



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Hand Block Printing: The Ancient Craft of South Asia**

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
<b>Received:</b> February 07, 2022 <b>Accepted:</b> April 10, 2022 <b>Online:</b> April 15, 2022 <b>Keywords:</b> Block Printing, Cultural, Designs, Evolution, <b>*Corresponding Author:</b> Sadia.qutub@punjab.ed u.pk	This research article explores the origin and of the magnificent art of Hand Block Printing and its development through different ages to its present form has been thoroughly studied. The report focuses on the evolution, techniques, categories and economic and social implications of Hand Block Printing. The research methodology adopted for this report is qualitative focusing on the contextual and formal analysis of its designs and forms probing into their origin and evolution through centuries. For a more direct knowledge interviews have been taken by the oldest shop owners of block printing. This craft has much more value as a visual representative of cultural and traditional norms since the beginning thus a strong connecting link between past and present. It has also been conclude that this craft has a good potential to flourish if it is provided with necessary support from Government and society.

**Introduction**

Block printing is the representative of cultural and social trends. The perspiration of numerous unconscious artists has passed rich tradition of a beautiful art from generation to generation which is now recognized as a symbol of indigenous art. One can boast that this art has provided the basis for printing on cloth which has spread to other parts of the world. Block printing is not only an art but it is also a mean of livelihood for many people on the one hand and through export this craft is earning foreign exchange and in this way it is contributing in the progress of the country, without much appreciation in Government document. For this report direct knowledge and history of this art has been gathered from the old shop in Krishan Nagar. Pictures were taken at their workshop of both new and age old blocks, worker printing cloth, dyes, large number of design catalogues and a large variety of finished products. The author has given all the details collected in a sequential order that were learnt regarding its history and its development.

Block Printing is one of the most ancient craft arts in existence. During this investigation it has been revealed that this art has been developed and passed through many generations of artisans and craftsmen, every generation has contributed towards its enhancement and artistic beauty. Its origin lies in the valley of the Indus some five thousand years ago. The craft of hand block printing is very ancient in Pakistan particularly in the Punjab. In fact, both mordanting (using fixing agents) and printing seems to have been discovered in the subcontinent. Flowered garments, probably referring to printed cloths, have been mentioned in Megasthenes' account in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. The earliest known specimens of prints known from China were imported from the Subcontinent in 140 B.C. Printed cloth was definitely exported to Egypt in the first century CE from this region in the first century CE. The Romans valued prints from our land which went there from Punjab, Gandhara, Iran and Asia Minor and later on into Europe (Allah Bukhsh, 2010). This craft was widespread in this region as in the city of Harappa, a building is identified as 'Dyer's

Workshop' with a number of dyeing vats discovered in situ. Besides, it is also suggested that the stone bust of the King Priest from the same city is shown wearing a block printed shawl with trefoil motifs (Ahmad and Dar, 2009, p. 164 ). (Figure 1).



(Figure 1) Ruins of a dyer's shop at Harappa Indus Valley 2000 BCE,

Patterned blocks for printing textiles have been discovered from Taxila (Allah Bukhsh, 2010). Terra-cotta stamps, probably used for printing textiles in the 1st century AD were also excavated in Taxila. Craftsmen, living in what is now Rajasthan, Pakistan and Gujrat, carved amazing patterns into local teakwood blocks (Block printing in 21<sup>st</sup> Century, 2013). Lahore's calicoes and chintzes were widely exported during the Mughal period with the Mughal fascination with its sophisticated floral and geometrical designs. In southern part of the Punjab, block prints are noted as one of the best prints produced in the subcontinent. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Multan's calicoes and chintzes and the chintzes from Thatta were admired as one of the best prints produced in the region (Daily Nation, 2013).

Besides we know that Punjab has a long tradition of block-printing. Some terracotta moulds used for block printing discovered from the city of Taxila, now exhibited in Taxila Museum, dated in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Some exquisitely fine specimens of block printed wall hangings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from Lahore and Kot Kamalia are now preserved in the V&A Museum, London. A rare large size (30x30') block printed canopy prepared for Delhi Darbar in 1904 is now preserved in Lahore museum. Similarly, a modern large size block printed floor covering from Koror Pakka and a large old piece of Cotton Cloth block printed with calligraphy are now in Bahawalpur Museum (Mills, Claus and Diamonds, 2003, p. 126).

Lahore remains one of the largest commercial centers for block printing. Heavy fabrics, printed for drapery are marketed throughout the country and are also exported. According to Khalid Javed (personal communication, 2013) "Punjab appears as vestiges of a craft that was so widespread that most villages had their own block printers to provide the printed fabrics required by the local people".

The traditional methods of block printing are least affected by modern technology. The craft of Hand Block Printing basically appertains to textile industry. But the beauty of this craft depends upon the accuracy of carving of wooden blocks that impart colorful designs on the surface of plain cloth and still more on their accurate use in correct order of colors applied and their flawless registration with reference to one another as envisioned by the designer (Allah Bakhsh, 2019).

Many cities, towns and villages of Punjab like Multan, Karore Pakka, Lahore, Jhang, Sargodha and their adjoining towns once used to be the principal sources of hand block printed fabrics. There used to be a large number of centers of blocks makers or block carvers. Two types of block printing in use are:

### Block-making for Kachi Chhapai

*Kachi-Chhapai* is relatively modern innovation. For this purpose the clock-maker carves a single block for a single color printing with light color washable ink. With the help of these blocks a complete surface of a sheet of cloth is printed on which, latter on, an embroiderer a male or female does the embroidery and the printed design disappears. *Kacha-Chhapai* is done on lady-suits, *dopattas*, bed sheets, table-covers and the like. Silk-print ring is cheaper, quicker and cleaner job (Allah Bakhsh, 2019).

### Block-making for Pakka-Chhapai

Block-making for *Pakka-Chhapai* is a difficult and complicated craft for which you need a well-grained seasoned *Shisham* wood and a really seasoned wood carver who must be an excellent draftsman and equally dexterous in carving in hard wood.

### Method of making a Block

First a block of a seasoned *shisham* wood (Indian rosewood) is selected. The block, usually 3" to 4" or 7 to 9 cm thick, is cut with its veins running vertical. This gives the delicate walls of the design great strength. The upper side of the block is smoothed with rasp or plane and sandpaper. The smooth surface the requisite design is sketched accurately with led pencil. If a design is complicated it is first traced out on a tracing paper or butter paper. This is fixed on the plain surface of the block with small nails. The craftsman carefully marks the outline with the help of his hammer and an iron style called *qalam*. When the design is complete, the butter paper is removed. In case of tracing the butter paper is pasted on the surface of the block with paste or glue lest the glue should spoil of the block. This process is called *Tapai* or *Okairna* (Allah Bakhsh, 2019).

Now the carving of the design proper begins. The craftsman cuts the design ½" or 1.5cm deep with tapering walls of the design so that the roots of walls remain strong. When the design is carved, the surplus of the wood is taken away. For *kacha-chappa*, one block suffices. For *pakka-chhappai*, you need to prepare more than one block to complete a design. Number of block depend upon so carefully carved the outlines carved for one color set in perfect harmony with its neighboring colors. A little carelessness in carving throws the whole harmony of the design out of balance. Simultaneously, three or four blocks are outlined on a single plank. It becomes easier to handle carving. When all blocks are carved, these are cut away from one another with a champak-machine. Each block is provided with a handle on the backside with a separate block of wood fixed with the help of nails. *Pakka-chhapai* is done over quilt-covers, bed-covers, table covers, pillow covers, curtains and seat covers (Allah Bakhsh, 2019). (Figure 2)



(Figure 2) Mohammad Anwaar is an artist who makes dyes for block printing at his small shop in

Rang Mahal area of Lahore. [blog.travel-culture.com/.../block-printing-dyes-maker-of-rang-mahal](http://blog.travel-culture.com/.../block-printing-dyes-maker-of-rang-mahal).

### Tools

The tools for block-makers are few in number. The craftsman need one small hammer and a few iron styles or *qalams* of assorted sizes, each with circular, semi-circular, and square tips. These *qalams* are prepared locally from old files and *kamanis* or springs or carriages. They also need a plane or rasp and sandpaper and *chalk-mitti* (dust) (Allah Bakhsh, 2010).

### Material

Plain cotton cloth, silk cotton, silk, *Khaddar*, satin or georgette and chintz of white colour are needed for this work. All these fabrics are now a day being manufactured in Pakistan and are easily available in the local market.

In Dera Ghazi Khan, this work was done by the people of a special caste called *Charro-hai*. During the last one hundred years block printing done by *Charro-hai* was quite renowned throughout the subcontinent. After Pakistan came into existence, block printing was still quite popular in the entire southern Punjab the neighboring areas of Baluchistan where dresses prepared with printed cloth, particularly the blue skirts called *Neel kai Ghagharai* were customary traditional among ladies of this region.

Block printing is known by various names, terms in various parts of the subcontinent such as *chhipai ka kam* or *chappai ka kam* (printing work) and *thappai ka kam* – *chappa* means impression or printing and *thappa* means impression with the help of blocks scientifically, the craft is known by name of Calico-Printing.

### Colors

The only other things needed are different dye. Traditional colors used for this purpose were blue, red, brown and black. For blue, indigo was used which was obtained from a local plant. Dera Ghazi Khan has always enjoyed the status of a big market for indigo production and for its export to other regions and countries. For obtaining red, black, brown colors from the indigenous sources, Lai tree (*tamarix dixa*), iron (ferreus) and *heera qasees* respectively are used in conjunction with a chemical or coloring agent called *majeetha*, a local tree. The colors thus obtained were called *ratta majeethi* (red), *kala majeethi* (black) *naswari majeethi* or brown color. All *majeethi* colors were used only on cotton cloth (Nazir, 2009).

The *ratta majeethi* color (red) was obtained from the skin of Lai tree which is found in great abundance in the whole division. Brown color, on the other hand, was obtained by boiling a mixture of *heera qasees* and gum. The cloth printed with this color was later on washed with soda (sodium bicarbonate  $\text{NaHCO}_3$ ). Similarly, the black color was obtained by keeping a mixture of water, iron, dried bread crumbs, dry white flour in the sun for 20 days. Thereafter, red clay was added to this mixture. The resultant mixture was of black color. The cloth printed with *kala majeethi* was washed with plain water (Nazir, 2009).

With the advent of western influences in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, chemical dyes from western countries started arriving first from Japan, then from Poland and still later from the USSR. Most popular were the Japanese dyes in three primary colors i.e. yellow red and black. These were called rapeseed inks. The dyes imported from Poland, on the other hand, were known as indigo colors. Contrary to Japanese colors, the Polish colors were available in all shades and hues. Cloth printed with indigo dyes was required to be washed with sulfuric acid diluted in plain water. In about 1930, Russian dyes were introduced here.

These were also called *rapet* colors (rapeseed inks). Cloth printed with these Russian colors was washed with water mixed with *pappari*, soda and *phatkari*, etc.

After 1960, Pakistan started manufacturing its own dyes. These too were called Rapet colors and designs created with these colors were also to be washed with a solution of sulfuric acid diluted in water.

The latest dyes added to the family of pigments are the so-called Arcamine colors. For making this class of dyes, kerosene oil and urea and used. Now a day, majority of block printer or calico printers in Pakistan, use the Arcamine colors. One great advantage of these colors is that these can be used on all types of materials cotton, silk, leather, plastic, wood, glass, etc. besides, there is no need of washing the cloth after printing. Also, these colors are very fast (Nazir, 2009).

## Technique

First of all, blocks with designs are to be prepared. It is very special job which only an expert carpenter can deliver with satisfactory result. For a single design a number of blocks are to be prepared one for the outline and others for solid portions and one for each color. The wood for making blocks must be hard so that a block has a long life. Initially, there were a sufficient number of block-makers in the city of Dera Ghazi Khan, but as the demand for the block makers decreased, the artisans shifted to other centers even to other professions. Currently, *thappa* or *chappa* or block-making is confined to the city of Jhang.



(Figure 4a, b,c) Few intricately carved blocks. Photograph by author. 28.09.2021

Finally, it comes to *chhipigar* or block printer-a member of the *rangrez* family (dyer's family) to do the final printing of design on the piece of cloth. Each block has a form called *siahi* or 'black' because it is printed in black color. The inner part of block is called *gid* for which there is prepared a separate block one block for one color only.

For proper printing, colors of desired or required choice are kept ready in a rectangular tray - 12" x10" with 5" high walls, sometime these trays are square in shape too, 12" x12". In the tray a thick layer of cotton cloth, cut to the inner dimensions of the tray, is placed covered with a wire-gauze with cotton threads bound around it. This pad is immersed in a liquid of desired color. The design side of the block is first pressed on the pad of ink then shifted to that part of cloth where the print is desired. The artisan presses the block gently with the fist of his hand and lifts off the block. The impression is transferred on to the surface of the cloths. This process is repeated all over the cloth. For more than one color more blocks are used. When the process is complete, the cloth is dried in the sun and washed with water simple or mixed with some chemicals according to the type of dyes used. If the printing has been done with *Rapet* colors, the printed cloth is washed with a solution of sulfuric acid and large amount of water. But, if the process of printing has been done with

pigment- *Acramine* colors, the printed cloth is washed with plain water without any chemical added to it (Nazir, 2009).

Before writing about block printing the author went to libraries collected information from books and Internet and to have a live experience went to the most famous and old shop of Block Printing in Krishan Nagar, Lahore by the name *Al Mashoor Baba Jee Chaapay Waale*. In an informal interview with Mr. Aminuddin, the owner of the shop the researcher collected very interesting facts and useful information regarding the history and development of this craft. (Figure 3).



(Figure 3) Mr. Aminuddin, owner of the shop "*Baba Jee Chaapay Waale*" 22.03.2013.

Mr. Azmiruddin told that the present shop has been in Krishan Nagar since 1970s but their family is in business for generations, Father of Mr. Aminuddin, Mr. Azizuddin, used to teach this art in many educational and vocational institutes since 1960s. In past their shop was part of the whole market of Block Printers in Krishan Nagar, famous for high quality Block Prints (Mr. Aminuddin, personal communication, 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2013).

Before coming to Pakistan this family was in Panipat, their area well-known as *Kucha Chaape Garan*. Rajas and Maha Rajas used to order gold water blocks for *Juzdans* and covers for other dowry gifts for their daughters.

When Pakistan was made there was very small quantity of printed cloth and this family printed a lot of white cloth and had a great market at that time. Later with the production of printed cloth the market of block printing became less in demand but this shop has sustained their business since then and successfully maintained the standards (Mr. Aminuddin, personal communication, 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2013).

The craft of Block Printing in present form developed gradually over a period of time. Initially they used pure colors that were obtained from various plants and ore of iron, indigo for blue, madder for red, turmeric for yellow, pomegranate rind for green and peels for brown, iron shavings for black, etc. These colors were extracted through different formulas and processes but the craftsmen are very secretive about their formulae. This family still has those old formulae but cannot follow their old traditional ways because of the lack of facilities in present days, like no availability of water, as they used to wash and dry clothes

at river Ravi in open waters in good old days (Mr. Amiruddin, personal communication, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2013).

Now they use readymade colors, pigments, as the making of original colors is not only expensive but a very time consuming and tedious process also. Mr. Aminuddin told how these pigment colors were discovered. There were Germans who visited Lahore, got information from his grandfather, Mr. Nizamuddin about technique of making colors. Later they introduced powder colors the 'Rapet colors'. Then later Pigment colors were imported from Japan and China, but they still have their own methods of using these colors for more permanent and better results. They have a special formulae by adding different chemicals like sulphuric acid, *Neela Thota*. Brown plum gum is also used, dipped in water for one or two days, mashed, strained in a cloth and then color is mixed in it. This method makes the color more permanent. It is the experience with which they know the specific quantity of adding these chemicals and other ingredients in a perfect way to get best results.

Japanese original colors are no more in use as they are very expensive and unaffordable. Large range of colors is now available mostly from China. All kind of clothes like cotton, *khaddi*, silks, and linens are being block printed. There is a wide range of categories in block printed materials including:

Dresses including, *Qameez shalwars*, *Kurtaaz*, Scarves, *Shawl*, *Dupattas*, curtain cloth, Sarees, table mats, bed sheets, cushion covers, dining table cloth etc. (Figure 5a, b, c, d, e, f, g)



(Figure 5a, b, c, d, f, g) Different products in Hand Block Printing. Photograph by author and <http://www.craftandartisan.com/>(accessed on 18.03.2013).

They get their block from Multan, Karore Pakka, and Jhang. A man in Lahore's Rang Mahal Bazar is also famous for his blocks (Figure 2). Mostly the blocks are now carved in teak wood. In olden days fine quality wood like 'sagwan' was used for making blocks. Mr. Aminuddin showed a block made in *sagwan* that was more than hundred years old. It was named '786 block'. It was very skillfully carved with intricate design. It is of finest quality and its results are better than today's blocks. It has holes on sides which give air while printing and the results are excellent with very neat print (Mr. Amiruddin, personal communication, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2013). (Figure 6).



(Figure 6) 100 years old family block in sagwan “786”, wood. with intricate carvings and Side holes for air for best results photo by author ,22.03.2013.

They get their designs from different sources from magazines, from boutiques, Indian copies and some designs have been in family for generations. Blocks are also being made on order for boutiques who give their own custom designs and they very professionally do not use those designs for their personal works. Workers are on wages according to their work.

Mr. Munir Ahmed has been working here since five years. He has come from Multan and is already skilled in the craft. An ordinary block-maker can earn Rs. 400/- daily whereas master craftsmen can earn Rs. 500/- to 800/- per day (Allah Bakhsh, 2010). The reason behind the success of this family is that the family member are all involved in the work ,fathers, sons and even daughters all do the work themselves. In one day they can complete three bed sheets or equivalent (Mr. Munir, personal communication, 22<sup>nd</sup> March, 2013).

### Influences on Design

Mughal tile and miniature design also inspired them as they have a block named ‘Taj Mahal’ with actual Taj Mahal tile motifs. In Lahore Museum, the old samples of block printing are done by their ancestors most artistic block printers in Lahore depict animals, birds and floral patterns in arched frames, as well as use traditional color combinations characteristic of the decorative style of Mughal tiles and paintings (Daily Nation, 2013). Vegetal patterns employed alone or in combination with the other major types of ornament—calligraphy, geometric pattern, and figural representation—adorn a vast number of buildings, manuscripts, objects, and textiles, produced throughout the Islamic world. Unlike calligraphy, whose increasingly popular use as ornament in the early Islamic Arab lands represented a new development, vegetal patterns and the motifs they incorporate were drawn from existing traditions of Byzantine.







(Figure 7a, b, c, d e) Taj mahal motifs on dados used in block print. Cushions with Mughal motifs

## Conclusion

Craft of any area represents its cultural heritage. The development of the crafts and the development of the society are prior to each other. Cultural and social interactions always play a great role in the development of the arts and crafts. This is very true of the craft of block printing. With its very old and traditional background this craft art is flourishing even today. It has passed through many transitional phases and every stage has its own importance and characteristics. In modern day now it is being practiced with modern methods and materials but still the work is done by skillful hands. While this craft art was more refined pure and expensive in old days as all the dyes, blocks and other herbal chemical were self-made and were obtained after a very tedious process. As a result the end product was very refined and has no match with the one being produced today. The skill and dedication is there but the socio economic conditions have created many problems for the craftsmen and due to the lack of promotional incentives this art is diminishing. This age old but beautiful craft has now become extinct in the areas previously famous for it, simply for want of patronage both by the public and the Government. But in some neighboring cities and towns like Bahawalpur, Multan, Karor Pakka, etc. this craft is still faring well. The craft on the whole-both of block-making and hand block printing is on decline all over the Punjab. But, block printing is not confined to bed covers, floor coverings or table cloths. The craft is also used for heavy fabrics such as curtains, upholstery as well as cotton *Durries*.

The art that was one of the hall marks of Krishan Nagar, Lahore, is now reduced to one shop as most of the people left the business because of the difficulties and lack of facilities. The support of the government can only save this diminishing art. There are new incentives to be offered to these people and the export of these items can be a good addition to Pakistan's economy. There are already some designers who are making use of these skilled craft men by giving them their own designs for block and their own cloth to print with a copy right agreement that they strictly follows. These designers are earning a lot of foreign exchange but on a personal level. Their designs are totally different and innovative and can be very successful if more of such works are planned and this craft can be turned into an industry. To keep it alive is also necessary as this art is eco friendly and has no negative impact on the environment. It is now Government's duty to help this art flourish in the most successful way.

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