

List Indigo//what we talk about when we talk about the blues

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

- Adrienne Rich, from "Diving into the Wreck"

Jorge Luis Borges once attempted in a story, to bring together a fictitious taxonomy of animals as written in an imaginary Chinese encyclopedia. The listing configured animals as those who had just left the room, those who broke a vase, those colored white, and those whose hair had been combed and so on. The listing was eventually used (by Foucault, in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*) to explain the arbitrary and possibly infinite nature that classifications embody, an attempt to point to our feeble efforts to limit and list the world around us. Bhasha Chakrabarti's work on Indigo, the color blue, its dyeing, making, mailing, its histories, its geographies, its politics, its patience, its soak, its weave, its drying, its dust, its blueing, its fading, its songs, and its labour, its revolution, its dismay, and its boundless horizon resonates probably another infinite list. This essay is a long, yet possibly incomplete inventory of Bhasha's work, her influences, her archives, her making of art, time, and her life.

Of Indigo Time//archives

- The mythical Hindu god Krishna has always been associated with the color blue, the blue-bodied Krishna, who could also have been black bodied.
- "What did I do to be so black and blue?" (Louis Armstrong)
- Indigo has been cultivated and used by humans for over 4 millennia, from the Indus Valley, to Mesopotamia, to Ancient Egypt, to Mayan civilizations.
- It takes hours of waiting to prepare an Indigo vat. Bhasha waits. She occupies the time with sketching, painting, and sewing.
- It took about six months to carry Indigo in a ship to Europe, before the 1860's.
- It takes about 7 days for Indigo to ferment.
- People were enslaved, forced into debt, and brutalized for lifetimes and even generations as laborers on Indigo plantations in the Americas and South Asia.
- Bhasha explains that time moves differently when you make or when you slip into labor and work, and it's not just the time of hands, but also the time of the archives.
- The sadness of the blues can also last a lifetime.
- In 1876, the British banned the play Nil Darpan as seditious, based on Indigo farmers and their revolt, under the Dramatic Performances Act.
- Bhasha has received another packet today from Lagos, Nigeria, yesterday she got one from Bangladesh.
- Post-17th century, the Europeans are expanding their trade and slavery empires, now new plantations of Indigo have come up in the West Indies and Central America (Haiti, Jamaica, and Guatemala)
- Bhasha grew up in Hawaii with the blue seas.
- Histories are like seepage, they stain you in different ways; sometimes the soak is too long, and the color comes deeper in you, like the blues.

- There are many shipwrecks and spills as an artist, you just get up and start making again.
- The time of your work has come, as Borges once said in another story.

Of Indigo Bodies//materiality's

- Krishna, Kali or Vishnu are described, in many ancient texts, as the color of the *koel*, the black bird which sings in the rains. Krishna in the *Gita govinda* is described in the colors of water-laden clouds, as dark nights, as mischief.
- How black is your blue? How blue is your black?
- Indigo traces its roots to India, *indikón* (Greek), *indicum* (Latin) meaning “substance from India”, “product of India”, something “Indian”.
- While Indigo traces its roots to India, the African slave trade made it exceedingly valuable on that continent. "Indigo was more powerful than the gun," Catherine McKinley tells *Tell Me More* host Michel Martin. "It was used literally as a currency. They were trading one length of cloth, in exchange for one human.
- Indigo embedded itself into the bodies of many ancestors of those who now live in America.
- Enslaved Africans carried the knowledge of Indigo cultivation to the United States, and in the 1700s, the profits from Indigo outpaced those of sugar and cotton. "At the time of the American revolution, the dollar had no strength, and Indigo cakes were used as currency," McKinley said.
- Bhasha paints bodies, as a reminder, she paints them as evidence, of these stories of the past.
- Bhasha is exhausted by racism.
- Grinding it and milling it into oil paint, like how it would have been done during Italian Renaissance, or in fresco painting. Sometimes we don't know if we speak of colors of the skin, or the color of paintings, or the color of gods, or that of our hands.
- In India, Indigo was primarily used in manuscript paintings - water based pigment - milling it with gum arabic. It wrote many histories, manuscripts, and scripts.
- How many revolutions happened because of this blue?
- In the early nineteenth century, peasants sold their Indigo plants to the manufacturers at the rate of 6–10 bundles per rupee. At the average rate of 8 bundles per rupee, the cultivators earned Rs 2 or less per *bigha*, which was not even sufficient to cover the costs of growing Indigo, which was estimated to be Rs 3 and 3 *ana* per *bigha*. A *bigha* of land yielded about 15–20 bundles (each weighing 3 1/2–4 *man*) of leaves. In the early 1830s, some planters raised the price to 5 bundles a rupee. Even at this price, peasants could not make any profits. (Bose, *Peasant Labor and Colonial Capital*).
- "Oh, their taxes on the bluest blue, have bound us through and through, there's no peace to be found; we've sold our lands, but these stains of debt won't leave our hands" (Bhasha's English translation of a Bengali protest song titled "*Baap re baap, nilkorer ki attyachar*", sung by peasants revolting on Indigo plantations in West Bengal).
- Each vat of Indigo holds different intensities, each parcel Bhasha receives different stories, different routes, costs, stamps and packing material.
- Indigo has high-fiber compatibility, it does not require heat, and can be used on all natural fibers; wool, cotton, and silk. It can also be used to calm the room, when it weaves itself as music, a mood Indigo.
- The Tuareg in Nigeria, after dipping in it in a vat, take the Indigo paste and pound it into the cloth with a wooden mallet that creates a glaze on the cloth itself, it gives the cotton a shine (the Indigo will keep rubbing off). Tuareg people are desert people, they use Indigo as protection from the sun, Indigo rubs off on their skin. Not much is known but it is believed that Indigo has cooling properties.
- Won't you sing me blues; sing me something my heart can use.... (Ben Harper)

- The color in the vat is maybe yellowish green, potassium and ash in the vat reverse the oxidation process, once the fabric is removed from the vat, the cloth slowly oxidizes to blue. Like a melody, a *raga* that can color someone's heart.
- Ragtime, Jazz and blues music rubs off on you, as you wander into the history of Indigo plantations.
- When Bhasha works with it, it gets all over her: her face, her hands, inside her words, inside her nose, inside her ears, and the sounds she hears.
- It is sadness, heaviness, comfort; and even fire becomes blue for a while.

Of Indigo Fabrications // dye, darn, stitch & paint

- *Raffoo karna*: to darn cloth, which has been torn: mending as making, mending is also making.
- Bhasha likes to mend cloth and possibly lives.
- Bhasha does *kantha* quilting, based on layers of used clothing sewn together with a running stitch. Women's bodies, women's lives, and women's time that makes these quilts.
- The Japanese practice *boro*—quilting Indigo scraps with simple running stitch (*sashiko*)—larger stitches, spaced apart.
- Bhasha works day and night stitching with long threads, long needles, long hours working with tired hands and arthritic fingers, with a present mothers, and circulating friends as companions.
- She is making quilts; she is making different forms of time in each of her acts of making - dyeing, stitching, and painting.
- Indigo becomes a physical material now; it sculpts into a new form of time.
- Her rags are growing up, becoming tapestries, telling stories they began with. Like endless nights of Scheherazade, they hold her through weary moods cover her in her sleep, make her dream of many lands, and many ships, many shipwrecks, lost cargos...
- “The sea, the sky, my heart and I, are all an Indigo hue. Without you, it's a blue, blue world” (in the voice of Ella Fitzgerald).
- Indigo is sleeping in the cloth now.
- Indigo is coming alive in Bhasha's work now, not invisibly hidden like it does in denims, but speaking volubly.
- She explains, stitching and quilting are time portals; they provide escape maybe not romantically, but literally. They provide collectives, and care, and a strange slowness as a deliberate form of resistance.
- Bhasha paints on these time portals adding weight to the cloth, adding bodies, adding stories, and adding songs and words.
- Her songs are mixing with the blues, her *shloks* are blue, and her hands her blue, and she has darned, dyed, stitched out whole new archives of Indigo.

- Sarover Zaidi (New Delhi, July 2021)

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