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Kalamkari: Andhra Pradesh’s Painted and Printed Textile Art

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Kalamkari: Andhra Pradesh’s Painted and Printed Textile Art

Practice: 7 MCQs



A Kalamkari artist paints a design on cloth with a bamboo pen. Photo: Sneha G Gupta (CC BY-SA 4.0), via Wikimedia Commons. Resized.

One craft name covers two crafts, a pen style and a block style. This article covers the name, both styles, their history, how the cloth is made, the GI dates and recent news.

- **Meaning:** Kalamkari means “pen work”, from Persian *kalam* and *kari*.
- **Two styles:** Srikalahasti is painted with a bamboo pen. Machilipatnam is printed with wooden blocks.
- **Dyes:** natural dyes, such as indigo, alizarin and myrobalan. Alum is the mordant.
- **GI tags:** both styles are registered. Srikalahasthi was certified on 12 January 2006 and Machilipatnam on 10 July 2008.
- **Steps:** PIB and EAC-PM say 23 steps. IGNCA says seventeen for painted narrative cloth.

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1. What is Kalamkari, and why does one name cover two crafts?

Kalamkari is painted or printed cloth from Andhra Pradesh. One name covers two very different crafts. One is painted freehand with a pen. The other is printed with carved wooden blocks.

1.1 What does the word Kalamkari mean?

Kalamkari means “pen work”. The word comes from Persian. *Kalam* means pen. *Kari* means craftsmanship. PIB gives this meaning in a 2022 release.

Today the name covers two kinds of textile. Both are cotton or silk cloth from the Coromandel Coast. This coast covers parts of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu. One kind is painted. The other is block-printed.

A common slip is to think Kalamkari means only hand-painting. Block-printed cloth is Kalamkari too.

1.2 Where is Kalamkari made?

Andhra Pradesh has two main centres.

- **Srikalahasti** is the home of the pen style. Cloth here is painted with a bamboo pen.
- **Machilipatnam** is the home of the block style. Cloth here is printed with wooden blocks. The name is also spelled Masulipatnam.

Sahapedia places Srikalahasti in Chittoor district and Machilipatnam in Krishna district. India’s ODOP portal now lists Srikalahasti under Tirupati. The block printing is centred on Pedana, a small town 13 km from Machilipatnam.

1.3 Are the dyes natural?

Yes. Kalamkari uses natural dyes. The CCRT book says they come from roots, leaves, flowers and fruits. A PIB brochure calls them vegetable dyes. Indigo gives the blue.

Sources:

- PIB brochure on Indian handicrafts, 2023
- Sahapedia, Kalamkari: An Introduction

- PIB release, 20 January 2022
- Krishna district, One District One Product
- India.gov.in, ODOP: Srikalahasthi Kalamkari
- CCRT, Tribal and Folk Paintings of India (archive copy)

Kalamkari means only hand-painted cloth.

2. How do the Srikalahasti and Machilipatnam styles differ?

Both styles use natural dyes on cloth. Almost everything else differs. The tool, the themes and the way the workshop is run all change from one style to the other.

2.1 What is the Srikalahasti style?

The PIB brochure sums it up. The Srikalahasti style uses a bamboo pen. The EAC-PM report calls free-hand drawing its main trait.

- **Themes:** scenes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata run in a row, with the story written beneath. Some cloths tell local epics, such as the Katamaraju Katha.
- **Look:** bold, black, angular lines. The CCRT book says they were inspired by temple murals, such as those at the Veerabhadraswamy temple in Lepakshi.
- **Use:** the cloth was used as a canopy or backdrop in temples.
- **Workshop:** small family units, where family members work together.



A hand-painted Srikalahasti Kalamkari cloth with a peacock, flowers and vines. Photo: rajaraman sundaram (CC BY 3.0), via Wikimedia Commons. Resized.

2.2 What is the Machilipatnam style?

The Machilipatnam style is mainly block printing. The artist's pen lines are carved onto wooden blocks. The blocks then print the cloth again and again.

- **Blocks:** a cross-section of teak wood is generally used. The carvers are mostly from the carpenter community. The design stands out in relief, and the background is cut away.
- **Look:** stylised plants, creepers, geometric designs, animals and human figures. Sahapedia says this cloth was free from cultural or religious restraints.
- **Use:** clothing, prayer mats, bedspreads, tapestries and hangings.

- **Workshop:** a karkhana, or commercial workshop. Block makers, washers and printers work under one roof.



A round Kalamkari tablecloth printed with red and blue floral designs. Photo: $nowPearl (CC BY 3.0), via Wikimedia Commons. Resized.

2.3 How can you tell the two apart in a question?

Look at the tool first. A pen means Srikalahasti. Blocks mean Machilipatnam. Temple backdrops and epic scenes point to Srikalahasti. Plants, creepers and geometric designs on clothing or prayer mats point

to Machilipatnam.

Do not mix them up because both are “Kalamkari”. Each style also has its own GI registration, covered in section 5.



Tool and typical subject for each style. Original explanatory diagram.

Sources:

- PIB brochure on Indian handicrafts, 2023 (section 2)
- Sahapedia, Kalamkari: An Introduction (section 2)
- CCRT, Tribal and Folk Paintings of India (archive copy) (section 2)
- EAC-PM, Documenting Traditional Knowledge

Srikalahasti Kalamkari is made by printing cloth with carved wooden blocks.

Think it through: a cloth shows Ramayana scenes in a row, with the story written beneath. Which style is it?

Srikalahasti. The CCRT book says its cloths show Ramayana and Mahabharata scenes in a row, with a narrative beneath.

3. Why did the two styles grow apart?

Place and customers shaped each style. Srikalahasti served a temple. Machilipatnam served a port.

3.1 How did the temple shape Srikalahasti?

Srikalahasti is a major Hindu pilgrimage town. Its Srikalahastisvara temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva. Sahapedia says the cloth was mainly made for ritual use. It stayed inside the temple space.

The temple rose under the Pallava kings. It grew further under the Chola and Vijayanagara empires. Inscriptions record that Vijayanagara rulers such as Krishnadevaraya patronised it. The CCRT book says Srikalahasti flourished directly under the patronage of temples.

3.2 How did the port shape Machilipatnam?

Machilipatnam was a busy port in the late medieval period. It was especially busy from the 15th to the 17th century. It mattered to the Vijayanagara rulers and the Bahmani kingdom. Later it mattered to the Qutb Shahi kings.

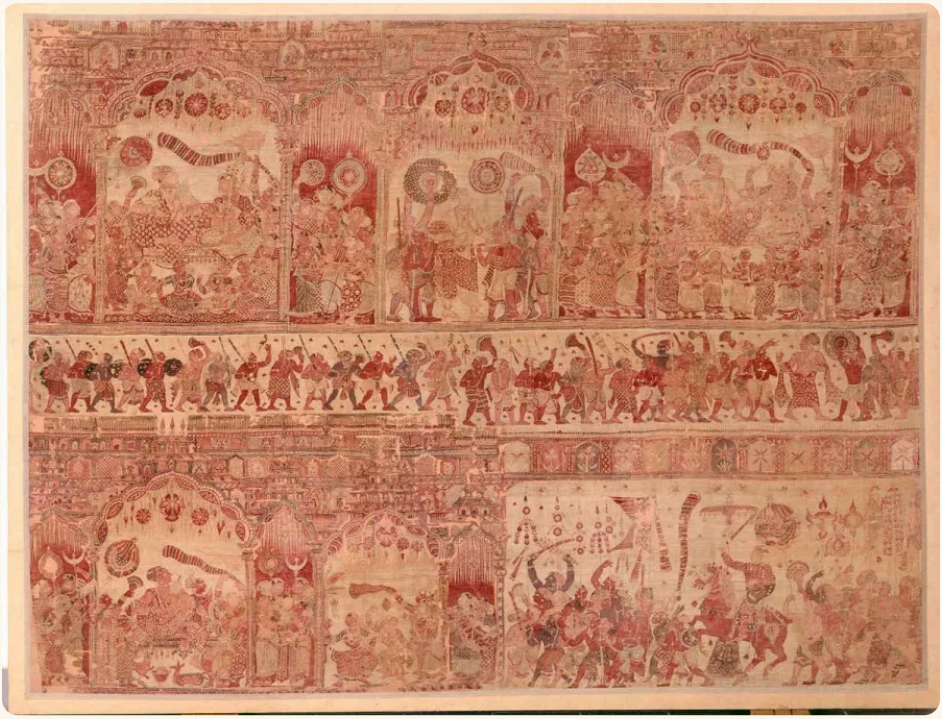
English, Dutch and French traders knew the port for textiles. Sahapedia calls it a “melting pot” of cultures. The CCRT book says the Golconda region was under Muslim rule. So the designs made at Masulipatnam suited Persian tastes.

3.3 Who bought the cloth?

Kalamkari travelled far from the coast.

- The CCRT book says Kalamkari items were exported to Europe and Iran from the 15th or 16th century.
- European merchants had their own names for it. The Portuguese said *pintado*. The Dutch said *sitz*. The British said *chintz*.
- A museum story says Machilipatnam cloth with non-figurative motifs went to European, Persian and South-East Asian markets.
- The V&A holds a jacket and petticoat from the Coromandel Coast, about 1750. It is painted and dyed cotton chintz made for export to Europe.
- Rulers such as the Nayakas and the Golcondas patronised the craft, and it changed in technique and design under them.
- Machilipatnam hangings called *mehrabs* were once designed for the Persian market.

The CCRT book and the EAC-PM report both say the craft flourished or gained popularity in the Mughal era.



A 17th-century Kalamkari hanging shows a royal procession passing a palace front. Photo: Unknown author (Public domain), via Wikimedia Commons. Resized.

Sources:

- Sahapedia, Kalamkari: An Introduction (section 3)
- CCRT, Tribal and Folk Paintings of India (archive copy) (section 3)
- Google Arts & Culture, Museum of Art & Photography story
- V&A, Indian textiles
- EAC-PM, Documenting Traditional Knowledge (section 3)

Machilipatnam cloth was made partly for export, including for the Persian market.

4. How is a Kalamkari cloth made?

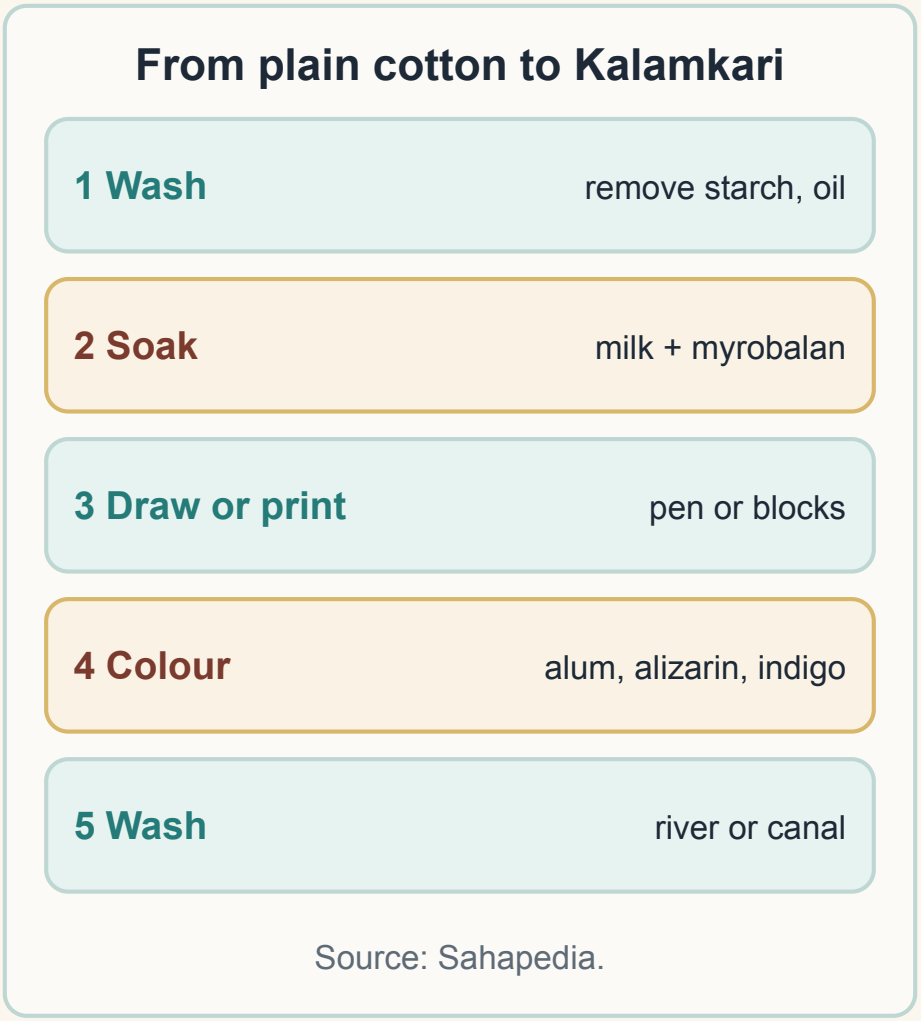
Making Kalamkari is slow work. The steps below follow Sahapedia's account of the two centres. A **mordant** is a substance that makes a dye stick firmly to cloth.

4.1 What happens before any colour goes on?

The cotton is prepared first.

- It is washed well to remove starch and oily substances.
- It is dipped in buffalo milk mixed with myrobalan fruit dust.
- The excess is squeezed out and the cloth is dried.
- At Srikalahasti, the artist then sketches with a charcoal pencil. The pencil is made from burnt tamarind twigs.

The EAC-PM report describes the same first soak as buffalo milk and astringents, dried in the sun.



Five broad stages from the Sahapedia account. Original explanatory diagram.

4.2 How does the Srikalahasti pen work?

The pen is a bamboo stick. One end is cut to a sharp tip. A piece of cotton is wrapped and tied near the tip.

- **Black outline:** the ink is called *kasim*. It is made from sugarcane jaggery, palm jaggery and rusted iron in water. It is kept about 21

days before use.

- **Red areas:** alum water is applied first. The cloth is then dipped in hot water with alizarin for about 45 minutes.
- **Yellow:** dust of ripe myrobalan fruit mixed with alum solution.
- **Blue:** indigo.
- **Washing:** the cloth is washed in the nearby river Swarnamukhi.

NID adds that alum is colourless. It acts as a natural mordant.

4.3 How do the Machilipatnam blocks work?

A separate block is used for each colour. Line drawings are not needed.

- Black and red parts are printed first. The cloth is then washed and boiled.
- Leaves from the local forest, called *gaja*, are added to the boiling water. They fix the colours.
- The cloth is dried and sent back for yellow and blue printing.
- It is washed again in boiling water. Finishing touches are given by hand.
- The CCRT book adds that wax covers the areas that should not take black or red.

4.4 How many steps are there?

Sources count differently.

- A PIB release of 2022 says the art involves 23 steps. They include dyeing, bleaching, hand painting, block printing, starching and cleaning.
- The EAC-PM report also calls Kalamkari a 23-step process.
- IGNCA says the painted narrative cloth goes through “a series of seventeen stages”.

Two government sources use 23. IGNCA counts seventeen for the painted cloth only. Name the source if a question asks.

Sources:

- Sahapedia, Kalamkari: An Introduction (section 4)
- NID D'Source, Kalamkari Work: Srikalahasti
- EAC-PM, Documenting Traditional Knowledge (section 4)
- CCRT, Tribal and Folk Paintings of India (archive copy) (section 4)
- PIB release, 20 January 2022 (section 4)
- IGNCA, A painted narrative on cloth

Before painting, the cotton is dipped in buffalo milk mixed with myrobalan fruit dust.

Remember this: how many steps do PIB and IGNCA count?

PIB and the EAC-PM report say 23 steps. IGNCA says seventeen stages for the painted narrative cloth.

5. Which Kalamkari styles hold a GI tag?

Both do. The dates below come from the IP India registry.

5.1 What is a GI tag?

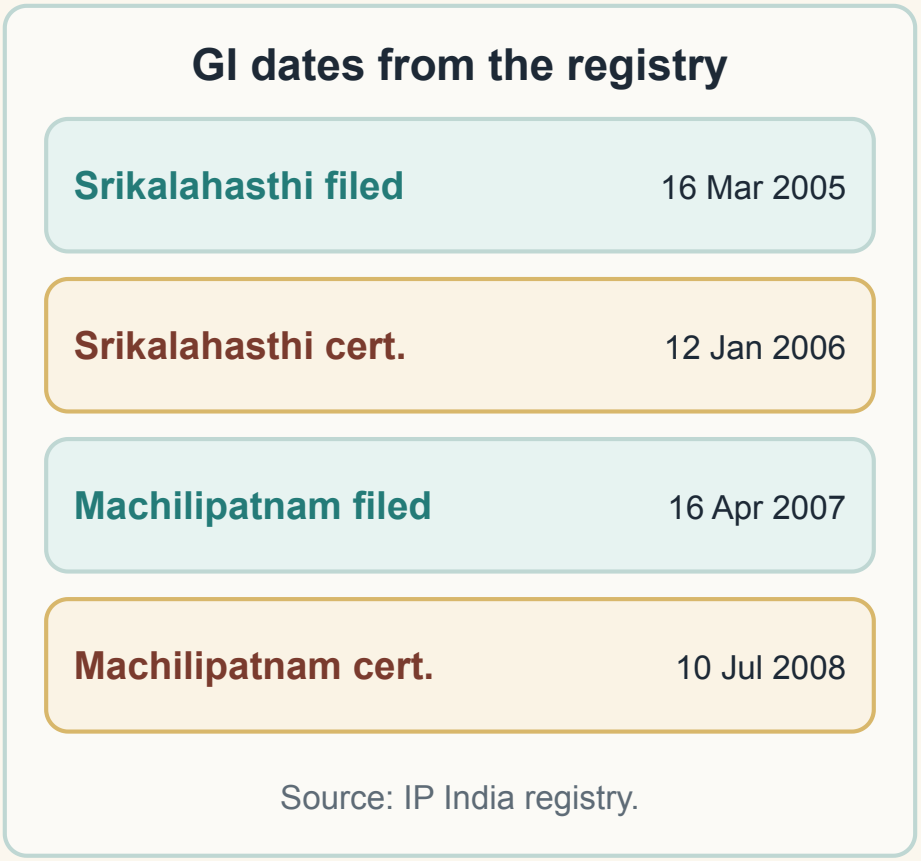
A **Geographical Indication (GI)** names goods that come from a place. The place must explain a quality, reputation or other trait of the goods. The Geographical Indications of Goods Act, 1999 sets this out. Producers' associations apply for registration.

The EAC-PM report says GI goods include handicrafts. It says Darjeeling Tea was the first Indian GI, in 2004-05. The report lists Srikalahasthi Kalamkari among its examples.

5.2 What do the registry records say?

- **Srikalahasthi Kalamkari:** application 28. The applicant is KARUNA, an artisans' group at Srikalahasti. Filed on 16 March 2005. Certificate 29 is dated 12 January 2006.
- **Machilipatnam Kalamkari:** application 90. The applicant is the Vegetable Hand-block Kalamkari Printers Association, Pedana. Filed on 16 April 2007. Certificate 71 is dated 10 July 2008.
- **Karuppur Kalamkari Paintings** is a separate GI from Tamil Nadu. It is application 424, filed on 28 May 2013.

The registry spells the first name "Srikalahasthi". Both Andhra Pradesh GIs are for handicrafts and cover classes 24, 25 and 27.



Filing and certificate dates for the two Andhra Pradesh GIs. Original explanatory diagram.

5.3 Why do some pages say 2013?

The Krishna district government page says Pedana (Machilipatnam) Kalamkari received its GI tag in 2013. The registry record gives the certificate date as 10 July 2008. The EAC-PM report also says 2008.

Use the registry date for exams. Remember the order too. Srikalahasti came first, in January 2006. Machilipatnam followed in July 2008.

Sources:

- IP India GI registry, application 28

- IP India GI registry, application 90
- IP India, Geographical Indications Act, 1999
- EAC-PM, Documenting Traditional Knowledge (section 5)
- IP India GI registry, application 424
- IP India list of registered GIs (archive copy)
- Krishna district, One District One Product (section 5)

Only Machilipatnam Kalamkari holds a GI registration.
Remember this: which Kalamkari GI came first?

Srikalahasthi Kalamkari. Its certificate is dated 12 January 2006. Machilipatnam's is dated 10 July 2008.

6. What is new in the news?

Government schemes keep Kalamkari in the news. None of the items below changes the facts above.

6.1 What is the One District One Product link?

Krishna district's ODOP page names Pedana Block Kalamkari Fabrics as its product. India's ODOP portal lists Srikalahasthi Kalamkari with its GI tag.

6.2 What did the 19 July 2026 release say?

On 19 July 2026, the Prime Minister shared an article by Union Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. It says traditional Indian craftsmanship can drive economic growth. The ways named are innovation and global partnerships.

Mr Modi said ODOP is helping local crafts gain market access. He also said it helps create sustainable livelihoods and preserve heritage. The release does not name Kalamkari.

6.3 Where has Kalamkari been displayed recently?

- **8 August 2024:** a new Textile Gallery opened at the National Crafts Museum and Hastkala Academy, New Delhi. It has about 150 objects in seven categories. One category is Kalamkari.
- **12 to 18 February 2025:** the Indie Haat event at the same museum listed Kalamkari painting among its crafts.
- **January 2022:** a Kalamkari work by artist Sudheer of Kalahasti was to be shown on a scroll at Rajpath for Republic Day.

Sources:

- PIB release, 19 July 2026
- Krishna district, One District One Product (section 6)
- India.gov.in, ODOP: Srikalahasthi Kalamkari (section 6)
- PM India, news update
- PIB release 2056759, Textile Gallery
- PIB release 2059503, Textile Gallery
- PIB release 2102958, Indie Haat
- PIB release, 20 January 2022 (section 6)

7. What should you remember for exams?

The exam facts are few and clear. Know the name, the two styles, the tools and the two GI dates.

7.1 Where does Kalamkari appear in school books?

NCERT's Class 8 history book, Our Pasts III, has a Kalamkari print in chapter 3, "Ruling the Countryside". Figure 5 on page 30 shows a print made by weavers of Andhra Pradesh. The book sets it beside a floral print by William Morris. Both prints use a rich blue called indigo.

An NCERT booklet, India: Unity in Cultural Diversity, says Kalamkari paintings and fabrics use vegetable dyes. It says they are mostly found in Machilipatnam and Srikalahasti.

7.2 What did UPSC ask in 2015?

UPSC Civil Services (Preliminary) Examination 2015, General Studies Paper I, Series A, Question 96.

Kalamkari painting refers to
(a) a hand-painted cotton textile in South India
(b) a handmade drawing on bamboo handicrafts in North-East India
(c) a block-painted woollen cloth in Western Himalayan region of India
(d) a hand-painted decorative silk cloth in North-Western India

The official UPSC answer key gives **(a)**. Kalamkari is hand-painted or block-printed cloth from Andhra Pradesh. View this question on the full 2015 paper.

7.3 What should you take away?

- **Name:** Kalamkari means “pen work”, from Persian *kalam* and *kari*.
- **Two styles:** Srikalahasti uses a bamboo pen. Machilipatnam uses wooden blocks.
- **Places:** Srikalahasti and Machilipatnam (Pedana) in Andhra Pradesh.
- **Dyes:** natural, such as indigo, alizarin and myrobalan. Alum is the mordant.
- **GI dates:** Srikalahasthi certificate on 12 January 2006. Machilipatnam certificate on 10 July 2008.
- **Steps:** 23 in PIB and EAC-PM. Seventeen in IGNCA for painted narrative cloth.

Sources:

- UPSC, CSP 2015 General Studies Paper I
- UPSC, CSP 2015 answer key
- NCERT Class 8 Our Pasts III, chapter 3
- NCERT, India: Unity in Cultural Diversity
- PIB release, 20 January 2022 (section 7)
- IP India GI registry, application 28 (section 7)
- IP India GI registry, application 90 (section 7)

Explain it back: what is the one-line difference between the two styles?

Srikalahasti is painted freehand with a bamboo pen. Machilipatnam is printed with carved wooden blocks.

Your understanding checks

Your 5 quick checks Answered 0 of 5 · Correct 0
This score resets when the page reloads.

Practice: 7 MCQs

Practice MCQs

1. Kalamkari's name comes from Persian words meaning 'pen' and what?

A. Painting

B. Cotton

C. Colour

D. Craftsmanship

See answer ↓

2. In which town is Machilipatnam Kalamkari block printing centred?

A. Kuchipudi

B. Srikalahasti

C. Pedana

D. Lepakshi

See answer ↓

3. Which tool is used to paint Srikalahasti Kalamkari?

A. Bamboo pen

B. Carved teak block

C. Metal stencil

D. Clay stamp

See answer ↓

4. Which statement about the GI registration of Andhra Pradesh's Kalamkari styles is correct?

A. Only Machilipatnam Kalamkari is registered

B. Only Srikalahasthi Kalamkari is registered

C. Neither style is registered

D. Both Srikalahasthi and Machilipatnam Kalamkari are registered

See answer ↓

5. According to the IP India registry, on what date was the GI certificate issued for Machilipatnam Kalamkari?

A. 12 January 2006

B. 16 April 2007

C. 10 July 2008

D. 28 May 2013

See answer ↓

6. How many steps does a 2022 PIB release say the Kalamkari art involves?

A. 17

B. 23

C. 12

D. 30

See answer ↓

7. Kalamkari painting refers to [UPSC CSP 2015, GS Paper I]

A. a block-painted woollen cloth in Western Himalayan region of India

B. a hand-painted decorative silk cloth in North-Western India

C. a handmade drawing on bamboo handicrafts in North-East India

D. a hand-painted cotton textile in South India

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **D.**
   Kalamkari combines the Persian words kalam, meaning pen, and kari, meaning craftsmanship. So the missing word is craftsmanship. PIB gives the same meaning. Sahapedia describes the name as work done with a pen.
   ↑ Q1
2. **C.**
   Block printing is centred on Pedana, a small town 13 km from Machilipatnam in Krishna district. The Krishna district page says production is limited to Pedana and nearby villages. Srikalahasti is the home of the pen style. Lepakshi is known for temple murals, not Kalamkari printing.
   ↑ Q2
3. **A.**
   Srikalahasti Kalamkari is painted freehand with a bamboo pen. The PIB brochure says so. Carved teak blocks belong to the Machilipatnam style. Sahapedia says the blocks are cut from a cross-section of teak wood.
   ↑ Q3
4. **D.**
   Both styles are registered. Srikalahasthi Kalamkari is application 28, with its certificate dated 12 January 2006. Machilipatnam Kalamkari is application 90, with its certificate dated 10 July 2008. Karuppur Kalamkari is a separate GI from Tamil Nadu.
   ↑ Q4
5. **C.**
   The IP India registry gives 10 July 2008 as the certificate date for Machilipatnam Kalamkari. The EAC-PM report also says 2008. The registry shows 12 January 2006 for Srikalahasthi. It shows 16 April 2007 as the filing date for Machilipatnam. The Krishna district page says 2013, which does not match the registry.
   ↑ Q5

6. **B.**
   A PIB release of 20 January 2022 says Kalamkari involves 23 steps. The steps include dyeing, bleaching, hand painting, block printing, starching and cleaning. The EAC-PM report also says 23. IGNCA counts seventeen stages for the painted narrative cloth only.
   ↑ Q6
7. **D.**
   This is UPSC Civil Services (Preliminary) 2015, General Studies Paper I, Series A, Q96. The official UPSC key gives (a). Kalamkari is hand-painted cotton cloth from Andhra Pradesh in South India. The other options give the wrong region or the wrong material.
   ↑ Q7

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