Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

“As technology advances at an alarming pace, the place of drawing remains as valid as ever in the creation of art...”
- Prince Charles

At dawn, as the cool breeze blows faintly, birds chirp to adore a brand new day that gradually begins. The lush green leaves of trees rustle as the fresh air blows on them. A walk on these streets leaves one observing a series of actions and expressions that add colour and vibe to the early morning experience.

The women folk of every household are all set to prepare for another traditional morning ritual. It is a quiet ambience as the preparation of Kolam begins gradually. While some women folk busy themselves in sweeping and brushing their thresholds, others are all set to prepare appealing patterns that dawn the day. The air is filled with the smell of fresh cow dung that is brushed along with water to clean the surface area. When the ground is spotlessly wet and shiny, some women, with a bowl in one hand sprinkle finely ground rice powder, through two or three fingers of another hand. The powder is sprinkled evenly along the curvy lines to complete different designs that stretch along the well cleaned roads of these streets. The entire street is covered with a variety of Kolam designs in different colours that seem to be an overall dramatic experience for an outsider.

1.1 Introduction

*Kolam* is a form of art prepared on the floors of the houses in Tamil Nadu. The meaning of Kolam is "guise". In Tamil, the word Kolam implies beauty, form and play. *Kolams* are beautiful sacred diagrams created by women. It is believed that when a beautiful
Kolam is drawn every morning or evening, the gods will bless their home and their families. Kolams are signs of holiness and good fortune in and around the domestic space.

1.1.1 History of Kolam

Tracing the history of Kolam is a difficult task. There is no exact historical proof or document for the origin of charting this art practice. The Indus Valley Civilisation (Suresh, 2003) and Sumerian culture (Kavita, 2006) were reported to have Kolam practices. According to the Mahabharata, the milkmaids (gopis) used to make Kolam to forget the pain that they experienced when their beloved Krishna was away (Chesky & Wolfmeyer, 2015). Vatsyayana, the author of Kamasutra speaks about Kolam and has been listed as one of the 64 forms of art (Claus, Diamond, & Mills, 2003).

1.1.2 Floor diagram practices in India

Floor diagrams of various kinds and genres are practiced throughout India. They are sanjhi in Brindavan, Mandana in Rajasthan, Rangoli in Gujarat, Alpana in Bengal, Muggu in Andhra Pradesh, Rangavalli in Karnataka and of course, the Kolam of Tamil Nadu, which is one of the most well documented forms of floor art (Suresh, 2003). Floor art is made by hand, using stencils, plates, and tubes and with stickers. Most floor diagrams are ephemeral but many are also semi-permanent; they can be renewed every day or made only for special occasions. The geometrical designs prepared by the women are spontaneous in nature. The hand movements are quick, fluid and seldom go wrong while the artwork is being drawn. Its makers, users and designers are mostly females; though men do get involved in the design aspect, especially in the production of computer-aided industrially printed diagrams. The expertise found in women drawing Kolams presupposes the fact that education has nothing to do with this artistic talent. Most of the women who are involved in the traditional Kolam preparations have not undergone formal education. Despite this, they are well guided by their instincts and inherent talents when it comes to designing and preparation of Kolams. This study will substantiate the feminine sensibility that is a characteristic of Indian art.
1.1.3 Practice of Kolam among people

There are many factors that influence the quality and quantity of every Kolam. Some of them are gender, age, traits, interests, psychological condition, time factor, space, time, geographical situation, profession, economic condition, health condition, religious practices and beliefs, and education. For example, the colour of the art may vary according to the age, gender, traits, interests, time, profession and health condition of the maker. Youngsters may prefer vivid colours in the Kolam than the white traditional Kolam made out of rice powder. The size of the art depends on the occasion, number of members involved in the preparation, economic situation of family, body structure and movement of the maker.

The movement of hands during the preparation of floor art is quicker than the way mind works. This way researcher also tries to make an attempt to study this phenomenon of prehension which involves thinking, visual, and action process.

1.1.4 Kolam, a medium for communication

Every floor design drawn on the floor communicates some kind of message. The floor design consists of three major elements: Illustration which is the design itself, Narrative- the story that the floor design depicts and the Metaphor, the story behind the floor design. Through this research an attempt will, also, be made to understand the varied concepts of symbol illustration, narration and metaphors which not only construct a strong base for this art form. Further they act as a medium for transforming cultural and religious beliefs from generation to generation based on a common spiritual plane. Therefore, major part of the research will concentrate on this idea/ concept/area. Here, one should note that Illustration, narration and metaphor are closely interrelated. These components may vary according to various factors like culture, tradition, and belief systems. The variations that are observed in the final result is the outcome of these three crucial elements that work in interplay with the person’s attributes.

The floor art which is usually drawn in the front of the house is a creative expression of the women. This expressive art form which is nothing but the spiritual distribution of colours provides an opportunity to the women to express their creativity in the given
space allowing their expressive imaginative language to grow and expand without any restrictions.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 1 Women engaged in Kolam sketching*

Space and the floor art are interrelated. The drawings on the floor have the power to occupy the space. Through the practice of these sacred patterns and decorations the women get a feeling of owning that space and the entire house occupied by the floor design.

India is famous for its rich culture and traditions. Each state has its own language, cuisine, festivals, culture, and traditions. These vibrant patterns, which are drawn on the doorsteps, are not solely for decorative purposes but also embody a deep religious spirit too.

Given such a large variety of designs and formats and such a large geographical expanse, as the researcher, have chosen to focus on Kolams in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka following the Tamil traditions for both pragmatic and intellectual reasons. At a pragmatic level, floor art and its makers in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka are easily accessible. Moreover it was able to communicate with the women who make the art and on other subjects around them. Further, proximity to both the locations made it easier to follow the cycle of local festivals and the art that is made for it as well as everyday practices. At a design level, the differences between the floor art of Tamil Nadu and Bangalore fascinate me. At this very preliminary stage, the researcher can characterize the former as more traditional and ritualistic and the latter as modern. Thanjavur is perceived as, more “traditional” but it is also a town that is rapidly
modernizing. Bangalore is perceived as “cosmopolitan” but there are many communities in which “tradition” is valorised selectively. Given that floor diagrams are understood as markers of tradition, it would be an interesting exercise to identify how tradition is perpetuated in daily life and how it is ruptured by situating my project in two different contexts, one urbanizing and one completely urbanized and globalized.

1.2 Need for the study

Along with a focus on these above aspects, this study is interested in how gender, class, market economics, and competitions play a major role in the performance of floor art. Documenting and analyzing the shifts and transformations in practice and meaning of making floor diagrams is of very high relevance in the current times of cultural shifts. The study can contribute and participate in the growing body of research on how tradition and innovation are defined in the field of the vernacular visual arts.

1.3 Research Gap

There are different studies conducted on the theme of Kolam in limited areas. During the research, it has come to the notice that three major studies were done extensively (Laine, 2009), (Nagarajan V. R., 1998), (Smit, The Art of Longing and Belonging: Kolam as a Reflection of Women's Complex Relations with Identity and Power in Contemporary India, 2013) and few research papers were published based on or related to Kolam. Laine’s (2009) study emphasizes on the perceptual notions of participants in Kolam, Nagarajan (1998) focuses on Kolam as a ritual and art form embraced by diverse culture while Smith (2013) in a study done lately on Kolam specifies on identities created by women in a contemporary scenario through their narratives and discourses of the art form.

The relevance of the study is in its holistic approach to understanding Kolam, with a special reference to the culture of Tamil Nadu, by considering its family and societal dimensions. Starting from the materials, colours and patterns, the study relates to family traditions, religious customs, social perspectives and responsibility to nature and the environment. The terminology of Illustration, Narration and Metaphor and their interplay is the connecting factor for the analysis of all different dimensions of Kolam.
1.4 Research Questions

1. As a simple art form and an integral part of a family/community/society, what are the various functions and roles of Kolam in interweaving splendid features and ingredients of culture?
2. How does the floor art provide women as performers of Kolam, an opportunity to participate fully in and around in the society, while living in closed spaces of their homes?
3. As one of the floor arts practiced in India, how does Kolam uplift the creativity and innovations among the makers?

1.5 Key Words/Terminology

1.5.1 Interplay

Interplay refers to the relation of two or more entities and their effect on each other. It can also refer to the reciprocal relationship between two entities. The study proceeds to interconnect three terminologies namely Illustration, Narration, and Metaphor.

1.5.2 Illustration

Illustration is a representation to communicate complex messages and ideas. It helps in communicating, persuading, informing, educating, and entertaining ideas with clarity, vision and style. In this study illustration will refer to the physical appearance of the Kolam design drawn on the floor. It also refers to the elements and principles involved in the art of drawing a Kolam. Illustration is the first approach towards a visual idea. It marks an entry to the world of symbolic representations of the real being.

1.5.3 Narration

Narration is the process of discourse where a particular situation or incident is told to the audience. The narrator could either play the role of a passive observer or an active character in the situation or story. Every representation holds two views of narration. The maker or the artist has an intended thematic meaning, idea or story to show through the visuals. The viewers’ role is to watch and interpret the visual representation. Thus,
every Kolam design has a message that relives the representation. These messages hold significance to related occasions.

1.5.4 Metaphor

The metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denotes one kind of an object or idea and is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them (Sakadolskis, 2003). Human lives, thoughts, and cognition are socked with metaphors (Singh, 2013). They play an important role in the cognition of images. According to Donald Davidson, an iconologist, the basic role of metaphor is to convey ideas. Metaphors come into existence when we use ‘…words or constructions to make novel references’ within a framework (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

1.5.5 Kolam Art

Kolam is an art drawn by women on the floor using rice powder in front of houses. It is mainly practiced among the Tamil Hindus, especially in the southern part of India. Different types of shapes and designs are used in the making of the Kolam.

1.5.6 South Indian Tradition

South India consists of four major states such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Another name for these regions can be termed with reference to Dravidian culture/tradition. South Indian tradition is unique from rest of the Indian regions. It is a unique tradition blended with a long history, religious practices and belief systems, caste, linguistic connections, economic system, political practices, flora and fauna, art and artifacts, and educational systems (Peregrine & Ember, 2003).

1.6 Objectives of the Research

The objectives of the research are to explore Kolams through specific aspects such as mythologies, gender, family impact, trends, space, and time.

1. To study the illustration, narration and metaphor of Kolam in diverse backgrounds.
2. To study diverse mythologies, legends, folklores and beliefs associated with the performance and practice of Kolam in the context of pluralistic religion and the multicultural context of urban life.

3. To study the design elements of floor diagrams. This involves the colours, shapes, motifs, lines, dots, and curves of floor art as practiced in these places.

4. To study how the process of floor art make the womenfolk to own the space including the living space and thus get connect to the society.

5. To observe the religious dynamics in ritual floor art. This might help in the understanding of floor art as a ritual which creates faith and devotion among believers.

6. To study the art form as a medium for self-expression of women folk.

1.7 Perception and Understanding

Perception is the process of becoming aware or conscious of a thing or things (Craigie, Murray, Simpson, & Edmund, 1884). Any object must be understood by the mind through the interplay of five senses - sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell. This ability to interpret this sensation is known as perception. A perception is an act carried out by every human and animal being. According to Kant, perception is the starting point of all cognition (Bähr & Lenk, 2002). In that sense, one has to transform the imaginative contents into sensible tangible form. Every art is such a process where one tries to perceive, understand and experience through senses.

1.8 Human Need for Religion through Art

Humans create a culture among all living beings. Art is a means of expressing his/her metaphysical, unreachable and imaginative realities of the world. They create images and visuals in their mind for reverence and worship. These visuals of mind are translated into visible icons or arts (Rao R., Indian Temple Traditions, 1997). This is the basis of religion. The first part is the religious aspect and the later part is the art.
1.9 **Meaning of Kolam**

Kolam, meaning “guise”¹, drawn on the threshold of a house is a simple and fine-looking floor drawing prepared far and wide. It is a traditional practice in every Hindu Tamil home. The threshold of the house adorns beautifully drawn Kolams every morning. Universally, this is an exclusive practice followed in every household by womenfolk.

1.10 **India and rich the tradition of floor art**

India’s pluralistic culture, is known for its spirited floor art practiced across the nation. This tradition in Indian, is followed with drawings on thresholds, walls, prayer halls (or pooja rooms) with thematic patterns and designs. According to Dutta and Suresh, across the country there are various names by which these practices are known (Dutta, The Mystery of Indian Floor Paintings, 2011) (Suresh, 2003).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Floor/wall art</th>
<th>State</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Alpona</em></td>
<td>Bengal and Assam</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Aripana, Madhubani or Mithila</em></td>
<td>Bihar</td>
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<td><em>Pakhamba</em></td>
<td>Manipur</td>
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<td><em>Jinnuti and Patachitra</em></td>
<td>Orissa</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Mandana</em></td>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
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<td><em>Rangoli</em></td>
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<td><em>Sathia</em></td>
<td>Gujarat</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Chowkpurana or Sonarakha</em></td>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
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<td><em>Likhnu</em></td>
<td>Himachal Pradesh</td>
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<td><em>Apna</em></td>
<td>Almora and Nainital</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Muggulu</em></td>
<td>Andhra Pradesh</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Rangavalli</em></td>
<td>Karnataka</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Kolam</em></td>
<td>Tamil Nadu</td>
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</tbody>
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¹ Words that are similar to Kolam can be alaku (beauty), rasa (taste), niram (colour), and latcanam (luster)
1.11 Major contributions of the study

The study is done with an expectation to contribute major aspects of knowledge in the area of art, culture and society. Some of the major areas of contribution are:

1. The study has helped in understanding diverse forms of art and culture in India. It has contributed to the threshold of knowledge specifically laying emphasis on the exposition of a traditional form of art and its impact on the present scenario of understanding this tradition. It has evolved a youthful spirit of influencing the younger generation to develop modern forms of this traditional approach.

2. Dying Traditions: Kolam has had a long lasting tradition and its presence and preparation is unique. Though its origin dates back to the significance of using special ingredients to prepare it, presently the art seems to be slowing fading away. The study has gone in detail to understand the original form of this dying art and tradition.

3. Study on art education: There are many elements of design used in this art form. These elements of design form a foundation to develop expertise in the field of drawing and adding colourful combinations that appealing to one’s sight. If Kolam as an art form, it can be beneficial to develop good skills in art education.

4. The significance of Kolam in religion: The study has enlarged its boundary by enchanting the significance of the art form within the socio-religious context.