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Designs on *Dabu*!

An ancient mud resist hand-block printing technique from the tribal regions of Rajasthan, *Dabu* is making a steady comeback into the apparel industry. **Bindu Gopal Rao** reports.

Holding a wooden block dripping in mud, Bhagwati Lal Chippa carefully prints the patterns on a white piece of cloth. The designs that he creates are in perfect symmetry and make for a stunning visual against the backdrop of the magnificent City Palace in Udaipur. I met Chippa, an artist from Akola, Chittorgarh in Rajasthan, during the 4th World Living Heritage Festival. For someone who learnt the craft when he was just 12-years-old and has continued its practice since the last 35 years, he is, in a way, one of the few people who is continuing his craft.

THE CRAFT

Dabu, which is derived from the Hindi word 'Dabana', meaning 'to press', is an ancient mud resist hand-block printing technique originating from the tribal regions of Rajasthan. The mud resist is prepared with clay, calcium hydroxide (*chuna*), wheat chaff (*beedan*), gum (*gound*) and lime. Acacia or babul seeds are used to make the gum which works like a binder. The dug out mud from the dry pond is soaked in water in a separate tank overnight. A mixture of *beedan* and *gound* along with mud is used to make a sticky



paste. “The mud resist is applied on the fabric by using wooden blocks. *Dabu* printing is done either on a single table while the printer is sitting, or on a running table. This depends upon the space availability and comfort of the individual printer. Sawdust is applied to places where the mud resist is printed to quickly dry the paste which is a binder that prevents colour penetration while dyeing. The final result creates beautiful and uneven cracks on the fabric,” says Alka Sharma, Founder, Aavaran. “The highlight of *Dabu* is the several stages of applying mud resist, dyeing and washing which results in the sophisticated and elegant patterns of veining, along with the symmetrical patterns derived from nature like the alignment of birds, flowers, leaves,” says Nidhi Yadav, Creative Head & Founder, AKS Clothings.

THE PROCESS

The fabric received from the mills is first washed to remove any impurities that can cause an obstruction to dyeing. The designs are then hand-block printed using fast dyes. “Next is the use of the mud resist paste made of gum, lime, mud and leftover wheat chaff. This paste is applied onto parts of the design, after which sawdust is sprinkled all over to dry and hold the paste. The fabric is then spread under the hot sun to get the

mud paste to dry out completely. Once it dries, it is dipped in a vat of dye, dried again and then washed thoroughly to remove all traces of the paste and excess dye. This process can be done more than once to achieve the desired colour and effect. Traditional *Dabu* print uses natural dyes and colours like indigo and vegetable dyes,” says Bhavya Chawla, Chief Stylist, Voonik. “Thus, the unprotected parts of the fabric catch the colour while the *Dabu* covered bits remain plain. The fabric may be dyed more than once in different colours to give each part of the design a different hue,” says Dr Lucky Yadav, Founder, Lyla.

REVIVAL MATTERS

With rising awareness of building a cleaner and greener environment all around, people have massively switched to eco-friendly alternatives in all domains of their life. Coming to fabrics, *Dabu* printed ones are the best choice to go for, as these adorable prints are made with organic colours and vegetable pastes which are eco-friendly, skin-friendly and retain the brilliance



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of colours for the longest time. The technique can be used to fulfil all ethnic and Indo-Western apparel needs of today's modern women. From saris and skirts to salwar kameezes and shirts, to tunics and kurtas to even scarves, stoles and shawls, *Dabu* prints look pleasant on them all. Designer Arpita Mehta says, "The practice of *Dabu* printing almost died out, but has been revived by the new age designers. Today, the print has become famous all over the globe in various forms due to its vibrant and unique designs. Designers have incorporated this technique in their collections to make Indo-Western outfits, making it appealing for the new generation. Many of the decor brands too have incorporated the same to revive the beautiful technique." At Lyla, apart from saris, they craft *kurtis* and some western styles in tops, dresses and even beachwear. *Dabu* print scarves and dupattas are a big hit and their latest collection which is an ode to this craft brings together *Dabu* and indigo to create a denim-like look for kurtas and dresses for women and kids, giving it a really modern makeover. Jawahar Singh, Co-founder and Owner, *Avishya.com*, says, "*Dabu* printing lives



on through hundreds of apparel and sari makers who have innovated with variations of traditional designs and experimented with bolder colour tones. Many NGOs and quasi-government bodies have encouraged and supported weavers using *Dabu* printing in their handloom products."

CHALLENGES GALORE

This printing is purely a labour-intensive process that involves several steps and stages of printing and dyeing done by expert artisans and craftsmen. Unfortunately, there are only a few artists who can do justice to this painstaking and meticulous job of hand-block printing. Further, adding to this, the natural dyes and vegetable pastes involved in the process are costly and tough to find. Vina Ahuja, Owner & Designer, Akashi says, "The biggest challenge of *Dabu* print is that after a certain point, it starts to fade

FEATURE



because of impurities in the dye colour. Getting a 100 per cent organic dye today is difficult. This technique is highly labour-intensive; hence, the dependability and absence of uniformity make it challenging. Being a natural printing method, it is difficult to replicate the exact same print twice and this makes large-scale production a little troublesome.” Designer Sayantan Sarkar says, “Due to the increase in demand of chemical colours and screen prints, the value of *Dabu* print has decreased with time, and as the days are passing, people are losing their interest in this art form due to it being a delicate, slow process, and also the cost of it is higher than the other forms of prints.”

LOOKING AHEAD

The textile industry is moving as quickly as the fashion industry and *Dabu* printing is used to create a lot of different designs and patterns in

both industries. Currently, *Dabu* print, depending on the design and aesthetic, is used for all types of garments and in all kinds of fabrics. Apart from the absorbent and resilient cotton fabrics which are most commonly used for this technique, fabrics like silk, crepe and georgette have become very popular amongst *Dabu* artisans. In the earlier days, *Dabu* printing was used exclusively in cotton saris. Slowly, it became very popular amongst the craftsmen for saris of all fabrics like silk, crepe and georgette. “These fabrics are used as they can hold the designs and colours very well. *Dabu* print is now being used in many Indian apparel items like dresses, *kurtis*, *salwar kameez*, shirts, tunics, scarves, stoles, shawls, etc. This is not only restricted to apparel; it’s also catching up and is being used in handbags, fashion jewellery, etc. It’s great to see that *Dabu* which is known as an Indian traditional print is now being exported to Western countries too, where it will soon be seen on trousers, etc. The vibrant colours and unique designs used in this printing are being liked by people,” avers Pooja Dahiya Dhankar, Fashion Consultant, Co-founder, Salesforever Stores. Designer Asha Gautam adds, “*Dabu* printing decorates high-end saris made of fine cotton fabrics like *Maheshwari* cotton. Nowadays, they are used for all types of garments and in all kinds of fabrics. In particular, silk, crepe and georgette have become very popular, mainly because they hold the print designs and colours well.” ■