

'Bagru' - A Traditional Printing Technique of Rajasthan



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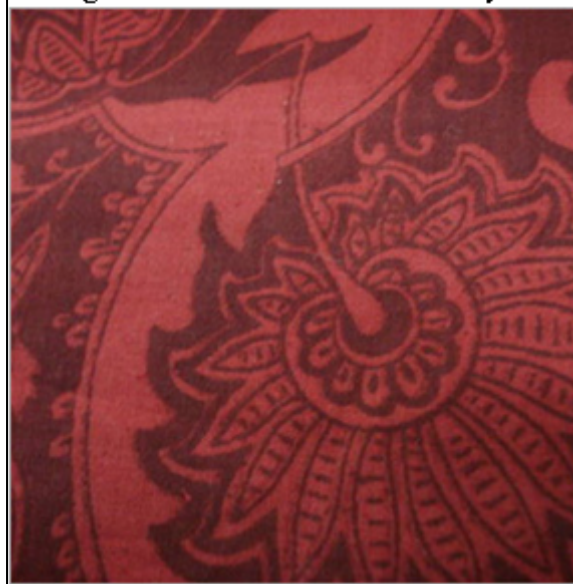
Abstract

Bagru printing is one of the traditional techniques of printing with natural colour followed by the chippas of a remote place of Rajasthan. The process starts from preparing the cloth to finished printed fabrics through their indigenous methods. Motifs having some specialty are transferred onto light coloured background with wooden blocks following two styles – direct and resist style. Although this technique is facing problems against the threat of globalization, this exotic art of creation is required to be encouraged in the present context of environmental consciousness.

Introduction

Indians were among the pioneers in the art of dyeing and printing with fast (natural) colour in the world. Dyeing with indigo was more of a mystery to many foreign travelers to India because they could observe no colour when fabric is dipped in indigo bath – colours develop during exposure in open air¹. Hand block printing has been recognized as a craft through generations in different clusters in the country. Each cluster follows its distinctive style & methods, uses locally available natural materials and motifs of some specialty. 'Bagru' print is that kind of centuries old traditional art of hand block printing still alive.

Bagru Print with Natural Dyes



In the interior of desert state of Rajasthan, at a distance of 30-35 kms from Jaipur, on Jaipur – Ajmer road there lies a small typical village called 'Bagru' having a population² of around 22,089 with male 52% and female 48%. The village town is not popular for any palace or fort but for keeping alive the three-centuries-old tradition of printing with the splendid efforts of artisans. It is unique for its indigenous style of printing using natural colours with wooden blocks known as 'Bagru printing'.

History:

There is no authentic record for reference on backdating Bagru's block printing practices and there prevail different opinions behind its starting. However, it is estimated that this art form was introduced 450 years back when a community of Chhipas (literally meaning people who stamp or print) came to Bagru from Sawai Madhopur (Alwar), and settled in Bagru. Even today, their community works together in a place called Chhippa Mohalla (Printer's Quarters) by the Sanjaria riverside. It is perhaps the river name that lends it name to Sangneri printing art form. The Chippas community settled along the

riverside, like any other nomadic settlement. The bank of the river provided them with clay which is an important ingredient in getting the base color of the famed 'Bagru' prints. The artisans smear the cloth with Fuller's earth got from the riverside and then dip it in turmeric water to get the beige colored background.

After that, they stamp the cloth with beautiful designs using natural dyes of earthly shades.

According to the opinion of other group, the tale unfolds more than 400 years ago when the Thakur on the lease of the village decided to develop Bagru as a centre for block printing and brought two families of printers from Isarda³, a village near Jaipur. The printers locally known as 'Chippa' came from the loyal patronage. The presence of abundant water in the overflowing 'Sanjaria' river and its clean sunny river bed led to the settlement of the Chippas. Today though the river runs dry these artisans thrive in Bagru practicing their same methods of the past thus ensuring survival of the traditional art.

Process of Bagru printing:

The process of Bagru printing is very simple as it looks the practice of printing and working with natural elements comprises a complex series of steps that includes:

- a. Preparing the raw cloth.
- b. Making dyes and colours.
- c. Steps involving different types of printing.
- d. Developing intricate dyeing technique for resist printing in particular.

The process starts with the plain cloth. The raw fabric usually containing different impurities like starch, oil and dust, which needs to be cleaned to remove those impurities initially for even and good penetration of colour. Chippas require two days to prepare a paste by mixing cow-dung, soda ash and sesame oil and washes the cloth with this mixture. This step is called scouring or locally as 'Hari sarana'.

This cloth is then washed, dried and made ready for 'Harda' treatment. Harda is a seed that is considered to be the most important element of printing and dyeing technique of Bagru. This seed is powdered and mixed with water. Scoured fabrics are given thorough wash in this mixture giving a yellow tint to the cloth. This produces the light ground colour which differentiates 'Bagru' from 'Sanganer', always on white ground. Harda has natural Tannic acid in it that acts as a mordant for the iron of the printing colour and resulting in formation of Bagru black.



The treated fabrics are then squeezed to dry and laid down in the sun. Abundance in water and sun shine are the most essential requirement for this process. Almost every stage requires the cloth to be washed with water and dried in sunlight. Now-a-days the used water is treated for recycling or charged into underground.

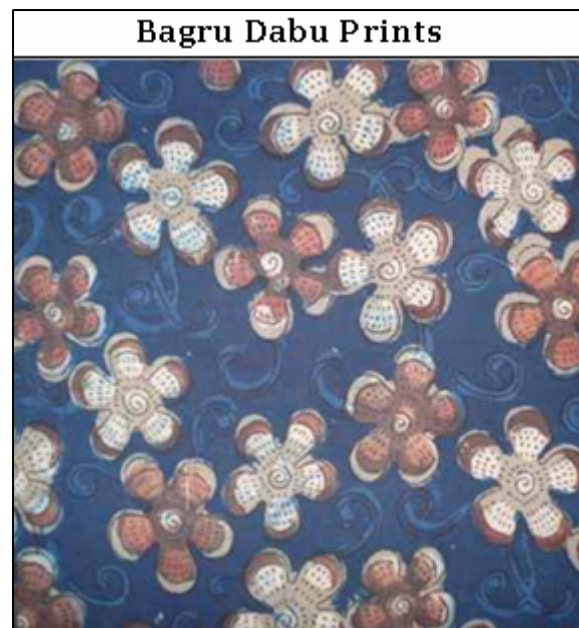
There are two main types of printing used commonly in Bagru: direct dye printing and resisting printing. In both procedures, first the blocks are soaked overnight in mustard oil or refined oil and then washed. Printing is done on wooden table, the size of which depends on the length of to be printed (18 foot approx.). These tables have a layer of ply on which there are 20 layers of tart and a sheet of cloth on which comes the final fabric.

a. Direct Dye Printing

In the first process, the dye solutions are poured in the tray. The printer presses the block into the dye tray and then onto the cloth until the pattern is complete. For every imprint the block is pressed into the tray to get a fresh smear of paste. The outline pattern is done in blocks for the background and highlights in different colors. Once each pattern is complete, the cloth is ready for the dye vat. This printing is primarily done by male printers.

b. Resist Printing

Bagru is known for its mastery in the second type, a special printing technique of Resist style called 'Dabu' printing. Its essence lies in printing with specially prepared Dabu paste i.e. applying thick black mud paste onto the fabric and then dyeing the fabrics. The prepared cloth is printed with Dabu paste by wooden blocks. Thereafter the printed cloth is dyed with natural colour, these results in resisting dyeing in the portions which were hidden and a printed effect is created in the fabrics. Each family follows its own secret of making Dabu paste. Although, women have traditionally done the dabu printing, men are also involving themselves in it.



Dabu preparation:

In general Dabu is made by mixing:

1. Lime dissolved in water,
2. Natural gum 'Bedhan' or the wheat flour spoiled by worms, and
3. Locally available black clay

All these are mashed well into a thick paste and left overnight. It is then strained into liquid paste which is used for printing. The cloth is stretched on the table and blocks are selected to print designs on the cloth.

There are 3 types of Dabu depending on the final result and the colour required:

- a. Kaligar Dabu that is processed only once
- b. Dolidar Dabu that has little more of gum thus better adhesive strength and can withstand about two trips to the dye vats
- c. Gawarbali Dabu has oil and gawar seed powder added to the paste which gives strength to cloth to go through repeated dyeing.

As Dabu printing is completed, saw dust is sprinkled over the cloth before the prints dries completely to avoid sticking with each other.

Preparation of Dye solution:

Dyeing process varies depending on the colour required. Bagru is known for its green shade that is acquired through two traditional methods:

In the first method, the cloth is sent to the indigo vats, dipped, taken out and dried in the sun. It is then rinsed in a pre-boiled and cooled solution of pomegranate peel and water that is prepared a day before. It is washed again and then rinsed in a solution of alum and water to fix the colour and also for removing dabu paste. As the cloth dries the Bagru print appears.

The other method is known as 'Potai'. In this process, a paste is made of pomegranate peel, turmeric and sesame oil. The dabu printed fabric is hold tightly by four persons and with a piece of woven cloth the artisan generously applies the paste on the cloth. The fabric is then dried, dipped in a solution of alum and water. Alum is dissolved in water to acquire a clean solution. This solution is then strained through a cloth filter. Quantity of alum varies according to the strength of the dabu. A fabric not treated with alum solution produces prints blurred and shabby.



Bagru print is also famous for the use of two major colours – a red colour outline called 'Began' and a black colour called 'Syahi'. For making the red outline, alum, Geru and natural gum are mixed together with water to make a paste. As a type of foam forms, ghee and oil is added to it. This is called red Began colour and it is an important part of Bagru printing. Black Syahi is essentially a fermented solution of iron, molasses, gum and the starch of tamarind flour. This paste when applied on harda treated fabric turns black on getting exposure to the air.

Common vegetable colours used for Bagru printing:

- Red or Madder from Aahl tree.
- Black from fermented Harda seeds.
- Blue from Indigo plant.
- Yellow from dried pomegranate rinds, turmeric and dried flowers of Dhabaria trees.

Preparation of Indigo colour:

Indigo is a challenging dye to use since it is insoluble in water. For making it soluble it undergoes a chemical change. Natural indigo is boiled in Pawar seeds and kept overnight. The next day, this solution along with lime is dissolved in the vats that are 15 feet deep and left untouched for a day. Dyeing starts only after that. More dipping in the water brings a deeper blue colour and one can dip a fabric for maximum of 6 times. The fabric is then dipped in alum and water solution for fixing the colour.

Different types of motifs used in Bagru printing:

The significant motifs of Bagru prints are:

1. Aath Kaliyan
2. Bankadi
3. Bada Bunta
4. Hajura
5. Bewada
6. Hara Dhania
7. Kamal
8. Chopad
9. Kel
10. Pyala
11. Chhota Bel



Conclusions

Today, artisans of various regions are using modern techniques to develop their craft. While traditional art form is replaced by modern tools, techniques and synthetic dyes, many Chhippas have given up the art of hand block printing. Yet there are a handful of artisans who engross themselves in their traditional and distinct art of dyeing and printing. As the world is waking up to environmental consciousness and eco-friendliness, this captivating and exotic art is getting recognized day by day.

References:

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