

Ajarkh, the resist printed fabric of Gujarat

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The present study attempts to document the magnificent resist printed natural dyed textiles of *Ajrakh*, which has reached the threshold of extinction of its pure form. This is due to increase in fashion, use of synthetic dyes and production of screens for this block printed textile. The objectives were to document the craft of *Ajrakh* printing in detail and record the changes that have come about in its manufacturing process, colours and motifs. Data regarding the craft was collected from a purposively selected sample practicing the craft in the traditional manner. *Ajrakh*, traditionally a double sided resist block printed cotton textile has undergone a number of changes in production, in the motif and colours used.

Keywords: *Ajarkh*, Indigo dye, Resist printing, Madder, Mordant

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Traditions are still found to be deeply rooted in India of the 21st century. Every tribe, region and individual reflects the influence of tradition from their textiles and costumes, which is found to be an ancestral gift. These textiles are preserved by the craftsmen but transformed to other forms by the rest of the people to fulfill their quest for new fashion. The cotton fragments unearthed at sites such as Fustat and Qesir-al-Qadim in Egypt appear to be the earliest known printed Indian fabrics. The interesting aspect is that Fustat fragments may have been the antecedents of the fabrics that were printed in centre called *Dhamadka* in Gujarat¹. The antiquity of Indian textile exports can be established from the records of the Greek geographer Strabo (63 BC-AD 20) and from the first century Greek source Periplus, which mentions the Gujarati port of Barygaza, (Baruch) as exporting a variety of textiles. Archaeological evidence from Mohenjo-Daro, establishes that the complex technology of mordant dyeing had been known in the subcontinent from at least the second millennium BC. The use of printing blocks in India may go as far back as 3,000 BC, and some historians are of the view that India may have been the original home of textile printing². Gujarat dominated the seaborne cotton trade through ages and is still a major producer of block prints. The combination of printing with mordant dyeing is typical of the technique in

many parts of Gujarat. The *Ajrakh* resist printing of *Anjar* and *Dhamadka* in Kutch is well known³.

Ajrakh is a double sided printed textile and is one of the oldest living textiles in the world. This textile is indigenous to and has come to symbolise the land, through which the mighty river Indus flows and makers of *ajrakh* are found along the banks of this same river. The origin of *ajrakh* can be traced to Sind, Pakistan. A popular legend has it that a certain ruler insisted that his bedspreads be changed almost daily. On a certain day the ruler, impressed by the colour and print of the sheet told his servant: *Aaj Rakh* (Keep it today). And the name stuck. The *ajrak*, is also seemed to be derived from *Azrak*, which means blue in Arabic and Persian. Many years have passed since and the craftsman, who made these block prints came and settled in Kutch too. In Arabic *Ajrakh* also means beautifying. *Ajrakh* denotes the colour blue - a primary and essential colour of these hand printed fabrics. The term *Ajrakh* may have been evolved from the Sanskrit word, *Jharat* from which *A-jharat* (stable object) was coined⁵. The *Khatri* community in Gujarat's Kutch region has been engaged in this craft for several generations. Many *dalit* artisans trained under the *Khatri* community members also pursue this craft.

Traditional craft has been and shall be a reflection of the cultural, socio-economic, climatic and historic state of the society at all times. So saying that it has to

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be preserved has two connotations, the first being the preservation from exploitation & commercialization, and the other being from the change that the craft is going through with the influences of the current market environment. The latter is inevitable and the former is where we can exercise some degree of control. A craft is bound to absorb and reflect what it breathes and we can only filter some of what it breathes, which is motive enough for pondering, looking out and taking action. *Ajrakh* is a valuable block printed textiles that needs to be preserved. The preservation requires a detailed documentation of the craft, its history, process, motifs, colours and products.

Methodology

The study aims at the documentation of *Ajrakh*, a printed textile of Gujarat. To fulfil this aim, a descriptive study was planned, for which a questionnaire was structured with open and closed ended questions and purposive sampling method was followed. These questions dealt with demographic details, history of craft, process of producing the craft (both traditional and present), colour, motif, products produced. For the collection of authentic data, a multi visit, interview method was implemented along with photographic documentation. The sample for the present study was selected purposively. Only those craftsmen were interviewed, who still carry out this craft in a traditional manner, and so 4 families were selected, 2 from the village Ajrakhpur (12 km from Bhuj) and 2 units in the village of Dhamadka (60 km from Bhuj).

Results and discussions

All the respondents were *Khatri* Muslims and their mother tongue was *kachhi*. They all lived in a nuclear family set up and all of them owned their own *pakka* houses. Three of the respondents had undergone only primary schooling and one had undergone secondary schooling. The children in the family were not forced to study. It was left to them whether they would like to study further and get any other kind of job or get engaged in the craft. But it was compulsory for their children to know the craft. The craft was handed over from one generation to the other. All the 4 respondents had a sole proprietorship type of business. It was observed that the craft of printing served as a major source of income for them. The women of the household also earned a small amount

of money by carrying out other textile crafts like *bandhana* and embroidery. The craft is carried out only by the men folk belonging to the *Khatri* community. *Ajrakh* is a double side block printed fabric with geometrical motifs in the shades of blue and red. This magnificent textile has a peculiar characteristic of being stitched from centre. The reason for this was, earlier the fabrics were woven in to small width and hence to produce a normal width of fabric, small pieces of fabric were stitched together. The fabric so produced of *ajrakh* was called *Bi-poti ajrakh*. This is an age old craft, as one of the respondents claimed that he was the 10th generation in his family carrying out this craft. The respondent mentioned that Raja Bharmalji I of Bhuj had brought the artisans from Sindh, Pakistan to this part of Gujarat.

Tools and equipments

The equipments and tools required for printing the textile were traditionally hand made. The materials used to prepare the tools were wood and locally available clay. These tools were earlier prepared at home. Earlier, women after finishing their household used to make these equipments. The equipments like blocks, *danda* (stirrer), *ghod* (wooden stand), printing table, *budho* (wooden beater), etc. were traditionally made of wood, whereas the equipments like *Indigo maat* (clay dye tank), *kundi* (tank for *harda* treatment), *tari* (tray), containers were made from clay. The equipments, like *rangchul* (tank for dyeing) were made using bricks and cow dung. *Charu* (pot in the *rangchul*) was made traditionally out of aluminium. *Chappri*, placed as a lower layer of *tari* was prepared from bamboo sticks. Today, these tools find different raw materials for their manufacture. The wood remains the basic raw material for many of the equipments like printing table, painting table, blocks, *danda*, *ghodi*, and *budho*.

Ingredients

A number of ingredient were used during the whole process of *ajrakh* printing and these ingredients were water, *Terminalia chebula* Retz. (*harda*; myrobalan), *mati* (clay), *lokhand* (scrap iron), *chuna* (lime), *dhaori na phool* (galls of tamarisk), *kuwadia na beej* (casatoria seeds), *sajikhar* (salt), *majith* (madder), *baval no gund* (gum arabic), alizarine, *fatakdi* (alum), *Curcuma domestica* Valetton (*haldar*; turmeric powder), *Punica granatum* Linn. (*dadam*; dried

pomegranate), *gud* (jaggery), *Tamarindus indica* Linn. (*kachuka no lot*; powdered tamarind seeds), natural indigo/synthetic indigo, sodium hydrosulphite and caustic soda (if synthetic indigo used), *ruharb* (occasionally to give brown colour). Many of the ingredients that were used earlier, find no use today in the process of production, like *jambe ka tel* (*Eruca sativa* Mill. seed oil), *Gissi* (camel dung), *Ricinus communis* Linn. (*erandi ka tel*; castor oil), *leema* (dried lemons), etc.

Printing process

The process of *ajrakh* printing is laborious and includes 14 stages. Each stage requires different tools and ingredients. The technique of hand block printing is used for all types of *ajrakh*, but the stages may differ with the motifs and patterns. The printing is done with the help of mordant, a resist, or both. The raw material for printing was a pure cotton fabric, known locally as *latha*, earlier a hand spun hand woven cotton fabric was used. The process of *ajrakh* printing is complex and is a highly skilled craft. Various stages of *ajrakh* printing (Figs. 1-8)) are as follows:

- 1 *Saaj no Marhalo*: First, the fabric is washed in plain water and beaten to remove all the impurities from the fabric. Traditionally, the procedure for this was soaking of fabric in soda ash, castor oil and then, further soaking it in camel dung solution to make the fabric soft, which acted as a bleaching agent (alkaline). Nowadays, the fabrics are washed in plain water at the *ghats*. The fabric is dipped in water and then beaten with a wooden beater in order to soften the fabric. The fabric, if required, is also steamed in water containing soda ash. Excess water is wrung out of the fabric and laid flat on the ground surface to dry in sun.
- 2 *Kasanu/Harda* treatment: The next stage consisted of treating the fabric with *harda* (myrobalan). The cloth at this stage is treated in the same manner as it was done traditionally. This particular treatment is given to the fabric in order to facilitate better process of printing later. This is done by soaking the fabric in *harda* solution, pounding the fabric with the feet, removing from the solution, drying and beating the dried fabric to dust off extra *harda* powder.
- 3 *Rekh* (outline) printing: Gum arabic and lime are mixed for *kiryana* (printing of the white outlines). Blocks (*rekh*) are dipped in the solution and the white outlines are printed over. If the fabric had to be printed double sided, then they are printed on the reverse side with *rekh* blocks.
- 4 Drying of *rekh* printed fabric: After printing the fabric with *rekh* (outlines), the fabric is dried in sun and if the fabric is to be printed both the sides, the fabric is reversed to dry on the other side.
- 5 *Kat* (black) printing: Gum, ferrous sulphate, fuller's earth and water are used to make the black outlines. These ingredients were traditionally used but today, the process of *kat* printing is carried out using scrap iron, *kachuka no loat* (tamarind seeds powder) and *gud* (jaggery) to make paste. These *kat* printed areas would turn into permanent black colour on treating with indigo.
- 6 *Phulli/Kan* printing: Resisting of small star like areas, where *Kachuka no lot* (tamarind seeds powder), is mixed in alum and then boiled for 1 hr to produce a thick printing paste. To this, some amount of fugitive dye, *kesari rang*, is added to separate this paste from the other printed resist pastes. Traditionally, *geru* is used instead of fugitive dye. The fabric is now stamped with this paste.
- 7 *Gach/Khor* printing: The first part of this stage is called *khori* printing, where the resist is prepared with a paste of alum, gum arabic, millet flour and red clay and is stamped on the fabric with the help of filler block (*gadh*). The later step of this stage includes the stamping of resist paste made of lime and gum arabic. These two combined steps are called *gach* printing. On this resist printed fabric, before it dried up, traditionally powder of dried *Bakri ni lindi* (goat excreta) is sprinkled, which prevent the smudging of design. Nowadays, wood powder is used.
- 8 Indigo dyeing I: Traditionally, natural indigo is used and the *naand* ('V' shaped container), that was dug in ground is used for dyeing. The indigo along with *kuwadia na beej* (casatoria seeds) is added in *naand* containing water and is left for months for the growth of bacteria. Then, the fabric is dyed in it for 10-15 min.



Fig.1 Saaj- washing



Fig.3 Rekh printing



Fig.5 Phulli printing



Fig.4 Kat printing



Fig.6 Gach Printing

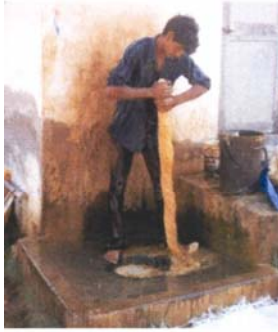


Fig.2 Kasanu- harda



Fig.7 Indigo dyeing



Fig.8 Rang

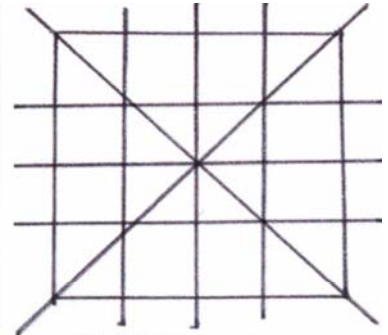


Fig.11 Division of square

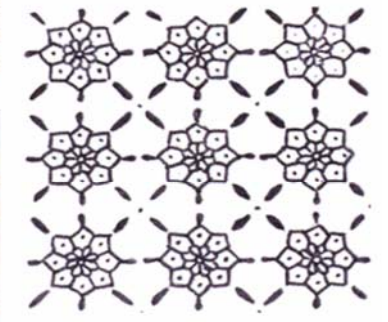


Fig.12 Kuiyaro



Fig.9 Common traditional Ajrakh prints



Fig.10 Contemporary prints

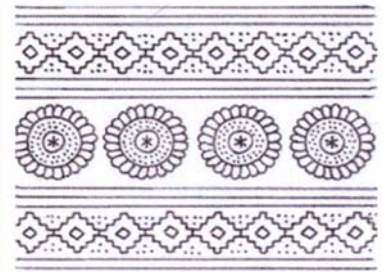


Fig.13 Dhadiyo



Fig.14 Mifudi



Fig.15 Sitara



Fig.16 Char pa ek



Fig.17 Limai, neem tree



Fig.18 Bopai or Ajrakh Kungri

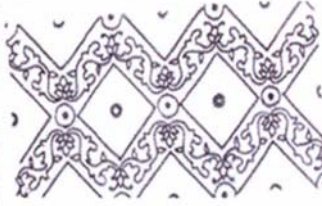


Fig.19 Tavith-Makudo



Fig.20 Tavith-Acchopatto

Today, the synthetic indigo is put along with sodium hydrosulphite and caustic soda in the *maat* (clay container) containing water. The *maat* is left to mature for 3-4 days; the fabric is then added to *maat* and dyed for 10-15 min. The fabric is now dried in sun.

- 9 *Vichharnu*: The indigo dyed fabric is washed in running water and laid flat to dry in sun. Fabric is not vigorously rubbed and the *khori* resist is not removed and hence the resultant fabric remains stiff.
- 10 *Rang*: For this step, the cloth is boiled with *dhaori na phool* (galls of tamarisk) and *majith* (madder) with sufficient amount of water in the *charu of rangchul* (metal container fixed on a stand) for 2-3 hrs. The fabric is then washed in running water and dried in sun.

Steps 7 to 10 are repeated once again to get brighter and more brilliant shades of red and blue.

Colours

Traditionally, *ajrakh* is called as *bi-poti ajrakh*, as two fabrics are stitched together from the centre. *Ajrakh* is of two types – *ek-puri*, which is printed only on one side and *bi-puri*, which is printed on both sides. *Ajrakh* is found mainly in blue colour with a bit of red, white and black. *Malir* is a type of *ajrakh*, found on red background with floral and geometric motifs (Figs. 9, 10). Today, *ajrakh* is also found in colours like green, yellow and brown. *Vadali / neela* stands for blue colour signifying sky; *laal*: stands for red, which signifies the red light in the sky at the time of sunset. *Safed / dhodo* is white colour used for stars; *kalo*, the black colour signifies dark night; *leelo* (green colour) is obtained by dipping the indigo dyed fabric in pomegranate and then spraying or swabbing *haldi* (turmeric) solution on the fabric. This was done when the fabric was still damp. *Peelo* (yellow colour) is obtained by dyeing fabric directly in *haldi*. *Bhuro*, which signifies brown colour of earth is obtained by dyeing fabric in *Ruharb* in the same manner as done in *rang* process.

Motifs

Motifs printed on *ajrakh* are combination of geometrical and floral ones. These motifs cover whole area of fabric. Each motif signifies a particular aspect of nature. Motifs are classified into overall patterns and borders. The foundation of Islamic art is *Mizan*, which means balance and order. This principle also governs the design and pattern of *Ajrakh*. The design

square is perfectly divided into quarters and then further divided into sixteen parts (Fig. 11). Even today, people prefer *ajrakh* with its distinctive colours and design, with no specific change in traditional motifs. Popular motifs are *kan kharek*, *riyal*, *ginni*, *mifudi*, *bodi riyal* and *tavith* while motifs like *sopari*, *nani jimardi*, *moti jimardi*, *ekko*, *kuiyaro*, *hydro*, *leemai*, and *sitara* are less often printed (Figs. 18-20). Newer motifs, like zigzag lines, motifs inspired from aquatic life and floral motifs resembling the *kalamkari* prints are also used (Figs. 12-17).

Products

Traditionally, *ajrakh* found its use as a shoulder wrap, lower wrap *Lungi*, *Kammarband*, *chaddar* and *rajai* only by men. Some types of *ajrakh* are also used as *odhani* and *ghaghara* by women. Today, *Ajrakh* has found a wider range of products like bed sheets, *saris*, *salwaar kameez* materials, stoles, etc.

Conclusion

The craftsmen were aware of the history of the craft. The method has changed to a great extent in order to meet the growing demand of the market and less availability of time. The production process has not changed in the number of stages but there is a change in the natural ingredients used at different stages. Natural indigo had been replaced by synthetic indigo to cut down on the time of production. The tools that are found today are made up of metal, plastic and wood but traditionally they were made only with clay and wood. Earlier, in an *ajrakh*, one would find green colour in a very small amount but today, a whole lot of yardages are printed in green colour. Traditionally, *ajrakh* was used as *kamarbands*, *lungis*, and turbans but today, it is used to produce whole range of products like bed sheets, *saris*, *salwaar kameez* material, etc. Due to the legacy of the traditional craft of *ajrakh*, it is still as brilliant as ever and competing in the modern market to maintain the heritage of India.

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