



## Block Printing in Sindh, AJRAK and other Contemporary Products

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**Abstract**— The purpose of the study is to record the oldest printing technique hand-block printing and preserve its evergreen product Ajrak<sup>1</sup> which is the traditional textile of Sindh. To find out the reasons of abandoning this traditional craft and to witness the difference in block printing done before and now. Different towns of Sindh were visited and eleven artisans (Ajrak-maker/block-printer and block-maker) were interviewed and a questionnaire was filled. The results illustrate that they are suffering from many problems but one of the major problem is lack of clean water which is badly affecting their business. It was also observed that traditional Ajrak formats and patterns are disappearing as only one or two patterns are mostly used nowadays. Whereas the machine block printing has somehow also affected the traditional craft. Despite all the problems they are still so passionate about this craft that they are training their children as well but there are certain evidences that Ajrak-making may not remain a family business anymore as it may be transferred to outsiders in future. However, they have also invented different contemporary products using various types of fabrics and patterns in hand-block printing according to the demand of the modern world. There may be a good contribution of this research to aware the people of the current situation of the ancient craft and a little effort can save the craft from further vanishing. It may also help the government to identify their problems and fulfill their basic needs so that the remaining centers can be saved.

**Keywords**— Block printing, Ajrak, contemporary products, fabrics and patterns.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Sindh is known for its rich traditional handicrafts. The craftsmen of Sindh are very passionate, hardworking, innovative and creative since ancient times. Due to their talent and skills they are well known all around the world for traditional arts & crafts. Women of Sindh have equally contributed in the rise of traditional crafts. The craftsmen with their inner sensibilities and intuitions gradually developed the printing techniques from simple resist patterning on one side of the fabric to the rich tonal two-sided resist printed fabric – *Ajrak* (Bilgrami 1990, p.22). One of the oldest techniques of printing patterns on textile is **block printing**. There are many assumptions related to its earliest examples as many people believe that it originated in China while some believe that the earliest block prints retrieved from Egypt. The *ustos*<sup>2</sup> of *Ajrak*

printing firmly believe that the shawl draped on the figure of the priest-king is *Ajrak* and trefoil motif is actually *kakar*<sup>3</sup> pattern but this theory is debatable as no printing evidence has been discovered yet (Bilgrami 1990, p.19).

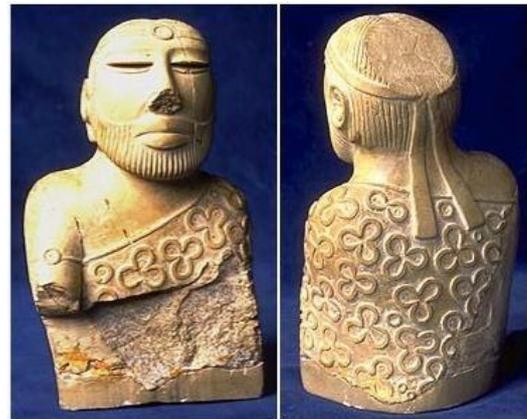


Figure 1. Priest-king wearing a piece of cloth with trefoil motif resembles kakar pattern of an Ajrak

It has been argued by the Bilgrami (2006, p.16) that the lack of repetition in the design of the cloak worn by the “priest-king” probably is not a block printed textile, but may have been made with large embroidered designs, appliqué or by tie-dying. This claim requires further investigation.

With the period of time trends keep changing but block printing is one of the trends that are everlasting, although there is huge change in designs according to the demand of the modern world. The most intricate & mesmerizing product of block printing is *Ajrak*, which is the identity and a symbol of pride for *Sindhis*<sup>4</sup> and is highly respected not only in Pakistan but all around the world. Though *Ajrak*-making is a very lengthy and time-taking process but it is worth all the efforts and energy. **Hala**, a place 30 km from Hyderabad is known as the hub of the traditional handicrafts as variety of Sindhi traditional handicrafts are made there and supplied in other cities.

However, it is observed that the number of artisans is reducing day by day as they are facing many problems. The change brought in new concepts, new commerce and economy, new symbols in tastes and fashion; the clarity of form disappeared, the vision of the craftsmen became blurred, and that was the decline of the indigenous textile industry; the old centers gradually withered and perished (Bilgrami 1990,

<sup>1</sup> Block printed shawl

<sup>2</sup> Masters

<sup>3</sup> Cloud like pattern used in Ajrak

<sup>4</sup> People of Sindh

p.22). There were 70 *Ajrak*-makers in Matairi alone (Duarte 1982, p.32) while now there are only 15-16 *Ajrak* centers left in Matairi. Around 10 to 15 years ago, there were many *Ajrak* centers in Hala but now there is only one *Ajrak* center left. In Sukkur, there were more than 100 *Ajrak* centers but now there is only one left (Daily Kawish 30 July, 2018). Currently only 50-60 *Ajrak* centers are left all over the Sindh and among them few are about to shutdown, whereas only two *poregar*<sup>5</sup> families are left all over the Sindh.

In Sindh, nowadays *Ajrak* centers exist in Hala, Bhitshah, Sehta, Khyber, Matiari, Sann, Matli, Tando Mohammad Khan, Tando Adam and Sukkur. Some of them only make *Ajrak* while rests of them make other block printing products as well.

## II. METHODS

To know the current situation of block printing and *Ajrak*-making in Sindh the methods used for the research were field survey, interviewing the artisans and a questionnaire was filled by each artisan.

First of all, a questionnaire was designed to get all the necessary information about the artisans and their work. The questionnaire was basically filled to know the difference in block printing and *Ajrak*-making done before and now and to search the reason of reduction in this craft day by day. Moreover, through a questionnaire it is easy to compare the information given by all the artisans with one another.

Secondly, field survey was conducted. The workshops of artisans were visited to observe their condition, to see how they work and personally observe the steps which were taking place in each workshop during the visit.

Lastly, the artisans were interviewed to know in detail about their family background, lifestyle, business, problems and threats that they are facing and the chances of continuing this craft in future generations.

To get all the answers the places visited during survey were:

- Bhitshah
- Sehta
- Khyber

## III. RESULTS

Three places of Sindh were visited and nine *Ajrak*-makers/block-printers and two block-makers were interviewed. In **Bhitshah**, five *Ajrak*-makers/block-printers were interviewed. They all make *Ajraks* as well as other block-printed products like ladies suit, scarves and bed sheets on various fabrics like silk, linen and khaddar. One of the respondent told that they are eight brothers all of them are *Ajrak*-makers and they make other block printing products as well. One of their brothers is block-maker as well. Block-making and *Ajrak*-making is their family business & currently their 8<sup>th</sup> generation is working on it. Basically they are from Matiari but around 19 years ago they moved to Bhitshah due to space and water problems. Their father was very well-known *Ajrak*-maker. He died recently on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2018 a few

<sup>5</sup> Block-maker

days before the survey was conducted. They told that their father taught 300 students in Matairi and they are now working in different areas of Sindh. In Bhitshah, three small shops are owned by them but their main shop is “Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai *Ajrak* Centre” located at Hunarmand Colony (also known as Artisans Colony), Bhitshah. He further stated that only few people are left who can recognize the original *Ajrak* and its worth and it saddens real artisan when people don’t see its worth and appreciate it. He also told that his father made *Ajrak* of worth Rs. 25,000 as a present for the President of Pakistan. However, despite the hurdles and negligence they strongly believe that it is Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W)’s *duas*<sup>6</sup> and blessings that they are still getting *rizq*<sup>7</sup>. He further added that when *Ajrak* season is on its peak bulk of *Ajraks* are purchased by retailers in Hyderabad.

Whereas in **Sehta** (a place between Bhitshah and Khyber), two artisans were interviewed. One of them only makes *Ajrak* whereas the other one makes huge variety of block printed products like suits, laces, male and female *kurtas*<sup>8</sup>, purses, male and female waistcoats, *ralli*<sup>9</sup>, table mats, handkerchief, buttons and pillow covers which were hand-block printed on jute fabric. Since two years he is working on such vast collection of block printed products. He showed an *Ajrak* design depicting Pakistan map which was gifted to former President of Pakistan. On the other hand, he also made American map on *Ajrak* which was sent to the Former First Lady of the United States, she accepted it and was mesmerized by the talent of the artisans. It shows that our amazing craft is appreciated all around the world but we being Pakistani don’t see its worth.



Figure 2. Naare-wari *Ajrak* as it consist narrow border *naro* (three lines) with central pattern *chakki*.

However in **Khyber**, two *Ajrak*-makers were interviewed. Both of them only make *Ajrak*. Both of them are highly disappointed because of the problems they are facing. They stated that their off-springs will not continue this craft as they are not interested and because of increase in problems day by day they want them to focus on their studies rather than depend on this craft. One of them told that he is about to shutdown his business as they have no proper water facility in their area and he is now fed up of roaming here and there for

<sup>6</sup> Prayers

<sup>7</sup> Provision

<sup>8</sup> Loose shirts

<sup>9</sup> Traditional quilts

completing each step of *Ajrak*-making process. While the other one said he will continue this craft till he can.

Here are some glimpses of different type of *Ajraks* and other block printed products captured during survey:



Figure 3. Hashe-wari Ajrak as it consist of three rows of hasha10 borders on all four sides.



Figure 4. Kashi-wari Ajrak along with cherh-wari wat (border).

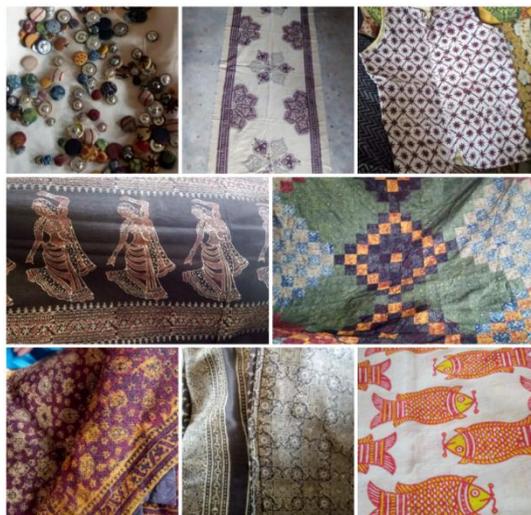


Figure 5. Contemporary block printed products & patterns

Top line (left to right): Handmade buttons made with block printed fabric, block printed dastarkhwan<sup>11</sup> and male waistcoat.

<sup>10</sup> Name of pattern

<sup>11</sup> Tablecloth used for serving food

Middle line (left to right): Hand-block printed shirt border and ralli (quilt).

Bottom line (left to right): Hand-block printed pillow cover on jute fabric, silk scarf and ladies shirt pattern.

It was observed that majority of the *Ajrak* centers are owned by *Soomra*<sup>12</sup> community and they are related to one another.

Following graphs show the result of questions that were asked by each *Ajrak*-maker/block-printer:

Since how long you/ your family are working?

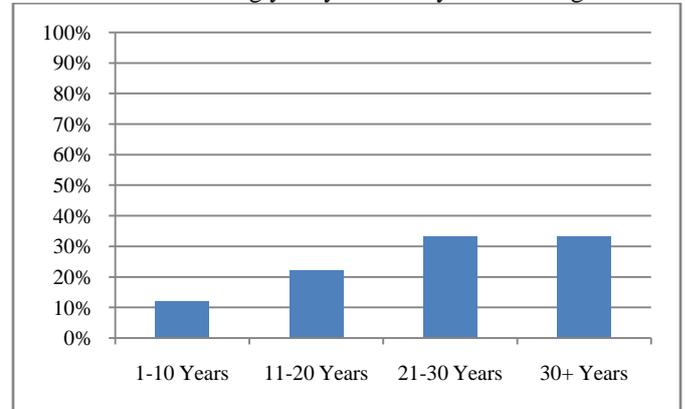


Figure 6.

All of the respondents told that it is their family business. 12% of the respondents are working since 1-10 years, 22% of the respondents are working since 11-20 years, whereas 33% of the respondents are working since 21-30 years & 30+ years respectively.

Who initiated it?

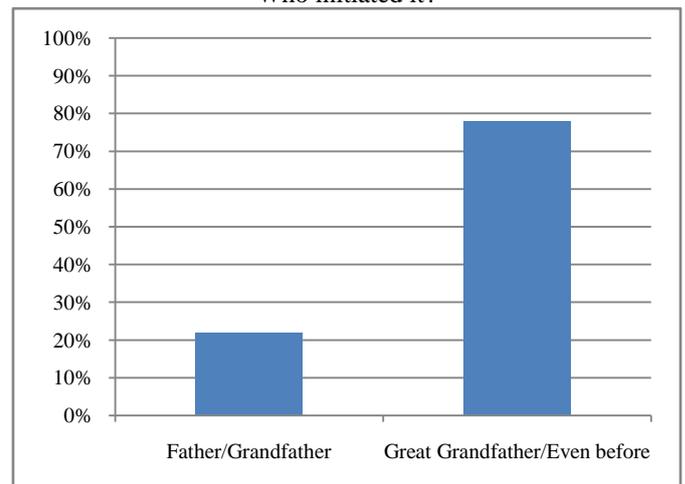


Figure 7.

22% of the respondent told that their father & grandfather started this business, while 78% of them told that it was initiated by their great grandfathers & even before.

<sup>12</sup> Sindhi tribe

Was there any generation gap?

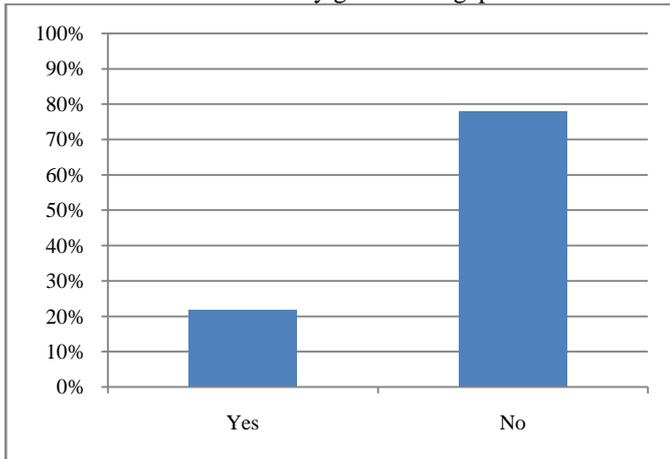


Figure 8.

22% of the respondents told that their business met a setback & remained closed for about 2 to 7 years due to crisis & expensive material. Whereas 78% of them told it is continued since it started.

Who else help you in this business?

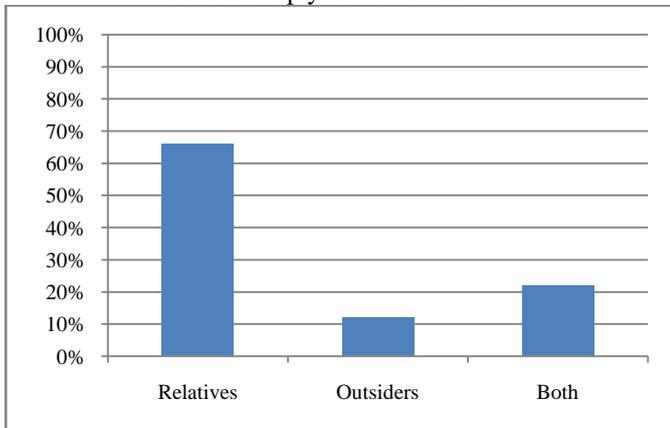


Figure 9.

66% of the respondents told that their relatives help them in this business, while 12% of the respondents told that only outsider workers help them, whereas remaining 22% said that they have relatives & outsiders both.

In future, is anyone in your family interested in continuing this craft?

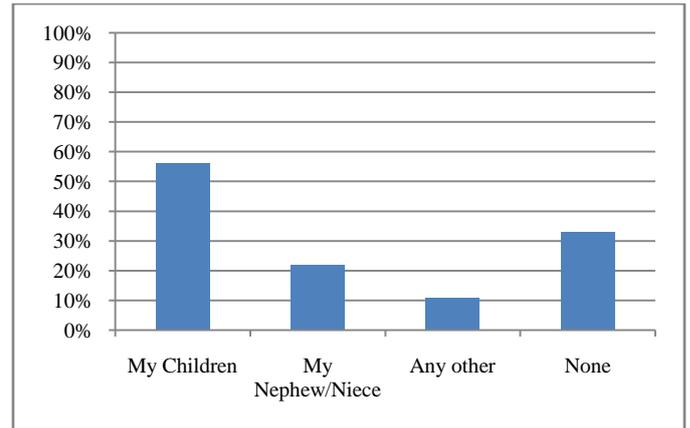


Figure 10.

56% of the respondents said that their children will continue this craft; 22% of them said that their nephews are interested in continuing this business. While 11% of the respondents told that their far away relatives or workers will continue, remaining 33% replied that none of their family member is interested in continuing this craft.

Is there any difference in your *Ajrak* made before & now?

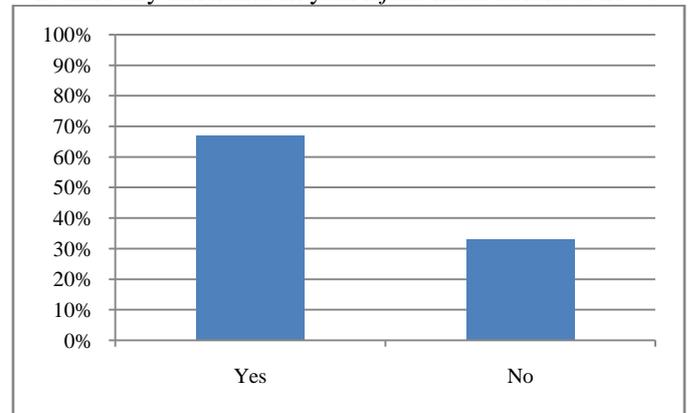


Figure 11.

67% of the respondents said that there is difference in *Ajrak* as the material, fabric, patterns and colors used nowadays are different than before. Whereas 33% of them said that there isn't any difference in their *Ajrak* made before & now.

Which of the following *Ajraks* you make?

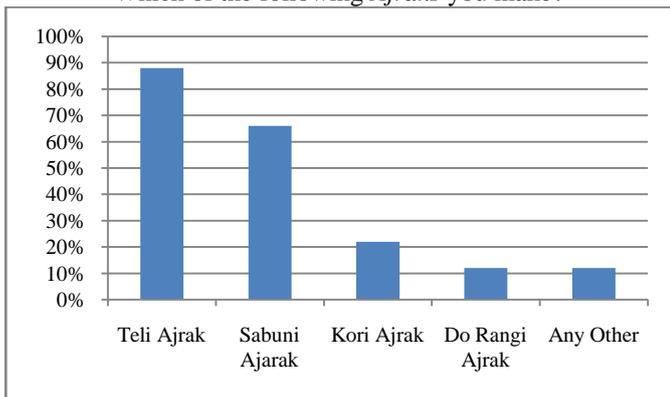


Figure 12.

88% of the respondents told that they make Teli Ajrak<sup>13</sup>, 66% of them make Sabuni Ajrak<sup>14</sup> & 22% make Kori Ajrak<sup>15</sup> as well, whereas 12% of the respondents also make Do rangi Ajrak<sup>16</sup> and other type of Ajrak known as Dhuri khar Ajrak<sup>17</sup> respectively.

Which type of dyes you use?

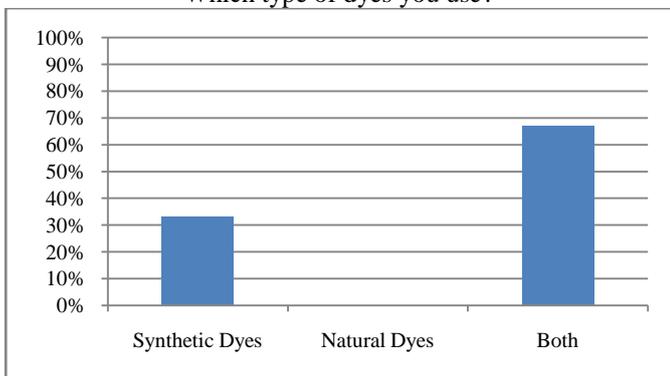


Figure 13.

33% of the respondents only use synthetic dyes whereas 67% of them use synthetic & natural dyes both. Mostly they use natural dyes (basar ja pan<sup>18</sup>, nim ja pan<sup>19</sup>, haidh<sup>20</sup>, thoom<sup>21</sup> etc) for hand-block printed ladies suit & other block printed products.

How much time do you take for *Ajrak*-making?

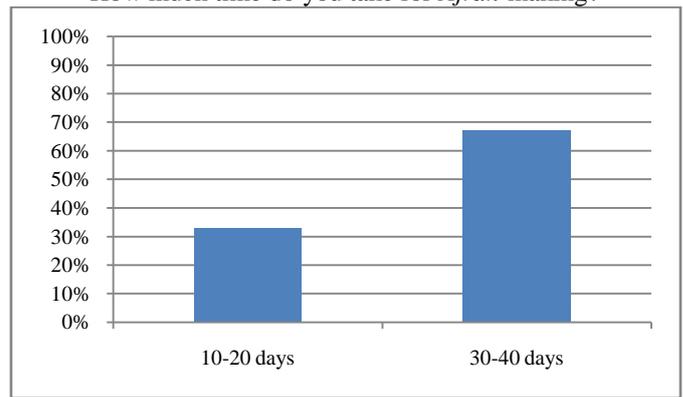


Figure 14.

33% of the respondents told that they take 10-20 days for printing one Ajrak whereas remaining 67% respondents take 30-40 days for printing forty Ajraks.

Which of the following *Ajrak* formats do you make?

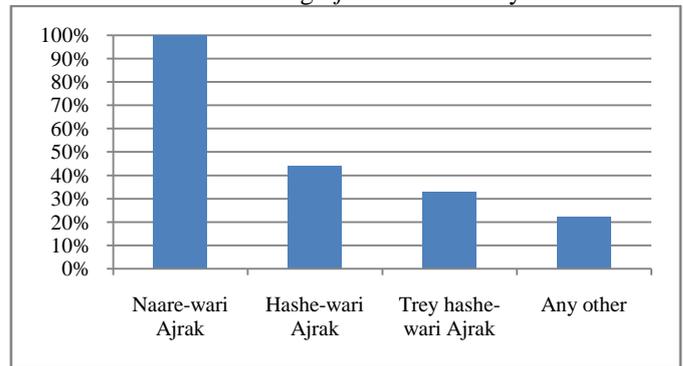


Figure 15.

All of the respondents print *Naare-wari Ajrak*<sup>22</sup> as it is mostly liked by people, while 44% of them also print *Hashe-wari Ajrak*<sup>23</sup> and 33% of them print *Trey hashe-wari Ajrak*<sup>24</sup> as well. Whereas, 22% of the respondents told that they also make an *Ajrak* known as *Kashi-wari Ajrak*<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> Best quality Ajrak

<sup>14</sup> Type of Ajrak depending on material used

<sup>15</sup> Inferior quality Ajrak

<sup>16</sup> Type of Ajrak mostly made in Sukkur and Sann

<sup>17</sup> Type of Ajrak depending on material used

<sup>18</sup> Onion leaves

<sup>19</sup> Neem leaves

<sup>20</sup> Turmeric

<sup>21</sup> Garlic

<sup>22</sup> Type of Ajrak depending on the design

<sup>23</sup> Three rows (borders) surrounding central pattern

<sup>24</sup> Addition of corner motifs in a Ajrak

<sup>25</sup> Type of Ajrak depending on the design

Which central patterns (*jaal*) & borders (*wat*) you mostly use in *Ajrak*?

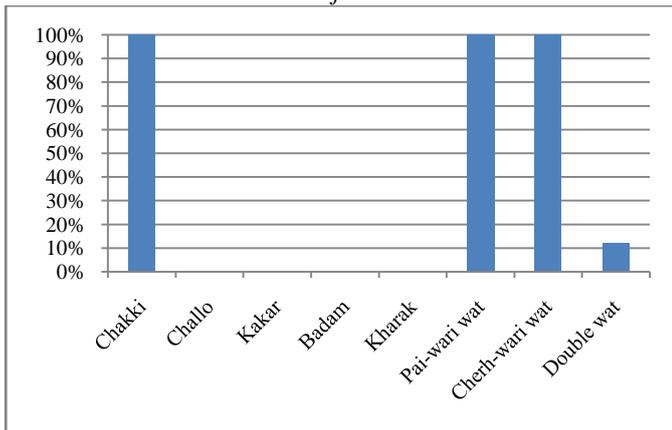


Figure 16.

All of the respondents told that they mostly use central pattern “*chakki*<sup>26</sup>” and borders “*pai-wari wat*<sup>27</sup>” & “*cherh-wari wat*<sup>28</sup>” as they are highly preferred by customers due to reasonable rates. They make other patterns only on order. Whereas only 12% of them told that they use “*double wat*<sup>29</sup>” also.

Quality of *Ajrak* depends on?

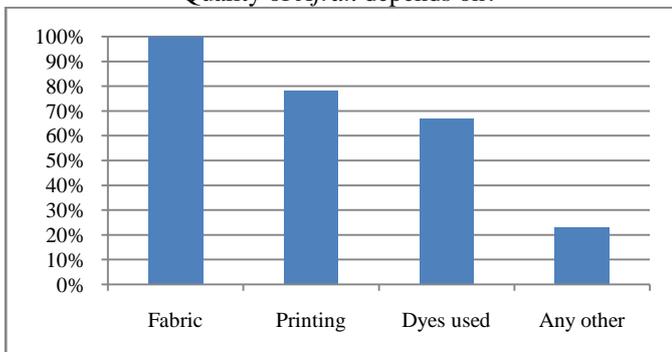


Figure 17.

All of the respondents told that *Ajrak* quality highly depends on the fabric that we use. Whereas according to 78% of the respondents printing also affects the quality of *Ajrak* and 67% of them also mentioned that *Ajrak* quality also depends on dyes while 23% of them stated two other factors i.e. nature & blocks that affect *Ajrak* quality as well.

How much do you charge for *Ajrak*, suit or any other block printed product?

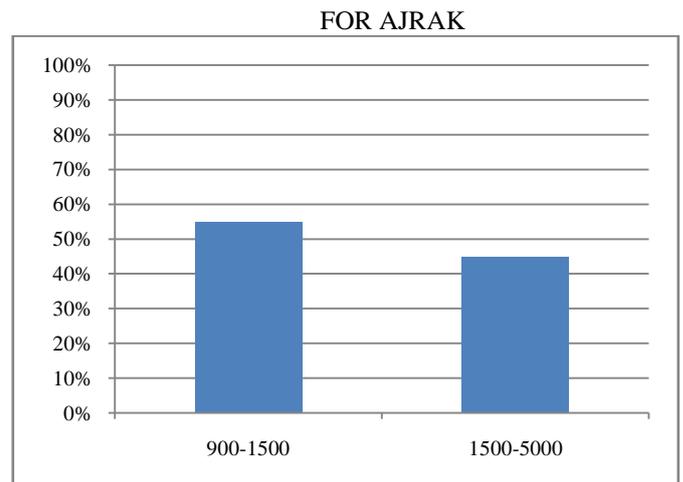


Figure 18.

55% of the respondents sell *Ajrak* for Rs. 900-1500 (2018) for each piece of *Chakki-wari Ajrak*<sup>30</sup> whereas 45% of the respondents sell *Ajrak* for Rs. 1500-5000 (2018) for each *Ajrak* depending on the intricacy of *Ajrak* design.

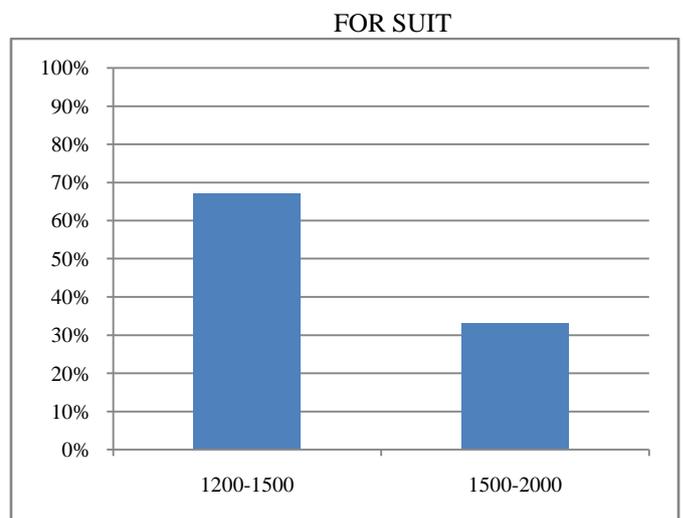


Figure 19.

67% of the respondents sell ladies 2pc block printed suit for Rs. 1200-1500 (2018) whereas 33% of the respondents sell for Rs. 1500-2000 (2018).

<sup>26</sup> A round pattern used in *Ajrak*

<sup>27</sup> Type of borders used in *Ajrak*

<sup>28</sup> Type of borders used in *Ajrak*

<sup>29</sup> Type of borders used in *Ajrak*

<sup>30</sup> *Ajrak* consisting *chakki* pattern

In your opinion the involvement of machine made *Ajrak* has any negative impact on your business

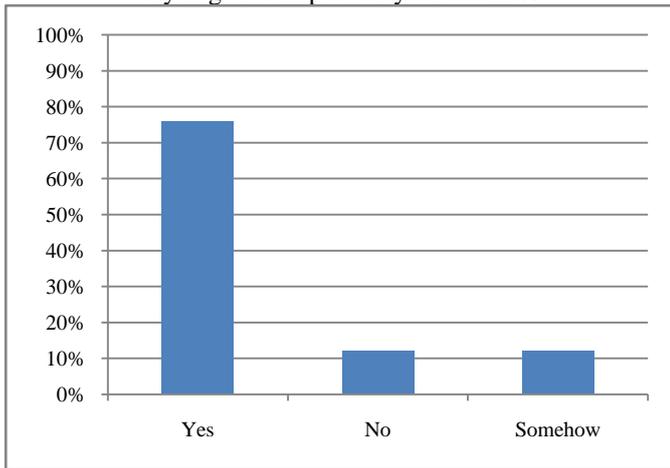


Figure 20.

76% of the respondents said that machine-printed *Ajrak* has badly affected their business as it can make bulks of *Ajrak* in one day & it's cheap in rates. While 12% of them said that it hasn't affected their business and remaining 12% believe that it has somehow affected not much.

In your opinion do people still prefer hand-block printed *Ajrak*?

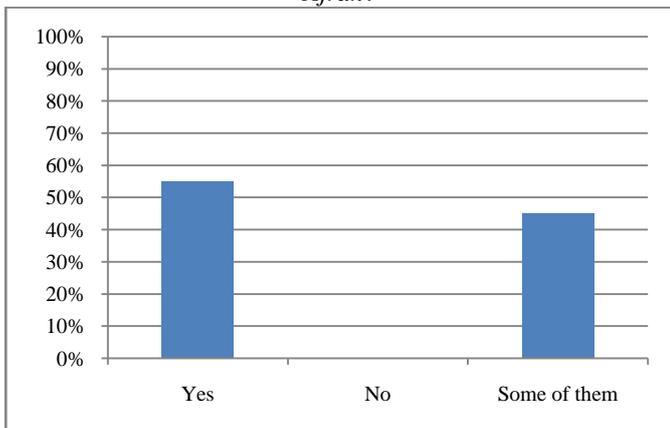


Figure 21.

55% of the respondents believe that people still prefer handmade *Ajrak* as nothing can beat its delicacy whereas remaining 45% believe that only few people who know *Ajrak*'s worth prefer handmade *Ajrak*.

Other than *Ajrak* do you make other hand-block printed products?

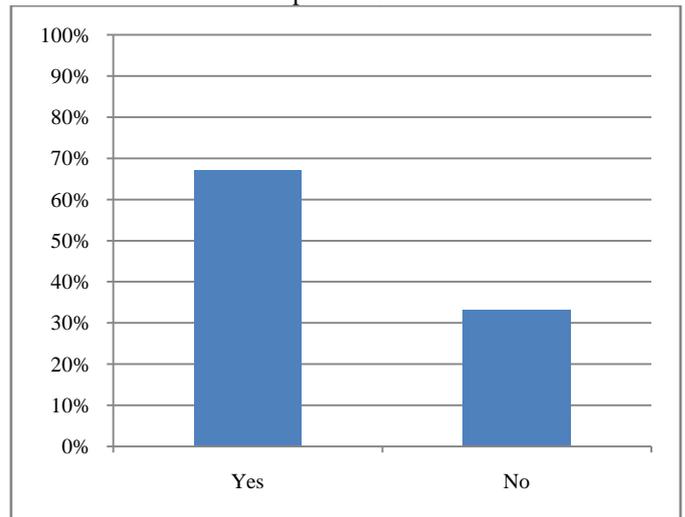


Figure 22.

67% of the respondents also print other hand-block printed products such as ladies suits, scarves, bed sheets, male/female kurtas, laces etc., whereas 33% of the respondents only print *Ajrak*.

Which type of blocks you use?

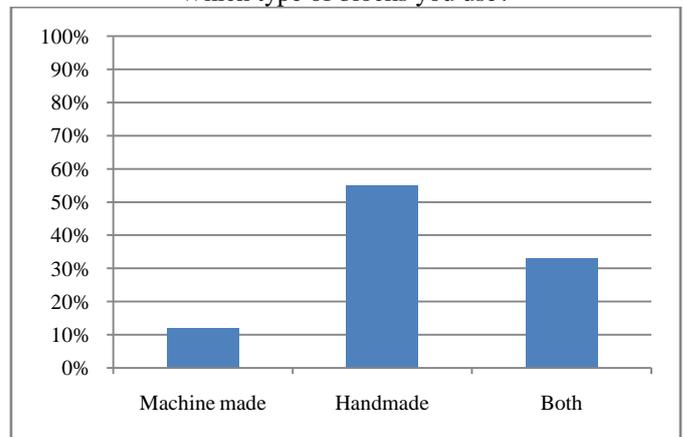


Figure 23.

12% of the respondent told that they only use machine-made blocks as they are quite cheaper than handmade blocks, while 55% of them only use handmade blocks as they believe that they give more finishing than machine-made. Whereas, remaining 33% of the respondents use both type of blocks.

What are the problems that you are facing to continue this traditional craft?

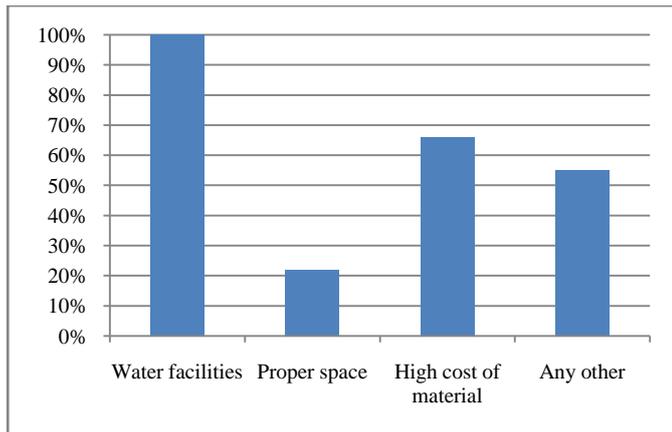


Figure 24.

All of the respondents are facing water problem as there is no proper facility of water in their nearby area, whereas 22% of them mentioned that they don't have a proper space and 66% told that due to the high cost of material we hardly make our ends meet. However 55% of the respondents stated some other problems like low profit, transportation for carrying material, lack of support & facilities for old aged workers who cannot work anymore.

Do you know other cities or villages of Sindh where hand block printing still exists?

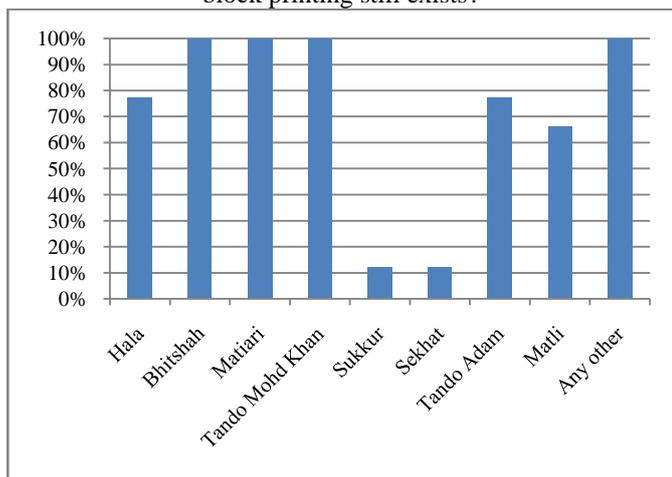


Figure 25.

77% of the respondents mentioned Hala & Tando Adam, whereas all of the respondents mentioned Bhitshah, Matiari, Tando Mohd Khan & other places like Khyber & Sehta where hand block printing still exists. 12% of them mentioned Sukkur & Sekhat respectively and 66% of them also mentioned Matli.

In **Bhitshah**, two block-makers were also interviewed. During conversation it was known that unfortunately only these two block-maker families are left.

One of the block-maker told that he is the only person in his family who makes blocks. His brothers are *Ajrak*-makers and block-printers. He is working since 10 years. He uses *babur*<sup>31</sup> (100 years old wood), *nim*<sup>32</sup> and *sareh*<sup>33</sup> wood for blocks. He charges Rs. 22,000 (2018) for *Chakki* pattern and Rs. 32,000 (2018) for *paland*<sup>34</sup> of *Ajrak*. Apart from *Ajrak* designs he can make any design whether it is a portrait, animal, truck, calligraphy or anything else. He also stated the main reason of reduction in number of *poregars* is the lack of interest among the people due to the invention of machine-block printing and machine-made blocks. The intricacy of this craft badly affects their eyesight and when after all this hard work no one appreciates they get dishearten and in result now only two *poregar* families are left in Sindh.

Another block-maker in Bhitshah is working since 30 years. Block-making is their family business. His uncles are also block-makers. He told that he uses *keekar*<sup>35</sup>, *nim* and *sareh* wood for blocks and his blocks are supplied all over the Sindh. He charges Rs. 18,000-20,000 (2018) for blocks of *chakki* pattern whereas "*Hashe wari Ajrak*" blocks are expensive they are around Rs. 65,000-70,000 (2018). It requires one month completing one set (consists 7 blocks) of *Ajrak*. He has also worked in one of the famous clothing brand "*Junaid Jamshed (J.)*" for 3 years in Karachi. However, his children are not interested in learning this craft as it is difficult and it affects ones eyesight. According to him, machine-made blocks haven't affected his business and he isn't facing any problem as if the material is expensive than the cost of blocks is charged accordingly so it doesn't affects his business.

Handmade blocks are only made in Bhitshah, whereas in Karachi and Lahore machine-made blocks are made.

#### IV. DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to know the problems that craftsmen are facing nowadays, find out whether cultural department or any other organization is helping out in preserving traditional textiles of Sindh, identify the difference in hand-block printing done before and now, analyze what are the effects of Cultural Day and finally to find out the impact of machine-block printing.

Summarily, it was found that all the respondents are mainly facing water problem as they don't have clean water available in their area, whereas 22% of them mentioned that they don't have a proper space and 66% told that due to the high cost of material we hardly make our ends meet. 55% of the respondents stated some other problems like low profit, transportation for carrying material, lack of support & facilities for old aged workers who cannot work anymore. However, despite all the problems and no support from

<sup>31</sup> *Acacia farnesiana*

<sup>32</sup> Neem tree's wood

<sup>33</sup> A type of wood used for blocks

<sup>34</sup> End panels

<sup>35</sup> *Acacia arabica* willd

government and cultural department it was observed that artisans are so passionate about their craft that 67% of them are not willing to quit and they are even preparing their future generations to continue this craft after them.

Moreover, 67 % of the respondents stated that there is difference in hand-block printing done before and now as the material, fabric, patterns and colors used nowadays are different. Whereas 33% of them said that there isn't any difference in their block printing. Despite 76% of the artisans said that machine-made *Ajrak* has affected their business but still 55% of them believe that people prefer handmade *Ajrak* more as during cultural celebrations bulks of *Ajraks* are purchased by retailers and wholesalers, whereas 45% told that only few people who know its worth prefer handmade *Ajrak*.

Overall it was good to see the enthusiasm of the craftsmen and their unconditional love towards their craft despite all the hurdles. A little effort by us and the government can save this craft as they just need encouragement for keep going with the same spirit. The purpose of this research is to convey the message to our younger generations to love our traditional crafts as they just need our support so that they can afford the best education for their kids and can easily fulfill the basic needs of their families. No doubt they are poor people with great hearts and hospitality.

#### CONCLUSION

In this study it was concluded that *Ajrak*-making has remained a family business which is being transferred from generations to generations but there are certain evidences that the people outside the family are going to continue the business in future as stated by 11% of the respondents, whereas 56% of the craftsmen's children will continue this craft while 33% told that none of their family member is going to continue their family business after them because of the lack of facilities and problems like lack of clean water, high cost of material and transportation for carrying goods. Although all of the respondents are working since different time periods but 33% of them are working since 21 to 30 years and 30+ years respectively and according to the 78% of the artisans their business was initiated by their great grandfathers and even before. Moreover, 67% claimed that there is difference in *Ajrak* made before and now as the fabric, material, patterns and colors are modernized, now it is not limited to cotton fabric and typical traditional *Ajrak* colors. It was observed that 88% of the artisans make *Teli Ajrak* as it is the best quality *Ajrak* among all other types which are also being made by some artisans. The dyes used by 67% of the artisans are natural as well as synthetic but they use natural dyes mostly for hand-block printed ladies suits which are sold for Rs. 1200-2000 (2018) and other block printed products whereas remaining 33% only use synthetic dyes as they only print *Ajrak*. Furthermore, different formats of *Ajrak* are also being printed but all of the respondents mostly print *Naare-wari Ajrak* with central pattern *chakki* and borders *pai-wari wat* and *cherh-wari wat* as it is sold for Rs. 900-1500 (2018) only and according to them it is most liked by people as it is cheaper as compared to *Hashe-wari Ajrak* and *Kashi-wari*

*Ajrak* which cost Rs. 5000 (2018) due to the intricacy of design and is made on order by only some artisans. It saddens to see that such dazzling *Ajrak* formats are vanishing day by day due to our negligence. Not only this but machine-made *Ajrak* has also badly affected their business as 76% of the respondents agreed to this but they also believe that somehow people who know traditional *Ajrak*'s worth prefer handmade *Ajrak* over machine-made. However, 55% of them only use handmade blocks and 33% use handmade as well as machine-made blocks because handmade blocks are quite expensive so they cannot afford using only handmade blocks while rest of them only use machine-made blocks. As *Ajrak*-making is a lengthy and time taking process it requires them 30-40 days for completing 40 pieces of *Ajraks*.

Hence, it is concluded that modernized *Ajrak* has badly affected the traditional *Ajrak* as slowly and gradually traditional *Ajrak* is vanishing as everyone is moving towards shortcuts and contemporary things but it can be preserved if looked after properly. Due to the negligence towards the traditional craft not only *Ajrak*-centers are disappearing but the traditional patterns used in *Ajrak* are gradually ending day by day.

#### SUGGESTIONS

It is recommended that the government should provide them space, clean water facilities, transportation and reduce the cost of material as these are their main problems. Cultural Department of Sindh must visit and interact with them to hear out their issues personally. The old workers who are not able to work anymore they should initiate a scheme to support and fulfill their basic needs. A little effort by the Cultural Department will not only save the traditional craft from dying but many lives who are suffering due to loss in their businesses.

The younger generation is requested to step forward to save their culture. Go and visit the towns of Sindh and see how talented the craftsmen are and how beautiful and mesmerizing products are being created. A visit can bring a huge change as it will boost them up and console them that people are here to praise and appreciate their work and dedication.

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