_AP_-_panoramio.jpg

Image no: 22

Caption: Briana Blasko, Detail, *Handspun Noile silk yarn immersed in a Marigold dye bath*, Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, September 2016, Photograph, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: N/A

Image no: 23

Caption: Ren Renfa, Detail, *Zhang Guo Having an Audience with Emperor Tang Xuangzong, The Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368)*, Handscroll section, ink and color on silk. 41.5 x 107.3 cm, Palace Museum, Beijing.

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Audience_by_Emperor_Tang_Xuanzong.jpg

Image no: 24

Caption: *Vibrant Dyed Cloth*, Digital Photograph, Pxfuel.

Link: <https://www.pxfuel.com/en/free-photo-qxclz>

Image no: 25

Caption: Detail, *Chintz (India)*, 18th century, Cotton, 79.5 x 44 cm, 1973-51-30, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York. Gift of Josephine Howell.

Link: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chintz_\(India\),_18th_century_\(CH_18481773\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chintz_(India),_18th_century_(CH_18481773).jpg)

Image no: 26

Caption: Anna Anisimova, Detail, *Shibori Ornament*, Silk Dress, 2006, St. Petersburg University of Technology and Design "Flower-Power" Collection, Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Annanisimo_red_shibori_silk_2006.jpg

Image no: 27

Caption: Detail, *Textile (India)*, 15th-18th century, Cotton, 33 x 10.8 cm, 1873-76-18-b, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, New York.

Link:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Textile_\(India\),_15th%E2%80%9318th_century_\(CH_18482391\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Textile_(India),_15th%E2%80%9318th_century_(CH_18482391).jpg)

Image no: 28

Caption: Valentina Vivod, *Rubii radix, Rubia tinctorum*, 2008, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/).

Link: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rubii1.JPG>

Image no: 29

Caption: Pancrat, *Indigofera tinctoria*, Jardin des Plantes de Paris, 2014, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY-SA 3.1](#).

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indigofera_tinctoria_id_plt_Paris.jpg

Image no: 30

Caption: Valentina Vivod, *Rubii radix*, *Rubia tinctorum*, 2008, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

Link: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Rubii1.JPG>

Image no: 31

Caption: Ben, *Sample of Alizarin*, 2007, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons.

Link: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alizarin-sample.jpg>

Image no: 32

Caption: Briana Blasko, Detail, *A Dyer prepares hanks of silk yarn for a temple cloth*, From 'Dance of the Weave', Nuapatna, Orissa, 2009, Photograph, Courtesy of the artist.

Link: N/A

Image no: 33

Caption: Nevit, *Alum*, *Potassium Aluminium Sulfate*, 2010, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons. [CC](#)

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Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alum_1270668_Nevit.jpg

Image no: 34

Caption: *The Priest-King*, 2400–1900 BC, low fired steatite, 17.5 cm, National Museum of Pakistan, Karachi. [CC BY-SA 1.0](#).

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mohenjo-daro_Priesterkönig.jpeg

Image no: 35

Caption: Gitane, *Indigo-guizhou*, 2007, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY 3.0](#).

Link: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indigo-guizhou.jpg>

Image no: 36

Caption: Pearson Scott Foresman, *Line art of Indigo Plant*, 2019, Wikimedia Commons.

Link: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indigo_Plant_\(PSF\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Indigo_Plant_(PSF).png)

Image no: 37

Caption: Saimon2000bd, *Indigo Plant*, 2013, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons, [CC BY-SA 3.0](#).

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Porphyrophora_hamelii_female.jpg

Image no: 38

Caption: Teona Swift, *Surface of Blue Water with Drops*, 2021, Photograph, Pexels.

Link: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/surface-of-blue-water-with-drops-6850734/>

Image no: 39

Caption: Detail, *Dyers soaking red cloth in a heated barrel*, 1482, Royal 15 E. III, British Library, London.

Link: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/britishlibrary/12458997313/in/photolist-jYXBQv>

Image no: 40

Caption: Jü, *Historische Musterkarten und Farbstoffproben Friedrich Bayer & Co.*, 11 April 2012, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons. [CC0 1.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/1.0/).

Link:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Historische Musterkarten und Farbstoffproben Friedrich Bayer%26Co.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Historische_Musterkarten_und_Farbstoffproben_Friedrich_Bayer%26Co.jpg)

Image no: 41

Caption: Biswarup Ganguly, *Women Changing Sarees - Ram Chandra Goenka Zenana Bathing Ghat*, 2012, Photograph, Wikimedia Commons. [CC BY 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/).

Link:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Women Changing Sarees - Ram Chandra Goenka Zenana Bathing Ghat - Kolkata 2012-10-15 0774.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Women_Changing_Sarees_-_Ram_Chandra_Goenka_Zenana_Bathing_Ghat_-_Kolkata_2012-10-15_0774.JPG)

Image no: 42

Caption: Detail, *Border Fragment of a Shawl*, late 1700s - early 1800s, Tapestry twill; wool, 3.5 x 17.8 cm, 1925.507, Cleveland Museum of Art, Ohio. Purchase from the J. H. Wade Fund.

Link: <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1925.507>

Image no: 43

Caption: Detail, *Kanchipuram Sari*, late 20th century – early 21st century, brocade with silk and gilt metal, L. 496 x W. 112 cm, TXT.01506, Museum of Art and Photography, Bengaluru.

Link: N/A

Image no: 44

Caption: Detail, *Printed Leheriya Turban with Zari Border in Kota Fabric*, Mid-Late 20th Century, Cotton fabric, Zari, 15cm x 16.93cm, 2011.02.003, Weavers Studio Resource Centre, Kolkata.

Link: N/A

Image no: 45

Caption: *Man Hand Dyeing Clothes Blue*, Video.

Link: <https://www.videvo.net/video/man-hand-dyeing-clothes-blue/6362/>

*“Colourful, come color me in your own hue.
You are my lord, Beloved of God.
My veil and my lover’s turban, colour them both with spring.
You are my lord, Beloved of God.
As the price you demand for the pigment,
accept the payment of my flowering youth.”*
—Amir Khusrau (1253 - 1325)

The early discovery of natural pigments and dyes in India inspired a range of spiritual and artistic forms of expression. Religious and philosophical texts, poems, travellers’ accounts and even trade manuals shed light on the significance of dyes seen prominently on Indian textiles. From very early on, Indians were able to produce vibrant fabrics through their mastery over complex dyeing techniques. Their bright and long lasting colours have set these textiles apart since millenia.

South Asian fabrics were traditionally dyed with natural materials extracted from plants, minerals and even insects. Each of these is used in different ways to produce a variety of shades or colours, some which include:

1. Yellow - Turmeric
2. Blue - Indigo
3. Orange - Henna
4. Red - Madder

You may also associate some of the raw materials used to dye textiles with food preparation, medicine or even temporary tattoos. The degree of precision, brightness and permanence of colour varies across dyeing processes which include resist dyeing, block printing or painting. Dyeing communities who have mastered these techniques produce textiles that have been coveted both in India and around the world.

As early as the Tang Era in the 7th century, Chinese texts venerated Indian textiles for their “dawn-flushed cotton” that they compared to “sunrise clouds of morning.” In the 18th century, a French traveller observed that the dyes of Indian fabric would “last as long as the cloth itself” — a quality of colour steadfastness

that was unparalleled at the time. In fact, for thousands of years, a majority of the world's red and blue coloured fabrics were primarily produced in India, where dyers were able to expertly handle difficult materials such as madder and indigo.

Madder, a root that contains a red colouring agent known as Alizarin, is native to several parts of the world. While it's difficult to fix this colour to textile fibres directly, Indian dyers established their expertise as early as the Indus Valley Civilisation, by using a substance known as a mordant that could bind the dye to the fabric. The faint traces of red pigment, which we see on the iconic Priest King's shawl indicate the possible use of madder. Artisans were also able to extract brilliant shades of blue from the indigo shrub native to India. It's fascinating to think about how the green leaves of this shrub could produce a dye with such exceptional vibrancy. Dyers in other parts of the world were unable to replicate natural dyeing processes which were prevalent in India. It was only by the 19th century that synthetic dyes were invented in Europe and soon spread across the globe.

Even though most dyers today use synthetic materials, brightly coloured textiles remain deeply entrenched in Indian social and cultural life. From delicate Kashmir shawls, to Kanchipuram silks, to leheriya turbans, it's the region's legacy of dyeing techniques that have made its textiles extraordinary.

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