

## SHORT DESCRIPTION

Ajrak is a traditionally handcrafted cotton fabric, often used as shawl (چادر) distinguished by its characteristic use of natural dyes, predominantly the 'Indigo' (blue) and 'Alizarin' (deep red) color palette. The production of Ajrak involves approximately 18-20 complex, labor-intensive, and historically preserved processes, reflecting a deep continuity of indigenous knowledge and craftsmanship. From preparation of fabric, to block printing, dyeing and washing; the various stages of Ajrak making reflect a deep knowledge and understanding of natural materials/ resources, and their reaction to various exposures of natural elements – the Sun, water and heat. The first process is 'Khumb', it uses plain fabric that is soaked in a baking soda solution and boiled overnight in a furnace to remove starch and impurities. The cloth is then washed for several hours in running river water, repeatedly rinsed and beaten on both sides to ensure thorough cleaning/opening of warp and weft threads. Finally, it is spread on the ground and sun-dried, resulting in fully cleaned and softened fabric. Following that, 'Saaj Jiban' i.e the oiling process takes place, where fabric is soaked in a mixture of oil, soda, and natural additives to soften and condition the fibers. The cloth is sun-soaked, beaten, dried, and treated on both sides to ensure even absorption. 'Kasai' is the post-Saaj Jiban cleansing stage where the fabric is washed and sun-dried to remove excess oil and residues. It is repeatedly exposed to sunlight on both sides, then treated with a light baking soda solution to clear remaining residue and set the oil. Finally, the cloth is river-washed to complete the fabric preparation process. 'Saquon Diyan' is a final pre-printing conditioning process where fabric is soaked in a natural mixture of mahi seeds, dried lemon, jaggery, and castor oil. The cloth absorbs this blend and is then sun-dried, giving it a finished, strengthened, and wellconditioned quality. Printing/ Chappai begins with 'Chur', the first printing stage that creates the design outline using a paste of natural gum (Almond or Acacia), lime (chuna), and Alizarin. 'Kutt' the 2nd print involves the execution of the black print, which adds definition and depth to the overall design. 'Phulli', 3rd print focuses on enhancing the star motif by increasing its whiteness and sheen through a secondary stamping process using the paste made of badam ka goond and lime (chuna), similar to the Chur mixture, but without the addition of Alizarin. The 4th and final stage of 'Kharr' involves printing with a paste prepared from Alum (phitkiri), mineral clay/ Multani mitti, and badam ka goond; sprinkling the printed areas with dry cow dung (gobar) or rice husk to absorb excess water. Following the completion of Chappai, the fabric is laid out under the sun for drying, after which the process of halka kun ka marhala is executed in which entire fabric is immersed in a diluted/ light indigo dye. Areas treated with phitkiri or left white resist the dye, while the remaining sections absorb a light indigo color. The fabric is again dried under the sun, and after fully drying, the process of 'Wichur' takes place, where-in the 5m length of fabric is opened, soaked and left floating on standing water (pond/ talab) for approximately 3–4 hours, to ensure uniform wetting and absorption. Again it is washed and dried out, then the fabric is dyed in Alizarin/ Maddar, prepared by heating in a furnace; known as the process of 'Rung'. After Rung, the wet fabric is washed in running water of a river or canal, and beaten on a rock to remove excess dye. It is then laid out under the sun

and continuously wetted by sprinkling of water, and turning of sides, approximately repeated twelve times. This process starts from late morning and continues till late afternoon, and is called as 'Tapai'. After the completion of Tapai and once the fabric is fully dried, the 'Meena' stage is undertaken. In this stage, block printing is carried out to mask the white and red areas of the fabric prior to the final indigo dyeing. Meena print is sprinkled with dry cow dung/ rice husk to stabilize the print and prevent from smudging, and then fabric is properly dried under the sun, before the final stage of dyeing, called 'Tyarai'. This involves dipping the breath-wise folded fabric in deep, dark indigo solution, and laid out to dry under the sun without twisting or squeezing. After the completion of three dyeing and drying cycles, the fabric is thoroughly washed in running river water to remove excess dye and to stabilize the final indigo shade. The finished Ajrak is washed in running water with the cloth fully opened for thorough cleaning. The process is called 'Dhulai'. It is then dipped individually into a measured solution of soda khar (Sodium Bicarbonate) and bleach to achieve the final finish. It is washed and beaten and again washed, and flattened on the ground, and sundried, flipping both sides to absorb the sun evenly, then folded in a particular manner for storage and dispatch for sale. Ajrak exists in a wide range of patterns, each carrying historical and cultural significance. Traditional patterns include 'Chaki' (characterized by circular and square geometry), 'Kakar' (inspired by cloud motifs), 'Hasho' (distinguished by its multiple borders), 'Kashi' (having intricate geometric compositions), 'Badami' (based on almond-shaped motifs), and other varieties including 'Puk', 'Jaleeb', 'Challa', 'Ish-peechee', 'Kharak' and 'Wal' contributing to the diversity of Ajrak's visual language. An ancient design named 'Tedi' (depicting three-petal flower) is believed to be worn by the King Priest of Mohenjo-daro. A typical border used in

traditional Ajrak is known as the 'Palland'. All designs of Ajrak patterns are composed from a set of three to five blocks series named Chur, Kat/Kut, Phuli, Kharr, Meena, Zameen. The block makers (por waro karigar) are highly skilled craftsmen gradually fading away; as evident from the fact that only one mastercraftsman exists in Bhitshah, from whom all Ajrak makers of the region acquire their blocks. The price of blocks ranges from 50,000 – 150,000 per set, depending on the pattern, and requires 4-5 months to prepare. One production cycle called "Dharak" consisting of 40 Ajraks, takes up to one week, if working in a group of 3 - 4 labour/artisans, else it takes almost 18 days if working individually. Each Dharak consists of 200m of fabric (5 thaans - 8 Ajraks of 5m each cut out from each thaan). Prices range between 3000 PKR to 6000 PKR for regular Ajraks; and can go up to 18,000 PKR depending on quality of material and detail. The most elaborate and expensive Ajraks are the ones having Kashi design pattern. Each workshop produces around 120 – 160 Ajraks per month.