

## BANDHANI (TIE DYE)

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Tie dye, commonly referred to as “bandhani” from the Sanskrit root “bandh” meaning “to tie”, is one of the oldest forms of surface design in India. The technique is cited in the seventh-century manuscript, the *Harschachrita of Bana*, in which the court poet refers to this process as being used in the dowry textiles of Rajaysri, sister of Harsha. In both the sixth and seventh centuries, cave paintings at Ajanta reveal design motifs resembling bandhani patterning.

A characteristic feature in Indian tie dye is the square or circle with a dot of color inside. This dot is due to the penetration of dye within the tied area. Imitation or machine printed bandhani lacks this center dot.

The actual production process involves folding thin fabric into three or four layers. Malmal muslin, bleached cotton, and loosely woven silk georgette or satin are the preferred materials. The layered fabric is then marked with a design in one of the following methods:

1. A stencil motif in which colored chalk is rubbed through the holes in the stencil.
2. A wooden block design is stamped onto the surface with “geru” (a burnt sienna colored solution of red clay).
3. A freehand pencil drawing is placed directly on the fabric.
4. The folded and dampened fabric is placed over a design of nails or pins which are embedded in a wood block. The fabric is then tied over each pin or nail head.
5. For repeat motifs, a stretched cord, saturated with “geru”, is struck against the surface, forming horizontal and vertical grids.

With the exception of the bed of nails technique, the tie dyer wears a pointed brass “fingernail”, which lifts tiny pockets of fabric to be tied with waxed or starched cotton thread.

The dyeing process usually proceeds from the lightest bath to the darkest bath, however, parts of the design may be daubed with color instead of dip dyeing. In some patterns, ties may be opened and re-tied for different dye baths.

The dyers in and near the city of Murshidabad use dyed thread for the tying process. This color then becomes imprinted on the fabric, leaving colored, rather than white, rings. After the final dye bath, the cloth is given a thorough rinsing to remove excess dye.

Laheria is a variation of the tie dye process and is achieved through the folding and twisting of the fabric prior to binding.

The traditional patterning in bandhani includes flowers, creepers, leaves, animals (elephants and fish), birds (parrots and peacocks), and human figures, especially dancing women. Abstract designs include circles, squares and diamonds as well as zig-zag and straight lines which form compartments for figurative or non-figurative motifs.

Color follows long established tradition: white for purity, crimson or red for auspicious occasions such as weddings, saffron denotes holiness, and ochre represents renunciation. According to "Handicrafts of India" author, Chattopadhyay, color is also associated with seasons and festivals: yellow for early spring, red for the beginning of the monsoon, and green for early summer and the harvest season.

Six states in India are production centers for the craft of bandhani, with two, Rajasthan and Gujarat, in the forefront.

**Rajasthan:** The Rangrez communities in the cities of Jodhpur, Jaipur, Ajmer, and Bikaner and the Chavdas community of dyers in Mewar are the principal producers of bandhani in Rajasthan. The women generally do the tying and the men dye the fabric. Much of the color is daubed onto the fabric with a felt pad; a technique referred to as "lipai". The background color is vat dyed, producing a bandhani with multi-colored spots on a single background color.

Fugitive dyes are used to produce "chunaris" (veils) for married women as the bleeding colors are much prized. Widows, on the

other hand, wear fast colored “chunaris”. Bandhani is very much a part of the Rajasthan culture and is celebrated in love lyrics and folk songs.

**Gujurat:** Intricately decorated saris with separate designs in the border, body, and pallu (the end of the sari which drapes over the shoulder), are made in Saurashtra, Anjor, Bhey, and Jamnagar. Red, green, yellow, blue, and black are the traditional colors but unusual combinations such as pink and grey or pink and violet are also used.

“Gharchola” refers to two special sari patterns from southern Saurashtra. In one pattern, gold threads are woven into the fabric in squares parallel to the edges and in the second, squares are woven or tied diagonally throughout the background. Each enclosed square contains a design motif such as an elephant, a flower, or a doll. The ground color is usually red, yellow, or green. When the design contains more than two colors, the fabric is referred to as “phulwadi” and when an animal motif is predominate, the fabric is referred to as “shikari”. The sectioning, which creates a gridlike surface, resembles Moghul garden patterning, and is known as “bar bagh” (twelve gardens) or “bavan bagh” (fifty-two gardens). The marriage dowry always contains bandhani such as the “ghatadi” or wedding scarf. The “veerbhat” refers to a sari given to a sister by her brother and is traditionally leaf green with diagonal dotted squares and circles.

**Maharashtra:** Some of India's finest bandhani comes from the Bombay area. There may be up to thirty separate ties in a single inch and the dyers often wrap glass beads, seeds, wooden pegs, or grains of sand into the fabric in a fashion similar to the work of the ancient Peruvians.

**Tamil Nadu:** This southeastern state hosts a community of Saurashtran dyers near the city of Madurai. The kolam floor pattern designs which are geometric in nature, have been incorporated into the designs and a wider color range has been adapted.

**Andhra Pradesh:** Masulipatnam, Kumbakonam, Ayampet, Bhavani, Salem, and Dindigal, are all centers for bandhani production. The Persian mango motif is quite popular in Masulipatnam as these fabrics are made for export to the Middle East.

**Madhya Pradesh:** During the spring festival of Holi, a “pillya” or large sized wrap is given by the father of a daughter to his wife, or to the daughter when she delivers a grandchild. The bandhani “pillya” has a red ground with two large circles created in motifs of leaves, flowers, elephants, and dolls. The same motif, used in a linear design, fills the border and the pallu areas. Bandhani in Madhya Pradesh is centered in the cities of Umedpura, Jawad, Bhairongarh, and Tarapup.

The creation of tie dyed textiles for both export and internal consumption is a continuing and vital textile tradition in India today.

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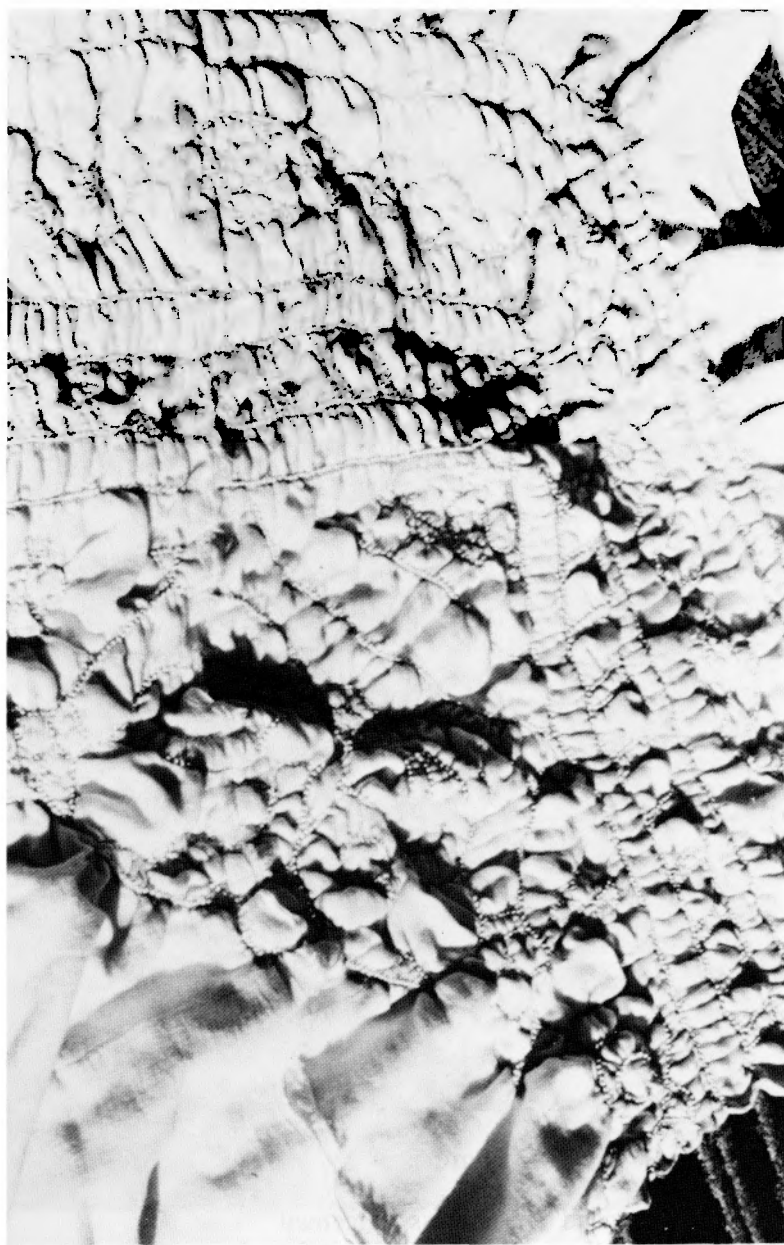
**Photo 1**

Brass "nail" used to lift tiny clumps of fabric for tie dyeing.



**Photo 2**

A second type of brass "fingernail"  
used to lift the tiny clumps of fabric for tying.



**Photo 3**

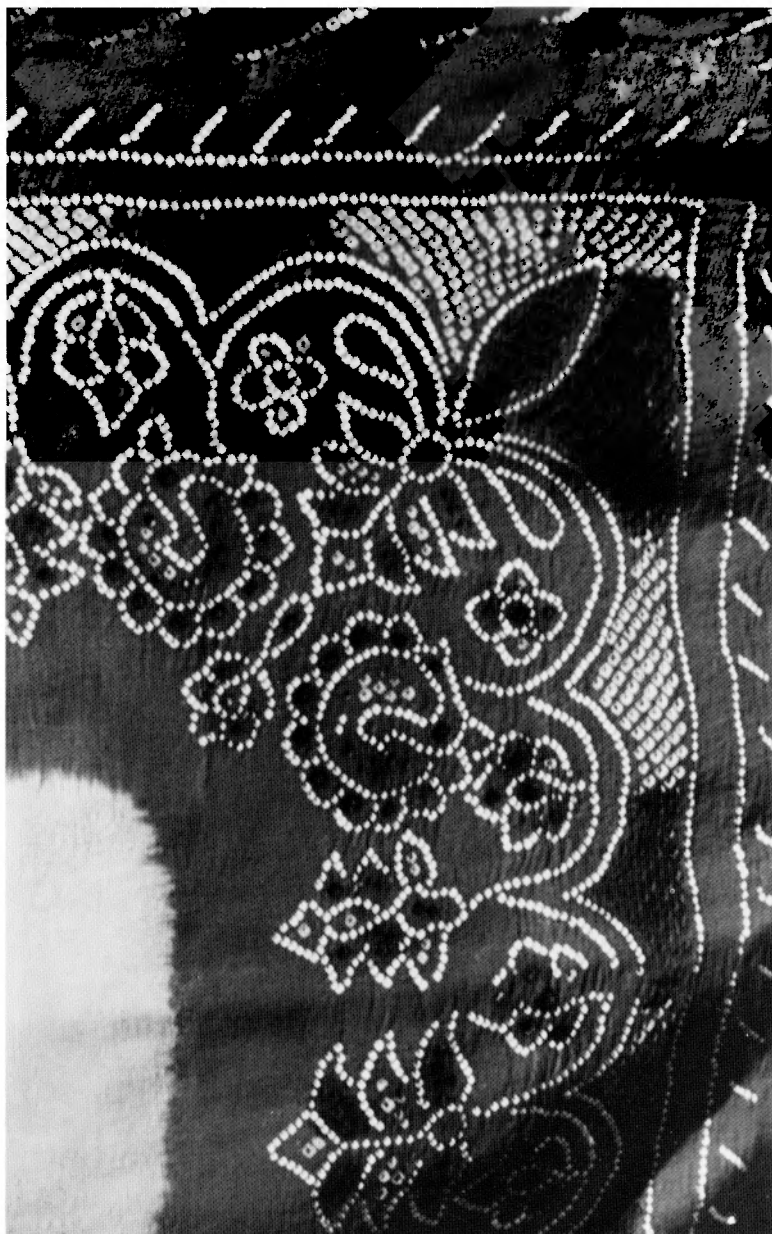
Cotton dupatta (scarf) tied and ready for first dye bath.





**Photo 4**

Characteristic dot which is resist dyed in an Indian cotton sari.



**Photo 5**

Detail of corner of tie dyed dupatta (scarf)  
from Jaipur, Rajasthan.