

# Traditional Textiles of the Desert

Rich and ancient textile traditions are a part of the desert and among these are bandhini or tie and dye, a process of resist dyeing, and Ajrakh, which involves block printing as well. Here, two artists, Shelly Jyoti and Neha Puri Dhir whose medium is textile, share their experiences of drawing from traditional textile processes to give expression to their contemporary artistic vision.

## AJRAKH

*Celebrating a Textile Tradition*

Text and photographs by Shelly Jyoti



My first experience of creating Ajrakh artworks was when I was researching my visual art project titled 'Indigo Narratives' in 2008. The installations and sculptural artworks I created reflected the plight of Champaran farmers and were inspired by a literary text, *Neel Darpan*, written by Deenbandhu Mitra in 1860. The artworks further explored Ajrakh textile traditions with indigo as a plant, colour and a dye.

Between 2008 and 2014, I created two exhibitions, 'Salt' and 'Indigo', both inspired by political movements in India's freedom struggle. In both efforts I used khadi (hand-woven cotton) for Ajrakh printing, dyeing and needlework. I selected the patterns from Ismail Mohmad Khatri's studio. He is a ninth-



generation mastercraftsman in the art of traditional Arjakh block printing. His sons Sufiyan and Juned continue to cherish their legacy. His workshop is in Azrakhpur, Bhuj, Gujarat.

Ajrakh is one of the oldest types of block printing on textiles still practised in parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan in India, and Sindh in Pakistan. The word Ajrakh carries many meanings. It is also linked to *azrakh*, the Arabic word for indigo, and a blue plant, *Indigofera tinctoria*, which thrived in the arid climate of Kutch until the 1956 earthquake. The popular story amongst local printers is that *Ajrakh* means 'keep it today'. Nomadic pastoralist and agricultural communities like the *Rabaris*, *Maldharis*, and *Ahirs* wear Ajrakh cloth as turbans, lungis or large wraps. It was a popular gift for the Muslim festival of *Eid*, for bridegrooms, and for other special occasions.

The history of Ajrakh can be traced to the ancient civilizations of the Indus Valley, around 2500 BC to 1500 BC. A bust of the King Priest excavated at Mohenjodaro has a shawl draped around his shoulders. This shawl is believed to be an Ajrakh, decorated with a trefoil pattern interspersed with small circles, the interiors of which are filled with a red pigment. The same trefoil pattern has been discovered in Mesopotamia, as well as on the royal couch of Tutankhamen. This pattern, which symbolises the unity of the gods survives as the cloud pattern in the modern Ajrakh. Small fragments of an Ajrakh more than 500 years

Above: 'Allow me to grow without fear'  
Ajrakh printing and dyeing and needlework  
Top left: Ajrakh dress - kids wear (blue)  
From Salt: *The Great March*



old have been found at Fustat, Cairo's first Islamic settlement. The largest collection, some 1200 scraps, is at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England. It is presumed by the curators that the many tailoring and mending seams in the pieces indicate that Ajrakh was a utilitarian garment cloth rather than a luxury good, and that it was desirable in Egypt because of the high quality of its colorfast dyes and the intricacy of its designs. The colors of a true Ajrakh textile are fast.

The art is believed to have spread across the River Indus to the Thar desert in the late 16th century CE. The then ruler of Kutch, Rao Bharmalji I (1586–1631), invited the cloth-printing Khatri artisans from Sindh and gave them permission to settle and earn their livelihood anywhere in Kutch. They were given land by the state and spared taxation on their produce.

From a technical perspective, Ajrakh is a very demanding and laborious form of cloth-printing and resist dyeing, in which designated areas in the pattern are pre-treated to resist penetration by the dye. Ajrakh designs, in terms of variety and arrangement, are limited and dominated by geometrical shapes. However, the Ajrakh cloths evenly printed on both sides are among the finest examples of textiles.

The process of creating an Ajrakh is complicated, involving a variety of steps, from pre-soaking the cloth in a mix of camel dung, soda ash and castor oil, to mixing the dye-resistant pastes made of gum and millet flour, to blending secondary dyes from an array of natural sources such as turmeric for yellow,



Facing Page. Top: 'Timeless Silhouettes: Seven Blouses.' Below: 'The blue ajrakh spinning wheel.' Above: Ajrakh printing and dyeing and needlework, on khadi fabric. From Salt: The Great March.

rhubarb for brown, pomegranate skin for orange, madder root for red and a boiled syrup of scrap iron, chickpea flour and sugar-cane molasses for black.

Water is vital to the production of Ajrakh cloth as it is prepared, mordanted, and dyed. At each stage the properties of the water will influence everything, from the tones of the colours to the success or failure of the entire process. After the 2001 earthquake in Kutch, the

water table has shifted and the water has impurities, a development which directly impacts the printing of textiles in the region. The artisans are seeking the help of the government to resolve this problem so that they can continue with their traditional craft.

Ajrakh blocks, or *Pors*, are hand carved from the wood of Acacia Arabica trees. Several different blocks are used to create the characteristic repeat pattern.

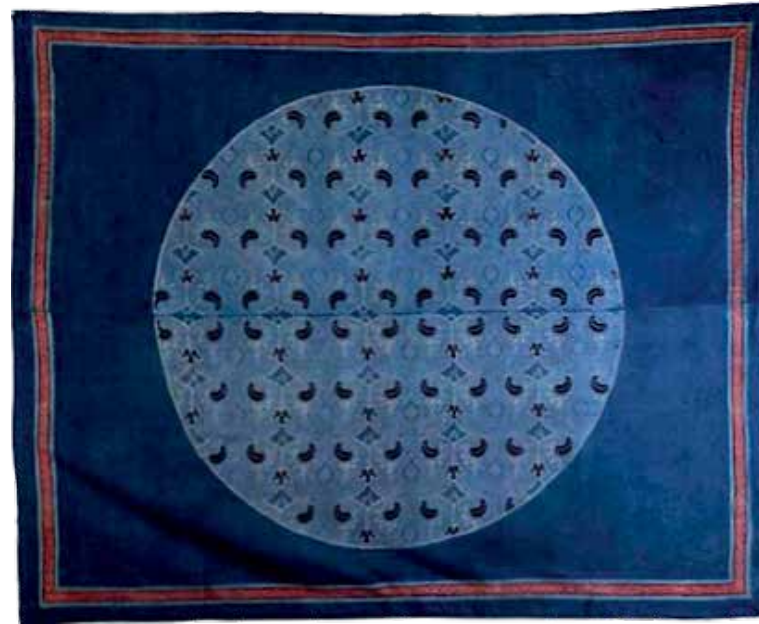


Top left: The history of Ajrakh can be traced to the ancient civilisations of the Indus Valley, from around 2500 BC to 1500 BC. A bust of the King Priest excavated at Mohenjo-Daro has a shawl draped around his shoulders. This shawl is believed to be an Ajrakh, decorated with a trefoil pattern interspersed with small circles, the interiors of which are filled with a red pigment. Above: Salt: The Great March Solidarity. Top right: Ajrakh printing and needlework on khadi fabric.

Making the blocks is a considerable challenge since the pattern has to synchronize perfectly with the whole of the Ajrakh as well as cover those areas which must resist the dye. Block makers or *poregars* use the simplest of tools, and carve each block in pairs that register an exact inverted image on the reverse. There are very few Ajrakh block makers left.

One of the most distinguishing qualities of this textile is that it has retained its traditional character through the challenging period of modernisation, and its established producers as well as customers remain loyal to the craft. It was temporarily sidelined by textiles involving modern, quicker methods of printing. But because of the efforts of the mastercraftsmen and the increasing awareness among the urban people of the overall richness and value of environment-friendly natural dyes, this craft is slowly regaining momentum.

As a contemporary visual artist, my art is centred on the cultural context of Indian history. It invokes history and celebrates the voices of the unsung heroes. In my recent works there is a coming together of my vision and the skill of the Ajrakh craftspeople. My artworks are collaborative efforts supported by Juned Ismail Khatri, and by his artisans, Sako Bhai, Rafiq Pandhi, Rahim Khatri and Razak. These artworks



draw upon India's history, narratives of immigration and economic changes and document the 4500 year old technique of Ajrakh printing and dyeing.

I have also tried to capture the techniques and patterns of Ajrakh textile traditions on khadi along with documenting women's wear in classic styles belonging to 21<sup>st</sup> century in *Salt: The Great March 2013-14* series. These artworks have been influenced by garments worn in the Mughal period in medieval India.

For me, textiles created as art serve as a visual documentation, much more than functional textiles, though both have symbolic purposes. My artworks challenge me to apply this traditional skill in the context of a contemporary and environmentally responsible design practice. 🙏



Above: These are samples of designs from my collection, which I use to create my works. Each sample design block has a specific name in the local language and is created in collaboratin with Ajrakh artisans. Right: Juned Ismail Khatri, Ajrakhpur, Bhuj.

