

Special Edition

SWABHIMAAN

In collaboration with
Feminist Economics &
Policy Initiative (FEPI)

*Women,
Culture, &
Traditional
Arts*

CONTENTS



03

COMMENTARY

*NAVIGATING IDENTITIES IN
HANDBLOCK PRINTING AMIDST
LOCAL & GLOBAL DYNAMICS*

09

UMEED

*SUSTAINABILITY & THE ART OF
HAND BLOCK PRINTING*

11

PHOTO ESSAY

A VIRTUAL VISIT TO BISOU

15

REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

*THE DILUTING CLUSTERS OF BAGRU
AND SANGANER*

21

VIDEO ESSAY

*WOMEN IN HANDBLOCK
PRINTING*

COMMENTARY

Text by Suparna Aggarwal
Edited by Tanya Rana

Feminist
Economics &
Policy
Initiative

O.P. Jindal Global University

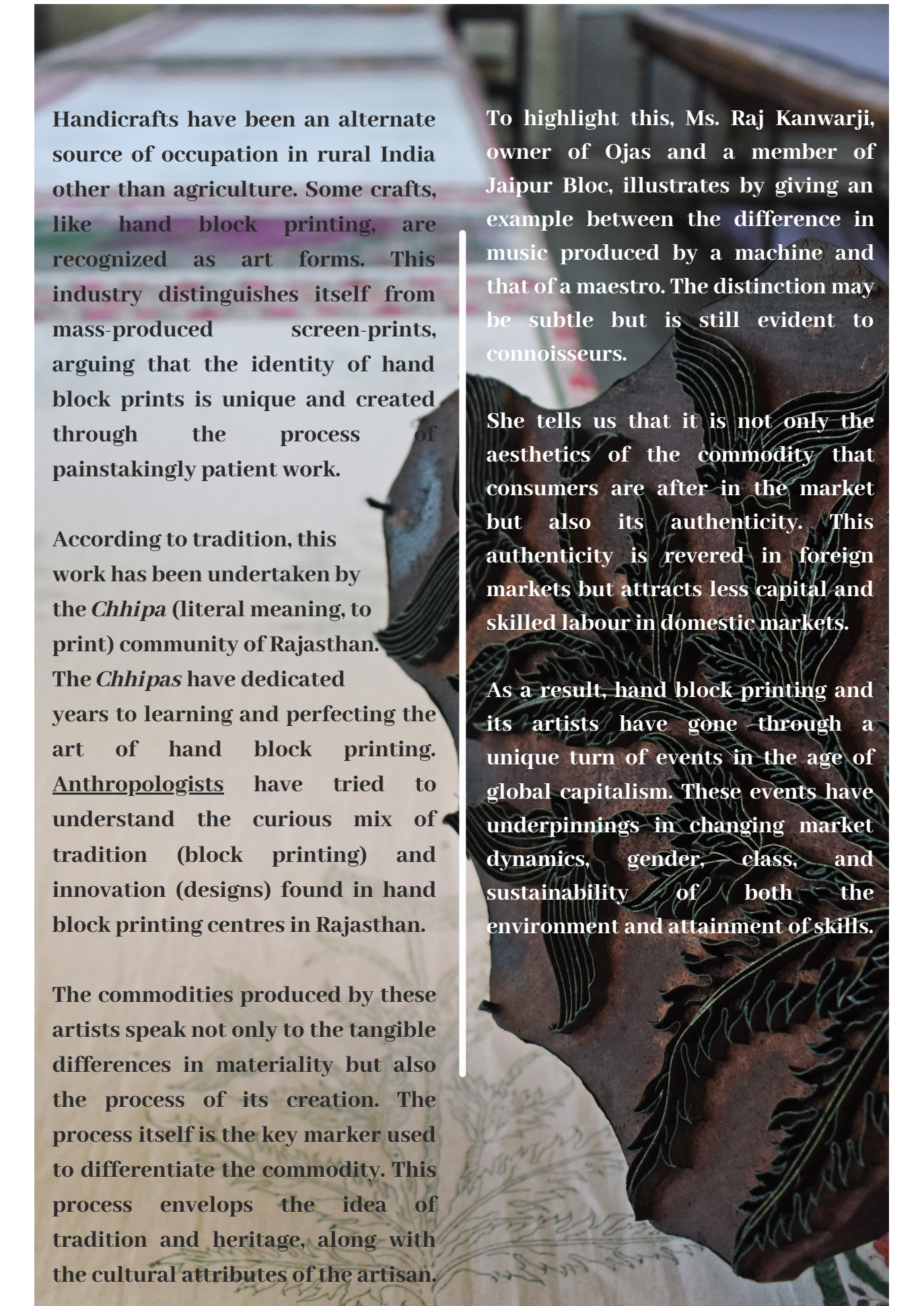
NAVIGATING IDENTITIES IN HANDBLOCK PRINTING AMIDST LOCAL & GLOBAL DYNAMICS



Women working at the Indus Art and Emporium-Mansarovar

Image credits: Jignesh Mistry

In this commentary, we are underlining the sustenance of handicrafts as a traditional art form in Jaipur, and how it has evolved with global dynamics. We also explore the significance of this artform to preserve identity—at the individual and community levels. We conclude by highlighting the scope of the Jaipur bloc as a pioneering entity to spearhead collectivisation practices, which women, in several capacities, have used to manoeuvre social, political, and economic agency.



Handicrafts have been an alternate source of occupation in rural India other than agriculture. Some crafts, like hand block printing, are recognized as art forms. This industry distinguishes itself from mass-produced screen-prints, arguing that the identity of hand block prints is unique and created through the process of painstakingly patient work.

According to tradition, this work has been undertaken by the *Chhipa* (literal meaning, to print) community of Rajasthan. The *Chhipas* have dedicated years to learning and perfecting the art of hand block printing. Anthropologists have tried to understand the curious mix of tradition (block printing) and innovation (designs) found in hand block printing centres in Rajasthan.

The commodities produced by these artists speak not only to the tangible differences in materiality but also the process of its creation. The process itself is the key marker used to differentiate the commodity. This process envelops the idea of tradition and heritage, along with the cultural attributes of the artisan.

To highlight this, Ms. Raj Kanwarji, owner of Ojas and a member of Jaipur Bloc, illustrates by giving an example between the difference in music produced by a machine and that of a maestro. The distinction may be subtle but is still evident to connoisseurs.

She tells us that it is not only the aesthetics of the commodity that consumers are after in the market but also its authenticity. This authenticity is revered in foreign markets but attracts less capital and skilled labour in domestic markets.

As a result, hand block printing and its artists have gone through a unique turn of events in the age of global capitalism. These events have underpinnings in changing market dynamics, gender, class, and sustainability of both the environment and attainment of skills.

Globalisation of Crafts

The block printing industry is segregated into two categories: mechanised and labour intensive (or non-mechanised). The latter constitutes forty per cent of the three billion dollars in trade generated every year. Even with its design-innovation duo, government support towards this industry has been less than satisfactory.

The slow shift from non-mechanised to mechanised hand block printing has been a response to meet market demands, both foreign and domestic. The resultant outcome is a minimal noticeable change in the final output but complete procedural changes to meet consumer aspirations.

These changes have resulted in screen printing, as the preferred method of mechanisation, and has taken the industry by storm. The artists who work in this trade are aware of this shift. Mr Brij Ballabh Udaiwal, director of Crafts Council of Weavers and Artisans, talks about how artists are bound to this trade due to their lack of capital to up-scale or their lack of skills to choose an alternate profession.

As a result, artists are stuck in a cycle of limited income-earning opportunities with a bundle of unwanted skills on behalf of the artist.

Respective government agencies are also cognizant of these changes and the growing need for people to earn a livelihood with dignity. They have responded by initiating easier access to credit to micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) in this area. They have supplemented this step by introducing infrastructural support, training of artists, and scaling of products in cottage emporiums and craft fairs.

Unfortunately, there is a lack of intention to augment existing efforts in the direction of providing social groups, engaged in hand block printing with incentives to continue this profession, which hampers their sense of identity and cultural capital they derive from this work. This is evident as no sector-specific schemes for hand block printing are prevalent in the country.

Teerath Kacholiya, the owner of Indus Art Emporium, laments the lack of support to this industry despite its roots being firmly embedded in tradition and art, and a source of viable economic profit. Among practitioners of this trade, there is a feeling of loss knowing their next generation are not willing to engage in hand block printing.

Morale has further been affected due to consumer tendencies to go for cheaper products, devaluing their profession resulting in a dwindling agency of artists. Ms. Raj Kanwarji laments the lack of people to carry on the practice of hand block printing. There is enough evidence to suggest demand for finished products using the traditional hand block printing method is on the rise in international markets.

Mr. Kacholiya has witnessed an overall increase in demand by five per cent. Since there is an increase in demand, naturally followed by the prospect of economic profit, firms have been trying to expand their capacities. They keep facing the issue of waning government support and the unwillingness of people to join this trade. The latter is attributed to the availability of better opportunities elsewhere. While the advent of diversification and growth of newer possibilities for Chhipas to move out of the confines of their caste identities is desirable, it comes at the cost of people not wanting to associate with the practice.

Women and Collectivization

These problems prompted some organisations, like the Jaipur Bloc, to set up units through the collectivisation of locals. Jaipur Bloc was conceptualised by like-minded individuals who wanted to preserve hand block printing. This initiative aimed to strengthen domestic orientation towards the art and its set of less frequented struggles.

Ms Kanwarji narrates how men folk in the village are trained step-by-step in printing, drying, and curing processes. “You are training an entrepreneur”, she says with certainty, knowing no specialised skills were imparted to this group of workers that they could utilise in other industries. This prompted her to open a training centre with the help of the government. Even though specialised skills were imparted, the beneficiaries of this programme found little merit to stay on and work for hand block printing centres. Whom should they train now?

The women in the village, unlike men, have not received as many opportunities to earn wages as their male counterparts. Women had been confined to less strenuous roles in hand block printing due to a perceived lack of strength in their wrists. They could also not commit to longer working hours as demands from their domestic lives were equally urgent. With time, ideas of gendered division in workplaces have been dismantled due to economic pressures. This was supplemented by public action and demands towards women’s empowerment on economic, political, and social lines. Since there is far and few literatures on self-help groups (SHGs) in the handicraft sector, said public action has been a noticeable source of momentum.



Women working at Ojjas, Bagru
Image credits: Jignesh Mistry

The Jaipur Bloc is no different; currently, it has sixteen women leaders who have taken the collectivisation model of SHGs to give voice and opportunity to women by training them in hand block printing. Women were not front runners and did not customarily engage in activities for which they now receive training. The origin of collectivisation is rooted in the changes in labour composition introduced by advances in sciences in the 19th century. This was first postulated by Marx. He argued that as production increases due to technological advancement, more women will be employed as substitutes for men.

Since there is a tendency for men to withdraw participation for better work opportunities, women get left behind to tend after domesticities. There has been an inclination to shift work towards women who are willing and interested to earn a wage to supplement their household incomes. More importantly, it was to inculcate a sense of agency in women.



Agency and the ability to recognise it is vastly different in genders, especially those who have faced marginalisation in several forms. This has led to a trend where we see slivers of feminisation of workers in the hand block industry that started due to collectivization.

While this process helps retain the momentum of increased sales in the hand block industry, it does more for its new entrants, i.e., its female workforce. First, the process of collectivisation aims to reduce the gender gap in human capital by training both men and women in the intricate process of printing. Second, it limits the possibilities of gendered differences in art. Lastly, it hopes to do away with the sense of devaluing those workers who have been battling in this line of work and renew their sense of confidence and identity.

Feminist Economics & Policy Initiative (FEPI) is a student-led initiative at the Jindal School of Government and Public Policy, O.P. Jindal Global University. We are an attempt towards bridging the gap of diversity & perspectives in economic research/policy.

This commentary has been written by Suparna Aggarwal, Co-founder, FEPI.

Umeed by Swabhimaan

Ruhi Nadkarni

SUSTAINABILITY AND THE ART OF HAND BLOCK PRINTING

Bisou is a sustainable clothing venture that upcycles scrap fabric to create pieces that appeal to the “modern” taste. Bisou was started with the objective of preserving the art form of Jaipur hand block printing. It focuses on empowering women and local artisans economically, and redefines the arena of fashion through a sustainable approach. Founded by Sachi Badaya in 2020, this clothing brand makes sustainable clothing affordable to reduce the usage of fast fashion and promotes local art industries.



Women packing stitched clothes for selling and delivering

In this conversation of Umeed, we talk about the role of women in sustaining the ‘culture’ of traditional art forms. This conversation highlights how adapting to modern practices and pandemic-specific impact are essential to conserving the Jaipur hand block printing industry. We shed light on the importance of sustainability, upcycling, thoughtful consumption, and the role producers, consumers, and the government can play in upholding the life of these dying art industries.

Listen to the podcast here 



Wooden block stamps used for hand block printing

Photo Essay

Captions by Dikshi Arora
Image Credits: Sachi Badaya

A VIRTUAL VISIT TO BISOU



Female workers sun drying the stitched cloth featuring various prints.



Stitching scrap fabric to create pieces that appeal to the 'modern' taste



Cutting and stitching of Bisou's Upcycle Pants



Pile of waste clothes/textile waste stock and Wooden Block Stamps kept unused



Sustainability, Upcycling and Thoughtful Consumption



REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Vanshika Mittal

THE DILUTING CLUSTERS OF BAGRU AND SANGANER

Craft communities in India usually exist in close knit clusters by virtue of which they have strong traditional knowledge systems. The older craftsmen have relied on these knowledge systems to pass down their knowledge and expertise in the craft to the younger generations. One such craft pocket is the hand block printed textiles in the towns of Jaipur district, namely Bagru and Sanganer.

India's textile and apparel industry has risen in the pandemic accounting for 5 percent of its GDP, 7 percent of its value added output and 12 percent of its export earnings. However, little do we realise the hidden costs behind the market dynamics of such commodification, capitalisation and globalisation.

The Declining Craftsmen

In 1958, a research advisory panel set up under the All India Handicrafts Board cautioned against the policy of 'technological laissez-faire' in India – a country with vast and rapidly increasing population and chronic mass unemployment. The panel deciphered that mill production which is imperative for growth must be quantitatively capped.

This limit beginning from 500 million meters p.a. was annually increased thereafter until it was completely abolished in 1966. With phenomenal growth rates every year, the mechanised sector last registered a total production of 2400 million meters in 1980.

Since then, there have been no records to gauge the size of this industry. Simultaneously, hand printing has only shrunk, losing an estimated more than 2.5 lakh jobs to mechanisation.

Screen printing has dominated the market today and even the small proportion of hand printed material has lost its authenticity. This is mainly due to two reasons – a large influx of unskilled migrant workers and lack of interest by the younger generations. In this capitalised production, the block printers are perceived as mere workers and their skill as hard labour. This has shifted the focus of the craft from the *kala* to a more strenuous form of work that brings home only a minimum wage – making the sector unappealing for employment to the youth.

At the same time, increased production through screen printing has opened opportunities for migrant workers that seek income in this region. Ultimately, a pool of printers has been created that neither hold the experience of printing nor are related to its heritage in any manner. Lack of governmental efforts to restore the craft have only worsened the situation as due credit is not provided to these artisans.

“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*

“Before 1990, the government of India supported artisans. We all received the yellow artisan card which provided us with many subsidies. Today, that card holds no value. I do not even get a stall for free to display my work in Delhi.”

~ *Suraj Titanwala, a printer from Bagru*

Additionally, the modern education system is very exclusive of arts and crafts. They are pushed aside as ‘extracurriculars’ with no developed curriculum. Training programmes run by the government too are not tailored to the needs of the industry since they take an entrepreneurial approach that does not equip students with enough skill to practice the craft.



Workers engaging in screen printing in Sanganer

Loss in Identity

The domino effect of the rapid commercialisation of the craft is the loss of its identity and authenticity. While increasing exports have filled the shelves of the foreign market with 'Made in India' labels, few people are able to tell the prints apart from one another or even whether the product is hand-made or screen printed.

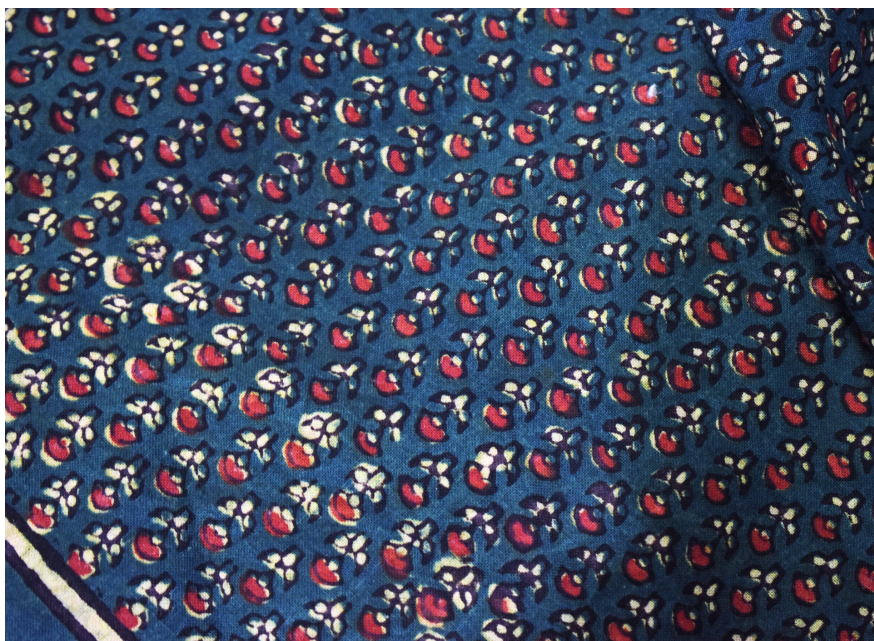
'Made in India' does not simply represent goods being manufactured in this location but also the identities of the cultures, people and materials used in its production. In today's fast-paced globalisation, labels such as these help trace the product to its origin. Moreover, it is a reflection of the workers of the country and an acknowledgement of their efforts and techniques. All of this is compromised when in order to meet the growing demand, the artisan's hand is replaced by a machine and they are completely alienated from the production process.

Furthermore, it is important to question who benefits from this process. This can be understood simply from the recent episode of fashion designer Sabyasachi Mukherjee using the Sanganer (screen) print in his collection – Wanderlust – under collaboration with the global organisation H&M. An open letter sent to him on behalf of the artisan sector lays out the sheer potential that Indian craftsmen possess only to be time and again robbed of the opportunity to showcase their own skills and designs.

It states – “...to adopt technology for greater efficiencies while taking a rights based approach to protect artisan rights and bring back ownership and prosperity to them. It is this vision we hope you will export to the world.”

Appropriation of prints into screen production has only become easier over time resulting in faster loss of identity. Earlier, the blocks (designs) made of sheesham wood were discarded in riverbeds where they would naturally disintegrate. Today, older blocks are sold as souvenirs to people hailing from all over the world allowing for easy replication. Absence of labels leaves no means for consumers to trace the origin of the craft that they are purchasing.

Even in the rare cases that they are present, there is no strong legal obligation that serves its purpose. For example, Sangneri print artisans have a Geographical Indication (GI) registration, however, there is no proof of their compensation from the high sales of Sabyasachi’s collection.



Fadat Prints

Apart from this, even the hand printed textile today lacks in quality. The original prints such as fadatas which were much finer and intricate are no longer produced and have been replaced by modern patterns that are larger and cater to the global demand. This is mainly due to the disintegration of the printing community and a rise in unskilled labour as explained earlier.

Fading Traditions and Sustainability

Screen printing requires minimal human effort and also completely eliminates the dependence on blocks. This threatens the heritage of not only hand block printing but also the large cottage industry of block carving.

The situation is disheartening for those handful of artisans and business owners who still practice authentic hand block printing in a traditional and sustainable manner with organic colours, designs such as the fadatas and efficient water management. These include a few chippas from Bagru and collectives such as Jaipur Bloc. They strongly believe that the culture of hand block printing can be revived by reintegrating some of these characteristics.

“If sustainability can become part of our crafts then they can be sustained.”

~ *Raj Kanwar Ji*

However, market forces and the climate crisis have challenged these efforts both socially and economically. Suraj Narain Titanwala and his son Deepak stand as commendable examples in this movement.

“In the earlier days, I would easily find natural colours and clean water.

There was no difficulty in procuring raw materials”

~ *Suraj Titanwala*

Polluting and diminishing water supply in the Thar region can completely wither the intended shade of the dyes. Bagru, too, has been struggling with the harsher quality of water every year. The village is in urgent need of a water treatment facility in order to carry out the processes of dyeing and washing. Therefore, it is imperative to mainstream a sustainable form of textile production in the face of growing environmental threats that can no longer tolerate the pressures of production through business as usual.

Bagru and Sanganer too might face the same fate as Jaipur which has completely lost its printing tradition. Older printers provide narratives of Jaipur's heritage of mud resist printing to be far finer than that of its nearby towns. However, with the rapid expansion of the city and paucity of space and water, almost all of Jaipur's printers have moved away or stopped printing.



Suraj and his son Deepak in front of the museum built by them displays all of their works

Conclusion

Much is needed to be done to uplift the crafts community which would be possible only when it is prioritised over individual profits. At the moment, the industry requires policy attention and hand holding. Given the large quantities exported by hand block printing, the sector already receives steady investment. What needs to be redefined is the focus areas of these investments – from business owners to the craftsmen.

In other words, the form of value addition must be clearly shifted from making profits to preserving the identity of our heritage and culture. Introduction and standardisation of a label as proof of the authenticity of the craft, while difficult, will serve the dual purpose of spreading consumer awareness and providing identity to the craftsmen. An amalgamation of the above interventions will go a long way in correcting the negative impact of the market dynamics on both the livelihoods and the environment of hand block printing.

VIDEO ESSAY

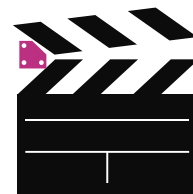
Tavleen Kaur Saluja

WOMEN IN HANDBLOCK PRINTING

MS. RAJ KANWARJI, OWNER OF OJJAS BAGRU



Please click here to watch the video interview



“Because we wear so much of textiles, women entrepreneurs have always been here in Rajasthan.”

~ *Raj Kanwar Ji*

OUR TEAM



Vanshika Mittal
Senior Research Analyst



Dikshi Arora
Research Analyst



Ruhi Nadkarni
Research Assistant



Tanya Rana
Research Assistant



Jignesh Mistry
Visual Storyboard Lead



Tavleen Kaur
Research Assistant

FACULTY ADVISORS



Professor Sriti Ganguly



Shreyashi Sharma



Professor Nisha Nair



Professor Deepanshu Mohan



Professor Saumya Uma



Swabhimaan brings out stories of success and positive evolution from gendered hurdles in the entrepreneurial spirit of creation and self-respect. This special edition is a collaboration between Swabhimaan and Feminist Economics & Policy Initiative (FEPI).



Contact Us:

swabhimaan.space@gmail.com