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Title: AJRAKH- A Textile Tradition in Transition

Prof. Dr. Sharmila J. Dua

The region of Gujarat in the west has been an important textile export zone of India and remains an important source of printed cloth, in terms of both volume and quality. Early evidence of Gujarat’s involvement in international trade of colourful block printed textiles comes from the fragments found at the Fostat excavations in Egypt. These have been dated back to the fifteenth century and have been printed by the resist printing technique. The designs, motifs and colours are typical of the hand block printed textiles characteristic of the region today. Khavda and Dhamadka villages in Kutch were known for printing the exotic rich blue and red cloth known as Ajrakh. These cloths were printed in a complicated sequence that involved both resist and mordant techniques. The deep blue sheen was derived from repeated dipping in indigo followed by vigorous beating and polishing. The most highly prized Ajrakh textiles were bipuri, i.e. the ones printed identically on both sides. Traditionally these were used by men as turbans, lungis (sarongs) and shoulder cloths and also as yardages for women’s skirts and veils.

The last fifty years has witnessed a tremendous change in every sphere of life, be it economic, social, technological or aesthetic. More and more, old techniques, design structures and patterns are disappearing or losing integrity as a result of transition into other regional or cultural contexts. Ajrakh, with its rich visual vocabulary is in a state of transition, as traditional processes, raw materials, designs, product categories and markets are evolving within the worldwide phenomenon called globalization. In spite of the omnipresent changes that have occurred over the last millennium, the printers of Ajrakh in Kutch continue to print some of the same design motifs that have been popular since very earlier times. The origin of Ajrakh can be traced to Sind, Pakistan. Although the name Ajrakh has many legends as to its origin but more popularly the term seems to be derived from Azrak, which means blue in Arabic. The artisans who made these textiles belonged to the Khatri community (both Hindus /Muslims) and have had artisans from the Gajjar community making the blocks in a place called Pethapur, near Ahmadabad.

Ajrakh (a term thought to be derived from azraq, the Arabic for blue) has a multitude of uses. Always made in a rectangular format (about 2.5 x 1.8m), Ajrakhs may be used as turbans, shawls, or lungis by men and in certain areas of Kutch, as shdhnies by women, not to mention the many household uses to which a large rectangular cloth can be put (Charpai-cover, curtain, floorspread). The designs are restricted to a range of geometrical patterns based on squares, with stars, circles and ellipses arranged symmetrically within them. The traditional colouring of Ajrakh is deep blue and red, with a small amount of white and black.

According to popular legend, this textile tradition was started in the family of late Mohammad Siddiki when in the year 1586, Raja Bharmal I, invited his forefathers, to migrate from Sind and settle in Dhamadka, Kachchh. The printers amongst the crafts persons who migrated to Dhamadka from Sind were printing the true Azrak – blue, red and white, used by men of the Maldhari community.
It is difficult to say whether men of Dhamadka and surrounding regions were wearing such Ajrakh cloths at that time, but it eventually became a piece of clothing worn by men of the *Maldhari* communities in this region as shoulder mantle, *lungi* or *turban*.

There were Ajrakh textiles specifically woven for the women with specific motifs. These Ajrakh textiles were used for *ghaghra* (skirt) and *odhanis* by women of various communities. The production of Ajrakh is now restricted to only three centers, namely Dhamadka, Khavda and Ajrakhpur. Although synthetic blue and red dyes are now usually used in place of natural indigo and madder, the processes followed are still the traditional ones.

The oldest piece that the contemporary artisans have, as shown in Fig 1, is a 100-year-old *chaddar* made by late Mohammad Siddiki of Dhamadka. Mohammad Siddiki Khatri’s family has been associated with this craft for approximately 8 – 9 generations. His sons, Abdulrazzaque Mohammad Khatri and Ismail Mohammad Khatri, (Fig 2) are both master craftsmen residing in Dhamadka and Ajrakhpur respectively and continue to print the resist printed textile called Ajrakh. Both Abdulrazzaque Khatri and Ismail Khatri still follow the traditional process. Post the earthquake in 2001, with the efforts of Ismail Khatri and other printers and with the support of the Government of Gujarat, a village called Ajrakhpur, 12 km from Bhuj, was developed exclusively for the printer community of Dhamadka.
Some of the artisans who traditionally used to print the traditional Ajrakh, using the mordant printing and resist dyeing with vegetable dyes and used blocks to transfer the print onto the cotton fabric, have started using chemical dyes instead of vegetable dyes and are using screen-printing method instead of block printing. This also includes artisans who are no longer using cotton as the base material for printing, but are using different fabrics as the base for printing the contemporary Ajrakh. Some artisans continue to use the block printing technique, but have replaced the vegetable dyes with chemical dyes.
It is also seen that most Ajrakh artisans’ no longer work with their own creative impulses but work to others’ dictates. Various influences have infiltrated their aesthetics and creative energy. These artisans have made changes in the technique and materials of the end products. Adaptation to newer products has led to a new set of pattern layouts and addition and/or deletion of certain motifs and details.

In spite of being traditional Ajrakh printers, some of the newer generation artisans are adopting a market-oriented view. They no longer want to be bound by convention, which would limit their marketability. They are aware of the fact that the discerning urban customer of today would like to be offered various options not only in product category but also design, patterns, motifs and colours.
In the craft sector, traditional knowledge is passed on from generation to generation by learning the craft from the father/mother from a very young age. Although traditional artisans were seldom found to be educated higher than secondary school, the more recent generation artisans are educated to graduate level which brings about a better understanding of all aspects of the complete value chain from raw material to end product.

Apart from general education, institutions like Kalaraksha Vidyalaya have started imparting design education to the gen-next artisans of Ajrakh. These artisans cum designers have brought about a paradigm shift in the craft of producing Ajrakh due to this training. Several changes have been brought about in the ornamentation styles and motif vocabulary while keeping the tradition alive. Each of the artisans has imbibed the inputs given during the course and responded in a unique way based on heritage, personal understanding, exposure, skill and aesthetics. All the innovations that have been initiated would create a new chapter in the history of Ajrakh and related prints.

Fig 5: Documentation of all the designs printed by a printer in Ajrakhpur in a plastic display folder for getting orders from buyers. (Source: Salem Dawood Khatri, Ajrakhpur)
Some artisans in the course of their work came across many researchers and scholars who travelled to these regions to study the Ajrakh textile. The most important name in this category was that of Dr. Ismail Khatri, who was awarded an honorary doctorate by the De Montfort University because he was invited by a research scholar to come there and deliver a lecture/workshop on Ajrakh. Fig 6: shows a textile printed by Ismail Bhai from a Fustat Fragment.

Fig 7: Left: Fragment of Indian cloth with “Hansa” (geese) design, recovered from Fustat, Egypt 14th century. (Source: Gittinger M. Master Dyers to the World) Right: Print created by Ismail Khatri. (Source: Ismail Khatri, Ajrakhpur, Gujarat)
Designers have played a special role in modifying and reinterpreting the traditional textiles for modern fashion. The designer, Rajesh Pratap Singh has modified the pattern and ornament on the textile by introducing new motifs of human skull and guitar. He has also juxtaposed single blocks of different patterns on the same fabric to create a layered print. The idea of adding new motifs to the existing motifs of Ajrakh and that too a motif which the Muslim Khatris refused to print is a step, but whether this will end up being taken as an additive one remains to be seen.

Organizations like Fabindia & Anokhi, more recently and Gurjari in the past have worked extensively with the Ajrakh printers in the Kutch region. After the 2001 earthquake, Madhurima Patni a designer from NID, working with Gurjari, gave a whole set of designs under the Kutch Project with new motifs and layouts to Mr. Abdulrazzaque Khatri in Dhamadka. Some of these motifs have gradually but eventually been included in the repertoire of Ajrakh motifs and are used by the contemporary Ajrakh artisans. Newer NGOs like Khamir are bringing about a fresh perspective as far as the Ajrakh textile and technique are concerned.

However, the traditional technique of Ajrakh has itself in time lost much of its focus, what with the grind of ever increasing production and losing quality as well as a watering down of the finest, both in terms of skill and aesthetic. With the current state where all handcrafted textiles are competing with machine made goods, and the patrons of yesteryears no longer exist, the
Ajrakh tradition like all others is facing the same fate. The artisan is not producing the textiles as an example of his fine skill and sense of aesthetics. But the production resembles machine made, mass-produced goods, merely completing orders with textiles, which are mediocre in their quality of design and aesthetic.

It can be concluded that a lot is being done for the traditional craft of Ajrakh, both from within the crafts community; for example, the setting up of the village Ajrakhpur named after the craft and motivation of younger artisans with design education opportunities to name a few endeavors; as well as from outside, with several interventions of government and non-government organizations at various levels. But can this be enough, especially when the loss is of a unique identity based on ornament, colour and technique? What with the customer having a plethora of options of printed textiles, and the modern-day conflict between artistic endeavor and livelihood of the artisan, there is a need for an expansion of design directory and technique innovation?
REFERENCES: