

The colour indigo blue has had a pervasive presence in our culture. It is present everywhere: in paintings, textiles, and our life, in general



'ART & SOUL'

B.N. GOSWAMY

*We plough the fields
Our bosoms are scarred
From the fields we get a harvest
But none from the scarred bosom
We shall plough no more the earth for rice
But to see how far it is to the graves.*

— Lines (translated from Bengali) of a popular folk song referring to the 'Indigo Riots' in Bengal

LEFT to myself, if I were to be asked to name a colour that comes naturally to mind as being most typical of our land, I would say 'yellow'. There obviously are different shades and hues of that colour and one sees an infinite, enticing, variety of them in our paintings, our textiles, in fact in our life in general, but 'amrasi' — colour of the juice of mango — as a single description of it covers it well perhaps. So convinced am I of this that I have suggested — unsuccessfully, I need to add — the colour yellow as a theme for doctoral research to some former students of mine; I have commended further exploration, experimentation, of it to traditional painters. But that is as far as I have gone.

However, picking up a book the other day on the *Culture of Indigo in Asia*, I felt invited sharply to turn to the pervasive presence of another colour — indigo-blue — in our land too. Like yellow, blue — *neel* — is also everywhere: in paintings, in textiles, in our life in general. It is the one colour — judging from the name given to it long ago by Europeans: *indigo*, 'coming from India' — that outsiders readily associate with our land.

But since blue, that is indigo, was not confined to India — as a dye-stuff, it was known to many ancient lands, from Egypt and Mesopotamia to China and, of course, India —, the IIC-Asia Project organised, a few years ago, an international seminar, accompanied by an exhibition, on Indigo in Asia. With the sweep that is characteristic of her thinking, and work, Dr Kapila Vatsyayan, who directed the seminar, wanted everyone to look at indigo as "a backdrop to religion, politics, trade, art forms and society". The result? The experts assembled turned to exploring



From left: Abandoned vats once used in indigo dyeing processes. From Budh, near Multan, Pakistan; and some species of the genus *Indigofera* from which indigo is extracted.



From left: Example of cloth dyed in indigo. Used in the clothing of warriors. Nagaland, India; and Example of Kokechi-dyed fabric, using indigo in the Shibori (tie-dyeing) technique. Japan

India was almost certainly the oldest centre of indigo dyeing in the world. For centuries, it was a major centre for the production and processing of indigo. Much money was to be made from trading in indigo.

a history of exploitation. The volume that resulted from the

Mohan Ram and Gita Mathur draw our attention, the question of how or why water, which has no colour at all, looks blue in the sea. This was, we learn, explained by the great Indian scientist, Sir C. V. Raman. "When the sunlight shines on the sea, it absorbs red, yellow and green light reflecting the blue light we see. When light traverses through a transparent material, some portion of that is deflected changes its wavelength." This is called the Raman scattering or the Raman Effect, which every physicist now refers to. This is the way it proceeds in this volume. On my part, I was interested in seeing how the term indigo came into being or what variations of it existed. The Greeks, I

carried the term 'indigo' back to the land of its origin."

Inevitably perhaps, one turns to the theme of commerce and the politics of commerce. India was almost certainly the oldest centre of indigo dyeing in the world, and for centuries a major centre for the production and processing of indigo. Much money was to be made from trading in indigo; and when medieval Europe fell under the spell of the dazzling blue dye, the heavens seemed to open up as far as profit-making from manufacture and trading was concerned. Almost everywhere in the world, from the old world to the new, indigo plantations were laid. It was India, however, that continued to

wanted to — resulted, in 1859-60, in their organising determined non-violent protests. But neither the Company nor their agents, whether English or Indian, would brook this. What are remembered as Indigo Riots then broke out. The protesters — *satyagrahis* we might call them — were treated in the harshest manner possible: prosecuted, shot, and hanged, in large numbers. Another chapter was added to the history of colonial brutality, something that a young Bengali writer, Dinabandhu Mitra, wrote about in a play — *Neel Darpan* — that is still read and performed.

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The volume that resulted from the seminar is filled with fascinating information, as also with insights. One can pursue any thread and, if one so likes, lose oneself in it. One can begin, for instance, with the ‘botany of indigo’ to learn that the plant from which the blue dye is extracted belongs to the genus *Indigofera*. But then, there are some 700 species of it: *Indigoferatinctoria*, *Indigoferaarrecta*, *Indigoferacoerulea*, *Indigoferargentea*, and so on. The secret of the presence of blue colour in plants is of obvious interest but so is, as

Sir C. V. Raman: “when the sunlight shines on the sea, it absorbs red, yellow and green light reflecting the blue light we see. When light traverses through a transparent material, some portion of that is deflected changes its wavelength.” This is called the Raman scattering or the Raman Effect, which every physicist now refers to. This is the way it proceeds in this volume. On my part, I was interested in seeing how the term indigo came into being or what variations of it existed. The Greeks, I learnt, called it *indikon*, ‘the (blue) dye from India’; the Romans for several centuries spoke of *indicum*, ‘Indian goods’; in Elizabethan England an Act of the Parliament referred to indigo as “*nele alias blewInde*”; the Arabs called it *nila*, going back to Sanskrit usage; the word was lent by them to the Spaniards who took it to the Spanish world of those times; the Portuguese pronounced it as *anilera*, which slowly turned into *aniline*. The circuit, one author says, “turned complete in the late 16th century, when English traders

the oldest centre of indigo dyeing in the world, and for centuries a major centre for the production and processing of indigo. Much money was to be made from trading in indigo; and when medieval Europe fell under the spell of the dazzling blue dye, the heavens seemed to open up as far as profit-making from manufacture and trading was concerned. Almost everywhere in the world, from the old world to the new, indigo plantations were laid. It was India, however, that continued to be the foremost centre of indigo production, and here it was the ‘Company Bahadur’ and its agents who shored up all the profits from it. The manner in which planters in Bengal, many of them Europeans, exploited the peasants who toiled on the land — only 2.5 per cent of the market price of indigo was given to them — bred widespread resentment. Anger and frustration kept swelling among the peasantry at being forced into indigo planting at such poor terms — instead of planting rice that they

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Everywhere, it seems, indigo dye workers toiled in dire conditions. In England itself, the plight of dye workers in his own county, evoked these words from William Wordsworth, in an autobiographical poem:

Doubtless, I should have then made common cause

With some who perished; haply perished too

A poor mistaken and bewildered offering

Unknown to those bare souls of miller blue

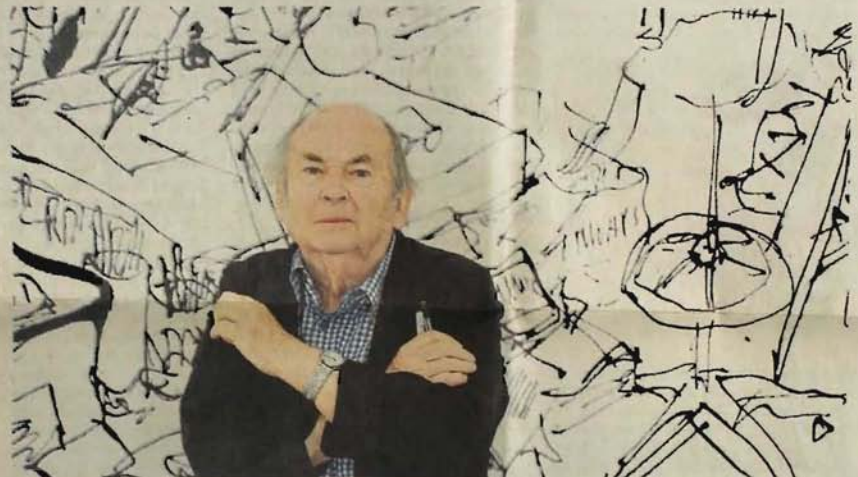
All this related, sadly, to that brilliant blue dye.

BROAD BRUSH A SPECTRUM SELECTION



<< MANIFESTA ANNIVERSARY

A visitor looks at graffiti at the museum of street art “Casus Pacis” during the Manifesta 10 European Biennial of Contemporary Art in St. Petersburg. This year will mark the 20th anniversary of Manifesta, the European Biennial of Contemporary Art, which was initiated in response to the new social, cultural and political reality that emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War. PHOTO: REUTERS



INSIDE STORIES

British cartoonist and illustrator, Quentin Blake poses for photographers during the press preview of his exhibition entitled ‘Quentin Blake’s Inside Stories’ at the House of Illustration in London. PHOTO: AFP



FLOWER SHOW

A woman takes pictures of a flower carpet portraying Pope Francis, part of the Infiorata exhibition along Via della Conciliazione, near St Peter’s Square at the Vatican, seen in background, in Rome. More than 1000 master florists, participating in the International Congress of Ephemeral Art Carpets taking place in Rome, set 50 flower carpets on the occasion of Rome patrons St Peter and St Paul’s feast. PHOTO: AP/PTI