

Ajrak:

A Sindhi Tradition and Living craft

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Ajrak is a block printed cloth with deep crimson red and indigo blue background, bearing symmetrical patterns with interspersed unprinted sparkling white motifs, mostly stars. Made of cotton its suppleness reminds us of smooth silk. More than a fabric, Ajrak is a Sindhi tradition, traceable from the earliest archeological finds of the old Indus civilization of Moen –Jo-Dero. It has been equally popular from times immemorial till today among its urban, rural and nomad users.

Ajrak is literally used in Sindh from the cradle to the grave. It is used as a hammock for infants, headgear for girls, a bridal accessory, a turban and a shawl, a

bed cover, a table cloth, a gift item and token of respect to honor a guest, as a weather protection being cool in summer and warm in winter and last but not least

as a farewell wrap, like a flag to honor the departing dear souls. Most of the state heads and dignitaries of Pakistan have used Ajrak in their public meetings to show



Indus River

نهر السند



Local Sindhi people

الأهالي في منطقة السند

respect and as a token of solidarity for Sindh province.

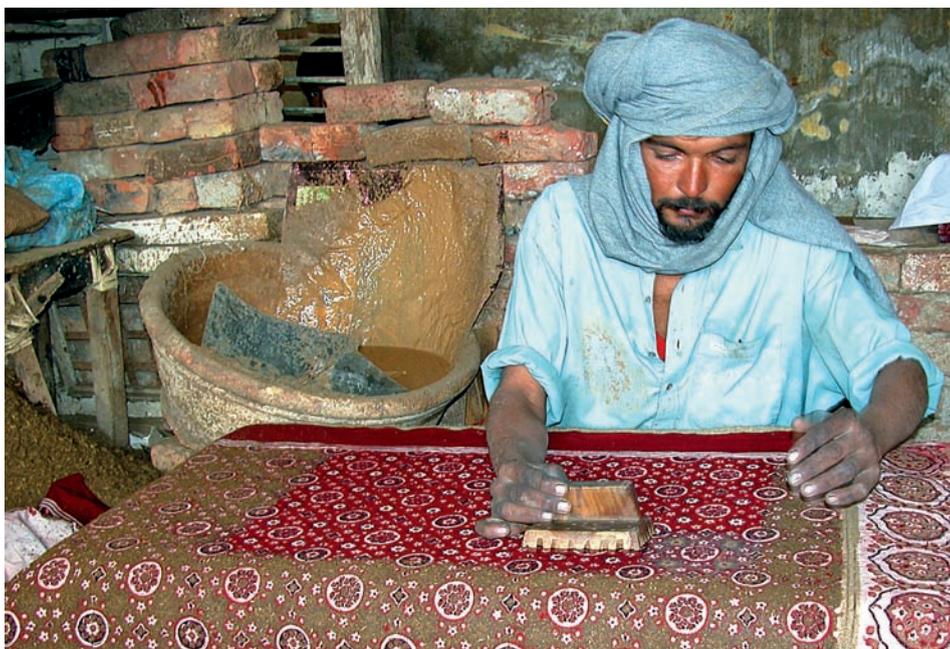
To get a first hand idea of how it is made we visited the small towns of Mityari, Bhit Shah and Hala located in and near Mityari district of Sindh province of Pakistan.

Bhit Shah is known on account of the shrine of the great Sindhi mystic poet "Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai" whose famous poetic

masterpiece "Shah Jo Risalo" (Shah's journal)" occupies a place next to none in old and modern Sindhi literature. A visit to Bhit Shah opens the door to "Sindhology" the specialization of the Indus (Sindh) valley civilization – as "Egyptology" is to the ancient Egyptian civilization. Mityari is known for ajrak craftsmanship, whereas Hala town is the marketplace of all the

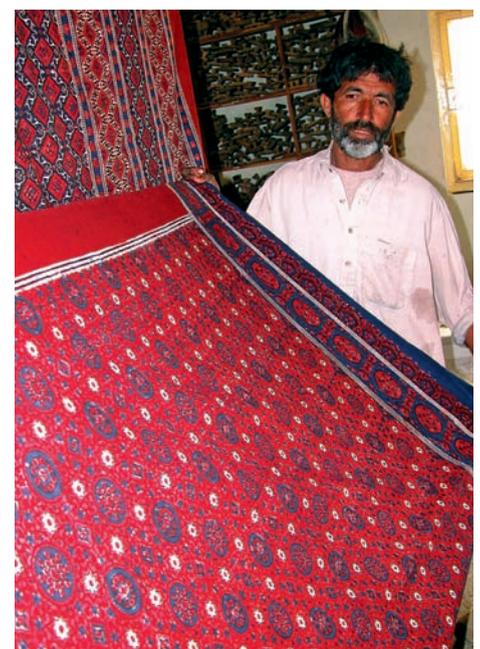
handicrafts including Ajrak, Sindhi embroidery, lacquered woodwork, typical glazed tiles in blue and white "Kashi" artwork, terracotta and some typical woven fabrics like "Soosi".

The urge to mention the stunning beauty of the scenic panorama along the highway during a drive from Karachi to these places is simply irresistible. The misty twilight, the ▶



Ajrak printing

طبع الأجراك



Finished ajrak

الأجراك في مرحلته النهائية



Printing mixture

خلط مواد الصبغ

wide stretches of green and yellow mustard fields in full bloom, attractive banana and mango plantations, widespread lush green fields of wheat interspersed with working village girls dressed in luminescent yellow, green, crimson and orange colors, with occasional colorful floral nurseries in full bloom, and

pure white migratory birds in their elegant flight over the old Sindh River are only a few glimpses of the tour.

The legendary Pakistani folk singer "Allan Faqir" with his down to earth personality has been an inspiring performing artist with his stylish Ajrak attire including his dancing peacock like turban made of Ajrak. Color is



Processing ajrak

عمل الأجراك



Printed ajrak

الأجراك المطبوع

the continuous phase of the "music in the colour emulsion" of Sindhi society.

The Muslim rulers used to award "Khilat" (an expensive gown) in recognition of the services of their courtiers. I think Muslim Sindhi rulers also continued the tradition and awarded "Ajrak" in recognition of outstanding performances or the valuable services rendered ▶



Mustard field

حقل الخردل



Camels

جمال

by individuals, as it is customarily conferred even today upon respectable guests.

Considering the different processes involved, particularly printing which is the heart of the craft, Ajrak making seems to be a scientific art. The technique of resist printing allows exclusive absorption of a dye in the desired areas only and prevents absorption on the areas intended to be left uncolored. It seems to be like differential staining used in microscopy wherein different microbes are stained and fixed selectively.

On February 22, 2008, the two hundred sixty first anniversary of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai was celebrated and a public holiday was observed throughout Sindh province.

The famous German orientalist Marry Anne Schimmel visited this shrine twice. Well-known scholar Mrs.Elsa Qazi translated Shah –Jo-Risalo selectively in verse. It is a pure spiritual delight to know how beautifully Shah Latif Bhattai created the divine melody from his earthy, arid environment, and how finely Mrs.Elsa Qazi captured its essence. Symbolic use of camel, saltbush and washing etc. strongly suggests

that Ajrak was very much in use at least in Shah Latif Bhattai's times; ■

"Like fresh pan-leaves are shawls they wear of shimmering emerald silk'

"Beautiful like roses sweet are robes of damsels fair"
(Elsa Qazi from Mumal and Rano)

There was a time when princely Hoat
my clothes to wash did choose;
Now even camelmens refuse
to take me with themselves
My gown is at my shoulders torn;
alas my head is bare
O sisters in Bhambore fair
what have I now to do?
(Elsa Qazi from Sauil:Hussaini)

I bound him near some glorious tree
That he some buds may eat
Ill-mannered camel, on the sly
Still finds the saltbush sweet.
Woes me-I know not how to treat
Camel that so confounds
(Elsa Qazi from Sur Khumbat)



Washing before printing

غسل الأجراك قبل طبعه



Wooden printing blocks

قوالب الطبع الخشبية