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In the 16th century, when the King of Mewar Maharana Pratap held meetings with his officials, thick cotton *jajams* (sheets) with colourful floral and geometric patterns were spread on mattresses to seat people. *Jajams* were also used in marriages and social gatherings, spreading their popularity. They were hand printed using wooden blocks and natural colours by a community of Khatri printers. “Training local tribals, my father felt, was the best way to keep our art alive as the number of

Khatri families practicing Bagh print is limited to a few.

It was also a good way of increasing income of these families which were solely dependent on agriculture until we started working with them in 1995,” says Mohammed Bilal Khatri, who received an excellence award from the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) in 2016 for reviving Bagh prints, which received the Geographical Indication (GI) tag in 2008.

“Some of our relatives in Rajasthan are Hindus. Our ancestors migrated from there and settled in Rajasthan and Gujarat. Our hand block printing imbibed local influences in both the states,” 33-year-old Bilal says.

His great grandfather moved from Rajasthan to Madhya Pradesh in the 1930s. And his grandfather chose to settle down on the banks of the Bagh river from which the village as well as the block printing technique derive their names.



Mohammed Yusuf Khatri, who entered the urban markets in the mid 1990s, using hand blocks at his unit in Bagh, Dhar district. Pic: Bagh Print

'For the locals' to 'by the locals'

Bilal's grandfather would print clothes mostly for the local *Bheel* and *Bheela* tribal communities, which wore indigo, red and yellow colours on *ghagra* (skirt), *odhni* (dupatta) and *lugada* (a wraparound) of about 4.5 metre length. It was his father Mohammed Yusuf Khatri, who thought of tapping the urban market with saris, cushions and table covers.

When Yusuf started making suits and saris in the early 90s, the demand kept increasing. Orders for stoles, dupattas started pouring in and there was a lack of trained hands.

“Our area is tribal. Earlier, this block printing was done only by the Khatri community. But my father began training the locals. Some of these tribals have set up their own hand block printing units,” Bilal adds. Yusuf has won numerous awards for his craftsmanship and recently won accolades for using Bagh print with natural colours on bamboo mats.

“They print 3 or 4 suits in a day and also work in the agriculture sector,” Bilal points out.



Mohammad Bilal Khatri with Bagh print fabrics, which use natural dyes made using iron, jaggery, alum and other ingredients. The patterns are floral and geometric. Pic: Bagh Print

Mohan Singh, a local who has been working with the Khatri family for the last 25 years, says Bagh Print has helped raise income levels in the area. "Earlier, we were only dependent on agriculture and incomes were limited. Bagh Print provided free training to thousands of people in the area and they had found an additional source of income."

But for the Khatri, this training has served multiple purposes. "We have access to trained hands, which help us to meet the increasing demand for Bagh printed clothes. And more importantly, it is helping keep our legacy alive. We have trained so many people in the art now that there is no fear of it getting lost," says Bilal, who has also won many awards.

Keeping tradition alive

Bagh block prints use natural colours made from flowers and other organic products. Clothes are washed in the Bagh river and hand printed using blocks made from Indian teak or *sagwan* wood.

“We believe in focusing on our craft – block printing. We don’t make the block ourselves,” Bilal says.

The teak blocks are sturdy and they are soaked in oil to further increase their life. “A single piece can be used to print about 5,000 metres of cloth,” he adds.



Bagh river has high levels of calcium and zinc, which improves the quality and colour of

prints. Pic: Bagh Print

The whole technique of Bagh printing is very labour intensive and the Khattris have been using the process which their ancestors practiced. The plain cloth, mostly cotton or silk, is cut as per requirement, washed in Bagh river and dried. It is then boiled and soaked overnight in a paste made using castor oil, goat dung and a type of salt. Subsequently, it is spread out on the mud floor for twenty four hours.

“One, the starch of the cloth is completely washed. Two, the cloth is ready to absorb the colours well,” says Bilal.

After this, the cloth is dyed in a paste of '*harad*' (terminalia chebula, a component of *triphala*) and left to dry in the sun. For printing, the black colour is made using raw iron strips, jaggery, lime and a gum, all of which are put together in an earthen pot for about a fortnight. The resulting liquid on top is used to make black colour. Blue colour is made using indigo leaves, pomegranate peels give mustard colour and the

two are combined to get green colour, Bilal points out.

The colours are poured into wooden trays in which blocks are dipped for printing. After printing, the cloth is left to dry in the sun and after 15 days it is again washed in the flowing river water. “Bagh river has high levels of calcium and zinc. This improves the quality of prints and gives brighter colours. The colours we get here are not found in any other part of the country,” Bilal adds.

“We keep a margin of 5 percent to 15 percent depending on the quality and demand of a product,” he says.



Mohammad Yusuf Khatri training tribal women under the Van Dhan Scheme. Pic: Bagh Print

Both Bilal and his father also provide training to tribals under the Van Dhan Scheme – an initiative of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and TRIFED that seeks to improve incomes through value addition to tribal products. “The farther our craft reaches, the better it is for us. Our ancestors worked for 500 years to keep it alive; we have to do our bit now,” Bilal adds.

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