

***The Indian Kalamkari (Vraathapani):
A Case of Optimism, Resilience and Transformation in Cultural Textiles***

Malini Divakala, National Institute of Fashion Technology, India

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2024
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Indian craft practices are inherited through family traditions and nurtured with reverence transforming them as traditions. The Indian Kalamkari/ Vraathapani is well recognized in the textile circle for its use of natural dyes rendered through painting with an indigenous tool, 'Kalam'(pen), or 'Vraata' (writing) and 'pani' (work) in Telugu, the local language. A product that was crafted for propagating Hindu mythology the Kalamkari/ Vraatapani pieces depicted elaborate folk style story translations of imaginative forms of Gods and Goddesses as described in the mythological literature. These visually extravagant portrayals have influenced the textile trade markets in the 17th - 18th centuries leading to creation of a new league of textiles built upon the indigenous technique but different in expression. The craft since then optimistically progressed into new frontiers with certain amendments in form and format that are perceived as features of resilience in its journey towards transformation as an Indian cultural textile.

Keywords: Kalamkari, Dye Painted Textiles, Indian Textiles, Temple Cloths, Srikalahasti

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Application of color on textiles was an age-old practice and the brilliance of these colors generated through indigenous processes fetched Indian textiles high esteem within the global trade markets (Bhushan, n.d.). Of the many such natural dyed textiles of the country Kalamkari/ Vraathapani of Srikalahasti in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh is unique for its indigenous painted style of patterning. Kalamkari/ Vraathapani, a name that signifies the art of painting on cotton with natural dyes has a popular presence among the traditional Indian textile domain.

Once a vital part of the Hindu temple tradition this craft has oriented and accommodated itself to suit the fancies of the changing (also challenging) political and geographical situations. As a result, its gradual transformation from a temple cloth to a textile craft, religious to secular format and traditional to efficient techniques have empowered the craft to thrive in new frontiers. This transformation of the craft reflects on the artistic capabilities and adaptability of the craftsmen along with the relevance and aesthetic appeal of the craft of Kalamkari/ Vraathapani.

This paper highlights the many stages of transformation of this cultural craft while it suffered, endured, thrived and mesmerised a global clientele. The optimistic approach of its practitioners coupled with resilience of procedures resulted in transformation of Kalamkari (Vraathapani) into a cultural textile that is relevant even in the 21st century.

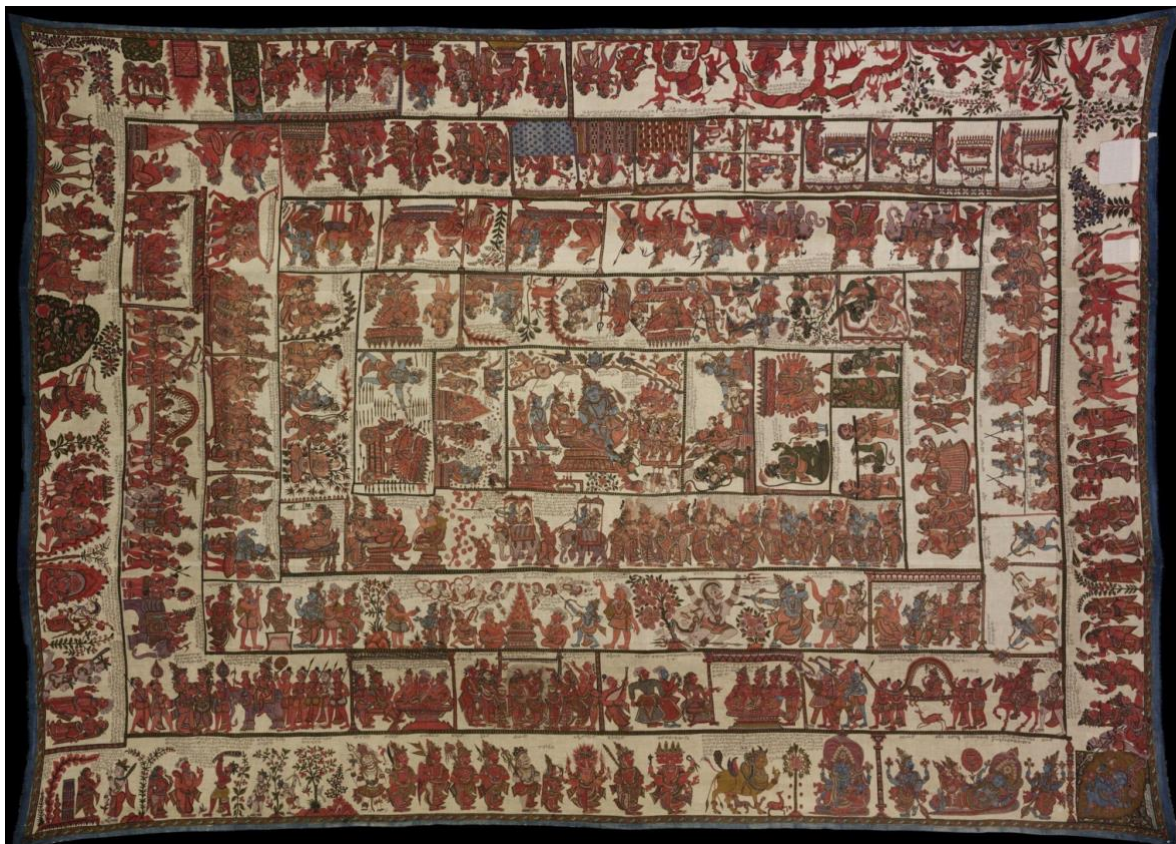


Figure 1: Painted and dyed Temple cloth, Andhra Pradesh, South India 1880.

Picture Source: V & A museum <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O143773/temple-cloth/>

Historical Narrative

With 3000-year-old history, Kalamkari is believed to be known in Persia in addition to India (Varadarajan, 1979). Referred to as “Vraata Pani” (‘Vraata’ meaning writing and ‘pani’ meaning work) in the native Telugu language, the craft was baptized as Kalamkari (‘kalam’ meaning pen and ‘kari’ meaning work in Urdu) by the Qutub Shahi dynasty (Chetty, 2012). The Kalamkari tradition of painting on cloth with vegetable dyes utilising an indigenous bamboo pen (kalam) is unique in many respects. The craft gradually diversified into a block printed secular medium to suit the Islamic aesthetics and is today practiced in printed and painted styles while both the styles share the same popular title ‘Kalamkari’. The commercial capital of the Nizam ruled Golconda state along the Coromandel coast; Masulipatnam (Machilipatnam in the present day) in Andhra Pradesh has been the base of this craft.

The earliest and closest reference to the term Kalamkari appears to be recorded by Watt (1903) as quoted by Tavernier, a dealer in the early 17th century as “*chintzes or painted calicuts, which they call Calmendar, that is to say done with a pencil are made in the kingdom of Golconda and particularly around Masulipatnam*”.

Patronized by the Moguls and later by the Europeans in India, the art form reached its pinnacle between the 16th and the 19th centuries (NFSC, 2002). The cotton paintings classified as ‘Early Coromandel’ are the earliest and also among the most impressive specimens of that class of work from which the European ‘chintz’ tradition subsequently developed (Irwin and Brett, 1970). The south-east coast often referred to, as the Coromandel Coast by the Europeans has been a flourishing stretch for trade of Kalamkari products. The first Kalamkaris to reach Western Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries excited immediate attention by their rich colors and fascinating detail (Hall, 1979).

The Painted

The trend in painting religious themes of Hindu mythology prevailed in and around Kalahasti in the North Arcot close to the temple of Tirupati. The Kalahasti style was more than just an art; it was rather a form of worship. Because of which the Kalahasti style was confined to local consumption for its religious base (Das, 1992). These temple hangings were executed with strong bold lines and simple contours, which enabled them to be readily appreciated across a distance. Kalahasti Kalamkari has a strong black outline, which remains something of a folk form and not anything like the finely painted Golconda cloths (Chishti, Jain and Singh, 2000). The entire story was laid out in rectangular panels (like those in present day comics) surrounding the main theme depicted in a square or circular panel. Free hand spontaneous drawing, with no prior planning of episodes is usually noticed (Ramani, 2007).

The need for religious hangings could have been originally responsible for the development of the skills involved in making large hangings and that subsequently these talents came to serve more secular commercial needs (Gittinger, n.d.,) “*The process of painting was so complex that one wonders how it was discovered*” (Chattopadhyaya, 1985). The very great demand for patterned trade goods may have forced out the kalam in favor of the more productive block method of work which may be perceived as a stage of adaptation.



Figure 2: Kalamkari/ Vraathapani depicting a scene from Ramayana with the detail written in Telugu script.

The Printed

Alongside the kalahasti temple cloths, a secular trend of the Kalamkari art, particularly flourished under the Muslim court patronage. The fall of the Vijayanagar empire in 1565, resulted in migration of the Hindu artists, as some moved to other courts in the Deccan, from which their influence spread northward. Under the patronage of the Mughal emperors secular format evolved from the existing religious Kalamkari. The dominant ideas that have differentiated this art into widely different forms may be said to be the uses to which they are put to. While the Hindus used them as canopies over the idols, the Muhammadans utilised them as prayer carpets or tents. By the 19th century, with the Industrial revolution in Europe, Iran had become the main market. The repetitiveness of the motif has encouraged a shift from the kalam (pen) to a block. In due course of time it is understood to have completely adapted to printing, for which Masulipatnam has and continues to be an important center in the South.

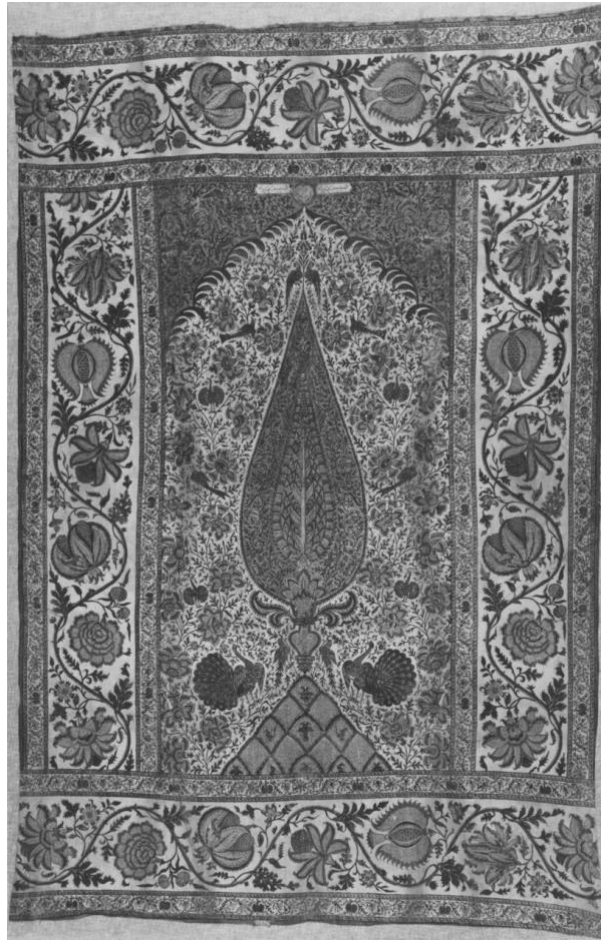


Figure 3: Ceremonial block printed, mordant dyed and resist dyed cotton from Coromandel Coast made in 1815.

Picture Source: V&A Museum <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O34080/hanging-unknown/>

The Chintz

Cotton paintings classified as “early coromandel” are the most impressive specimens of that class of work from which the Indo-European Chintz tradition subsequently developed (Irwin & Brett, 1970). These fabrics known as the Coromandel chintz were hugely popular among the European markets. The term appears in Indo-European trade records of the 17th and 18th centuries, and is derived from *chitta*, ‘spotted cloth’. It was gradually superseded by the Europeanized word ‘chintz’ (Irwin and Hall 1971, Irwin and Schwartz, 1966). Words may change in meaning with the passage of time and that the medieval connotation of the term Kalamkari would be conterminous with Chintz, while each region referred to them through different terms describing the nature of its technique. Their craze for this particular art- fabric and the resultant flourishing trade gave rise to different denominations used by the European buyers. The Portuguese termed it *Pintado* (painted or spotted); the Dutch named it *Sit* (painted) and the English referred to it as *Chintz* (Das, 1992). Probably, the English created much confusion by using painted and printed synonymously with *chintz* while the Portuguese and the Dutch used *pintado* and *sits* in the sense of Kalamkari (Varadarajan1979).



Figure 4: Woman's overdress of hand painted and dyed cotton.
Coromandel Coast 1760-1770 (made)

Picture source: V & A Museum <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O73105/overdress-unknown/>

Discussion

The Endurance

While it is assumed that terms art and craft are similar, craft objects are segregated as those, which often have what are loosely called practical or utilitarian functions, while paintings have depending on the view no function at all only an aesthetic use (Markowitz, 1994). Believed to be successors of the ancient texts with illustrations on palm leaves, Kalamkari diversified simplistically from an art to craft format. The temple art featuring the Hindu Gods and Goddesses evolved into a diverse medium of floral, geometric or abstract art formats under the Islamic influence. And further with the European influence it transformed as Chintz featuring hybridised & stylised florals on cotton fabrics. Featuring an array of floral compositions Chintz fabrics at first decorated walls, tables and bed covers. However, the rich vibrance of color, dainty detail of motif and the smooth cotton surface enabled its progression into clothing. This transition from temple art to the textile craft had a much meaningful impact as with the Chintz the kalamkari technique garnered global prominence.

As the Indian artist gradually transformed into a textile artisan the Kalamkari shifted in the form (i.e., the motif), the format (i.e., the product) and the technique (i.e., painted, printed or painted & printed). These adaptations could be attributed to the failing traditional/ religious markets initially followed by the restricted trade of the Chintz by the late 18th century and then the Industrial revolution in the 19th century. However, by the mid 20th Century Kalamkari (Vraathapani) was a dying craft. With the timely structured revival by the Government, it survived and prevailed as a prominent Indian traditional textile within the painted and printed textile category. All through these stages of transition the art and the artisans remained truly optimistic by practicing, teaching and sustaining the traditional indigenous knowledge. With a known history of five centuries (the oldest surviving examples date from the 15th -16th century and were made for export to South-East Asia, according to Dallapiccola and Crill, 2015) the journey of the craft through the highs and lows can undoubtedly be described as an optimistic existence.



Figure 5: Religious wall hanging. Artist: Mr. Theertham Balaji.

The Adaptation

Historically any reference to global Indian prominence in textile trade has never failed to mention the clever use of natural dyes by the Indian artisans. Though several writers described a ‘cotton painter...’ at his work, no name- no personality emerged; the Indian craftsmen who produced these lovely cloths remained anonymous, while the very simple Indo- European dress fabric remained a mere shadow of the rich technical resources evident in the large Kalamkaris made for covers, hangings and floor spreads (Hall, 1979). Neither the vernacular identity, Vraathapani nor the adopted title, Kalamkari, nor the Indian artisan gain much recognition in the global frontiers while the Chintz garnered appreciation as an exotic

Indian textile in Europe. It is this meagre and unpretentious nature of the Indian artisan (dyer or painter or printer) that made them remain in the background while they re-appropriated the indigenous knowledge to suit global appeal.

The patterned trade goods of the Coromandel coast were popularly referred to as the Masulipatnam paintings by the contemporary merchants and travellers. Though these were not made in Masulipatnam, it being the only good port on this part of Coromandel Coast served as a common ground for trade. In the Golconda style the subject matter inevitably reflected Persianized tastes, while Kalahasti inherited strong links with the art traditions of Vijayanagar. Yet transcending these recognizable differences of local tradition was the uniting factor of trade while both areas specialized in fine patterned cottons. The distinct visual differences between the two carved a new visual identity resulting in fruition of a new technique - the printed. In spite of the aesthetic and technical variations the craft co-existed sharing a common nomenclature featuring a resilient and a confident bond.

Subsequently when the production popularity of Kalahasti fell into deep decline at the beginning of the 20th century and the temple patronage declined and the local landlords lost wealth and powers of patronage, the craft suffered a setback. The revival in 1958 provided a platform to the few surviving artists (only two) to pass their knowledge to a modern generation of craftsmen. Until then, traditional crafts in India were ancestral and inherited through family links, but this revival was a structured intervention that broke the norms of ancestral inheritance indicating the keenness to nurture and sustain this cultural knowledge.

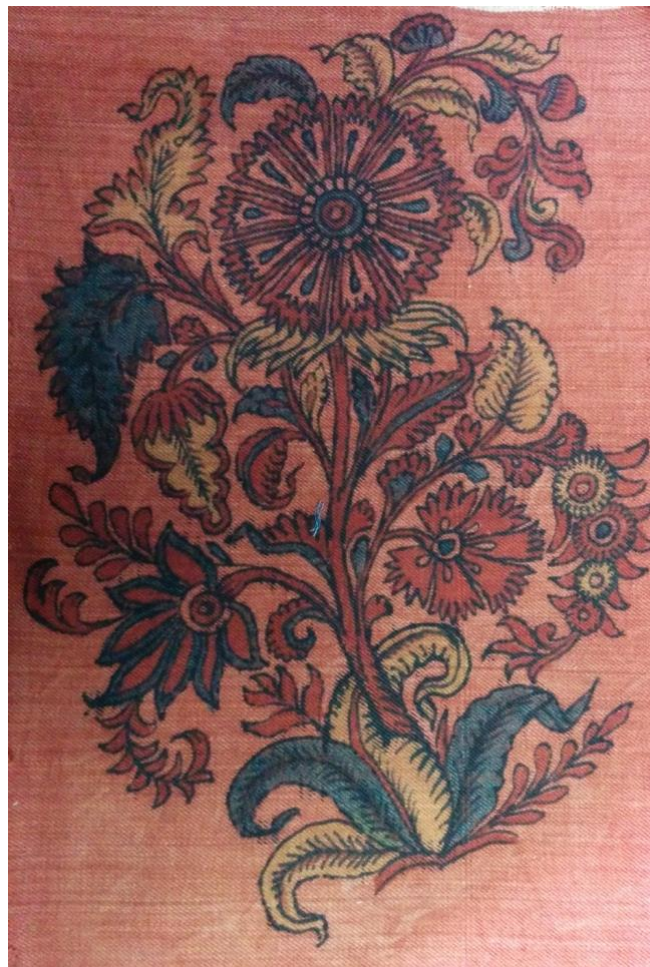


Figure 6: Floral painted Kalamkari/ Vraathapani on Denim. Artist: M Kailasam

The Transformation

“To preserve tradition is to continuously develop it” (Nugraha, 2010). While, crafts cannot just be limited to perform the role of keeping the traditions alive, they can only be alive when they serve to earn a livelihood.

The contemporary dimension of Kalamkari/ Vraathapani as a cultural textile may be perceived as an extension of its historical adaptation of Chintz. The technique of Kalamkari/ Vraathapani that was initiated as temple cloths gradually extended its application as Islamic prayer mats, tents, bed spreads, wall décor, and as an apparel fabric that grew into a phenomena called Chintz- Indo European fashion fabric. With this as an inspiring factor, the contemporary Kalamkari/ Vraathapani artisans soon were open work with the technique as a textile material.

This adaptation as a textile craft necessitated certain adjustments, for which the Vraathapani artists adjusted and reinvented some of the processes to suit the contemporary demands. The widened perspective of this tradition and heritage demanded a contemporary appeal with changes in the motifs, layouts, sizes and fabrics. Artists as they practiced the craft began to refine drawing styles while experimentation of motifs was initiated. Craft motivators in the form of non-profits or individuals with creative ideas encouraged this visual articulation. The gradual awareness of natural dyeing and its importance further complimented this progression.

The fashion orientation initiated by a few fashion designers proved helpful in projecting the craft as a medium of green fashion, making it pertinent for the socially responsible markets. Non- profits created societies with some craftsmen, trained women in skills of applying color with the use of kalam and generated employment while they executed independent design orders. Meanwhile the master craftsmen forged linkages through craft bazaars and set up independent workspaces while once again they employed skilled women labor. Such methods of work generated employment opportunities as it also propagated skill while the diversification as textile application gave more prominence to the craft.



Figure 7: Painted Kalamkari/ Vraathapani as a fashion textile by Designer Mr. Shashikanth Naidu

Conclusion

The indigenous art of ritualistic hangings endured variations and gradually progressed into a craft of lifestyle, textile and fashion relevance while the craftsmen showed restraint in holding the skills. The historical divergence into secular (Islamic influence) and ornamental (European influence) textile formats demonstrate the adaptable nature of the art form and the that of the artists. If not for this resilience of the art and the artists the traditional wisdom of Kalamkari/ Vraathapani would have vanished.

Textile crafts play an important and intermeshing role in creating a cultural identity, while fashion shares a sturdy bond with textiles. Similar to India's religious traditions craft traditions are a part of its great past. The indigenous production of Kalamkari marked with local identity that was restricted to ritualistic usage, had gradually diversified into a manner that perhaps the Kalamkari/ Vraatapani artists in the past would have never anticipated. But, the art with its characteristic regional identity has endured and extended its presence into a modern markets. The changing formats of the markets prioritised a shift in the focus of the craft. This change in reorientation of motif, the technique and product demanded role of craft traditions to be altered. Though a challenging task, the craftsmen with the limited resources but abundant skills attempted to reach newer and wider markets. Thus facilitating a change in

the orientation of the craft from a visual aid to a decorative hanging that pivoted the craft to churn into a meaningful occupation and a viable means of livelihood.

The show of resilience, coupled with optimism in re-orienting the format of the Kalamkari/Vraathapani has enabled an emergence of new markets, new linkages, creative occupation, and a dynamic image as an Indian cultural textile relevant even in the 21st Century.

References

- Bhushan, J. (n.d.). *The Costumes and Textiles of India*. Bombay: D B Taraporevala sons and Co Private Ltd.
- Chattopadhyayaa, K. (1975). *Handicrafts of India*. New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations.
- Chetty, G. (2012). *Srikalahasti Kalamkari (Vraata pani)*,. Srikalahasti: J Niranjana.
- Chishti, R., Jain, R. and Singh, M. (2000). *Handcrafted Indian textiles*. New Delhi: Lustre Press.
- Dallapiccola, A. and Crill, R. (2015). Introduction. In: A. Dallapiccola, ed., *Kalamkari Temple Hangings*, 1st ed. London: Mapin Publishing, pp.9-21.
- Das, S. (1992). *Fabric art*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Divakala, M. (2016). *Contemporary articulation and Sustainability of Painted Textile Tradition of South India- A case study on Kalamkari/Vraathapani*. dissertation.
- Divakala M. (2019). Kalamkari (Vraatapani): The humble foundation for the glorious Indian Chintz textiles, In: Intl conference on Recent Trends and Sustainability in Crafts & Design, IICD, Jaipur, India.
- Divakala M. (2020). "Charming Chintz- An Indo-European fashion fabric", In: Intl seminar on Costumes- past, conserved and present, Textile & Clothing Research Centre, New Delhi, India.
- Divakala, M. and Vasantha, M. (2017). 'Temple cloth to textile craft: The progression of kalamkari (Vraatapani) of Srikalahasti', *Craft Research*, 8: 1, pp.79-99, doi: 10.1386/crre.8.1.79_1
- Gittinger, M. (n.d.). Ingenious Techniques in Early Indian Dyed Cotton. *Marg*, 40(3), pp.4-15.
- Hall, M. (1979). Painters on Cotton: Collection in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. *Marg Publications*, pp.95-114.
- Irwin, J. and Brett, K. (1970). *Origins of Chintz*. London: HMSO.
- Irwin, J. and Hall, M. (1971). *Indian painted and printed fabrics*. Ahmedabad: Calico Museum.
- Irwin, J. and Schwartz, P. (1966). *Studies in Indo-European textile history*. Ahmedabad: Calico Museum of Textile.
- Markowitz, S. (1994). The Distinction between Art and Craft. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 28(1), p.55.

Nugraha, A. (2010). Transforming Tradition For Sustainability Through 'Teusm' Tool. *Synnyt/Origins*, [online] 3. Available at: <https://wiki.aalto.fi/download/attachments/70792358/nugraha.pdf?> [Accessed 23 Jun. 2015].

Ramani, S. (2007). *Kalamkari and traditional design heritage of India*. New Delhi: Wisdom Tree.

Varadarajan, L (1979). Towards a Definition of Kalamkari, *Marg Publications*, pp. 19-21.

Watt, G. (1987). *Indian art at Delhi 1903*. Delhi: M. Banarsidass.

Contact email: malini.divakala@nift.ac.in