

# Asian Resonance

## A Brief Review of Block Printing in India, with a Comparative Analysis of Ajrak and Sanganer Styles of Printing



**Ravneet Kaur**

Research Scholar,  
UIFT&VD, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh



**Prabhdeep Brar**

Assistant Professor,  
UIFT&VD, Panjab University,  
Chandigarh

### Abstract

Block printing is an age-old art-form of India, with different variations of the same existing in different regions of the country. Two of the most interesting styles are the Sanganer and Ajrakh styles. This paper reviews the historical and technical aspects of the two forms. A comparative analysis of the two sheds light on the important similarities and differences between the two art forms, and helps understand them better. An attempt has been made to understand the reasons for the decline of the two art forms, and the recent attempts at their revival. The contribution of modern fashion designers in this regard has been highlighted.

**Keywords:** Block Printing, Sanganer, Ajrakh, Textile Art

### Introduction

Block printing is the process of printing patterns on textiles by using wooden blocks, on to which patterns have been cut. It is the one of the earliest methods of textile printing. Another rather early technique of textile printing is stencil printing. The preferred fabrics for block printing technique include cotton and silk, as these tend to absorb dyes well. Though block printing is a slow process, it can be used to obtain highly artistic and unique designs.

Block printing is believed to have originated in China during the early 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Also, there is evidence of records of its presence in Egypt and some Asian countries as far early as the 4th century. From these regions, it spread to Europe and other places. Apart from wood, blocks were made of metals and porcelain.

Today, India is major hub for block printing. Specifically, regions of Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan and Gujarat are the flourishing trade centers for hand block printing. India has been renowned for its printed and dyed cotton cloth since the 12th century, and the creative processes flourished as the fabric received royal patronage in Rajasthan. The art of block printing, however, began much later, and the craft has since been passed down from generation to generation. Even today, Rajasthan is home to some of the best block printing work.

One of the most important centers for trade of painted and printed textiles was Surat in Gujarat. The major items produced were wall hangings, canopies and floor spreads in rich natural colors. It was in the 17th century that Surat gained prominence as a major center for export of these products.

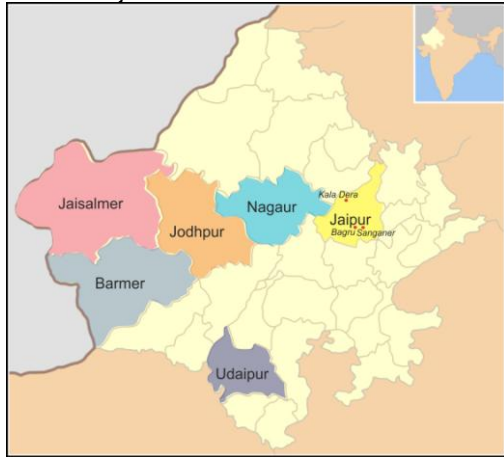
### Aims of the Paper

1. To study the method of block printing in detail
2. To identify the major types of block printing existent in India
3. To conduct a comparative analysis of two major block printing techniques, i.e. those of Sanganer and Ajrak
4. To discuss the environmental damage caused by these methods of block printing.
5. To evaluate the current scenario of these two methods in India
6. To identify the inputs by modern Indian fashion designers in uplifting the art and reviving the method of block printing.

Several types of block printing exist which vary slightly in different areas in terms of motifs, dyes and resist techniques used. The names of these prints are based on the places of origin.

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The major Indian centers famous for block printing include the following among which the majority of printing is done in different areas of the state of Rajasthan:



## Major Centers of Block Printing in Rajasthan

**Sanganer, a Suburb of Jaipur(Rajasthan)**  
Block printing in Sanganer is done using red and black colors, using two different blocks for each motif. Motifs inspired from nature like the buta, a floral design, are used to make traditional products like Safa, odhani, rumal, etc.

### Ajrakh of Gujrat

Ajrakh printing is usually based on bold geometrical designs. These are usually printed on an indigo blue background, using black, white and red colors. It involves block printing and resist dyeing using Indigo, madder and printed mordant.

### Dabu Printing of Kala Dera, Rajasthan

Wax mixed with a resin is usually used as a resist in Dabu printing. This resist is applied on to the cloth with the help of a brush or block, following which color is then applied. Following this, the wax is melted using hot water, thus allowing the color to move and produce a beautiful diffused look. Next, traditional block printing is added on using vegetable dyes.

### Bagru, near Jaipur, Rajasthan

Bagru printing involves mainly floral and geometrical designs, but also involves animal and bird motifs. Mud-resist is used in Bagru printing. The process of printing includes bleaching, dyeing, resist

and color printing. The printed fabrics thus produced are used for making dupattas and ghagras (traditional skirts).

### Barmer, Rajasthan

Block-printing in Barmer involves bold designs. The most famous design is the 'ChirkalaBooti'. This is a red chilli, drawn with a dark outline. It is often depicted as surrounded by flower-laden trees.

### Udaipur, Rajasthan

The designs of this region are famous for the special fragrance they provide to the cloth. This is courtesy of the sandal wood blocks used in block printing. Most of the designs are a tribute to Lord Krishna.

### Nagaur, Rajasthan

This area is largely populated by gypsy tribes (banjaras). No wonder, therefore, the design motifs include scorpions and centipedes. Other common motifs include *Singharas* and Chillies. Bright red and yellow colors are favored.

### Jaisalmer, Rajasthan

Hand block printing of Jaisalmer is unique for two reasons. One, it is a sort of cold printing, done at night so as to ensure a cooler environment; secondly, it involves designs made up of squares.

### Jodhpur, Rajasthan

Block printing of Jodhpur is unique in that it involves the use of wooden blocks with nails. These nails are used to form impressions on folded cloth. This is then followed by the process of *Bandhni*. Most of the designs are derived from the common flora and fauna, like flowers and birds.

### Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh

Lucknow has a rich Muslim influence in all its arts, and hence Chikan embroidery motifs are quite popular in the region. Also, a lot of paisley motifs can be seen in the hand block printing fabrics of the region.

### Maharashtra

Delicate fabrics like silk or chiffon are used for printing on in Maharashtra. Similarly, the wooden and brass blocks used are also delicately carved, with the most commonly used design being the 'Tree of Life' Motif.

Type	Sanganeri	Ajrak
Colors	Black and red designs on white cloth or yellow background	Traditionally four colours were used red (alizarin), blue (indigo), black (iron acetate) white (resist) where the background color is blue
Motifs	Butis (floral motifs) and floral borders inspired from nature, religious motifs, patterns mimicking the bandhani tie and dye, small sipahi (soldier) motif and other figures which include human and animal motifs.	Combination of borders, butis, 3 white lines, diamond designs, floral edging, motifs inspired from dates, figs and almonds.

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Technique	Direct Block Printing	Resist Dye Printing
Dyes	Natural dyes or Chemical dyes	Natural dyes or Chemical dyes
Color Fastness	Fast colors	When washed frequently the colors instead of fading, became more brilliant and luminous.
Identification	Sanganer prints can be identified with a white background and floral motif in black or red colors.	To identify <i>ajrakh</i> one needs to look for fabric with a background of red or blue (though other vegetable dye colours like yellow and green have been introduced)
Fabric	Royal muslin, mulmul	Cotton
Products	Safa turbans, angoccha shawls worn by men, dupattas, shawls	Safa turban, lungi for men, ghagra for women
Designers Using These Prints	Richa Aggarwal, Vikram Phadnis etc.	Divya Sheth, Rajesh Pratap Singh etc.

## History

### Sanganer

In the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, Sangaji, the Kachchwaha Rajput Prince, founded Sanganer in Rajasthan. Being located on the periphery of a broad riverbank, the village was ideally suited for cloth printing, as the wide riverbanks provided space to spread out the cloth. Moreover, mineral-rich water from the river was ideal for processing dyes. No wonder, then, that Sanganer gained reputation as a centre of hand block printing by the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The most intricate of designs and techniques were usually reserved for the rich and the powerful. The finest of royal muslin cloth was used. Flower motifs used in the designs often had a strong Persian influence. There was a community of Muslims in the region who dispensed herbal medicines. This community was responsible for the development of some really eye-catching colors, using herbal products like turmeric, lemons, etc. To add splendor to the garments, they were often embellished with gold leaves, and embroidered with gold threads.

For the common man, however, designs on the traditional dress (dhoti-kurta with a turban) were restricted to a floral veil running along the border, and additional floral motifs in the center.

In course of time, a number of temples came up in Sanganer. Special dupattas were offered by the devotees to the presiding deity at the temple. Many of these dupattas were printed with divine sayings or names, and were hence called 'naamwallidupatta'. In addition, other motifs used included sacred symbols like the lotus flower, Rudraksha beads, feet of Vishnu, etc.

As of today, over 300 printing units of various sizes are operational in Sanganer. These provide livelihood to more than 1200 families.

### AJRAKH

The word Ajrakh is believed to have been derived from '*aajrakh*', or 'keep it for the day', implying the importance of having long waiting periods between the various steps involved. Glimpses of the Ajrakh style can be found as far back as the earliest of civilizations. Cotton threads dyed with dyes used in the Ajrakh techniques have been found in the Mohenjodaro excavations in

Sindh. Indeed, there is plenty of evidence to indicate that Ajrakh originated in the Sindh region, which is now a part of Pakistan. From there, a number of artisans migrated to their current settlements in Barmer, Rajasthan, and Kutch, Gujrat. The modern Ajrakh printing is not much different from that found on cloth fragments dating as far back as the eight century AD, and is likely a result of the amalgamation of Islamic and traditional Indian designs and concepts.

True Ajrakh is worn only by the men folk in various styles. It may be worn as a turban or wrapped around the waist as a *lungi*. Often, it is also used by men as a utility cloth carried on the shoulder. Most commonly, Ajrakh fabrics are dyed red at the ends. While floral motifs are printed at the periphery, border blocks in different combinations fill up the central area of the fabric. To these, diamond designs may be additionally added. The Ajrakh may be printed on one or both sides of the fabric, called 'ekpuri' or 'bipuri', respectively.

Ajrakh has been adapted for women, and differs significantly in design from the original Ajrakh worn by men. Also, women's attire also varies with age, marital status, etc. Often, differently printed clothes are stitched together to make a *ghagra*, or traditional skirt. Young girls usually wear dresses with stylized floral motifs on yellow background. More mature women wear more subtle floral motifs on an emerald background. Widowed women wear designs with simple flowers printed in rust and blue colors.

### The Production Process in Sanganer & Ajrakh Printing

#### Scouring and Bleaching

The initial process is similar in both the systems, though it is called 'teluni' in Sanganer and 'saaj' in Ajrakh. The aim is to remove the impurities from the cotton fabric, which is achieved by scouring and bleaching. In the past, this was done using natural scouring and bleaching materials like cow dung, soda ash and sesame oil, mixed in a little water. After a period of soaking, the fabric was rinsed and dried. The same is now achieved using chemical detergents. Also, modern bleaching agents are used to aid the bleaching process.

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## Yellowing of the Fabric

The fabric is given a pale yellow tinge using tannic acid obtained from the fruit of the Myroballan tree. This process is called 'PilaKarna'in Sanganer and 'Kasano'in Ajrakh, but involves essentially the same technique in both art forms.

## Printing

### 1. Outlines

The outline in Sanganer is printed using a black ink derived by a special process. Scrap iron is blackened in fire, and then dipped in a vessel containing jiggery. This is then allowed to ferment for more than a week. The solution thus obtained is mixed with locally obtained gum and water, to get the desired ink, which can now be printed on to the fabric to obtain a black outline. The Ajrakh printing, however, uses a resist paste of tree gum mixed with lime, thus providing a white outline when required.

### 2. Infills

The Sanganer technique uses a mixture of ground alum, gum and red ochre. The paste so obtained is used to print in the area within the outlines. Once printed, the cloth needs to be dried for at least a week. In Ajrakh however, the process used in Sanganer for deriving black ink for the outline, is adapted to develop the ink required for filling the inner portion (within the outlines). Also, in Ajrakh, a number of other natural ingredients such as clay, millet flour, sawdust, etc. are used to achieve different colors and effects.

At the end of these processes, the cloth is washed and dried.

## Dyeing of the Cloth

The main ingredient for a red dye is obtained from the crushed roots of the Mulberry tree. A number of other natural ingredients are added to this, and then heated in a large copper vessel filled with water. In Ajrak, Indigo dye is used to obtain a blue color. Blocks containing indigo are crushed to a powder, soaked, and then fermented. The cloth is dipped (and often heated) in a vat containing the desired dye. Once the dye has been taken up, the cloth is washed and beaten to get rid of any excess chemicals.

## Tapai or Tapano

'Tapai' is the final process, and is common to both the styles. The wet fabric is spread out on the river bank, and not allowed to dry. This helps in bleaching the fabric, thus highlighting the printed area. A variation in Ajrak is that, before spreading on the waterbank, the cloth is soaked in cowdung, which acts as a bleaching agents.

Finally, the cloth is washed to remove any excess chemicals.

## The Decline and the Revival of the Art Forms

Both the art forms have suffered at the hands of natural disasters as well as man-made industrialization. In 1981, Sanganer was devastated by floods. Most of the blocks and other material used in printing were destroyed. Almost the entire leagacy of the art form was washed off. However, brave artisans have worked hard to recover and revive the

art form. This has been helped by the resurrection of a co-operative society, called the Calico Printers Co-operative Society, which was originally established by Maharaja Man Singh II in 1943.

Similarly, the Ajrakh art form suffered at the hands of a massive earthquake that hit the Kachchh region in 1945. Many villages specializing in the art form were destroyed. The artisans did not give up, however, and shifted base to the nearby Bhuj region, where a new town called 'Ajrakhpur' came up.

More damage to these arts has probably been caused by industrialization. Clothes manufactured and printed by machines are difficult to compete with because they use cheaper and longer-lasting chemical dyes, and cost-effective mechanized production processes. These art forms have responded partially by replacing natural dyes with synthetic chemical dyes.

## Environmental Hazards

The processes involved in the manufacture of both Sanganer and Ajrakh products result in the production of large amounts of potentially harmful wastes. Given the topography of the regions, these wastes easily percolate into the groundwater. This poses a risk to the health of people living in the region. [8–14]. As per an unpublished survey conducted by the Rajasthan State Pollution Control Board, in Jaipur, 75% of total wastewater from dyeing and printing units is directly drained into the Amanishah Nallah. The remaining 25%, however, accumulates in the areas surrounding the printing and dyeing units, forming pools of water, which percolates down the porous sand of the region to reach the groundwater. The accumulation of wastewater in the pools adversely affects the groundwater of the area on account of the high porosity of the sandy soil of the region.

## Involvement of Indian Fashion Designers

With these traditional techniques seeing a revival today, Indian designers are already experimenting with them to create interesting patterns and designs.

### Designer Rajesh Pratap Singh

The famous designer has created stylish women's jacket using an Ajrakh fabric. He has provided a modern edge to a traditional garment. Also, he has successfully combined traditional hand-making with hi-tech technology.

### Richa Aggarwal's 'Doo Rookhi' collection at Lakmé Fashion Week Winter/ Festive 2013

Her collection is an ode to the hand block-printed textiles of Sanganer. She has given a modern twist to the art by using lemon green and purple colors.

### Vikram Phadnis

He is a well-known designer based in Mumbai. In 2013, at the Rajasthan Fashion Week, he presented a collection of traditional outfits and accessories for both men and women. The collection made extensive use of traditional art forms like Sanganer prints, tie and dye prints, and Zari work.

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## Divya Sheth

At the Lakme Fashion Week, 2014, designer Divya Sheth showcased Ajrakh in a big way. Her collection was titled Ajrakh Jo Galicho, and consisted of natural dyed Ajrakh with experimental Kalamkari.

## Anokhi

Anokhi is a highly successful brand that has contributed to the revival of Rajasthan's traditional techniques of block printing for over 3 decades. Other than block printing, the brand also uses other traditional arts like patchwork, applique, and embroidery.

## What the Future Holds?

The future holds exciting prospects for the art forms, as more and more people feel drawn towards hand - made art forms that promise a unique product each time. With a little push from modern designers, these art forms can re-discover their glory days.

## Conclusion

Block-printing is an age-old tradition in India. The two art forms of Sanganer and Ajrakh vary largely in terms of motifs and colors used. However, they also have a lot in common, especially in terms of the fabric and dyes used, and the production process. Also, both the art forms are currently engaged in a battle for survival, as more-efficient industrialised units pose a threat to their existence. A little help from the modern

fashion designers can help accelerate the revival of these ethnic art forms.

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