

Nature, Symbol, and Tradition: A Study of Motif Vocabulary in Balotra Block Prints of Rajasthan

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INTRODUCTION

Rajasthan, despite being a desert state, has nurtured a rich and diverse range of textile traditions, encompassing printed, woven, and embroidered forms. Among these, cloth printing has acquired a distinctive prominence, deeply intertwined with the lives of dyer-craftsmen who sustain these practices. While Sanganer and Bagru are widely recognised centres of block printing, other towns such as Balotra, Barmer, Akola, and Pali also represent significant yet lesser-known traditions.

Balotra, situated in the Barmer district and approximately 110 km southwest of Jodhpur, historically benefited from the river Luni. Once a lifeline for dyeing and washing textiles, the river is now dried and polluted due to unchecked industrial effluents, threatening both craft practices and ecological balance. This shift highlights the urgent need to address issues of environmental degradation as part of safeguarding craft heritage.

The Chhipa community, who migrated from present-day Pakistan, established themselves in Balotra and became the primary custodians of block printing in the region. Their skills in dyeing and printing found a natural home here, supported by the resources once provided by the Luni river. The prints they produced were largely consumed by local communities such as the Chaudhary, Maali, and other agrarian groups of Balotra, who integrated these textiles into their daily and ritual attire. For the Chhipas, therefore, block printing was not only an economic pursuit but also a cultural identity, linking artisan and consumer through patterns embedded with symbolic meaning.

Balotra prints employ approximately 20–22 simplified plant and object motifs inspired by the immediate environment, executed in natural shades of indigo, red, green, and yellow. Each motif carries cultural codes, reflecting marital status, age, occupation, and community identity. The distinctive characteristics of Balotra printing lie in its single-unit and striped patterns, produced using the traditional *dabu* resist method. The garments—comprising *ghaghra* (skirt), *choli* (bodice), and *odhni* (veil)—are both functional and expressive. Agricultural women, for instance, favour dark green skirts that camouflage field dirt, paired with brightly patterned odhnis, reflecting both utilitarian necessity and aesthetic preference.

These prints hold great cultural significance for the Balotra communities. A woman receives a new set of clothing from her husband for each major life event she experiences, such as marriage, pregnancy, the birth of her first child, and the marriage of her eldest son, with distinct patterns on each garment representing these occasions. Married women traditionally wear printed ghaghra featuring a red border embellished with yellow piping. Upon becoming a widow, the red border is removed from their skirts. Furthermore, the colours and patterns of their attire change as women age; older women tend to wear more subdued colours and simpler designs. The fabric's thickness also reflects economic status—women from lower socioeconomic groups wear coarser cotton, while those from wealthier households select finer, lighter cotton.

Balotra block prints, therefore, extend beyond the realm of aesthetic expression; they function as a cultural

language embedded within social order and daily life. From marking significant life stages to communicating identity through fabric choice, these textiles embody a semiotic system that reinforces belonging while also reproducing hierarchies. The significance of clothing indicating marital status is particularly striking: the removal of the red border in widowhood is a visual articulation of social identity. Similarly, muted designs adopted by older women or the fabric quality distinguishing class position reflect how deeply gender and class shape textile traditions.

From a social reform standpoint, these practices underscore the intersection of gender, tradition, and class in shaping identity through dress. While these cultural codes maintain continuity, they also reflect rigid indicators of hierarchy and gendered expectations. Contemporary reform initiatives should aim to safeguard the symbolic importance of Balotra prints while addressing inequalities embedded in them. Ensuring access to finer materials for marginalized groups, expanding design innovations beyond restrictive symbolism, and creating inclusive practices so that widows or elderly women do not face stigma based on their attire would allow the tradition to evolve in ways that balance cultural preservation with social equity.



(Source: Ronald Emma (2007), *Balotra: the complex language of print*, AMHP PUBLICATIONS)

Challenges of Modernization and Industrialization in Balotra:

The textile tradition of Balotra today faces serious challenges due to both industrial growth and cultural transition. The establishment of nearly 700 industries across four phases in Balotra has not only contributed to ecological degradation, particularly through the pollution of the Luni River, but has also disrupted the traditional ecosystem of craft practices. Industrialization has accelerated the decline of artisanal dyeing and block printing, leading to shrinking opportunities for conventional craftspeople.

Modernization adds complexity to this landscape. While older women in Balotra continue to adhere to traditional dress codes by wearing ghaghra decorated with customary motifs—made from cotton or, more recently, polyester—the younger generation has progressively adopted modern clothing styles influenced by global fashion trends. This generational change indicates a diminishing continuity in cultural identity, where traditional clothing no longer holds the central place it once did in daily life.

Moreover, the authenticity of Balotra designs has been compromised by imitation and dissemination into other regional or cultural settings. Block-makers frequently share designs, creating a cycle of reproduction that, while guaranteeing survival, dilutes the uniqueness of the motifs. As a result, even though Balotra-inspired designs are widely recognised, their cultural significance is often lost or modified. The outcome is a paradox: the designs flourish in various markets and industries, yet very few traditional printers remain who preserve the integrity of the craft. Despite these challenges, Balotra prints continue to play a significant role within the community. They retain symbolic importance in marking social identity, marital status, and cultural belonging. However, unless interventions are introduced—such as safeguarding design originality, providing sustainable platforms for traditional printers, and sensitizing younger generations to the cultural value of these textiles—the craft risks being relegated to mere imitations divorced from its social meaning. From a social reform standpoint, revitalizing

Balotra printing thus requires both ecological restoration and cultural advocacy, ensuring that this unique textile tradition continues to serve as a living heritage for the community.

METHODOLOGY

This research employed a descriptive cum exploratory research design to fulfill its objectives. The primary focus was on the systematic documentation of the craft and its associated processes, followed by a detailed analysis of motifs through the lens of cultural symbolism. Fieldwork was undertaken in Balotra, where data collection was carried out using purposive sampling. Observation and in-depth interviews with practicing artisans were the key methods employed, as they allowed for a nuanced understanding of both the technical dimensions of production and the cultural meanings embedded within the motifs. This methodological approach not only highlighted the material aspects of the craft but also established its connection with broader cultural identity.

Given that only a limited number of families continue to practice this traditional form of printing in its authentic manner, the study purposively focused on three representative units. These included the workshops of Chippa Yaseen Khan, Irfan Khan, and Shabir Khan, who remain among the very few artisans committed to sustaining the craft amidst a broader shift of many other families towards tie-and-dye practices

Process undertaken for printing by the artisan:

The production of Balotra prints is a meticulous and time-consuming process deeply rooted in traditional knowledge systems. This study documents the authentic production method, which utilizes natural cotton fabric and natural dyes. Each stage of the process requires considerable time, not only for applying the dyes but also for allowing them to penetrate deeply into the fabric. This ensures the final product's durability and vibrancy. As such, the craft embodies both patience and precision, qualities that are essential to its cultural and artisanal significance. Traditionally, Balotra printing involves **eleven distinct stages**, carried out sequentially:

Fabric Treatment Process with Images

Process + Description	Image
Washing of the fabric – to remove impurities and prepare the cloth for treatment.	
Harda treatment – application of harda (myrobalan) to fix the base and enhance dye absorption.	

Rekh printing – outlining of motifs with blocks to establish the design framework.



Washing – to remove excess materials and prepare for dyeing.



Red dyeing – immersion in alizarin to develop red shades.



Dabu printing – application of mud-resist paste on areas intended to resist dye penetration.



Indigo dyeing involves dipping the fabric into indigo vats to achieve characteristic blue tones.



Washing – to cleanse the fabric post-dyeing.



Dabu printing – repeated resist application for layered designs.



Yellow and green printing – addition of secondary colours to complete the pattern.



Final washing – thorough cleaning to reveal the finished fabric, ready for use.



Each of these stages signifies not only a technical step but also a cultural tradition maintained by generations of artisans. The time-consuming nature of this process highlights its authenticity and uniqueness, in stark contrast to mechanized printing methods that prioritize speed over cultural richness and craftsmanship.

Analysis of Traditional Motifs of Balotra

The motifs employed in Balotra block printing reveal a strong interrelationship between community life, natural surroundings, and social identity. Stylized plant forms, geometric patterns, and symbols derived from everyday objects constitute the principal design vocabulary. These motifs extend beyond aesthetic ornamentation, functioning as cultural signifiers that denote marital status, occupation, community affiliation, or stage of life. For women in Balotra, textiles operate as more than garments; they serve as markers of identity and social position. The *ghaghra* (skirt), *choli* (bodice), and *odhni* (veil) are imbued with motifs and colour arrangements that communicate social meaning. Married women traditionally wear skirts with red borders edged in yellow, while widows remove the red border to indicate their changed status. Agricultural women favour green skirts inspired by local flora, which are both practical for concealing stains and symbolic of livelihood, paired with vibrant odhnis that bring brightness to daily attire. Age further influences textile choices—older women adopt subdued hues and simplified motifs, whereas younger women display brighter colours and intricate designs.

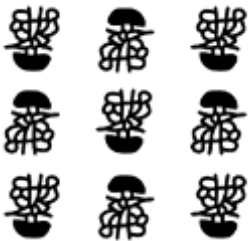
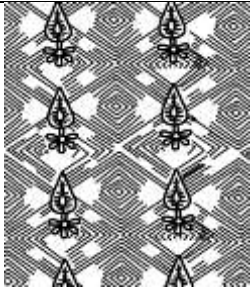
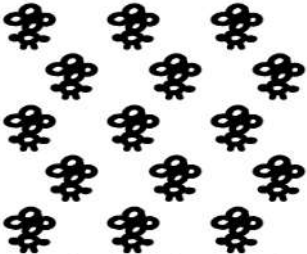
Balotra motifs are not arbitrary decorations but reflect a symbolic language embedded in nature and community life. Designs such as Babooliya or Nodana are directly inspired by local plants, tools, and surroundings, underscoring the ecological and cultural rootedness of the craft. At the same time, these motifs operate as markers of social differentiation. The presence or absence of a border indicates marital status, colour tones signal age, and fabric quality reflects economic standing. In this way, textiles simultaneously reinforce cultural identity and reproduce distinctions of gender, age, and class.

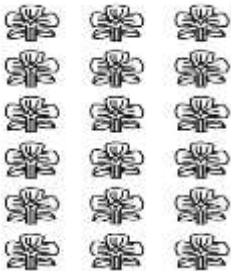
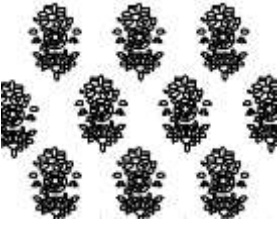
The persistence of these motifs highlights their enduring cultural significance; however, modernization and the increasing availability of mass-produced, inexpensive fabrics pose challenges to their continuity. As younger generations migrate to urban spaces and embrace alternative forms of dress, traditional practices face gradual decline. Nevertheless, the intrinsic link between Balotra motifs, ecological surroundings, and social symbolism positions this craft as a living tradition capable of adaptation and reinterpretation in contemporary contexts.

Motifs

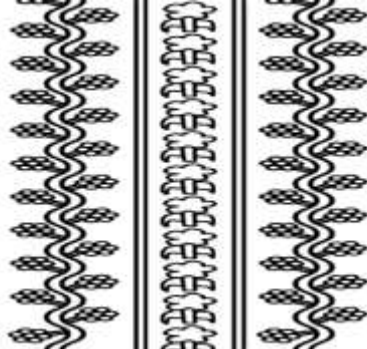
Category: A) Single Unit Motifs

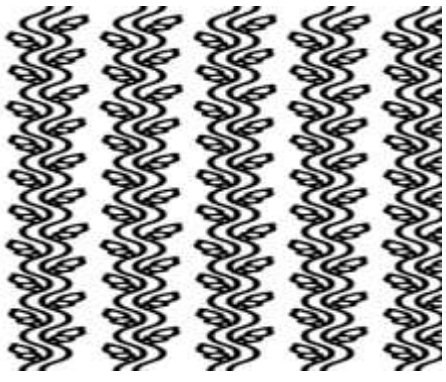
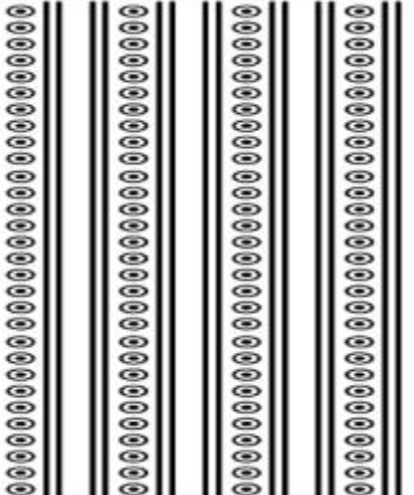
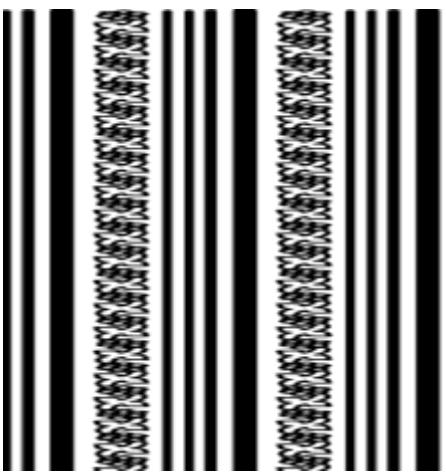
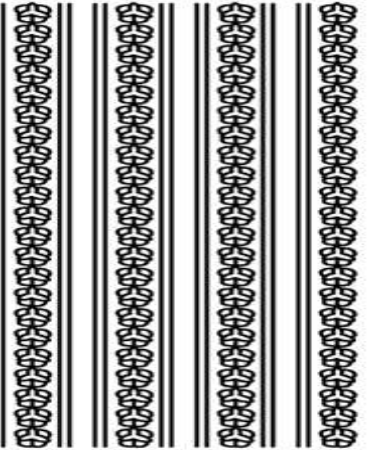
Motif	Description	Image
Babooliya	The motif is inspired by the leaves of the Babul tree, a hardy native tree found in desert regions. The leaves are used as animal feed, and the sticky gum extracted from the tree is sometimes utilized by block printers as a binding agent for mordants or colours. Traditionally, this print is worn by widows from various tribes.	

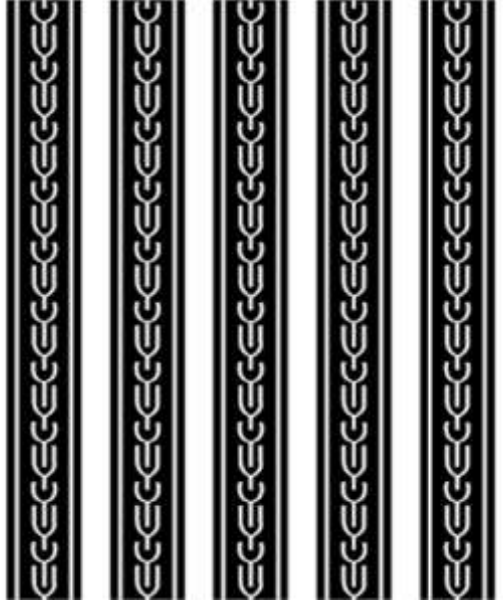
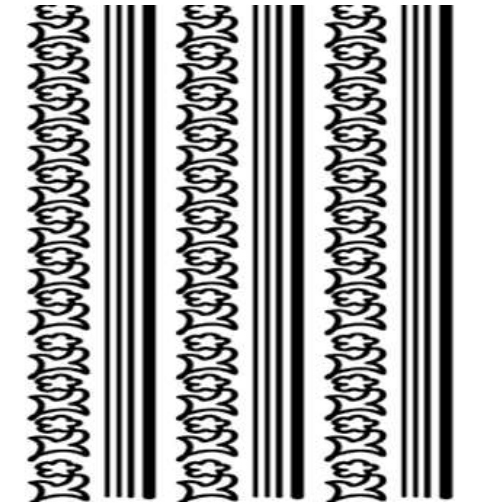
Nodana	The motif is inspired by the marigold flower, as seen in the cap of the motif. The Nodana design is worn by Choudhury and Jat women, designed for widows of these communities.	
Gainda	The Gainda motif, worn by middle-aged Maali women, is inspired by the marigold flower. Marigolds are used for medicinal, dye, and ornamental purposes.	
Bhalka	The term 'Bhalka' refers to the <i>bhala</i> or spear, and it holds special significance for the Gadia Lohar community, who are itinerant ironworkers known for their strong defence of identity and exceptional craftsmanship in creating the <i>bhala</i> . This motif can also be found in southern Gujarat, particularly in areas like Rajpur-Deesa, where it is recognized as the Banjari print, traditionally worn by the nomadic Banjara community.	
Trifuli	The term 'tri' refers to three, and 'fuli' means flower, so together, Trifuli signifies a motif featuring three flowers. This design resembles the traditional Bagru Nargis print but can be considered a simpler version of it. The Trifuli motif has historically been associated with young girls, often worn before they enter marriage.	
Maali ro fatiya	This design is primarily worn by Maali widows, featuring understated red spots in a muted rusty hue that reflect the solemnity of widowhood.	
Chameli	Inspired by the fragrant jasmine flower, sacred to Lord Vishnu and used in temple garlands. Traditionally worn by Maali widows, symbolizing their lifelong association with cultivating these blossoms	

Mobiyara fatiya	The Mobiyara fatiya is traditionally worn by widows of the Meghval community, who are known for their expertise in handloom weaving. They utilize coarse cotton to print unique motifs that are distinctive to their craft. The Mobiyara motif resembles a ripened cotton boll bursting open, symbolizing their remarkable skill and mastery of the loom.	
Rabari ro fatiya	The Rabari ro fatiya is known primarily by its name and its distinctive appearance, which is closely tied to the nomadic herding community of the Rabaris. This community is divided into several regional groups and sub-groups, each depending on their family's place of origin. Widows exclusively wear this unique motif and are specifically associated with the Rabaris from the Ajmer district, located to the east of Barmer district.	
Gul butah	The term 'Gul' refers to the locally cherished rose flower known for its delightful fragrance. The Gul butah motif is a subtle yet elegant floral design that is exclusive to Jain widows from the Sirohi district near Mount Abu.	
Mato ro fatiya	The term 'Mato' originates from the Sanskrit word for sand and is commonly used locally. The phrase 'Mato ro fatiya' is also linked to pre-construction workers who prepare the foundations for simple village huts. This design is traditionally worn by widows and is considered customary attire for the bhaats—local genealogists and storytellers.	
Tokriya	The Tokriya refers to circular bamboo baskets used for gathering, carrying, storing, and selling fruits, vegetables, and flowers.	

Category: B) Stripes

Phooli	This motif features intertwined flowers and is traditionally worn by the Maali community, renowned as the legendary artisans of temple flower garlands. The Maali gardeners significantly influence the Balotra prints, as their work revolves around cultivating fruits, flowers, and vegetables. As a result, the textiles they wear often showcase vibrant prints inspired by the flora they nurture.	
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Neemboli	Neemboli is derived from the fruit of the neem tree. Neem tree grows in every village of India. Maali widows wear it.	
Boriya	The term 'Boriya' is derived from the word 'Bor,' referring to a small, round ornament shaped like a ball that is commonly worn on the forehead by married women in certain communities of Rajasthan. This ornament is typically attached to the center parting of their hair as a symbol of their marital status. Additionally, the Kumhar community adorns themselves with a slim stripe featuring tiny red bor fruit. These small red accents in the striped design hold special significance for the Kumhar, as they are also reminiscent of the eye-catching patterns found on their handcrafted earthenware matka water pots. Consequently, this distinctive design is embraced by married women from both the Kumhar and Chaudhury communities.	
Goonda	The small, yellow cherry-like fruit of the hardy desert tree Cordia myxa, commonly known as Indian Cherry, serves as the inspiration for this design. The Goonda pattern features a striped design interwoven with intricate plant motifs.	
Methi	It shows the leaves of the locally grown Methi or Fenugreek leaves. Widows of all the tribes wear this design.	

Kuttar	The myth suggests that this distinctive print, once associated with the Gadia Lohar blacksmiths who crafted court weapons, has various interpretations across different regions. Some view this forked motif as representing Lord Shiva's trident. In Balotra, it is a common adornment among all tribes, while in Gujarat, particularly in Deesa near Palanpur, it is worn by Rabari women.	
Long (Cloves)	As the name reflects that long cloves inspire the design. It also represents the dried, unopened flower buds of the clove spice. This piece is worn by all tribes, except for widows.	

CONCLUSION

The study of Balotra block prints reveals that motifs in this tradition transcend their decorative value and function as a profound cultural language. Each motif—whether derived from plants, objects, or tools—serves as a symbolic marker of identity, deeply interwoven with the lives of the communities who practice and wear these textiles. Colours, patterns, and designs articulate marital status, age, economic standing, and community affiliation, making clothing a visible and lived expression of social order. For instance, the removal of a red border on a widow's garment, the use of darker tones by older women, or the coarser cotton worn by the economically disadvantaged reflect how textiles embody cultural codes and social hierarchies.

In Balotra, motifs such as *Babooliya*, *Nodana*, *Gainda*, or *Boriya* are not merely patterns but carriers of collective memory, community pride, and social values. They encode stories of livelihood, rituals, and transitions in a woman's life, functioning as silent yet powerful communicators of belonging and transformation. Despite modernization, industrialization, and ecological challenges, these motifs retain their symbolic importance, grounding individuals within their cultural and social milieu.

Looking ahead, the future of Balotra block prints reflects both challenges and opportunities. Traditionally, these motifs were embedded in everyday clothing, but shifts are visible as younger generations migrate toward urban centers. With increased access to a wider variety of mass-produced, inexpensive textiles, traditional block prints are no longer the only choice for daily wear. This changing consumer preference risks diluting the role of motifs in community identity.



Image: The changing traditions of dress in Balotra can be observed across generations: elderly women continue to wear traditional block-printed attire, daughters-in-law prefer mill-made fabrics, while younger girl is seen in salwar-kurta

At the same time, Balotra block printing is experiencing a revival through product diversification and global exposure. Brands such as Anokhi and Fabindia are incorporating Balotra motifs into contemporary apparel and lifestyle products, bridging heritage with modern aesthetics. Moreover, master printers from Balotra are exporting their work to markets like Japan, reflecting the international appreciation for the craft's authenticity and artistry.

Thus, the cultural symbolism of Balotra motifs underscores their role as a living heritage—where textiles serve not just as attire, but as a visual vocabulary of tradition, identity, and continuity. Safeguarding these motifs is therefore essential, not only to preserve artisanal skills but also to adapt them to evolving markets, ensuring that Balotra's heritage remains relevant and valued for future generations.

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