

## Enduring Threads of Tradition : The Block Printed Cottons of Rural Rajasthan

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(Received January 15, 2010 : Accepted April 30, 2010)

### Abstract

*The hand printed cottons of India are historically world-renowned for their rich fast colours, elaborate designs, and matchless quality. Until the discovery of synthetic dyestuffs in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the unsurpassed master dyers of cotton were the craftsmen of India-birthplace of cultivated cotton. The Indian printers and dyers monopolised this arcane art of permeating cotton cloth with richly hued, colour-fast designs, and the fruits of their labour proved hugely influential in international trade and the development of modern textile technologies. This paper focuses on a lesser-known body of hand printed cottons, traditionally produced in rural Rajasthan for everyday use by the local pastoral communities. Drawing on extensive research carried out with the region's Chhipa community of hereditary cloth printers, the complex and multiple applications of mordant, dye and resist are illustrated. Often taking months to complete, the enduring popularity of these labour-intensive hand printed cottons is then discussed, particularly in the light of the huge social importance borne by cloth in Rajasthan. Cloth and clothing are widely recognised as indicators of social status, gender, rank, and individual and group affiliations. In addition, cloth and clothing have been established as indicators of social, economic, political and technological change. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the recent influx of machine-printed polyester textiles, often replicating the designs or colours of the traditional locally produced cottons. Thus women of the region, whilst using these modern synthetic textiles as part of newer ways of expressing their identity, also visibly retain the values associated with hand printed cottons and traditional dress codes.*

*Key words : The Block Printed, Rural Rajasthan, cultivated cotton.*

### 1. Introduction

Cotton, unlike wool and silk, cannot absorb natural dyes easily and requires a *mordant* or

metallic salt to link dye to fibre. Archaeological evidence suggests that the technology of mordant-dyeing was known in India as early as the second millennium BC (Barnes, 1997; Gittinger, 1982). Since that time, the manufacture and trade

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This paper forms part of a wider ongoing programme of research, which has been made possible through a number of small grants and awards. In particular the support of the Pasold Research Fund Ltd ([www.pasold.co.uk](http://www.pasold.co.uk)), the Elmley Foundation ([www.elmley.org.uk](http://www.elmley.org.uk)), and INTACH (UK) ([www.intach.org](http://www.intach.org)) has been greatly appreciated. None of this research could have been possible without the support of Anokhi (Jaipur), and the Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing ([www.anokhimuseum.com](http://www.anokhimuseum.com)). I am also indebted to the Chhipa community of Rajasthan for granting me access to their lives, homes and work.

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of cloth, alongside agriculture, has formed the mainstay of the regional economy, with a constantly expanding repertoire of products created in response to differing demands from markets and customers near and far. In Europe, the work of the Indian cloth printer is historically associated with the well-documented *chintzes* and *palampores*, fashionable in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Beer, 1970; Crill, 2005; Guy, 1998; Irwin & Schwartz, 1966; Irwin & Brett, 1970). However, somewhat overlooked in current literature and museum collections, are the everyday, coarse, domestic cottons which continue to be hand printed and dyed for use by rural communities in parts of northern India (Edwards, 2005, 2007; Ronald, 2007a, 2007b; Varadarajan, 1983).

Hand block printed and resist-dyed textiles are a cultural product of Rajasthan's *Chhipa* artisan community. The *Chhipas*, in conjunction with the *Rangrez* (dyer) community, apply pattern to pre-woven cotton cloth using hand carved wood blocks, time-honoured recipes, and a range of locally available resist, mordant and dye materials. Block printed cloth, like pottery and metalwork, is one of the many traditional utility crafts of rural Rajasthan, and historically was created for temple, court and commoner. As a result, the patterning, colouration, and complex print technologies, have developed and adapted in parallel with the communities for whom the cloth is important.

The hand printed cottons in this paper are examples of cotton cloth designed and produced in rural Rajasthan for possibly thousands of years. Produced in rural towns and villages, by local printers and dyers from hereditary artisan families, these cottons were traditionally traded to local pastoral communities and used as everyday garments, household items, bedding, and floor coverings. As garments, the variations of colour, pattern and style contribute to a local 'language of appearance', in a region which is defined by distinct social and occupational hierarchies (Erdman et al., 1994).

Reliant on hereditary dyeing and printing skills, handed down through many generations of the

*Chhipa* community, in association with specialist indigo dyers (*Nilgar*), block carvers, and cloth washers (*Dhobi*), the production of these cotton textiles has continued despite widespread industrialisation in the state. However, in recent decades the arrival in the region of synthetic fabrics as the new 'easy-care' base-cloth for garments, many of which replicating the colours and designs of traditional hand printed cottons, signals a change in peoples' perceptions of hand printed cotton. A shift in preference which reflects both the industrialisation of the region and the changing values of modern society (Edwards, 2003).

### 1. Block Printing of Cotton

The technique of hand block printing consists of the application of various substances with a view to modifying the colour of the support textile (Cousin, 1986: 9). Colours applied are either 'direct' or 'substantive', the former making an immediate colour change on the fibres, the latter requiring a mordant (usually an insoluble metal salt/oxide) to be pre-applied to the fibres to make the dye-sites available.

Loom-state cotton is subjected to a number of key processes, and variations of colour or design in the finished cloth are controlled by altering the combination of process and raw material. Mordants can be prepared either as a cold bath or as a paste to be printed onto the cloth prior to hot dyeing. Cloth can also be immersed in a cold direct colour, such as indigo or *naspal* (pomegranate rind and turmeric). Prior application of *dabu* mud-resist, which is unique to Rajasthan, can achieve patterning as the clay-rich mud prevents cold dyes from penetrating the material. In addition, cloth can be immersed in, or have cold pastes of other dyestuffs smeared or wiped onto the surface (with or without the prior application of a resist). Aside from the indigo and madder dyes, most raw materials are local, and many of which, such as pomegranate rinds, are considered waste products.

A wealth of photographic images, gathered during extensive fieldwork in Rajasthan, trace the cotton cloth from its loom-state, through the leng-

thy and complex dyeing processes, to the finished textiles.

## 2. A Complex Language of Print

In Rajasthan cloth bears enormous social importance; showing status in society, and caste or tribe affiliations. Base-cloth, pattern, colour, motif, garment style and assemblage all indicate a wealth of information about a wearer's individual and group affiliations, gender, and position in the local social structure. The block printed cottons of Rajasthan contain many layers of meaning within their layers of pattern, colour and resist. Once incorporated into an ensemble of garments by particular communities of rural Rajasthan these textiles become an intrinsic component of the local language of appearance.

In rural areas, women's vibrantly coloured everyday dress includes a gathered *ghaggra* (skirt), voluminous *odhani* (head-cloth), and fitted *choli* (blouse). The design and colour displayed on a woman's *ghaggra* or *odhani* can indicate such things as her community, family, occupation, age, marital status, even number of children. Each major life-stage is marked by new cloth. In contrast, male dress is almost exclusively white, except for the *safa* (turban), which varies dramatically in size, shape, colour and patterning. For pastoral communities all garments are cotton, which is considered a pure or pious fibre, and the variations of colour, texture and pattern embody the cultural and societal values of the wearer, indicating inclusion in or differentiation from specific social groups.

In this sense, textiles and dress may be viewed as a form of visual communication, enriched by the inclusion of surface design elements (Barthes, 2006; Bogatyrev, 1937 [1971]; Lindisfarne-Tapper & Ingham, 1997; Lurie, 2000; Roach & Eicher, 1979). Heavily gendered, and loaded with layers of cultural meaning, it seems these textiles function on practical, social, and almost magical levels, communicating a wealth of information about the wearer or the home in which they are displayed (Edwards, 1999; Tarlo, 1996).

## 3. Changing to Polyester

From the late nineteenth century onwards, increasing pressure from the invention of synthetic dyes and mechanised printing have threatened the exclusivity of block printed cloth, and Indian Independence in 1947 brought widespread socio-political change and aggressive industrialisation. More recently, globalisation and modern fashion influences have radically shifted consumption patterns within and beyond Rajasthan.

In the early 1980s the textile mills of industrialised Surat and Ahmedabad, in neighbouring Gujarat, began to flood domestic markets with polyester cloth, printed in garish mimicry of the traditional cottons. In the towns and villages of Rajasthan the local bazaars now present an ever-increasing and dazzling array of polyester and nylon textiles, in a riot of gaudy synthetic colours. Whilst older generations continue to perceive cotton as a pure and pious fibre, the earthy-hued hand printed cottons are now more commonly relegated to the top shelves of the drapers' shops, seen by younger generations as dowdy and old-fashioned, associated with older generations, or even indicating backwardness.

However, while the local rural communities increasingly favour wearing easy-care polyester textiles and plastic flip-flops, India's new urban middle classes are choosing contemporary block printed fashions as an expression of their modern identity (Tarlo 1996). As agents of a dynamic tradition, the *Chhipa* artisans constantly adapt their products and working practices to meet these new markets.

## II. Conclusions

This paper contributes new material on regionally-specific forms of cotton dyeing and printing, exploring the ancient yet dynamic tradition of hand block printing onto cotton cloth in Rajasthan. It also supports the notion of cloth and clothing as a language, offering a fresh perspective on the communicative function of textiles and dress in the Indian context. In addition, this analysis of the functions of block printed co-

tions within Rajasthan offers a unique insight into the construction of local identities, aspects of which may be subtle or invisible to the external observer but crucial to communications within and between the rural communities, villages and even families in the region.

The visual materials incorporated into the presentation offer a unique insight into the hitherto largely ignored complex language of cloth in rural Rajasthan, in a paper which highlights that focussing on everyday things such as cloth can be a rewarding way to understand the changing complexity of social life. The difficulty with which cotton fibres are permeated with colour, but the permanence of their results, is thus perhaps a reflection of the way in which these textiles have become a strong and permanent thread within the local fabric of Rajasthani culture.

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