

The Sacred Stories of the ‘Ganga Patams’

Dr. Nirmala Biluka

Assistant Professor, Dept of Painting, JNAFA University, Hyderabad

Abstract

Gangapatams are narrative paintings done using Kalamkari technique of dyeing colors on textiles. Although prepared by Kalamkari artisans in Coastal Andhra regions, several patams were rediscovered to be commissioned and used in various regions of Telangana as well.

They are generally as large as a 3 to 4 ft wide and 10 to 30 ft in length while more recent ones are the size of a bedsheet and hence referred to as ‘Ganga dupatti’ in Telugu. They are mostly in horizontal format with the story of Katamaraju depicted in episodes with focus on main scenes and characters in the story. The paper tries to understand the historical background of the folk narrative that is recited by travelling bards or performers to communities of the Gollas (shepherds/ cattle rearers) for disseminating caste genealogies and association with Katamaraju, believed to be descendant of Lord Krishna himself. Through a visual study of stylistic features, narration in the patams, the paper attempts to study the changing dynamics of golla caste, the condition of patronage to the art form and its relevance in contemporary times.

Keywords: Gangapatams, Kalamkari Textile Art, Narrative Painting, Katamaraju Katha.

Introduction

This paper is a brief introduction to patams (cloth wall hangings) and canopies that were used primarily for temple decorations and for narrating stories based on caste mythologies. The set of patams, discussed here are specific to South India with special reference to the Telugu speaking regions. They are generally called as Ganga Patam/ Duppati (wall hanging/ Textile) named after the principal icon and deity, Gangamma who is worshipped mainly by Yadava or the Golla caste (cattle herders) and are hand painted using the cloth dyeing process of Kalamkari¹ (fig.1). Although the artists belonged to Bandar and Nellore, the patrons were from Nalgonda District of Telangana. The paper tries to trace the journey of this traditional art from walls, to cloth and to various regions and shifts in themes.

¹ Etymologically ‘Qalam’ comes from Persian word meaning pen and ‘kari’ means artisan. Its is an ancient cloth dyeing process where bamboo pen is used for drawing the design and natural dyes are used for colouring .Presently there are two main styles of the art form, one is hand drawn popular as Srikalahasti style and other is made using block printing technique known as Machilipatnam style.



Fig1. Gangamma Patam, 1943, Artist -Vinna Kota Veera Raghavaiah, son of Vinna kota Adishesu, Nellore, Patron- Bellamkota Venkayya, Kondapur, Nalgonda. Size 182 cms x 487 cms (6 ftx 16 ft)

Temples have not only been centers of religious worship, but also provided platform for expression of the creativity and to attain highest level of spirituality. Hence temple culture can be seen not just as religious in nature but also as a cultural practice that promoted art in a variety of shapes and forms such as music, dance, architecture, sculpture and paintings. The Kalamkari wall hangings or patams that will be discussed here belong to the genre of hand drawn and natural dyed cloth paintings that were used as backdrops, wall, pillars and ceiling decorations both inside and outside the temple to mark sacred spaces during ceremonies. They were usually used as canopies when the Hindu idols were brought out of the temple during the annual fairs and processions for public darshan.

While this can be seen as traditional ritualistic and decorative purpose of the wall hangings, a set of unique patams, similar to the Nakashi scroll paintings, are used to narrate genealogies pertaining to specific castes² or vocational communities who do not necessarily belong to the upper echelons of the Hindu society. These patams served as visual aids for recitation or oral performance of *puranas* and community legends.

In recent times, a set of patams done in Kalamkari style were discovered and collected by scholars like Dr. Jayadhir Thirumal Rao that were procured from Nalgonda district of Telangana state, whose existence so far had not yet been traced. Interestingly even the stories painted on them are not the usual upper caste Hindu puranas such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, found generally in the well-known Sri Kalahasti or Madurai Kalamkaris, but are caste/ community genealogies of lower castes belonging to vocations like cattle herders which makes them unique.

Historical Background

In order to map the origin and development of these patams, one needs to comprehend their purpose in

² Caste is social hierarchy according to the Hindu Society that divided into 4 sections with lowest status given to those who did unclean jobs like cleaning, leather workers.

ritualistic practices while comparing other related art forms prevalent in the region such as temple murals, Nakashi scroll painting and idol making traditions and their connection to local histories. In this regard, Irwin and Hall remark, “In some cases it would not be inaccurate to describe them as murals on cloth” (Dallapiccola, 2010). Such is the similarity and overlapping between these mediums of art. For instance, in the Lepakshi murals done under the patronage of the Vijayanagara kingdom in the 16th century, we can see the Kalamkari designs on the costumes and borders which also reflect the existence of this ancient cloth on murals. (fig.2)



Fig.2. Lepakshi murals with men wearing Kalamkari costumes, 13 century.

However, what happens to temple wall painting tradition by 18th and 19th century is not quite clear as no evidence of extensive temple art is found during this period. Nevertheless, we do find samples of mythological paintings in the form of Nakashi scroll paintings and Kalamkari textiles in the region of Andhra and Telangana. Nakashi scroll painting tradition is one such folk art form that has survived since early 17th century. Accounts of temple painting can be imagined from paintings on wooden doors and metal grills decorated with figures and compositions found in Nakashi scrolls. We can only assume that the patronage for temple murals declined after the Muslim and British rulers gained power by the 16th century and so the artisans may have continued an already existing parallel tradition of painting on cloth. According to Anna.L.Dallapiccola (2016), the oldest surviving examples of Kalamkari wall hangings belong to 15th - 16th centuries. They were first noticed at the colonial exhibition in 1886 at South Kensington, U.K. She suggests that the reason they missed the eye of the British traders is because they were made exclusively for ‘religious purposes or temple patrons. Also, European traders dealt with merchants rather than the artisans directly. Apart from this, the fabric before 18th century has not survived the test of time and hence the date of origin cannot be located exactly. Dallapiccola’s study is based on the collection of Victoria and Albert Museum, UK which were collected by Caspar Purdon Clarke on his mission to India in 1881-82 with the museum budget of 5000 pounds.

Although Srikalahasti and Machilipatnam genres of Kalamkari have survived and still flourishing in 21st century, there were several other centers of production like Petaboli in Krishna district, St.Thome (presently Chennai), Chirala, Nagapatnam, Madurai and so on. Earliest survey reports done by W.S

Hadaway' (1917) 'Cotton Painting and Printing in the Madras Presidency', suggests that there were thriving workshops in places like Sikkinayakanpet, Kumbakonam, Ponneri and Palakollu. Similarly E.B Havell, the pioneering founding member of Madras School of Art and later Shantiniketan, in one of his articles mentions of exquisite canopies made by workmen in Pallacollu and Madurai (Dallapicola, 2016). He gives minute details of the process and information, for instance the red colour of the Madurai Kalamkari is deeper due to the mineral properties of the Vaigai river. The Kalamkari clothes are washed on the banks in flowing water of the river. The fine river sand washes off excess dye and brings out natural whiteness of the base cloth which is usually handmade khadi (kora) cloth. Each time a new colour is dyed, the process of boiling in pure buffalo milk and washing in water is repeated. Although the older patams were generally made only in two colors, i.e red and black, we can find multi colors in the more recent ones.

Bandar School

Machilipatnam or Bandar was a well-known sea port and trade center for the production of block printed Kalamkari since 19th century. However, the wall hangings, canopies, tents and carpets made here, especially catered to the tastes of Persian and European market. Due to the influence of Islam's iconoclastic position and Europe's modern fashion trends, religious narratives and scenes were discarded and replaced with more simplified motifs and floral designs such as the Paisley or the mango motif which is popularly known as 'Mamidi pinde'. The hand carved wooden block prints helped in faster production for the market need compared to the lengthy and tedious process of Srikalahasti Kalamkari. While block printing was used to make carpets, yardage cloth, textiles and other utility products, few artisans continued to make Kalamkari hand painted wall hangings for religious purposes.

Dallapicola studies a few such Ganga duppatis belonging to 1881-82 which is signed by artists, Panchakalla Pedda Subba Rayaudu and another one by Koppala Subbarayudu of Irappalli, Bandar, the old name of sea port town Machilipatnam. Both these patams depict the popular story of Katamaraju katha. It is perhaps the oldest and longest ballad which is narrated even till today. The story traces the genealogy of the Golla or the Yadava caste to descendants of Lord Krishna, who were an important nomadic herding community in the region, and their conflict with sedentary agrarian communities. It is also a commemoration of community hero of the Golla caste, Katamaraju who fought for their rights and is believed to be reincarnation of Lord Krishna himself.

The Legend of Katamaraju

According to the legend, Katamaraju was the son of Peddiraju who ruled Yelamanchili in 13th century, now Vishakapatnam who later moved to Kalyanagara in Bidar, Karnataka. Peddiraju had no children but after worshipping Lord Someshwara, he was blessed with a son Katamaraju and daughter Papanuka. (Thallapalli & Battula, 2015) While Katamaraju was seven years old, his father is killed in a battle with an enemy ruler Valiketavaraju. During night time, the young Katamaraju goes to the battlefield to find his father's dead body and for the first time he encounters goddess Gangamma and her brother Potharaju. The goddess immediately falls in love with him and pleads him to marry her but Katamaraju somehow evades the proposal. Then Potharaju and Valiraju confront him but he defeats both of them and brings back his father's dead body.

Later Bhakttiranna, his relative takes Katamaraju and his family back to Yalamanchili where he ascends the throne. However, soon he has to leave his kingdom due to heavy drought and thus moves to Nellore

to save his cattle and people from dying. Here the significant battle with the Manumasiddhi or Nallasiddhiraju occurs that is central to the story. The reason for the conflict is apparently the refusal to pay grazing tax to Nallasiddhiraju as narrated by the oral balladeers.

The sub-caste of the folk performers is called ‘Kommulavaru’ who are a dependent caste of the Gollas and are hired by them to narrate the story and worship of goddess Gangamma, the tutelary deity of the Gollas, on important occasions. In parts of Guntur and Prakasam they are also called as ‘Gudalaru’ from the word Gudaram meaning tent as they erect a tent and hang their patams in the village they halt to perform. They are believed to be descendents of the ‘Boinidu’ caste who fought on the side of Katamaraju in the battle and hence were ordained by Bhaktiranna, the sole survivor after the battle, with the divine duty of narrating the glorious exploits of their hero, Katamaraju.

The story is depicted in episodes and is accompanied with text written in Telugu describing the scene it represents. However, there is no linear depiction of the whole legend and only bits and pieces are found in different *patams*. Although the descendants are believed to belong to Yadavas, only three generations of Gollas can be traced through these scrolls and literary texts available. Hence overlapping history and myth at various points. The artists who paint them are the Kalamkaris. In fact, the act of making the patam is often referred to as ‘katha vrayuta’ (story writing) rather than as drawing and painting.

Gangamma

The role of the principal deity, Gangamma in the whole story is very ambiguous. She is often revered as the mother goddess and yet she is shown as appeasing Katamaraju to gain his love. Throughout the tale, he postpones the marriage and even at the end after marrying her, the hero retains his position as a celibate and never actually consummate their union. The balladeers explain this relationship, that while Katamaraju was born Lord Krishna, Gangamma was Yashoda’s actual daughter who was swapped to save him from the cruel Kamsa. So, biologically they are brother and sister and hence cannot marry.



Fig.3 Ganga Patam, 1942, Artist - Vinna kota Adishesu, son of V. Kotappa Shiva Kumar, Machilipatnam, size 168cms x 493 cms (5.6 in x 16.3ft)

The present Ganga patam (fig.3) was collected from Nalgonda district in Telangana. According to the text written on it, it can be dated to 1942 and was painted by artist Vinna Kota Adishesu, son of Vinna Kota

Kotappa Shiva Kumar who belong to Inumanamolluru village of Ongole Taluka, Guntur district. Apparently, the patrons belonged to Nalgonda district.



Fig .4 Katama Raju Katha, 1959, Artist- Ramabhajana, Machilipatnam 182cms x 360cms (6ftx12 ft)

Another Ganga patam (Fig.4) in the collection of Thirumal Rao is dated as 1959 and painted by artist Rama Bhajana, son of Anumakonda Subbarao Naidu from Machilipatnam, while it was commissioned by a resident of Miryalaguda village in Nalgonda district. Both the *patams* are painted exquisitely in black and red colors with minute figures and details.

The story is divided into scenes of importance and begins from the top left corner and moves to the bottom right side. The first idol to be painted is usually Vigneshwara or goddess Saradambha both deities are invoked for knowledge and smooth making of the holy image and text. Then the story of Katamaraju begins by introducing all the family members and genealogy of their caste and how they come to Yalamanchili and the prosperous life his people enjoyed. Few episodes depict his heroic deeds that are very similar to Lord Krishna's. Cows and bulls are shown in several scenes to highlight their pastoral life. The 1942 patam is fairly modern compared to the 1959 one. For instance, the figures are more scarce, the attires look modern with no stylization of side posture and profile faces of figures. The head gears and backgrounds are less embellished. The buildings look more modern and similar to Nizam and British brick constructions, while mythical figures like Gandaberunda and Garuda are totally absent. The scenes are evocative of scenes in street theatre rather than as the typical Kalamkari narrative. It is very much possible that the same artists also made backdrops for theatre, tents. The signature of the artists confirms this as he writes that apart from prabhaguddalu (*patams*), pandhilla chandhinilu (tents, canopies), vedhi nataka scenula prabhaguddalu (street theatre backdrops) are also made by them.

Bits and Pieces of Other Patams

Most of the patams were found in very dilapidated conditions that need urgent restoration work. Some fabrics are extremely fragile and can tear apart very easily. Even from the faded colors, one can still appreciate the stunning and stylized drawing of the figurines, floral motifs and mythical creatures. For instance, in one such patam whose artist and provenance cannot be traced due to the illegibility of the text,

the drawing style is similar to Madurai style of Kalamkari, where the figures are slightly bent and are captured mostly in movement rather than static poses (fig.5).



Fig.5 Detail of Ganga Patam similar to Madurai style, year and artists- unknown

Whereas the more recent patams can be recognized from their vibrant and multiple colors such as blue, yellow, brown and green which were not commonly available in natural dyes of old Kalamkari.

Decline and Revival of Machilipatnam Kalamkari

Till mid-19th century, Machilipatnam was the center for sale of Kalamkari textiles both for export as well as the local market. '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).

Much later another severe blow came to the Kalamkari textile industry as the great cyclone of 1864 that effected the sea trade route and gradually led to the decline of production and trade of Kalamkari. A news article in 'Imperial Gazetteer of India, Madras'(1908), notes that by now former centers of textile industries like Masulipatnam and Walajapet, piles of wooden blocks are seen stacked in corners and roofs of workshops.

In 1924, Persia prohibited import of Kalamkari. The period from 1924 to Independence and beyond, saw the near disappearance of the industry at Machilipatnam. The patronage for temple wall hangings and *patams* became very limited as modernity and new forms of storytelling and entertainment such as theatre and Cinema were introduced by early 20th century. Soon, many of the families of Kalamkari started choosing other vocations in order to survive and abandoned this age old tradition that could no more earn them a living.

It was not until after India's independence in 1950s, the Crafts Council was founded under the pioneering leadership of Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya that many of the crafts and folkart forms were revived by

providing training workshops and funding of production of the products (Gillow and Barnard, 1991). However, the art form had to undergo various reforms in terms of design (mostly Persian) and suitability to the changing modern times. A more recent threat to the handmade Kalamkari is the advent of screen and digital printing technology that are exact replicas of the original art forms but is achieved without the laborious process and involves meagre production cost and time.

Despite several hurdles, a few dedicated artisans continued to produce exquisite pieces of Kalamkari. Gurappa Chetty, a national awardee, is one such artist who revived the wall hangings and painted new themes such as the story of Jesus Christ. Other artists like Ramachandraiah have painted the ‘Shri Rama Pattabhishekam’, V.Nandagopal’s ‘Vishwaroopam’ and ‘The Divine Tree, Religious Tolerance of Human Integrity’ can be termed as more contemporary forms of Kalamkari art of the present day. Nandagopal is not only adept in the style of drawing traditional figures but has successfully drawn themes from other religions such as Islam and Christianity to represent the subject of humanity and religious tolerance. Most of these new patams are monumental in scale, larger than 60x 40ft and are made in the 2000s and are in the collection of artist, Ramesh Gorjala.(Fig. 6)



Fig.6 ‘The Divine Tree, Religious Tolerance of Human Integrity’ patam by V.Nandagopal, size 15 ft x40 ft (app), 2007

Acknowledgements

This paper is made possible with generous grant for Minor Research Project sponsored by R&D Cell, JNAFA University, Hyderabad

List of References

1. Anna L. Dallapiccola , Rosemary Crill, “ Kalamkari Temple Hangings”, Grantha Corporation & V&A Museum, London, 2016
2. Anna L. Dallapiccola , “South Indian Paintings”, Mapin & British Museum, 2010
3. Gillow, John& Barnard Nicholas, “Traditional Indian textiles”,Thames and Hudson, New York,1991

4. Hadaway, W.S., “Cotton Painting and Printing in the Madras Presidency”, Govt.Publication, Madras, 1917
5. Rosemary Crill , “Chintz: Indian Textiles for the West”, V&A Museum, London, 2008
6. Thallapalli. Manohar, Battula Srinivas, “Eulogising the Patrons: the Kommus and the Epic of Katamaraju, ACMASS Conference Proceedings, Malaysia, 2015