

Printing in the तीरे इपटे : Cultural Reconnection Through इंग्गानेरी woodblock printing

This critical report documents my exploration of traditional Indian printmaking as a medium through which to navigate my diasporic identity. By learning Sangneri woodblock techniques and creating a sari, I'm not seeking to recover some lost authentic connection but rather engaging in what anthropologist Kirin Narayan calls "multiplex identity". Acknowledging the complex, sometimes contradictory positions I occupy in relation to Indian culture.

I aim to utilize what Homi Bhabha calls the "intervening space"—the gap between established categories that allows for new articulations of identity. Physically engaging with traditional craft processes while bringing my contemporary design education to bear, I'm creating work that exists in a third space—neither purely traditional nor entirely contemporary, but a hybrid form that speaks to the reality of diasporic experience in a globalized world.





Never return home empty handed

The sweetest bananas at the fruit vendor just before entering my dad's home town
Baghpat, Uttar Pradesh India | March 2025



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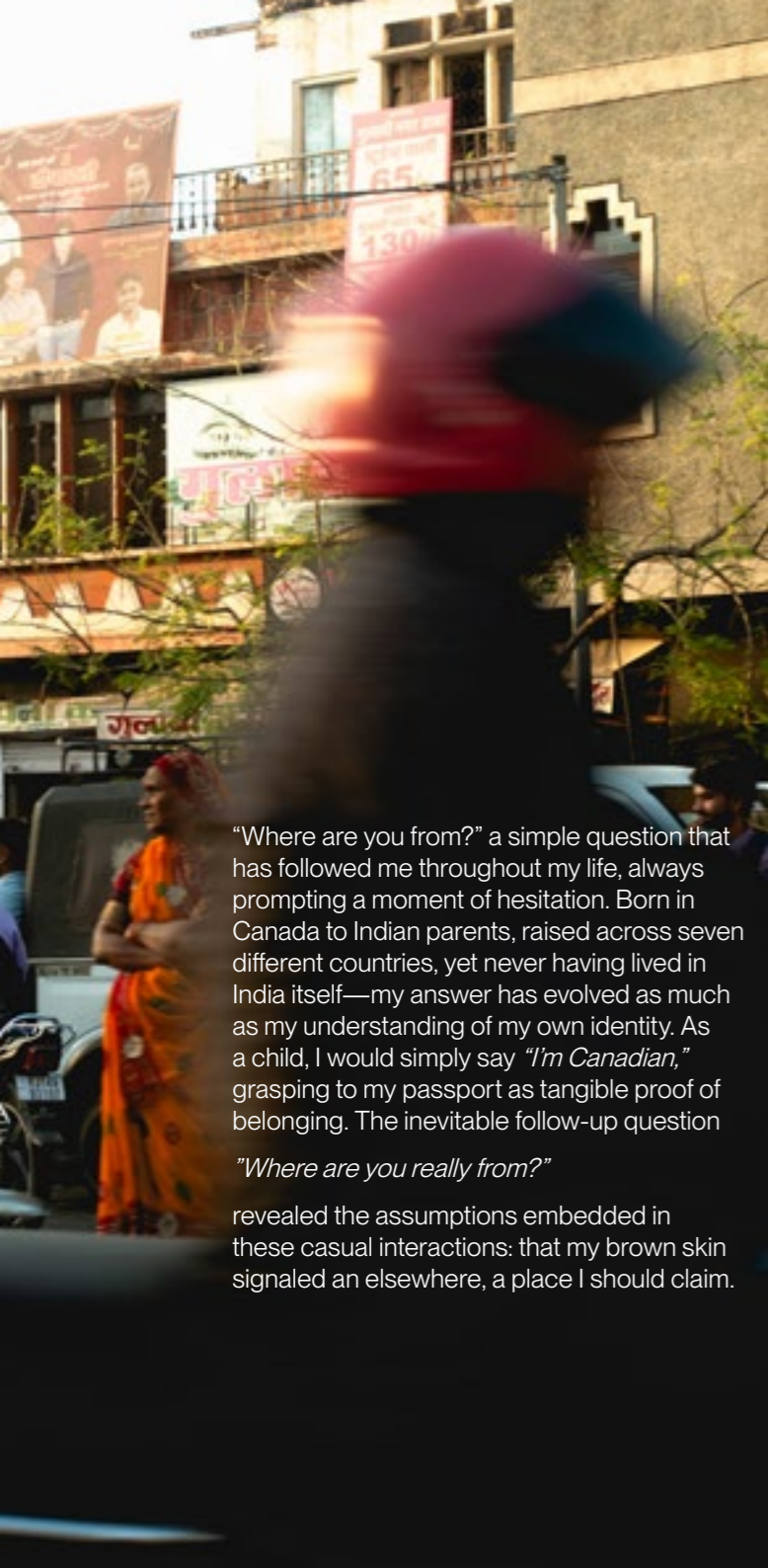
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The Sari as Cultural Dialogue



Navigating cultural in-betweenness

“Where are you from?” a simple question that has followed me throughout my life, always prompting a moment of hesitation. Born in Canada to Indian parents, raised across seven different countries, yet never having lived in India itself—my answer has evolved as much as my understanding of my own identity. As a child, I would simply say “I’m Canadian,” grasping to my passport as tangible proof of belonging. The inevitable follow-up question “Where are you really from?” revealed the assumptions embedded in these casual interactions: that my brown skin signaled an elsewhere, a place I should claim.

Growing up, these moments of being questioned made me feel unsure in my sense of self. I found myself distancing from my Indian heritage, uncomfortable with the stereotypes and simplifications that often followed my reluctant admission of Indian roots. I navigated the complex terrain of being visibly Indian yet experiencing India primarily through summer visits to relatives, Bollywood movies, and my parents’ cooking.

My relationship with my cultural identity existed in what theorist Homi Bhabha terms the “third space” neither fully within nor fully outside of either culture, but in a productive, and sometimes uncomfortable, in-between.

What even is authenticity?

It is precisely in the friction between my Western education, my Indian heritage, my nomadic upbringing, and design practice that I’ve found my most authentic creative voice.

This understanding transforms how I view my project: not as an attempt to recover some authentic Indian identity I’ve lost, but as an exploration of the unique perspective that emerges from my specific positioning across cultures. This aligns with Bhabha’s theory of “vernacular cosmopolitanism”—a worldview that values both local cultural specificity and global interconnection.

001_jaipur.jpeg
The pigeons and calf are paid actors
Jaipur | March 2025



The power of free will

In India, the cows do as they please. Exhibit A – roaming in the middle of the street
Jaipur India | March 2025



My research journey began with an ironic question often directed at me: “Oh, you’re Indian... don’t they worship cows there?” This question, reductive as it may be, opened a space for exploring how religious and cultural practices are understood — or misunderstood — across borders. These questions embody how representation functions ideologically, often reinforcing dominant Western narratives about Eastern religions. Yet rather than dismissing such questions as merely ignorant, I became interested in how these moments of cultural translation might serve as opportunities for deeper understanding.

Theoretical framework : वैवाचक्य, design and cultural identity

Hard at work

Awdhesh Kumar block printing factory, no machines just the purity of handcraft
Sanganer Rajasthan | March 2025



Representation and cultural power

Stuart Hall (1997) demonstrates that cultural representations are never neutral but embedded in power relations. When documenting Sanganeri printing workshops, my photographic focus evolved from “exotic” elements toward social relationships and technical knowledge — demonstrating Hall’s insight that meaning is constructed through “signifying practices” rather than inherent in objects. The reductive questions I’ve encountered about Indian culture exemplify these power dynamics, motivating my design work to create more nuanced cultural narratives that challenge Western stereotypes.





Orientalism and Counter - Narratives

Said's (1978) critique of Orientalism reveals how Western discourse constructs Eastern cultures as exotic and timeless — evident in the appropriation of Indian textiles in Western design. My research into colonial exploitation of Indian textile industries connects directly to my family's region in Uttar Pradesh, transforming my design practice into a counter-narrative that acknowledges historical injustices while celebrating cultural resilience. Said's concept of "contrapuntal awareness" (1993) informs how I integrate Western design education with traditional techniques, understanding cultures through their interactions rather than in isolation.



Ganna Chusna | to chew the end of a sugarcane

Every summer I am reminded of the proper way to enjoy sugarcane
Family's sugarcane field, UP India | March 2025



Autoethnography and Material Engagement

Ellis's (2004) autoethnographic methodology legitimizes personal experience as valid research data, particularly valuable for exploring diasporic identity. This approach is complemented by Ingold's (2013) concept of "thinking through making," which positions material practice as knowledge generation rather than application. Together, these frameworks validate my embodied engagement with woodblock printing as a form of research that generates insights about cultural identity that might not emerge through observation alone.



Design as Therapeutic Practice

Hooks (1994) provides a framework for understanding design as a “practice of freedom” that can address the “psychic fragmentation” often experienced in diaspora. Rather than seeking to recover some essential cultural identity, my engagement with Sangneri printing creates a third space where multiple influences integrate. This therapeutic dimension extends beyond personal healing to creating spaces for collective dialogue, positioning design as a medium for developing what hooks calls “radical openness” — an approach that welcomes cultural complexity rather than seeking simplified narratives.

Karigar wala | the craftsmen's workshop

Every summer I am reminded of the proper way to enjoy sugarcane
Sanganer, Jaipur | March 2025

The Secular and The Sacred

A harmonious moment during my visit to the block printing factory came through a simple sign requesting visitors remove their shoes. While practically intended to protect fabrics from stains and dirt, this gesture resonated deeply with cultural practices I'd grown up with — the ritual of removing shoes before entering someone's home or stepping into a mandhir (temple). In this context, the act transformed into a sign of respect for the handicraft itself, perhaps even approaching something sacred. This small moment embodied how traditional practices weave through everyday spaces, creating bridges between the practical and the spiritual, the secular and the sacred.



Historical and Cultural Context : Sanganeri Block Printing

Sanganeri block printing epitomizes cultural hybridity through centuries of exchange across traditions. Originating near Jaipur in the 16-17th centuries, this craft synthesizes Persian, Mughal, and indigenous influences, paralleling my own experience navigating multiple cultural contexts. The tradition's distinctive characteristics include delicate floral patterns on white backgrounds, carved sheesham (Indian rosewood) blocks, and vegetable dyes.

These aesthetic elements emerged from its development along trade routes connecting South Asia to Central Asia and the Middle

East, flourishing under Mughal patronage as court aesthetics influenced local artisans. Traditionally from the Chhipa caste, maintained this craft through generations despite colonial disruption, industrialization, and changing fashion trends. Sanganeri printing exists within what anthropologist Arjun Appadurai terms "global cultural flows"—networks of images, ideas, and practices moving across national boundaries (Appadurai, 1996).

This history challenges narratives of cultural purity, showing instead how creativity emerges at intersections between traditions.

Awdhesh Pandey

My understanding deepened through interviews with Awdhesh Pandey, fourth-generation owner of a printing factory in Sanganer. "Our family has maintained these techniques for over a century, adapting to changing markets while preserving our core traditions," he explained. Through his demonstrations, I gained insight into the entire process—from fabric selection and block carving to printing and dyeing—and how traditional knowledge transforms across generations.



Karigar wala | the craftsmen's workshop

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Sanganer, Jaipur | March 2025



My attraction to Sangneri printing stems from this multicultural character. Just as these prints emerged from productive friction between different traditions, my identity has been shaped by navigating multiple cultural contexts. By engaging with a craft that embodies cultural hybridity, I find a material practice resonating with my experience of cultural in-betweenness.



Methodology and Process : लवटारणे Engagement as Research

I began by analyzing family photographs, my parents' wedding album, and documentation from previous trips to India, identifying textiles as a central element in my cultural memory. This visual research revealed recurring patterns that had traveled with my family through multiple moves. Elements that became starting points for experimentation and informed my focus toward Indian printmaking traditions





Experimentation and iterations

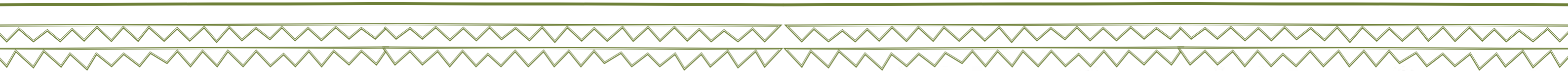
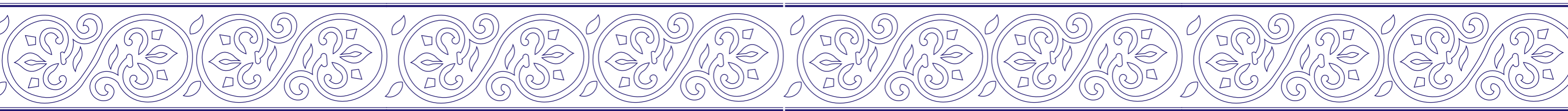
Building on these explorations, I developed iterative designs for my sari, exploring different combinations of traditional motifs and contemporary elements. Throughout this process, I documented not just the physical artifacts but my decision-making process and emotional responses. This reflective practice helped me understand how the material process of creating a woodblock-printed sari paralleled my broader navigation of cultural identity — both involving negotiation between different influences, acceptance of imperfection, and recognition of multiple valid approaches.

This integrated methodological approach allowed me to engage with Sangneri printing not just as a technical skill but as a means of exploring and expressing diasporic identity. The process itself became as significant as the final artifact, embodying the complex negotiations involved in navigating cultural in-betweenness through creative practice.



Bridging Traditional and Contemporary Methods

My exploration extended from traditional Sangneri woodblock printing into contemporary screen printing techniques, creating a hybrid approach that mirrors my cultural positioning. While woodblock printing connected me to traditional knowledge through direct material engagement, screen printing allowed experimentation with contemporary design sensibilities from my Western education. This contrast proved methodologically significant — where screen printing offered precision and consistency, woodblock printing demanded negotiation with material variations, with the dialogue between techniques becoming a physical manifestation of my diasporic experience. Through screen printing, I could rapidly prototype patterns before committing to the laborious woodblock process, developing a visual language that honored traditional Sangneri aesthetics while incorporating contemporary principles. This hybrid approach reflects diaspora reality, where cultural practices inevitably transform through contact with new contexts, demonstrating how traditions can evolve while maintaining their essential character.



The इक़रों as Cultural Dialogue

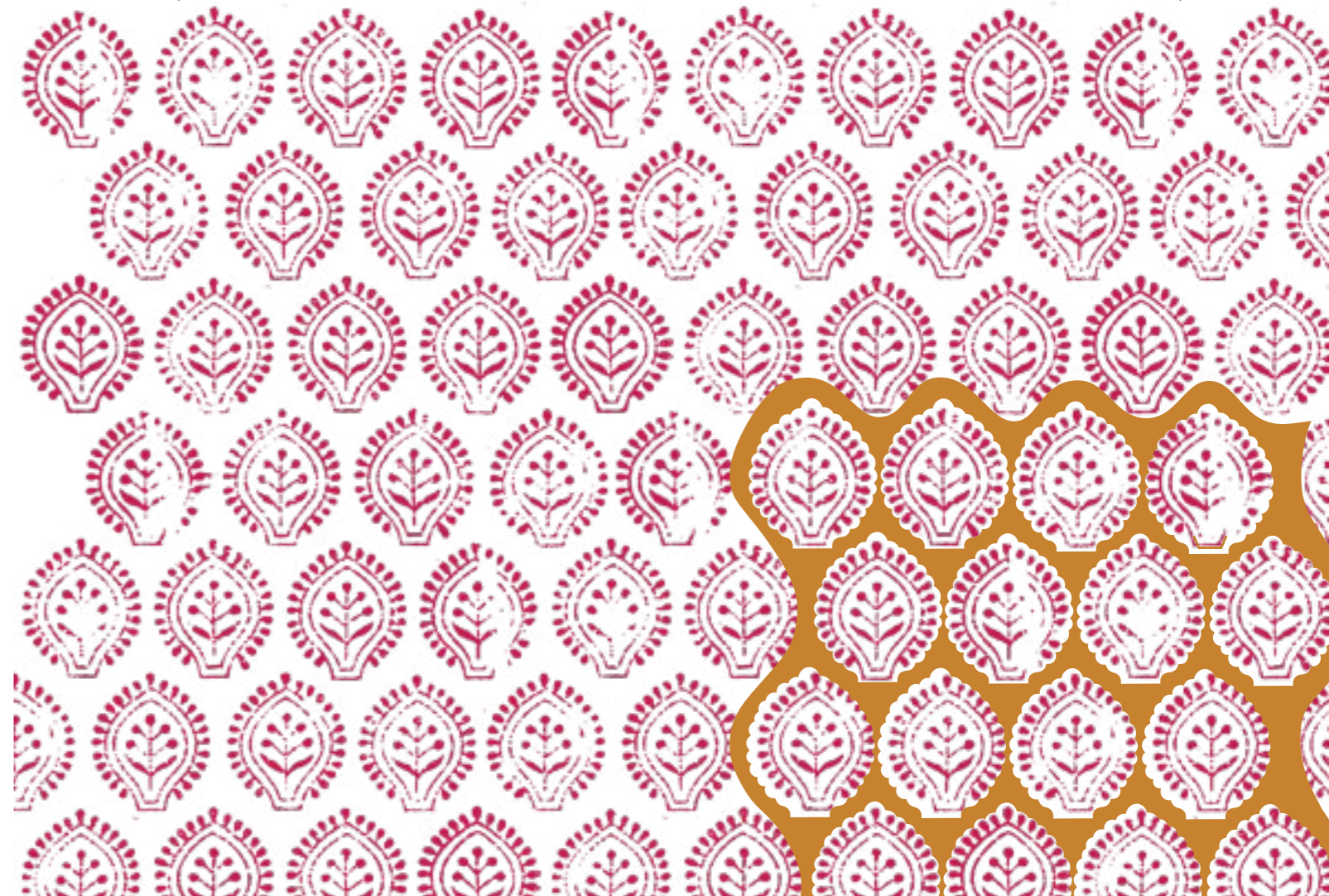
The sari itself incorporates multiple layers of cultural reference and personal meaning. I designed the woodblocks to include motifs that have particular significance in my cultural memory. Stylized floral patterns reminiscent of those in my family's home, geometric borders inspired by architectural elements I photographed in Jaipur, and abstract interpretations of religious symbols that featured in questions.

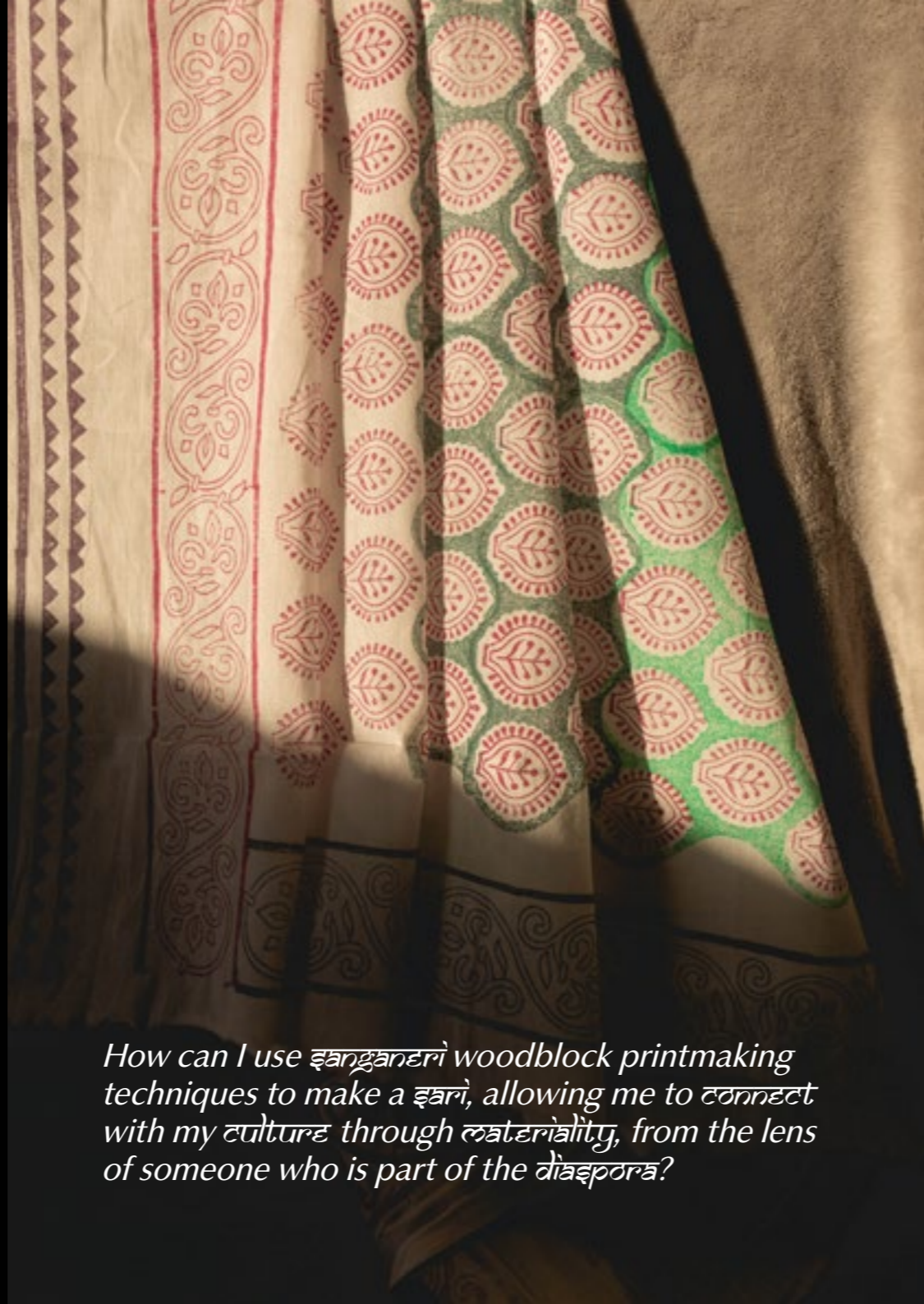
Rather than simply reproducing traditional Sanganeri patterns, I created a hybrid visual language that references traditional elements while incorporating contemporary sensibilities developed through my Western design education.

The color palette reflects this cultural hybridity. I selected colors that evoke both traditional Indian textiles and my contemporary aesthetic preferences.

This approach acknowledges what textile historian Judy Frater (2003) identifies as the “multiple narratives” within traditional crafts—narratives of cultural continuity, colonial disruption, creative adaptation, and contemporary revival.

The physical process of printing the sari became a ritualistic engagement with cultural identity. Each impression of the block required negotiating between the precision I valued from my design education and the organic variations characteristic of hand printed textiles. These moments paralleled my broader experience of navigating between different cultural values and expectations, demonstrating how material practice can embody the complexities of diasporic identity.





How can I use ಇನ್ನೂಳುಕಾರ್ತೆ woodblock printmaking techniques to make a ಇಳಗೇ, allowing me to ತರಗುಡುತು with my ತುಲಗುಡು through ಲತಾರುಣಾಲಿಗು, from the lens of someone who is part of the ವೆಣ್ಣುಕಾರ್ತೆ?

From this project I've been able to understand how material engagement with traditional techniques offers a form of cultural connection based on active practice rather than abstract knowledge or continuous immersion. The physical process created embodied understanding that intellectual study alone could not provide. The "in-between" position of diasporic identity proved a creative strength rather than limitation, providing perspectives unavailable to either cultural insiders or complete outsiders. Similarly,

traditional craft practices themselves embody cultural hybridity, with Sangneri printing's multicultural history paralleling my own experience of navigating multiple influences.

Most significantly, this project transformed my understanding of cultural identity from something to be recovered to something actively constructed through creative engagement—acknowledging both continuity with tradition and the inevitability of transformation.





