

# *Song of Kalamkari*

*In search of the golden hue in Kalamkari*

*Meera Curam*

South Central Zone Cultural Centre, Nagpur  
Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India

# *Credits*

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All the master artisans at Syamala Kalamkari

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*Meera Curam*

*In silence I seek you, watch you in awe as you emerge...*



## Foreword

Kalamkari, as the word denotes is an art of drawing and painting with pen. Kalamkari is a term used for both block printing and hand painting on textiles using natural materials to dye the fabric. Kalamkari is much in demand at one level, least understood on the other; this book is a timely reminder to appreciate Kalamkari processes and artists. As more modern processes begin to override the traditional methods, this book articulates why we need to understand the roots of our cultural creativity.

Meera Curam, an artist and textile designer, and artistic director of Studio Azure, currently faculty at Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology brings a wealth of understanding to this beautiful form. Through her narrative, she raises critical ideas about sustainability in these natural dyed fabrics. She also brings a philosophical inquiry to colour, residing in the shades of yellow that give life to all the other colors in the Kalamkari palette. Meera's voice is unique in the documentation of Kalamkari as she brings together nature, sustainability, techniques, landscapes, culture and living masters together in her book. Her insights are rich into this unique cultural and creative process and add to the literature on Kalamkari, opening new avenues for students and other researches to inquire further into this art form. As the chapter on living masters makes it evident, Kalamkari is in need of young people to take it forward into the future. This book talks gently to young readers inviting them to engage with the cultural richness of this textile form providing them directions and roadmaps to begin new journeys.

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Dr. Piush Kumar,  
Director  
December 2016

History has it that many an affluent society in the Occident and Orient alike had per force to lose track of glorious traditions of craft forms that they were home to earlier in the wake of Industrial Revolution / in the mire of civilization. The good news is that India is one country that could withstand the onslaughts of such a fall out and preserve quite a few time-honoured traditional crafts which won her laurels from far-off lands in the bygone eras, thanks to popular patronage and the sheer spender of impeccable skills handed down for centuries past as a faithful tradition from father to son that such crafts are imbued with. And, notable amongst such crafts is the KALAMKARI industry as obtaining even to this day in the port town of Masulipatam and the temple town of Sri Kalahasti -both situated in the Andhra country in south India. While the former represents eye-catching designs block-printed, the latter represents narrative panels painstakingly drawn through free hand drawing. However both have two things in common, viz. use of vegetable dyes and maintaining same steps in the process of cloth production which are ancestral.

The past glory of this craft is such that through export of its products to the Moluccas in South-east Asia which through barter fetched the much sought-after spices to Europe where they came in handy for preserving meat during the long winter months. What is more, the Arab and European markets were being flooded with our kalamkari cloth to such an extent that the British Parliament was led to pass the 'Calico Act' in 1721 restricting its import for protecting its native textile industry. Sadly, as nemesis would have it, the industry suffered many blows at the hands of British India Government resulting in quite some decadence. Nonetheless, untiring and dedicated efforts made by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Pupul Jayakar, Martand Singh, Nelly Sethna, Vinnakota Venkataswamy, Gurappa Chetty, besides a host of others, bore fruit in post-Independence India with the industry getting a fresh lease of life. A new generation of producers and exporters of kalamkari cloth emerged in the past years who are nation's pride for they are keeping the flag flying through continuous production and marketing of kalamkari

products suiting the modern market needs based on consumer preferences catering to domestic needs as well as those of the sophisticated clientèle overseas. The demand for these products from across the country as well as from foreign countries is ever on the increase. Now the world knows better as to why India for long was known to be home for coveted cloth production historically and this gives a satisfying finality to both the country and the artisans involved.

I am all praise for the author inasmuch as she brought the craft come alive in words and pictures through her creative approach. More particularly her going the extra mile to have a deeper insight into the past of the craft and culling information about its present status is laudable. The presentation is lucid and interest-generating besides containing all significant details about the industry.

I do hope and trust that this monumental work will not miss the attention of researchers, academics and connoisseurs of art the world over for the valuable information it contains on the subject. The book, for sure, will serve as a dependable 'Reference Source' for all 'Interest Groups', with the cloth producers, marketeers and Government not excluded.

Hyderabad  
AKURATHI VENKATESWARA RAO  
31.12.2016

*Akurathi Venkateswara Rao is the Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland (London). Born, as son of a traditional hand-weaver, his interests chiefly lie in the life and work of handcraft persons and traditional artisans. He was awarded Ph.D by Osmani University for his dissertation on the Kalamkari industry of Masulipatam. He was a senior executive in The Andhra Pradesh State Handloom Weavers' Co-operative Society Limited. He has also headed a team of consultants working on the evaluate of the impact of Government's handloom development schemes during the years 2006-07, 2007-08*

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## Making through the seasons

From time immemorial the traditional practices have followed a rhythm in tune with nature and surrounding. They observed and learnt from nature. In the traditional knowledge system there is a calendar for the farmer to follow the pattern of climate to plan his agricultural practices. Similarly an artisan follows a method wherein he/she works with the local materials, knowledge systems and processes. For example a natural dyeing method needs certain amount of time to develop, by hurrying one will not get the result. While observing the master dyers and printers, I found that the artisan learns to slow down according to the materials, he/she is so sensitive and intuitive that he/she does not interfere with time or the space required by the material to develop into a colour. It is alive, sacred and needs to be nurtured carefully. In this age of globalization where local slowly takes a backseat where the exact shade has to be produced batch after batch, where do we pause!

Right: Pond for washing the fabrics, Polavaram





On the way to Sri Kalahasti



On the way to Canal for washing, Pedana



Canal at Pedana



Canal at Pedana



Washing in progress at the Canal



Laying of the fabrics for drying



Fabrics drying after the Red colour development



Fabrics drying after colour development



Fields on the way to Pedana

When her search brought her to Rukminidevi Arundale's Kalakshetra, it was a student there who identified it as Kalamkari from Sri Kalahasti. She then went with the student to Sri Kalahasti and met few Kalamkari artists who were no longer practising the art. She took personal interest and built a team of interested individuals to promote and bring the finest Kalamkari fabrics back into vogue in the sixties.

It is to Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay's passionate belief in artistic heritage and the philosophy behind it that we owe the great renaissance of the crafts in the post-Independence era as well as the resurgence of pride in all things Indian. She tracked down Jonnalagadda Lakshmiah, father of Gurappa Chetty, Sri Kalahasti. She helped them to set up a Kalamkari Training centre at Sri Kalahasti. Unfortunately Lakshmiah passed away in one and half year's time. Munikrishnaiah took over as the main artisan training others. Initially there were five people who were trained. The training centre ran two-year programme and trained a number of artisans. The Training centre no longer exists, but current artisans train a large number of interested skilled, semi skilled artisans in the art of Kalamkari. Today there are a large number of artisans engaged in creating Kalamkari artworks on wall panels, sarees, dupattas, bed linen and many more articles. There are very few who can draw the human figures, and while many are skilled in developing colours, they are dependent on those few to plan and compose the main figures.

Right: Kalamkari fabric at Salar Jung Musuem

Left: Kalamkari fabric at Salar Jung Musuem

Right: Kalamkari fabric at Salar Jung Musuem





Block printing unit



Fabrics ready for Myrobalan application



Myrobalan paste



Filtering the Myrobalan solution



Fabrics soaking in Myrobalan solution



Fabrics soaking in Myrobalan solution



Myrobalan Application



Fabrics drying in sun



Printing tray



Khasimi or the black dye



Khasimi or black outline printing on Myrobalan treated fabric



Washing the fabric after the printing of outline



Black outline printed fabric



Alizarin



Alizarin dye



Boiling with Alizarin and jeedi leaves



Development of red colour



Development of red colour



Drying of fabric post development of colour



Final shade of colour after drying



Indigo printing



Indigo printing in progress



Final printed fabric



Washing of the fabric after printing

dry completely; if the fabric is not completely dry, bubbles will form on it. As the print will be uneven the bubbles will be visible.

3. Outline printing of the pattern with Khasimi, (iron acetate) solution: Fabrics are washed in running water and agitated to remove the gum.

4. Alum solution as a mordant is applied on the areas where the colour red is required. Alum is painted till the crystals are visible and it is then gently washed to remove the excess alum. Otherwise the colour red will spread unevenly. Second stage dark colours are printed and washed and boiled for the colour development.

5. The cloth is kept for 24 hours to allow the mordant to settle completely onto the fabric.

6. The next process is a gentle process, where excess mordant is washed gently in flowing water, if any excess mordant is left back, the colour red will develop in unwanted areas.

7. Water is heated up to 70 degrees in a copper vessel and the cloth boiled with any of the red colouring material along with the Jeedi leaves (the leaves help to develop the colour red and works as a fixer of the colour). Some of these materials are Chavalkodi, Surutichakka, Sapanwood (manjishta) or Alizarin. Iron vessels are avoided as they

can spoil the colour. Alizarin is used to obtain a range of reds. Earlier, they were using Chayroot, the Madder root to achieve deep red, peach, pink and shades of orange colour.

8. Earlier, care was taken to ensure that the portions to be printed blue were painted with wax. Nowadays most of the units print Indigo mixed with the natural gum directly wherever required. If wax is applied, then the fabric is immersed in Indigo vat to dye the colour blue. The wax is removed by boiling the cloth in hot water. Rice flour is mixed with hot water, stirring continuously to remove lumps, hydros is added with caustic soda and fine powdered indigo (from the Indigo cakes) and mixed thoroughly to form a good consistency for printing.

9. The yellows are painted or printed on white and blue to obtain yellow and green.

10. The fabric is washed thoroughly to remove any excess colour or gum.

For the white colour on the cloth, the fabric is washed in milk and water and left under the sun to bleach. The milk reacts with the sun to achieve a bright white cloth.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> As explained by Pichuka Srinivas , Mukkanti and Nageshwara Rao



Final washing at the unit



Final Printed Fabric



Final washing of fabric in the canal

# Carving of the wooden blocks

Gangadhar Narasaiah Private Ltd.



Master Block maker Gangadhar at work



Teak wood pieces for the blocks



Planing of the wood



Marking on the wood using Calipers



Marking on the Plutonium and Fevicol coated wood



Detail of the pattern on the wood



Setting of the design



Tools for the carving of the block



Block making in progress



Tools for carving



Block making in progress



Blocks soaking in oil



Outline block



Carved blocks ready for printing



# Kalamkari process practised at Sri Kalahasti

Demonstration at CERC, Kalakshetra Foundation



Unbleached cloth



Unbleached cloth is boiled to remove the starch



Milk and Myrobalan



Milk and myrobalan



Fabric soaked in Milk and Myrobalan



Squeezing the myrobalan from fabric



Spreading the fabric for drying



Myrobalan treated fabric drying



Outline with Tamarind charcoal



Outline drawing with Khasimi



Application of Alum for red colour development



Surutichakka and Palash flowers



Boiling with Surutichakka and Jeedi leaves



Red colour development



Red Colour



Application of Colour yellow



Colour yellow for Green



Indigo vat



Application of Indigo on yellow for Green colour



Application of Indigo for Blue



Completed painting



1. Unbleached Cotton cloth



2. Washed Cotton cloth



3. Treated with Myrobalan and Milk



4. Drawing with Charcoal



5. Outline painted in Khasimi (Black)



6. Alum for the background



7. Alum cloth washed in flowing water



8. Boiled with Surutti chakka and Chavalkodi

## Process practised at Sri Kalahasti

Demonstrated by Nandagopal



9. Treated with myrobalan and milk



10. Alum applied to the back ground



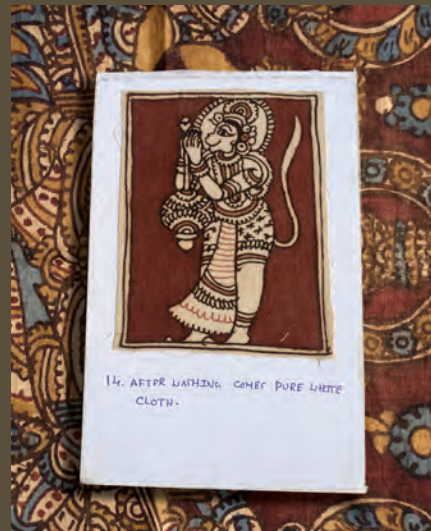
11. Washed in flowing water



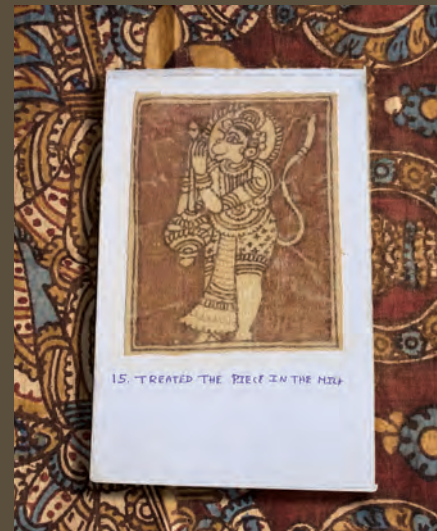
12. Second boiling to achieve red in the background



13. Treated with sheep dung and cow dung



14. Washing to achieve white cloth



15. Treated with milk



16. Yellow from Myrobalan flower



17. yellow colour washed in flowing water



18. Application of Indigo



19. Painting blue over yellow for green



20. Green colour development



## Pichuka Srinivas and Varun

Pitchuka Veera Subbaiah was one of the four people who revived Kalamkari at Pedana. It is interesting to know how a chance remark led Veera Subbaiah and his friends to start the revival of Kalamkari at Pedana near Machilipatnam. Veera Subbaiah had studied till the twelfth grade in school and started a small business of handloom weaving. Pedana was historically (was- not required) also known for finest cotton weaving of muslin, very fine gossamer-like fabrics. His father was a weaver of diapers or short length fabrics, thin fine fabric of one and half foot width or lesser. He would take this and sell at the weekly market at Dwarapudi, Godavari district. Veera Subbaiah was working as a Gumastha or peon/sales clerk in a shop, selling handloom fabrics to Bombay and Chennai. In the 1960s six people started the business of handloom weaving together and they used to meet many influential people. One of the men asked Veera Subbaiah if he could get a Kalamkari sari. He was taken by surprise as he had never heard of Kalamkari at all. He started looking for it. The four friends, keen to revive the lost tradition, found the artisans, learnt the craft and started practising it at Pedana.

Veera Subbaiah's son Srinivas continues the tradition today. His earliest memory of Kalamkari is when he was around 8-9 years and used to sit at the riverside to watch the washing of the fabrics early mornings. As the

water became polluted, the artisans started going to the neighbouring villages for washing the fabrics. Srinivas was reluctant to complete his studies, fearing he may have to take up a job elsewhere and leave the fascinating world of handloom. Srinivas has been manufacturing and exporting Kalamkari and natural colour yarn dyed handloom fabrics and made-ups and other home textiles for the last 10 years. He exports his fabrics to US, Japan, Korea, Netherlands and Amsterdam. Srinivas' son, Varun a third year engineering student, has also decided to return to work with his father after completing his engineering studies.

Recently, Srinivas has developed the 'Tree of life' design using the block printing technique. Block makers K. Gangadhar and K. Narasiah carved the tree of life motif in 212 wooden blocks, taking almost two months to complete the blocks and check the setting and continuation of the blocks. The wall hanging measuring 45 inches wide and 75 inches in height is in production at Syamala Arts and Crafts, Pedana.



Top left: Srinivas and Varun at Shyamala arts and crafts

Top right: Pichuka Veera Subbaiah



## Munikrishnaiah

One of the oldest Kalamkari artisans at Srikalahasti is nonagenarian Munikrishnaiah who has trained several students in the art. He took up the mantle of training several artisans after the passing away of Lakshmiah, the last surviving artist in 1940. Munikrishnaiah has won several awards and accolades for his work which has been exhibited at numerous venues.



Top Left: Lifestory of Saibaba

Top Right: Artist Muni Krishnaih

Bottom right: Story of Vaali and Sugreeva

Opposite page: Mahishasura mardini

