

## CHAPTER 5

### Colour, cloth, colonialism: the alchemy of shit and piss

John Barker [Independent researcher]

In the intertwined histories of cloth dye and paint colours with that of the European colonial presence in India, cow dung and urine play a significant role.

The aesthetic and commercial importance to Europe of bright and lustrous colours that dyed well prior to the development of synthetics in the late 19th century is testified to by laws of secrecy, and the determination to gain secret knowledge. The Spanish colonialists in Mexico kept a tight control of information about cochineal, which left the rest of Europe still dependent for red dye on the inferior results obtained from madder; earlier, the chauvinist English explorer Richard Haklyut gave clear instructions to the master dyer Hubblethorne on his departure for Persia: “You must have great care to have knowledge of the materials of all countries that you shall passe through that may be used in dyeing, be they herbes, weedes, barkes, gummes, earthes of whatsoever... in Persia they have great colouring skills with dyed cloth as neither raine, wine nor yet vinegar can staine.”

In the 18th century this serious concern involved an interplay between scientists, philosophers, dye and paint makers, and artistic practitioners. On one side it also involved the colonial plunder of what might be called intellectual property rights focused on India and their painting and printing of cloth. Before knowledge of techniques and control of natural ingredients was completed, indigo became the highly effective base for a variety of blues.

With red, when European countries were excluded from access to cochineal, industrial espionage was required. “Spies” in the form of French navy men and Jesuit priests in the enclave of Pondicherry on the Coromandel coast of India, revealed the techniques of its master dyers in a series of letters and samples, fully conscious of what they were about and did so even though there was a prohibition on cotton printing in France at the time. The first, the naval officer Beaulieu, had been asked for information by M. Dufay de Cisernay, a colour chemist and also Inspector of Dye Works and Mines and of the Botanical Gardens of Paris which, like London’s Kew, was a storehouse of the intellectual property rights of others. Beaulieu observed each of eleven stages of production and “after each stage of the proceedings cut off a piece of cloth which he brought back to France with him together with samples of all the materials used in the process. His work was followed by a French Jesuit priest, Father Courdeux, who was “versed in Tamil and Telegu”. He, although he makes no reference to Beaulieu, is equally conscious of what he is doing. In his letters to his Jesuit superiors in France, as in the first, in 1742, he makes this clear: “I have not forgotten that in several of your letters you have urged me to acquaint you with the discoveries I might make in this part of India, since you are persuaded that knowledge is to be acquired here which, if transmitted to Europe, would possibly contribute to the progress of science, or to the perfection of art.” He goes on modestly to boast of how he obtained his knowledge from “various neophytes skilful in this sort of work on whom I recently conferred baptism”, their low caste status making them susceptible to conversion to Christianity. The modesty vanishes in the second letter of 1747 where he mentions that there may have been others before him but that “as they would not be conversant with the native tongue, indispensable for dealing with the painters nor accustomed to their ways, and since their very condition must give rise to a certain mistrust on these timid natives, I doubt whether they could have

successfully carried out the orders imparted in these matters.” He repeats that “the aim he had in mind” was to perfect the art of dyeing in Europe, but adds to make sure that there can be no question as to European superiority: “it’s not because Europe doesn’t have the skill but India has advantage of certain ingredients and above all, certain waters.”

### **Turkey Red**

One of the colours on which knowledge was gained was called Turkey Red (*rouge de Turc* or, revealingly, *rouge des Indes*). This was “closer to carmine than to the dark scarlet or brick reds of the European madder-dyeing process”. We owe it to the tireless Dr Edward Bancroft, operating at the beginning of the 19th century and notorious as a double-agent in the American War of Independence, who, in his *Experimental Researches Concerning the Philosophy of Permanent Colours; and the best means of producing them*, while revealing that the dye was something of a Holy Grail, showed that a red from India was the same hue as what had been called “Turkish Red”. He described the works of those who followed up on the work of Courdeux and Beaulieu, such as those of Jacques Savary and the Abbé Mazeas. Of another French account he noted the significance of cow dung in the process. They all seem to have agreed that use of the chay root rather than madder was also crucial in getting the deepness of the red.

Bancroft gives credit to Chaptal but thinks that he missed the significance of cow dung in the process, even though “it is still in use in Assam to soften cotton”. Whereas M. Bondier, a physician, asserts that at Masulipatam and Pulicat (where the reds are excellent), the cotton after being dyed is soaked in either oil of sesamum or in melted hog’s lard. “It is a very labour-intensive process, involving several dips and drying processes after this manner”. Bancroft is also much exercised with the employment of alum in the process of dyeing cotton; he wonders if the French correspondents had missed it, or if there had been “studied concealment” by Indian dyers, but then concludes that it must have been in the water.

The basic knowledge was however in circulation in Europe before his comprehensive account, for example in Manchester, which would become the world centre for dye printed cottons. There, John Wilson published his *An Essay on Cloth and Colour* in 1786. Local availability perhaps determined that it was sheep dung that was to be used in Step Six of his how-to guide.

Bancroft’s book was and is measured and detailed, but he had no respect for great names. He takes on Sir William Perry of the Royal Society and rejects the knight’s assertion of the use of urine as an astringent in wool fulling. Urine does though re-appear in the history of colonised India.

### **Indian Yellow**

In the 19th century the paint colour Indian Yellow was used by British artists for skin tones. It represented a breakthrough in conveying “a wider range of skin tones especially at the darker end of the spectrum.” This at a time when British art teachers were preoccupied with the standardisation of colour vocabulary with words like “dusky” and “swarthy”, and with the representation of British colonised peoples. Indian Yellow was produced from the urine of cows fed exclusively on mango leaves, mainly in Bengal, and the profits were enormous; the price in Calcutta 100 to 200 times greater than that paid to farmers. But late in the 19th century the British, who had already faced the first concerted Independence uprising from impoverished indigo farmers who provided the crucial dye to the British cotton industry, then became concerned about Indian Yellow when Hindu cow protection societies were making an issue of how these cows died early from malnutrition. The ambiguity of meaning in the heterogenous localised worship of “Mother Cow” allowed activists to link local identities and values. The figure of the “sacred cow” was able to “unite popular and high culture; it could reach the heart of townsman and peasant alike”. Lord Landsdowne referred to them as the greatest threat to the British government since the “Indian Mutiny”. The political threat was perceived to

be too great and its production was stopped by British colonial administrators with a ban, and they went out of their way to make it known that this was what they were doing. As Jordanna Bailkin makes clear, “The desire to paint or visually represent colonised people came to clash directly with the mission to rule them”.

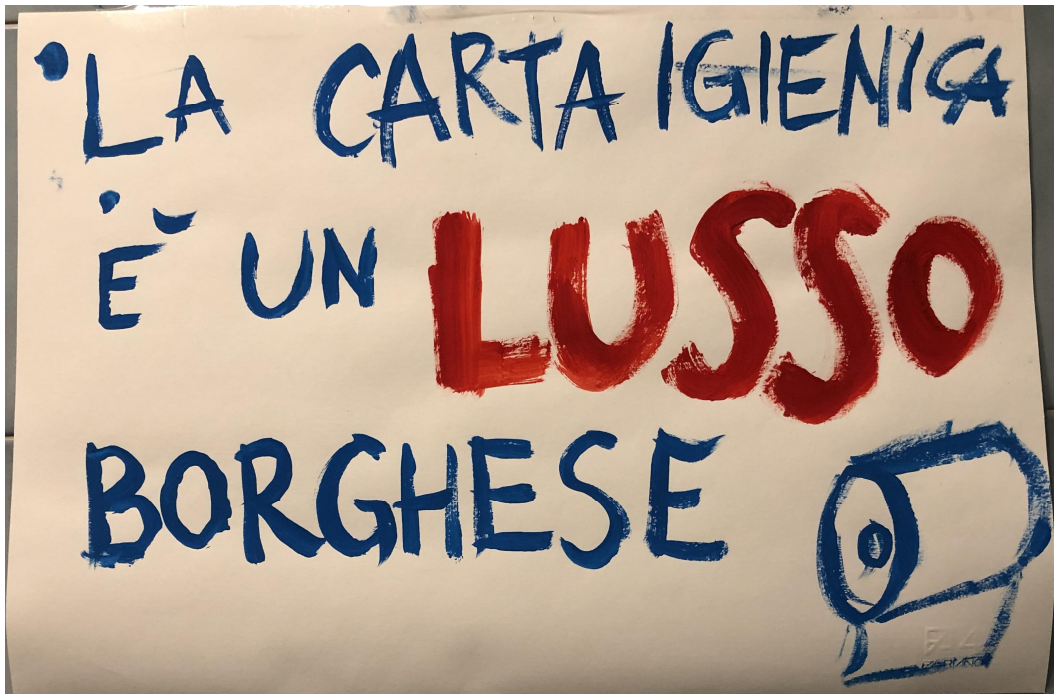
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**Illustration 4:** Artwork. A pile of shit on Bondi Beach, Australia



**Illustration 5:** *La carta igienica è un lusso borghese* [Toilet paper is a bourgeois luxury]. Paradiso Perduto restaurant, Cannaregio, Venice, September 2022.