

Past and Present of Hand Block Printing



By:

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(Views expressed in this article are the personal opinion of the authors.)

ABSTRACT

The block printing of Sanganer now termed as “heritage craft” has carved a name for itself and is valued for intricacy, detailing, delicacy and fineness. The paper depicts the journey of Sanganer printing right from the inception to the present. Further the paper discusses the traditional aspects and modifications made as regards to designs, dyes, tools and techniques with the spinning wheel of time in the hand block printing of Sanganer.

INTRODUCTION

Sanganer is situated 15 kilometers south west to Jaipur, once considered as outskirts, now it is a part of Jaipur and is well renowned for block printing. Hand block printing Industry from Sanganer enjoys the share of almost 15% with an export of ₹ 100 crore in the ₹ 690 crore of national export market. The major destinations for export are USA, UK, France, Australia, Italy and Canada.

This sector has a glorious history and the prints of this area had been a prized possession in the past and still continue to maintain the same kind of prestige in the global market. Almost three centuries earlier this process started as an art and artisan was valued for his skill and knowledge but with the advancement the scenario changed. The paper depicts the history of the craft, the changes it underwent and the current status.

METHODOLOGY

To fulfill the above objective the primary data were collected through owners and artisans involved in the trade in Sanganer. The printing units are not registered with any of the government organizations so information about units was gathered through a report presented by a voluntary organization “Sanganer Rangai Chhapai Association”. There were 473 units in eight clusters and around two lakh people were involved directly or indirectly in this trade. Fifteen units were randomly selected from eight clusters and from each unit the owner and six artisans including one experienced artisan involved in the trade for at least 20 years were selected. Hence 90 artisans and 15 owners and along with them the national awardees formed the sample. Observations were done in the field. Secondary data was also explored by consulting records, catalogues and documents.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Sanganer printing was on records since the beginning of 18th century as earlier to this no

record of printing unit of Sanganer can be traced. No such account was mentioned in 16th and 17th century records of the East India Company. Even the state archival records are available from 1727 A.D onwards and so onwards a well documented record for many of the printed cloths present in the royal family were evidenced by Chandramani Singh as described in her book. But it is an established fact that printed cloth from Sanganer was popularly known as Chintz in Europe. A Japanese writer Yuko Tanaka mentions that the development of English and French textiles was greatly influenced by the introduction into Europe of Indian chintz. European chintz became the basis of modern textiles and interior design. With the setting up of the Dutch East India Company or VOC (1597), the English East India Company (1600) and the French East India Company (1664), superior quality dyed Indian textiles came into Europe. Also the exhibits in Calico Museum of Ahmedabad show some fragments of printed cotton found in excavations in Fostat (Egypt) where dead bodies were wrapped in bright printed cotton cloth, which shows the resemblance of these prints to the costumes worn in Jain miniature paintings from Western Rajasthan (Kothari G, 2000). Hence hand block printing of Sanganer existed much before the 18th century.

King Sawai jai Singh has to be credited for settling a foundation to this Printing as he invited artists and craftsman from all over the country especially from Gujarat and Malwa to Sanganer, a place near Jaipur. The art was patronized by the royal family of Jaipur so exquisite masterpieces were produced for various ceremonial purposes, glimpses of them can be seen in the Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum and in the plates as showcased by Chandramani Singh in her book on “Costumes and Textiles from Maharaja Sawai Man Singh II Museum”. Various reports and newspapers confer the traditional block printing to be 500 years old. Singh et al, (2000) in Handcrafted Indian Textiles reports “The block printed cottons of Sanganer, near Jaipur has been renowned for their precious pattern and coloring for at least two hundred and fifty years”.

During 18th and 19th century this art touched exquisite excellence and was popular in Europe and other countries. Sir George Watt in his monumental work “Indian art at Delhi 1902-03” wrote “The Sanganer town of Jaipur state must however be regarded as the very metropolis of the calico printing craft of India so far as art conceptions and technique are concerned”.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SANGANERI PRINTS

Designs

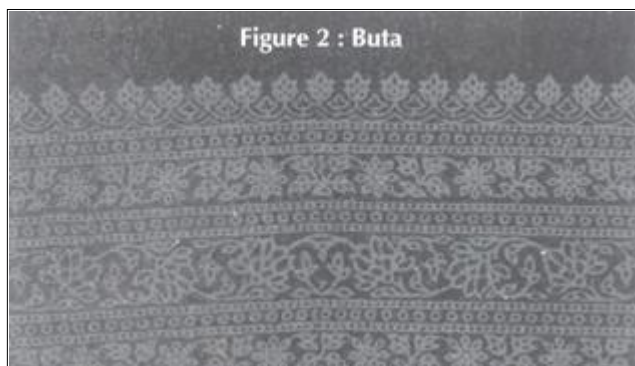
Earlier printed goods of Sanganer were known as “Chintz” because of the small size of motif repetitively used on a white background. The motifs were described in the language of a “Chhipa” the printer, as Buti, Buta, Jhal and Bel/Border meaning small motif, big motif, bunch and border. Flower and plant motifs dominate with animal and bird motifs being subordinate. Highly stylized forms of leaves, buds and flowers of different species were the characteristic of Sanganer Printing. Another characteristic feature was use of variety of designs in one pattern, which required artistic bend to beautifully harmonize the different designs. In the words of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay “Sanganer, a village near Jaipur, became the prestigious work centre for such prints with very elaborate techniques. A special feature of these prints is the use of variety of designs in the same piece of cloth, but beautifully harmonized”.

The details of the four categories used in those times are as follows:-

Buti: Buti is a very small motif and the spacing between one buti and another is predetermined. There could be up to 20 buties on one block, depending on the size and space, they depict the flora and fauna and birds of the area. Sometimes the geometric forms like dots, circles, squares and lines were also used. Sanganeri buties of those times were classic, decorative delicate, refined and exquisite, which were basically used for royal families of Jaipur for clothing. In some buties one finds a collection of more than one flower. Sometimes two different blocks of two different buties are printed together to form a third type of buti e.g. Singhbal buti. By printing different buties together, the Sanganeri chhipas have portrayed excellent know how and artistic expression. Sometimes more than three flowers are fitted beautifully in a single buti.



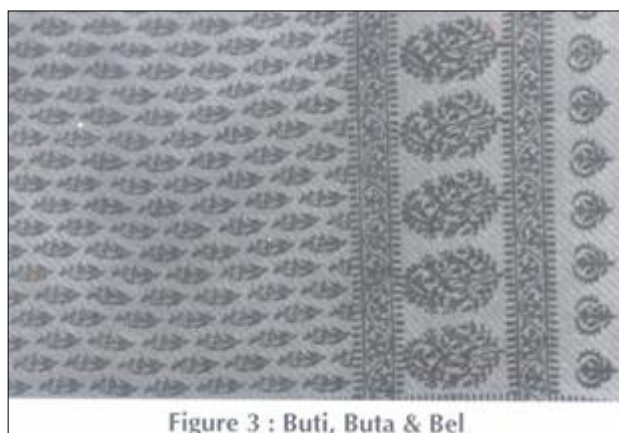
Buta: Buta is normally referred to as design, which is single and complete in itself (Fig. 1). The word buta is derived from the Persian word Butteh which means complete tree. Buta depict the flora and fauna of the region and sometimes birds are also seen. Since it is single unit the spacing between the two impressions can be varied by choice, normally a buta is not bigger than 3"x5".



Jaal: Jaal is pattern, which gives continuous interconnection surface. They cover the entire body of the cloth. Jaal was not very popular in Sanganeri prints. Patterns used were floral, paisley (keri) and geometric.

body. The designs were similar to buties in form and decoration (Fig.2).

Bel: Narrow borders of 2"-4" width were also used and they represent and repeat the same theme as used in the entire



Different buta, buti, and bel have been named by the chhipas according to their shape and according to the flowers and fruits used. These were very appropriate and interesting. Chhipa's generally used a single concept while printing a saree, in which the Buti for the body, Bel for the edges and Buta for the end part of a saree are, used (Fig.3). Thus, for printing one sari, a large number of blocks need to be made.

Fineness remained a key factor to this art, whether the selection of the fine cotton muslin called “mulmul” or the selection of motif which had fine lines and soft curves in a highly stylized form.

Technique

The artisans used the blocks to create the patterns and during those times the block size could be as small as two and a half to three inch. The patterns were impressed so perfectly with the help of a wooden block made of ‘shisham’, ‘gurjan’, ‘mango’ and ‘teak’ wood that the print appeared vividly at the backside. A high degree of skill was required right from carving of the block and then lifting the colour by pressing the block on the padded tray containing dye and finally impressing it on the cloth again and again at equal spacing with the same amount of pressure.

Carving the block needs to follow certain steps in sequence beginning with ‘Ghisai’ meaning smoothening the surface of the wooden block than ‘Chakai’ where a design is transferred from a tracing paper to the wooden surface that is already coated with titanium dioxide and adhesive followed by ‘Khudai’ that was carving the design ranging from 2-3 mm to 2 inches. After this the background of the block was levelled called ‘Dabana’ and finally ‘Chilai’ the sides of the block were smoothened to match the consecutive printing. Lastly the ‘Hatha’ a handle is added to it. Generally a block of outline called ‘Rekh’, second outline block, if required called ‘Chirai’ and the third for filling called ‘Datai’ was used for printing. The number of blocks made for a design was as many as the colours were used.

Fashion Designer Ritu Kumar remarked “The block-makers were among the most innovative and creative of the royal craftsmen. They understood how to produce texture on cloth and how to enhance the richness of the base cotton fabric. The genius of their print designs lay in their understanding of patterning fabric surfaces and the use of space.” The main contributions of Sanganer printers to the Indian printing industry were fast colours, and well proportioned lyrical motifs designed for dupattas, odhanis, dress materials, soft furnishing, quilts and upholstery. These motifs had to suit the occasion, location and requirements of the patrons who commissioned the textiles.

The whole exercise of printing has to be done with great precision as many number of times as the number of colours may be. The water of the river ‘Saraswati’, the soil, the sunshine, the humid air, and the availability of flowers, leaves and herbs all contributed to the characteristic seasoning of the shades and tints produced by the natural dyes. It was the traditional washing of the cloth many times due to abundant water and drying in the open sun gave the Sanganer printing a characteristic touch. The art was practiced in almost every house so it flowed into the blood of all the family members and passed from generation to generation. The printers belong to Chhipa community. They were all Hindus and were followers of the renowned Marathi Saint Namdev.

Dyes

The printing dyes were made either from the herbs or minerals by the traditional printers. Preparation of these natural dyes also took days of soaking flowers, leaves, cereals, spices and metal strips. Two colours red and black called ‘Beggar’ and ‘Syahee’

were prepared meticulously by experienced hands. Red colour dye was made using alum and 'geru' a red soil and Black had a more tedious process where iron pieces in the form of horse shoe and jaggery were placed in a certain proportion in cold water for a fortnight in a closed mud pot. The extract becomes the black dye. When these very extract was applied on cloth in combination with 'harda', a spice it produces a yellow tint. The red dye is also developed from Maddar a plant.

Invasion of screen printing

Prior to 1950's this art served and satisfied the needs of local people by making utility items and at the same time as a form of art it was patronized by the royal family hence production of exquisite items was also there. Artisan was playing a key role whether in weaving the cloth, carving a block, preparing a dye paste and making the design. It was around 1960 that screen printing invaded the area. Migrants from Pakistan (Mirpur and Sind) known as 'Khatris' engaged in printing settled and took to Screen printing, one of the colony in Sanganer is named as 'Khatri nagar'. Slowly with the mechanization the artisans lost their utility market as cheaper imitations of this art were available. The result was that slowly cheaper substitutes like mill made cloth, synthetic dyes and a faster process of screen printing was adopted in many families engaged in this art and other who were very few still continued with the traditional methods relied on the consumer who was at a distant place. Hence the whole art culminated into the form of a trade and it became consumer centric where many artisans were just reduced to job workers. The major bulk that got converted into screen printers started reaping lot of profit as it was faster and could meet the ever-growing demand.

The ordinary consumer could never make out the difference between the two, as screen-printing designs were a perfect imitation of block printing designs. Even than exclusive - items with ethnic designs and eco-friendly natural dyes remained at competitive advantage for block printers but block printers instead of exploring and chiseling their potential for exclusiveness started competing for the low cost utility products substituting and compromising their dye, quality and wages. They could not cater to their high end market except a few entrepreneurs.

REVIVAL MEASURES

After independence the craft almost died until it was revived in the 1970s due to the patronage of prominent exponents like Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, the person behind the cottage industries movement, Prabha Shah, Laila Tyabji, Pupul Jayakar and Faith and John Singh of 'Anokhi' an entrepreneurial unit. Along with 'Anokhi' other entrepreneurs tried hard to restore and to maintain its traditional flavor with natural dyes and established their firms such as 'Cottons' and 'Soma' who are now catering to national and international needs. Floods in 1981 also gave a big setback to this small scale industry.

In 1997, Sanganer was selected for the Cluster Development Programme under UNIDO since it was diagnosed as the 'underachiever' reason being it was a sector with declining performance and high potential. Calico printer's cooperative society (CALICO) was the only formal organization present through which this programme tried to provide the artisans the platform for marketing through fairs and exhibitions. Consortium of Textile

Exporters (CoTex) was formed to give a boost to the exports. Numbers of financial institutions were also roped in 10.

PRESENT SCENARIO

The traditional flavor of block printing underwent lot of synthesis. Not only the word artisan was superseded by daily wager or job worker, the designs, dyes, technique, equipment and cloth all have undergone substantial change. The information regarding this was withdrawn by observing fifteen units and conducting interviews with their owners and artisans.

Design



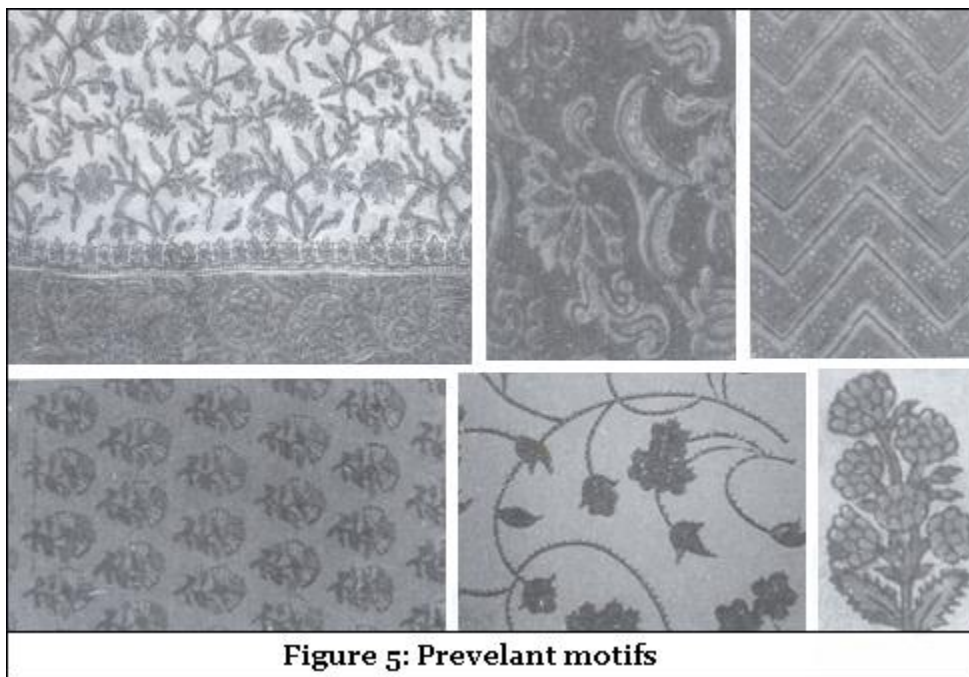
Figure 4: Amalgam of geometrical and floral motifs from 1990 onwards

The most important change, which the designs had undergone, was that earlier very small and fine designs were popular but now bigger designs capture the market (Fig 4 & 5). Geometrical designs had become popular in 1990's especially the square and rectangular ones but later in 2000's the addition of lines, circles and dots could be seen. Further one could see the amalgam of flowers and creepers along with the geometrical designs. Another important variation is that now more than one type of design is combined to make a single design hence one design comprises of many small designs (Fig 4).

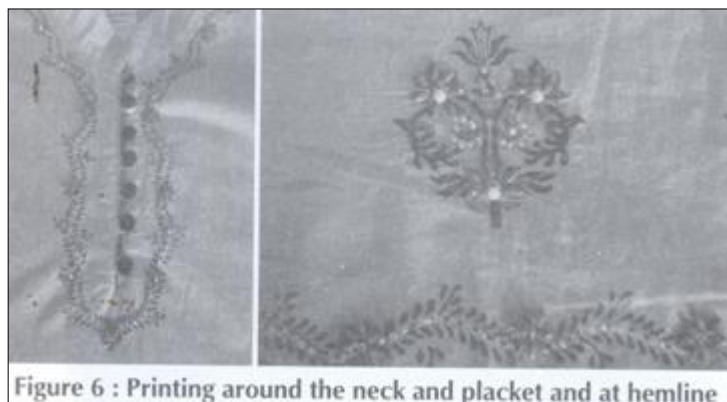
Besides this animal and bird motifs were popular before two decades now they are rarely seen except when some buyer demands these particular designs. Singh in 1983 reported that flowers like rose, lotus, cotton and marigold and coriander leaves were popular. These days the floral motifs are combined with geometrical ones in majority of the designs. Another important finding was that now the buyer decides the motif and the pattern of the design than places the order in bulk, he could be a national or international buyer. Hence the exports and the consumers dominate the designs.

Placement of design on the garment has become important and thus printing is done keeping in mind the style / construction of the garment. Previously printing was done

on running fabric without any consideration to the location of motifs on the garment.



Nowadays printing is done on all items like bed sheets, pillow covers, cushion covers and bolster covers. Apparels like saris, salwar suits, dupattas, scarves skirts and gowns are made and thus care is taken while making designs that they are made according to



to the specific placement on the item like hems of the skirts, around the neck and placket for the kurta, borders and pallavs of saris (Fig.6). Coordinated furnishings like bed sheets with pillow covers bolster covers, cushion covers and curtains are designed specially. Since the buyers are tasteful and have specific demand the artisans are trying their best to design the product up to the taste of the

buyer. Fashion is playing a key role in the design part. High end products are produced in this category.

Dyes

General Secretary of Sanganer Rangai and Chhapai Association Mr Rajendra Jindal reported that 95% synthetic dyes are used in the area. An important finding was that on the basis of the gum used in printing, the people involved in the trade call it natural or chemical, so if the dyers are mixing guar gum to make the printing paste, it is considered as natural dye and if synthetic gum is used they call it chemical dye. In any case the dye used is chemical, very rarely the dye from the natural source is used in printing unless ordered by the buyer. Chemical dyes are cheaper and colour fast. Thus one can see lot of

tints and shades are possible of one colour that are difficult to be achieved by natural dyes. Rapid and Indigo sol dyes and pigments are frequently used. The major change in this area is the addition of golden, silver, copper and glitter colours in special binders and pigments. Hence very interesting results can be seen (Fig.7). This new modification has created a demand for these prints. "Anokhi" an established printing unit does lot of innovations with new designs and was the first one to bring golden, copper and other glitter additions to the existing ones.



Figure 7: Printing using glitter

Technique and Equipment

Screen-printing has substituted block printing, as this is faster and less labour intensive.

In whatever meager amount the block printing is done, the size of the blocks have increased as these days the designs are bigger. As the size of motif is bigger so the size of tools used has also increased, now 4-6 inches blocks and bigger are used instead of 3-5 inches.

There is no restriction on the size of screen as the major production is done with screen printing and so depending on the item; various sizes of the screens are used. Whereas decades back screen sizes never varied. It is the demand of the design and the item printing i.e. hemlines of the skirts and gowns, necklines and borders on sleeve edges results in various sizes of screens (Fig.8). These days the screens are made of iron instead of wooden frames.

It is the changes in style, which has brought lot of additions, and modifications in the equipments and techniques. Besides gold and silver printing lot of glitter is also used and hence the cloth used for making screens have larger mesh so the glitter can pass through. Another technique of applying glitter is first applying the adhesive with the tube according to design and later dusting the fabric with glitter. Sometimes the table is covered with glitter and the fabric with the adhesive pasted is reversed on the table.

Fabric

All the artisans reported that before a decade only cotton cloth mostly mulmul was used and silk was used only for the royal people and now lot of silk, cotton crepe, cotton georgette, linen as well as silk is used both in chiffon and georgette form. Besides this innovations are done by using khadi and jute fabrics also. Another important change

noticed was that these days male garments are also printed which was not done earlier.

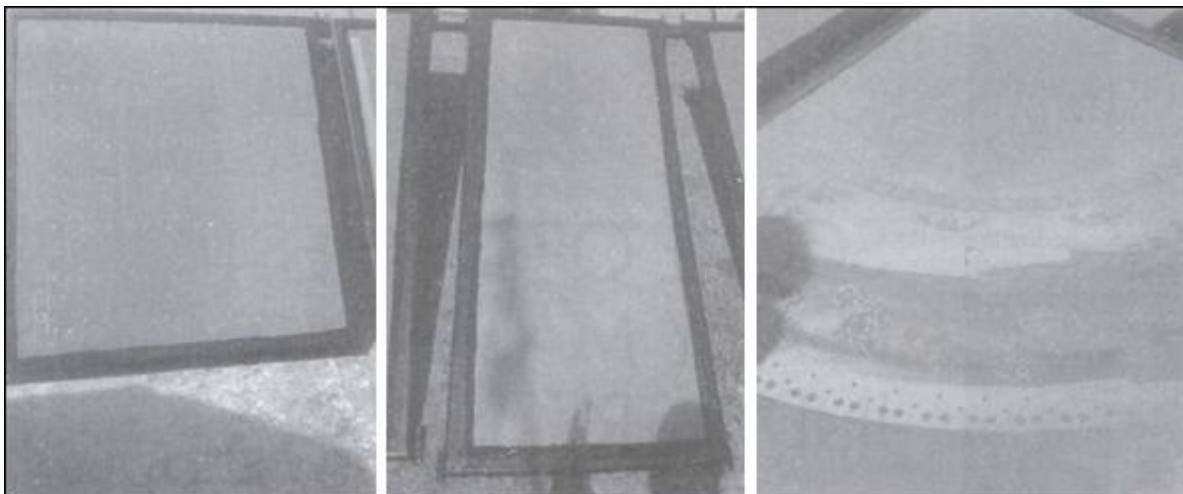


Figure 8: Screens of different sizes

Social environmental issues

With the invasion of screen-printing, mass production of the goods resulted into flooding of that area with hazardous effluents that were let out in the open. Since this art developed from a home based cottage industry with no proper drainage, there was lot of agitation from environmentalists and social activists. The result was that the high court issued an order that these units have to be moved out because they have crossed the permissible limit of pollution and the dead line given was March 7th 2004. These units were, however, not ready to relocate to a new place, Chitroli village, 42 kilometers away, which the state government wanted to develop as a relocation site. As reported by Times of India in 2003 there were about 150 block print units were functioning in Sanganer provide employment to approximately 3,000 families. The export potential is also estimated to be at least Rs 200 crore only through block printing. Further, about 18,000 to 20,000 people are directly dependent for their livelihood on this craft. Along with them there were some 300 Screen Printing units, which were the main source of the pollution. In the “Report of ministerial sub-committee forwarded by Registrar, High court” on June 5th 2003 there are 8 clusters identified and 473 units in which around 2 lakh artisans are working directly or indirectly.

Brij Vallabh, joint secretary of Calico Printers Cooperative Society headed this movement that the block printing units should not be penalized and transferring them to a place other than Sanganer would result in losing its ethnic importance and fame, which is attached to the place. Sanganer Rangai Chhapai Association formed by screen printers could get a stay against the High Court Order as more than 150 screen printing units were served the notification. The need of the day is to tackle these social and environmental issues in such a manner that the block printing sector remains and blooms maintaining its traditional touch.

CONCLUSION

Since Sanganer is valued for block printing hence every effort should be made by the

government to develop that area into an ethnic hub for block printing. Screen printing products should not imitate block printing designs and disguise the customers. They have their own market, price and potential. Efforts made by the CALICO to get block printing added under Geographical Identification Goods category had been successful in 2010 and now the block printers should be motivated to use Geographic Identification Certification. This will give a major economic boost to artisans and customers will be able to get the authentic product. Urgent step is to get the patent for designs of Sanganer Block printing.

Screen printing units can be relocated as the effluent problem is significant. Common Effluent Treatment Plant can be worked out. The printing units can get the status of SSI (through SSI Registration) and will be in a position to avail benefits. This will only be possible when Rajasthan Pollution Control Board issues No Objection Certificate. But again very recently the orders have been issued to relocate the printing units. This kind of agitation would continue till all the units are loyal enough to commit the kind of printing they undertake and not that the screen-printers continue to work in disguise as block printers... Relocation of screen printers can be a solution since block printing is synonyms to Sanganeri printing which derives its name from the place Sanganer hence relocating them would be devastating. Big established entrepreneurs should help small block printers in designing update, technical knowhow and marketing. Proper training programmes should be organized by established entrepreneurs.

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