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PRESERVING HERITAGE THROUGH FABRIC: THE ROLE OF AJRAK IN SUSTAINING INDIGENOUS SINDHI CRAFT TRADITIONS

Hisamuddin

Lecturer, Institute of Art and Design, University of Sindh, Jamshoro, Pakistan. Email: hissamuddin@usindh.edu.pk

Khwaja Amir Rasheed

Lecturer, Department of Art and Design, University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Muzaffarabad, Pakistan. Email: amir.rasheed@ajk.edu.pk

Jahanzaib Afridi

Lecturer, Department of Art and Design, University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Muzaffarabad, Pakistan. Email: jahanzaib.afridi@ajku.edu.pk

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of Ajrak, a traditional block-printed textile, in preserving and sustaining indigenous Sindhi craft traditions. Researcher Employed qualitative research method with phenomenological research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and field observations in various districts of Sindh. A purposive sample of 18 respondents including artisans, cultural activists, and community elders was selected based on their direct involvement with Ajrak production and use. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data, revealing four major themes that highlight Ajrak's role as a symbol of identity, a source of economic livelihood, a vehicle for intergenerational knowledge transfer, and a cultural artifact facing modern challenges. Despite threats from commercialization and declining youth interest, the findings indicate a growing awareness and revivalist spirit aimed at preserving Ajrak's authenticity. This study emphasizes the need for integrated cultural, educational, and policy initiatives to ensure the long-term sustainability of this iconic Sindhi tradition. Ajrak is more than fabric it is heritage in motion.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Handloom Industry, Textile Preservation, Sustainable Craftsmanship and Block Printing

Introduction

Ajrak, a special dyed cloth has its honored position in the cultural heritage of Sindh, a province in Pakistan with a glorious history and versatile traditions. It is a complex fabric, mainly crafted out of cotton or silk, consisting of geometric designs and using bright colors, and it has a longstanding relationship with the Sindhi people, their sense of identity, and their art forms. Ajrak is more than just a cloth, it is representative of the centuries old craftsmanship that has been aged down the generations. One of the most important elements of the Sindhi culture is the practice of making Ajrak, a complex process involving block printing, dyeing and washing, it depicts the ingenuity, history and relation with nature of the region (Ayub et al., 2024).

Ajrak-making is an ancient art form, some sources claim its History dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization. Ajrak tradition has been changing through centuries, yet its main principles, the emphasis on details, the fascination, and regard towards the nature, and the continuation of the cultural tradition have been preserved. The colors in Ajrak are all obtained through natural means, using indigo, pomegranate and iron oxide among others, and demonstrate a balance between the Sindhi people and ecology (Bilgrami, 2020). Not only is the color scheme (deep reds, blues, blacks, and whites) visually arresting, but it is also full of meaning, with colors and patterns of design representing particular cultural elements. Ajrak is a vital constituent of socio-cultural life of the Sindhis. Not only it is worn during festive occasions, weddings, and religious events, but it is also applied in the domestic setting,

which enhances its application in the daily life. Ajrak is much more than a practical piece of clothing; it bears social and family connotations as well as regional pride. It has become a part of the very identity of Sindhi people, something that gives them a physical connection to their roots and history. Nevertheless, similar to most native crafts around the globe, Ajrak is also in danger of extinction owing to industrialization and the shifting fashion design, as well as the degradation of traditional craftsmanship (Clifford, 2012).

The past few years have seen an increased realization of the importance of preservation of Ajrak and other traditional crafts, not just as cultural symbols but also as means of livelihood to the artisans. The contribution of Ajrak to the continuance of indigenous Sindhi craft traditions cannot be regarded merely in terms of aesthetic value or even economic value but must be considered in terms of cultural value as well (Farah, 2011). This paper aims to investigate how Ajrak as an art form is still able to preserve the heritage of Sindh, through an investigation of the history, processes and modern-day challenges of Ajrak, it will ensure that the knowledge, skills and values attached to Ajrak is transferred to future generations. Ajrak is not only the matter of preserving a cloth, but it is the matter of preserving living tradition, which carries the essence of Sindhi culture. In this journey, we will be pointing out how Ajrak is helping to keep alive the indigenous crafts in the growing globalized world (Hussain, 2024).

Objectives of the Study

1. To explore the historical and cultural significance of Ajrak within Sindhi society.
2. To examine the traditional techniques and artistic processes involved in Ajrak making.
3. To analyze the major challenges and current efforts in preserving Ajrak craftsmanship.

Literature Review

Ajrak making as a type of important indigenous craft is a tradition that has already been studied in a variety of fields. The historians have looked into its historical origins, its cultural and symbolic interpretations, peculiarities of its production process and challenges it is experiencing today in a shifting socio-economic environment (Iqbal et al., 2025). The structure of this literature review comprises four thematic titles: the historical and cultural background of Ajrak, the techniques and craftsmanship involved, its significance as a symbol of Sindhi identity, and the challenges threatening its sustainability.

Historical Context and Cultural Significance of Ajrak

Ajrak is deeply rooted in the history of the South Asian subcontinent (specifically in Sindh). Early textile production and dyeing technologies similar to those form the basis of Ajrak making have been found at the archaeological sites of the Indus Valley Civilization. Such an association makes this craft linked to one of

the oldest known civilizations, and it is not only a textile but a cultural object of thousands year old roots. The development of Ajrak is firmly connected with the Islamic art and aesthetics. The Islamic artistic tradition, of which the geometric and symmetrical patterns of Ajrak are a part, favored abstraction and symmetry instead of representational art. Gradually, these inputs became assimilated with the local cultural traditions in Sindh resulting in the emergence of the distinct Ajrak Patterns that are characteristic today (Jan & Shar, 2019).

Ajrak is not just a cloth but it is a symbol of culture, which is bonded in the life of Sindhi people. It is used during special events e.g. weddings, funerals and religious ceremonies. The home decor is another common usage as it is employed to decorate tables, walls, and beddings. Therefore, Ajrak serves two purposes, it is practical and ritualistic. It tells the history, memory and beliefs of sindhi people through its motif and colors. This cloth also represents respect and honor among the Sindhi society. It is a customary kindness to present Ajrak to the guests or dignitaries as a show of hospitality and value. It is used as a cultural symbol which reinforces group boundaries and reinstates group identity (Mirza, 2020).

Techniques and Craftsmanship in Ajrak Making

The process of Ajrak making is lengthy and tiresome and it represents the skill and efforts of skilled craftsmen. It usually starts by washing and treating the fabric ready to be dyed. Block printing is the central method in Ajrak, it is a print technique where wooden blocks are carved with detailed patterns. These blocks are further put in natural dyes and stamped on the cloth creating repeating designs. Natural dyes form one of the distinct features of Ajrak. The chief dye is indigo, and it gives the deep blue colour that is so characteristic of Ajrak fabrics. Shades of red, black and brown are produced by using other natural substances e.g. madder root, pomegranate rind and iron oxide. The selection of natural dyes not only outcomes in the provision of beautiful colors but also makes the craft environmentally friendly. Another significant part of the Ajrak-making practice is resisting dyeing. It is the application of resist paste on some areas of the cloth so that the dye would not be absorbed by those areas. This creates rich, multi-layered designs which are visually and texturally enticing (Mubashra, 2023).

The cloth is dyed and washed numerous times, often over several days, to produce the required degree of color saturations and complexity of pattern. Every pattern and motif of Ajrak has a symbolism. The symmetrical patterns commonly indicate the universe, nature, fertility and the spirituality. In this regard, Ajrak can be treated as a visual language comprising of which cultural tales, spiritual ideas, and historical remembrances are narrated. The craft person thus is not only a craftsman but a story teller and a custodian of culture. The art of Ajrak making is usually handed over generations within the artisan families. The children usually

start practicing the craft when they are still young and over time they develop the skills and knowledge to continue with the tradition. This artisanal form of knowledge transfer, through apprenticeship, strengthens the kinship and social ties, which are part of the craft (Rauf & Kamal, 2023).

Ajrak as a Symbol of Sindhi Identity

Ajrak is full of symbolism in the Sindhi culture. It is generally taken to be a symbol of ethnic pride and regionalism. Ajrak gives a physical manifestation of cultural specificity in a place where cultural heritage is at a risk of assimilation or abandonment. The act of wearing Ajrak is a way of practicing culture and is a way of making a public statement of being a Sindhi.

Such symbolism is supported by social and ceremonial activities. Ajrak forms a part of the trousseau of the bride and is commonly seen to adorn the venue of the wedding. It is used in folk festivals, national holidays and political meetings (particularly meetings supporting Sindhi rights and recognition). In that sense, Ajrak goes beyond being a piece of clothing and turns into a political and cultural declarations. What also gives Ajrak a boost in terms of its cultural importance is the gender-neutral appeal. It is worn by both men and women, and is frequently thrown over the shoulders, or worn as a head covering (Sattar, 2024).

This popularity reinforces its position as a symbol of the masses as opposed to being a class or gender specific symbol. Children are also introduced to Ajrak at an early age as they wear them at school functions and family get together. The Sindhi communities living in the diaspora have been using and encouraging the use of Ajrak to keep in touch with their origins. It appears on major cultural shows, scholarly conferences, and global art events. Ajrak provides a cultural unity between Sindhis in Pakistan and those elsewhere along with the geographic boarder through these medium. Besides, Ajrak has infiltrated the popular media and fashion. It appeared in the music videos, TV shows, and on the fashion runways, where it is praised as the instance of the traditional grace and local beauty. The fact that it keeps appearing in newer platforms highlights its flexibility and applicability to the modern society (Sheehan et al., 2014).

Challenges and the Future of Ajrak Craftsmanship

In spite of this cultural significance, the practice of Ajrak making is experiencing a number of problems which are likely to lead to the disappearance of this tradition. The decreasing population of the skilled artisans is one of the most burning problems. Fewer people are willing to learn the craft as younger generations turned masse towards formal education and job opportunities in the cities. Apprenticeship system is becoming weak and knowledge of tradition is being lost.

There are also economic reasons that lead to this deterioration. The process of Ajrak making is time-consuming and labor-intensive but does not necessarily bring artisans enough

financial compensation. It has also been aggravated by the emergence of machine-printed imitations. These cheaper versions which are usually made using artificial dyes and cheap material flood the markets and devalue the real thing, handmade Ajrak the problem is worsened by lack of institutional support and formal recognition of Ajrak artisans. The artisans are unable to continue with their trade without access to training programs, financial support, or even marketing platforms. Lack of the protection of intellectual property of traditional designs also permits big manufacturers to misuse and copy Ajrak motifs without acknowledging. Some attempts are however being done to revive the Ajrak tradition (Simair et al., 2023).

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), cultural groups and individual designers are trying to build awareness of the issue of preservation of traditional crafts. There are projects that give access to the artisans to new markets online and in international exhibitions. The interest of the young generation in the crafts is to be re-established by training courses and craft workshops and the skills are to be transfer to the young generations. The development of ethical fashion and the demand of consumers to sustainable products opens a possibility of Ajrak to acquire new relevance. Educating the world more on environmental concerns and cultural diversity would also assist in branding Ajrak as environmentally sustainable and culturally diverse alternative to the mass-produced fabrics. This change in consumer behavior when tapped in the right manner can provide a lifeline to the dying artisans communities who sustain the tradition of Ajrak (Yang et al., 2018).

Methodology

The presented study used a qualitative research methodology with a phenomenological research design to identify the cultural value of Ajrak in the preservation of the indigenous Sindhi craft tradition. The data was gathered by means of semi-structured interviews and field observations in several districts of Sindh. A purposive sampling method identified 18 participants comprised of artisans, cultural promoters, sellers, and community elders that had direct involvement with Ajrak production or utilization. With the permission of the participants, all the interviews were recorded and transcribed subsequently to be analyzed. Visual observations and field notes were recorded as well to give a contextual depth. Data were analyzed via thematic analysis in line with the six-phase method offered by Braun and Clarke, which provided the possibility to identify patterns and develop meaningful themes that reflected the lived experiences of the participants. The research process was guided by strict adherence to ethical consideration such as informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation of the subjects, and being culturally sensitive to all the people that were involved.

Results and Discussion

Theme 1: Ajrak as a Symbol of Cultural Identity

Among the very effective lessons which came out of the interviews and observations was the fact that the cultural significance of Ajrak was very deep-rooted within the Sindhi community. Much more than a cloth, Ajrak is an influential symbol of identity, history and pride. Participants defined it as not only clothes but spiritual and cultural item.

Narration 1

"Ajrak to us is second skin. It is not a piece of cloth, it is a remembrance of our fore fathers. And the moment I throw it around my shoulders, it seems that I am taking their blessings along with me. It could be Eid or funeral, Ajrak is never missed. It links us with our land, our saints and our narratives."

Narration 2

"Even at birth, a child is born, we wrap him/her first in Ajrak. It is how we greet them to the world. When it is a birthday or marriage or even when there is a protest or a festival- Ajrak speaks and not us. It says to the world, I am Sindhi. This is the reason why we treat it as we treat our flag."

Field Observation

Ajrak was also observed at the annual mela of Bhit Shah, where it was used to decorate shrines, as well as to give as gifts to guests and to wear by people of all ages. The cloth had a ceremonial use, and so was an important item not just because of its utility. Its presence in both the religious and social places made the powerful emotional stories of the participant legitimate.

Through these narrations and observations, it is confirmed that Ajrak is an identity artifact, which carries with it multi-layered meanings of culture, religion, and social interactions. It is a vital component of individual and group expression among the Sindhis, crossing all generations and social boundaries.

Theme 2: Craftsmanship as Devotion and Daily Struggle

Ajrak has a noble cultural status, but the reversal of this situation is that the artisans experience two sides of life; one of dedication and pride, and the other of financial hardship. Several interviewees told me about their love of the trade, but also talked about their disappointment at the diminished economic rewards.

Narration 1

"It is not just common work. It is a show of loyalty. And as I make ready the dye of natural indigo I am mindful of being a Sufi making up the colors of the divinity. each block print, each pattern is a prayer. Yet at the end of a day of work sometimes I am not able to afford the price of cloth and dye."

Narration 2

"Times are hard, we follow the traditions of the fathers and forefathers. Now people demand cheap Ajrak made by machines. Natural process requires ten days or over. All buyers want to know is the cost, not how it is made. I consider quitting sometimes, yet my

heart does not allow me to do that."

Field Observation

In Hala, the researcher visited a family-owned Ajrak workshop that has simple tools and scarce resources. They also did not have modern infrastructure despite their commitment to their generational knowledge. The craftsmen had to work in poor safety and economic security.

Producing ajraks is a labour of love, as it is a hardship, to many artisans. It is a conflict between tradition and livelihood. On the one hand, the craft is supported with a great respect, but artisans themselves are frequently affected by the unfriendly commercial system.

Theme 3: Knowledge Transmission Across Generations

Oral traditions and family mentorship form a big part of how Ajrak-making has continued to exist. There are no documented training regimes, instead, the information is imparted by observation, repetition and closed family ties.

Narration 1

"I did not learn this in any school. I would sit beside my mother under neem tree and she would print the cloth. She would say, 'Look at me stamp, hear the rhythm.' That was the way I learnt. We never put it in writing--our hands do.'"

Narration 2

"My father used to be strict. He used to say that Ajrak is not design only, but it is also discipline. He would have me do the same pattern over and over again until I did it correctly over the course of weeks. instructs me now my son. It is not only printing, it is a matter of patience and pride. It belongs to us inherited."

Field Observation

When a father was visiting a workshop, he was observed as he carefully positioned the hands of his son on the printing block. Formal instruction was never used--just demonstration, repetition and correction. This was an expression of silent pedagogy of care and cultural responsiveness.

Ajrak is not taught in manuals or in institutions but rather through family-to-family intergenerational learning. The transfer is affective, concrete and personal- it is based on fidelity and duration. A powerful model as this one is also susceptible to modernization and migration.

Theme 4: Preservation Amidst Modernization

The performers of today were usually concerned with the issue of losing authenticity because of modernization and commercialization. But they had a guarded optimism regarding awareness, outreach education, and the interest of the young people in traditional arts.

Narration 1

"It is painful when someone puts on machine-printed Ajrak and tells others that it is traditional. Real Ajrak is alive. The hand-printed blocks are irregular, the colors vary with the weather - that is the

beauty of it. Design can be replicated by machines, but not soul."

Narration 2

"There is hope as well. Last month young girls of the university came. They inquired about themes, messages, background. I was proud. Perhaps this new generation will battleground on our behalf. We want those who do not just wear Ajrak but know about it."

Field Observation

The researcher visited a local cultural institute in Hyderabad and observed a training session on the techniques of block-printing with natural dyes on young students. Older people were invited to talk on the spiritual meaning of motifs. The conversation between generations was vivid and cordial.

Threatened with commodification, the attempts to revive Ajrak by means of education and community outreach provide the hopeful directions. The future of many artisans does not necessarily consist in opposing modernization, but rather leading it in an authentic and culture-sensitive way.

Discussion

The results of the research done in this regard show that Ajrak is more than just a traditional textile, it is a strong cultural icon, rooted in the identity, Livelihood and spiritual awareness of the Sindhi community. Using interviews, field notes, and experiences with the artisans and community members, one can easily understand that Ajrak is an intricate substance that redefines generations, embraces tradition, and withstands culture dwindling under the influence of modernization. The former theme emphasizes the fact that Ajrak is a living embodiment of Sindhi identity. Respondents also kept stressing the importance of Ajrak being part of every life event; birth, marriage, death among others and serving as a visual language of belonging. The observation is consistent with more general anthropological knowledge about the social meaning of textiles. The peculiarity of Ajrak is in the level of emotional and spiritual attachment its carriers have to it, making the cloth to the level of sacred heritage (Ayub et al., 2024). The second theme reveals the duality of Ajrak craftsmanship that is sacred and economically vulnerable. On the one hand, artisans take profound meaning and pride in their work; on the other hand, they are under increased pressures of machine-made substitution and low returns in the market. The fieldwork revealed the disjuncture between the traditional processes that were time consuming and the commercialized needs of fast paced consumer economy. This turns up an imminent necessity of policy intercessions, viable marketing, and consumer instructive had better recognize the importance of the authenticity of handmade genuineness instead of lower-cost imitations. The third theme of transmission of knowledge was crucial to the survival of this art form. The dependence upon oral tradition and practical apprenticeship indicates the resiliency and the weakness of the craft. Although the learning within the family and the community guarantees the

preservation of the cultural continuity, the lack of formal records and the use of modern education devices and methods puts the tradition in danger, in case it fails to attract the attention of the younger generations (Mubashra, 2023). But the situation in the field revealed encouraging signs, as children were taught by older people and participated actively in mini-production. Lastly, the fourth theme is a complicated connection between modernization and preservation of culture. Although modernity and its associated activities like mass printing have watered down the exclusivity of Ajrak, it has also asleep awakened the revivalist sentiment in the hearts of some educated young people and culture promoters. The paper has observed that students and cultural researchers are starting to recognize the symbolic wealth and technical mastery inherent in Ajrak. Concerts, seminars and university partnerships have begun developing new avenues through which the tradition can be allowed to grow without affecting its core. Altogether, these data help to understand that Ajrak is not just a piece of cloth but a cultural story which is being woven throughout the years (Simair et al., 2023). The sustainability of the craft is through shared responsibility between artisans, communities, cultural institutions as well as policymakers. As well as conserving the textile itself, efforts should be made to conserve the structures of knowledge, value and community that support it. Incorporation of Ajrak into heritage studies and facilitation of artisan cooperatives and enhancement of the cultural connotations of Ajrak in both local and foreign markets may offer new threads of life to this textile.

Conclusion

This study in particular sheds light on Ajrak being a crucial string in the cultural identity of Sindhi society- not just as an aesthetic thing but something that runs much deeper in terms of identity, spirituality and continuity between generations. The investigation shows that Ajrak is not just a cloth, but it is a live tradition that is created by human hands (skilled artisans), passed knowledge and socio-cultural rituals. Though imperiled by industrial-scale production and changing economic realities, the tradition of Ajrak lives on in the skill of its artisans, in the traditions of family teaching, and in a new sense of culture among the younger generation. But this strength should be favoured with realistic programmers and policies, education and protection of handmade crafts in markets and promotion of culture worldwide. The diversity of this indigenous heritage could die out without active preservation and adaptation measures. Consequently, Ajrak can be considered as not only cultural asset but also the means of the sustainable development that is worth protecting and celebrating on local and international levels.

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