

AJRAK PRINTING: A TESTIMONY TO ANCIENT INDIAN ARTS AND CRAFTS TRADITIONS

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Abstract

Textile traditions in India date back to the Indus Valley civilization. Indian textiles were traded in the Arab kingdoms, Egypt and East Africa. Textiles are deeply tangled with the identity of Gujarat and its people. They reveal the innate aesthetics of artisans and their associations with the natural environment. Using a combination of dyeing, weaving and printing, the craftsmen in Gujarat come up with the amazing materials. Block printing is a very old textile craft of Gujarat. The craftsmen are specialized in using wooden blocks to handprint complicated patterns on the yardage. One such block printing craft is Ajrakh. This printing skill came to Gujarat from Sindh. Dhamadka village in Kutch is the chief centre for this fine art of resists printing and mordant dyeing. It is one of the oldest types of block printing on textiles still practised in parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan in India, and in Sindh in Pakistan. Textiles printed in this manner are hand -printed using natural dyes on both sides by a lengthy and time-consuming process of resist printing.

Keywords: Printing, Ajrak, motif, dyeing, blocks

Introduction

The legacy of the Indus Valley Civilisation “Ajrakh” is a block-printing style. It is an ancient block-printing method that originated in the Sindh and Kutch. The word 'ajrakh' itself denotes a number of different concepts.

According to some sources, *ajrakh* is Arabic word which means blue, which is one of the chief colours in this art form. Others say the word has been evolved from the two Hindi words- aaj rakh, meaning, keep it today. According to few peoples, it means making beautiful. Although ajrakh printing is a part of the culture of Sindh, its roots extend to the states of Rajasthan and Gujrat. The most important resource for washing fabric and sustenance of raw materials like indigo dye and cotton was the Indus River.

In 16th Century khattris from the sindh migrated to kutch to thrive this art of printing in India. the textile art was acknowledged by the king of kutch and thus the migration of khattris to kutch was encouraged. Few khattris families migrated to Rajasthan & Gujrat and settled down there to excel the art of ajrak printing. Now the supreme quality of ajrakh printed fabric is consistently produced by Khattris community as it became their prime occupation in ajrakhpur village in kutch & barmer.

Celebration of nature

Ajrakh printing celebrates nature incredibly. This is evident in the aesthetics of the amalgamation of its colours as well as motifs. In ajrak printing dark colours are used which symbolise nature. Indigo blue symbolises twilight, crimson red symbolizes the earth. To outline motifs and defines symmetrical designs black and white is used. The use of traditional natural dyes is being resumed gradually even though eco friendly synthetic dyes were prevalent. Indigo dye is obtained from the indigo plant. Craftsmen used to grow indigo plants profusely along the Indus River. Red is obtained from alizarin found in the roots of madder plants. From iron shavings, millet flour and molasses black is obtained with the addition of ground tamarind seeds to thicken the dye. The contemporary ajrakh prints have intensely vibrant contrasting colours like yellow, orange & rust

The use of traditional elaborate motifs is still popular in ajrakh printing, which is the legacy of earlier generations. Symmetrical geometric jewel like shape symbolises natural elements like flower, leaves & stars. Trefoil is the most important motif found in ajrak printing which is thought to be made of three sundiscs joined together to represent the cohesive unity of the gods of earth, water & sun. All motifs are engraved around a central point and are repeated across the fabric in a grid forming something similar to web-like design, or the central jaal. This jaal is made of vertical, diagonal and horizontal lines. In addition, border designs are also printed aligned both horizontally as well as vertically and frame the central portion, distinguishing one ajrakh from another. To differentiate the the layouts of borders a double margin is used to print the lateral ends of the fabric.

Mens of Jat & Meghwal community wear ajrakh printed fabric as safa (Shoulder fabric) and lungi. Low income groups are spotted with Ekpuri ajrakh (Printed on one side only). High income group wear bipuri ajrak (printed on both sides) as shoulder-wear during ceremonies like wedding to mark the status symbol. On some special occasions, it is presented to bridegrooms. Everyday usage, like bed spreads, dupattas, scarves, hammocks, and even gifts are printed with ajrakh art.

Processing Ajrakh

Ajrakh printing is arduous & long process that requires different of stages of printing and washing the fabric repeatedly with different mordant's & natural dye. It follows the resist style of printing which prohibits absorption on the areas meant not to be coloured and permits absorption of a dye in the required areas and. The stages are elaborated below:

Saaj: Starch is removed from the fabric by washing & then dipping in a solution of camel dung, castor oil & soda ash. Then it is wrung out & kept overnight. In the morning the fabric is allowed to partially dry under the sun & then again dipped in the solution. The complete process is repeated about eight times until foam is produced by rubbing the fabric. Then finally washed with plain water.

Kasano: In this process fabric is washed in a solution obtained from the nuts of harde tree called as myrobalan. It is first mordant to be used in dyeing process. After that the fabric is dried in sun from both sides & extra myrobalan is brushed off from the fabric.

Khariyanu: A resist of gum Arabic (babool tree resin) & lime is printed on both sides of fabric using carved wooden blocks to outline the motif in white colour. This white outline printing is called as rekh.

Kat: For about 20 days the the mixture of Jaggery & iron scrap with water are kept, to make water ferrous. After that tamarind seed powder is added to ferrous water & boiled to make a thick paste called as kat. And kat is printed on both sides of fabric.

Gach: Gum Arabic, alum & Clay are mixed to form a paste which is to be used as a resist in printing. At the same time gum Arabic & lime is also printed. The combined phase is called as gach. Finely ground cow dung or saw dust is spread on the printed portion to shield the clay

Clay, alum and gum Arabic are mixed to form a paste which is to be used for the next resist printing. A resist of gum Arabic and lime is also printed at the same time. This combined phase is known as gach. To shield the clay from smudging, saw dust or finely ground cow dung is spread on the printed portion. After this stage, the cloth is dried naturally for about 7-10 days.

Indigo dyeing: The fabric is dyed in indigo. Next, it is kept in the sun to dry and then is dyed again in indigo twice to coat it uniformly.

Vichharnu: The fabric is washed thoroughly to remove all the resist print and extra dye.

Rang: Next the fabric is put to boil with alizarin, i.e. synthetic madder in order to impart a bright shining red colour to alum residue portion. Alum works as a mordant to fix the red colour. The grey areas from the black printing steps turn into a deeper hue. For other colours, the fabric is boiled with a different dye. Madder root imparts an orange colour, henna adds a light yellowish green colour, and rhubarb root gives a faint brownish colour.

In ajrakh printing, the fabric is first printed with a resist paste and then it is dyed. This process is repeated several times with different kinds of dyes with the aim of achieving the final design in the deep blue and red shade. This process consumes a lot of time. The longer the time span before commencing the next stage, the more rich and vibrant the final print becomes. Hence, this process can consume up to two weeks, and consequently results in the formation of exquisitely beautiful and captivating designs of the ajrakh.

The role of the industries

Water plays a significant role in ajrakh printing. Craftsmen treat the fabric with mordants, dyes, oils, etc. Water impacts everything from the shades and hues of the colours themselves to the success or failure of the complete process. The iron content in water is the decisive factor which determines the quality of the final product.

Dhamadka was the chief location of ajrakh printing for a considerable span of time due to the favourable source of water. But after the 2001 earthquake, the iron content in water increased heavily and the water turned to be unusable. Thus, the artisans from Dhamadka village shifted to a new base and named it Ajrakhpur. They have taken initiative in harvesting water keeping in view the fragile eco-system.

Ajrakh printing in Sindh, Kutch and Barmer, are almost similar in terms of production technique, motifs and use of colours. This is due to the fact that craftsmen in these areas descend from the same caste-families of the Khatri community who migrated to Kutch and Barmer from Sindh in the 16th century, and who are the descendents of the Indus Valley Civilisation. At present, the Khatri families are distinguished for carrying on with the traditional technique of ajrakh printing.

The Khatri community had been involved in ajrakh printing in the village of Dhamadka long before the destructive earthquake of 2001. All Ajrakh printers were shifted to the new village of Ajrakhpur, which was set up primarily to commemorate the art of Ajrakh printing and its highly proficient artisans. It is chiefly the Khatri who have acquired perfection in this craft, and are carrying on the legacy of traditional technique of their ancestors.

A plethora of problems

Ajrakh craftsperson's today face a number of problems, which hinder work.

Use of synthetic dyes and sophisticated machinery: Use of eco-friendly and synthetic dyes and sophisticated machinery which has lessened production time to a great extent is proving to be a threat to the age-old traditions of this textile art.

Government loans: It is cumbersome for artisans to get government loans which in turn discourage them from setting up their own printing units.

High cost of blocks: The high cost of wooden blocks used in Ajrakh printing imposes a great financial burden on artisans as one block costs as much as Rs 3,000.

Crunch of water resources: There is lack of water resources which is a mandatory criterion for ajrakh printing in and around printing hubs.

Lack of new crafts persons: Due to the lack of payback and great labour requirement, the upcoming generation is hesitant in adopting this craft as chief occupation.

Traditionally, vegetable dyes were used by ajrakh printers, but soon they began to use naphthol dyes and synthetic dyes realising that vegetable dyes were proving to be too expensive. But with the revival of the craft once again, ajrakh printers have reverted to the use of natural dyes. New motifs are being added to the design library day by day. Earlier, the body and the border used to be same, but now complementary borders are in vogue.

Earlier, blocks used to be made in a place called Pethapur. Now, blocks are made in the homes with the help of machine-like drills. And, instead of natural water resources, modern printers use water from borewells. The craftspeople are also planning to establish a treatment plant for treating polluted water. Changing times have called for critical changes both in terms of utility and design. But the beauty of the traditional art has withstood the test of time. A number of hubs of ajrakh printing have cropped up across India as well as Pakistan proving that art is supreme and it transcends national boundaries.

In tune with changing times

A number of NGOs are currently engaged in making efforts to uplift this craft by providing new inputs to the craftspeople. The NGOs conduct year-long training programmes to train aspiring craftspeople in all relevant aspects of the art and give them monetary support during the same. NGOs also back them in selling their products in the market and earn due profits. But the number of such NGOs is not sufficient in proportion to the number of craftspeople needing this assistance. Thus, the government, the NGOs and those who are devoted to this craft should come forward and devise ways and means to shield the interest of craftsmen who have been nurturing this art for ages.

In spite of environmental calamities, industrialisation and changing political regimes, the traditional craft of ajrakh has survived. Craftspeople are revitalising the age-old use of natural dyes for western markets. The handmade, ecofriendly and natural dyes are preferred to non-eco-friendly machine-made and artificial dyes and colours.

With passage of time, ajrakh printers are now open to trying out new motifs, designs, dyes, materials and want to keep pace with the growing and changing contemporary world of fashion. At present, the printing art is being impacted by market demand and the new crop of ajrakh printers are prepared to accept and experiment with new pattern inputs provided by fashion designers. Hence, it has received a new lease of recognition both nationally as well as internationally. There is hope that these are not just transient fashion trends and that the ajrakh artisans will carry on the tradition of catering to the world with a fascination for highly proficient, elaborate, handcrafted textiles for generations to come.

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