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## AJRAK: CLOTH FROM THE SOIL OF SINDH

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*Textile Society of America*

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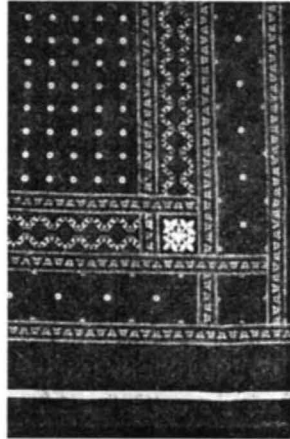
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## AJRAK: CLOTH FROM THE SOIL OF SINDH

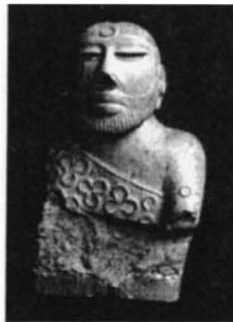
NOORJEHAN BILGRAMI



*Teli ajrak: tre-hashe-wali* (ajrak with three borders)

*Ajrak* is a traditional cloth from the province of Sindh in Pakistan, whose lineage dates back to the period of the Indus Valley Civilization which flourished from 2500 - 1500 BC.

Pakistan, bordered by India, Afghanistan and Iran, has the River Indus flowing southwards from the Himalayas and emptying into the Arabian Sea. Pakistan is only fifty-three years old as an independent country but excavations here have revealed several major ancient cities and their material cultures, which existed on this land thousands of years ago. Amongst a wealth of pottery and ornaments discovered at the site of Mehrgarh (6500 – 4500 BC) was found the impression of a woven cloth.



King Priest – terra-cotta statuary  
excavated from Moenjodaro: 7” high,  
draped in a shawl with the trefoil motif.

Photo courtesy: Dr. Mark Kenoyer

The celebrated statue of the King Priest discovered at Moenjodaro has a trefoil motif on the draped shawl. The *ajrak* craftsmen claim that the pattern is *kakar*, a cloud pattern. The same trefoil is seen on the Hathor Cow and on the bodies of

Sumerian bulls in Mesopotamia where the concept of trinity was evolved. The trefoil is thought to be composed of three sun discs fused together to represent the inseparable unity of the Gods of Sun, Water and Earth.



Plant of *Indigo Ferra Tinctoria*

One of the greatest accomplishments of the sub-continent was the development of the technology of dyeing and printing of fabric. This is evident from the discovery of a dyer's workshop at Moenjodaro. *Indigo Ferra Tinctoria*, the most ancient fabled dye also grew in abundance on the banks of River Indus.

In 1930, hundreds of cotton fragments were retrieved from *Al Fustat* – harbor of Old Cairo – dating from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD. These fragments are the earliest known printed textiles. The simple patterns printed with small sized blocks, resist dyed in indigo and madder, bear a striking similarity to *ajrak*.

Historically, Sindh has been trade-oriented and receptive to external influences. Over a period of time, the craftsmen developed printing techniques from simple resist patterning on one side, to the rich tonal, two-sided resist-printed cloth, the '*ajrak*'.

There are some spectacular burial sites in Sindh. The Chawkandi and Makli tombs, the largest necropolis in the world, dating 11<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century AD, appear like a conglomeration of gold-jeweled sculptures in the stark desert. Intricately carved to a depth of three layers are the patterns reminiscent of Buddhist, Hindu and Central Asian influences. These incredible carvings that transcend time, illustrate the similarity of motifs in the design repertoire of other traditional crafts of Sindh.



Shepherd with an *ajrak* turban



Mohd. Siddique in an *ajrak* shawl



*Ajrak* covering for a bullock cart

The people of Sindh have a deep reverence for *ajrak*. From birth to marriage, until death, *ajrak* commemorates all significant events of the life cycle. This cloth is not only used for special occasions but also has multifarious usage in every day living. It is used and re-used till threadbare. It is worn as turban, a shawl, spread as a bedsheet, table cloth and when worn out, recycled as a hammock, cover for a bullock cart, and most commonly used as a backing to patchwork quilts, called *rillis*. *Ajrak* is a cloth commonly worn by different income groups from the wealthy to the poor. The colors, patterns and designs remain the same; the only difference would be in the quality of the fabric.



*Ajrak* backing on a *rilli* ( patch-work

quilt)

Knowledge is handed down through generations. It is not recorded but learnt through experience and an inner intuition.

*“God spreads the scrolls  
upon the heavens, until  
man learns to read them  
once he can read them  
he can roll up the  
scrolls and put them away”*

- ‘The Sufi’ by Laleh Bakhtiar

Nature plays an important role in the making of *ajrak*. The *ajrak* craftsman works in total harmony with his environment, where the sun, river, animals, trees and mud are all part of its making.

A *тели ajrak* – (an oily *ajrak*) is known for its unique property: the more it is used, the more the colors intensify and mature. The complex making of a *тели ajrak* is further explained in detail.



*Khumbh*: Steaming of the cloth.

Bales of cloth are torn into 10-meter long sheets. These are soaked in carbonate of soda and taken to the river to be washed. The cloth is coiled and placed on top of a slated, copper vat and the bundle is covered with a quilt to prevent the steam from escaping. This vat is heated through the night and the next day. Steam opens the pores of the cloth and makes it soft so that the impurities can be easily cleansed. This process is called *Khumbh*.

The next stage is *Saaj*, in which camel dung, oil of the *Eruca Sativa* seeds and water are mixed together for the fabric to soak in. Dung enables the cloth to become softer and acts as a bleaching agent. This stage is very crucial in determining the quality of an *ajrak*. The wet cloth is then tied into an airtight bundle and kept for 5-10 days, depending upon the weather. A distinct smell of mango pickle emanating from the bundle confirms that the fibers have been impregnated with oil. The cloth is spread to dry in the sun and then torn from the middle to make pairs.

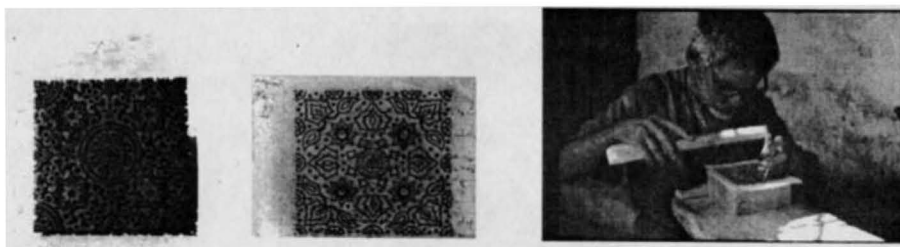
Preparation of the fabric for the most crucial stage – *Saaj*. Haji Porra ties the bundle.



Washing the fabric at the river.

After another rinsing in carbonate of soda and a wash, it is given an oil treatment. The oil is curdled with soda solution and the cloth is again soaked to ensure maximum penetration of the oil in the fibers. The cloth is left in the open to dry overnight. After a thorough wash in the river the next day, it is soaked in a mixture of *Sakun* – Galls of Tamarisk, dried lemons, molasses, castor oil and water. The women prepare the mixture at home. The wet cloth after drying is brought to the workshop for printing. This process is called *Kasai*.

At this point I shall digress a little to talk about the wooden blocks or the *pors*. The *pors* are carved from the *Acacia Arabica* trees, indigenous to the Sindh region. The repeat pattern, which gives the design its character, is determined by a grid system. The pattern is first transferred to the block and then carved with great precision by the block maker, using very simple tools. The blocks are carved in pairs that can register an exact inverted image on the other side. Today, there is only one surviving member of a family of block-makers whose forefathers were skilled in this craft.



*Asl*, an outline for the *por* (block)

Wahid Buksh traces the pattern on the wood block

Back to the process: *Kiryana* is a resist made with rice paste, acacia gum and lime. Using the outline block, the printer dips his block in the paste contained in a small terracotta tray, to print on both sides of the cloth. The printed pattern remains white.



Printing of the *Kiryana*, the outline resist to remain white after dyeing

*Kut* is the printing of the black areas. A mixture of Ferrous Sulphate, Fuller's earth, gum and water is stamped on the cloth with a filler block known as *Datta*.

For the next stage, gum is mixed with rice paste, alum, molasses, fennel, Fuller's earth and other herbs to form the mud resist paste – the *Kharrh*. This paste is printed on the areas that are to be protected against indigo dye, that is, the white, black and the portions that are to become red.



The first indigo dyeing of an *ajrak*

The cloth goes through the first indigo dye, which, unfortunately, is synthetic indigo, as the usage of natural dyes had been abandoned over 50 years ago. Usually the *Usto* – the master-dyer, who is the owner of the workshop, himself does the dyeing in the vat. The dyed cloth is then taken to the river the next morning before sunrise.



*Vicharrh*, the thrashing and rigorous cleansing after the dye



Soaking of ajraks in *Sakun* solution

All the *ajraks* are submerged in the water for at least an hour. To a rhythmic count, the craftsmen swish and thrash the *ajraks* in the water for an hour or more until the gum and the excess dye have been washed off and the white areas become clear. The cloth is soaked in the *sakun* solution for deeper red registration.



Nisar, preparing the alizarine dye bath in a copper vat

In a large copper vat the *ajraks* are dyed with alizarine (no longer in *Manjeeth – Rubia Cordifolia*). Heated by log fire the craftsman diligently lifts and immerses the cloth repeatedly for a couple of hours till the desired red color is reached.

It is again soaked in *gissi*, (camel dung) to clear the white areas.



*Tapai*, the artisan sprinkles water on the *ajraks*



*Meena*, printing of the *Kharrh*, the resist mud paste

On the banks of the river, for *Tapai* the red *ajraks* are spread out to partially dry in the sun, the artisan scoops the water to sprinkle on the cloth. The alternate drying and drenching of the cloth bleaches the white area and deepens and matures the other colors. This continues for a couple of hours before they are washed, dried and then taken to the workshop.

The mud resist mixture is again printed to cover the red areas and immediately sprinkled with the sifted, dried cow dung to dry the wet areas. This process is called *Meena*.

The thick, mud-encrusted cloth is folded and slowly lowered in the indigo vat for the second time. The *ajraks* are dried, rolled into a bundle and then taken to the river for the final wash. The craftsmen fold the *ajraks* while still damp and the weight presses them as they become dry.



Detail of a *trey hashe wali ajrak*

My involvement with *ajrak* began fourteen years ago, when by chance I stumbled upon this incredulous process. It was astonishing to learn that *ajrak* making activity has been carried out for centuries, unnoticed, in the villages. I felt it was important to document the oral tradition; the complex process of 21 different stages, and most importantly record the 15 centers and the 78 master craftsmen, practicing in towns and villages of Lower Sindh. For two years I carried out the survey and in 1990, it took the form of a book – ‘*Sindh jo Ajrak*’, and eventually I got an opportunity to make a documentary video, ‘*Sun, Fire, River, Ajrak, Cloth from the Soil of Sindh*’, to capture the inherent Sufi rhythm and spirit of *ajrak*-making.

During my research I learnt that the craftsmen had abandoned the use of natural dyes two generations ago and were using only imported, synthetic indigo and alizarine, yet they continued to process the cloth as it was done earlier for natural dyes. My present focus is to gradually



convince the craftsmen to revert to natural dyes. It took me a few years to find the person possessing the knowledge of indigo dye-making and to coax some farmers to grow indigo again. It is a long story, but after a battle against all odds, it is being cultivated once again. A few weeks ago I convinced a craftsman to dye a few *ajraks* with indigo and madder. The activity attracted the attention of many other craftsmen; they could not believe that the leaves and roots of plants could give out such rich colors! To revert to the original is possible; but it will be a slow, uphill task.

Will there be a continuity of this ancient craft tradition? The younger generation is seeking more lucrative work; work that is less labor-intensive with short-term gains. Some are taking short cuts by reducing the number of essential stages in the making; others simply have switched to printing cheap silk-screen versions.

Unlike their forefathers, the craftsmen have little incentive to continue with *ajrak* making. It is therefore imperative to give due respect and recognition to the master craftsmen so that the next generation is encouraged to carry on with these craft skills.

To sustain any craft, the product has to be economically viable. Alternative markets have to be explored and developed, since the traditional social structure is going through a major change. As time passes, festivals and ceremonies play a less significant role in their lives. Political uncertainties, fashion and consumer dictates and pressures from the urban areas are all contributing to change that is not relevant to their way of life.

The continuity of *ajrak* production and use over the centuries is maintained only because it is an integral part of Sindhi culture. Its usage is evident at all levels of society and the cloth is held in high esteem with the utmost respect given to it.

I trust the world would give protection to preserve this incredible process and this precious, ancient craft tradition.

*“What do we perceive of his life,  
his secret joys, his anguish?  
For there are so many alternative solutions –  
but there are also many richnesses,  
the web, faith and penetration of his eyes and hands,  
and the joys that are fast disappearing.”*

- Anonymous

\* Source/owner of all the images (except the King Priest) is Noorjehan Bilgrami.

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