

SAFFRON AND TURMERIC

16. Saffron is prepared from the deep orange-colored stigmas, with a portion of the style, of the flowers of *Crocus sativus* (family *Irideae*). The dried stigmas are nearly 3 cm long, dark red, and aromatic, about twenty thousand of them making a pound, or a grain containing the stigmas and styles of nine flowers. It is a small plant with a fleshy bulb-like corm and grassy leaves with a beautiful purple flower blossoming in the autumn. As a dye, condiment, perfume, and medicine, saffron has always been highly prized, and has played an important part in the history of commerce. It has been cultivated in western Asia from remote ages, so much so that it is unknown in a wild state. It was always an expensive article, restricted mostly to the use of kings and the upper classes, and therefore subject to adulteration and substitutes.¹ In India it is adulterated with safflower (*Carthamus tinctorius*), which yields a coloring-agent of the same deep-orange color, and in Oriental records these products are frequently confused. Still greater confusion prevails between *Crocus* and *Curcuma* (a genus of *Zingiberaceae*), plants with perennial root-stocks, the dried tubers of which yield the turmeric of commerce, largely used in the composition of curry-powder and as a yellow dye. It appears also that the flowers of *Memecylon tinctorium* were substituted for saffron as early as the seventh century. The matter as a subject of historical research is therefore somewhat complex.

Orientalists have added to the confusion of Orientals, chiefly being led astray by the application of our botanical term *Curcuma*, which is derived from an Oriental word originally relating to *Crocus*, but also confounded by the Arabs with our *Curcuma*. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that Sanskrit *kuṅkuma* strictly denotes *Crocus sativus*, but never our *Curcuma* or turmeric (which is Sanskrit *haridrā*),² and

¹ Pliny already knew that there is nothing so much adulterated as saffron (adulteratur nihil aequè.—XXI, 17, §31). E. WIEDEMANN (*Sitzber. Phys.-med. Soz. Erl.*, 1914, pp. 182, 197) has dealt with the adulteration of saffron from Arabic sources. According to WATT (*Commercial Products of India*, p. 430), it is too expensive to be extensively employed in India, but is in request at princely marriages, and for the caste markings of the wealthy.

² This is not superfluous to add, in view of the wrong definition of *kuṅkuma* given by EITEL (*Handbook of Chinese Buddhism*, p. 80). Sanskrit *kāvera* ("saffron") and *kāverī* ("turmeric") do not present a confusion of names, as the two words are derived from the name of the trading-place Kavera, Chaveris of Ptolemy and Caber of Cosmas (see MACCRINDLE, *Christian Topography of Cosmas*, p. 367).