

Kalamkari, the Art of Painting with Natural Dyes

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Kalamkari means painting with a pen. It is an exquisite form of textile art with a heritage dating back to the ancient times. The origin of the term can be traced to the early period of alliance between the Persian and Indian trade merchants which identified all painted textile art from India as *Kalamkari*. 'Kalam' is the Persian word for pen, and 'kari' in Urdu implies the craftsmanship involved. Hence, 'Kalamkari' denotes the myriad manifestations of hand painted textiles with natural dyes. The pen referred to in the term is a short piece of bamboo or date-palm stick, shaped and pointed at its end to form a nib. Created without the use of chemicals or machine *Kalamkari* art is entirely a handicraft using natural or vegetable dyes and metallic salts called mordants to fix the dye into the cotton fibers. An exact resist process, complex and careful dyeing, sketching and painting of the design and, occasionally, even the addition of gold or silver tinsel into it are the other integral components of this art.



Figure 1

The *Kalamkari* works are mostly produced in the small towns of Kalahasti, Machilipatnam and other interior regions of Andhra Pradesh by rural craftsmen and women, and is a household occupation passed from generation to generation as heritage. In olden days the centres famous for this kind of work, were concentrated within two main regions of India, Burhanpur and Sironj, in the West until 1630, now in Central India, and along the Coromandel Coast, stretching from the Krishna Delta to Point Calimere, on the other, with its chief centres of production being Palakol, Petaboli (Nizampatnam), Machilipatnam and Sri Kalahasti in Andhra Pradesh, and Pulicat, Madurai, St. Thome and Fort St. George in Tamilnadu.

The two main centres of the *kalamkari* work production are, Kalahasti and Machilipatnam. Both have their own distinct style. The kalahasti artist uses the "kalam" or the pen for outlining as well as for filling in the colours. His paintings are completely hand worked without the use of blocks. He first treats the cloth with mordant, then sketches the outline of his design with 'kasami' (black colour) and then fills in other colours in stages, one at a time. The only colours he uses are the ones obtained from the

plants— the vibrant yellow, indigo, red, and green. Hence each finished work is specifically personal, original, and unique. The *Machilipatnam* work, though also referred to as 'kalamkari', strictly speaking, is not pure kalamkari or pen-work. The Machilipatnam artist prints the outlines as well as the main features of his designs with hand-carved blocks which keep getting used again and again for years and not necessarily by the same person.



Figure 2

The Kalahasti style developed around the temples with their patronage. As a result it has a distinct religious identity and thrives on mythological themes. The attractive blend of colors on the fabrics usually portrays characters from the Indian mythology. with the divinity figures of Brahma, Saraswati, Ganesh, Durga, Shiva, Parvati as the main source of inspiration. The Kalahasti artists generally depict on the cloth the deities, scenes from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Puranas and other mythological classics mainly producing scrolls, temple backcloths, wall hangings, chariot banners and the like. In ancient times, the common man learned of gods and goddesses, and of their mythical character from these paintings. Groups of singers, musicians and painters, called *chitrakattis*, moved from village to village narrating the great stories of the Hindu mythology. Progressively, during the course of history, they illustrated their accounts using large bolts of canvas painted on the spot with rudimentary means and dyes extracted from plants. Thus, it is believed, was born the first Kalamkari. Today, the Kalamkari art is being adapted to the tastes and interests of the new generation. Some innovative artists have even introduced Christian and Buddhist legends into it.



Figure 3

The Machilipatnam paintings, on the other hand are Persian in character because of the patronage and proximity to the Mughals and the Golconda Sultanate. The traditional block prints in this art largely use Persian motifs like interlacing pattern of leaves and flowers, the cartwheel, different forms of the lotus flower, creepers, birds like parrots and peacock, and other intricate leaf designs. One very popular subject with them is the tree of life. Their chief production is in the field of table and bed linen, curtain lengths, dress material, scarves, file and bag covers, cushion covers and wall hangings. With the advent of the Mughal Empire, after Aurangzeb conquered the region in 1687, a new style emerged in Machilipatnam work which represented personal portraits of the emperors along with panels depicting sagas of their rule and daily life, and the richness of their courts. During this period Iran became a dominant patron of the art form and several centers were opened in the country to meet the Iranian demand for textile art. The art form adapted multitude patterns portraying religious beliefs, flora and fauna, ornamental motifs and the like under the influence of diverse patrons. Religious beliefs, traditional ethos, trade and cultural exchanges influenced the art of Kalamkari and extended its application from temple hangings to products of daily use. The Dutch and Europeans introduced Kalamkari art to assorted collection of products like home furnishings, canopies and garments.

The exact nascence of this art cannot accurately be established but it seems to have an ancient, long tradition in India as evident from the kalamkari designs and motifs visible in the costumes and draperies in the Ajanta and Ellora frescoes, and the *Kalpasutra* paintings of the Jains. The textual resources, however, indicate that this form of art evolved about 3000 years ago in Andhra Pradesh in the south of India. It flourished throughout the Deccan plateau between 13th. and 19th. centuries CE as a result of the

extensive textile trading along the Coromandel coast and was extremely popular in the West. The Portuguese called this kind of fabric decoration, *pintado*, the Dutch referred to it as *sitz*, and the British preferred the term, *chintz*. Printed or painted, it was all the same for them. The trade and ordinary people did not bother much about the two distinct categories but the French connoisseurs, however, immediately distinguished between the 'toiles peintes' and the 'toiles imprimees'. Francois Bernier (1625-1688) who was personal physician to Aurangzeb for twelve years and Jean-Baptiste Tavernier (1605 – 1689) have left expansive record of their wonder at the immense variety and beauty of "Hindoostan's handcrafted treasures" that they saw at the bazaars.¹

The Kalamkari art of painting is a slow, laborious, gradual process of bleaching, resist – dyeing and hand printing. Unlike other styles of painting, Kalamkari work goes through a lot of treatment before and after the painting is completed on the cotton fabric. It involves several washings, use of mordant, wax, milk, bleaching with buffalo or goat milk and the like. The treatment of the cloth and the quality of the mordant used determine the look and the lustre of the final product. Every step from soaking of the fabric to sketching the outlines, to washing and drying the fabric, is done most carefully, cautiously following the exact prescribed manner. Different effects are obtained by using cowdung, seeds, plants and crushed flowers in the process. The work in hand needs to be washed after each application. Thus, each fabric can undergo up to twenty washings before it is finished. The quality of the finish depends upon many factors, of which the quality of the water used and the availability of local minerals to be used as mordants, are not the least. This has a lot to do with why Kalamkari was centered in these two locations.

It takes seventeen painstaking steps before the final results are achieved. The process used by both the schools of Kalamkari painting is more or less the same except that the Srikalahasti style is more tedious and more time consuming. It is worked out completely with 'kalam' or the brush-like pen whereas the Masulipatnam artist makes full use of block printing for outlines, as well as for filling in of the colours. Another specialty of the Kalamkari work is its elegance and esthetic appeal. In the originally prepared Kalamkari work even though the colours used are bright, the finished effect is mellow. The fabric doesn't look gaudy and with each wash the colours shine more and more and the designs stand out better against the background.

Today, the world over, people are turning away from the use of dangerous chemicals. The kalamkari then, is just the right kind of work. With this one can avoid chemicals and still enjoy colourful fabrics. The Kalamkari artists use natural dyes extracted from the bark, flower and the root of the plant. It is amazing to learn how these colours are obtained – red from the madder root, yellow from some flowers or the pomegranate seeds, or even from the mango bark, and the black colour from the myrobalam fruit and the like. With the passing of time, however, the living and working habits have changed which has also introduced new trends in the work style. The young generation of artists doesn't so much like to work with things like buffalo milk, cow dung, fermented jiggery. They find the traditional methods of kalamkari work, beginning with bleaching, pouncing, or mordanting extremely slow, wearisome, time-consuming, complicated and demanding. They prefer faster, simpler, uncomplicated methods, and have, to a great extent, given up

the original cumbersome procedure with all its myriad precisions and cautions in the bleaching, soaking, and drying of the cloth; in the preparation of colours and mordants. Some of them are abandoning natural dyes in favour of their chemical replacement, especially the indigo, even though the chemical substitute is not as fast and lacks the gloss of the natural dye.

The cotton fabric acquires its characteristic gloss by leaving it soaked in a mixture of myrabalam (resin) and cow milk for an hour. After that the contours and reasons are drawn on it with a 'kalam' dipped in a mixture of fermented jaggery and water. The entire procedure of Kalamkari art follows a strictly serialized, specific procedure. After the cloth is mordanted the dyes are applied on it one at a time. Mordanting is an important part of Kalamkari work. Indian mastery over this process is responsible to a great extent for the superior place that the Kalamkari productions enjoy over other painted material.

The Masulipatnam port was a prominent trading site along the Coromandel Coast from where *kalamkari* fabrics were shipped off to a variety of international locations. As I have said above the importance of Masulipatnam as a trade center was largely due to its connection with the Golconda kingdom. The Golconda ruler, Qutab Shahi, was formative in establishing a strong trade relationship with the Persian Safavid Empire, which was particularly interested in acquiring *kalamkari* textiles for a variety of personal and domestic uses. Other trading ports along the Coromandel Coast were Pulicat and Fort St. George, now, Chennai.

Besides being traded as works of art the *kalamkari* textiles were also used as a currency in the spice trade. European and East Asian markets demanded spices like nutmeg, clove, and pepper as well as aromatic woods and oils, which were available almost exclusively in parts of Southeast Asia and Indonesia. The Southeast Asian and Indonesian markets, on the other hand, demanded Indian textiles particularly for ritual and ceremonial use. Thus a triangular trading system was established that implicated Indian textiles in a larger global exchange of goods and products. As time went on, Indian textiles were seen as luxury items in themselves, and a variety of textiles and textile-related products were sold to merchants throughout Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

The main artist families involved in *kalamkari* during the 19th century were members of the *Balaji jati*, a community traditionally involved in agricultural work and small industry. Today, there are over 300 individuals in and around Sri Kalahasti involved in some aspect of *kalamkari* work, from preparing cloth and dyes, to design motifs and format layout, to final painting and execution. Around the middle of the 20th century, the popularity of *kalamkari* in Sri Kalahasti waned to the point of near extinction with most artists focusing on agricultural work and other local occupations. However, in the years immediately following the independence the *kalamkari* art received government attention and sponsorship through the intervention of an art activist, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya who later on became the first Chairperson of the All India Handicrafts Board. The present status of this art owes its place to her unflinching efforts. She helped establish a government-run *kalamkari* training center in Chennai in 1957 that focused on teaching the techniques and stylistic vocabulary of the art of *kalamkari* to the new and emerging

generation of artists. Regular workshops take place there and are conducted by expert artist. The most recent one took place in February 2011 and was directed by none lesser than the renowned Guruppa Shetty who was honoured by Padma Shri a couple of years back. These facts have contributed greatly to bring about an upsurge in the interest of the designers as well as that of the buyers.

Contemporary kalamkari techniques show various departures from the past. In Masulipatnam, mordant is now uniformly printed with a block. Indigo dyeing has been given up and the application of the wax resist by kalam has also disappeared. The mordant for outlining in black remains unchanged, but iron acetate has replaced indigo for dyeing the larger areas black, despite its known corrosive qualities. Yellow dyes are made from dried flowers called aldekai (Telugu) or kadukai (Tamil) of the myrobalam, *Terminalia chebula*. Similarly, myrobalams are used for tanning.

Extant traditions of kalamkari show two techniques in vogue. The Masulipatnam region relies virtually on the block method while in Kalahasti and Sirkinaikkenpet, where the temple influence is more dominant, reliance is entirely on free hand drawing, initially with a charcoal stick to outline the pattern, followed by the reworking of the contours with a kalam. European observers, who documented the Coromandel kalamkari techniques and processes in the 18th century, have recorded references to the practice of the now lost pouncing technique, also used in Iran. The pouncing method probably came from Iran during the Safavid period because of its link to embroidery traditions in Iran. However, an equivalent link cannot be established in relation to south India. The Kalamkari is now practiced by a number of small families in and around the old fishing port of Masulipatnam. The intricate designs, elaborate borders and understanding of balanced composition have made Kalamkari one of the most widely imitated styles of Indian printing. Today a stylish range of home décor products made with Kalamkari is available, namely, wall hangings, bedcovers, cushion covers, even rugs and theatre backdrops, besides beautiful saris, dress materials, and stoles.

Acknowledgement:

Figure 1: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ABrooklyn_Museum_-_Wall_Hanging_%28Kalamkari%29_-_overall.jpg

Figure 2: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AKalamkari_Painting.JPG

Figure 3: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AKalamkari_painting.jpg

References:

1. Francois Bernier, **Travels in the Mogul Empire**, AD 1656-1668, Archibald Constable on the basis of Irving Brock's version, ed. by Vincent A. Smith. Delhi, Low Price Publications, 1994 (1934)
2. The dynasty's founder, Sultan Quli Qutb-ul-Mulk, migrated to Delhi with some of his relatives and friends in the beginning of the 16th century. Later he migrated south, to

Deccan and served Bahmani sultan, Mohhammad Shah. He conquered Golconda, after the disintegration of the Bahmani Kingdom into the five Deccan Sultanates. Soon after, he declared independence from the Bahmani Sultanate, took the title *Qutub Shah*, and thus established Qutb Shahi dynasty of Golconda. The dynasty ruled Golconda for 171 years, until the Moghul emperor Aurangzeb conquered the Deccan in 1687.

Sharad Chandra has been contributing to *Rencontre avec L' Inde* since 1988. She is a freelance literary journalist, book reviewer, and author. Her publications include several monographs on Albert Camus, latest being *Albert Camus et L' Inde* (Editions Indigene, Montpellier), short fiction, and poetry.
