

Colours to dye for

An enterprising company has reinvigorated the craft of block printing textiles in Rajasthan.

WORDS NIGEL HOPKINS PHOTOGRAPHY SIMON BRACKEN

DRIVING THROUGH RAJASTHAN, often in a landscape similar to parts of outback Australia, extraordinary splashes of colour create sparks of life where little should exist. As you draw closer, the colours grow more vivid and you realise they are the brilliant red, pink and peacock blue saris of peasant women working in the fields, looking like a million dollars despite their obvious poverty. The colours and energy of these textiles have become almost synonymous with Rajasthan, hypnotising tourists and giving a strong sense of identity to people who have little else to show off.

As in many poor countries, textiles have been an important part of Indian culture for literally thousands of years. There is a longstanding innate love of textiles, where each region and state has developed its own technique skill and style.

Serious textile lovers must visit Gujarat's Calico Museum of Textiles in Ahmedabad, a city that became famous for its wonderful cotton—a Manchester of the East. One of the world's finest textile museums, it contains a feast of rare, exquisite fabrics from different parts of India.

There are temple hangings and canopies from Gujarat and southern India, huge woven temple curtains called *picchwais* from Rajasthan, silk brocades from Varanasi, tribal shawls >



Anokhi Museum, Jaipur

Woodblock prints (left and right)

Master craftsman carves wooden printing blocks at Anokhi Museum, Jaipur (below and right)



Wooden printing block (left)
Mixing indigo dyes, Bagru (below)



“ Evidence has been found of block-printed fabrics dating back to 2000BC

from Kashmir, embroidered *odhanis* made by young brides of the Punjab to cover their heads and, from Himachal Pradesh, the finely embroidered *runal* cloth used to wrap gifts and offerings. But perhaps the simplest, yet most colourful and captivating of all, is the block-printed cotton from Gujarat and its neighbouring state, Rajasthan – a skilled craft that until recently looked like it was doomed through competition from cheaper, mechanised printing.

No-one knows for sure where or how block printing began in India, but evidence has been found of block-printed fabrics dating back to 2000 BC.

Ahmedabad, in Gujarat, became a centre for the block-making caste. These were mostly carpenters who, 200 years ago, migrated 40km to Pethapur, which today is the only

remaining centre in the country solely making wooden blocks. Pethapur supplies most of India's hand block-printing communities, including two of the most famous – Sanganer, now a suburb of Jaipur, and Bagru, a small village about 30km west of Jaipur.

This is one of the most culturally rich areas of Rajasthan. From Jaipur, the *chippas* – the printing caste – moved to Bagru about 300 years ago. Their presence transformed it into one of Rajasthan's most important centres of hand block printing. Integrated communities were formed that included the related castes of *neelgars* (indigo dyers), *rangrez* (tie-dyers) and *dhobis* (washermen). The block printers enjoyed royal patronage and were well paid – often earning as much as a police constable. Tents were created from their printed fabrics and became a necessary part of royal processions.

In his book *Traditional Indian Textiles* (Thames & Hudson), John Gillow describes Sanganer and Bagru prints as being very similar. Both reflect a Persian influence dating back to the 17th century, though the Bagru prints tended to be somewhat less sophisticated, being aimed mostly at local rural >



Woodblock prints (also left)

“ Traditional dyes such as pomegranate rind are still used in villages like Bagru

women. Bagru prints were usually on a light-brown background and mostly used red, black and blue colours. However, Sanganer prints generally featured delicate floral designs on a white background.

The wooden blocks, called *bunta*, are made of teak with the design carved into the underside. Several air holes are drilled through the block to allow excess printing paste to escape. While many block printers have now turned to cheaper, more convenient chemical dyes, traditional dyes such as pomegranate rind, indigo and turmeric are still used in villages such as Bagru. Most importantly, the fundamentals of the dyeing process remain unchanged. The process is as labour-intensive as ever.

The block-printing process seems simple enough, but the master craftsmen of Sanganer and Bagru have refined the art to produce exceptional prints in rich and vibrant colours.

Long, narrow lengths of cotton are first washed and bleached before being stretched over a printing table, up to 10m long. Printing starts from left to right, one colour at a time, using blocks that have been dipped in trays of ink paste. The printer carefully applies the block before giving it a fast, hard whack to create a clear, sharp imprint.

Up to four colours may be used and it requires great skill to ensure the various colours dovetail perfectly – a skill that sits comfortably in the hands of master block printers such as Suraj Naryan, whose family have been craftsmen block printers in Bagru for 10 generations.

Thirty years ago, Naryan says, the bottom fell out of their traditional market as cheaper machine-printed – and often synthetic – textiles took over. The art of block printing started to be forgotten and precious employment was lost. There had been little innovation in the block-printing production process, or in its range of products, to bolster commercial viability in a market increasingly driven and inundated by mill-made fabrics and prints.

These were bleak times for Bagru and dozens of similar villages in the Jaipur region. >



Woodblock printing factory, Bagru (above)

Mud applied to prevent dye taking to the fabric (right)



Indigo-dyed fabrics drying in the sun, Jaipur



Bishnoi woman demonstrates woodblock printing, Jaipur

However, over the last 30 years an amazing change has taken place. Bagru now has some 200 families engaged in block printing, a phenomenon repeated in many other villages in the Jaipur area. According to the 45-year-old Naryan, demand for craftspeople is now so intense that wages of up to R300 (\$9) a day are normal, perhaps two or three times the average rural wage.

That change was brought about almost entirely by the efforts of a single company, Anokhi, which identified the urgent need to make the craft viable by bringing in a new range of products and colours. In doing so, Anokhi transformed the traditional product so that it was compatible with a contemporary aesthetic and lifestyle, especially in export markets. Anokhi's roots go back to 1968, when the young Faith Hardy – Indian-born (her father was a bishop) and passionate about textiles – returned to India with the aim of buying fabrics to sell at home in England.

“What she found was that block printing was in total decay,” says her daughter-in-law Rachel Singh, who is now the company's design director. “Mills in Gujarat and northern England had flooded the market with cheap printed fabrics. There was no more royal patronage and there was an over-riding need to find an overseas market that would appreciate these traditional skills.”



Checking registration of new wooden printing blocks; proof prints from new woodblocks (right)

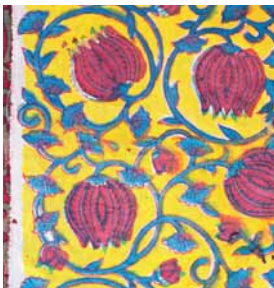
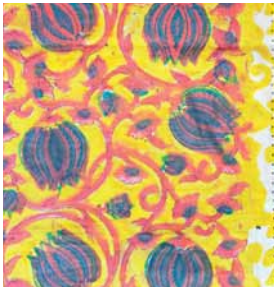
Faith Hardy and her future husband, JP “John” Singh, opened a Cambridge shop from which they sold block-printed fabrics into trendy outlets such as Liberty.

“It was high-end fashion – even the Queen of Spain wore Anokhi fabrics,” Rachel Singh says. Soon shops in Paris and Spain were selling their fabrics, but it was a fickle market and as demand for the “ethnic look” started to wane, Hardy had to change direction. She started experimenting with printing techniques and designs.

The increased popularity of silk-screen printing (it is faster and cheaper) also hit sales of block-printed textiles. Anokhi's response was to cut back on exports and build a market inside India, setting up a network of shops, the first of which opened in Jaipur in 1984. There is currently a total of 17 shops located in five cities across India.

In 1995 Faith and John's son Pritam Singh, now aged 36, returned from England and took on the job of Anokhi's managing director. In a curious repeat of history he had also ▶

“ Demand for craftspeople is now so intense that wages of up to R300 (\$9) a day are normal



BEST ON THE BLOCK

CALICO MUSEUM OF TEXTILES

Sarabhai Foundation,
Shahibag, Ahmedabad.
(079) 2286 8172.

ANOKHI MUSEUM

Chanwar Palkiwalon ki Haveli
(Anokhi Haveli), Kheri Gate,
Amber, Jaipur. (0141) 253 0226.

Located in a fine *haveli* (mansion) at Amber, near Jaipur, the Anokhi Museum of Hand Printing has beautifully displayed collections that reveal the progress of block printing over the years. Perhaps not in the same league as Ahmedabad's Calico Museum, but still an essential visit for textile lovers.

ANOKHI JAIPUR BOUTIQUE

2 Tilak Marg (Opp Udyog Bhavan),
C-Scheme, Jaipur. (0141) 222 9247.
www.anokhi.com

Anokhi products are not currently available in Australia.

Anokhi Museum, Jaipur (right and below)



married an Englishwoman, Rachel, who had worked with Anokhi as a designer. Pritam Singh's involvement has meant his parents have now stepped back from direct involvement in Anokhi and have instead focused their energy full-time on voluntary work in the fields of heritage, environmental issues and social welfare.

The key to Anokhi's success was the way it moved beyond the once fashionable "ethnic look" with innovative new designs and colours that were more suited to contemporary fashion and furnishing fabrics.

This was a process driven by Rachel Singh and other designers she recruited from the UK, who were more in tune with current international trends. Printers such as Suraj Naryan were receptive and quickly adapted to the new style, producing fabrics that would be turned into both Indian and Western garments – home textiles, sarongs and accessories.

The role of companies such as Anokhi in saving the block-printing craft of Rajasthan has now been widely acknowledged.

"It is largely the efforts of private entrepreneurs that have ensured a dependable future for the art and its practitioners," says textile craft expert Rta Kapur Chishti. "By the early 1980s, demand for

block-printed fabrics had declined, but new export channels helped bolster the fortunes of the industry."

As Anokhi revitalised the craft of hand block printing, it also evolved its own business philosophy, built on values like fair trade, openness and taking care of people. At the heart of the brand's ethos is the belief that "every Anokhi product should have a craft input and, by virtue of that, it should support the craft and the craftsmen," Singh says.

Anokhi now provides an income for about 1500 people, including 300 production workers at its modern production facilities on the Singh's 25ha farm on the outskirts of Jaipur. That means perhaps 10,000 people (in extended families) are now being supported through the company's initiatives.

"The rural population of India is still as badly off as it ever was. Its only economic hope lies in craft and agriculture – and in many cases craft is the best option," Singh says.

"No models have been developed for keeping rural livelihoods viable. The challenge remains to keep people living in rural areas rather than following the dream of riches to the big cities. Anokhi is attempting to meet that challenge." 🌐

Woodblock print, Anokhi Museum



✉ For airfares call **Qantas on 13 13 13** or visit qantas.com
 For holiday packages to India call **Qantas Holidays on 13 14 15.**