

A Comparative Study of Bagh Print and Tarapur Print: Traditional Hand Block Printing Techniques of Madhya Pradesh

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Abstract

Madhya Pradesh is home to several indigenous hand block printing traditions, among which Bagh print and Tarapur print hold significant cultural and economic importance. Both crafts use natural dyes such as alizarin for red and iron-based compounds for black, and both were developed by artisan communities whose ancestry is traced back to the Sindh region. Bagh print, practised near the Baghini River in the Dhar district, is known for its bright red colour and bold geometric and floral motifs, and it carries a Geographical Indication (GI) tag. Tarapur print, practised near the Gambhiri River in the Neemuch district, is known for its deep black and indigo shades combined with red, giving it a richer and darker colour palette. This paper compares the two crafts on the basis of their history, dyeing process, colours, motifs, and the present condition of the artisans practising them. The aim of the study is to understand how two similar hand block printing crafts, originating from communities with a shared ancestry within the same state, developed distinct visual and technical identities, and to highlight the need to preserve and promote both traditions.

Keywords: Bagh Print, Tarapur Print, Nandana Print, Dabu Print, Hand Block Printing, Natural dyes, Madhya Pradesh, Chhipa Community, Khatri Community.

Introduction

Tarapur Printing

Tarapur and Umedpura are two historically significant craft villages located in the Jawad tehsil of the Neemuch district in Madhya Pradesh. Geographically, these two villages face each other, separated only by the flowing waters of the Gambhiri River. Together they form a major heritage hub for traditional hand block printing, famous for Dabu (mud-resist) printing and Nandana printing. The entire printing process relies on eco-friendly, chemical-free methods that uses natural dyes made from plants, minerals, and locally available materials. This ancestral craft has been preserved and kept alive for generations by the families of the Chhipa and Nilgar communities.

These artisan families have migrated from villages such as Kukshi, Dharampuri, and Thikri in search of ideal natural conditions, particularly the mineral-rich waters of the Gambhiri River, which enhance the depth and richness of the dyed colours. The craft is believed to be 600 years old and was traditionally created to serve the clothing needs of local tribal communities, especially the Bhil and Bhilala, they used to wear Nandana-printed odhni, lugda, and ghaghra as part of their everyday and ceremonial attire. This craft holds its rustic, tribal character, using a limited but distinctive set of five

traditional motifs and a technique that combines alizarin (red) printing with Dabu resist and indigo dyeing to create its characteristic dark, layered colour palette.

Bagh Printing

Bagh print gets its name from the village of Bagh, located in the Dhar district of Madhya Pradesh. It is situated on the banks of the Baghini River. The craft is practiced by Muslim Khatri community, whose ancestors migrated from Sindh (present day Pakistan). They were drawn in part by the mineral-rich waters of the Baghini River, which are said to enhance the brightness and permanence of the printed colours. Many Bagh artisans belong to families that converted to Islam under the influence of a Sufi saint, and today they are commonly referred to as Muslim Khatri.

Bagh printing is characterised by hand-carved wooden blocks used to stamp geometric, floral, and paisley motifs directly onto undyed cotton or silk fabric using a mordant-and-dye process built around alum, alizarin, and iron. The finished cloth traditionally served the clothing needs of local tribal groups, particularly the Bhil and Bhilala communities, before the craft was gradually introduced to urban and international markets from the 1980s and 1990s onward. In recognition of its distinctive character and regional roots, Bagh print received a Geographical Indication (GI) tag from the Government of India in 2008 to protect this beautiful heritage.

Objectives of the Study

- To study the dyeing process of Tarapur and Bagh hand block printing.
- To study the colours used in Tarapur and Bagh hand block printing.
- To study the design and motifs used in Tarapur and Bagh hand block printing.
- To study the historical background of Tarapur and Bagh hand block printing.

Literature Review

The studies available on Bagh print and Tarapur (Nandana) print, when looked at together, give a good base for comparing the two crafts.

Anshika Jain, Dr Amrita Rajput (2024), in their paper on Bagh print, explain that the craft comes from the Khatri artisan families of Bagh village in Dhar district. They show how the minerals in the Baghini River help in making the dyes brighter and long-lasting. Their paper explains that some of the red, black, and white motifs of Bagh print are inspired by Mughal designs like the Taj Mahal's jaali pattern carry cultural meaning connected to nature, and that this knowledge is passed down mainly within Khatri families. The paper also describes the dyeing process, which uses alum, indigo, and pomegranate peel, and looks at the real-life situation of today's artisans: their income is low and seasonal, they depend heavily on middlemen to sell their work, and they face growing competition from machine-made copies. At the same time, the study notes that more people today want handmade, sustainable textiles, and some artisans have started working with designers and using digital marketing to reach new customers.

Dr Anjali Karolia, Arooshi Mogha's (2025) study on Tarapur and Umdephur gives similar kind of information, but from the other side of Madhya Pradesh. This study focuses on the Chhipa community and the Nandana and Jawariya Dana printing. This craft is done near the Gambhiri River in Neemuch district. Through case studies, they describe the craft's nearly 600 year-old history, and its process of wax-resist printing (meend), indigo dyeing, and alizarin printing, along with its five traditional motifs. These prints were originally worn by Bhil, Sahariya, and Mandla tribal communities as ghagharas, odhnis, and turbans. By interviewing three artisans, the study shows a range of situations: from a single artisan working alone with one printing table, to bigger family units with hired workers. In almost every case, the artisans want their children to study and find other jobs instead of continuing the craft. The study's SWOC analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, challenges) shows that the craft is eco-friendly and needs low investment to start, but it also has a small, mostly local market, fewer artisans every year, and a long water-heavy production process.

Reading these two studies together, they show that Bagh print and Tarapur print, even though they look different and use different methods, are shaped by very similar forces. Both crafts depend on the special mineral quality of their local river. Both were originally made for tribal communities before slowly reaching wider markets. And both face the same problems today: increasing cost of raw materials, competition from machine-printed cloth, and doubts about whether the next generation will continue the

craft. At the same time, there is a clear difference between the two: Bagh print has grown with the support of its GI tag and now sells in national and international markets, while Tarapur print is still mostly limited to a small group of local artisans. This difference is exactly what makes a comparative study useful. Neither Studies compared the two crafts directly to each other, so putting these findings side by side, their histories, techniques, motifs, and the real conditions of the artisans gives the base for the comparative study of Bagh print and Tarapur print done in this paper.

Research Methodology

This research paper is based on a combination of secondary data and field research. Secondary data was collected from published craft documentation, reports, academic and journalistic sources describing the history, technique, and present condition of Bagh print and Tarapur (Nandana/Dabu) print. Field research, in the form of observation and interaction with artisan communities and craft clusters, was used to supplement and verify the secondary information, particularly regarding the dyeing process, the sequence of printing steps, and the current socio-economic condition of the artisans. This combined approach allows the study to draw both on documented historical and technical knowledge and on first-hand contextual understanding of the two crafts.

Comparative Analysis Table

The following table presents a structured comparison of Bagh print and Tarapur print across nine key parameters.

Basis of Comparison	Bagh Print	Tarapur Print
State	Madhya Pradesh	Madhya Pradesh
District	Dhar	Neemuch
Fabric	Cotton and silk (mulmul, kosa silk, chiffon, crepe)	Coarse and thick cotton fabric
Motifs	Genda (marigold), Chameli, Kairi, Nariyal Jaal, Jaali (Taj Mahal inspired), geometric and floral patterns	Mirchi, Champakali, Amba, Jalam Buta, Dholamaru (five traditional tribal motifs)
Natural colour used	Bright red (alizarin) and black (iron rust with jaggery), with white background	Deep black/indigo blue with red, using indigo along with alizarin
Raw materials used for printing	Corroded iron filings, alum, alizarin (madder/aal root), dhawadi flowers	Alum, alizarin, iron rust with jaggery, indigo, tamarind seed powder, clay-and-gum resist paste (Dabu)
Method / Technique	Direct alizarin (thappa chhapai) printing on undyed base cloth	Combination of alizarin printing and Dabu (mud/clay resist) printing
Natural bleach / mordant treatment	Harad (myrobalan) solution used as pre-treatment mordant	Harad (myrobalan) solution used for pre-treatment mordanting
Drying / dyeing in sunlight	Cloth sun-dried for about 8–15 days before final river wash	Cloth dried in open plains after each stage of dyeing and resist printing
River	Baghini (Bagh) River	Gambhiri River



Bagh Print Motifs



Tarapur Print Motifs

Image 1 Source: <https://imp-art.org/articles/bagh-print/>

Image 2 Source: <https://qaatha.org/Craft-of-India/nandana-dabu-print-madhya-pradesh/>

Analysis

The comparison shows that Bagh print and Tarapur print, both native to Madhya Pradesh and both rooted in artisan communities linked historically to Sindh, have developed along noticeably different lines. Geographically, Bagh print is practiced in the Dhar district along the Baghini River, while Tarapur print is centred in the Neemuch district along the Gambhiri River. In both cases, the mineral content of the local river water is considered essential for the quality and brightness of the dyed colours, showing that the identity of each craft is closely tied to its specific natural environment.

In terms of colour and technique, Bagh print favours a brighter, high-contrast combination of red and black on a white background, achieved through a direct alizarin printing process without a resist stage. Tarapur print, by contrast, layers alizarin red printing with Dabu (mud or clay resist) printing and repeated indigo dyeing, producing a deeper, darker palette dominated by indigo blue and black. This difference in these two processes: the absence of a resist step in Bagh print and the main role of resist and indigo dyeing in Tarapur print is the single biggest technical distinction between the two crafts.

The motifs used also reflect differing influences. Bagh print motifs, such as the Jaali pattern said to be inspired by the Taj Mahal, and floral forms like Genda and Chameli, show a degree of adaptation toward urban and pan-Indian decorative tastes. Tarapur's Nandana motifs such as Mirchi, Champakali, Amba, Jalam Buta, and Dholamaru remain closely tied to their original tribal consumers and have changed comparatively little, since the craft's market has historically remained confined to Bhil and Bhilala communities in the surrounding districts.

It is observed that geometric designs are often used in Bagh Printing whereas it is not used in Tarapur Printing. The motifs and designs in Tarapur Printing are limited.

The present condition of the two crafts is also different. Bagh print has benefited from a Geographical Indication tag, national and international recognition, training programmes for tribal artisans, and access to retail and export markets, giving it comparatively stronger institutional support and economic sustainability. Tarapur print, on the other hand, remains a far more fragile tradition, practised today by only a small number of artisan families, and facing decline due to limited market reach, competition from machine-printed cloth, and reduced interest among younger generations. This difference shows how two crafts can start with exact same things (migrant artisans, natural dyes, mineral rich river) but end up in completely different situations today.

Conclusion

Bagh print and Tarapur print stand as two distinct expressions of Madhya Pradesh's rich hand block printing heritage. Despite sharing common roots in migrant artisan communities, similar reliance on

river water for dyeing, and overlapping use of natural colourants such as alizarin and iron-based black, the two crafts have developed separate visual identities, technical processes, and market trajectories. Bagh print's brighter palette, direct printing method, and stronger institutional recognition through its GI tag have allowed it to expand into wider commercial and export markets. Tarapur print's darker, resist-and-indigo-based technique and its continued attachment to a narrower tribal clientele have kept it more traditional, but also more vulnerable to decline.

The study concludes that both crafts deserve sustained documentation, promotion, and support. While Bagh print offers a useful model of how GI recognition and market linkage can help a traditional craft survive and grow, Tarapur print urgently needs similar attention including skill-training initiatives, design intervention, and improved market access to prevent this centuries-old tradition from disappearing along with its last practising artisan families. Preserving both crafts is important not only for the livelihoods of the artisan communities involved, but also for safeguarding a distinctive part of India's textile and cultural heritage.

References

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This paper compares these two crafts based on their history, dyeing process, colours, motifs, and the present condition of the artisans. The objective is to understand how two similar crafts from Madhya Pradesh (the same state) developed different identities, and to highlight the need to preserve and promote them.

