

# The Ancient Art of Kalamkari: Problems and Prospects with Special Reference to Pedana, Andhra Pradesh

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**Abstract:** *This article is a descriptive study on painted and printed textile tradition of Kalamkari units of Andhra Pradesh, using mordants and natural dyes. Initial representation of Kalamkari art was as religious paintings that depicted Indian Gods. Kalamkari started off during the Mughal dynasty and presently Andhra Pradesh is the largest producer of Kalamkari fabric. With the emergence of high quality machine looms and acceptance for printed textiles; Kalamkari art came on the verge of extinction. However, printed Kalamkari is a new craze among the current generation, as it is a combination of traditional and modern trends. Present research study examines brief history of Kalamkari Art and this article is an investigative in nature. Present study sheds some light on Kalamkari workers of pedana village. It is an attempt to reveals problems and prospects of Kalamkari workers in various aspects like change in production process or technology, marketing opportunities, availability of raw materials, infrastructure, environmental factors etc.*

**Keywords:** Kalamkari, painted textiles, block printing, pedana, Problems of Kalamkari workers

## 1. Introduction

Kalamkari is an ancient textile printing art that finds its roots in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Kalam implies pen and Kari means art a name given by the Mughals when they discovered the art during their reign over the Deccan region. Kalamkari is the art of drawing and painting with a bamboo pen using natural dyes. There are two main styles of Kalamkari. The block printed that is practiced in the town of Machilipatnam and the hand painted style that is largely practiced in the town of Srikalahasti. Present study is to bring some insights on Kalamkari units in a small village pedana near Machilipatnam city, Andhra Pradesh.

## 2. Research objectives

The research will be carried out with the following objectives

- To examine the history and growth of Kalamkari products.
- To examine the existing potential market and possible threats to Kalamkari units.
- To offer suggestions to policy makers and entrepreneurs.

## 3. Research Methodology

Present study is a descriptive and investigative in nature. Most of the data is collected from secondary sources like journals, articles, news reports, and Government reports.

## 4. Brief History of Kalamkari

The textile tradition in India is said to be more than 3000 years old. The Indian silks and brocades have been famous among the rich around the world but the simple Kalamkari on cotton made a wide impact and revolutionized the textile

trade in India in the 18th and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though the art of dye painting fabrics is known as an ancient tradition in India it is not certain as to when it all began but certain evidences revealed that the origins of the art were found in since 16<sup>th</sup> century.

Kalamkari gained popularity as a temple art in the south of India in the Kingdom of Vijaynagar. It flourished around Hindu temples as supplements for murals in the interiors of temples. At that time the themes were mainly religious. Minstrels would paint mythological figures on cloth and wander from place to place singing and spreading the word of God. It was a part of a popular cult and due to its vast rural base became a representative of the grass root culture of India.

Simultaneously the art of textile painting and printing also existed in western India in the states of Gujarat and Rajasthan. 'From contemporary trade records it appears that the principal cotton painting centres in the 16th and 17th century were Burhanpur in Khandesh, Sironj in Rajputana (now M.P), Agra, Petaboli and Palakollu on the Golconda sea board and certain towns like Kalahasti in hinterland of Madras.' Das (1992).

The interconnection of the western and deccan styles took place only later in the early 16th century when the Mughals subjugated the Vijaynagar Kingdom. The painting tradition did not have a specific name until the Sultans of Golconda discovered the art. They gave it the name Kalamkari, 'kalam' meaning pen and 'kari' implying art.

In the 17th century, Kalamkari saw a rise in demand from the Mughals, Persians, Dutch as well as the British. 'The Kalamkari fabrics of India with jewel bright colours, printed and painted in fascinating and intricate designs caught the fancy of women in England and France and became the fashion for daily wear.' Ramani (2007).

Volume 9 Issue 7, July 2020

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What attracted them the most was the 'brilliant colouring, undimmed by repeated washes, the light texture and drape of the fabric, and its strength and durability were a unique and unprecedented combination, rendering the cloths suitable for a variety of uses' Chisti & Jain (2000).

#### a) Downfall

'As early as 1670s complaints had started to be heard from English weavers about the influx of cotton from India, by 1696 dyers and linen drapers had joined the protest. 5000 English weavers mobbed the House of Commons in a mass protest against Indian imported goods. Finally in 1701 a law was passed forbidding the import of Indian dyed or printed cottons and silks into Britain, except for re-export.' Crill (2008).

This was the beginning of the downfall of Kalamkari. There are many other reasons why Kalamkari declined so drastically among all other fabric crafts of India. One of the early reasons was the establishment of the European cotton industry in the eighteenth century. Workers were thrown into punery and master craftsmen died without heir to their trade secrets. Also the rise of the batik industry in Indonesia in the 19th century leads to India's loss of market for the cloth. (Gillow and Barnard, 1991).

Dr. Bhatnagar (2011) opines "So clothed in ritual and superstition was this craft that for many years it was restricted to only a handful of practitioners and the technique was a closely guarded secret. Unfortunately many a traditional craftsman has taken this jealously guarded secret with him to his grave and no written records are available of the techniques employed and the colour yielding plants used by him in his work. This has been mainly responsible for the decline of this beautiful art form and we have now barely a dozen dye recipes in the place of over a hundred which existed before."

The period from 1924 up to Independence and beyond saw the near disappearance of the industry at Masulipatnam. At the same time at Kalahasti temple patronage declined and the local land lords lost wealth and power of patronage. In 1952 Kalamkari was revived at Masulipatnam at the instigation of some local textile lovers and with the help of the All India Handicrafts board. The Kalamkari as used and made in Iran was taken as model. In 1958 All India Handicraft board set up a training course and school for Kalamkari workers, drawing on skills of few remaining Kalamkari workers. (Gillow and Barnard, 1991)

While there is a lot of material on the history of the Kalamkari fabric and its evolution, the academic literature on the Kalamkari market and its current products is very scarce. The textile industry in India is one of the core sources of income for the economy. Rangarajan says "Textile industry is one of the main pillars holding the Indian Economy. It constitutes about 14 percent of industrial production, 20 percent of total export earnings, 4 percent of GDP and direct employment to an estimated 35 million people. In spite of these, India's entire share in the world textiles trade is still maintained at around 3 percent. Mills, power-looms and handlooms constitute three independent sectors of the Indian Textiles Industry."

#### b) About Pedana Kalamkari Work

Pedana is a small town just 13 km from Machilipatnam, the Krishna district headquarters in coastal Andhra Pradesh. This small place has carved a niche for itself with its own style—Kalamkari block printing. Over 1,200 artisan families in pedana survive on making vegetable dyes, blocks and printing of 25 distinctive Kalamkari textiles, including bedsheets, lungis, kerchiefs, curtains, Punjabi suits and sarees. Kalamkari has got rich heritage from ages by making various products in different styles. Most of the units are small and labour intensive. These units are providing employment to women and youth of pedana.

Materials used in making Kalamkari:

Cotton Cloth

Indigo Blue

Alzarin

Anar

A solution of alum, tamarind and Indian madder root

Pobbaku

Ventilago Madraspatana Gartan (Surudu Chekka)

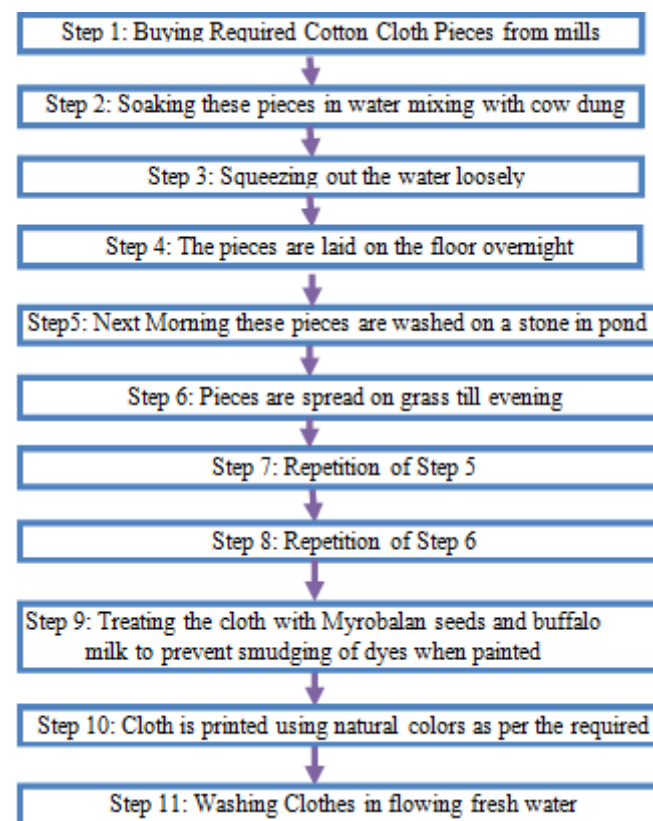
Myrobalan

Mango Bark and Pomegranate

According to sources, Hand block-printed Kalamkari is a tedious and time-consuming process involving a minimum of 10 steps. Important steps in making Kalamkari are:

#### 5. Problems of Kalamkari Units:

The Kalamkari art provides employment to thousands of people, not only to artisans but also designers, activists etc. But the drawback is that the industry is quite unorganized since it is cottage based and decentralized. Kalamkari units in pedana are also no exception. They are also facing plethora of problems, which are:



- Lack of design, innovation and technology up gradation.
- Highly fragmented industry.
- Unstructured and individualized production systems.
- Lack of strong umbrella sector organizations.
- Limited capitalization and low investment.
- Insufficient market information on export trends, opportunities and prices.
- Limited access to credit.
- Limited resources for production, distribution and marketing.
- Limited e-commerce competence among producer groups.
- Lack of adequate infrastructure, absence of latest technology

Along with these issues, some external factors are also affected the units in pedana:

- Increasing threat from imitative designs.
- Decreasing supply of good quality raw material.
- Lack of quality standardization process.
- Declining investment in the sector (largely in the developed economies) and increasing consumer sophistication.
- Absence of institutional support.
- High freight costs associated with air cargo and shipment.
- High cost of production.

There is a clear evident that demand for pedana Kalamkari units have been declining for last couple of decades, but there is a ray of hope for the revival of the units due to the uniqueness of the concept of Kalamkari work.

Strength of Kalamkari units in various aspects is:

- Availability of unique local raw materials e.g. natural fibers, bamboo, cane, etc.
- Rich and diversified culture producing wide range of unique and exclusive products.
- Strong existing pool of skilled artisans.
- Wide range of traditional production skills derived from indigenous knowledge.
- High potential for empowerment of women, youth and people with disabilities.
- Low production costs
- Increasing emphasis on product development and design up gradation.
- Rising demand in domestic and traditional market.
- Rising appreciation by consumers in the developed countries.
- Government support and interest in preserving the craft.
- Emerging markets in Latin America, North America and European countries.
- Fair trade practices.
- Increasing flow of tourists provide market for products.

## 6. Government and Institutional Support to Kalamkari Units

Governments have been extending their support to Kalamkari Units with respect to finance, subsidies, Exhibitions, trade shows, Export promotion activities etc. Few important schemes are:

- Baba Saheb Ambedkar Hastshilp Vikas Yojana

- Marketing Support and Service Scheme
- Design and Technology Up gradation Scheme
- Export Promotion Scheme
- Research and Development Scheme
- Training and Extension Scheme
- Bima Yojana for Handicrafts Artisans
- Special Handicrafts Training Projects

These schemes are introduced and implemented for the entire handicraft segment. These supporting schemes have turned useful for Kalamkari artisans also to certain extent but the measures are not enough to bring smiles on the faces of artisans. The niche sector is expecting more encouragement from the Government to continue the unique artistic textile culture and for making available the same to future generations.

## 7. Exports of Kalamkari Products

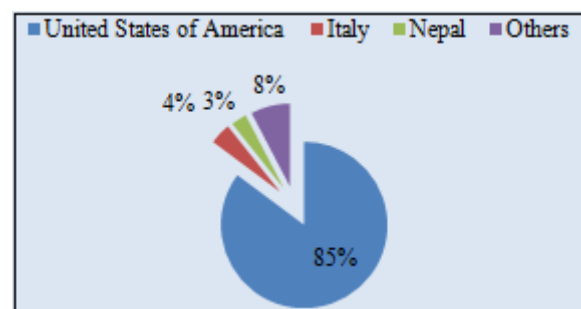
As per the available data, imports of Kalamkari to United States are more profitable, followed by Republic of Korea and Singapore. Below table illustrates the averages prices of Kalamkari products in these countries.

**Table 1:** Average prices of Kalamkari products in top export countries

S.No.	Name of the Country	Average Prices (in Dollars)
1	Unites States of America	23000
2	Republic of Korea	15000
3	Singapore	278.11

Source: <https://www.voleba.com/india/product-kalamkari-exports-data.html>

United States of America, Nepal and Italy are the leading importers of product Kalamkari from India with a market share of 85 percent, 8 percent and 4 percent respectively.



**Chart 1:** Export Market share of Kalamkari Products

Source: <https://www.voleba.com/india/product-kalamkari-exports-data.html>

United States of America, Italy, Nepal, Republic of Korea and Singapore are the fastest growing importers of Kalamkari from India. Other exports markets include UK, France, Germany, Japan and UAE.

**Chart 2:** List of Countries show a healthy growth in Kalamkari exports from India

S.No.	Name of the Destination Country	Growth Rate
1	United States of America	85.20
2	Italy	4.11
3	Nepal	3.03
4	Republic of Korea	2.70
5	Singapore	1.86

Source: <https://www.voleba.com/india/product-kalamkari-exports-data.html>

## 8. Major concerns and Suggestions to Policy Makers & Kalamkari Entrepreneurs:

- **Marketing network of Kalamkari:** Absence of systematic marketing network has been a discouraging factor in the Kalamkari segment. The artisans must be organized by themselves under the co-operative umbrella for marketing their products by themselves. For this more and more linkages must be developed with outside parties.
- **Tourism-Centred crafts:** For the crafts culture to be appropriately propagated and its commercial potential duly explored, development of tourism can go in tandem with the development of crafts. There is a great deal of scope for craft-centered tourism possibilities to be explored.
- **Strict registration norms** for ancient Kalamkari work to reduce imitated items.
- **Design registration of Kalamkari:** Design registration of Kalamkari should be done. That means whatever designs any artisan has introduced on any item should be registered. Then no one can copy it.
- **Price uniformity in Kalamkari:** The prices of Kalamkari products are very much erratic and not uniform. There is significant difference in prices of the same item if purchase from two shops or from two places. In this situation the customer feels very much exploited and harassed. This might have very bad repercussion on the demand of the products. Pricing of the product should depend on categorization of art in each craft, skill exhibited and quality of raw materials.
- **More Research and Development in Kalamkari:** For improving the quality of the products Research and Development is a must. Many more new items and new designs can be developed with the help of Research and Development. Environmental problems need to be addressed. European nations are sensitive to toxin substance, e.g., azo dyes in textile crafts. Child labour is, no doubt, another emotive issue. Environment friendly packaging and general social and hygienic conditions are other important facets. These aspects can well be converted into opportunities as a conscious and aggressive campaign to enhance the acceptability of Indian products among affluent consumers susceptible to these considerations. Environment and conservation need to be woven into the concept.
- **Role of technology:** Product innovation and improvements in design as well as manufacturing technologies occur in the formal sector of economy on a routine basis. In the case of the informal sector, the concept of product innovation remains subdued. With an introduction of modern technologies of design and product innovation, the change is necessary in informal sector so

that the economy can be uplifted.

**Value Addition in Kalamkari:** The various specialized organization, like Development Commissioner (Handicrafts and textiles), may help the local units to produce various value added items which would not only help to penetrate the local market, but also help in exporting of such items to foreign countries.

**Window Display of Kalamkari products:** In whatever possible manner, all the promotional and marketing organization, must display the local items in various airports, railway stations, bus stands, commercial centers, etc. This will help the local artisans to get more orders from foreign tourists, traders, marketing organization etc. Window display is emerging as the new mantra in retail and is fast changing from a dull, uninteresting exhibition of wares to a dynamic form of advertising. Retailers are recognizing the importance of window display as the first point of contact between the store and the customer and a chance to create the most critical first impression on the customer. Developed countries look at window display as a critical tool of marketing; however, in India, it is still an emerging concept. Done properly, window display can attract the right kind of customers to undertake impulse buying under the influence of attractive window display.

**Positioning of Kalamkari products:** Kalamkari products, which are produced with traditional skill, are gradually facing competition from machine made products, which give greater uniformity and better finish. For large number of Kalamkari items, there have been neither substitutes nor competition from any significant entrant into the field. Thus, suppliers, new entrants and substitute products do not appear to be significant factors in the strategic positioning of typical Kalamkari design.

## 9. Conclusion

Kalamkari is such a product that when a buyer likes it, he is prepared to pay a price, which may be far in excess of the standard price of the product. The prime consideration is his liking of the product. Channel agents, such as middlemen, retailer or distributor try to capitalize on such possibilities and earn significant profit almost wholly at the cost of the craftsmen. Kalamkari product may be categorized on the basis of price, export on domestic market, ease of maintenance, ease of storage, utility value or decorative value and modernity or traditional orientation. Besides, it is necessary for like-minded institutions to come together to provide the strategic direction and action plans to evolve systems. Procedure and norms related to design, market, technology, innovation and quality of life so that product designs, technology and marketing become integral part of the craft up gradation and repositioning process. The sector has, however, suffered due to its being unorganized, with the additional constraints of lack of education, low capital, and poor exposure to new technologies, absence of market intelligence, and a poor institutional framework. However Indian unique art of Kalamkari has great growth potential in the changing scenario with its basic strength being the abundant and cheap availability of manpower and being a traditional profession of thousands still requires very low



investment compared with other countries.

Present Research Paper is a part of an ICSSR sponsored project work titled "Problems and prospects of Kalamkari units in Machilipatnam - A study with reference to selected villages practicing Kalamkari art in Machilipatnam, Krishna District, Andhra Pradesh, India".

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Volume 9 Issue 7, July 2020

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