

# IMPRINT OF IDENTITY: TRADITIONAL HAND BLOCK PRINT ON TEXTILE OF INDIA

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## *Abstract*

Hand block printing has developed as a simple way to do printing on fabric. It comprises of basic and natural things for doing the printing on fabric. Sustainable approach is one of the major benefits of hand block printing. Most of the materials which are involved in printing work are sustainable.

**Keywords: Block print, textile**

## **Introduction**

Block Printing is one of the ancient types of printing, and has been around for thousands of years. There is indication that it existed as early as the fifth century BC, with actual trashes found from as early as the fifteenth century. It has been practiced around the world, with roots in India, China and Japan. Since there is such a long history of block printing, there are many different methods, but it is essentially using a carved material covered in ink to transfer an image on to paper or fabric. Block printing can be done with wood, linoleum, rubber, or many other materials, but I use linoleum for my work. Pictures that are printed with this technique are typically much bolder than other types of printing: since the blocks are carved by hand, there is often less detail and more texture to the prints. It is possible however, when using a very small knife, to carve blocks with a huge amount of detail. Hand Block Printing refers to the method by which carved block of wood covered with dye are repeatedly pressed on fabric to create designs. The beginnings of the art of ornamenting textile fabrics by the stamping or printing on of colored designs are lost in antiquity. Block printing was originated in China towards early 3rd century. About the 4<sup>th</sup> century, records of its presence were found in Egypt and some Asian countries from where it spread to Europe and other places. Block printing was first originated in China and is said to be over 2000 years old. The Diamond Sutra from 868 AD is earliest popular example which is currently in the British museum.

## **Characteristics of Indian Block Printing**

It is the spirit of India and the arts that make India stand out in the world. However, the several arts and arts are slowly dying and so have to be transformed and brought back to life. Hand Block Printing is such skill which can be used for making every piece of fabric, every design unique and different from others.

## **Block Printing Technique**

India is famous for dyeing and printing of cotton fabric since the 12th century and the creative processes flourished as the fabric received royal patronage. Surat in Gujarat is a prominent center for profession of painted and printed textiles. The art of Hand block printing was passed from generation to generation.

Today, this art has again received revival and has extent to the new centers like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai, and Bangalore.

## **Block Printing in ancient time**

In the 12th century, several places in India, namely in the south, western and eastern coasts of India became well-known for their excellent printed cotton. The brush or kalam was used on the southeastern coast, and the resist applied by the same method. Rajasthan developed special method of printing and dyeing of cottons while use of wooden blocks for printing was more common in Gujarat. From Buddha's time, Trade in cotton fabric is said to have existed between India and Babylon. Indian printed and woven fabrics cotton traveled to Indonesia, Malaya and the Far East. Surat emerged as a prominent center for export of painted and printed calicos while cheaper printed fabric came from Ahmedabad and other centers.

## Famous Centers of Hand Block Printing

Ahmedabad, Sanganer, Bagru, Farukhabad and Pethapur, are the main centers of hand block printing in Gujarat and Rajasthan. The Bagru and Sanganer prints are not easily distinguishable but on a closer observation the difference between the two are revealed. White background is required for Sanganer prints whereas red and black are required for the Bagru prints. Artistry and intricacy characterize the designs of Farukhabad. Other famous centers are Pethapur near Ahmedabad and Banaras. Banaras block prints which makes design their blocks to suit fine silk printing. Each design has seven colors also.

Block designs get bigger and bolder and the delicacy is lost as one moves towards the south or towards Calcutta. Today, Andhra Pradesh is a big center for hand block printing. Lepakshi prints of Hyderabad are very popular. Ajarakh prints, primarily intended for garments for men, originated in Gujarat is popular even today.

Block printing is famous because of the rich and vibrant colors. Initially natural dyes were used but today they have been replaced by chemical and artificial colors. The main colors used are red, yellow, blue, and saffron.

The main tools of the printer are wooden blocks in different shapes and sizes called bunta. The underside of the block has the design etched on it. Each block has a wooden handle and two to three cylindrical holes drilled into the block for free air passage and also to allow release of excess printing paste. The new blocks are soaked in oil for 10-15 days to soften the grains in the timber. Wooden trolleys with racks have castor wheels fastened to their legs to facilitate free movement. The printer drags it along as he works. On the upper most shelf trays of dye are placed. On the lower shelves printing blocks are kept ready.

The fabric to be printed is washed free of starch and soft bleached if the natural grey of the fabric is not desired. If dyeing is required as in the case of saris, where borders, or the body is tied and dyed, it is done before printing. The fabric is stretched over the printing table and fastened with small pins (in the case of saris the pallu is printed first then the border).

The printing starts from left to right. The color is evened out in the tray with a piece of wood and the block dipped into the outline color. When the block is applied to the fabric, it is thumped hard with the fist on the back of the handle so that a good impression may register. A point on the block serves as a guide for the repeat impression, so that the whole effect is continuous and not disjointed. The outline printer is usually proficient because he is the one who leads the process. If it is a multiple color design the second printer hollows his block in color again using the point for a perfect action to fill in the color. The third color if existent follows equally. Talent is necessary for good printing since the colors need to merge into the design to make it a merged whole. A single color design can be executed faster, a double color takes more time and multiple color design would mean additional labor and more color consumption.

Various dyes are used for silk and cotton. Rapid fast dyes, indigo sol and pigment dyes are used as cotton dyes. Printing with rapid dyes is a little more complex as the dyes once mixed for printing have to be used the same day. Standard colors are black, red, orange, brown and mustard. Color variation is little complicated and while printing it is not possible to measure the quality or depth of color.

It is done only after the fabric is processed with an acid wash that the final color is established. Attractive greens and colors are possible with indigo sol colors but pigment colors are generally popular today because the process is simple, the mixed colors can be stored for a period of time, subtle nuances of colors are possible, and new shades evolve with the mixing of two or three colors. Also the colors are visible as one prints and do not change after processing. Colors can be tested before printing by merely applying it onto the fabric. The pigment color is made up of tiny particles, which do not dissolve entirely and hence are deposited on the fabric surface while rapid dyes and indigo sols penetrate the fabric.

Pigment colors are mixed with kerosene and a binder. The uniformity should be just right, for if it is too thick it gives a raised effect on the material, which spoils the design. Small plastic buckets with lids are ideal for storing the mixed colors over a few days.

Cotton saris after pigment printing are dried out in the sun. This is part of the fixing process. They are rolled in wads of newspapers to prevent the dye from following to other layers and steamed in boilers built for the purpose. Silks are steamed this way after printing. After steaming, the material is washed thoroughly in large amounts of water and dried in the sun, after which it is finished by pressing out single layers, which fix the color permanently.

## Block Printing Process

- The first step is to draw the design. It is important to reverse the image if using text, as the printed image will be the reverse of what is on the block. Once the image ready, then transfer the design on to the linoleum to give an outline of where to carve.
- The next step of block is to carve the design. Cut away the parts that don't want to print, as the color applied to the raised surfaces to print the design. Carving a block can take any place from an hour for a small piece, to several weeks or even months depending on the size and detail of the design.
- Use various knives, with very small-tipped knives for carving outlines and details, and much larger ones for cutting away the background. Carving the blocks takes a lot of patience, because if hand slips it can ruin the whole piece. With practice, amount of pressure it takes to carve the material, and the best techniques to use for certain designs.

- Once the block is carved, trim the excess off with scissors to give it a straight edge, and then it is ready for printing. There are many different types of color on the market, and it's important to test them out to find the best one. Use oil-based colors because they give the best even coverage and print well on both fabric, but there are lots of options out there.
- To print, squeeze a small amount of color onto a piece of glass and roll it out with a roller. Do this to get a thin, even layer, because it's important to apply the color evenly to the block.
- Then roll the color on to the block, making sure there is a thin but even layer on the whole design. Then take the block and press it down onto the fabric. Do this with your hands, a printing barren, a rolling pin, by walking on it, or with a printing press – whatever it takes to apply even pressure.

### **Advantages of block printing**

- Gorgeous effects can be created.
- Bright and colorful prints are acquired.
- A number of blocks can be used not only for different colors but also for different shades in the same color.
- Many types of designs can be created with blocks.

### **Limitations of block printing**

- Slow production and high rate
- The placement of the blocks is rarely perfect leading to slight misalignment of the design.
- Absence of delicate shading and gradation
- Separate block is necessary for each color

### **Conclusion**

Block printing is an ancient craft which was adapted as a textile designing technique very early in the history of textile designing and printing. Within a short time this technique turned into a large scale business all over the world. There are several types of blocks such as wooden blocks, linoleum blocks, matchstick blocks, potato blocks, and lady's finger blocks, capsicum blocks, and metal blocks. For making wooden blocks, Logs of wood are sliced horizontally into small pieces and the designs traced over them, Blocks for drawing the outline and for filling are separate

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