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Popular Article

Kalamkari - an Insignia of Andhra Pradesh's Artistic Legacy

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Abstract

India has a long history of rich cultural traditions, the oldest and most prominent of which is perhaps the hand-spun and hand-woven textile industry. The history of Indian textiles dates back more than three millennia. Kalamkari is a revered and timeless style of traditional Indian art. Kalamkari is an exquisite gem amongst Andhra Pradesh's cultural treasures. The celestial craftsmanship has made the art popular worldwide and people explore the elegance of kalamkari. The Mughals and Persians called the craft 'Kalamkari', the Portuguese called it 'Pintadoes', the British called them 'Chintz', and locally known as 'vraata pani'. The Kalamkari scrolls were also referred to as 'pat chitra'. Irrespective of what it was called it was popular in the textile industry circles because of its practice in both print and paint techniques. It was not until the Mughals subdued the Vijayanagar Kingdom in the early 16th century that the western and Deccan styles came together. The temple cloth evolved into a standard for casual attire due to its comfort, strength, durability, jewel-bright colours, and exquisitely patterned and painted designs. This transformation of Kalamkari facilitated its advancement as a prospective sustainable textile craft.

Keywords: Kalamkari; Machilipatnam; Srikalahasti; Block printing; Andhra Pradesh; Traditional textile

Introduction

Kalamkari, a craft from Andhra Pradesh, has a history that dates back to the Mughal Empire and the Indus Valley civilizations. The history of Kalamkari is deeply entwined with the history of India (Maddala *et al.*, 2023). Even though dye painted textiles is regarded as an age-old custom in India, its exact beginnings are unknown, yet some evidence points to the 16th century as the art's first known period (Maddala and Chiruvuori, 2020). From the Vijayanagara Empire to the Mughals and

the Europeans in India, the craft was consistently supported by a number of ruling lineages (Phogat and Raja, 2022). Named upon the technique of production, Kalamkari, 'Qualam/Kalam' which translates to 'pen' and 'kari' for 'art', is prevalent throughout Southern India. The Portuguese and Dutch terms were 'pintado' and 'sitz' respectively. From the Western Indian vernacular term 'chitta', which means 'spotted cloth', kalamkari is also known as 'chintz' (Irwin, 2012). The craft is known locally as Vraata pani, where 'vraata' refers to writing and 'pani' to work. (Divakala and Vasantha, 2014)

The genesis and modernizing journey

The earliest fabric samples of this craft found in "Mohenjo-Daro" excavations date back to 3000 B.C. During the excavation at Al Fust, near Cairo, some samples of Madder dyed cloth with traditional Indian designs were also found in the Egyptian tombs. These indicate not only how old the craft is, but also how advanced it was and how it contributed to a thriving ancient export. It reached its peak as an art form during the affluent Middle Ages (Rani, 2021). The waqai or news reports of the Golconda court from the 1670s mentioned the term kalamkari, which is perhaps one of the early archival records of the usage of kalamkari in Deccan (Sengupta, 2019). The painting tradition did not have a specific name until the Sultans of Golconda discovered the art. It was the Persian tie that gave the painted fabrics their Indian term, 'kalamkari', which has been used to refer to them since the Middle Ages.

Kalamkari gained popularity as a temple art as Srikalahasti was under the patronage of temple. It thrived in the vicinity of Hindu temples as an element of the artwork witnessed in. Themes back then tended to be religious. Minstrels would go from place-to-place singing to convey the glory of God while painting mythical figures on cloth. It pertained to a popular faith and considering its large rural following, came to symbolise India's grassroots culture (Maddala and Chiruvuori, 2020). This craft also has its origins in Masulipatnam, or now called Machilipatnam, in Andhra Pradesh, which was previously the commercial centre of the Golconda state ruled by the Nizam (Divakala and Vasantha, 2014). It was not until the Mughals subdued the Vijayanagar Kingdom in the early 16th century that the western and Deccan styles came together.

According to Gommans (2020), the Coromandel Coast was first connected to other regions of the Indian Ocean and specifically Southeast Asia through South Indian traders before 1600. Therefore, in the 17th century, Kalamkari saw a rise in demand from the Mughals, Persians, Dutch as well as the British. Their greatest attraction was the cloth's bright colours, which remained unfaded even after several washes, as well as its light texture and drape. Its strength and durability combined to create an



unparalleled combination that made the fabric useful for a range of applications (Maddala and Chiruvuori, 2020). The art would have been lost in time but for its timely revival in the year 1957. Kalamkari technique has been revived through the structured intervention programme initiated by Independent India in 1958. Following its revival the practice found support from its application on fabrics and was transformed into a craft with a decorative and utilitarian value. This transformation of Kalamkari facilitated its advancement as a prospective sustainable textile craft. (Divakala and Muthian, 2017)



Fig. 1 The Kalahasti style



Fig. 2 The Machilipatnam style

Source: <https://www.lepakshihandicrafts.gov.in/kalamkari-paintings.html>

Styles

In India, there are two unique forms of kalamkari art: the 'Srikalahasti' style and the Machilipatnam style. The hand-painted technique was prevalent in Srikalahasti, and the block-printed form was employed in Machilipatnam (Rani, 2021). The distinction between the two styles was not particularly bothered by traders or normal people but the French individuals recognised the difference as 'toiles peintes' and 'toiles imprimees'. (Chandra, 2015)

In the 19th century, Srikalahasti evolved consequently under the auspices of temples, which necessitated hangings that included significant narrative and figurative aspects. Thus, one distinctive feature of Kalamkari in Srikalahasti is its fabrics, which have been painted to evoke the magnificence of mythical legends and exhibit elegant vibrance of natural colours (Divakala and Muthian, 2017). The religious colour selections for the mythological figures, insisting blue for gods, golden yellow for females, and red for demons and bad ones, involves drawing the subject freehand by employing a *kalam*. The usage of blocks was not suited for this technique as it hardly had any repeats. (Gillow and Barnard, 1991)



The style of art in Pedana of Machilipatnam involved the usage of blocks dipped in colour to outline the designs as well as to fill in the colours. The exquisite craftsmanship of Pedana kalamkari pertains to the intricate carving of wooden blocks meticulously crafted to embody the prescribed designs. Masulipatnam designs were more Persian owing to the Golconda Sultanate's rule over it (Ghosh, 2018). The motifs of Persian influence like butti and mihrab which were patterned all over the cloth led to the work of block and were therefore introduced in the mid nineteenth century. (Gillow and Barnard, 1991)

Tools and Technique

Hand woven cotton was always used to produce traditional hand painted Kalamkari and traditionally, this coarse cotton was called the gada (Divakala and Vasantha, 2014). However, these days, it's being altered with a range of fabrics, including silk, georgette, crepe and chiffon. It is also possible to use different types of cotton such as chanderi or kota. Fusions with other crafts including *zardosi*, *badla* and embroidery is common. This is often employed for *kurtas*, ready-made *salwar kameez*, saris and dress materials. (Rani, 2021)

A low wooden table padded with gunny sacks, wooden trays for paste, mud pots for the black dye and a copper vessel for the dye vat are the only tools required by the craftsman to create his work of art. When it comes to Kalamkari printing, everything is done by hand. The most common village tools are the granite grinding stone, wooden mortar and pestle and basic clay jars used as receptacles. The craftsman makes his own charcoal pencils by burning Tamarind tree twigs and *Kalam*, which is produced from a sharpened bamboo sliver (Pareek, 2020). Teak wood is typically used to make blocks, which are then engraved with patterns. For the *kalam*, a strong bamboo stick with a thick goat-hair felt at the end is used (Ghosh, 2018). It is cut to the required line thickness. A cotton ball tuft is placed in the middle of the stick to serve as a dye reservoir (Divakala and Muthian, 2014). The scrolls are created solely using natural colours. The art's distinctiveness comes from this. The earthy tones of red, blue, green, yellow and brown are the hues traditionally used in kalamkari (Phogat and Raja, 2022). For many years, the method was kept a closely-guarded secret and was only available to just a couple of practitioners. Sadly, a lot of traditional artisans have passed away carrying this closely guarded knowledge, and there are no documented records of the methods utilised or the plants used to produce colours. This has been the primary cause of this fine art form's downfall, and instead of the more than a hundred dye formulae that were formerly known, now only about a dozen are known (Pareek, 2020). Alizarin is used today instead of organic matter (Ghosh, 2018). The following table shows the ingredients used throughout the Kalamkari process. (Gupta and Muppidi, 2022; Maddala



and Chiruvoori, 2020; Divakala and Muthian, 2017)

Table 1 Ingredients and their uses

Source/ Ingredients		Colour produced	Purpose/ use
Local name	Technical name		
Chaval kodi/ Chevellikodi/ Chay root and Alum	<i>Oldenlandia umbellata</i>	Red	
Pobbaku	<i>Narigama alta</i>		Carrier of colour
Suruli chekka or Surruduchekka	<i>Ventilago madraspatana</i>		Gives intensity to red
	Myrobalan flowers	Yellow	Light yellow
Danimma beradu	Pomegranate rind	Yellow	Golden yellow
Neel	<i>Indigofera tinctoria</i>	Blue	
Sunnam	<i>Lime</i>	White	
Chinta boggu	Tamarind twigs		To outline motifs
Karakkal	Myrobalan fruit		To treat the grey fabric
Kachu thumma	<i>Senegalia catechu</i>	Rosemary	
Kassim kaaram (Bellam, Rusted iron filings and water)	Scrap iron and jaggery	Black	Outlines for fabric
Alum mixed with water		Gray	
Patika	Alum		Mordant
Neeli mandu	Ultra marine blue	Blue	
Boggu	Charcoal		Fugitive agent
	Cow dung		Bleaching agent
	Beeswax		Resist material
	Fatty buffalo milk		Prevents colour leakage



Fig. 3 Steps involved in Kalamkari





Fig. 4 Artisans at work

Source: Surya Tejaswi Desu

Technique/ process

Sources claim that Kalamkari is a tedious and lengthy process that requires between ten and twenty-four steps. Cotton fabric is obtained from mills and split into sections (Rani, 2021). The required size of grey fabric is soaked in water for an hour, properly kneaded, washed to get rid of starch, and dried. is properly kneaded, washed to get rid of starch, and dried. After being soaked for a few hours in a mixture of buffalo milk and cow dung, the cloth is rinsed in a pond or under running water. The cloth is then treated with a solution of Myrobalan (*Terminalia chebula*) to get rid of the smell of buffalo milk. A kalam, or wooden block, is used to fill the iron acetate solution. Alum solution is used as a paint mordant on areas that will be red. After a day of being set aside, the cloth is later washed under running water. Boiling red colouring ingredients is how red colour dyeing is done. The parts that are not to be painted blue are coated with wax and immersed in an indigo solution. To remove the wax, the cloth was boiled in water. If it is intended, it is painted yellow and then washed. Originally, blue was dyed with indigo which was obtained from *Indigofera tinctoria*. Cotton would absorb ochre colour quickly, but other colours would require the cloth to be treated with a mordant to initiate the necessary chemical reaction with the dye. Resist, which is a mix of materials like gum and mud, wax, etc., was used to prevent colours from bleeding into other areas. Cotton would need to be dipped in a tannin solution in order to employ madder as the red dye. The application of mordants would come next. Alum was used as the red mordant. Alum and madder would react to turn crimson. The brush worked as a resist and a mordant on fine cotton cloth for narrative panels intended for



temples. Most of the resist applied was beeswax. The choice of brush or block method was determined by the motif and design. (Ghosh, 2018)

Motifs used

Originally, events from ancient texts like the *Bhagavatam* and the *Mahabharata Ramayana* were depicted in kalamkari. These murals, which tell the stories of the Gods, were frequently utilised as ornamental backgrounds in temples. The aforementioned subjects are still prevalent in Kalamkari today, along with other esoteric and spiritual symbolism. With its deep roots and skyward growth, the Tree of Life is a particularly well-liked Kalamkari symbol that unites the earth, sky and underworld. According to Guru *et al.* (2022), the Tree of Life denotes protection, nourishment and renewal. The Islamic culture embraced a more comprehensive synthesis of this artistic medium, and their innate affinity for natural themes was evident in the Kalamkari textiles of that era. Within their design, there was an amalgamation and fusion of the lotus, palm, mango, peacock and elephant motifs (Rani, 2021). Decorative borders are made of stylized natural shapes. Though not strictly followed, significant colour connotations were observed, blue colour relates to Gods and other deities, yellow is frequently used for resembling gold and to represent the tone of the female form and green colour to represent the deity, *Hanuman*. Demons and evil people were represented by red colour (Divakala and Vasantha, n.d.). Mughal themes, floral patterns, mosque mihrabs (prayer niches), trees of life, cypresses, and animals as motifs were described in Islamic texts. (Ghosh, 2018)

Conclusion

With its lengthy history, method, themes, and design, Kalamkari's journey may be traced to reveal that it still serves practical, ornamental, and sacred functions now. The rise of mass manufacturing, digital printing, and machine printing presents Kalamkari with difficult times ahead. However, perhaps the value of craftsmanship will never diminish. The craft has survived across various eras because to its significance as a religion, the blending of traditions, and constant additions with religious practices. The temple cloth evolved into a standard for casual attire due to its comfort, strength, durability, jewel-bright colours, and exquisitely patterned and painted designs. This transformation of Kalamkari facilitated its advancement as a prospective sustainable textile craft.

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