

Design Resource

Ajrakh Block Printing - Kutch, Gujarat

Traditional Craft of Block Printing and Dyeing

by

Prof. Bibhudutta Baral and Sandhya B.

NID, Bengaluru

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/ajrakh-block-printing-kutch-gujarat>



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Introduction

Gujarat is a known place for tourists. People from all over visit this place to experience mere yet exceptional handicrafts, holy temples, historic capitals, wildlife sanctuaries, beaches, hill resorts, mouthwatering cuisines, traditions and culture and colorful lifestyle of the people. It is one of the most diverse states in India. The word Gujarat is from the word 'Gujaratta' which means the land of Gurjars, a sub-tribe of Huns who ruled the area.

Gujarat has a very rich inheritance of handicrafts. The handicrafts of Gujarat are very unique and they have been given a boost by the government and some private clients. The products can be seen in emporiums. Other crafts such as embroidery, leatherwork, Bandhani and hand block printing are also witnessed in Gujarat. Printing on cloth is seen widely and is a complex and specialized job. The wooden blocks are engraved with the designs needed. There are various techniques of embellishing fabric with dyes and Ajrakh printing is one among them. An extraordinary piece of Ajrakh printing is that the same design on a single fabric is done with other dyeing techniques. The process of printing is repeated on both sides of the fabric perfectly which takes the skills of an experienced artisan. Dyeing is repeated to get brilliant colours and sometimes to fill the outlined patterns. The superimposing happens so flawlessly and clarity is perfected.

The skilful and patterned Ajrakh printing came to kutch around four hundred years ago when Muslim artisans settled in Dhamadka, a village 50kms away from Bhuj, a center for printing fabric. The earthquake that took place in 2001 relentlessly damaged Bhuj, Dhamadka and other towns all over the region. In the rise of this disaster, the artisans who worked on printing fabrics were brought together and a new village was built to rebuild their lives and start with craft production, they named the place Ajarakhpur. The fabric of Ajrakh carry a lot of meanings and a popular one amongst local printer is that Ajrakh means 'keep it today'. The word is also linked to the Arabic word Azrakh, a word for indigo. The deep indigo and mesmerizing maroon dyed with tinges of black and white of an Ajrakh product charm the heart and soul of any beholder. The deepest blue of indigo and the heated red that are the complement base colors, are the motive of creation. Artisan works with sheer joy keeping the tradition of producing printed fabrics. Traditionally Ajrakh printing is exclusively done on both sides of cotton fabric and these days silk is also used. Ajrakh uses complex geometry patterns to create collections in indigo, maroon, and black and white colors. The patterns are inspired by the architectural forms of Islamic architecture's complicated jali windows and trefoil arches. The Ajrakh coloring is fast and it is carried out in fourteen to sixteen steps of the making process that includes washing, dyeing, printing and drying that requires a high level of a skilled and experienced person to keep colors fast and even. Natural ingredients are used to get the dyes. Keeping eco-friendly dyes will increase the sustainability of the craft and the ecology.

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Ajrakh is also said to signify the universe and the use of color palate is explained so as the color red is used to symbolize the earth, black for darkness, white for clouds and blue for the universe on the whole. The star-spangled sky against a bluish-black background is what Ajrakh means, blue in Arabic as compared. One can easily notice the fabric of Ajrakh, backgrounds with colors of red or blue along with some vegetable dyes like yellow and green make it noticeable. It is also believed that warm and cool colors that are printed on fabric steady the body temperature.



Artisan printing on fabric using designer wooden blocks.



Experienced craftsman arranging the fabric for printing process.

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Artisan displaying the final product.



Neatly arranged final product for sale.

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Tools and Raw Materials

Tools that are used to carry out ajrakh block printing:

- **Fabric:** Cotton cloth is used mostly as the dye sits firm. Silk is also introduced lately.
- **Hand-carved Blocks:** Wooden blocks are carved with design patterns.
- **Color Trays:** Color trays are used to dab the block.
- **Pins:** Fabric is pinned to the printing platform with the help of pins.
- **Printing Table:** Fabric is spread on the printing table to begin with printing.
- **Water Tank:** It is used to wash fabric.
- **Containers:** They are used to steam fabric and dye.
- **Natural Dyes:** Jaggery, tamarind seeds, and turmeric are some of the natural ingredients that are used.



Fabric is the basic material used for Ajarakh printing.

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Wooden blocks are the mandatory material which are used for printing the designs on the fabric.



Different wooden blocks are used according to the required design.



Tray is used for spreading the color in it.

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Making Process

Ajrakh printing is a laborious work of perfection and initially, communities like Rabari and Ahir and other Muslim communities carried this printing. It was the work of ancestors which is passed on to the current generations. Earlier the printing set used to have a huge crowd where even the weaving of fabrics and block carving happened in the same area. But later these days, the people who work on printing have lessened and only dyeing and block printing are carried out. Modern designs patterns are adapted for the good market of materials. New patterns and techniques have to be acquired to keep the market of printed fabrics in good shape. The process of printing on fabric seems easy but it is sweat work.

Firstly the cloth is stretched on the table and pinned. The printers spread the cloth. Once the cloth is properly spread on the table, the block with designs is dipped in the dye container and hit on the cloth with a whack. This is repeated a number of times until the patterns are completed on the cloth. Later the cloth is dyed in a base and allowed to dry under the sun. The cloth is rinsed and dyed again to transform it into the look of a painting of colors and themes. Before beginning to actually print on cloth the cloth undergoes several steps to become suitable for the print process for the ink or the dye to last for a long time. The cloth is soaked in water and steamed to soften it. It is washed over with oils and dried to attain a dull beige color. Once the cloth is processed it is later taken to continue with the printing process.

The blocks are finely chiselled by experienced men in this field and designs are got ready on the blocks. A block for outlines, another one for filling up the outlined designs with colors can be obtained. A set of blocks can be designed to arrange with the patterns that have to be printed on fabric. It is better when the design is pre-decided and the blocks are made. The blocks are carved with simple tools, they are carved in pairs and the designs are reverted as the image when printed must appear exact.

There are basic colors that go in while printing patterns in Ajrakh, they are black, white, red and blue. Natural dyes are prepared by using all-natural available elements. It takes days of work to attain a proper necessary color and preparation of dyes is a lengthy process as the proportions and addition of ingredients have to be maintained. The colors are stored and taken in a container in which the blocks can be immersed and the process of transforming dyes onto the fabric can be carried on. The patterns on the fabric are formed by the blocks. It seems very rapid and tranquil work to print on fabrics but only an experienced artisan can achieve that sort of result as the prints have to be aligned exactly without any flaws. The patterns are directly printed, sometimes two three-set of blocks are used to complete a pattern. The outlines are printed later which gets filled with a set of colors with a set of other blocks. The fabric is sundried once the complete print work is done. The fabric is washed with base colors when needed and washed in plain water. When a base color is not required it is simply sundried and washed in plain water and dried again. It is packed as material for table cloth, curtains and more.

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Flow Chart:



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The white fabric is being selected for screen printing.

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The cloth is cut into the required length.



The cloth is dipped in the color solution.



The white fabric immersed in color solution.

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Fabric is evenly spread on a table before printing.



Wooden blocks are dipped in the printing color for printing on the fabric.



Artisan carefully placing the wooden block to print on the cloth.

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The outlines are printed first and they are filled with another set of printing.



Printed fabric is again tread with color solution.



The fabric is spread on the ground to let it dry.

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The dry fabric is being folded.

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Products

The fabric that is printed can be used as table cloths, curtains, bed covers, tapestries, handbags, carpets and more. They are not so expensive, the dyes stay for long and the material is invulnerable. Ninety-five percent of the printed materials get sold in the home country and the remaining five percent of the printed fabric gets exported. The colors that are used are natural dyes and these have more market than the chemical dyes. There are techniques adapted to make the printing more interesting and to keep up with the market. The price of fabric depends on the quality of the fabric, the number of patterns that have been done, and the quality of dyes that have been used in the process. It starts from rupees two hundred fifty and goes on depending on patterns and fabric.



Attractive bright colors are used to give the fabric more elegance.

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Beautifully printed fabric.

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Elegant black kurta material with beautiful prints.

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Video



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You can write to the following address regarding suggestions and clarifications:

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