

A Survey on the Awareness of Past and Present Practices of Machilipatnam Kalamkari

Ms. Thadepalli Srivani¹, Dr. Sundervel Amsamani²

(Associate Professor & Center Coordinator)

¹Department of Fashion Technology National Institute of Fashion Technology (NIFT),
Hyderabad 500081, TS

²Professor, Department of Textiles & Clothing Avinashilingam Institute for Home Science and
Higher Education for Women Avinashilingam University, Coimbatore 641043, TN

Abstract

The Traditional Block printed Textile Industry of India involves Craftsmen with intrinsic traditional wisdom of Natural Dyeing and Hand Block Printing using indigenous and eco-friendly substances. The port town Machilipatnam/ Masulipatnam of Krishna district is known as the birthplace of the heritage craft Kalamkari, practiced since the 15th Century. The craft is slowly getting transitioned to the use of synthetic dyes and screen printing with pigments causing hazardous effluent and adverse environmental impacts. An attempt was made to highlight the distinguishing features Machilipatnam Kalamkari, the changes and evolution that the craft has experienced under the influence of modern urban markets as the artisans attempt to shift from sustainable craft tradition.

Although Craft is independent of the ever-changing fashion trends, the availability of resources and craftsmen to revive traditional art/clothing is declining. This is, thereby, turning time-honoured craft Kalamkari and its styles into mere history.

A survey was conducted with the master craftsmen who are into block printing of the Kalamkari cluster of Andhra Pradesh including Machilipatnam, Polavaram, Pedana, Kappaldoddi, Guduru and also block makers of that region. However the data collected from Master craftsmen and in few cases their family members, who are continuing the profession next to them had lent scope to know their awareness of craft in the past and present, their concerns and vision for the sustenance of craft. The results and findings of the survey emphasises the need for reviving the traditional craft of Kalamkari and re-establishing the skilled craft communities.

Key words: Handicrafts, Block Printing, Kalamkari, Craft practices, Craft revival

Introduction

India has had a rich cultural heritage with indigenous skillsets of craftsmen from times immortal and hand-spun and hand woven textiles as well as hand painting, hand printing and hand processing of handloom cloths were amongst the crafts that were perfected by the Indian crafts persons. Skill acquisition comes not through formal schooling but through experience gained by crafts people over long years from early on in life learning nuances of the craft from the home environment (Venkateswara Rao 2011).

Better known among these hand woven and hand printing craft forms that had brought laurels to India was the Kalamkari Industry of Masulipatnam. The distinctive feature of Kalamkari printed textiles was the use of plant and mineral based dyes particularly madder. With its pre historic Persian links motifs such as *Butti*, *Paisely cone* and the *Mihrab* which eventually precipitated to block work around mid 19th century (Gwande 2017 and Gillow 2008). Today a great deal has changed in the dyeing process of Machilipatnam. Alizarin used in place of organic matter, Indigo dyeing has been almost given up, as has been the use of Kalam to apply wax resist (Sethna 1985). According to a recent account, Kalamkari units of varying sizes employ approximately 4000 people in the cluster, with Pedana being a local hub of screen printing using pigments and chemicals to go for bulk production and a quick turnover (Edwards 2016).

Though the craft was contemporised in several ways owing to its acceptance by the young generation and also by the consumer who is price conscious, recently, with the markets flooded with cheaper imitations of block printed Kalamkari produced using screens and pigments followed by drop in demand, perhaps will be the next on the list for losing its popularity and usage. However, several Indian fashion designers are coming together now to bring this immortal art back to the fore. In this paper, an attempt was made to conduct survey the Master craftsmen to know their awareness on present status of the craft to suggest suitable interventions needed. Structured interviews are conducted as they are twice as effective as unstructured interviews. Open ended questions allow people to express what they think in their own words (Kumar 2011). Qualitative analysis is one of the best methods of research which provides depth and detail by analysing things more than just numbers and sizes. Hence data was analysed qualitatively for further interpretation. The results and findings of the survey emphasises the need for reviving the traditional craft of *Kalamkari* and re-establishing the skilled craft communities.

Objectives

To Check the awareness of Master craftsmen regarding the past glory of the craft, which followed sustainable production practices and the sense of privilege they hold for the profession they are into. To evaluate if they are conscious about the present day practices leading to environmental pollution and gradual loss of traditional knowledge / Intellectual property.

To derive alternative practices / interventions suitable for the available craft resources at present for sustenance of the craft.

Hypothesis

1. All master craftsmen are aware of the changes that took place over a period of last 5 to 10 years in the craft cluster
2. The master craftsmen played a major role in building craft awareness and training young generations
3. Master craftsmen can best reveal the speciality of Machilipatnam Kalamkari in comparison to other block prints of India

Methodology

A sample of eleven Master Craftsmen of Block printed *Kalamkari*, who are also members of the "Vegetable Hand Block *Kalamkari* Printers Welfare Association, Krishna Dt. of Andhra Pradesh were chosen for the study out of the population of master craftsmen distributed in the established geographical areas of *Kalamkari* production. This include *Machilipatnam(MP)* town and surrounding villages namely *Pedana (PD)*, *Guduru(GD)*, *Polavaram(PL)* and *Kappal doddi(KP)* and also *Chirala* of *Prakasham* Dt. The study was a result of several field visits undertaken and also documentation of the craft as it is practiced in their units, which contribute a major share of *Kalamkari* production. Though the extent of the survey is three fold with the responses collected from Master craftsmen(MC) including block printers(BP), block makers(BM) and next generation practitioners(MCF). For uniformity, this paper excludes the responses of block makers (BM) in the analysis of awareness regarding past and present status of the craft.

The method of research is exploratory. Structured Interview was chosen as a method of data collection and Interview schedule was used as an instrument or tool for primary data collection as it was a researcher administered survey involving personal interaction. An in depth interaction was undertaken with major focus on understanding the present status of the craft (Post GI) in terms of its continuation of practice of *Kalamkari* in its traditional / sustainable form to propose required interventions for the sustenance of craft.

Qualitative analysis (QI A) was preferred for in depth reasoning and quality of results. The data was classified into keywords /patterns in order to assess responses and conclude results. The data used was in the text form. However, the in-depth knowledge of the investigator on research area supported efficient interpretation of results. Simple statistical tools like mean and Mode are used for evaluation and the results were presented in percentages wherever feasible.

Findings and Discussion

Master Craftsmen and their awareness regarding the past and present status of the craft:

Roots of learning: The senior most master craftsmen of the cluster had their roots of learning from the gurus like Ponnuru Purushotham and Rekapalli Parthasarathi, who were master craftsmen then at Balyalagudem Cooperative Society, established in the year 1960s and existed till 1980 at Machilipatnam. Dr. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, Advisory Chairman of All India Handicraft board had contributed immensely for the revival of block printed *Kalamkari* craft post-Independence. All master craftsmen of *Kalamkari* cluster belong to weavers' community and their fathers and forefathers practiced handlooms on which later block prints were employed. The next generation learnt from the present master craftsmen and from the training offered by Weavers Service Center (WSC), Vijayawada.

Experience of Master craftsmen in the cluster:

Table No 1: Experience of Master Craftsmen in the Machilipatnam *Kalamkari* Cluster

Experience of Master Craftsmen is ranging from 8 to 52 years. With only one crafts men from

Experience in Craft (in Yrs.)	5-15	16-25	26-35	35 & Above
No. of Craftsmen	1	2	6	2

the next generation and 2 are senior most who are former presidents of Vegetable Hand block Printers Welfare Association, Pedana, Krishna Dt. More than 50% of the craftsmen served the Craft for 26-35 years.

Significance of craft to the artisan: The craftsmen affirmed that the craft signifies only as an article of sale and not a religious, ritual or group social activity for the artisans involved.

Changes observed over a period of time (past 5/10 years): In an attempt made to know the awareness of Master craftsmen who had an experience ranging from 20 to 30 years in the

journey of practicing Kalamkarit, the survey revealed the following observations pertaining to the changes which took place in craft over a period of last 5 to 10 years. The analysis of responses reveals that almost 50 % of the master craftsmen expressed painting technique which was mainly practiced in Kalamkari is completely not followed now and hence considered as extinct. Also the main ingredient 'Tumma Jiguru' natural gum used as a thickener in printing paste earlier has now lost its existence. To some extent, the use of live vat, Mixing of milk while myrobalan treatment, Use of wax for resist, Elaborate practices of the past in fabric preparation, printing, dyeing and washing, Design innovation and use of varied natural coloured backgrounds in the block printed merchandise are also not seen in the present day practices.

The survey also reveals that the practices of using cow dung for kora fabric preparation, boiling of gum, use of manjistha, hand block printing, final treatment with alum and other time taking traditional practices are slowly disappearing. In place of disappearing practices, screen printing, use of pigments and chemical substitutions in second colour prints, use of alternative mordant, contemporary designs and use of a variety of fabrics in printing process are fast evolving replacing the past practices. However, Block printing, Block making, use of cotton fabrics, boiling with natural dyes, bed sheets as main items of production remained stable

Distinguishing features of Machilipatnam Kalamkari in comparison to other traditional block prints of India: The distinguishing characteristics of Kalamkari in comparison to other traditional block prints of India tend to be use of Persian stylised florals and creepers with specific style of saw toothed outlines, Use of figurative motifs like peacocks, elephants, birds and mango motifs, Use of limited variety of natural mordants and dyes for all over coloured backgrounds and prints with no practice of Butis.

Identity of Master Craftsmen in practicing specific style of Kalamkari in the cluster: In another attempt made to understand the areas of work the traditional craftsman feel privileged for knowing and having practiced in the craft for several decades for which they are well known, they threw limelight on their respective specialisations in producing Mehrabs (Fig.1), Tree of life panels (Fig 2), printing on carpets, using traditional process of printing, using a variety of fabrics and raw material of good quality, Quality and clarity of prints and printing on white backgrounds. They affirmed those as their favourite items to make.

Trainings offered in traditional block printing method: All master craftsmen have trained their family members, artisans, visitors from various institutions and also taken up training under Govt. schemes. They further responded that they are looking forward to train many more from younger generations in the future.



Figure 2: Tree of life

Figure 3: Nachu Mamidi kaya

Aspects of Kalamkari craft that are hard to achieve: With respect to the awareness of master craftsmen regarding the aspects of traditional kalamkari which are difficult to achieve, majority of them opined that the intricate and elaborate motifs of *Tree of Life* wall hangers (Fig.2), Machilipatnam *Mihrabs* used on doorways/ curtain panels (Fig.1), '*nachu maamidi kaya*'- an intricately patterned Mango motif with floral twines (Fig.3), *Pandu / Dhoni stambham* one-way motifs used in borders, creation of *floral sprays in chakra*, *square and diamond shapes* in bed sheet printing, maintaining consistency in colour/print quality of yardage goods and Reproducibility in any piece of work are considered to be time taking in the process of production of traditional Kalamkari. **Concerns on present status of Kalamkari production as detailed by Master craftsmen:** Though the artisans feel that the use of geometric contemporary motifs in multi colours, Screen printing, use of pigments in second colour printing, direct printing on whites are not suitable for Kalamkari, they are taking up

production owing to the current market needs. They also pointed out their dislike towards their own practices of production at a fast pace which affects quality.

During the interaction, senior master craftsmen have expressed their concern over the unethical practices followed by other craftsmen like use of screens, pigments and chemical alternatives to dyes and mordants, skipping of steps for faster production, use of inferior quality of raw material and fabrics, copying of designs stating that they pose an unhealthy competition at craft cluster.

Importance of continuing the craft tradition: The craftsmen proclaimed that Kalamkari is a Traditional craft, which is inherited from their family provided livelihood to many artisans who are directly or indirectly associated with the activities of the craft supporting their survival. Kalamkari being a unique craft of India signifying our art of sustainable production it has to be treasured and should not be allowed for extinction. They further explained that younger generations not taking craft further owing to the laborious and time taking processes may pose a threat to its survival.

The best giveback for the craft in the words of Master craftsmen: According to them, their best giveback for the craft would be by practicing the craft continuously honouring traditional process of production without ignoring any threats possible to the motherland in the process of its production, training the young and new generations with respect to the livelihood that it offers. The craftsmen deliberated the need for the craft to be taken to a global scale by making Kalamkari as a household item abroad to bring back the previous glory.

Awards received: The *Machilipatnam Mehrab* created by Master Artisan Late. Sri. P. M. Eswarudu and his father Late. Sri. Nageswara Rao for the Festival of India in 1982 is a Masterpiece of Kalamkari. He had received UNESCO excellent award in 2008 for Kalamkari gold painted Mehrab and also a Lifetime achievement award by Craft Council of Telangana in 2017. Mr. Vinnakota V.V. Surendrakumar had received a State award in 2014 given by Lepakshi for bedsheets produced by him. Mr. Metla Durga Nageswar Rao Received Best artisan, Best supplier and Best producer awards from Sri Lanka Govt. and honorary Doctorate from SIPA, South Indian Producers Association, India. Many of their clients in the US and Europe received best collection of fabrics and textiles awards for the items supplied by them through buyers.

What makes a good Kalamkari fabric?

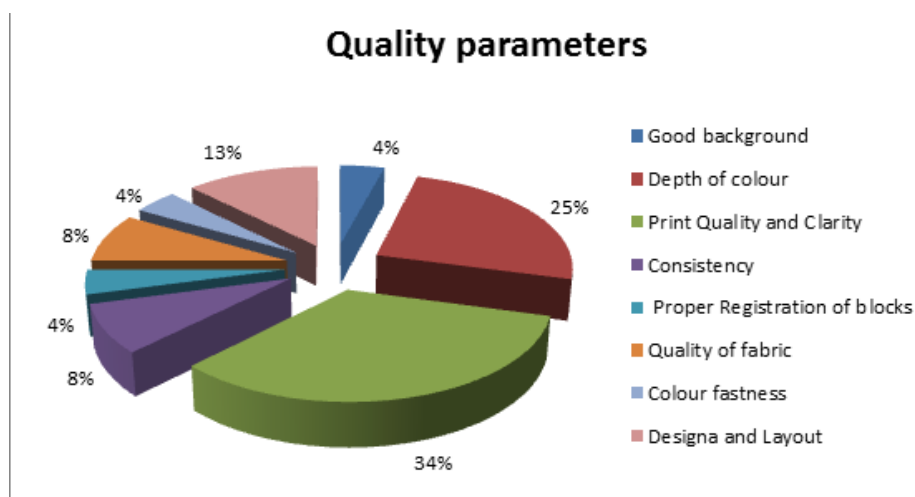


Figure 4: Parameters for judging quality of Block printed Kalamkari fabric

The master craftsmen of the cluster explained the parameters based on which a piece of Kalamkari can be judged for its quality (Fig.4). 34% of the responses stressed on the importance of Clarity and quality of print followed by 25% mentioning the need for depth of shade or colour strength. Design and layout representing 13%, Quality of Fabric and Consistency 8% each and the remaining responses include parameters like good background, colour fastness and proper registration of blocks.

Summary

Out of 11 master craftsmen it is found that almost all craftsmen inherited the art of Kalamkari from their ancestors and regard it as their tradition and occupation. All craftsmen are found to have rich experience in the traditional craft practices. It was observed that the respondents are quite aware of the past practices which are now extinct and also about the disappearing. It was discouraging to note that the craftsmen witnessed the evolution of contemporary practices like use of screens, pigments, chemicals and several other deviations to the printing and dyeing processes all for the sake of easier and faster production. The distinguishing features limited only to this craft earlier continued to exist even till date. The awareness of painstaking efforts in achieving master pieces of art can instil confidence in the young generation for the revival of the craft legacy.

Conclusion & Implications

It is evident from the study that the commercial aspects of craft are dominating over the traditional practices which are in turn affecting the quality of craft. If proper support and awareness is inculcated through practical demonstrations, trainings and exhibition of rare collections with focus on product diversification productivity can be enhanced. Design and technology intervention can uplift the confidence in new generation to accept family profession. The master craftsmen seem to have less exposure to craft related websites, magazines and online marketing which is a key factor in today's success. Hence, specific training in these areas is need of the hour. Last but not the least, the reason for the less patronage to take up this exquisite handicraft forward, proper recognition and encouragement through awards by Government and non- Government agencies is highly recommended.

Suggestions For Future Research

1. Similar survey can be taken up with the job workers at craft cluster who work for the orders that they receive from Master craftsmen or marketing agents who are not part of the craft activity
2. A consumer survey can be taken up to evaluate their awareness and preference of traditional and contemporary block prints of Kalamkari
3. A retail market survey can be conducted to see the range of options available for consumers to buy from traditional and contemporary print styles

References

1. Barnard, N., & Gillow, J. (2014). *Indian textiles*, London: Thames & Hudson, pp 198-202
2. Edwards, E.,(2016), *Block Printed Textiles of India- IMPRINTS of Culture*, Niyogi Books, New Delhi, India pp 93-109
3. Gwande, A.,(2017), *Designs from Indian Textiles Chintz- Kalamkari*, StoryMirror Infotech Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, India, pp 9-13
4. Kumar, R., (2011), *Research Methodology, a step by step guide to beginners*, 3rd edition, Sage publications, London.
5. Nelly, H., Sethna (1985). *Living Traditions of India: Kalamkari*: Mapin International, pp 9-13
6. Venkateswara Rao, A., (2011). *The Kalamkari Industry of Masulipatnam*, Rao's Books (Regd.) Hyderabad, pp 142-168