Naveen Shodh Sansar (An International Refereed / Peer Review Multidisciplinary Research Journal)
RNI No.- MPHIN/2013/60638, ISSN 2320-8767, E- ISSN 2394-3793, Scientific Journal Impact Factor (SJIF)- 8.054,
July to September 2025, E-Journal, Vol. I, Issue LI (51), ISO 9001:2015 - E2024049304 (QMS)

A Chemical-Toxicology Perspective on Chemical Dyes in Bhopal's Fabric Industry

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Abstract: The textile industry in Bhopal, like many other parts of India, relies heavily on synthetic dyes, including azo, reactive, anthraquinone, and disperse dyes. These compounds, while essential for vibrant and durable fabric coloration, pose significant occupational and environmental hazards. This paper examines the chemical mechanisms by which dyes undergo reactions that generate harmful byproducts, such as aromatic amines, chlorinated aromatics, and reactive oxygen species, and connects these to observed toxicological outcomes in workers. Evidence from case studies in Indian dyeing hubs highlights dermatological, respiratory, and genotoxic health effects directly traceable to these chemical transformations. In addition, heavy metal contaminants frequently found in dye formulations exacerbate systemic toxicity. The discussion provides a chemical–toxicology perspective on dye hazards in Bhopal's textile sector, identifies research gaps, and outlines future directions for sustainable dye chemistry and worker protection.
Keywords: Synthetic dyes, Occupational health hazards, Aromatic amines, Genotoxicity, and Textile industry in Bhopal.

Introduction - Bhopal's fabric industry is part of a larger Indian textile ecosystem that extensively employs synthetic dyes to meet global demands for bright, long-lasting colors. The most common dye classes include azo, reactive, anthraquinone, and disperse dyes, each of which exhibits unique chemical structures that confer desirable industrial properties but also introduce toxicological risks (ScienceDirect, 2019; Roop Kishor et al., 2021). For example, azo dyes are characterized by the –N=N– bond, which ensures stability but is reductively cleaved in vivo to generate aromatic amines with carcinogenic potential. Reactive dyes, such as the Remazol group, bind strongly to cellulose fibers through covalent interactions, yet their hydrolysis produces mutagenic and carcinogenic breakdown products (Paste et al., 2023). Anthraquinone dyes, though durable and resistant to biodegradation, participate in redox cycling within biological systems, leading to oxidative stress, DNA strand breaks, and organ toxicity (ScienceDirect, 2019). Similarly, disperse dyes are poorly soluble and exist as fine airborne particulates during processing; once metabolized or degraded, they yield nitroaromatic and aniline derivatives associated with allergic dermatitis, respiratory sensitization, and reproductive toxicity (Kausar et al., 2011).

Adding complexity to the problem is the frequent contamination of dye formulations with heavy metals such as chromium, lead, nickel, and copper, either introduced during synthesis or through their use as mordants in fabric processing (Paramasivam et al., 2010). These metals are linked to systemic toxicities, including neurotoxicity, infertility, and carcinogenesis. While research specific to Bhopal remains limited, extrapolations from other Indian dyeing hubs strongly suggest similar occupational risks given comparable dye profiles, informal processing units, and limited wastewater treatment (Paste et al., 2023).

Emerging epidemiological data confirm the toxicological mechanisms proposed by chemical studies. Workers in Mumbai and South Indian dyeing facilities have demonstrated high rates of dermatitis, respiratory impairment, and genetic damage, with prevalence strongly correlated to duration and intensity of exposure (PubMed ResearchGate, 2023; Manipal Academy, 2023; WAOCP Journal, 2020). These findings underscore the urgent need to integrate chemical toxicology perspectives with occupational health monitoring to better characterize and mitigate risks in Bhopal's textile sector.

Methodology: This work is based on a literature review of peer-reviewed articles, case studies, and occupational health investigations conducted in Indian and Southeast Asian textile hubs. Mechanistic chemical data are drawn from industrial chemistry studies, while health outcomes are linked through epidemiological surveys, biomonitoring assays, and clinical observations. This approach enables direct correlation between the chemical degradation of dyes and their toxicological manifestations in workers.

Chemical Reactions of Dyes and Associated Health

Impacts

Azo Dyes: Aromatic Amine Production: Azo dyes contain the –N=N– bond, synthesized by diazonium coupling:

$Ar–N_2^+Cl^-+Ar' –H \rightarrow Ar–N=N–Ar' +HCl$

Within biological systems, reductive cleavage releases aromatic amines:

$Ar–N=N–Ar' \rightarrow Ar–NH_2+Ar' –NH_2$

The resulting benzidine and naphthylamine are established bladder carcinogens and mutagens. Case studies of Indian workers in azo dye–intensive industries report elevated bladder cancer prevalence and frequent dermatitis (Roop Kishor et al., 2021).

Reactive Dyes: Hydrolysis and Respiratory Risks: Reactive dyes, such as Remazol types, covalently bond with cellulose fibers:

$Cell–OH+Dye–Cl \rightarrow Cell–O–Dye+HCl$

Yet in aqueous conditions, hydrolysis occurs:

$Dye–Cl+H2O \rightarrow Dye–OH+HCl$

This produces free aromatic amines and chlorinated aromatic byproducts, which are mutagenic and carcinogenic. Inhalation of aerosolized reactive dyes has been shown to impair respiratory health. A 2023 study of 209 polyester dye workers reported 32.1% respiratory morbidity and $\geq$20% decline in lung capacity in 12.1% of participants (Paste et al., 2023)

Anthraquinone Dyes: ROS Generation and Genotoxicity: Anthraquinone dyes undergo metabolic redox cycling:

$Anthraquinone+e^- Anthrahydroquinone$ ($\rightarrow$ROS generation)

Reactive oxygen species such as hydroxyl radicals and superoxide anions contribute to oxidative stress, DNA strand breaks, and organ toxicity. Case studies in South Indian textile workers showed significantly elevated micronucleus frequency in peripheral lymphocytes, a biomarker of genotoxic stress consistent with oxidative DNA damage (ScienceDirect, 2019).

Disperse Dyes: Particulate Allergens and Reproductive Toxicity: Disperse dyes, poorly soluble in water, thermally degrade during processing:

$Ar–NO2 \rightarrow Ar–NH_2$

This yields nitroaromatic amines and aniline derivatives, both associated with allergic dermatitis and reproductive toxicity. A 2023 cross-sectional study involving 242 dye workers in Mumbai reported 51.7% prevalence of dermatological disorders, including itching, redness, and eczema, with a higher risk among long-tenure workers directly engaged in dyeing (PubMed, 2023).

Heavy Metal Contaminants: Systemic Toxicity: Heavy metals are introduced during mordanting, for instance:

$Dye–OH+Cr^{3+} \rightarrow Dye–O–Cr–O–Dye$

Chromium (VI), lead, nickel, and copper compounds exacerbate dye toxicity. Cr(VI) is a recognized carcinogen, lead causes neurotoxicity and infertility, and nickel and copper act as sensitizers and genotoxins. Environmental monitoring of Indian dyeing hubs has confirmed the presence of these metals in wastewater and worker dermal samples (Paramasivam et al., 2010).

A Chemical–Toxicology Link between Dye Reactions and Health Outcomes: The harmful effects of synthetic dyes can be explained by the chemical reactions they undergo. Azo dyes, once reduced in vivo, release aromatic amines such as benzidine and naphthylamine, both potent carcinogens (Roop Kishor et al., 2021). Reactive dyes undergo hydrolysis, releasing chlorinated aromatics and free amines that cause respiratory diseases, a link supported by findings of impaired lung function in over 30% of dyeing workers (Manipal Academy, 2023). Anthraquinone dyes participate in metabolic redox cycling, generating reactive oxygen species that trigger oxidative stress and DNA damage, corroborated by elevated micronucleus frequency in exposed textile workers (WAOCP Journal, 2020). Disperse dyes, through degradation into nitroaromatic and aniline compounds, account for the widespread cases of dermatitis and allergic reactions observed among dye workers in Mumbai, where over half of the surveyed individuals reported skin disorders (PubMed ResearchGate, 2023). Heavy metal contaminants further amplify risks: chromium (VI) is a known carcinogen, lead impairs neurological and reproductive health, and nickel and copper compounds induce sensitization and genotoxicity (Paramasivam et al., 2010). Collectively, these chemical pathways provide a coherent explanation for the dermatological, respiratory, and genetic health effects documented in India's textile industry.

Harmful Effects of Dyes in Relation to Their Chemical Reactions: Evidence from Case Studies: Synthetic dyes are extensively used in the textile industry due to their vivid colors, stability, and cost-effectiveness. However, the same chemical properties that make dyes effective in fabric processing often translate into adverse health effects when workers are exposed to them. The toxicological pathways of these dyes are strongly linked to the chemical reactions they undergo during synthesis, application, and degradation. Case studies in India, particularly in textile hubs such as Bhopal and Mumbai, provide strong evidence connecting these mechanisms with dermatological, respiratory, and genetic health outcomes among exposed workers.

Azo Dyes: Aromatic Amine Formation and Carcinogenic Outcomes: Azo dyes are produced through diazonium coupling, where diazonium salts react with aromatic compounds to form the characteristic –N=N– linkage. Although stable in fabrics, this bond undergoes reductive cleavage in the human body, producing aromatic amines such as benzidine and naphthylamine.

These compounds are well established as carcinogenic and mutagenic agents (Roop Kishor et al., 2021). Epidemiological studies have consistently linked azo dye exposure to bladder cancer and skin sensitization among textile workers. In Indian case studies, contact dermatitis was also common among workers handling azo dye

solutions (Kausar et al., 2011).

Reactive Dyes: Hydrolysis and Respiratory Impairments: Reactive dyes, such as the Remazol group, form covalent bonds with cellulose fibers through reactions with hydroxyl groups, ensuring bright and durable coloration. However, these dyes are prone to hydrolysis in aqueous environments, releasing free aromatic amines and chlorinated byproducts. Both degradation products exhibit mutagenic and carcinogenic properties (Paste et al., 2023). Inhalation of aerosols generated during dye application has been implicated in respiratory disorders, including asthma and chronic bronchitis. A cross-sectional study of 209 polyester dyeing workers reported respiratory morbidity in 32.1% of participants, with 12.1% showing a significant decline in lung capacity across work shifts, strongly supporting the role of reactive dye aerosols in respiratory impairment (Manipal Academy, 2023).

Anthraquinone Dyes: Oxidative Stress and Genotoxicity: Anthraquinone dyes are chemically stable polycyclic aromatic compounds. Under metabolic conditions, however, they undergo redox cycling that generates reactive oxygen species (ROS), including hydroxyl radicals and superoxide anions. This leads to oxidative stress, which can cause skin irritation, DNA strand breaks, and organ toxicity, particularly in the liver and kidneys (ScienceDirect, 2019). Evidence from a South Indian study using the micronucleus assay showed elevated micronucleus frequency in blood lymphocytes of textile workers, indicating genotoxic stress associated with anthraquinone dye exposure (WAOCP Journal, 2020).

Disperse Dyes: Particulate Exposure and Dermatitis: Disperse dyes, commonly used in polyester processing, are poorly soluble in water and are released as fine particulates during dyeing. Thermal or metabolic degradation produces nitroaromatic and aniline derivatives, compounds known to cause allergic contact dermatitis, respiratory hypersensitivity, and reproductive toxicity (Kausar et al., 2011). A 2023 study of 242 workers in Mumbai dyeing units reported that 51.7% experienced dermatological symptoms, including itching, redness, and eczema, with higher prevalence among those employed for more than five years (PubMed ResearchGate, 2023). These findings align with the allergenic potential of disperse dye byproducts.

Heavy Metal Contaminants: Systemic Toxicity: Beyond organic dyes, heavy metals such as chromium, lead, nickel, and copper are frequently present in dye formulations or mordants. Chromium (VI) is particularly dangerous due to its strong oxidative potential and established role as a lung carcinogen. Lead exposure has been linked to neurological impairment and infertility, while nickel and copper act as skin sensitizers and genotoxic agents (Paramasivam et al., 2010). Environmental monitoring in Indian and Southeast Asian textile hubs has detected these metals in wastewater, soil, and dermal samples from workers, confirming their contribution to systemic health risks (Paste et al., 2023).

The toxicological outcomes of textile dye exposure are closely tied to their chemical transformations. Reductive cleavage of azo dyes explains the release of carcinogenic aromatic amines; hydrolysis of reactive dyes accounts for respiratory disorders; anthraquinone dye metabolism induces oxidative stress and genotoxicity; disperse dye degradation contributes to dermatitis and hypersensitivity; and heavy metal contaminants exacerbate systemic toxicity. Case studies from India provide compelling evidence that these mechanisms translate into significant occupational health burdens, particularly affecting skin, respiratory, and genetic health. These insights underscore the need for stricter regulation, improved protective measures, and continuous biomonitoring in the textile industry.

Research Gap: Although existing studies provide strong correlations between chemical mechanisms and health outcomes, there are several gaps that limit a comprehensive understanding. First, region-specific data for Bhopal are scarce, with most evidence derived from studies in Mumbai, South India, and Southeast Asia. Without localized epidemiological studies, precise exposure–effect relationships for Bhopal remain unclear. Second, chemical analyses of dyes used in informal units are limited, and the role of contaminants such as heavy metals is often under-characterized. Third, while genotoxicity has been observed, the long-term cancer risk among textile workers in central India has not been quantified. Finally, interventions such as protective equipment and wastewater treatment have not been systematically evaluated in terms of efficacy for reducing exposure.

Future Scope of Study: Future research should prioritize systematic chemical profiling of dyes currently used in Bhopal's textile sector, including analysis of degradation pathways and contaminant levels. Longitudinal biomonitoring of exposed workers, focusing on biomarkers of genotoxicity and respiratory function, would help establish stronger causal links between dye exposure and chronic disease outcomes. Comparative studies between formal and informal industry settings could reveal the role of regulatory compliance in mitigating risks. Additionally, there is scope for exploring sustainable alternatives such as plant-based or enzymatically synthesized dyes that minimize toxic byproducts. The integration of occupational health studies with chemical toxicology is essential for developing targeted policies and interventions that protect worker health while maintaining industrial productivity.

Conclusion: Synthetic dyes are central to the textile industry in Bhopal but carry significant health risks due to their chemical behavior and toxic byproducts. Azo dyes degrade into carcinogenic amines, reactive dyes release respiratory irritants, anthraquinone dyes cause oxidative stress, and disperse dyes generate allergenic and reproductive toxins. Heavy metal contaminants add systemic toxic burdens, exacerbating risks for exposed

workers. Case studies across India confirm the real-world manifestation of these hazards, although localized data from Bhopal remain limited. Bridging this gap through integrated chemical and epidemiological studies is essential. The future of Bhopal's textile industry must balance economic utility with sustainable practices and worker protection, guided by a chemical–toxicology perspective that connects molecular pathways with public health outcomes.

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