RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Visual Language of Textile Tickets in 20th-Century British India: A Collection from B. Taylor and Co.

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Abstract: This essay examines the visual language of textile tickets — small, printed labels used on cotton bales and fabric lengths — produced by British printers for export to colonial India between the mid-19th and early 20th centuries. Emerging amidst expanding colonial trade and advances in printing technology, these ephemera evolved into vivid, ideologically charged artifacts. Focusing on a collection of textile tickets produced by Manchester-based printing firm B. Taylor and Co., this study explores three recurring visual themes: empire, religion, and gender. It argues that these images did more than advertise textiles: they glorified British imperial authority, appropriated Indian religious imagery, and idealized women as passive ornamental objects to enhance appeal in a male-dominated trade. Through visual and contextual analysis, this essay demonstrates that textile tickets — often valued only for aesthetics — also functioned as everyday instruments of colonial control.

Keywords: British Empire; colonial India; design history; iconography; Indo-British cotton trade; textile tickets; visual culture

1. Introduction

In the 19th century, as colonial trade in cotton expanded, an intriguing form of commercial packaging emerged in Britain: the textile ticket. These small printed paper labels were affixed to bales of cotton, bolts of cloth, or cut fabric (Opie, 1987, p. 134; Rickards,

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Figure 1. Textile ticket featuring iconography from Hindu religious practice. The central figure is identifiable as the god Krishna by his blue skin, forehead markings, and peacock feathers. The identities of accompanying figures in postures suggestive of reverence are less certain. The words "Printed in England" are inscribed at the lower left. Designed and printed by B. Taylor and Co., early 20th century. 205 × 265 mm. Reproduced with permission: Centre for Ephemera Studies, University of Reading.

2000, p. 324).* Originally conceived as trademarks, their purpose quickly extended beyond simple identification. Textile tickets featured diverse imagery but rarely depicted the textiles themselves (Figure 1). As with trade labels for other commodities, their role was not only decorative but also communicative — sophisticated visual media conveying broader commercial and cultural meanings. Historically, labels served as sites for displaying aesthetic sensibilities capable of expressing narratives and ideas (V. Geetha, 2006, p. 97).

Visual culture played a central role in imperial propaganda in colonial India, where art and printed images were used to legitimize British authority in everyday life. Scholarship on Indian visual culture in the 19th and 20th centuries — across art, architecture, photography, and print culture — shows how colonial art and print media shaped

* Textile tickets are also known as trade labels, bale labels and shipper's tickets. The *Encyclopedia of Ephemera* (Rickards, 2000, p. 324) refers to them as "textile labels", describing them as pictorial trademarks typically devoid of lettering and printed using chromolithography on high-gloss paper designed to appeal to the tastes of African and Asian markets. The English term "ticket" derives from the Old French word "etiquette", meaning label. In the Indian subcontinent, the tickets were known as "tikas" (Jain, 2017, p. 37). Export merchants catering to niche foreign markets were called "shippers" (Peters, 2020). This essay uses "textile tickets" as the preferred term.

public perception, embedding imperial values within both elite and popular imagery (Chatterjee et al., 2014; Mitter, 1994; Monks, 2011; Pinney, 2012).

Within this field of study, the historical, economic, and cultural evolution of textile tickets has drawn scholarly interest. Art historians have explored their visual characteristics alongside other ephemeral objects featuring popular imagery, such as calendar art and matchbox labels (Datawala, 2006; Jain, 2007, 2017). Collectors' archives often emphasize the aesthetic appeal of textile tickets while downplaying their colonial and ideological dimensions (Meller, 2023; Wilson, 2023). For instance, the Science and Industry Museum in Manchester, United Kingdom, displays a small collection of tickets in its Textiles Gallery with minimal interpretation.* Similarly, the exhibition *Ticket, Tika, Chaap: The Art of the Trademark in Indo-British Textile Trade* (Museum of Art and Photography, 2025) in Bengaluru, India, broadened public exposure to textile tickets but was criticized for inadequate critical engagement with colonial themes (Umachandran, 2025).† Therefore, while both scholarship and archives have examined the history and aesthetics of textile tickets, comprehensive visual analyses connecting these domains remain limited.

This essay examines a unique collection of textile tickets held at the Centre for Ephemera Studies, University of Reading, United Kingdom‡. After situating textile tickets within their historical context, the analysis focuses on three interrelated visual themes: empire, religion, and gender. It employs critical design analysis to explore how visual language — through composition, hierarchy, repetition, and selection or omission of imagery — articulated meaning within the Indian colonial context. Building upon previous scholarship, this study offers a precise examination of how imagery encoded, communicated, and legitimized colonial power in early 20th-century British India.

2. Historical Contexts

Before the 18th century, the Indian subcontinent dominated global cotton textile production, establishing Indian craftsmanship as the benchmark for quality, aesthetics, and innovation. Indian textiles were prized for their comfort, beauty, and durability,

* Based on the author's visit to the museum in April 2024.

† Based on the author's visit shortly after the opening in March 2025. A book of the same name accompanied the exhibition but was not accessible within the timeframe of this study.

‡ Unless stated otherwise, all images featured in this essay are from the Centre for Ephemera Studies, Lettering, Printing and Graphic Design Collections at the Department of Typography & Graphic Communication, University of Reading and are reproduced with permission. Minimal digital adjustments to brightness and contrast have been applied to improve clarity and legibility.

functioning as a form of currency exchanged for diverse commodities. Major manufacturing centers were located in regions corresponding to present-day Gujarat in the west, the Coromandel Coast in the south, and Bengal in the east of the Indian subcontinent (Riello & Roy, 2009, p. 1).

The industrial revolution of the 18th century gradually shifted the locus of textile production from South Asia to Europe in a process that was as political as it was economic. Historian Prasannan Parthasarathi (2023) provides key insights into this transition. By the late 17th century, European demand for Indian cotton was immense. However, while cotton cloth was popular across all social classes, its widespread use threatened existing social hierarchies, triggering public discontent. The high prices of Indian textiles led to a drain of precious metals from trading regions, creating trade imbalances and monetary shortages.

Driven by economic necessity and profit, international manufacturers began imitating Indian textiles to capture lucrative markets. These efforts were pursued most ambitiously in Britain, especially in Manchester. The city's rise as a textile hub was propelled by attempts to replicate the superior quality of Indian cloth, motivating technological innovations: inventions such as the water frame and the spinning mule facilitated large-scale cotton yarn production, transforming global trade dynamics (Parthasarathi, 2023). Manchester became a commercial center for the production, exchange, and distribution of cotton textiles, earning the nickname "Cottonopolis" (Peters, 2020).

By the mid-18th century, this economic shift acquired a distinctly colonial character. Parthasarathi (2023) describes how British companies, fueled by machinery and capital, pursued monopolies over Indian textile imports. Indian manufacturers faced severe restrictions through high tariffs and trade regulations. The expansion of British mills was motivated both by the desire to match the quality of Indian textiles and by a strategic intent to cripple the Indian textile economy and protect domestic labor. These policies displaced long-standing craft communities — spinners, weavers, dyers, and cloth printers — across the Indian subcontinent. British-made textiles flooded global markets that had once relied on Indian cloth — such as North America and the Caribbean — and were ironically exported back to the subcontinent that had once set the global standard for quality (Parthasarathi, 2023).

In this economic and political contest, packaging and branding became particularly important. Colorful labels attached to textiles served as pictorial trademarks and identifiers for manufacturers, merchants, and buyers. Following the Designs Registration Act of 1839 and the Trade Marks Registration Act of 1875 in Britain, textile ticket designs were formally registered to prevent fraudulent copying (The National Archives, 2022; The National Archives, 2025). Around the same time, advances such as chromolithography enabled multicolor printing. This process separated images into color layers

drawn in reverse on limestone slabs treated to attract ink only on drawn areas. Stones were inked and the image was transferred onto paper, repeating the process for each color (Wyeth, 2023). These innovations transformed the humble paper label into a space for visual experimentation, featuring vivid colors, intricate illustrations, and evocative imagery. In 1896, John Mortimer, Chief Cashier of a textile merchant in Manchester, described textile tickets as "a very important feature of the shipping trade, and often a curious artistic production, jealously guarded in its copyright as a valuable trade mark" (Mortimer, 1896, pp. 106–107).

The evolution of such trade imagery reflects broader transformations in branding practices across the Indian subcontinent from the late 19th century onwards. Labels for ordinary commodities — such as matches, cigarettes, and textiles — were conceived not simply as identifiers but as aesthetic artifacts that communicated narratives and situated products within networks of visual and cultural associations. Beyond their commercial role, their imagery enhanced a product's appeal and perceived worth. Circulating through markets and homes, these labels became familiar symbols of shared cultural experience, linking commerce with everyday life (V. Geetha, 2006, pp. 97–111).

By the early 20th century, textile production in the subcontinent was revived through rising Indian nationalism and the Swadeshi movement — a significant campaign in India's struggle for independence that promoted economic self-reliance and the boycott of British goods, including public burnings of British-made textiles (Pinney, 2004, p. 60). Indian mills adopted textile tickets to brand their own products, competing with British manufacturers amid an intensified resistance to imperial rule.

In the midst of these political and economic upheavals, textile tickets acquired the nature of "commodity images" — tickets displayed visual elements that conveyed cultural, religious, and symbolic meanings beyond their functional use, becoming emotionally meaningful images to the consumer (Rajagopal, 2010). Situated at the confluence of art, commerce and ideology, textile tickets embodied a dual role: commercial trademarks featuring attractive visuals and ideological artifacts transmitting specific cultural and political values. Consequently, they became complex sites where themes of empire, religion and gender intersected.

3. Visual Analysis

The textile tickets examined in this study come from a single bound album or 'stock book' comprising over 200 printed paper labels of various sizes (Figure 2). Produced by commercial printers, such albums served as reference catalogs for textile agents and merchants. Despite its worn condition and missing front cover, a logo on the back

Figure 2. Catalog page from the B. Taylor and Co. stock book, displaying four size variants of a single textile ticket design. Images in this essay feature the topmost ticket from such a set. Designed and printed by B. Taylor and Co., early 20th century. Approximately 250 × 340 mm. Reproduced with permission: Centre for Ephemera Studies, University of Reading.

Figure 3. Back cover of the stock book with the logo of B. Taylor and Co., indicating authorship of this collection of textile tickets. Early 20th century. Approximately 250 × 340 mm. Reproduced with permission: Centre for Ephemera Studies, University of Reading.

of this volume attributes it to B. Taylor and Co., a Manchester-based printing firm established in 1828 (Figure 3). Iconography across many tickets — including references to military campaigns, imperial portraits, and global events — suggests a production date in the early 20th century. A similar album by the same firm is dated 1936, placing this one in a comparable timeframe (Meller, 2023, p. 53).

B. Taylor and Co. was a prominent British printer of the 19th and 20th centuries, specializing in textile tickets for export markets, notably India and China (Museum of Art and Photography, 2025). Extensive collections of their work (Meller, 2023; Wilson, 2015) attest to their prominence. According to collectors, B. Taylor and Co. was among at least 12 such enterprises, employing around 20 full-time artists and printing in up to 16 colors (Heller, 2021; Wilson, 2023). Other active firms included John Neill Limited, William Porter & Sons, Norbury Natzio and Co., and Norbury, Snow & Co. (Jain, 2017, p. 37; Meller, 2023, p. 19; Wilson, 2023).

Most tickets in this collection feature a rectangular frame with decorative borders surrounding a central illustration, while a smaller number are die-cut into inventive shapes displaying only an image (Figure 9). Narrow blank spaces within the borders likely permitted overprinting of trade names. The absence of mill, manufacturer, or merchant names suggests such details were added after purchase. The imagery spans imperial symbols, religious figures, royalty, industrial and military references, mythological scenes, idealized women, flora and fauna, and architectural landmarks, with supporting lettering occurring only rarely.

The predominance of image over text reflects the nature of the Indian market in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Rooted in oral and image-based traditions, Indian visual culture implied a high degree of visual literacy among indigenous consumers. Foreign entrepreneurs recognized these cultural expectations and relied on Indian viewers' ability to identify, interpret, and respond to familiar icons and symbols. They also understood that Indian buyers often based purchasing decisions on memorable pictorial trademarks, and within international trade networks, it was advised that goods bound for the subcontinent carry distinctive images — a visual strategy as decisive for sales as the product quality (Pinney, 2004, p. 17). In this transcontinental exchange, visual communication often outweighed written content, especially given the Indian subcontinent's linguistic diversity. By contrast, tickets for British and American markets were letterpress-printed in a single color and largely contained textual information (Rickards, 2000, p. 324). This distinction underscores British printers' preference for rich visual design in colonial markets and invites reflection on whether such imagery was designed mainly for straightforward recognition or for persuasion with concealed motives.

To study the visual language of these ephemeral objects, the entire stock book of over 200 tickets was surveyed. Selection criteria prioritized clear, legible imagery suitable for meaningful interpretation. From this set, 100 tickets were shortlisted and categorized into 13 themes based on recurring motifs and iconographic features. Three central themes — imperial iconography, religious symbolism, and representations of gender — accounted for 50 of the 100 shortlisted tickets, while the remainder depicting military, industrial, or natural subjects were less frequent or too ambiguous for detailed interpretation. From the selection, 21 examples were chosen for close discussion: eight tickets featuring imperial iconography, five with religious symbolism, and eight depicting women. This subset offered sufficient variety without overextending the analysis.

Iconographic analysis was used to interpret images and symbols within their historical contexts, identifying recurring motifs and decoding their intended meanings through visual and archival evidence. The first theme, imperial iconography, examines power dynamics between colonizer and colonized through a postcolonial lens, focusing on

emblems, portraits, and allegorical forms. The second investigates Indian religious imagery, highlighting cross-cultural exchanges between Britain and the subcontinent. The third analyses depictions of women to understand evolving ideas of gender, femininity, and masculinity. This combined visual and theoretical approach provides insight into the contexts in which textile tickets were produced, circulated, and understood.

An inherent limitation of this study is its reliance on a single printer's catalog. At the time of this research, the B. Taylor and Co. catalog was the only collection of textile tickets at the Centre for Ephemera Studies catering specifically to the Indian market. Although this necessarily narrows the scope of conclusions, the catalog comes from a leading producer of textile tickets and is sufficiently rich to provide meaningful insights. The findings should therefore be read as foregrounding one strand within the broader, heterogenous visual culture of textile ticket production.

3.1. Icons of Empire

Many textile tickets in this collection assert British imperial authority through portraits of monarchs such as Queen Mary and King George V framed by imperial symbols (Figure 4). For Indian viewers, the visual language may have been unfamiliar, but the combination of imposing portraits, ornate framing, and densely arranged motifs conveyed notions of prestige and dominance, implying that British-manufactured textiles were inherently superior and more desirable by their association with empire.

Colonial propaganda is especially evident in elaborate compositions showing monarchs atop a globe centered on the Indian subcontinent, with mounted Indian troops

Figure 4. Set of textile tickets featuring portraits of Queen Mary (a), King George V (b) and the royal crown (c), each symbolizing imperial authority. All designed and printed by B. Taylor and Co., early 20th century. Dimensions: (a) 165 × 235 mm; (b) 165 × 235 mm; (c) 160 × 200 mm. Reproduced with permission: Centre for Ephemera Studies, University of Reading.

Figure 5. (a) Textile ticket depicting monarchs seated atop a globe, illustrating the territorial reach of the British Empire. Designed and printed by B. Taylor and Co., early 20th century. 130 × 165 mm. Reproduced with permission: Centre for Ephemera Studies, University of Reading. This composition recalls (b) the Imperial Federation map of 1886, designed to showcase Britain at the center of the world. Note the Indian man at the bottom left bending under the weight of cotton bales. Colomb, J. C. R. (John Charles Ready), 1886. Imperial Federation, map of the world showing the extent of the British Empire in 1886. Map. MacClure & Co. Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center. 860 × 630 mm. https://collections.leventhalmap.org/search/commonwealth:x633f896s (accessed 31 October 2025) Image reproduction courtesy of the Norman B. Leventhal Map & Education Center at the Boston Public Library.

marching below (Figure 5a). The image serves as a striking metaphor for imperial authority sustained by indigenous forces. The composition recalls the *Imperial Federation* map from 1886, in which Britannia — the female personification of Britain drawn from Greco-Roman iconography — occupies a similar powerful pose while colonial subjects line the borders in implicit homage (Figure 5b). The recurrence of Britannia (Figures 6a and 6b), identifiable by a plumed helmet, trident, shield, and lion, supports myths of conquest and global supremacy (Victorian Web, 2018a).

Some tickets use allegorical imagery to equate authority with sanctity. Cherubs or toddler angels holding a crown — borrowing from Judaic, Christian, and Islamic iconography — flank the monarch, assigning the ruler and, by extension, the commodity, a sacred status (Figure 6b) (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). Yet, even within this potent European symbolism, Indian presence remains minimal, relegated to diminutive figures or architectural motifs such as a monument in the background that resembles the Taj Mahal. This marginalization visually reinforces colonial hierarchies.

These images were designed not only to be 'read' but to project imperial power and evoke awe and intimidation. Their effectiveness depended less on legibility than on their ability to create a spectacle — overwhelming indigenous viewers through unfamiliar symbolism. This dynamic is critical in understanding textile tickets as tools of colonial

Figure 6. Set of textile tickets with imperial motifs — crowns, emblems, and allegorical figures — signifying colonial power. All designed and printed by B. Taylor and Co., early 20th century. Dimensions: (a) 130 × 170 mm; (b) 165 × 215 mm; (c) 130 × 170 mm; (d) 95 × 125 mm. Reproduced with permission: Centre for Ephemera Studies, University of Reading.

control. Layering European symbols while marginalizing Indian elements normalized oppression, making imperial hegemony appear inevitable but also natural. Such visual tropes were not unique to textile tickets and were part of a visual repertoire that circulated between the Indian subcontinent and Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries (V. Geetha, 2006, p. 108).

The rhetoric of imperial compassion and Indian allegiance is explicit in Figure 6c, where heraldic motifs intersect with Indian elements. On either side of the monarch, Britannia and an Indian woman — a diminutive figure possibly gesturing in submission — offer laurel wreaths, circular bands of interlocked branches or leaves that traditionally symbolize victory in Greek iconography. Below, the Manchester coat of arms celebrates the city's industrial prowess and Britain's imperial ambitions: the ship references commerce, the antelope and lion signify courage, and the globe encircled by bees symbolizes industriousness, accompanied by the Latin motto, *Concilio Et Labore*, meaning "by counsel and work" (BBC, 2009).

Another example (Figure 6d) shows a robed woman gazing at a dove, recalling Nike, the winged Greek goddess of victory, or her Roman equivalent Victoria (Women in Antiquity, 2020). The dates 1914–1919 anchor this image in the First World War. Laurel wreaths along the border list the Allied nations — Britain, France, and Russia — whose forces included thousands of Indian soldiers who were compelled to serve under colonial rule. Although India and Britain appear together prominently at the top, the ambiguity of India's status — whether as equal partner or subservient colony — reveals tensions in colonial visual narratives. Collectively, these images glorified empire while integrating colonial politics into everyday commerce.

3.2. Sacred Images

In marked contrast, another category of textile tickets features religious imagery drawn from the Hindu pantheon — a visual language deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual life of the Indian subcontinent. Deities such as the god Krishna, revered for compassion and protection and identifiable by his blue skin and peacock feathers (Figures 7a–c), and the god Shiva, the creator, preserver, and destroyer, recognized by a crescent moon and coiled serpent (Figure 7d), appear with their familiar attributes. The predominance of Hindu deities in this collection is notable, as imagery associated with other religious traditions of the subcontinent — such as Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and others — is evidently scarce or entirely absent. This imbalance suggests a selective visual strategy that privileged Hindu iconography over the region's broader religious diversity.

While sacred figures likely resonated with the Indian masses, their use was not simply decorative. Their presence sought to invoke trust, familiarity, protection, and legiti-

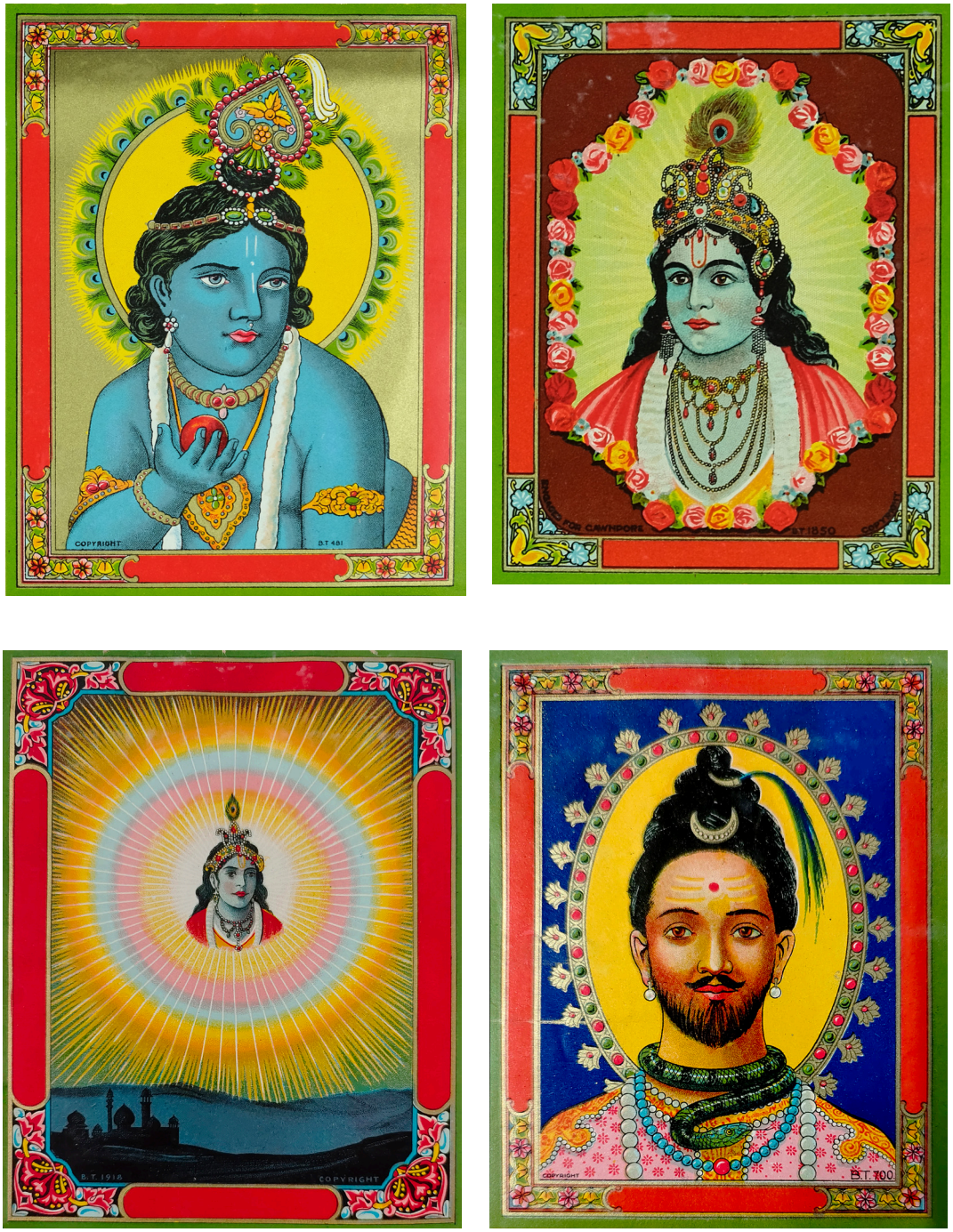

Figure 7. Set of textile tickets depicting Hindu deities. Tickets (a–c) portray the god Krishna, identifiable by blue skin and peacock feathers: (a) infant form; (b) portrait with floral decorations; (c) bust with radiating rays suggesting divinity. Ticket (d) shows an anglicized portrayal of the god Shiva, with crescent moon and serpent. All designed and printed by B. Taylor and Co., early 20th century. Dimensions: (a) 130 × 165 mm; (b) 100 × 130 mm; (c) 175 × 220 mm; (d) 100 × 126 mm. Reproduced with permission: Centre for Ephemera Studies, University of Reading.

macy; these deities appear to 'bless' the goods they marked, thereby transforming foreign-made textiles into objects enveloped in indigenous values and compatible with Hindu religious practice. As art historian Kajri Jain notes, foreign firms viewed religious imagery as an "instant cipher of Indianness", relying on Orientalist stereotypes of Indians as inherently devotional or superstitious, while capitalizing on the proven commercial value of sacred images (Jain, 2007, pp. 126–132).

A noteworthy example is a ticket featuring the goddess Saraswati, deity of knowledge, wisdom, and the arts (Figure 8a). This image replicates a chromolithograph of a painting by Indian artist Raja Ravi Varma, whose realist art style blended Indian themes with European techniques, reshaping visual traditions in the subcontinent. Chromolithographs of his paintings circulated widely after the establishment of the Ravi Varma Fine Art Lithographic Press in 1894, and a copy (Figure 8b) appears to have crossed geographical boundaries before being imitated by British printers. Although both works are chromolithographs, the textile ticket (Figure 8a) is considerably simplified: while the goddess retains her posture and attributes, the realism and subdued palette of Ravi Varma's original are replaced by flatter lines and brighter colors.

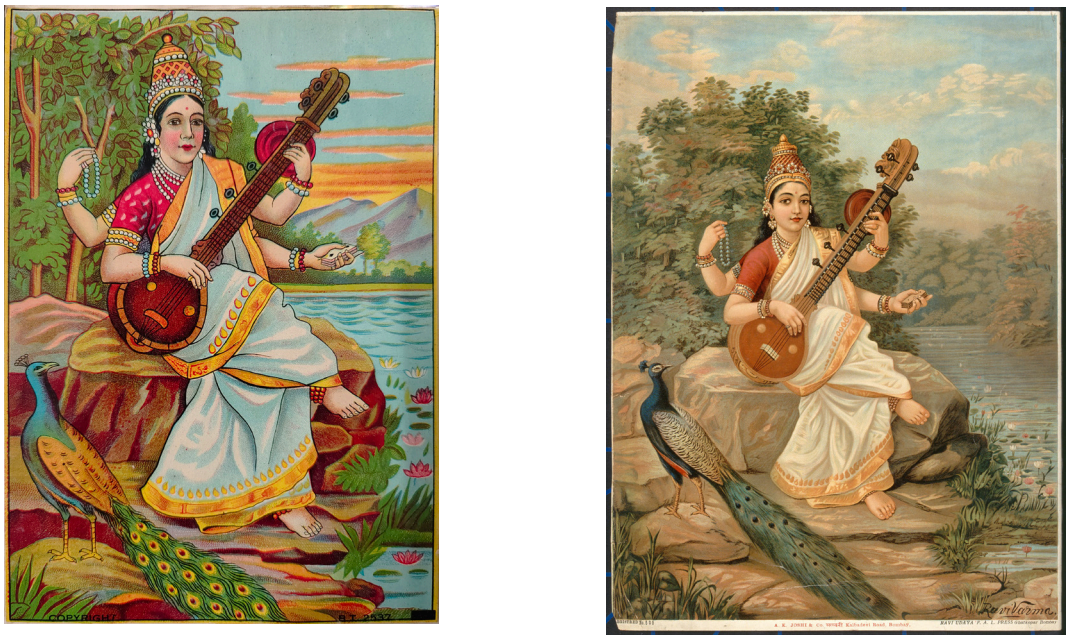

Figure 8. (a) Textile ticket depicting the goddess Saraswati, copied from an oil painting by Raja Ravi Varma. While posture and attributes are retained, the image is simplified and anglicized. Designed and printed by B. Taylor and Co., early 20th century. 150 × 210 mm. Reproduced with permission: Centre for Ephemera Studies, University of Reading. (b) Chromolithograph of Ravi Varma's oil painting of the goddess Saraswati. Raja Ravi Varma, late 19th century. Sarasvati with her sitar and peacock. Chromolithograph. Ravi Udaya F.A.L. Press. Wellcome Collection. 500 × 700 mm. https://wellcomecollection.org/works/r7r6snbs (accessed 31 October 2025). Image reproduction courtesy of the Wellcome Collection.

This simplification reveals the anglicization of such imagery by artists at B. Taylor and Co., who sought to both imitate and adapt devotional figures to suit colonial aesthetics and commercial needs. These alterations changed both appearance and meaning, transforming sacred imagery into decorative designs for trade. This trajectory — from sacred art to colonial commodity — illustrates the interplay of cultural appropriation and economic strategy.

Until the 1930s, entry to Hindu temples in many parts of the Indian subcontinent was restricted by caste and class hierarchies — practices that, in some contexts, persist even today — limiting exposure to sacred imagery for large segments of society. Chromolithography transcended these barriers, widening public access to devotional images. In this way, textile tickets depicting deities could function simultaneously as objects of veneration and tools of commerce (Jain, 2017, p. 37; Shivaswamy, n.d.).

Compared with imperial motifs, the religious imagery in this collection displays distinct changes in tone and complexity. Deities are rendered as static, anglicized portraits with recognizable attributes but little narrative depth, whereas imperial allegories are dense, multi-layered compositions designed to awe and overwhelm. This contrast may reflect the B. Taylor and Co. artists' limited understanding of Indian religious iconography but also suggests a deliberate choice to preserve cultural specificity while altering form and meaning. By maintaining core iconographic features — posture, gesture, and symbolic objects — yet modifying color and expression, these artists produced images that appeared culturally authentic but were recontextualized for commercial appeal. If imperial imagery sought to naturalize British supremacy and conquest, religious imagery cloaked colonial intent in a veil of cultural familiarity.

Amidst growing anti-colonial resistance and competition from Indian textile mills in the early 20th century, the use of Indian religious imagery on textile tickets by B. Taylor and Co. could be interpreted as a final strategic attempt to appropriate local visual idioms to maintain relevance and market share.

3.3. Depictions of Women

Images of women occupy a unique visual space within this collection, distinct from those of monarchs or deities. Notably, Indian cultural and visual traditions have long accommodated complex and nuanced ideas of gender, in contrast to Western binaries (Pattanaik, 2020). However, the women depicted on the B. Taylor and Co. tickets — whether Western or Indian — embody fixed gender roles. They are idealized as aesthetic objects: fair-skinned, adorned with flowers and jewelry, carefully dressed, and captured in romanticized poses, often engaging the viewer with a confident expression (Figure 9). In this collection, portrayals of women far outnumber those of men, who appear almost

Figure 9. Set of textile tickets, including die-cut varieties, depicting women in stylized settings that reflect British ideals of femininity through posture, costume, and floral decoration. All designed and printed by B. Taylor and Co., early 20th century. Dimensions: (a) 200 × 260 mm; (b–d) 205 × 260 mm. Reproduced with permission: Centre for Ephemera Studies, University of Reading.

exclusively as powerful rulers, representative of empire. This discernible imbalance reinforces gendered hierarchies and suggests a largely male audience.

This treatment of women parallels artistic movements from late 19th- and early 20th-century Europe. British artists such as Walter Crane and Henry Ryland portrayed women amidst natural and ornamental settings (Encyclopedia of Design, 2025; Lapada, n.d.). Similar visual influences came from the Indian subcontinent, where Ravi Varma's realism and the ornamental intricacies of Mughal painting (16th–18th centuries) shaped portrayals, particularly in costume and floral embellishment (Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.).

Especially noteworthy is the impact of Art Nouveau from early 20th-century Europe, characterized by curvilinear motifs, botanical ornamentation, and representations of women as embodiments of purity, beauty, and seduction. The work of Alphonse Mucha — one of the most influential exponents of the style — mystified the female form, substantially shaping public perceptions of femininity and transforming commercial ephemera into collectible art (Henderson, 1980, pp. 9–14).

Art Nouveau aesthetics are also evident in the flowing, translucent fabrics and draped silhouettes of Indian women's attire on textile tickets. In the early 20th century, urban Indian women began replacing cotton cloth — particularly hand-spun *khadi* fabric, itself a political symbol of the freedom struggle — with textiles such as chiffon. This preference reflected the cultural aspirations of the urban elite and the growing influence of colonial aristocracy, European fashion, and modernization projects (Jain, 2017, pp. 41–42). Such convergences likely inspired the B. Taylor and Co. artists to blend European and South Asian visual idioms, producing hybrid aesthetics that idealized femininity (Figure 10).

These images reflected not women's lived realities but conservative fantasies designed to captivate a predominantly male clientele. The early 20th century witnessed significant shifts in women's roles in Europe: in Britain, women entered the workforce during the First World War, secured the right to vote, and replaced the extravagant fashion of the Victorian era with more practical, liberated attire — markers of new-found independence and agency (Marly et al., 2023). Yet, the women on textile tickets remain suspended in an idealized, ethereal world, jarringly disconnected from social realities.

A similar dissonance characterizes portrayals of Indian women. Although patriarchal structures predated colonial rule, British claims of advancing women's rights were often superficial; in practice, gendered divisions persisted and continued reinforcing unequal power structures (Liddle et al., 1985, pp. 73–74). These images operated both as objects of male desire and as visual references for urban Indian women experimenting with fashion and self-expression (Jain, 2017, p. 42). Nevertheless, for the primary audience

Figure 10. Set of textile tickets displaying decorative details merging European and South Asian motifs. All designed and printed by B. Taylor and Co., early 20th century. Dimensions: (a–d) 130 × 170 mm. Reproduced with permission: Centre for Ephemera Studies, University of Reading.

— male merchants, agents, and buyers — women were reduced to decorative, commodified objects, rather than active subjects.

Through such imagery, female subservience and passivity were normalized within prevailing political and visual ideologies. These depictions upheld conservative ideals of purity and seduction, concealing women's agency and participation. Ultimately, they expose the complex cultural exchanges of the colonial era, where femininity served both commercial interests and imperial ideologies.

4. Discussion

This study of textile tickets across the themes of empire, religion, and gender demonstrates that within the examined B. Taylor and Co. collection, these modest, colorful labels were in fact complex sites where global politics, print technology, and colonial ideologies converged. Emerging as by-products of the transcontinental cotton trade, the tickets used chromolithography to produce vivid, detailed imagery, evolving into a distinctive niche within print culture.

In this collection, compositions featuring British monarchs, allegorical figures, and imperial symbols asserted and normalized imperial authority while marginalizing indigenous presence. Religious imagery, meanwhile, masked foreign textiles with cultural familiarity, integrating commerce with spiritual symbolism. Yet, these appropriations were also exclusionary: Hindu iconography overshadowed depictions of other faiths, constructing a false vision of the subcontinent's religious diversity. Depictions of women appeared idealized and passive, while men were conspicuously liberated from such portrayal, embodying a masculinity defined by authority and control. Together, these compositions point to broader colonial visual strategies that reduced complex and diverse cultural identities into recognizable, marketable tropes. These images thus transformed the routine act of buying cloth into an encounter with imperial hierarchies — an everyday channel through which colonial propaganda entered popular consciousness.

The visual language of the B. Taylor and Co. tickets drew from local, colonial, and global sources, often blurring the boundary between creative inspiration and cultural appropriation. Their motifs were part of a wider colonial visual repertoire — stereotypical yet popular imagery that circulated through posters, postcards, matchbox and cigarette labels, and other forms of ephemera exchanged between the Indian subcontinent and Europe. B. Taylor and Co. artists similarly reinterpreted familiar iconography to build trust within the Indian export market, turning acts of commerce into moments of cultural exchange.

As visual commodities, these tickets quietly perpetuated social and cultural hierarchies in the mundane locales of the market. Their imagery thus operated on two levels: primarily commercial but deeply ideological — manipulating desire, shaping consumption, and sustaining imperial authority through objects as ordinary as cloth.

This study, however, acknowledges its limitations. Focusing on a single printer's catalog — albeit an important one — offers valuable insights but carries the risk of overgeneralization. Moreover, this inquiry excludes tickets produced by local printers in the Indian subcontinent, particularly during a period when print culture became an important site of anti-colonial resistance. These constraints highlight the need to situate such material objects within wider colonial and postcolonial visual cultures. Further research integrating multiple perspectives, particularly those amplifying indigenous visual languages and strategies of resistance, can offer a more holistic understanding of textile tickets as cultural artifacts.

The study of textile tickets from the B. Taylor and Co. collection demonstrates that these ephemera — often only celebrated for their aesthetic appeal — were potent artifacts of colonial capitalism. This study shows how art, design, and print culture actively upheld ideological frameworks of empire and deepens design history's understanding of how profoundly imperial politics permeated even the most ordinary objects.

5. References

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