8. Kalamkari

After obtaining an overview of some of the painted textiles of India in the previous lesson, now we will study in greater detail about Kalamkari, which is an important and beautiful form of hand painted textile from Andhra Pradesh.

8.0 Objectives

After going through this lesson you will become:

- Acquainted with the historical background of Kalamkari.
- Understand the different styles of Kalamkari.
- Gain an understanding about the raw materials, preparation of colours and the production process of Kalamkari.

8.1 Introduction

Kalamkari is a very important form of hand painted and printed textile from Andhra Pradesh (Fig. 8.1). The word Kalamkari originated from the word *kalam* which means pen and *kari* meaning work. Kalamkari paintings were done using vegetable colours, depicting mythological scenes, floral motifs, tree of life, birds, animals etc. The artists got their inspiration from temple architectures and its surroundings, the natural beauty of mountains and natural resources of Andhra Pradesh.

![Fig. 8.1 Kalamkari work](image)
Andhra Pradesh is a centre of the arts of Kuchipudi dance, melodious songs and various crafts, of which Kalamkari (Vrathapani) is one of the most significant arts. It is about three thousand years old. It took birth in a village called Masulipatnam, 200 miles east of Hyderabad (Fig. 8.3). This form of art spread and settled down in the temple town of Sri Kalahasti, 80 miles north of Chennai near Tirupati.

8.2 Historical Background

The earliest fabric samples of this craft, found in the Mohenjo-daro, excavations, date back to 3000 B.C. Some samples of Madder dyed cloth with traditional Indian motifs have also been discovered in Egyptian tombs during excavations at Al Fustat near Cairo (Fig. 8.2). These bear testimony not only to the antiquity of the craft but also prove that it was well developed and formed a part of the flourishing export in ancient times.
The popularity of Indian textiles in the ancient world may be attributed to the fact that India had even at that time perfected the technology of fixing the colours found in nature with a certain degree of permanence to fabrics. With the bounty and variety of tropical vegetation available to the Indian craftsmen, they were able to make many colours derived from vegetable, animal and mineral sources.

There are numerous references in ancient Hindu texts describing the colours and patterns of the clothes worn by the people of the Vedic Age which reveal that more than a hundred species of plants were known and used by the craftsman of those days.

Varahamihira, author of the voluminous Hindu text Brihasamhita belonging to the 6th century A.D., describes not only the dyes but also the process of mordanting in fixing colours to cloth. The term Mordanting is derived from the Latin word Mordere (to bite). This is a process in which a mineral salt like Alum, Tin or Chrome is applied to the cloth, which "bites" the fibres and makes it receptive to the dye. By this method a fugitive dye is fixed and forms a colour on the fabric which is fast to washing and light.

Kalamkari depicts stories of great moral value from the Mythological scenes from epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata. The 15th century was considered the “golden” period of the craft, during which the Vijayanagar emperors spread the art of Kalamkari. The craft suffered a setback in the mid 16th century.

In the 17th century, stylized Persian motifs, the tree of life, roses, bulbuls and pomegranate fruit were added to the design dictionary. When these pieces were exported to Persia, the Persian demand for prayer mats, bolster and pillow covers, floor mats without human images grew to such an extent that block printers took over the work from painters and block-printed designs began to catch the fancy of people.

In the 17th century the Europeans were delighted with Kalamkari owing to its colours and floral patterns. There was a great demand for dress material, bedspreads and curtains, but they often called it calico or chintz, instead of Kalamkari.

The British East India Company established a flourishing trade in these fabrics in the later half of the 17th century and special orders were placed on the Indian craftsman for producing goods for the European market. The printed calicos of the Coromandel Coast became so much part of the fashion scene that often embroidered samples of garments were sent by the fashionable ladies of London and Paris for duplication in print.

The Kalamkari designs were used for furnishings goods, known as Chintzes, were extremely popular. Many European designs like the Tudor Rose were incorporated into the Kalamkari tradition during this period. However, by far the strongest influences were the designs from Iran and Persia, much favoured by the Muslim rulers of those days.
Persian motifs (Fig. 8.4) such as Cypress tree, Mihrab, Almond, Tree of life etc. have ever since been an inseparable part of Kalamkari. Absorbing various traditions and adapting them to the Indian idiom, the Kalamkari craftsman evolved a rich and vibrant textile tradition.

8.2.1 Other centers

The work done in ‘Arava’ in a province of Tamil Nadu state is most similar to Andhra Pradesh’s Kalamkari. Other centres of this type of fabric designing are in Palakollu, Machilipatnam, Vijayawada, Guntur, Nellore, Sri Kalahasti, Ponneri, Arani, Setwachari, Tanjore and in Pondicherry province.

Self-check Questions

1. Where did Kalamkari Originate?

2. Fill in the blanks:

The word Kalamkari originated from the word _______ which means pen and _______ meaning work. Kalamkari paintings were done using _______ colours, depicting ______________ scenes, _______ motifs, _______ of life, _______ and animals etc.
8.3 The Styles of Kalamkari

8.3.1 Sri Kalahasti style

There is little information on how and when the industry originated in Sri Kalahasti. Locals believe that perhaps the Kalamkari printers of Machilipatnam, who had specialized in Kalamkari printing for centuries, might have passed on their knowledge to the Sri Kalahasti workmen, who developed their own designs to suit the local demand and specialized in temple cloth painting (Fig. 8.5). The Sri Kalahasti temple cloth painting is done entirely by Kalamkari process, i.e., only with the help of kalam. The religious importance of the town led artists to focus on mythological themes.

![Kalamkari and Temple cloth](Fig. 8.5)

In this style all work is done by the kalam. First the artist outlines the figures on red background. The outlines of the motif are black and only natural colours are used. This style is also known as *Vrathapani*.

8.3.2 Masulipatnam style

The town of Masulipatnam (now, Machhilipatnam), the birth place of Kalamkari art was one of the well-known ports of ancient sea routes to the world. Due to the contact with the outside world, the hand-printed cloth of Masulipatnam was popular with the Greeks even before Christ. This also led to foreign influence on the art.

Due to changing fashions and increase in demand, kalamkari artists adapted new techniques, which involved block-printing, followed by filling the colours with kalsams. With blocks, the artists were able to print the outline faster than drawing (Fig. 8.6). Artists started using chemical dyes also. This made their work easy. As chemical colours gave a bright look, they caught the attention of the customers. The artists also used molten bee-wax to block certain portions while dyeing in indigo blue. This style was also known as *Addhakamu*. 
8.4 Raw Materials used by the Kalamkari Artists

1. Gada or Kora cloth. (These are cloth woven with unbleached yarn).
2. Vegetable dyes.
3. Alum or Phitkari
4. Tender Myrobalams (dried) or Harad in Hindi.
5. Buffalo milk.
6. Charcoal from burnt tamarind twigs.
8. Large copper vessels.
10. The work-benches, which enable the workers to squat by its side, do block printing.
11. A three-legged low table for wax processing and other colour dyeing.
13. Stamping pads to hold the dye for block printing.

8.5 Preparation of Colours

The vigour of the Kalamkari designs was due to richness of colours. The colours used were deep red, black, indigo, green, yellow, dusty pink, brown and off-white. Generally, the colour schemes were:

- Female figures were usually in yellow.
- Devatas or Gods were depicted in indigo or blue.
- Rakshasa or Demons were in red and green, and
- Some figures were left without any colouring at all.
The colours are prepared as follows:

i) **Black Dye:** The basic black dye (Fig. 8.7) used by the Kalamkari craftsman was iron liquor. This was made by soaking iron pieces in a solution of jaggery (molasses) and water in a mud pot. The solution took about 20 days to mature. Brownish foam on the surface indicated that the solution was ready to use. In a cool place, the solution could be stored for up to one year. The black Kasim solution was used for outlining of figures/motifs and for filling in larger areas in black colour.

ii) **Yellow Dye:** A yellowish coloured dye (Fig. 8.8) is obtained by mixing Myrobalam flowers with boiling water in an earthen or metal pot. The solution is stirred and then cooled. For a dark shade of yellow, the solution is left for a week. Before painting with the yellow dye solution onto cloth, alum is added to it. Once Myrobalam yellow painting is completed, the cloth is dried in the shade. The next day, the cloth is washed well in flowing river water and dried in the sunlight.

iii) **Green Dye:** The yellow solution, if set for several days, can turn a slight greenish tint. Otherwise, green colour can be obtained by painting portions with the *myrobalam* yellow solution and then treating the same portion of cloth with indigo dye (Fig. 8.9).

iv) **Brown Dye:** Sometimes artists add a solution of aged mango bark and boiling water over the Myrobalam yellow dye solution to obtain superior colour fastness, or to create a slightly brownish colour (Fig. 8.10). The printing paste is made of country gum, or powdered tamarind seed or even common flour.

v) **Red Dye:** Alum or Phitkari is used on a Myrobalam-treated cloth for developing dull red colour (Fig. 8.11).

vi) **Red and Maroon:** Chavalikodi root and Surulipatta bark (madder plant) is added to boiling water. Alum or Phitkari-painted cloth is submerged in the boiling water for about 40 minutes (Fig. 8.12). The cloth is then removed, rinsed with cold water, and let dry. For a darker shade of red or multiple shades of red in a single piece, the entire process is repeated until desired colour(s) is obtained.
vii) **Pink Dye**: Lime juice is applied onto portions of cloth that have already been dyed red, in order to obtain a light pink colour (Fig. 8.13). Typically, lime juice is used to create pink line details on red figures or floral motifs.

viii) **Blue Dye**: The blue colour (Fig. 8.14) is made by using colours obtained from indigo plant. It is applied on unpainted portions of the cloth where a blue colour is desired. Once dried, the cloth is washed in water and dried. However, the colour may turn pale on repeated washing. The indigo dye is treated with alkaline and lime solution to make it fasten on cloth. After treatment, the solution looks yellow-greenish in colour and smells like mud. The indigo solution is then ready for painting, turns blue when exposed to air. Charcoal pencils for drawing the outlines of motifs are made by burning twigs of the tamarind tree.

The shade of a given colour can vary from one printing to another depending on the plants age and even the weather. Colours are boldest when the dyed cloths are dried under hot, sunny skies. During the rainy season colours are duller and in the winter they are darker.

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**Self-check Questions**

3. Which are the two important styles of Kalamkari?

4. Fill in the blanks

   The colours used in Kalamkari were deep ____ , ______, ______, ______, ______, ______, dusty ______, ______ and ______-white.

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**8.6 Production process**

**8.6.1 Sri Kalahasti**

The inspiration of work done at Sri Kalahasti as the name suggests are Mythological. The scenes depict the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata using colours like golden yellow for a female character, blue was used to show the gods and red for demons.

The cloth is painted. The kalamkari artist outlines the figures and designs on the cloth with charcoal sticks made of tamarind twigs. Over this the final lines are drawn with a black solution (Fig. 8.15), called the kasim.

The next stage is to give the cloth its background, red or pink. Whenever red colour is needed on the cloth, the workman paints over those areas with an alum solution. The cloth is spread over a woolen blanket and the artist applies the solution to
the cloth with the help of a kalam, which has a brush like end. The cloth is dyed, washed in water and dried in the sun before it is dyed red (Fig. 8.16).

8.6.2 Masulipatnam

The work done at Masulipatnam is hand block printed with vegetable dyes (Fig. 8.17). The cloth is thoroughly washed and soaked for 5 minutes in solution of a handful of sheep dung and water. The cloth is then squeezed to remove excess water and kept overnight. Next day it is washed in flowing water, spread out on a flat moist surface sprinkled with water till it is bleached.

The design is then block printed on to the cloth, using kasim liquid (iron acetate) to which alum or phitkari has been added. The cloth is then left for 2-3 days to dry. Excess of alum is removed by washing in flowing water, and spread on a flat moist surface and sprinkled with water every two hours or whenever dry. The Sprinkling must continue for 9 hours throughout the day, as this prevents fading. The colours dark and light red, black and white are distinct. The cloth is then dipped in rice starch to make it stiff. This makes it easier to print or paint the wax.

With the design on the block or kalam, all parts of the scroll or painting that are not to be dyed blue are carefully covered with wax. Fold the cloth neatly and keep dipping into the vat dye solution till all the unwaxed white portions have turned blue. Spread the cloth out in the open to oxidize. Put the cloth into boiling water to remove the wax. Clean the cloth thoroughly in soapy water and add salt. Apply yellow colour with a block or kalam wherever needed. When yellow is painted over blue, it turns green.

Self-check Questions

5. In Kalamkari what colour is traditionally used for female figures?

8.7 Modern Designs on Kalamkari

In 1958, the All India Handicraft Board set up a training course and school for Kalamkari workers, to train and upgrade their skill. Production was aimed for the domestic market as well as the foreign market. In tune with market demand, the traditional materials like jute, linen, heavy weight jute, silk blends, cotton lycra fabrics, were used.

Traditional symbolic and floral designs were used for the fashion conscious. The motifs included were mor (peacock), hamsa (goose), tota (parrot), kamal (lotus), kalga
(paisley), tree of life, gods and goddesses and narratives from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, geometric patterns and floral forms (Fig. 8.18).

The traditional colours of golden yellow female character, blue gods and red demons, were being replaced by new vibrant colour schemes that dictated prevailing fashion. One was able to see Kalamkari on bed-spreads, lamp shades, and dress materials.

8.8 Assignments

8.8.1 Class assignments

i) Draw and sketch the various motifs used in Kalamkari.

ii) Make a replica of Kalamkari.

8.8.2 Home assignments

i) Collect pictures of Kalamkari work that you can find from magazines, shops, and the internet, representing different styles we have covered in this class. Paste them neatly on clear pages with labels under each photo or picture.

8.9 Summing Up

Kalamakari is a 3000 years old hand painted and printed type of textile. It was born in Masulipatnam, a coastal city of Andhra Pradesh. From there it spread to various other places of which Sri Kalahasti near Tirupati is very famous. Thus two types of Kalamkari textile is recognized. Sri Kalahasti style and Masulipatnam style. Traditionally, the painting and printing is done by hand, using vegetables dyes. The colours used are very rich.

8.10 Possible Answers to Self-check Questions

1. Kalamkari originated in a village called Masulipatnam, 200 miles east of Hyderabad.

2. The word Kalamkari originated from the word kalam which means pen and kari meaning work. Kalamkari paintings were done using vegetable colours, depicting mythological scenes, floral motifs, tree of life, birds and animals etc.

3. Sri Kalahasti and Masulipatnam style are the two important styles of Kalamkari.

4. The colours used were deep red, black, indigo, green, yellow, dusty pink, brown and off-white.
5. Yellow colour is traditionally used for female figures in Kalamkari paintings.

8.11 Terminal Questions

1. What are the characteristics of Kalamkari textile?
2. How old is the Kalamkari textile?
3. What is mordanting?
4. What prompted block printing in Kalamkari textiles?
5. How is Addakamu different from original Kalamkari?

8.12 References and Suggested Further Reading


8.13 Glossary

1. Madder Mentally deranged
2. Testimony Evidence affirmation
3. Excavations Unearth buried objects
4. Antiquity Great age, ancient times
5. Chintz Printed cotton fabric with glazed finish
6. Dictated Ruled
7. Prevailing Commonly present