



Traditional Indian Textiles – Dye and Nomenclature:

Lotika Varadarajan in conversation with Anamika Pathak

Dr. Pathak: The word 'Kalamkari' is from which language? Are there any regional names?

Dr. Varadarajan: The philosophy of nomenclature in India is very different from that followed by Islamic cultures and in the West. Items are identified not in terms of technique but their place of origin – be it food or textile items. The Dutch and French used terms like *sits* for painted, *chits* for printed (Dutch), *les toiles peintes*, *les toiles imprimées*, both subsumed in the term *les indiennes* (French), while the English preferred the term chintz which covered both painted and printed textiles. The term *chit*, speckled or dotted referred to the sprinkling of water on the cloth when left to dry in the sun to prevent fading. This gave rise to the word chintz. Chintz in India was made with the use of natural dye on cotton fabric through the processes of resist and mordant. Mordant could be applied either with a block made of terracotta, wood or brass or with a brush/pen like instrument, the *kalam*, and this was affected on a pre-woven fabric. Resist would involve the placement of either treated mud or wax over the areas which were intended not to absorb the colour applied in the mordanted areas. The origin of the word *kalamkari* is derived from the two Persian words, *qalam*, pen and *kari*, craftsmanship, collectively meaning "drawing with a pen". Persia also had a tradition of this craft but the appeal of the Indian

fabric lay in the excellence of the colour white which formed the background material and the vibrancy of the other shades. This term *kalamkari* was absorbed into Indian artisanal and trade vocabulary.

Dr. Pathak: Can one trace the origin of *ikat* dyeing? Where is *ikat* practiced in India?

Dr. Varadarajan: There are different theories as to the origin of the word *ikat*. Edward C. Yulo, Philippines is of the view that the technique of *ikat* was first developed by the Austronesian speaking seafaring group having their origin in Taiwan and the southern coast of China. From here they spread into insular Southeast Asia, Melanesia and ultimately into Polynesia. R.N.Mehta (*Bandhas of Orissa, Journal of Indian Textile History*, Vol, VI, 1961) mentions the double *ikat* woven by Bhulias in Orissa. Orissa had rich trading links with insular Southeast Asia and it is possible that the *ikat* traditions were absorbed through trade. It should however be remembered that except for the double *ikat*, *gringseng*, produced in the village of Tenganan, Bali, insular Southeast Asia has produced only single *ikat*. At this moment research is awaited on tracing the history of double *ikat* as well as the connection if any between the double *ikat* of Orissa, the Sambalpuri saris, and the double *ikat* found in the work of Patan *salvis* in Gujarat.

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It is interesting to note the role of commerce and the linkages established through trade. Gujarat was the entrepot for the trade in black pepper of which Kerala was the sole producer. It was from Gujarat that its circulation in West Asia took place. It is possible that it was through this trade that Patan *patola* was introduced into Kerala. Not only is this much in evidence in the mural paintings of Mattancherry Palace, Cochin, but it also entered into the category of textiles given as a mark of honour by the monarch, the *veeralipattu*. There is no tradition of *ikat* weaving in Kerala and samples were brought in through trade.

Dr. Pathak: What is the earliest evidence of *ikat* in India? Is there any connection between *ikat* and *plangi*?

Dr. Varadarajan: As has already been stated the *ikat* tradition has been associated with the speakers of the Austronesian group. The Benaki Museum, Athens, has Yemeni *ikat* textiles of the *tiraz* category the earliest being dated to the 9th century. This technique could have been introduced to Yemen from Gujarat through trade contacts. The Central Asian tradition appears to have been derived from Yemen where it underwent further transformation. The twin processes of *ikat* and *plangi* are based essentially on the reserve technique. The processes found in western India include *ikat*, *plangi* and painted and printed textiles. In *ikat* the yarn is tie dyed prior to being woven. In *plangi* the fabric is first woven and then tie-dyed. The two techniques are quite different.

Dr. Pathak: What is the difference between the *kalamkari* practiced in South India and that in the Western region?

Dr. Varadarajan: Both are practised on cotton, which is cellulose fibre and thus resistant to dye. The constitution of this fibre is changed by the application of a mordant. The mordant can be introduced either by the block, which is generally true of Gujarat or it may be applied through the pen or *qalam* associated with South India. Mordant provides reasonable depth and permanence of colour. The major difference between the *kalamkari* of South India and Gujarat is that, in the case of the first the cotton fabric is fine, while in Gujarat it is generally done on thicker cloth. Usage of each was related to specific processes and techniques. Gujarat has a 12th century reference by Hemachandra to printing being carried out.

Dr. Pathak: Different techniques of pigment painting and their centres?

Dr. Varadarajan: Pigment painting is found in the *khari* painting of Gujarat and some of the *pichhwais* painted in Nathwada in Rajasthan and later in the Deccan.

Dr. Pathak: How much do we know about our past tradition?

Dr. Varadarajan: The find of a mordant dyed yarn in a cord to hold a necklace at Moherjodaro indicates the antiquity of mordant dyeing in South Asia. Ochre was one of the few colours, which cotton could absorb without mordant. As has been already stated to achieve the dyeing of cotton fabric in many hues, the fabric had to be initially treated with a mordant, which set up a chemical reaction in the fibre allowing the absorption of the desired hue. Mordant could be uniformly applied over the entire fabric or it could be placed on a restricted area. There was little respect for old textiles in India and fragments from archaeological sites are missing. Some information with regard to weaves can be gathered from impressions of fabric left on terracotta vessels. However, there is much ethnological evidence, which can be used.



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Dr. Pathak: Have we found samples of painted textiles among the cloth fragments at Fustat?

Dr. Varadarajan: There appear to be some samples of Gujarat origin painted textiles at Quseir al-Qadim, Egypt as stated by Ruth Barnes in her work, *Indian Block Printed Textiles in Egypt, the Newberry Collection in the Ashmolean Museum Oxford*, Vol. 1, Oxford, 1997. Quseir al Qadim is synchronous with Fustat, Old Cairo, Egypt and both sites have yielded similar fragments. However, the majority of the India derived cotton fragments found at Fustat is of the printed variety. The Benaki Museum, Athens has a large collection of such textiles. The tradition of printed textiles is also to be found in Mamluke Egypt, Turkey and parts of Eastern Europe, which were under Ottoman rule. The Indian tradition was, however, the most complex.

Dr. Pathak: How were such textiles used in the domestic market?

Dr. Varadarajan: Such textiles could be used for decorative hangings in domestic and monumental structures, as wrapping and covering material (*rumals*) or in costume.

Dr. Pathak: Does royalty patronize it or did it serve others as well?

Dr. Varadarajan: It was patronized by both the privileged as well as by others including the temples in South India. In the absence of written records and paucity of archaeological finds we have to depend more on ethnological evidence.

Dr. Pathak: What are the differences between the old and contemporary items?

Dr. Varadarajan: The old pieces are of much finer and more precise workmanship but at the time of their production the pricing mechanism had not been worked out. The price was calculated on the basis of the price of the cloth the cost of items used in its manufacture. The cost of labour and the artistry involved were not paid for.

Dr. Pathak: What inspired your interest in this subject?

Dr. Varadarajan: I was not satisfied only with trade statistics but was also wanted to investigate the technology involved and the craftsmanship. I found that the ethnological approach was more appropriate for the kind of investigations I wished to make.

Dr. Pathak: Do you have any thoughts on the future of the crafts?

Dr. Varadarajan: I feel that mechanization will increasingly replace work by hand. Therefore this sector has to concentrate on what cannot be done by machines. I see this sector as one of great vibrancy as only the traditional workers can envision new horizons rather than designers or specialists from outside. I strongly believe that a system of education specifically by and for the craftsmen has to be established rather than one based on western models.