PHOTO ESSAY

A Fading Tradition
At the heart of people’s identities lies a deep rooted connection to culture and traditions. Traditions that have been passed on from generations to generations, from which a lifestyle is moulded from, forming cultures that act as an expression of society’s aesthetic, moral and spiritual values. The practice of Hand-Block printing has been a long standing tradition in Rajasthan, especially Bagru and Sanganer.

Traditionally practiced by a caste of printers known as the ‘Chhipa’, they would pass on their skill to their children as a proud marker of their identity. In the face of globalization and rapid commodification, the occupation is no longer as caste-bound as it once was, but as many printers feel, the Art has lost its authenticity, and their cultural identity, fading.

Bagru, a village 40 Kilometers West of Jaipur, is home to around 100 Chhipa families. It is here that hand block printing has much to be owed for the success of Bagru. Life here revolved around printing. ‘Dhobis’ would wash the cloth, and the Chhipas would imprint them with designs carved out of sheesham wood. It is here that hand block printing still thrives.
“We wear colours here in Rajasthan”
Bagru, India - Prahalad Rai Dosaya, a Chhipa, owner of Dosaya Textiles.
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Losing Touch

The ceaselessness of the craft is owed to the inter-generational passing down of skills and creativity of the block printers. However, as the craft became increasingly commercialised, screen printing has become more prevalent to meet the increasing demands of the market. Although production has improved, many feel a loss of ownership over their designs. In contrast, hand block printing poses to be more strenuous whilst not providing much revenue in return.

This industrialized process has furthered the next generation of printers from taking up the profession of hand block printing. Newer generations of printers see a lack of utility in keeping up with traditions and in the wake of the modern education system, arts and crafts in general have been neglected. Government programs are minimal, and the focus is on making the crafts industry more profitable as opposed to conserving what craftspeople see as being authentic to their culture. Growing demands in a neo-liberal environment meant that productivity has overtaken authenticity resulting in the introduction of machines to the market. As a consequence, the demand for workers fell and have wages declined.

Bagru, India - A woman dyeing cotton cloths
Sanganer, India - A man rinsing a screen frame

Sanganer, India - Men screen printing patterns
"We made a very big mistake. When we recognised our crafts and craftsmen we did not give them dignity. We should have certified them as gurus and given them disciplines to train." - Raj Kanwar Ji, owner of Ojjas, Jaipur.
Finding Solidarity

A sense of distrust and lack of solidarity is prominent within printing communities in the region. Printers are wary of their designs being stolen in a tight competitive climate at not only the local level, but until recently, at the global stage as well. Chhipa’s, once touted for their skill are now made wary of one another. Market values of their work supersede the value it has in preserving cultural heritage and identity.
In the face of a rapidly changing economy, these printers lament the diminishing authenticity of their art, but understand that times are changing. While there is a strong desire to preserve traditions, printers wish for a more lucrative future for their children. While hand-block printing may have enriched communities in Rajasthan for generations, it may not be enough to sustain them today.

“When we don’t recognise the hand as a skill but machine as a skill then who benefits from this process?”
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THE TEAM

The Trunk Door is an enterprise committed to giving the tireless workers in India’s textile and handicraft sector, a voice. As an online business rooted in India with its branches spreading overseas, the tree of its business curates a collection of hand-made works in block printing, mughal art, chikan work to name a few, providing its customers the best shades of these authentic made-by-hand craft

JIGNESH MISTRY is a Senior Research Analyst and the Visual Storyboard Team Lead with the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), Jindal School of Liberal Arts, O.P. Jindal Global University. He is a freelance photojournalist, who has been working in the field as a journalist for over 11 years. Jignesh started his career as a nightshift news photographer at a daily tabloid during his graduation. Since then, his work has been published at multiple magazines, wire agencies and national newspapers. He is also involved in undertaking photography workshops for students in academic institutions. He has been engaged with the PAIGAM network and is a regular contributor at The Wire, The Press Trust of India and other International Wire Agencies.

Tavleen Kaur
Research Assistant, CNES

Advaita Singh
Senior Research Analyst, CNES

Apremeya Sudarshana
Intern, CNES