

AIMING HIGH

How a man who dreamed of flying raised the hopes of his village...



A cool morning in Bagru, and a man with blue hands opens a gate to the village compound. Behind the chipped grey steel lies a world of colour – not just the dry gold dust and impossibly azure skies of Rajasthan, but fields that shimmer with pink and indigo. A house to the left is draped in fluttering skeins of butter yellow. A cow with purple ears ambles past, and you wonder if Bagru is where rainbows go when they need a coat of fresh paint. Humming to himself on the way home from a temple, Vijendra Chhipa beams as he spots visitors. Seven years ago, another visitor, on a morning just like this, changed the fate of his village forever.

The Chhipas, a caste settled in Bagru but also found in other parts of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Nepal, have worked as cloth dyers and printers for generations. According to Hindu mythology, when the Kshatriya (warrior) caste was facing genocide at the hands of a vengeful lord called Parashuram, one pair of brothers hid themselves in the temple of a goddess. Sympathetic to their plight, she offered them redemption handing one a needle and thread, and the other the leaf of a red betel plant. Castes in India were believed to be mainly occupational – to an extent they still are today – and this was how warriors were transformed into a caste of dyers and tailors.



Vijendra Chhipa's earliest memory is of sitting under a wooden table at his father's feet, block printing on discarded scraps of cloth – a far cry from his own well-lit, airy and spacious studio, which is lined with vast, endless tables and walls covered with shelves that hold blocks of every style. The fourth generation of a family of dyers and printers, Vijendra always loved fabric and colour – but like millions of Indians, he hoped a college degree would allow him to break from tradition and choose his own profession. When he was a young boy, Vijendra recalls, printing and dyeing weren't much of an industry: "We bartered fabric for provisions – we'd give some cloth to a farmer in exchange for wheat. My father printed about 35 to 40 metres of cloth every week, and we'd sell it at the local fair."

Studying to fulfil his dream of becoming an air force pilot, Vijendra continued to read about textiles, blocks and pigment in his free time, ▶





wishing that he could share his new knowledge with the older generations. “To delve deeper into the craft, understand where the materials came from, how they were made, why they were made in a particular way... this was very important to me. The people of Bagru, who are traditional printers, only knew how to do their work, with no idea of why they did certain things. They didn’t communicate the fact that they were using three or four hundred year-old processes, or understand that this adds value to a finished product,” he mused.

During this time Vijendra began to understand the wisdom of the traditional way – vivid blues that came from *Indigofera tinctoria*, the lush pinks, reds and oranges from begar and the deep blacks of fermented syahi. Hand block printing with vegetable and mineral dyes, produced less cloth than machines but at less cost to the environment. Vijendra realised that a home-based unit meant one needn’t spend money on vast tracts of land to set up factories. Furthermore, since the dyes were natural, the water used to make and wash them could be reused to irrigate crops. As he understood more and more, young Vijendra became consumed with telling the story of the Chhipas.



Telling the tale was becoming easier for other reasons too. Moonlighting as a hotel receptionist when he wasn’t at school, Vijendra was rapidly becoming the most fluent English speaker that Bagru had ever seen. A twist of fate destroyed Vijendra’s dreams of becoming a pilot by rendering him ineligible to take the exam. Defeated, but not broken, he began to sell insurance. When his father passed away in 2007, leaving the small dyeing and printing business to Vijendra and his five siblings – Vijendra was the only party interested, and in a position, to take it on. Not satisfied, however, with running a minuscule, isolated operation like the other dyer-printers, Vijendra looked for ways to apply his education and contacts to improve the lives of the Chhipa community. He wrote to ministries to enable artisans to take business loans. He lobbied local representatives to get Bagru’s artisans a ‘Geographical Index tag’, so middlemen couldn’t claim credit for their craft. ▶



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Vijendra dreamed of expanding his small workshop into a cooperative of many printers, but he just needed a client. As luck would have it, in 2010 an American Fulbright scholar introduced him to Lily Stockman, a painter living in Jaipur with a keen interest in traditional block printing. Vijendra's knowledge of natural dye chemistry and Stockman's blocky, minimalist design language was a perfect fit. After Lily's sister, designer Hopie Stockman, visited the Chhipas to prototype new designs, Block Shop Textiles was born; and is now Vijendra's oldest and largest client. During those early years, Vijendra had another visitor at Bagru, Jeremy Fritzhand, a recent Union College graduate and a Minerva fellow, who quickly became Vijendra's "best friend, brother and business partner." "Jeremy explained he could apply for a grant from his college if we could find a way to help Bagru's entire community of dyers and printers. This worked for me. I had always wanted to do something for my people."

Together, they founded Bagru Textiles, which is environmentally conscious and also socially and economically responsible. While Fritzhand looks after virtual logistics and branding, Vijendra communicates what designers want to his team of master printers by creating samples in his studio for them to replicate. In its current capacity, the company employs 16 families of master printers, all of whom 'pitch' or come up with various designs. If successful, the family that made the pitch gets the bulk of work, at double the market wage rate. In addition, half the families are constantly occupied with custom orders. Bagru Textiles supply their products to stores such as Anthropologie, J Crew, Soup Kitchen and Fleece, to name a few.

It's been four years since Vijendra Chhipa last took his children on a vacation but the lean, bronzed man with a wiry moustache never stops smiling. He is visiting faculty at colleges across the country, sharing with young, aspirational designers the secrets of his craft. Of the future he says, "Maybe, if the goddess wills it, we will grow bigger and I can hire someone to help... at the moment, it's expensive to hire English speakers, and I can't even replace me!" But it's only a matter of time – the man who once hoped to be a pilot is definitely on his way up. ●●● Nishita Jha

www.bagrutextiles.org

