



Block Printing in Transition: Economic Viability and Artisan Livelihoods in Sanganer, Rajasthan

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Abstract

Block printing is a method of printing images and patterns on textiles, fabric and paper using hand carved wooden blocks which originate from East Asia. The art form has flourished particularly in the state of Rajasthan in India, and is renowned for being home to various communities that have been practising the art for the last 500 years. With developing technology and the onset of machine printing methods this paper aims to analyse the economic transformation and long term viability of block printing alongside the impact on the livelihood of artisans and market dynamics concerning the growing competition. Using a mixed method approach of secondary data, interviews with artisans and questionnaires, the paper explores the extent to which high production costs of block printing, small manufacturing volume and a trend of underpaying labourers can affect the future of this art. It highlights the increasing reliance of the handicraft industry on exclusivity and customisation to retain niche market demand. While identifying constraints in current policies, government efforts and training activities, the paper determines the current socio-economic status of traditional block printers in Sanganer, Rajasthan, and what strategies can enhance their earnings and sustain the craft amid rising competition and evolving market dynamics

Keywords: *Block Printing; Artisan Livelihoods; Sanganer; Price Discrimination; Engel Curve*

1. Introduction

The art of Block printing in Jaipur is more than just a textile technique; it is a living testament to India's rich artistic heritage, cultural resilience, and the enduring skill of its artisans. This elaborate technique, which has its roots in centuries-old customs, has been handed down through generations. Craftspeople carefully carve wooden blocks, dip them in natural dyes, and stamp designs onto fabric with extreme precision. Every item created is distinct, with flaws that have come to contribute to its allure and

authenticity. In a time when mechanized production and industrialization dominate, block printing is still a unique form of sustainable artistry. Block printing thrives on originality and traditional knowledge, in contrast to machine-made textiles that prioritise consistency and speed. The technique has begun to play a key role in the modern fashion and textile industries because of its versatility, which enables it to accommodate both large-scale production and custom designs. The process is divided into 2 stages of production. The first being the designing and manufacturing of the individual blocks themselves, each design requiring a set of at least 4 blocks to accomplish one full print. The second stage consists of using these blocks to transfer the design onto a 6 foot long cloth pinned down to wooden tables to create the final piece.

The biggest obstacle faced by block printers with the onset of screen printing is the low production costs that they are unable to compete with. The cost of the dye, the blocks and of labour combined forces them to raise their selling price. This decreases the size of their customer base, as they are able to only attract those with a genuine interest and respect for the artform, but not sell at a commercial level. Additionally, those without a sharp eye may not even make out the subtle differences between a screen printed product and authentic printing as machines have now begun to replicate the small imperfections that are a trademark of human handiwork. This further increases competition, enhancing the struggles of the block printing community. However, on a brighter note the community outside India has begun to discover and take keen interest in the art with tourists in Jaipur being a large part of their customer base. Visiting international festivals at the governments' request has been a huge asset in the expansion of these businesses.

The government may have initially worked to encourage and spread the art however by supporting ventures like Dastakar and Dilli Haat, they have over time become incredibly commercialized transforming into a business venture. The artists at the end may not be receiving a large percentage of their selling price but take away key skills of trade, the market, and making connections with exporters. From my own interviews I have gathered that the workers in block printing factories are generally uneducated and believe their children deserve better opportunities. This is despite the fact that those with post-graduation education may not end up earning more than these labourers. It becomes a matter of perception, not of quantifiable data that is encouraging these workers to direct their children away from the art form.

2. Background of the Study

The three most prevalent kinds of block printing are Bagru, Sanganer and Ajrakh, the first two located in different parts of Jaipur district and the last located in Gujarat.



Figure 1: District Map of Jaipur
Source: Desai Foundation

Located 30 kilometres away from Jaipur, the district of Sanganeer is a central hub for handicrafts in Rajasthan. Employing over 5000 printers today, the art form was initially introduced in the 18th century by Sawai Jai Singh. However, the birth of block printing occurred in the Bagru district brought to Jaipur by the Chippa community (those who stamp and print). However, the craft faces an uncertain future. The rise of digital printing and screen-printing methods, which can now mimic the imperfections of hand-printed textiles, threatens to overshadow traditional practices. Additionally, economic pressures, urban migration, and policy challenges have placed many artisans in precarious positions, pushing this heritage craft towards the brink of extinction. But the future of the craft is questionable. The emergence of screen-printing and digital printing techniques, which can now replicate the flaws of hand-printed fabrics, poses a threat to the art form. It is also in danger of going extinct due to regulatory issues, urban migration, and economic constraints that have put many artists in precarious positions.

However, block printing is a cultural ecology unto itself, not simply a way to decorate textiles. There is a strong argument for the resurgence of block printing as the textile industry shifts toward ethical and sustainable production practices. Its combination of artistic ability, environmental friendliness, and cultural relevance, makes it a skill that should be preserved for both its historical significance and its potential for the future. The purpose of this study is to investigate the artistic, historical, and socio-

economic facets of Jaipur's block printing industry with a focus on the Sanganer district, highlighting challenges and the tenure of its relevance in a rapidly changing market.

2.1 History of Block Printing

Each of these forms are three distinct traditional Indian block printing techniques, reflecting the rich cultural heritage and artisanal skills of their respective regions, contributing significantly to India's diverse textile traditions

Bagru Printing

Bagru printing is a traditional method of hand block printing on textiles, originating from the village of Bagru in Rajasthan, India. It is practised predominantly by the Chippa community, and has been preserved through generations and is characterised by the use of natural dyes and hand-carved wooden blocks to create floral prints. The process involves multiple stages, including washing the fabric to remove impurities, treating it with a paste of cow dung, soda ash and sesame oil, and subsequently dyeing it with natural colours sourced from indigo, pomegranate, madder root, and turmeric. Bagru printing is typically identified by its earthy tones on light-coloured fabrics, which lend the method its distinct aesthetic appeal.



Figure 2a: Bagru print
Source: outlook traveller



Figure 2b: Bagru district
Source: Knocksense.com

Sanganeri Printing

The town of Sanganer, close to Jaipur in Rajasthan, is the birthplace of the ancient hand block printing method known as "Sanganeri printing." The craft was created between the 16th and 17th centuries, and gained popularity during the Mughal era, later becoming a vital export for the East India Company. Sanganeri printing, distinguished by its delicate and elaborate designs, is well known for its use of floral themes, such as narcissus, roses, and sunflowers, which are printed on white or off-white textiles. However, in response to changing customer preferences, modern versions have expanded the method to accommodate a wider palette of basic colors.



Figure 3a: Sanganer print
Source: Expedia



Figure 3b: Sangner district
Source: Times of India

Ajrakh Printing

The Kutch district of Gujarat, India, and Sindh, which is now in Pakistan, is where the traditional hand block printing method known as ajrakh, originates from. This art form is said to be more than a thousand years old. Ajrakh is known for its intricate geometric designs, which are often symmetrical, as well as its rich color scheme consisting of vivid reds and deep indigo blues. Block printing and resist dyeing on both sides of the fabric are steps in the time-consuming process. Natural dyes are essential; the main sources of red and blue hues are madder and indigo, respectively. Ajrakh, which has earned international recognition, was traditionally worn by pastoral tribes.



Source: Khamir.org
Figure 4a: Ajrakh print

3. Literature Review

Rajasthan's hand block printing industry has been observed to be undergoing a significant transition, primarily due to mechanization and changing consumer tastes. Traditional artisanal roles have been undermined by mechanized techniques such as screen and digital printing, which have drastically changed production dynamics. Jain and Kapadia (1984) noted that indiscriminate mechanization had begun eroding artisan autonomy and driving traditional printers out of their trade. Following the use of technology, craftspeople in Sanganer faced unstable wages and dwindling job security, as reported by Nandi and Chaudhury (2010).

Although there are significant risks associated with these disruptions, a number of studies also suggest resilience and adaptive strategies that are being adopted. Block printers in Jaipur are moving toward commercialization by working with designers and serving specialized markets, according to Tokas et al. (2023). Similarly, Greru and Kalkreuter (2017) highlight Sanganer's changing design culture, as craftspeople reimagine classic products to appeal to modern customers. Mathur's (2019) research showcases these changes by linking artisanal survival to knowledge of consumer trends and access to market connections. However, hand block printers are still being driven out of the market by the advent of less expensive screen printing. According to Garg and Walia's (2018) SWOT analysis, mechanization is the main threat, but there are also opportunities in sustainable fashion and export markets. Kishore (2022) provides a scientific comparison of digital, screen, and hand block printing, demonstrating how production costs and perceived quality affect market segmentation. The institutional obstacles that craftspeople encounter are the subject of several studies. Meitei and Ahemad (2021) draw attention to a lack of training and capacity development to assist artisans in navigating technological transition, while DeNicola (2003) shows how design mediation by NGOs and private entities frequently leads to the loss of creative agency for craftspeople. Dimensions relating to gender and health are also significant. When considered collectively, the literature demonstrates that traditional hand block printing is at a turning point, torn between market-driven change and cultural heritage. Even though technology has made many artisanal livelihoods unstable, this research paper claims that the niche demand of block printing attributed to high end designers, international recognition and tourism in Rajasthan has there is hope thanks to focused interventions and design-led adaptation.

4. Research Gap

This paper through primary sources tries to analyse the status of artisans and all stakeholders involved in block printing. It attempts to understand the present standing of this art in the current economic scenario where the textile industry is facing immense competition from the onset of digital printing and mechanized screen printing. It focuses on the economic theory which is applicable to this industry and also attempts to analyse their long term economic viability. The paper would conclude that theories that were applicable to the primary research were:

1. Engel curve (income elasticity of demand)
2. Imperfect competition (monopolistic market structure)
3. Price discrimination within monopolistic markets.

5. Methodology

The main Methodology for the paper is a form of questionnaire and interviews with local artisans with respect to demand for their products, impact on their earnings this is contrasted with the earnings and demand for machine printed fabrics. From the interviews an idea would be developed on the number of

artisans that still continue in the traditional arts and why. The primary research would substantially prove that there are 3 economic theories behind the growth of this segment. Secondary data would then be used to obtain an idea on the export potential of traditional block printing commodities. An attempt was made to contrast men's and women's wages in this art, information for this was through primary sources.

6. Results of Questionnaire Filled by Artisans

Information gathered from artisans working in factories across Sangner made it abundantly clear the long hours required to perfect a single piece, with most working 6 hours a day, 6 to 7 days of the week as displayed in chart 1 and 2. They admitted to producing 2-3 printed fabrics per day, a testament to the meticulous nature of the art, but also a disadvantage in comparison to the higher volume of screen prints produced at the same time.

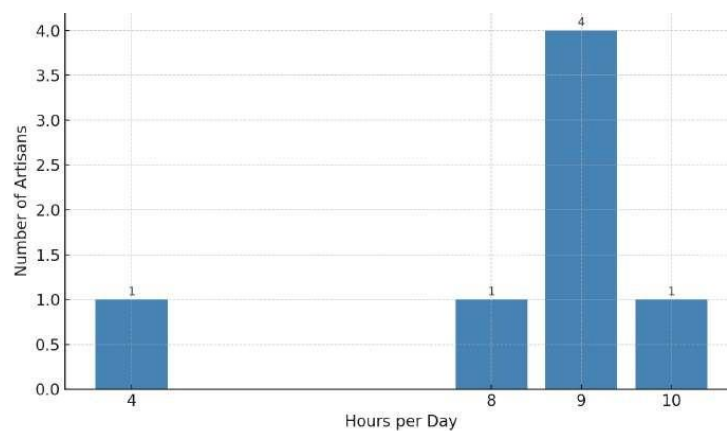


Chart 1: Number of working hours per day

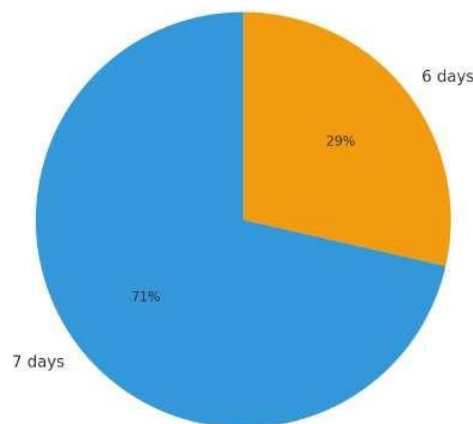


Chart 2: Number of working days per week

The common consensus was that for the amount of work, effort and skill they provided they were not adequately paid. Most of the artisans with families to support, said they struggled to do so with block printing as their only source of income (chart 3 and 4). The most significant takeaway depicted in chart 5, was that none were willing for their children to follow in their footsteps, instead wanting them to finish

their education, a privilege the artisans themselves never had as financial hardships resulted in them being employed since childhood as shown in chart 6.

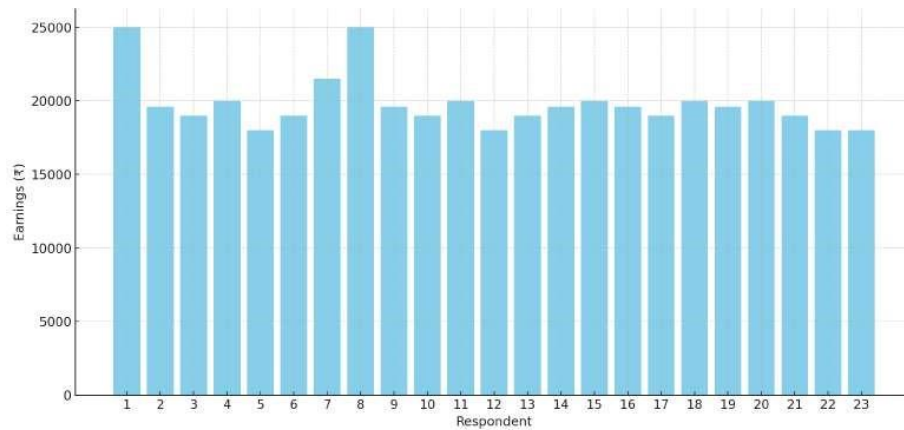


Chart 3: Monthly earnings of block printing artisans

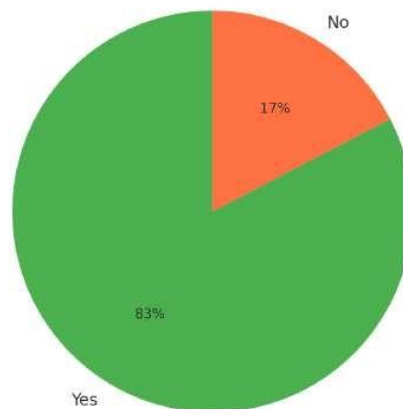


Chart 4: Percentage of artisans with block printing as their sole occupation

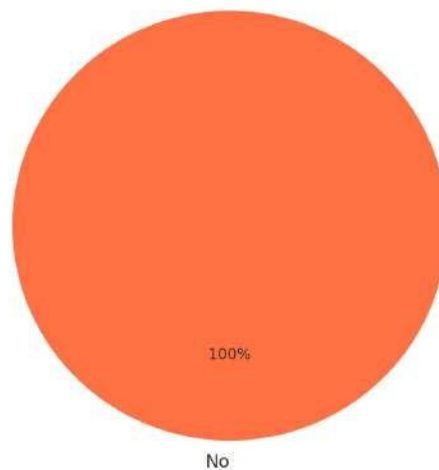


Chart 5: Percentage of artisans willing to pass the art onto their children

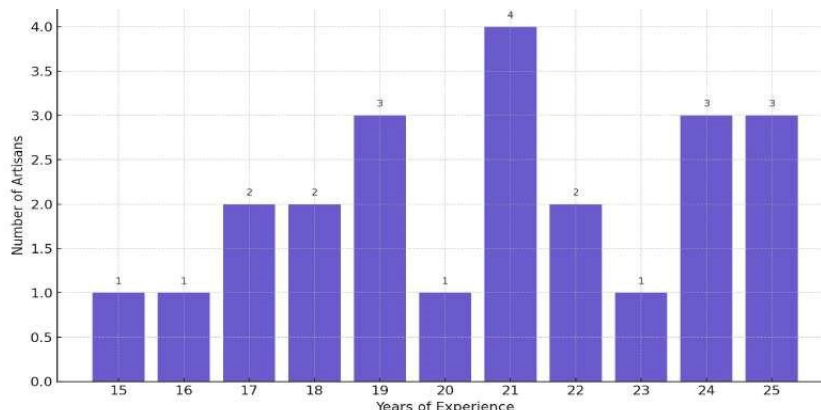


Chart 6: Number of years' artisans have been involved in block printing

6. Design Process (Manufacturing of Blocks Used)

Printing begins with the development of a design concept. Artisans then sketch the intended artwork which is handed over to specialised block makers who carve wooden printing blocks as shown in images 1 and 5, based on these specifications. The complexity of the design determines the number of blocks required to execute it. Typically, multi-colored designs require distinct blocks for each layer, starting from the basic outline, to the overall colour to more intricate detailing. The block preparation takes approximately 20 days, with the number of blocks varying from 5-15. Prior to printing, fabrics undergo a material-specific treatment process to neutralise any impurities and enhance absorption of colour. Cotton fabrics are soaked in a caustic soda solution, while Tassar silk is conditioned using warm water. Once treated, the fabric dried, spread across 6 feet long wooden tables and pinned down at intervals of 2-3 inches to ensure the cloth remained in a stable state of tension. The workers then proceed with the task of printing which includes the creation of 3 blocks Rekh, Datta and Gadh that work in harmony to create a single print. The imprints of each block are depicted in images 6,7 and 8 Rekh blocks are the finely carved “outline” tools with thin, sharp edges to shape the print. Datta blocks fill those outlines. They add bolder colours and textures, letting artisans create variations in density, hue to add depth to the design. Gadh blocks work to lay the broad background and fill the negative-space, completing the composition.



Image 1: Hand carved wooden block Source: Self-photographed



Image 2: organic dyes
Source: self-photographed



Image 3: process of covering block in dye
Source: self-photographed



Image 4: Datta block dipped in colour
Source: self-photographed



Image 5: carved block
Source: self-photographed



Image 6: printing process
Source: self-photographed



Image 7: Rekh placement
Source: self photographed



Image 8: Datta placement
Source: self-photographed



Image 9: Gadh placement
Source: self-photographed



Image 10: finished product
Source: self-photographed



Image 11: process of pinning cloth to table
Source: self-photographed



Image 12 : Eldest artisan in the factory (started printing at age 5)
Source : self-photographed

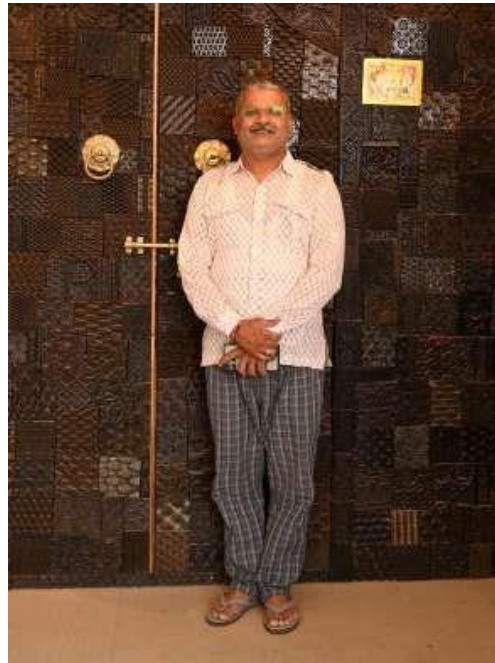


Image 13: Santosh Dhanopiya (7th generation block printer and national award winner)

Source: self-photographed

7. Costing of Involved in the Printing Process (Sanganer)

The printing process involves the use of natural, eco-friendly pigments sourced from Dyestar, a provider of mineral-based dyes. This process is similar for Bagru as they use the same material, artisans with similar levels of experience who are paid similar wages, both areas are in Rajasthan relatively geographically close. The difference lies only in the style of printing. These colors are significantly more costly when procured in smaller, artisanal batches (INR 180 per liter) compared to the rates available for mass production (INR 40 per liter). Colors are mixed manually in shallow trays for application.

A standard cotton saree production requires a team of three skilled kaarigars (craftsmen), each working from 9 AM to 6 PM over a span of three days. The printing involves multiple stages including outline and datte (filling) work, ensuring consistency across the fabric. Although all artisans are equally well versed with each part of the process, while working on a particular piece they are assigned responsibility of different stages throughout the process, which they continue to work on until that order is completed.

7.1 Cost and Pricing Structure

The cost breakdown for a single saree production is as follows:

- Labor: INR 9,000 (for three artisans over three days) which amounts to INR 1000 per artist each day for 9 hours of work.
- Fabric: INR 2,500
- Operational Costs: INR 2,500 (includes table usage, electricity, and block washing)
- Color Maintenance and Miscellaneous: INR 2,000

This results in a total production cost of approximately INR 16,000 per saree. The sarees are retailed at an average market price of INR 20,000, providing a modest profit margin that reflects both the intensive manual labor and the quality of materials used.

The high cost of production, especially when compared to machine-printed or mass-produced textiles, underscores the artisanal value embedded in each piece, as indicated above. The use of environmentally sustainable dyes, the intricate design process, and the time-intensive manual labor justify the premium pricing of block printed sarees from Jaipur. However, the paltry wages paid to skilled artisans indicates that the artisan would prefer to leave this field for a higher paying job and is adamant against encouraging his children to follow in his footsteps. This corroborates the sentiments expressed when the primary study was undertaken.



Image 14: factory owner in Sanganer
Source: self-photographed

8. Analysis of Primary Information

Interviews from block printing factory owners have yielded an insider's perspective of the current market. According to them; the contemporary block printing sector in India is experiencing a transformation shaped by market segmentation, creative innovation, and tensions between traditional methods and industrial-scale production. A critical distinction has emerged within the sector between commodity-driven and creativity-driven production. While block printing faces stiff competition from screen and digital printing in the commodity segment—where uniform, large-scale outputs dominate—the creative segment, characterized by limited editions, bespoke designs, and non-repetitive layouts, continues to favor hand block printing due to its aesthetic flexibility and perceived authenticity.

According to business owners two kinds of products exist, commodity and creative. When it comes to commodity products, a typical screen printing factor relies on mass production methods and machinery to maximise profit. When asked to customise a certain piece, it disrupts that process, costing

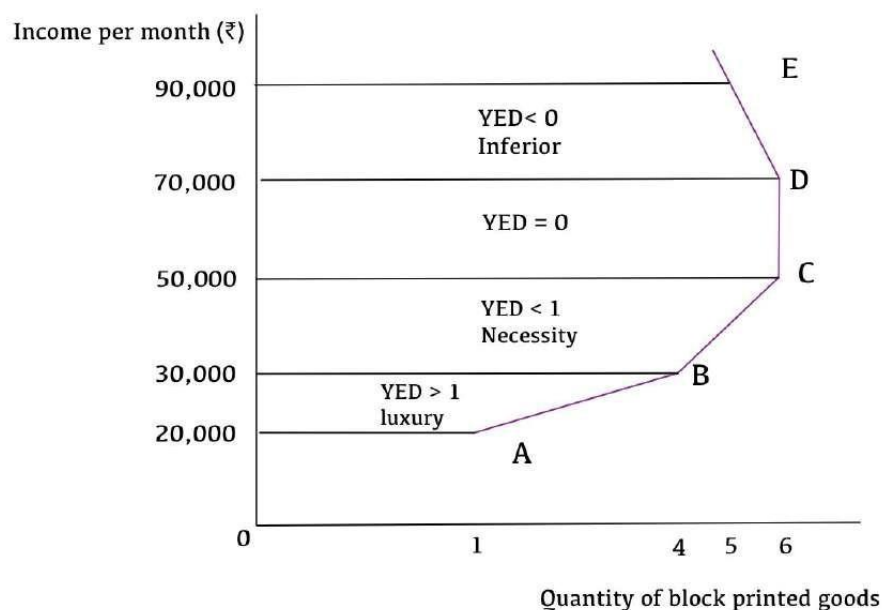
the factory time and resources in order to create a design, buy the required dye and cloth, thus deviating from the fixed process. If they were to produce a customized piece the moment it would hit the market other firms would begin replicating it. The speed of screen printing machines becomes a disadvantage here.

Indian consumers—particularly women, are described by retailers as possessing highly discerning tastes in textiles, which further entrenches the demand for innovation and originality in high-end garments. This need is amplified in rising income segments such as the upper-middle and upper classes, where exclusivity and artisanal value command premium pricing. Block printers, with limited capacity, limited producers have less incentive and resources to steal designs. This reduces their productive efficiency and would result in lower profits than if they were to proceed with the original designs. However, from a production standpoint, block printing offers remarkable flexibility. Unlike mechanized systems that favor long-run prints to justify setup and calibration costs, block printers can produce as few as two or five unique items hence customisation is less of an obstacle in their process. This allows them to maintain a sense of exclusivity that not Indian and international designers are beginning to value.

One factory owner claims that when he started his factory in Sanganer there were less than 100 units, each with tables of 2-3 metres allowing around 2 sarees to be printed per day. Today 25 years later there are approximately 700 units in the vicinity. The reason, he states, that demand for block printing will not decrease is that for any designer selling premium products block printing is their most valuable asset. The ease of digital printing, the incentive of making profits easily, attracts new firms to the market. To the point where there is minimal differentiation in their products. The screen printing market cannot cater to the needs of high end designers who value uniqueness, instead they turn more and more to block printing. Block printing has begun to capture the international market, focusing heavily on exports to counter such as. United States, Belgium, United Kingdom, Russia and more.

9. Economic Viability of Block Printing and Screen Printing

9.1 Income Elasticity of Demand (YED) with Regards to Block and Screen Printed Products



Graph 1: Engel curve

It is clear from the field study and interviews that block printed textiles, particularly hand-printed saris and clothing are luxury items with strong income elasticity of demand. With a rise in income, among the metropolitan upper-middle classes there has been observed a disproportionate increase in demand for distinctive, handmade, and custom clothing. The upward-sloping Engel curve for luxury products exemplifies this phenomenon. Artisans in Jaipur noted a clear trend: the rising income levels of Indian consumers, especially women, have led to greater preference for exclusive, handcrafted textiles. One artisan explained that women who recognize the exclusivity of block prints refuse to wear pieces that are mass-produced or available in multiple outlets. This observation reflects an Engel curve where demand for block printed items increases more than proportionally with income (after a particular income level).

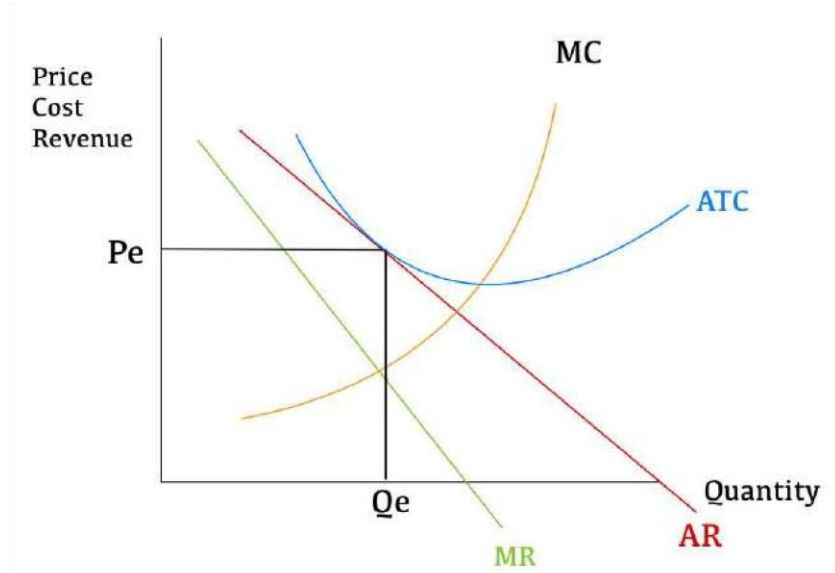
The Engel curve, in microeconomic theory, illustrates the relationship between a consumer's income and the quantity demanded of a particular good. It helps classify goods as normal (positive income elasticity) or inferior (negative income elasticity), and within normal goods, as necessities (low income elasticity) or luxuries (high income elasticities). Assuming that at lower income levels, where monthly disposable incomes may range between ₹20,000–₹30,000, block printed textiles are largely unaffordable, leading to negligible purchases. In this segment, cheaper substitutes such as screen-printed textiles have higher demand. As incomes rise to ₹30,000–₹50,000, block printed goods transition from luxury to accessible purchases, particularly for festivals and special occasions. Here, income elasticity exceeds 1, reflecting strong responsiveness to income increase. This pattern aligns with those mentioned in the field interviews.

In the highest income bracket, which includes global markets, income elasticity remains positive. Every year, consumers who have disposable incomes of more than ₹70,000 per month (or similar foreign earnings) tend to buy many custom-made block-printed items driven by a value for sustainability, artisanal history, and uniqueness. Marginal increases in consumption, however, decrease after a saturation point, lowering income elasticity to less than one when consumption demands are met. Rarely does block printing decline in quality at any economic level; instead, it continues to be a high-end cultural luxury. Block printing's future is therefore still bright, if it is strategically positioned and has institutional support, even as incomes rise both domestically and internationally.

Understanding block printing's high income elasticity can guide both policy and market interventions: Through creative partnerships and e-commerce, subsidies and promotions should concentrate on increasing market access to higher-income domestic and international market segments rather than lowering the cost of block prints, which decreases the quality of the product. Upskilling and training craftspeople to match luxury market expectations will cause production to align with the upward sloping demand depicted in the diagram. Additionally, the attractiveness of the art customers of higher incomes can be increased by government and non-profit organizations supporting narrative branding that links it to exclusivity and ethical fashion. In conclusion, the Engel curve shows that market accessibility and income stratification, rather than a lack of significance, are the real threats to a possible decline in block printing. Currently, its demand potential is likely to increase sharply with rising incomes, both in India and elsewhere, when properly positioned to the public and supported.

9.2 Market Structure

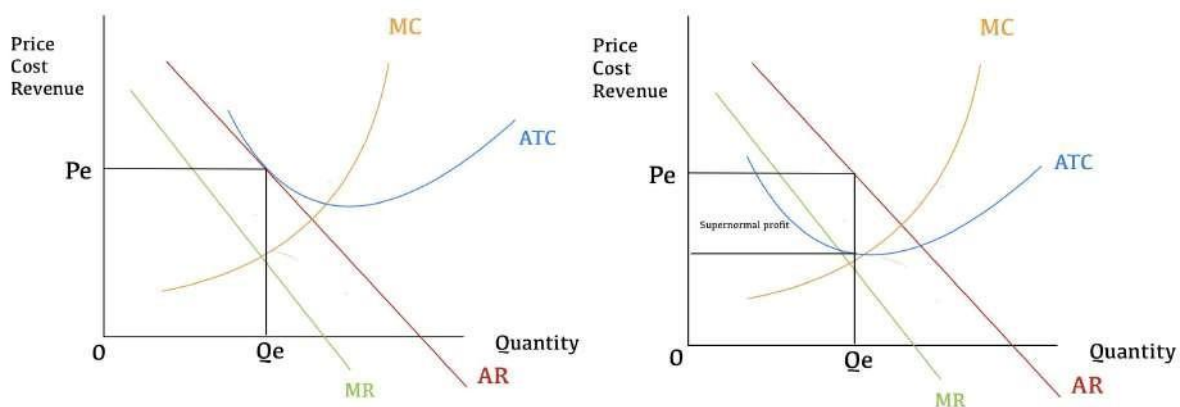
The traditional textile printing sector in India, encompassing both block printing and screen printing, operates within the framework of monopolistic competition, a market structure characterized by many sellers, differentiated products, and low barriers to entry and exit. However, the extent and manner in which each sector conforms to this model diverges significantly due to differences in cost structures, product attributes, and market dynamics.



Graph 2: monopolistic firm (normal profit)

The monopolistic graph of a firm depicts a downward-sloping demand curve due to scope of product differentiation within the industry, giving firms the power of being price makers. The short-run equilibrium occurs where the firm's marginal cost (MC) curve intersects the marginal revenue (MR) curve, and the price is set above marginal cost at the corresponding point on the demand curve. In the long run, as more firms enter the market due to the potential of making profit, the demand curve shifts left and becomes more elastic, eventually leading to zero economic profits, although firms still maintain market power through differentiation.

9.3 Block Printing and Monopolistic Competition



Graph 3: Monopolistic firm in block printing market (normal and supernormal profit)

Block printing firms exemplify the upper segment of monopolistic competition graph, where product differentiation is extreme and price elasticity of demand is high. Each block printed textile is

unique, shaped by variations in hand-carved wooden blocks, natural dye batches, and artisanal technique. As such, the firm's demand curve is more steeply downward sloping than that of screen printing, reflecting a niche customer base willing to pay a premium for authenticity and exclusivity. In the short run, successful block printing firms, particularly those supplying elite designers or exporting to Western markets, can earn supernormal profits. This is illustrated on the monopolistic competition graph where the average revenue (AR) curve lies above the average total cost (ATC) at the quantity where $MR = MC$. The area between AR and ATC at this output level reflects positive economic profit.

However, in the long run, as the craft becomes more popular, new entrants (designers, boutique labels, or export-focused artisans) may attempt to enter. But unlike a classic monopolistically competitive industry, block printing has skill and cultural barriers to entry: years of training, access to skilled labor, and understanding of traditional motifs act as natural barriers. Hence, while the long-run demand curve may shift slightly inward, block printing may not fully converge to the zero-profit long-run equilibrium, as predicted by the textbook model.

Screen Printing and Monopolistic Competition

In contrast, screen printing aligns more closely with the traditional economic theory of monopolistic competition. Firms offer moderately differentiated products, primarily through branding or surface-level design changes. The capital-intensive process allows significant economies of scale, which pushes the average total cost curve downward as output increases. Consequently, screen printing firms operate with flatter demand curves, indicating more elastic consumer preferences and greater sensitivity to price. On the standard monopolistic competition graph, screen printing firms in the short run can also earn supernormal profits if they achieve large-scale contracts. However, due to low entry barriers, the ease of purchasing printing equipment and hiring semi-skilled labor incentivises new firms to enter the market, shifting the demand curve leftward. Over time, this leads to normal profits in the long run, where the AR curve becomes tangent to the ATC curve at the profit-maximizing quantity. Causing firms in the industry to produce at normal profit. Furthermore, in screen printing, the marginal cost (MC) remains relatively low and constant, and firms tend to produce at or near capacity to spread fixed costs. Yet, when required to deviate from fixed designs and production processes, such as for customization or limited editions—costs increase, and efficiency drops, making such requests economically unfeasible. This rigidity contrasts sharply with block printing, where each piece is inherently customized.

Comparison

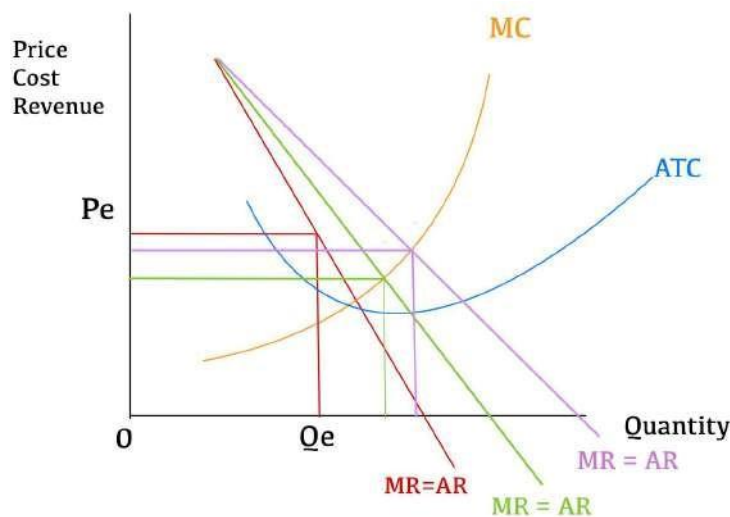
Despite both industries being subject to monopolistic competition, the screen printing and block printing sectors differ in terms of pricing, degree of customization, and consumer perception. Screen printing makes it possible to produce goods quickly and cheaply due to economies of scale. However, its inflexible design and oversaturation make it inappropriate for the high-end fashion industry. The disadvantage of block printing lies in its cost and manufacturing volume, but the exclusivity of products adds value to make up for it. Block printing is a popular choice among designers looking to create tailored or limited-edition collections because of its authenticity. The ladies' dress material market in India is estimated to be around ₹55,000 crore, according to retail consultants. Even a 5–10% market share in this sector suggests a significant volume for block printing. While screen printing dominates the commodity sector, it cannot displace block printing in the creative sector. The economic viability of block printing, therefore, does not depend on matching industrial outputs but rather on capturing niche, high-margin segments through design partnerships, export, and storytelling.

9.4 Role of Price Discrimination in Monopolistic Competition

Monopolistic competition, involving differentiated products and some degree of pricing power, enables firms to adopt price discrimination strategies, charging different prices to different customers for essentially the same good based on willingness or ability to pay. Price discrimination allows a firm to capture more consumer surplus and convert it into additional profit, often shown on the monopolistic competition graph as an expansion of the profit-maximizing area above average total cost (ATC).

These strategies can be divided into the following 3 segments:

1. Third degree price discrimination
2. Second degree price discrimination
3. First degree price discrimination



Graph 4: Price discrimination in monopolistic firms

In third-degree price discrimination, consumers are segmented into different groups, and each group is charged a different price. In second-degree discrimination, prices vary based on the quantity purchased or product version. Block printing firms use a blend of both, based on customer segmentation (domestic vs. international; designer vs. tourist) and product type (limited edition vs. mass order). Each segment faces a different price point for similar or even identical fabrics. For instance, a hand-printed cotton fabric sold to FabIndia in bulk might be priced significantly lower per unit than a single piece sold to a tourist at a Jaipur workshop, even if the material and labor are the same. This reflects price discrimination by buyer identity, where artisans use observed or expected income and demand elasticity to set prices accordingly. The artisans of sanganer emphasized the value of exclusivity and customization. Such a boutique or designer might request a custom sari design with specific motifs and placements, incurring higher labor and design input, but also allowing the artisan to charge a much higher price per unit than for a ready-made design.

This aligns with second-degree price discrimination, where the product itself is tiered based on quality, customization, or edition size. A sari printed in a run of 2–5 pieces will sell for a higher price than one produced in 50–100 units, even if the base fabric and print are similar. Another layer of

discrimination emerges in international exports. Artisans noted that 90–95% of premium block-printed products are exported, often at prices several times higher than those for the same goods sold in India. This is not solely due to logistics, but to a strategic understanding that foreign markets perceive higher value in artisanal Indian goods and exhibit lower price sensitivity.

10. Impact of Government Policies

The contemporary artisan navigating this landscape, typically must adopt a hybrid strategy which includes, engaging with exhibitions, aligning with brand-driven aesthetics, and leveraging networks in order to sustain and grow their practice. Governmental support, while present, is increasingly mediated through digital portals, replacing older manual processes. The digitization of application systems for funding and exhibition access has created significant barriers for artisans unfamiliar with these technologies. Moreover, the criteria for receiving state support, such as national awards or participation in international showcases, often require high levels of design innovation and production refinement, which are not always accessible to all practitioners. Additionally, government sponsored exhibitions, fairs, etc have become increasingly commercialised over the years. According to interviews, for artisans from across India, after accounting for rent, stay and travel they reportedly suffer a 60% loss on their sales. Positioning such presentations of art as commercial ventures rather than avenues for cultural expansion has negated the purpose of such programmes.

“Where there is the government’s ‘financial support’ there can never be growth” a quote stated by an artisan in the primary interviews that were conducted.

11. Conclusion and the Way Forward

If one merely considers mass-market economics, the idea that block printing is a dying art is deceptive. In reality, block printing's future success depends on its positioning as a high-end, innovative product and focused initiatives to address four crucial areas: policy, education, market intelligence, and cultural perception. Firstly, several obstacles remain in the way of transmission of skills and education. According to interviews, not many schools and internships give students the hands-on experience they need for this craft. This needs to be addressed by replacing inefficient academic programs with fully financed training centers that provide stipends along with demanding, practical experience. These initiatives ought to emulate the apprenticeship model, appointing seasoned craftspeople as mentors and establishing collaborations with design schools to bridge knowledge gaps and enhance the required skills. Such organization and attention is critical in altering the perception of block printing which prevents pursuit of the art or propagates the belief it is a less respected or less preferable occupation to pursue. Particularly for artisans, such centers would offer financial incentives as well.

Secondly, decentralization and policy reform are essential. Token acknowledgements like national prizes, which sometimes exclude those low levels of computer literacy, cannot be the extent of state support. Instead, to guarantee greater accessibility and influence, initiatives should concentrate on extending decentralized platforms beyond major cities like Delhi, such as regional exhibits, cooperatively owned retail locations, and craft tourist hubs. Thirdly, there is a need to improve entrepreneurial skills and market intelligence. Craftspeople require financial knowledge, strong branding abilities, and access to consumer trend data in order to compete and expand. Private sector and non-governmental organization support is crucial, especially when it comes to financing design incubators, e-commerce training, and ethical finance methods. Successful artisan-led companies already show how these actions can promote resilience and growth.

Finally, cultural rebranding is necessary to shift youth perceptions. Block printing must be reframed as a sustainable, dignified, and forward-thinking profession, not a relic of the past. This requires strategic alliances with influencers, collaborations with designers, and effective storytelling through social media to restore the craft's aspirational appeal. Block printing is not on the brink of extinction; it is evolving. The question is not one of preservation in the face of machine development but of strategic coexistence, where tradition harmonizes with design innovation and economic empowerment aligns with cultural preservation. Rather than pitying artisans, we must empower them with tools, platforms, and recognition, enabling them to reclaim control over their craft and their future.

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Appendix

Transcripts of Interviews with Business Owners

Interview 1 and 2

https://docs.google.com/file/d/1sMn9RzR-tsl8L5ySTXRtKamGIDazxw6L/edit?usp=docslist_api&filetype=msword

Interview 3 and 4

https://docs.google.com/file/d/1wcjz8LmPQIjJ03RVSoHGoMuCIvBlcYky/edit?usp=docslist_api&filetype=msword

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