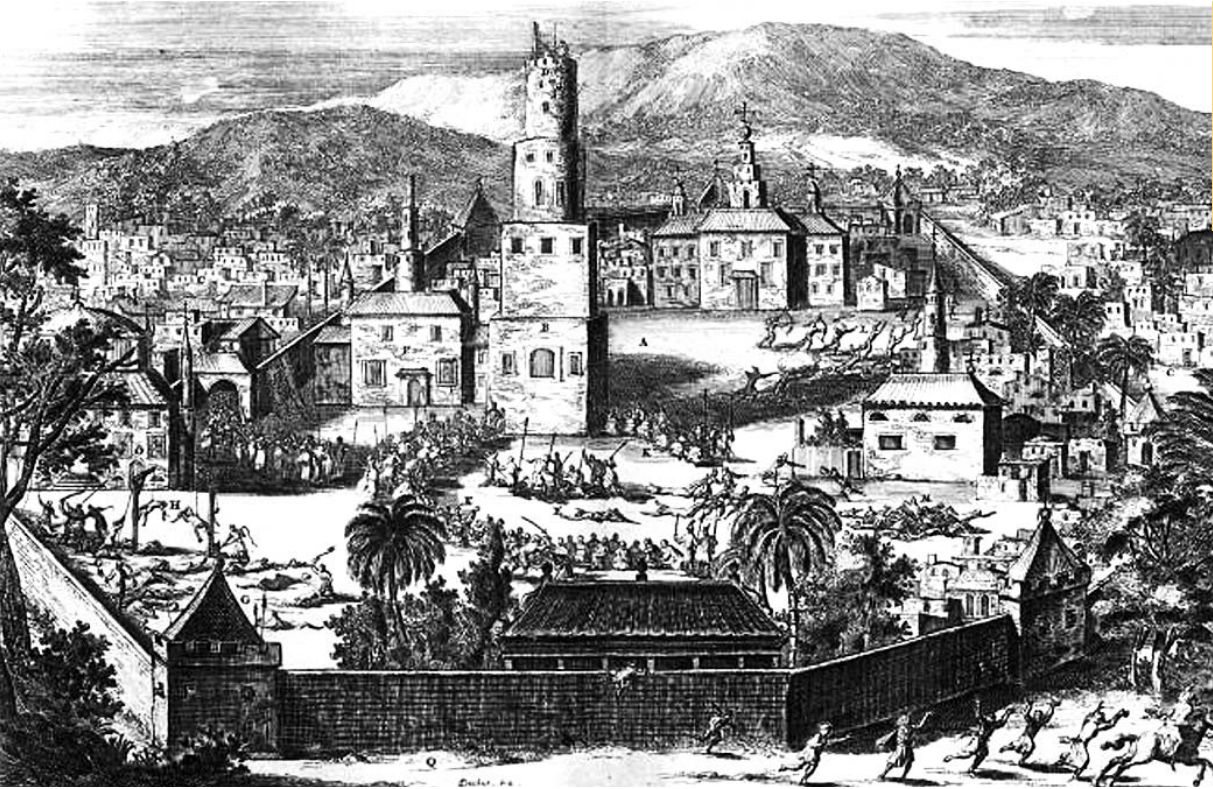




Everyone Writes Day

Everyone Writes Day is a special occasion that celebrates the joy and importance of writing. It encourages people of all ages to express their thoughts, ideas, feelings, and imagination through words. Writing helps us communicate better, become more creative, and understand ourselves and others. On this day, students can write stories, poems, essays, or even personal journals. Teachers can organize fun writing activities and competitions to inspire young writers. Everyone Writes Day reminds us that every person has a unique voice and a story to share. It motivates us to write freely, confidently, and creatively.



● Kshema Jatuhkarna

Imagine walking through a Russian city on the banks of the Volga River and discovering, four centuries ago, a street associated with Indian merchants. Imagine entering a building used by Indian traders and finding a Hindu temple inside it, with images of Rama, Lakshmi and Hanuman, sacred stones brought from India, and merchants who had travelled thousands of kilometers from the Indian subcontinent through Afghanistan and Persia.

This is not a scene from modern times. It happened in Astrakhan, a city in southern Russia where the

Volga River reaches the Caspian Sea. For centuries, Astrakhan was one of the great crossroads between Russia and the East. And among the merchants who arrived there were Indians, particularly traders from Multan and north-western India, along with Marwari and Sindhi merchants.

Their story is one of the most fascinating and largely forgotten chapters in the history of India's connections with Russia.

They had not arrived by an easy journey. Merchants travelling from India had to cross enormous distances through Afghanistan and Persia, following some of the oldest commercial routes linking South Asia with the Eurasian world.

Among them were Khatri merchants from Multan, as well as Marwari and Sindhi traders. Many were Hindus. They came for one reason above all: trade.

The Volga, Europe's great river, flows southward through Russia and eventually empties into the



An Indian business quarter on the Volga

The Indian merchants did not simply pass through Astrakhan. They established a community.

Historical accounts describe an Indian commercial establishment known as the Indianskiy Gostiny Dvor, essentially an Indian merchant courtyard or trading house. It became associated with the Indian community in Astrakhan.

There was even a street connected with the Indian merchants.

Inside their commercial establishment was something even more remarkable: a Hindu place of worship. For traders living thousands of kilometers from India, the tem-



ple was more than a religious building. It was a piece of home.

The merchants could conduct business in a foreign land, negotiate with Russian officials, buy and sell goods and travel across the empire, but within their community, they could still worship according to their traditions.

Rama, Lakshmi and Hanuman beside the Volga

One of the most fascinating accounts of the Astrakhan temple comes from the eighteenth-century traveller and naturalist Peter Simon Pallas.

Pallas visited Astrakhan and recorded observations about the Indian community and its religious practices. According to descriptions associated with his account, the Hindu temple contained images of Rama, Lakshmi and Hanuman. There were also sacred black stones associated with the Ganges.

For the merchants, these objects carried enormous religious significance.

Think about the symbolism. The Ganges was thousands of kilometers away. Yet, stones associated with India's sacred geography had travelled all the way to the Volga.

The temple therefore represented something larger than religion alone. It was a physical connection between the merchants' homeland and the distant world in which they had chosen to live and work.

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What were the Indians selling?

These merchants were part of a much larger international trading network.

Indian traders brought goods from the subcontinent and surrounding regions into the Russian

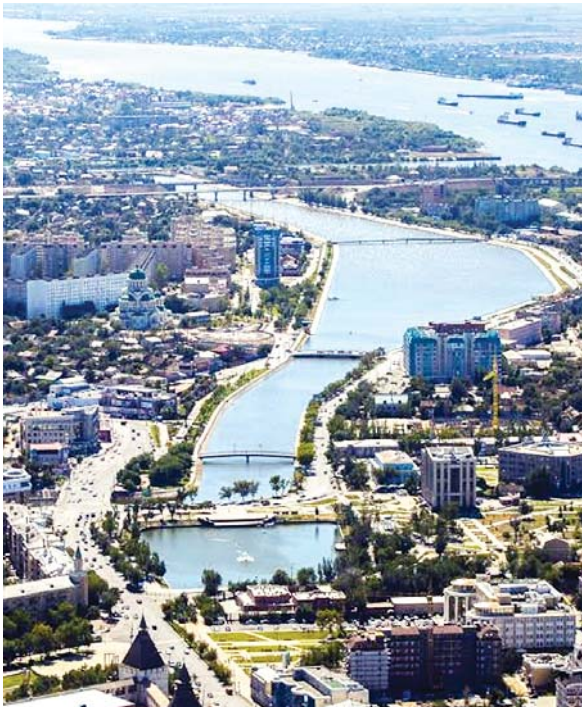
market. Among the commodities associated with their trade were cloth, indigo and sugar. In return, they could obtain goods that were valuable in South Asian markets, including furs, metals and leather.

The Volga route gave them access to an enormous commercial world. And Astrakhan was only the beginning.

Indian merchants did not necessarily remain confined to the city. Their trading connections extended northward into the Russian Empire, reaching major commercial centres such as Moscow and St Petersburg. Some traders even

The Hindu Community on the Volga

#ASTRAKHAN



travelled much farther north, towards Arkhangelsk, the important port on Russia's White Sea. That means an Indian merchant who had begun his journey in Multan could find himself conducting business thousands of kilometers away in northern Russia.

The Volga route gave them access to an enormous commercial world. And Astrakhan was only the beginning.

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The extraordinary story of Sukhanand Dimandas

Among the merchants associated with this world was Sukhanand Dimandas, who is described in historical accounts as having travelled from Multan to Russia at a young

age. According to accounts of the Indian merchant community, he arrived when he was about 17 years old. His career illustrates the extraordinary opportunities available to successful merchants in the Russian Empire.

By the eighteenth century, Indian traders could accumulate considerable wealth through their commercial networks.

Accounts of Dimandas's fortune at the time of his death put it at around three lakh Russian rubles, an enormous sum in the context of the period. His story is a reminder that these were not isolat-

ed travellers selling a few goods in a foreign marketplace. Some had become substantial international businessmen. They had employees, commercial relationships, capital and connections extending across enormous distances.

Astrakhan was therefore not simply a place where Indians happened to live. For a period, it functioned as an Indian commercial outpost inside Russia. The Volga carried their goods north and south. Caravan routes connected them with Persia and Central Asia. Their businesses connected them with Moscow and St Petersburg.

their community conduct business.

A particularly interesting moment came during the reign of Peter the Great.

Peter visited Astrakhan in 1722 during his Persian campaign. The Indian merchants had established themselves strongly enough by then to attract official attention.

Historical accounts describe arrangements under which Indian merchants were permitted to settle commercial disputes according to their own customs and laws, rather than being forced to resolve every internal matter according to Russian practice.

For a community living so far from its homeland, such recognition was significant. It allowed the merchants to preserve aspects of their own social and legal traditions while operating inside the Russian Empire. In effect, Astrakhan had become a small bridge between two worlds.

A community thousands of kilometres from India

There is something especially striking about this community. The merchants were geographically distant from India, but culturally, they remained connected to it. They had their temple. They had their religious images. They had their sacred objects. They had their own community institutions. And they continued to maintain commercial connections with other Indian merchants.

Astrakhan was therefore not simply a place where Indians happened to live. For a period, it functioned as an Indian commercial outpost inside Russia. The Volga carried their goods north and south. Caravan routes connected them with Persia and Central Asia. Their businesses connected them with Moscow and St Petersburg.

Then the world changed

But communities built around international trade are vulnerable to changes in government policy. During the nineteenth century, Russia increasingly changed the way it regulated foreign commerce. Restrictions on foreign merchants and international trade made the old Indian commercial system increasingly difficult to sustain.

The Indian trading establishment in Astrakhan eventually declined. By around 1840, the historic Indian merchant house had closed. And once the economic reason for the community's existence disappeared, the community itself began to disappear. Some families left. Others remained. Over time, some Indian families married locally and became part of Russian society. Generations passed. The distinctive Indian merchant community gradually dissolved.

The strangest ending

And that is perhaps the most haunting part of the story. The community did not necessarily disappear because every Indian merchant packed his belongings and returned to India. Some stayed. Some formed families. Their descendants became part of the population around them.

The Indian faces and names that once marked a distinct merchant community slowly became harder to recognize. A person living in Astrakhan generations later could carry a completely Russian surname while having ancestors who had travelled from South Asia centuries earlier. The temple disappeared. The merchant house disappeared. But the memory of the community survived in historical records.

An Indian chapter in Russian history

The story of Astrakhan's Indian merchants challenges the way we usually imagine India's historical connections with the world. We often think of Indian merchants travelling to East Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East or Europe. But India also had commercial links reaching deep into Russia.

Four centuries ago, merchants from the Indian subcontinent crossed mountains, deserts and political borders to reach a city on the Volga. They established businesses. They traded goods. They created a community. They built a place of worship. Long before modern Indian

migration to Russia, before airplanes, before railways and before modern globalisation, Indian businessmen had already established a community on the banks of the Volga.

Their journey from Multan and other parts of South Asia to Astrakhan was an early example of globalization, powered not by the internet or multinational corporations, but by caravans, rivers, ships, merchants and an extraordinary willingness to travel into the unknown. Their temple may have vanished. Their merchant house may have closed. But for centuries, on the banks of the Volga, there was a little piece of India.

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A Print? A Living Textile Tradition!



There is also a characteristic tonal quality to traditionally made Ajrakh. The colours do not necessarily appear as a flat, uniform layer sitting on top of the fabric. Instead, there is a depth created by the repeated processes of dyeing, resist, printing, washing, and fixing.



● Bulbul Joshi

Ajrakh is often described simply as a form of hand block printing. But this description does not fully capture what makes the textile so distinctive. Ajrakh is not merely a print; it is a complete textile technique involving the treatment of fabric, natural dyeing, resist processes, block printing, washing, and finishing. The beauty of authentic Ajrakh lies not in a single stage of production, but in the relationship between all these processes.

From Natural Elements to Colour

One of the defining characteristics of traditional Ajrakh is its use of natural materials to pre-

pare and colour the fabric. Ingredients such as pomegranate skins, rust and other natural substances are used at different stages to create colours and prepare the fabric.

The fabric goes through extensive preparation before the characteristic Ajrakh patterns appear on its surface. This treatment is essential because the final quality of the textile depends as much on how the fabric has been prepared and dyed as on the printing itself.

The process can involve natural dyeing, resist dyeing, block printing, washing, and post-treatment with natural fixing agents. Each stage contributes to the final colour, depth, softness, and character of the textile. This is why calling Ajrakh simply a "hand block print" misses an important part of the story. It is better understood as a complete system of textile treatment and surface design.

The Character of Authentic Ajrakh

Authentic Ajrakh has a distinctive tactile quality. A well-made piece feels soft and comfortable, rather than stiff or excessively coated.

One of the interesting ways to understand an authentic piece is to observe how it behaves. When the fabric is crumpled or wrinkled, the creases do not remain rigidly pressed into the textile for a long time. The fabric relaxes naturally.

There is also a characteristic tonal quality to traditionally made Ajrakh. The colours do not necessarily appear as a flat, uniform layer sitting on top of the fabric. Instead, there is a depth created by the repeated processes of dyeing, resist, printing, washing, and fixing.

Look at the Reverse

One of the simplest ways to examine an Ajrakh textile is to

#AJRAKH

turn it over. The reverse side can reveal how deeply the dye has penetrated the fabric. In a traditionally processed Ajrakh textile, the colour penetration can be substantial, because dyeing is an integral part of the process rather than merely a surface application.

The blocks used in Ajrakh are also significant. Because the fabric undergoes repeated dyeing and printing processes, the final impression can have a subtle variation in scale and character.

This can help distinguish traditional block printing from certain forms of screen printing. With screen printing, the printed area can appear more uniformly deposited on the surface. In Ajrakh, the interaction between

the block, fabric, dye, resist, and repeated processing creates a different visual depth and quality.

A Cottage Industry Rooted in Kutch

Ajrakh is deeply connected to the Kutch region of Gujarat, where it has been practiced within artisan families for generations. The knowledge is not simply a set of instructions written down in a manual. It is a craft tradition transmitted through practice, observation, and family knowledge.

Ajrakh production is largely a cottage industry, with different stages of the process often carried out within an artisan-based production system.

The result is a textile that carries the landscape and culture of Kutch within it, not only through its distinctive geometric patterns and colours, but through the hands and histories of the people who make it.

A Craft of Survival and Resilience

The story of contemporary Ajrakh is also a story of resilience. Many of the artisans associated with Ajrakh production were affected by the devastating 2001 Bhuj earthquake. In its aftermath, artisan communities were relocated and a new settlement, Ajrakpur, became an important centre for the continuation and revival of the craft.

The development of Ajrakpur is often seen as an example of how rehabilitation can go beyond rebuilding homes. By supporting

the continuation of traditional livelihoods, communities can rebuild their economic independence, cultural identity, and collective future.

The craft survived because the artisans survived, and because the knowledge of Ajrakh continued to be practiced.

Why Cottage Industries Need Our Support

Ajrakh represents something larger than a beautiful textile. It demonstrates the importance of India's cottage and artisan industries, where traditional knowledge, livelihoods, and cultural heritage are closely intertwined.

When we support authentic hand-crafted textiles, we are not simply purchasing fabric. We are supporting the people who carry the knowledge behind that fabric. A machine can reproduce a pattern, but it cannot independ-

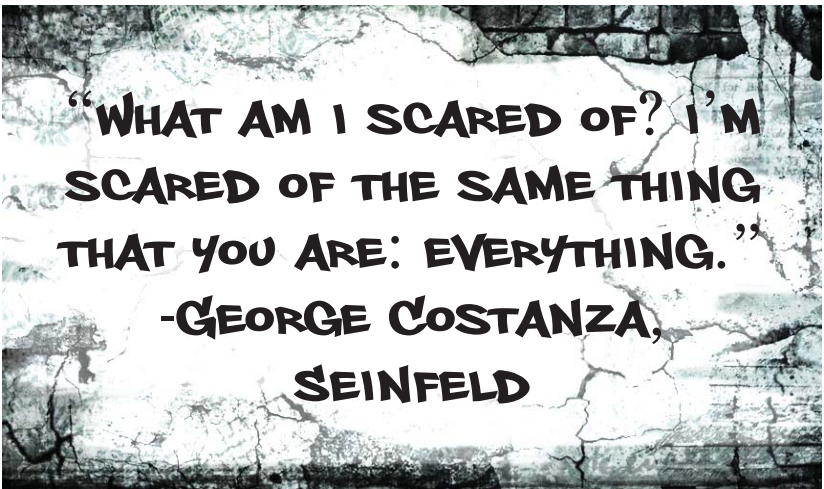
ently carry the accumulated knowledge of generations of artisans, the understanding of natural materials, fabric preparation, resist processes, dye behaviour, washing, fixing, and finishing. Ajrakh therefore deserves to be understood not as just another block print, but as a living textile tradition.

And perhaps, one of the most beautiful ways to experience it is simply to hold an authentic Ajrakh sari in your hands. Feel the softness, look at both sides, observe the depth of the colour, and notice its natural, earthy fragrance.

There should be no harsh synthetic smell competing with the textile. Instead, there is the quiet sensory evidence of a fabric made through natural materials, water, dye, wood, cloth, and human hands.

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THE WALL



BABY BLUES



ZITS



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott

By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman