

## Study on Indian traditional art –*Karuppur Kalamkari*

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*Kalamkari* is a traditional textile art form which is done using natural dyes and tools. There are two main types of *kalamkari* practised from the olden days - *Srikalahasti* and *Machilipatnam*. There exist two styles *Kodalikaruppur* and *Karuppur* styles of *kalamkari*. This study is about the *Karuppur* style of *Kalamkari*. The objective of this research is to understand and document the history of the hand-painted *Karuppur* style of *kalamkari* art and create new verge of trendy products that are appealing to the younger generation and can also save this beautiful form of art from extinction. A qualitative experimental and exploratory research method study used primary and secondary data. The primary data of the art was collected from the craftsman family who were practising *Karuppur kalamkari* in traditional methods. The secondary data was collected from websites, blogs and journals. The products designed and developed were a concoction of trend and tradition without extracting the essence of tradition.

**Keywords:** Craft products, Handmade, *Kalamkari*, *Karuppur Kalamkari*, Natural dye, Traditional, Young generation

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*Kalamkari* is a hand-painted or hand-block printed textile made of cotton which is famous for its beautiful, elegant and intricate designs<sup>1-4</sup>. *Kalamkari* is a very detailed and complicated art form that has a beautiful and elegant design. *Kalamkari* is a hand-painted or block-printed cotton textile<sup>1-4</sup>. The word *Kalamkari* is derived from the Persian language<sup>1,4</sup>. *Kalam* means 'pen' and *Kari* means 'craftsmanship'<sup>1-5</sup>. There are many types of *kalamkari* arts; such as *Srikalahasti*, *Machilipatnam*, *Kodali Karuppur* and *Karuppur Kalamkari*.

The *Srikalahasti* style of *kalamkari* is a freehand drawing using a pen with motifs and stories relating to Hindu mythology because of the influence of the Golconda rule<sup>2-6</sup>. *Srikalahasti* is located 37 kms away from Tirupathi in Chittoor district in Andhra Pradesh<sup>7</sup>. *Srikalahasti* style of *kalamkari* is mostly used for temple cloth painting<sup>2-7</sup>. Drawing and filling is the technique that is used in *Srikalahasti Kalamkari*<sup>1-4,7</sup>. Raw material, climatic conditions, and river water from *Swarnamuki* make *Srikalahasti* an ideal place for making *Kalamkari*<sup>3,6</sup>. *Machilipatnam kalamkari* is a hand-block printed style made of wood which usually contains Persian motifs like creepers, lotus, twines, etc due to the influence of *Mughal* rule and

trade proximity with Persia and Iran<sup>1-5</sup>. *Machilipatnam* artisans used natural dyes and also prepared the blocks for printing<sup>1-4</sup>. *Kodalikaruppur kalamkari* involves weaving, dyeing and printing. It is a combination of wax-based resist painting, block printing and intricate weaving<sup>8</sup>. *Kodalikaruppur* is a completely different technique where fine cotton muslin is woven in which *zari* (gold and silver) patterns are woven in a discontinuous manner which follows the *Jamdhani* style of weaving<sup>8</sup>.

The *Karuppur kalamkari* is an ancient traditional hand painting style of art that got separated from *Srikalahasti* style. It's a fabric painting method, usually painted on cotton or silk using natural dyes and brushes made from natural materials like Palm stick, and a wooden stick used as a pen, with Hindu mythology concepts and *thazhampoo* motifs (screw pine flower)<sup>1,2</sup>. The *Karuppur kalamkari* is also known as 'Chithra Paddam' (figurative drawing). *Karuppur kalamkari* artisans were invited by the Thanjavur court during the seventeenth or early eighteenth century to make outfits for kings and also to depict stories in the fabric that is used to decorate the temple<sup>9</sup>.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, *Sevappa Nayak*- the first *Nayak* ruler of Thanjavur is said to have brought a group of 25 families of *Srikalahasti Kalamkari* artists to work

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in the palace and temples of Thanjavur<sup>10,11</sup>. *Achyutaraya*, the brother and successor of *Krishnadeva Raya*, was then the emperor of Vijayanagar kingdom<sup>9,11</sup>. *Sevappa Nayak* was closely related to the emperor *Achyutaraya* as *Sevappa's* wife *Murtimamba* was the sister-in-law of *Achyutaraya* and the sister of the Vijayanagar Queen.

So, this is how *Karuppur Kalamkari* got separated from *Srikalahasti* style<sup>11</sup>. During those days, the artisans decorate the entire palace with drawings and paintings in times of any big festival or function like *Vasantotsava* which is a festival that celebrates the transition from winter to spring<sup>9</sup>. This art majorly

possesses yellow, black, blue and red colours in their paintings. These artisans were treated like royals during that period. After that zamindar, a ruler of a certain place among the whole kingdom who accepted the suzerainty of the emperor and *madathipathigal*, a person who teaches about religious matters started using this product to decorate the *devasthanam* (temples). They had the privilege to decorate 27 *devasthanam*. Each *devasthanam* requires 3 temple car decoration products. This led to more than hundreds of people starting this craft, and this was the reason to keep the art alive. Some of the temple decor products are shown in Figure 1 (Images taken from a



Fig. 1 — *Karuppur Kalamkari* style temple decor products

photo album of the artisan, which shows his ancestors traditional art done for temples).

During the period of British emergence in India, these artisans were honoured with 150 acres and moved away from the palace. The artisans migrated around the outer areas of Thanjavur and due to lack of art recognition, for survival, they slowly started shifting to other jobs. Today only Krishnamurthy (Master Craft Person) and his family in Sikkalnayakanpet, Thanjavur sustained and practised this art. To survive in the competitive world, lately, the craft has also gone through some changes by innovation of new products like screens that can also be framed and used as wall hangings which is shown in Figure 2 (Fig. 2 depicting images of wall hanging and screen made by the artisan) Later, by understanding the concept of customer demands, the artists decided to do sarees and some of them are shown in Figure 3 (Fig. 3 depicts sarees done by artisan). Earlier, they did it with minimal designs and mostly plain sarees in cotton. Later days they also did all those artworks in silk. Their work was recognised with Poompuhar State Award by the Former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu Ms. J. Jayalalitha in 2013.

During the 1980s and 1990s for the festival of India, Martand Singh who is India's best-known textile revivalist and expert in traditional and

contemporary textiles and fashion, designed the landmark Vishwakarma Master Weavers exhibitions in which one of the rare textiles *Karuppur kalamkari* was showcased to the world.

To practise this art, not only skills but also patience, concentration, and knowledge of the history of art, its motifs and its aesthetic sense of colour combinations is required. Today, *Karuppur Kalamkari* art is at the edge of extinction as only one family in Sikkalnayakanpet of Thanjavur district, Tamil Nadu practises this art. Hence, this article aims to ensure the necessity of documenting the history, tools, equipment, process motif, colours, fabrics and products of *Karuppur Kalamkari* art to preserve the art from extinction and create new trendy products to create awareness among the younger generation.

### Methodology

As there is very little information available about the history, process, evolution, products and present situation of *Karuppur kalamkari* art, a qualitative experimental and exploratory research design method was chosen for this research study and used to find out the details and to bring change in product designs. To conduct the study, data collection from both primary and secondary sources was done.

The secondary data was collected from websites,



Fig. 2 — *Karuppur kalamkari* screens



Fig. 3 — *Karuppur kalamkari* sarees

internet sources, social network sites like Instagram, Facebook, blogs and journals. The data collected was unstructured, and qualitative and are also not certain as such research on *Karuppur Kalamkari* wasn't conducted earlier.

The first set of primary data about the present trendy products that attract the younger generation and the current situation on how *Karuppur kalamkari* art has been implemented in various products was collected through a market research study. This was done by visiting online stores that sell *Karuppur Kalamkari* products and reviewing their product designs and details. To understand the styles of products that are trending and attract the younger generation, various other stores were also visited and reviewed. Based on this study, it's seen that most of the products in the market are sarees, temple decors and wall hangings that cater to women and the elder generation. So, it's pretty obvious why this art is at the edge of extinction and the younger generation is not interested and is unaware of the existence of this art. The exploratory market research helped us understand that *Karuppur Kalamkari* products are mostly catered to women and the elder generation and not many products are targeted at the younger generation.

The next set of primary data about the art was collected through a case study and the sample for the case study was selected based on the purposive sampling method which is a type of non-probability sampling where the sample was purposively chosen by the researcher to focus on specific characteristics. In this study, an award-winning artist - The craftsman Krishnamurthy family, at Sikkalnayakanpet of Thanjavur district in Tamil Nadu was chosen as the sample as it was the only place of existence of the art. The informal interview schedule was conducted wherein both open and close-ended questions regarding the history of art, fabric preparation process, painting procedure, required tools and types of equipment, colours, motifs, after-treatment process, the types of products produced, sales, the experience of artisan, etc were focused to gain information and understand about the progression of art during these years.

## Results and Discussion

As mentioned in methodology, the following sections discuss data collected from two main sources of information: secondary sources *i.e.*, published literature which includes books, magazine journals and the internet; primary sources include information

gathered from artisan. The findings of the study have been discussed by the objective of creating new verge of trendy products using this art that is appealing to the younger generation.

### Tools and equipment

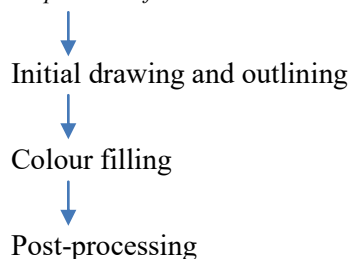
The basic tools required for this art are fabric (gada cloth or silk of your choice) and Kalamkari pens or brushes of different sizes made from stems and twigs of palm tree, date tree, tamarind twigs or bamboo sticks<sup>1-4,12</sup>.

And then comes the natural dyes: Black colour (also known as *Kasimkaram*) extracted by blending jaggery, water and iron fillings. Yellow is derived by boiling pomegranate peels. Red hues are created from the bark/roots of madder. Blue is obtained from natural indigo and green is derived by mixing yellow and blue together.

Other materials required for completing this whole process of painting are buffalo milk, gum powder, boiled rice water, Natural Mordant: cow dung or Myrobalan solution (commonly known as Kadukkai solution), Malabar nut leaf (commonly known as *adhatoda*- a medicinal plant leaf)<sup>1-4,12,13</sup>

### Production method

#### Preparation of cloth



Firstly, the fabric is washed in plain water to remove the starch and then it is dried. After drying, the gada fabric (Greige fabric) is then treated with a solution of boiled rice water and buffalo milk. The proportion for preparing 2 metres of gada cloth: buffalo milk & boiled rice water mixed in a 1:3 ratio. The cloths are immersed in this solution for about 15 to 20 min and then washed in the pond or in running water<sup>2,3</sup>.

By soaking in this mixture the cotton fabric acquires its characteristic gloss, and smoothenes the cloth as rice water acts as starch and the high-fat content in buffalo milk makes sure that the outline colour black doesn't spread while drawing<sup>1,7,14</sup>.

After this, the fabric is treated in Myrobalan solution (myrobalan fruit ground and squeezed to

obtain milk) for 15 to 20 min to remove buffalo milk odour<sup>2</sup>. Then the fabric is laid on the floor under natural sunlight to dry for 6 to 8 h and stored at room temperature for one day, then finally the fabric is ready to be painted<sup>3</sup>. Then to further smoothen the fabric, it is washed using pumice stone.

#### **Initial drawing and outlining**

After preparing the fabric, the design is drawn roughly on the cloth by free hand using pencil, scale and stencils. Then outline is given using a pen made out of tamarind twigs with *Kasimkaram* (A natural Black dye) extracted by blending jaggery, water and iron fillings in a mud pot which is soaked for 20 days<sup>1-4,12</sup>. After giving the outline, the fabric undergoes washing, and then it should be dried under sunlight.

#### **Colour filling**

After making outlines on the fabric, Colour fillings are done by mixing both dye extract and natural mordant which makes the colour stick firmly to the fabric<sup>1,3,4</sup>. The treatment of the cloth and the quality of the mordant are used to determine the look of the final product<sup>1</sup>.

Natural mordants such as Myrobalan solution and cow dung were used simultaneously as it was observed that, the dye uptake was found to be good in the Simultaneous Mordanting method<sup>13</sup>. The proportions to create myrobalan mordant is 1 g of *Kadukkai* (Myrobalan) ground to a fine paste in 20 mL water to 20 min at heated  $60^{\circ}\text{C}\pm 5^{\circ}\text{C}$  and for cow dung mordant is 2 g of cow dung and 10 mL of water added and the mixture stirred, filtrated. Each dye extracted was mixed with a mordant solution in definite proportion<sup>4,13</sup>.

A single colour can be applied at a time. The colour is applied from darker colour to lighter colour, if lighter colour is applied first, the colour which will be applied further will mix, so the darker colour should be applied first and light colour at last and then washing should be done<sup>3</sup>.

For example, the designs that are to be filled with dark colours like red are first painted and are left to dry under sunlight for 24 h until the fabric absorbs the colour completely. The fabric is then washed so that excess dye is removed. After painting each colour on the cotton fabric, it needs to be washed, then dried, then soaked in pure milk and dried again. Milk helps to prevent colour spreading on the fabric when other colours are applied to it later. The fabric is then

painted with light vibrant colours such as yellow, blue, etc and the process repeats<sup>3</sup>.

#### **Post-processing**

It involves several washings, the use of a mordant, starch, wax, and bleaching with buffalo milk. For 2 metres of *Gada*, 1 litre of buffalo milk third of rice boiled water and a small amount of *adhatoda* and gum powder are mixed. The fabric is dipped in this solution for 1 h and then it should be washed in running water because the water flows faster in running water and so the excess colour dye will go off so that the smudging, spreading or mixing of colours will not take place and it should be dried under shade<sup>1</sup>.

Based on the process explained in the previous section and a deep understanding of various aspects of product demand, consumer market and product trends concerning young generation people, a range plan of nine products was decided and they were categorised into two divisions.

The first division of products caters to garments & accessories, which includes 5 products that are shown in Figure 4(a-d). A *men's kurta* made of silk cotton fabric with motifs inspired by *thazhampoo* (screw pine flower) and colours used are black and blue (Fig. 4a). The colours are extracted from natural material as explained under the topics '*tools and equipment*' and '*initial drawing and outline*'. A *shawl* made of cotton *gada* fabric with floral motifs and colours used are black, red, blue, green and yellow (Fig. 4a). A woman's *saree* is made of cotton *gada* fabric with motifs inspired by the marriage theme and the colours used are black, red, blue and yellow (Fig. 4b). The *saree* is also embellished with tassels at *pallu* made from *khadi* thread. A sling bag made of silk cotton fabric with peacock and flower motifs and the colours used are black, red and blue (Fig. 4c). A hand fan made of cotton *gada* cloth with design inspiration from the Hindu religion god 'Lord Krishna's garden' (Fig. 4d). The product can be used in two directions. One side is with a peacock motif and the other side is with a floral motif. Blue, green and red colours are used. It is also embellished with *zardosi* embroidery. The products were decided keeping in mind the needs of the younger generation. The product sketches were prepared. The pattern was drafted. Suitable fabrics were chosen. The tools were prepared. The natural colour was extracted as explained under '*Tools and equipment*' section followed by cloth preparation, initial drawing and outlining, colour filling post-processing etc, as per the steps explained



Fig. 4 — Karuppur kalamkari garment & accessories (Men's kurta, a shawl, a woman's Saree, a sling bag & a hand fan)

in previous paragraphs. After completing the processes on the fabric, it is then cut and sewn. All these procedures were done by the authors under the supervision of the artisan.

The second division of products caters to home decor products which include 4 products that are shown in Figure 5(a-d). A mirror frame made of silk cotton fabrics with leaf & lotus flower motifs that are

inspired by Srikalahasti style of kalamkari and the colours used are black, blue, green and yellow (Fig. 5a). It is embellished with beadwork. Golden sugar bead is used randomly on the designs and along the border of the mirror. A tea coaster made of cotton gada cloth with an elephant motif & geometric pattern in the border (Fig. 5b). The colours used are black, red, blue and yellow. The wall hanging 1 made of cotton gada cloth



Fig. 5 — *Karuppur kalamkari* home decor products (A mirror frame, a coaster & two wall hangings)

with design inspiration from Lord Ganesh (Fig. 5c). Geometric patterns are used in the borders. The colours used are black, red, blue and green. The wall hanging 2 is made of cotton gada cloth with a peacock motif and the colours used are black and red (Fig. 5d). The procedure for product development is the same as that explained in the previous paragraph.

### Conclusion

The *Karuppur Kalamkari* art started its journey from Nayak rule dating back to 481 years and it struggled a lot to make its presence till now in the market as it was practiced by only a few artisans in a traditional manner. This dissertation started with the idea of documenting the art's history, tools, colours, motifs, fabric process and creating new trendy products that attract the younger generation so as to

preserve this beautiful art from extinction. A range of nine products which includes trendy garments, handy accessories, and home decor products were made using traditional methods. Through this article, an ancient traditional art form was studied and adapted to newer trends, keeping the technique intact.

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## Declarations

### Prior Informed Consent

Prior informed consent was taken from the *Karuppur Kalamkari* Craftsman Mr. K. Lakshminarayanan regarding their traditional knowledge and product images.

### Images

- 1 Fig. 1- *Karuppur Kalamkari* temple decor products: Photographs of the Craftsman's products attached with the consent of the respective Craftsman Mr. K. Lakshminarayanan.
- 2 Fig. 2- *Karuppur Kalamkari* screens: Photographs of the Craftsman's products attached with the consent of the respective Craftsman Mr. K. Lakshminarayanan.
- 3 Fig. 3- *Karuppur Kalamkari* sarees: Photographs of the Craftsman's products attached with the consent of the respective Craftsman Mr. K. Lakshminarayanan.
- 4 Fig. 4(a-d)- *Karuppur Kalamkari* garment & accessories-Men's kurtha, a shawl, a woman's Saree, a sling bag & a hand fan: Photographed by authors.
- 5 Fig. 5(a-d)- *Karuppur Kalamkari* home decor products - A mirror frame, a coaster & two wall hangings: Photographed by authors.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest with this manuscript.

### Author Contributions

BS supervised the study, edited and reviewed the manuscript for final submission; PP, RT, RG, SS, SR& TU conceptualized the study design, performed the field study, analyzed the data, interpreted the results, developed the products and wrote the manuscript.

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