Chapter 1: History, Origin & Significance of Floor Art

Ephemeral floor art or rangoli is a manifestation of the beliefs and customs of the groups of population in different parts of the world. It is in a way a reflection of the cultural psyche of people. Hence it would be worthwhile to take a brief survey of the background that might have led to the creation of the ephemeral art. A search of its background leads one to explore the historical past. Similarities of beliefs in various civilizations are noted here.

Introduction:

In the pre-Vedic age, man faced the powers of the five natural elements, namely, Prithvi (earth), Aap (water), Vayu (air), Tej (luster), Aakash (ether). With experience and observation man realized that till these natural elements do not display their rudra or fierce nature, they contribute to his well being and prosperity but in their fierce form they can create havoc and endanger his life and well being. Man began to worship them so as not to incur their wrath.

Even today the following verse is recited in the morning prayers:-

Prithvi sagandha sarasastathapah sparshi vayurjwalanam satejah

Nabhah sashabadam mahata sahaite kurvantu sarve mama suprabhatam

Which means- Let the Earth, full of fragrance, the water, having different tastes, the wind whose touch is very pleasing, the lustrous burning (sun), the sky full of words (sounds of winds and clouds), make my dawn (the early morning) pleasant.
The experience gained by the primitive man facing the powers of the elements, earth, water, fire, air and ether stimulated awe and in turn these elements were worshipped as conscious entities in different symbolic forms.

In some places he left traces of his creations which were expressive of his experiences, his aspirations and his fears as well as of his close contact with nature. The pre-historic cave paintings give testimony to this fact. Few other traces of his existence left behind by him in the form of bone and stone implements, pottery and clay figurines emphasize his creativity. The need to make an object personal and the desire for self-expression later led to the decoration of these objects. He decorated them with motifs taken from his surroundings, from the elements that dominated his life and those whose hidden powers he wished to control. This need for creation and expression reflects man’s innate need not only to express himself but also to affirm life and immortality- the conviction that death is not real, that man has a soul and that it does not perish – beliefs arising out of the deep need to overcome the fear of personal destruction.

Dr. Devangana Desai points out that, the religious impulse of primitive man is directed “primarily to one end only, i.e., the conservation and promotion of life. This end is served in two ways, one negative, one positive, by the riddance of whatever is considered to be hostile and by the enhancement of whatever is conceived of as favourable to life. The dual task before primitive man is to get rid of evil - hunger and barrenness and to secure good - food and fertility.  

Man’s experiences taught him about his frail and fleeting existence, subject to infirmity and old age and ending in death. This was true not only with respect to himself but also his family, his fields, cattle, hearth and home. All these beings and all these things, mortal and frail as they are, can only withstand the ever-present danger and misfortunes if constantly strengthened by the life-giving powers of some sort of ritual and magic.

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For magic in its essence is the conviction that, by the utterance of the appropriate spell and the performance of correct ritual gestures, man can bind and bend to his will all that is incalculable, dangerous and adverse in the potentialities of chance. Magic, in short is a supernatural technique by which man can, in his conceit, bring about all that which his rational technique fails to accomplish.\textsuperscript{15}

According to Frazer, Magic is an early step of religion and science.\textsuperscript{16}

This led to a deep need for performing certain acts under controlled circumstances which created the desired situation, when the unknown was made known. Thus rituals were built around ritualistic objects specially prepared for the purpose, or the very act of making the object was the enactment of a ritual. Every gesture, movement, syllable spoken or chanted was laid down. Through this not only were the supernatural powers propitiated but power descended upon those who were involved in the rituals. This led to the creation of symbols which enriched man's life and gave him a sense of power in his ability to synthesize the known and the unknown.

While discussing the role and origin of pictorial symbols- Mackenzie writes that all the ancient art practices were rooted in religious and magico-religious beliefs.\textsuperscript{17}

Pre-historic cave paintings where animals are shown with spears pointed towards them or piercing their bodies is an enactment of a ritual. The ritual hunting dance of the Maria tribe in Central India, performed before the hunt, re-enacts the whole procedure and the animal is ritually hunted down. It is only after this performance that the hunters proceed for hunting for they feel that they have acquired the strength of the defeated and have control over their situation. Among the Northern tribes of Central Australia, the men of the Thalaualla or Black Snake totem, when they perform the rites for the purpose

\textsuperscript{15} Malinowski Bronislaw, \textit{The Dynamics of Culture Change}, Yale University Press, 1961, p.48.


\textsuperscript{17} Donald Mackenzie, \textit{The Migration of Symbol}, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1926, p.x.
of increasing the numbers of this snake species, paint partly symbolic and partly imitative designs on the
ground with red ochre and other coloured earths and charcoal.\(^{18}\)

The principle of sympathetic magic is applied here. Similar practices are followed by various tribes in
different parts of the world. Thus one can infer that the aspect of sympathetic magic lends itself to
artistic treatment throughout the world.

The people of IVC like their counterparts in Mesopotamia and elsewhere, employed symbols to
represent their beliefs, some of which might have come down from the hoary past when man was living
in the Stone Age.

Rai Govind Chandra in his study on symbolism says, “No people, however hard their lives might have
been, could spend all time and all their energies in the acquisition of food and shelter. Even the earliest
tribes are known to have some thoughts about the creation of the world, the continuation of life after
death, the cause of the elemental fury, etc. It appears as if the primitive mind, afraid of divulging its
knowledge about life and nature lest the elemental forces might take revenge, hid it in abstract forms
though preserving the outward appearances of the objects embodying its theories, so that the origin of
its beliefs might be remembered and communicated secretly by drawing the symbol on the ground and
explaining its meaning in the ears of the disciple as is done among primitive tribes inhabiting Africa,
Australia and India even today. These symbols in years to come must have acquired magical potency like
our \textit{yantras} and would have been painted or carved at random on all household goods to bring good
luck to their owners and protect them from evil forces. The knowledge about their meaning having been
once confided to the witch-doctors, who acted as priests, would have slipped from the memory of the
other members of the tribes after a few generations”.\(^{19}\)


\(^{19}\) Govind Chandra Rai, \textit{Indian Symbolism: Symbols as sources of our Customs and Beliefs}, Munshiram Manoharlal
Floor Paintings are a ritualistic part of many ancient cultures. In America the Native tribal medicine men drew patterns on floors to invite friendly spirits and cure the patient. The Australian aborigines too created dot paintings to depict their dreamtime stories. These dot paintings drawn by the elders in the clan, were used to cover secret-sacred ceremonies, the details of which were not revealed to anyone outside the clan. The clan elders sang their way through the painting process, imparting tribal knowledge to younger members of the clan. In Haiti island near Cuba, the priests draw design on the floor and subsequently the design is obliterated by the dancer. Before obliteration people can kiss the design. These designs are called veve or vever. The African aborigines also drew magic diagrams on the floor with respect to rites of fertility and creation. Similar practices are still followed by the tribals in various parts of India.

The Tibetan sand painting or mandala sand painting is a part of Tibetan tantric art tradition and is drawn for healing and meditation purpose. Indeed the significance of floor paintings is varied yet very much alike.

An interesting fact is that, though floor painting was practised in many cultures throughout the world, it has survived only in India with respect to day to day practice of the art by women. It is very much a living tradition here.

The floor art is practised in various parts of India. Its significance is much wider than the aesthetic and decorative purpose. According to Mulk Raj Anand, “the sources of the folk painting lie in the protection sought by Homo sapiens in the magical drawing, which may prevent the auras of bad spirits from coming into the house”. This tradition continues down the

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history of man till date. Art was also used as instrument of magic at all levels of society at all the time.\textsuperscript{22}

Floor art known as \textit{Rangoli} in Maharashtra, is known as \textit{Sathiya} in Gujarat, \textit{Kolam} in Tamilnadu, \textit{Muggulu} in Andhra Pradesh, \textit{Rangavali} in Karnataka, \textit{Chowkpurana} in Northern India, \textit{Mandana} in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, \textit{Aipan} in Bihar, \textit{Alpana} in Bengal, \textit{Osa or Jhunti} in Orissa, \textit{Poovidal} in Kerala and so on....... In fact the word \textit{rangoli} is often used as a synonym for any kind of traditional Indian floor art.

Classification and nomenclature is essential to structurally organize such a vast multiplicity of forms, however, it is equally important to go beyond the nomenclature to understand that which binds all these forms into one unifying whole. Apart from being a symbol of auspiciousness, the art of \textit{rangoli} is in fact drawing of magic diagrams for rituals, to ward off evil, to invoke the deity, to fulfill the wishes when taking a vow (\textit{vrata}), for meditative purposes and to create a sacred space within the confines of home. It is intimately linked with agricultural life and village tradition. The tradition is carried forward by women, who have kept this art alive by passing the expertise down through the generations. The women elaborate their vision in forms by which the floor is covered with the magic potency in patterns. No brush or tool of any kind intervenes between the hand of the artist and the ground. This direct contact of the finger, powder or paste and ground allows the direct translation from her inner vision and experience into visible form. Walked on by family and friends, the drawings become blurred and disappear only to be renewed the next morning. Its value lies solely in its creation and it is not meant to last. The ephemeral nature of \textit{rangoli} symbolizes the frailty and the ephemeral aspect of everything in this world.

The most important place for the floor design is the front of the main entrance. On festive days it is also made in the verandah, the forecourt and the floors inside the house, especially in the kitchen and in front of the altar.

\textsuperscript{22} Niharranjan Ray, \textit{An Approach to Indian Art}, Publication Bureau, Punjab University, Chandigarh, 1974, p.35.
It is very likely that the floor designs were initially drawn by spreading powder/dust or by creating lines on a layer of powder/dust (dhool-paati in Maharashtra). The Italian traveler Pietro Della Valle (1623) has left a vivid account of the village schools in South India and the methods of instruction they followed, including the process of learning by rote and the use of fine sand strewn on the floor for writing, methods which survived in full force till the recent times in the villages.23

Perhaps the necessity of drawing with a solution of ground powder first arose when it was intended to be drawn on walls and pillars. It would thus not be inappropriate to assume that the drawing on the floor preceded all the other types of art.

It is observed that in the writings of the scholars of Indian folk art, the art of painting on the wall and floor is hardly differentiated. Both the types are generalized and termed as rangoli or any of its synonyms. This generalization may be true if we consider the literal meaning of the word ‘rangavali’ which means ‘rows or creepers in colour’ but on minute observations the difference between the two is revealed. Some of the differences are as follows:

In the ancient treatises, paintings are classified as being shashvatak (permanent) and takalik or kshanik (temporary or momentary). The wall paintings definitely come under the former type as it lasts or are made to last at least for a year in the village homes and it is needless to say about the life of rock paintings of cave man and paintings at Ajanta, Bagh etc. where as the floor paintings come under takalik or kshanik category. The ancient treatises also classify the paintings as bhauma-chitra and bhitti-chitra, thus further elaborating the difference.

Some ancient treatises like the ‘Shilparatna’ classify the paintings as ‘rasa chitra’ (wet paintings made using some sort of paste) and ‘dhuli chitra’ (powdered paintings). Floor paintings come under both the categories as it is made with dry as well as wet medium but the wall paintings come only under rasa chitra category. Pertaining to this differentiation, the technique of drawing also differs. Rasa chitra is almost always drawn using some tool like a brush, a stick or a piece of cloth where as the dhuli chitra is invariably drawn by using fingers only. As mentioned earlier, the necessity of drawing with a solution of ground powder must have arose when the painting was intended to be drawn on the walls.

In terms of the motifs drawn, it is seen that the motifs on the floor are highly symbolic as compared to the walls, where, many times natural forms of plants, birds and animals seen around, are employed. To site a few examples – the Warli tribes of Maharashtra draw the triangular shaped human figures performing day to day activities on the walls (though in a simplified abstract forms) whereas their floor paintings consists of simple shapes like circles, called bhovara. Similarly the wall paintings in the villages of Rajasthan consist of motifs seen around in the nature, like the peacock, tiger, and various other birds and animals forms. Even the deities are represented anthropomorphically on the walls but in the floor paintings the motifs are highly symbolic, like two interlocked triangles representing the goddess. Even the vegetative motifs like the stem of a brinjal or water chest-nuts drawn on the floor are highly symbolic.

Thus the wall paintings and floor paintings definitely differ from each other in terms of the medium, technique, longetivity and motifs.

**Rangoli: Rock paintings of India and Indus Valley Civilization**

The origin of rangoli goes back to the hoary past and scholars of Indian arts have tried to show its link with ancient magic rites and rituals. Parallels can be drawn with early rock paintings of India and drawings found on seals and amulets of the Indus valley.

The archaic Indian rock paintings are symbolic representations of the primitive way of life. Some symbols common to these paintings and rangoli designs are Swastika, Sun, Moon and Stars,
Chakra, Spirals, Labyrinths, Trident, Vajra, Cross, Mangala-ghata and some triangular and quadrangular patterns very similar to rangoli.  

The art of the Indus valley reveals the earlier visual expressions of the people of India, linking rites and symbols with the contemporary art and ritual of villages and tribes. The motifs like the Swastika, crosses, the spirals, the knot, the checker board, the mother goddesses, the snakes and many more found in the early rock paintings of our country are also found in the vast amulets and seals of the Indus valley. These motifs are commonly used in the rangoli art even today.

The loop or knot pattern used in kolam designs is believed to be a universal symbol of protection which originated thousands of years ago. A design representing endless knot is also found on some Indus Valley seals. Regarding this loop motif from IVC, Irene Gajjar points out that similar patterns are common in pre-dynastic Egypt and in Sumer especially in the early periods where they are known to have had a talismanic significance. The Indus Valley representations of such designs probably had equivalent connotations and possibly they are survivals of an early symbolism.

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Historically, the worship of snakes dates back to antiquity. An amulet from Harappa shows Garuda flanked by two snakes. Another seal from Mohenjo-daro shows a seated deity worshiped by a kneeling figure on either side. Behind each worshipper is seen a cobra with raised hood. Snake worship and its drawing in rangoli related to some rituals is practised very widely all over the country.

The figure of the upside down nude woman with plants issuing from her womb along with the inscription at the side is found on a seal from Harappa. It is associated with fertility and the female goddess. The woman, incorporating within her an exclusive mysterious life-bestowing force, was considered directly responsible for the fertility of the earth. The archetypal mysticism associated the birth of a child with the secret sprouting of seeds. The human womb was likened to that of mother earth and vice-versa. Natural fertility and human fertility was seen as synonymous. The Markandeya P. quotes the goddess as declaring – “Next, O ye Gods, I shall support (i.e. nourish) the whole world with the life sustaining vegetables which shall grow out of my body during a period of heavy rain. I shall gain fame – on the earth then as Shakhambari”.26 This motif appears in a symbolic form in the mandana design drawn by the Rajasthani ladies desiring to have children.

Pre – Aryan to Aryan and further....

With societies taking to agriculture, the intense occupation with the earth and its fertility combined with the woman’s exclusive association with procreation led to the matriarchal society with enhanced status for womanhood. This further led to the discovery and worship of the Mother Goddess, whose fertility and fecundity was associated with the earth. The moon echoed the menstrual cycle. The earth was likened to a womb that brought forth plants and sprouts. The non-Aryans, as the findings from Mohenjo-daro and Harappa suggest were agriculturists and functioned as a matriarchal society. Their cults and various objects of veneration were all associated with the mother goddess.

The Aryans, who succeeded the Indus Valley people, were all Indo-European nomadic/semi-nomadic tribes. Their pastoral mode of living required them to maintain and protect their cattle and rendered them aggressive. The hardships faced and endured led them to proclaim every heroic endeavours and favour a patriarchal society. Their pantheon too was male-oriented, the gods being celebrated heroes and personifications of natural phenomena.

Their mobility favoured an oral tradition and each phenomenon was rendered alive with intuitive and graphic description, the perceived attributes of which were praised and metaphorically expressed. Gradually the two combined into a mental personification of the natural forces. Probably, this is when

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28 *Loc.cit.*
image worship came into existence. It is believed that the concept of image worship was borrowed by the Aryans from the Dravidian culture.\textsuperscript{29} It is a general belief that rangoli was used during poojas even during the pre-Aryan times. There is every possibility of the absorption of this practice by the Aryans and giving it a new form that of decorating the Vedic altars with the various shapes like lines, triangles, circles, semi-circles, squares, lotuses etc. drawn with the help of grains, flour, turmeric, vermillion, flowers and leaves. Even the shape of the altars corresponded to the geometric shapes of the rangoli.\textsuperscript{30}

This also may be the time when elaborate mandalas, yantras and chakras took form and were used in various religious ceremonies. Here, one point worthy of mention is that many scholars including D. D. Kosambi have pointed out that in elaborately Sanskritized ceremonies, traces of ancient pre-Hindu conceptions are visible.\textsuperscript{31} These are particularly explicit in the villages and among the tribal communities. Following this line of thought one can conclude that the early magical diagrams of the natives must have been concretized by the Vedic Aryans giving it a more religious and ritualistic shape. The contours of the yantras and the mandalas are determined by the need to give visual form to the magical spell (mantras) and to concretize the energy of the ritual gestures (mudra). These magical diagrams created by the ritual act, when awakened and made operative by incantation and the ritual gesture, could create, enclose, protect and destroy energy.

It is seen that rangoli employs all the principles of the mandalas and some aspects of the yantras as well. Some rangolis assigned to each day of the week has beej-akshara of the deity presiding over the planet of that particular day.

On comparing the rangoli and the mandalas and yantras, it is observed that rangoli has survived as an art practiced by commoners, particularly women, where as the mandalas, yantras and chakras have acquired a particular mystical status and is drawn by priests, tantriks, shamans and the similar types.


\textsuperscript{31} Kosambi, op.cit., p.40.
Coming back to the Vedic period, the abstract and the metaphysical aspects of a natural phenomenon were rendered immediate worship through hymns and sacrificial oblations which were highly formalized and specialized acts. The tradition of shruti and smriti facilitated and perpetuated the invaluable formulae of invocations and mental images from generation to generation. The early Rigvedic hymns were articulated in poetical fantasies of natural phenomena.

With the growing preoccupations of the Aryans with agricultural processes and fertility rituals, the later Atharva Veda myths resonated with magical incantations and spells rooted in the archaic imagery and belief of the local inhabitants.\textsuperscript{32} The vrata rites are believed to have originated from the Atharva Veda. The vratas were religious observances introduced by the Aryans in an attempt to absorb the local inhabitants. The ceremony derives its name from the wandering yogis/magicians adept in yogic practices and employing sexual rites to enhance regenerative power and fertility. These vratas were accessible to all, unlike the highly formalised and specialized mantras, sacrifices and ritualistic oblations of the Aryans. Though it was around the vratas that thousands of rural arts found significant expression, two movements emerged out of the fusion of Aryan (Margi) and the native (Desi). Rangoli forms a part of both the category. When drawn by priests or tantrics, it is Margi or Shastriya in nature whereas when practised by women, it becomes Desi or Ashastriya. The creativity within the Desi is the paramount factor in the rural tradition.\textsuperscript{33}

The Rigveda Brahmakarma Samucchaya a text about the rites and worship, mentions several mandalas, plain or drawn in various colours, such as Sarvatobhadra mandala, Chaturlingatobhadra, Prasadavastumandala, Grahavastumandala, Grahadevatamandala, Hariharamandala, Ekalingatobhadra drawn as a part of some rites and worship.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} *Ibid.*, p.73.


\textsuperscript{34} V.L. Panshikar, (ed.), *Rigveda Brahmakarma Samucchaya*, Nirmaya Sagar Press, Bombay, 1st ed. 1905, 6\textsuperscript{th} edition, 1936.
The *Grihyasutras* too mention the ritual of smearing the ground with cow-dung and drawing of auspicious lines on it.

With the settling down of the Aryans the gradual process of imposition, adaptation and subsequent assimilation of the religious observances started. The *Puranas* reveal the emergence of a new pantheon resulting from this assimilation. The more earthy deities of the non-Aryans were elevated to a more respectable status and in attendance to the Aryan pantheon.

Almost all the *Puranas* enjoin drawing of diagrams on the floor in some form or the other, related to various occasions and rituals like *vratas*. Various acts and offerings involved in worship are mentioned in the *Puranas* like –selection of the place for worship, cleaning of the place with water mixed with cow-dung and sometimes also by sprinkling some fragrant liquid, offering of the seat to the deity, invocation of the deity and so on. These rituals invariably require the drawing of mystic figures or *mandalas* like the *Sarvatobhadra*, *Swastika* or the *Ashtadala – padma*.

To cite a few examples, the *Shiva P.*, enjoins drawing of the *padma* studded with gems with various attendant deities at the petals and the main god at the centre. According to *Linga P.* such a lotus should be drawn in front of Shiva in the temple, using the particles of gems such as *indranila*, *padmaraga* and pearl and that it may be drawn with rice-flour, if a person cannot afford gems.

The *Skanda P.* mentions various designs or stripes to be drawn in colour (*kumkum* and *kesar*) at the temple at festivals and says that similar custom was followed on occasions of royal marriages when cities were decorated with flower designs and parched rice.

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35 Dange, (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.1630.


Similarly, Narada P. prescribes that a cow with a calf should be drawn and worshipped on Govatsa Dwadashi. Hemadri in his vrata-khanda describes how to draw gods and goddesses related to a particular vrata.\(^{38}\)

In a story from Padma P., Savitri is not able to attend the sacrifice of Brahma, as she had not decorated her house with the Swastika-sign.\(^{39}\) This Purana also spells out duties to be performed by women and says that she must be careful to sweep her house every day, to smooth the floor with a layer of cow-dung, and to decorate it with white tracery.

Markandeya P. highlights the importance of gomayanulepana and mentions that it is absolutely necessary for the ladies to draw the Swastika mark on the cow-dung smeared ground every morning.\(^{40}\) Smritiratnakar P. prescribes upalepana of a sthandila (sacrificial ground).\(^{41}\)

Garuda P. describes in detail the drawing of a mandala called Vajranabha to be prepared with the powder of five colours to worship Vishnu. It further gives the reasons for preparing the mandala and points that without the mandala on the ground - whatever performed is as if unperformed, a diseased person does not get free from disease, and it may lead to death of a person irrespective of his age. It also says that the gods Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra and Agni sit in the mandala and therefore it is necessary to make it.\(^{42}\)

The word ‘rangavalyadibhih’ is used in the Skanda P. with respect to the line-drawings to be made in the courtyard or the inner hall of the temple with various gems or rice floor. It further mentions the


\(^{39}\) Ibid., p.424.


\(^{41}\) Loc.cit.

three types of worship to be practiced in the temple or at one’s own place as – Vaidika, Tantrika and Mishra and adds that the technical devices (yantras) such as the circle and lotus formations etc. are marks of the tantrika worship.\textsuperscript{43}

The Bhagavata P. mentions the drawing of rangoli by gopikas to lessen the grief of separation when they were away from Sri Krishna.\textsuperscript{44}

Of all arts the best is Chitra,

It gives the fruit of Dharma,

Artha, Kama and Moksha

Wherever it is established in a house,

It is the harbinger of the best of auspiciousness.\textsuperscript{45}

According to the Vishnudharmottara, (an appendix to Vishnu P.) paintings instructed and enlivened the mind of the public as permanent or temporary decoration on the floors, on the walls and ceilings of private houses, palaces, temples, and in the streets.\textsuperscript{46} Stella Kramrisch says that, paintings took a wide part in secular and religious life of the people which naturally led to legends being invented to explain the origin of this art. Thus the Vishnudharmottara links the origin of this art form with the very act of creation by sage Narayana, who on discerning the purpose of apsaras who were trying to distract him

\textsuperscript{43} Dange, (ed.) \textit{op.cit.}, Vol. V, p.1633.

\textsuperscript{44} This is further elaborated in Chp.2, with respect to Sanjhi traditions of U.P.


\textsuperscript{46} Stella Kramrisch, “Introduction to Vishnudharmottara”, in Barbara Miller Stone (ed.), \textit{Exploring India’s Sacred Art: Selected Writings of Stella Kramrisch}, Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, 1994, p.265.
when meditating, extracted the juice of a mango tree and drew the most beautiful female figure with it on the ground. Having seen her, the *apsaras* went away in shame. The woman came alive and was named Urvashi.\(^{47}\)

According to a legend recorded in *Chitra Lakshana*, the earliest treatise on Indian painting, a King and his kingdom were steeped in sorrow at the death of the high priest’s son. Everyday the king prayed to Lord Brahma who moved by the prayer asked the king to paint a portrait of the boy on the floor so that he could breathe life in to it.\(^{48}\) Both the tales underline the belief in the life-giving power of this art tradition.

Interestingly, in the tale of creation narrated by the Chodris, one of the tribal communities of Gujarat, gods created human beings from raw clay and breathed life into them with auspicious words whispered in their ears.\(^{49}\)

Stella Kramrisch commenting on the power of life giving *mandalas* writes: “The magic diagram makes it possible for power to be present and it brings this presence into the power of the person who has made the diagram….here it is the magic circle, in other designs the sacred square, a concatenation of curves, or intersection of polygons, that encloses the magic field. Into it the power of the god is invoked. It is assigned to its enclosure, it is spell bound. It cannot escape; it is controlled. It is held in its confinement, bound in a plane by the outline of the enclosure so that it cannot escape into the ground where like lightening, it would be rendered impotent.”\(^{50}\)

Reference to this art is found in the Ramayana and Mahabharata too. For instance, Sita was protected by the enchanted circle drawn round her hut by Lakshamana and she was asked not to cross the latter during her protector’s absence. She disobeyed the order out of charity towards Ravana, who was disguised as an ascetic, and was thus carried off by him. As per oral traditions,

\(^{47}\) *Loc.cit.*


this enchanted circle was *rangoli*. Similarly, when describing houses of noble men like Vibhishan and others, the presence of *rangoli* on their threshold is always mentioned as one of the signs of their nobility.

Vidura full of ecstacy when he heard that Krishna was coming to him drew beautiful *rangolis* in front of his house with the powders made of coloured stones which he picked up from the surroundings of his house.

Many such instances can be quoted from the sacred books. Interestingly, such episodes are very much in the belief and living memory of our people.\(^\text{51}\)

The third chapter of Bharata muni’s *Natyashastra*, which is based upon the *Gandharva Veda* (appendix to *Sama Veda*) and is believed to have been compiled between 200 B.C. to 200 A.D., gives detail of the *pooja* (*rang-pooja*) to be performed to the gods of the stage before dramas can be enacted in a newly constructed theatre. It says that a *mandala* should be drawn on the stage and the gods should be invoked to occupy their proper seats and worshipped.\(^\text{52}\) In another ritual, mentioned in the *Natyashastra*, a brilliant *mandala* of *ashtadala padma* is drawn in which Brahma and other guardian deities of the eight quarters etc. are worshipped.\(^\text{53}\)

Jagadisa Ayyar in his studies of South Indian Festivities says that the wise sages of the olden days originated temples, festivals, *vratas*, fasts and so forth with definite aims. As they were thoroughly conversant with the needs of men, their aims may be said to be two-fold- physical and spiritual. The festivals, *vratas*, fasts etc., are designed to serve one or other or both of these aims. From the standpoint of those wise sages, physical acts are for serving spiritual ends.\(^\text{54}\)

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\(^{51}\) As per the conducted surveys and interviews.


Various stories associated with different vratas mentioned in the Puranas and other religious writings, highlight the importance of drawing rangolis and the benefits gained thereby. The stories appear to have been woven around the rituals by the wise men so as to encourage people to follow the practice of making rangolis religiously, the practice which is believed to confer physical as well as spiritual benefits on the practitioner. One such popular story related to the Mahabharata goes as – In a certain township on the auspicious day of Ekadashi, it was ordered for drums and tabor to be sounded. But it was reported that the leather covering of the drum had been torn and the sticks of the tabor had been broken. The king ordered that those in the town who had not performed the Shankha Chakra Gopadma ritual should be sought. Their skin from the back should be removed and used to cover the drum and their bones should be used as sticks for the tabor. It was revealed that all the women had observed this ritual except for Subhadra, the sister of Lord Krishna. So it was ordered that she should be punished in the way mentioned. Subhadra anxiously approached her brother Lord Krishna to suggest a solution for this problem. To this Lord Krishna suggested that she should clean the floor of the house and of the cow shed and decorate them with auspicious symbols like Swastika, Shankha, Chakra, Gada, Gopadma, leaves, flowers, sugarcane etc., using precious stones and powders of gold and silver. He further suggested that she draw thirty-three lotus flowers on the stomach of the cow’s figure and circumbulate this rangoli thirty-three times and prostrate before it. He said that following this ritual of drawing rangoli will free her from the consequences of her lapse in performing the necessary ritual and also from the punishment.\textsuperscript{55} The rangoli described in the story is drawn by young brides, practising the Gopadmavrata in the chaturmasa period, for five years after marriage, in rural Karnataka and Maharashtra.

It is also commonly believed that when Lord Vishnu was married to Lakshmi Devi, rangoli designs adorned the floors.

Few more relevant stories have been mentioned in the later chapters.

\textit{Rangoli in Tribal culture:}

The lifestyle of the tribals which majorly remains unchanged provides a window to peep into the past. These tribal societies because of their isolation have retained their ancient ways of life up to a large extent. In their rituals and art, life and creativity are inseparable. Their canvas of expression which comprises mainly the walls of their houses extends to the floor on certain occasions.

Since time immemorial, the floor art forms an important aspect of their tradition. Though not practised everyday, it forms one of the important components of any ritual. These are made only for special rituals and are the magical diagrams, never meant to last. These diagrams are the favourite tools of the mediators, be it a priest, priestess, astrologer, the healer or the sorcerer. They draw ephemeral designs on the ground with powder which become sacred enclosures, to welcome and to channel the powers above.

While describing the wedding ceremony of the tribes of Middle India, Verrier Elwin says, “most tribes erect a booth with a roof of leafy branches; beneath it a platform on which they draw patterns; put up a wooden pillar with lamps and pitchers, round which the bride and groom perambulate”. He further elaborates on the patterns and says, “the patterns round the mud platform which is built up about the central pole are almost certainly ‘witch-baffling’, though people are rather inarticulate about explaining their purpose”.

The tortoise which stands for stability is designed in white or red wash on the floor of a Gond house to ensure that the building will be secure.

In his study on the Saoras of Orissa, Verrier Elwin describes the four different kinds of altar made by them. The four altars are the one made of stone, wood, grain and by drawing patterns on the ground. He says that, the simplest of all the altars is the last one made on a piece of cow-dunged ground, where patterns are traced with rice flour and sacrifice offered upon them. According to him these patterns are of an apotropaic character and aim at confusing any hostile spirit who may approach to disturb the rite. They are often made in the middle of a path with the intention of preventing a god (fearful one) who is

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being taken out of a village, from returning to it. The third type of altar of grain is prepared at various places—inside a house, outside the village, by a stream; on a hillside in the middle of the path etc. This altar is made in careful symmetry with rice grains and other pulses, at the time of sacrifice.

While describing the magical practice followed by the shaman to prevent the god or ghost from stealing the grains, Verrier Elwin observes that it involves making a double circle of blood of the sacrificed animal and rice-flour paste around the stack. He says that the belief behind this practice is that, besides preventing the evil powers from stealing the grains, it will attract more grains from outside to the enclosed space.

Among the Warlis, at the time of marriage, a circular rangoli, which they call bhovara, is drawn and the groom and the bride stand on it. They should not cross over the boundary line of the bhovara, because as per their belief if one crosses it, the other partner flees away. Such patterns are also drawn at the time of funeral rites and the body of the deceased is kept on it. It is believed that the tree grows in these circles. Interestingly in a seal from Mohenjo-daro, depicting some ritual, probably tree worship, the tree is surrounded by a mandala.

Significantly enough, even at the time of birth the circle is drawn and filled with dots as a symbol of the Goddess Sashthi. Also, on the morning of the wedding day, a chowk (square diagram) is drawn around the umbar tree and the tiger God (Waghdev) implying that before the actual wedding of the couple, these two have to be united.

60 Ibid., p.178.
61 Ibid., p.335.
The Warli bhagats (priests) perform the rites called ‘raval’ deep in the forest wherein the students acquire the skill to get possessed whereby control can be exercised over nature. The entire area is encircled by a boundary line on which some wooden and iron nails are fixed and sand poured over them. It is believed that this will prevent the witches from entering for they cannot cross the boundary line unless the nails are taken out from the ground and every particle of sand counted. This process would take such a long time that the bhagats would become aware of their presence.  

The ritual for the propitiation of Hirvadev also involves drawing of a prescribed square rangoli.

Drawing of human figures at the time of birth and death and also for propitiating the ancestors is common among the tribal people. K.J.Save mentions the ritual of drawing two human figure one big and one small, besides each other, with rice in a winnowing basket by the midwife on the fifth day after child birth. These figures are of goddess Sashthi and the child. Sat or Sati, as the Warlis call her, is supposed to be the controlling deity of the child and hence her propitiation.

He also mentions the drawing of the symbolic figure of the dead, outside the house on the tenth day of mourning. A mandap is erected below which two lines of rice are drawn. In the space between the two lines, a human figure is drawn by means of red lead as an image of the dead.

Similar practices are followed by the other tribes, like the Katkaris in Maharashtra. On the twelfth day after death, the Katkaris go to the place of cremation and take the ashes of the dead and draw an image of the dead on the ground. Then sprinkle milk and gomutra (cow urine) on it.

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63 Ibid., p.46.
64 K.J. Save, The Warlis, Yashwantrao Chavan Academy of development Administration, 1945, pp.56-57.
65 Ibid., p.116.
66 Ibid., p.131.
and destroy the image.\textsuperscript{67} These diagrams act as magical tools by which the dead are freed from their ghost state and become ancestors (pitr).

The Golla tribals of South India too draw the images of the ancestral dead on the floor and propitiate them.\textsuperscript{68}

Among the Pardhans, a song sung at the time of the wedding reflects the importance of drawing chowk (square or rectangle diagram). In the song a conversation takes place between the bride and her father-

\textit{“Kaheka chowk likhayo vabola,}

\textit{Gulyado chowk likhayo kaniya,}

\textit{Kamkata chowk likhayo kaniya}

\textit{Chowke udale vala ho kaniya”}

Which means “Oh father, what is the chowk you have written (drawn) made of? Oh daughter, it is made of gulal and haldi. You come and sit on the chowk”.\textsuperscript{69}

The Thakars draw the chowk with a circle in the centre on the inner and outer walls and ground in front of their houses. There is a belief that the walls and the ground should not be left ‘bare’ after they are smeared with red soil and cow-dung respectively. Also drawing of these figures protects the house from evil eye. This belief is still prevalent in rural India. The Thakars use white clay or shaadu for this purpose.\textsuperscript{70} Also, at the time of wedding, a chowk using rice grains is


\textsuperscript{70} N.B. Ransing & Mohan Ransing, \textit{Thakarwadi}, Granthali, Dadar, Mumbai, 1994, p.54.
drawn in front of the home deity wherein a tray full of offerings of plants, fruits and rice grains is placed on it. This tray is called *kul* and it is worshipped on this *chowk.*

The above examples give an idea about the beliefs of the tribals pertaining to this art, which in their context are pure magical diagrams.

**Material and colour used for rangoli- its symbolism and significance:**

The folk and tribal traditions, consider all materials available in day to day life worthy of serving as a medium of expression. Topography and geography have control over the medium of art. Hence, the material that is easily available in a particular region and at the same time has some significance when it is used. With respect to rangoli it is seen that in the regions like South India, Bengal and the Konkan in Maharashtra where rice is grown in abundance, rice flour or paste, water left from boiling rice or powder made by burning rice husk is used. In other regions like Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, white quartz or lime powder and sometimes flour of wheat or jowar is used. Similarly, flowers are used for floor decoration in Kerala.

It is observed that besides the aspect of easy availability of materials, some scientific and spiritual aspects and religious beliefs are also attached to its usage.

**Cow-dung:** Traditionally all over India, the ground in front of the house used to be smeared with cow-dung. This practice is still followed in the rural parts of India. The preparation of ground using cow-dung is known as ‘sadasammarjan’ in Maharashtra, *mezuku* in Tamil, *chanakam* in Malayalam, *lipana* or *lipai* in North India and so on. In fact, the names *alimpana, alpana, aripan* or *aipan* for rangoli are derived from this practice.

*Rangoli* which is made before sunrise and also before sunset is considered to be a form of solar worship. The energetic and beneficial force of the sun's rays must have a receptive space, one that is purified. The Hindu conception of purity, as is well known, is linked closely with water and cow-dung.

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dung also has antiseptic properties and hence provides a literal threshold of protection for the home.

There is a firm belief that cow-dung which purifies a place also renders it unusable and inauspicious unless some decoration is done over it. If due to some unavoidable reasons, the freshly washed and smeared place could not be decorated, it is either strewn over with green leaves or grains. Also, the ground treated in this manner enhances the effect of the rangoli drawn and causes the design to adhere better than it would on a dry and dusty surface.

According to Padma P., Lakshmi is said to stay in cow-dung “gomaye vasate Laksmih”.72

The spirits are always afraid of cleanliness, and therefore, where there is cleanliness, there is very little fear of their attacks.73 Evils are said to frequent a place which is smeared or plastered but not offered to the deity.74 Rangoli is a medium of offering the place to the deity.

It is generally believed that by smearing the ground with cow-dung, lines are traced on the surface which criss-cross by over-lapping sweeps of the cow-dung wash. These lines though imperceptible emanate light waves which by crossing each other, in an irregular manner, prove injurious to the sight and the health of the people. To undo this effect well composed lines of rangoli are drawn resulting in beautiful designs which have a pleasant and soothing effect on the mind. Besides this, it is considered inauspicious to keep the ground ‘bare’ after smearing it with cow-dung or sprinkling it with water. It is related to the practice of sprinkling water on the ground after the body of a dead person is taken out of the house for cremation. Rangoli is never drawn on such ground and hence the ground is not left bare otherwise.

Rice: In South India, one of the purposes behind using rice flour for creating rangoli is that it also serves as bhutayajna i.e. offering of rice flour to tiny creatures like ants and other insects as one’s good deed of

the day. Rice powder is also a cleansing element preventing chicken pox during the coming summer and is therefore applied on the faces of children in rural southern India.  

The material rice powder, itself acts magically and scares away evil spirits. The designs drawn with it on the floor have magical power.  

The Jains use rice grains to draw *rangoli* in the temples. In Indian rituals, grains of rice serve to represent the seed of fertility.  

**Lime:** Lime powder used for *rangoli* had some purificatory significance. It acted as disinfectant when the roads were not finished with tar, serving the scientific as well as the decorative purpose. It also had an aspect of protection attached to it as it was believed that white lime prevented ghosts from killing members of the household and thus guarded the doorways.  

Megalithic cists and pit circles show the use of lime to seal off entrances. According to D.D. Kosambi, the nearest modern custom seems to be among the Mahars who often sprinkle the ground above burial with lime.  

References to use of *vibhuti* (holy ash) for drawing diagrams dedicated to deities and the use of ashes of the cremated corpse in the after death rituals, as mentioned above, are also found.  

**Colours of *rangoli***:  

75 Sastri & Narayanan (ed.), *op.cit.*, p.18.  

76 Kramrisch, *op.cit.*, p.65.  


Colours have always played a vital role in the folk traditions of India. The characteristic significance of colours must have been comprehended by man much before he could draw forms. But he could use colours only after acquiring the requisite knowledge to extract them from nature and the sense to use them for the right purpose. The dark curtain of the night, the golden horizon at dawn and the warmth of the glowing sun, the green surroundings, the red blood, must have evolved in the primitive mind the association of colours with certain emotions. Thus, he associated black colour with terror and awe, yellow with sobriety and calmness, red with passion and strength and green with freshness and growth.

In course of time his characteristic distinction of colours attained canonic significance.

In rangoli art, colour adds further meaning to the linear forms and renders them more abstract. Though many shades of synthetic colours are available and used today, the important five colours or the panchachurna, panchavarnarajobhih or dasharddhavarna as mentioned in the literary sources, have been significant since ancient times. The earliest literary sources point to the use of these five colours for making rangavali. The actual design made in white is coloured using red, yellow, green and black.

Traditionally, the colours are made from natural ingredients like:-

1. White: made of rice flour
2. Black: made of powdered burnt paddy husk or charcoal
3. Yellow: turmeric powder
4. Red: produced by combining dry chunam (lime) with turmeric powder and a critical amount of water, causing a chemical reaction which transforms the powder mixture into a rich earth red. The dampened powder is again dried. Sometimes ragi flour dyed with red sanders (a tree native to Deccan part of India, commonly known as Rakta chandan, the extracts from which are used as dyes) is used.
5. Green: dried and powdered leaves.

Sometimes the blue from indigo replaces black. Dry powder of coloured stones is also used.
The world in Indian culture has always been considered as prapanch that houses the panchamahabhuta. The five coloured powders depict these five elements of nature or the panchamahabhuta. White represents aap or water, red – fire or tej, black-vayu or air, yellow-prithvi or earth and blue-akash or ether.

In Karnataka and Kerala, five colours are essential for making the nagamandalas as they are visible on the necks of snakes.

To understand the significance of colours in the folk rituals, its relevance in the tribal culture needs to be studied. Colours are used by the tribals not merely for its own sake but because of its symbolic significance. Its use is considered both real and effective in that it would actually bring about a change in the order of things.

The chief three colours used by the tribals are white, red and yellow. White is the colour of rice and is deified to the level of divine purity. Its stark luminous light is used for the auspicious and ritualistic paintings on the wall and making the sacred diagrams on the floor to scare away the evil spirits by the Warlis, Saoras and other tribes. White pigment is universally employed for rangoli. In fact the white powder used for rangoli, has itself acquired the name rangoli. White and black has the biggest visual contrast, this can easily be associated to other opposite concepts such as day and night or good and evil. White as symbol of purity is seen in the expression ‘white wash’, which figuratively means an attempt to obscure that which is unclean and unpleasant. In the Indian context, the term white wash is nothing but lipana or lipai and which in turn has evolved in to the names of rangoli in various regions like- alpana, aipan, aripan.

Red, the colour of the blood, brings to mind the hymenal blood of creation. Red pigment is a substitute for blood sacrifices of the primitive. It is often sprinkled over the auspicious objects by the tribals. In the tribal context, the association of red could be only with a sexuality which would be life generative. To the primitive mind, menstruation was of the same nature as birth. The mystery associated with the phenomenon had many diverse notions of fear and reverence: sanctity or pollution. Blood was the source of life. Whether in birth or life it was considered as life-generating and life-bestowing. Red is

80 Dalmia, op.cit., p.110.
81 Kosambi, An Introduction to the Study of Indian History, op.cit., p.8.
renewal of life. It was a universal phenomenon to anoint the dead with red and bury them as babes, deep in the womb of mother earth, in the hope that they shall be reborn, revived by the nurturing unseen forces of earth.

In Sanskrit, the word red is referred to as rakta-varna which means the colour of blood. A mixture of lime and turmeric becomes red and is commonly used for warding off evil. The colour red or vermilion is still part of all ceremonies. It is an important symbol of marital status of women. Vermilion being associated with blood is the highest abstract personification of the fertilising goddess. The application of red infuses productive energy and implies both auspiciousness and protection.

Just as fly-papers are made use of to get rid of flies, substances like a mixture of turmeric and quicklime in a quantity of water were made use of, to get rid of super-physical pests, directing super-physical forces, in a manner injurious to human safety and welfare.\(^\text{82}\)

Red combined with other colours like white and yellow has special significance in rituals. In the tantric texts which originated in agricultural rites, the white dot was male and the red female. The South Indian village folk believe that the sudde mannu –purified earth dust, white in colour and the kemmannu –red soil are husband and wife. So they never fail to draw them together. In Tamilnadu invariably all temples and certain houses on auspicious occasions are painted in white and red. Red clay known as geru or hirmich is also used as a base coating for rangoli. White pattern on the dark reddish packed clay floor besides enhancing the overall effect of the patterns also act as symbols of fertilization and procreation.

In Andhra, Karnataka and Tamilnadu, the thresholds are mainly dotted in red and yellow. Inside the houses, dots of kumkum in varying numbers are applied on turmeric smeared walls. Vermillion dots or lines on a turmeric smeared wall are a common representation of mother goddesses.

\(^{82}\) Ayyar, op.cit., p.2.
The yellow of turmeric, is a powerful antiseptic and used in the ancient systems of Indian medicine for many cures. It heals injury and gives radiance to the skin. It is the colour of the ripe corn fields, a colour of brimming fullness and is thus used most lavishly in the weddings. It is believed to drive away evil. Turmeric along with vermillion is considered an essential offering both to the goddess and to married women.

Green colour, as is obvious for any agricultural economy, symbolizes a new beginning, harvest, and happiness. It symbolizes nature and is therefore a manifestation of God himself.

In rangoli art, black is considered an inauspicious colour, never to be used on auspicious occasions. But this colour is indispensable in drawings for magical rites for curing ailments or exorcism rites. Paradoxically, black colour is used to ward off the evil eye.

Elaborating on the significance of colours in tantra, Ajit Mookerjee says that, “Projecting the four regions between the directions north, south, east and west, the dimensions unfold as the three qualities of prakriti or nature (Sattva, Rajas and Tamas), which constitute the universe, and a fourth (Ahamkara), which is the ‘ego-sense’ out of which the grosser elements of the world (bhutas) are evolved. Sattva is the essence or balancing force, represented as golden-yellow, Rajas is the dynamic quality, represented as red, Tamas is the state of inertia, depicted black, while Ahamkara, the ego-sense, is symbolized by green”.

The basic color of rangoli is white. This white powder is mixed with other colors to get many different shades. Many other mediums such as fresh flower petals and pulses are also used.

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Nowadays, though synthetic powder colours are commonly used, temple rituals necessitate the use of natural colours even today.

**Some other facets of rangoli:**

The combination of few lines and colours is believed to invoke some supernatural power, to produce influence on men. The ancient sages are said to have come upon such designs by meditation and penance. Even now yogis are said to realize the designs appropriate to their gods in their meditation. Such geometric patterns called as *mandalas* and *yantras*, form a part of *tantric* Hindu practice. These diagrams also form an important part of the spiritual and mystical practices of the Buddhist and Jain traditions.

Pupul Jayakar sees *mandalas* as “man’s earliest attempt to communicate concentrated, non-verbal meaning. *Mandalas* were born of ancient man’s perceptions of the cosmos and of the magical processes of birth, death and existence- imponderables that could only be explained or revealed non-verbally through geometry and the magical abstractions of mathematical form”. 84

It is seen that very often the terms *mandalas*, *yantras* and the *chakras* are used as a synonym for each other. Gurdun Buhnemann briefly summarises the opinion of the various scholars regarding the distinctive points between the *mandalas*, *yantras* and the *chakras* and concludes that it is not possible to arrive at a universally valid definitions of the three, based on their use and functions. As per a common understanding, all the three are ‘mysterious diagrams’ used to invoke the deities, used in rituals leading to the attainment of supernatural powers (*siddhi*). 85 One basic point of distinction could be that the *yantras* are sometimes also engraved on metals giving it a sort of permanency. Triangle-shaped *yantras* generally made of glass are kept in houses. They are considered to be micro version of the cosmos while temples and all other spiritual places are the macro version of the cosmos. They invoke positive energy in the house. The pyramids of Egypt are considered to be a form of *yantra*. Among the muslims there is a custom of tying a *taveez*, which is a *yantra* written on a special paper and stored in the *taveez* to protect the wearer.


Nevertheless, these diagrams be it the mandalas, yantras or chakras are drawn on the ground for the relevant rituals, usually of tantric nature, and are always obliterated at the end of the ritual.

These auspicious geometrical diagrams, primarily consisting of the square, circle and triangle were used as base for making the yadnya vedi, the building of theatre (as per Natyashastra), for making sculptures, as foundation for architectural structures like the Hindu temple and also denotes the formation of Indian musical notes (raga chakra). It is also observed that some weaves used for cloth construction very much resemble the geometric mandalas and yantras. Practically, one of the reasons for using these diagrams for various purposes appears to be its perfectly balanced and orderly composition.

The concept of an auspicious figure or diagram was carried over in the realm of poetics too. Dandin, the famous poet of the 7th Century A.D., in his work Kavyadarsha cites a verse in the form of Sarvatobhadra, which is an illustration of what are called chitra-bandhas. Chitra-bandha is a parallelogram used in poetics that had letters of the alphabets arranged in absolute symmetry rendering the diagram immune to penetration by evil forces. The Agni P. describes the chitram as an arrangement of words in the shape of a lotus or a sword which had letters placed in the petals of the lotus which, when read in the natural order, conveyed one meaning and when read in an inverse order, conveyed another.

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86 Observed in the capacity of being a textile designer-specializing in weaving.
88 Jayakar, op.cit., p.111.
The verses patterned into design consist of coiled snakes (*Naga-bandha*), *Swastika*, *Chakra-bandha*, *Shankha*, *ayudhas* such as sword, knife, mace and such others, banner or flag (*patakabandha*) besides the *Sarvatobhadra* and the *Padma*, in addition to the sun and the moon. All these diagrams have an important place in rangoli.

Alice Boner in her study of composition in Hindu sculptures points out that, “no art style, developing on natural traditional lines had ever existed, whose forms in architecture, sculpture, painting and all minor arts had not been based on strictly mathematical and geometrical principles.”

The *Puranas* from about A.D. 300 onwards, was influenced by tantric elements. It had become the dominating religious texts, guiding the *pooja*, *vidhis*, and ceremonies of the Hindu temple and also rites pertaining to its construction. These consists of, besides other practices, the drawing of coloured lotuses, circles or *mandalas* during worship, in vows, consecration etc. The *Agni P.* mentions 25 *tantras* for the consecration of the images of Vishnu and tantric ceremonies in *mandalas* for the building of a temple.

Many designs in rangoli correspond with the designs of the *Vastupurusha mandala* and can find parallels in the ground plans of temples. *Vastupurusha* is the deity that is believed to protect and control any structure uninhabited by humans. Thus he is to be worshipped at the construction of new dwelling be it for humans or divine. *Vastupurusha* is mentioned in the construction of city also. Before the construction work begins, a diagram confirming to the *Vastupurusha mandala* is actually drawn on the leveled ground after the performance of a series of rites and rituals.

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90 Devangana Desai, *op.cit.*, p.131.


Interestingly, the word ‘pura’ (city) is also sometimes used as a synonym for mandala.\textsuperscript{93} Other synonyms of mandala found in literature are yaga, bhavana/bhuvana, veshman and in a metaphoric sense, pitha.\textsuperscript{94} The rangoli representing the seat of a deity is also known as a pitha.

According to Kapila Vatsyayan, the figure of man (purusha) was a common point of reference for various rituals. The image was consistently used as a place of coordinated function, whether in the chanting of hymns or the raising of the altar, or in the placing of the implements of the pravargya or as a measure in construction of the yadnya vedi. The description of the purusha is found in the Purushasukta and in the Upanishads. The texts ranging from the earliest Puranas to the latest belonging to the 14\textsuperscript{th} and 16\textsuperscript{th} centuries, such as the Tantrasamuccya and Shilparatna of Shrikumara all make reference to this figure of man in Indian architectural plans.\textsuperscript{95} The Natyashastra, according to her, makes the earliest reference to this image with respect to the construction of the theatre. The principles of the construction of the Hindu temple are reminiscences of the construction ritual of the theatre. As in the case of the theatre, the earth on which the temple is built is consecrated. The cleansed, smooth surfaced earth is like water or the surface of the mirror and on this the temple diagram of a Vastupurusha mandala is drawn. The diagram is a square commonly divided into 64 or 81 squares or padas exactly in the same manner as in the construction of the theatre. It is a physical device (sharira yantra) for building a temple.\textsuperscript{96}

Stella Kramrisch in her study of the Hindu temple says that, although this ritual diagram is neither the ground-plan of the temple nor necessarily the plan of the site, it regulates them and is a ‘forecast’ of the

\textsuperscript{93} Buhnemann (ed.), \textit{loc.cit.}
\textsuperscript{94} \textit{Ibid.}, p.16.
\textsuperscript{96} \textit{Ibid.}, p.79.
This *mandala* is an aid to actual planning of a temple-complex, its alignments, form and elevational construct.\textsuperscript{98}

This concern with movement in space and time with the human body in the centre establishes an integral relationship between all forms of arts including ritual, architecture, dance, music and plastic arts. Kapila Vatsyayan in her work explores the realms of the classical art forms and contends that it is the ‘speculative thought of the Vedas and Upanishads....(that) become the foundations of the principles of artistic form in all arts, literary, performing and plastic’.\textsuperscript{99} The speculative thought that got crystallized in Vedas and Upanishads began with that dot and that line which was put on the canvas of time by the primitive man, which gradually evolved into an image of homeopathic and sympathetic magic and then expanded into the ritual diagrams, the *yantras* and the *mandalas*.

Besides the *Vastupurusha mandala*, many other types of *rangolis* appear to be reminisces of architectural plans. The names and forms of some of the *rangoli* designs like *Khera, Bavadi, Pushkarni* etc. suggest their composition as architectural motifs. The *Manasara granth* explains few types of grams or villages with diagrams. These lay-outs are named as *Dandak, Sarvatobhadra, Nandyavarta, Padmak, Swastika, Prastar* (square), *Karmuk* (bow-shaped) and *Chaturmukh* as per their shapes.\textsuperscript{100} These shapes are commonly drawn in *rangolis*, especially in the Northern and Western parts of India.

In Indian classical dances, *yantra*-like geometrical figures are created by dancers through their dance movements. The body assumes particular stances known in general terms as the pose. In Indian sculptures and paintings we recognize it as *bhangas*. The body assumes postures recalling


\textsuperscript{99} Vatsyayan, *op.cit.*, p.20.

\textsuperscript{100} Joshi & Hodarkar, (ed.), *op.cit.*, 1965, Vol.3. p.241-245.
abstract yantras, all contained within the space of a circle or a square. The body is depersonalized to the point of geometrical abstraction. The continuities of this approach and the consequent methodology of form are consistently apparent in the various dance styles of India. Bharatnatyam is a series of triangles in space, Kathakali a square, Manipuri a spiral or an intertwined serpent, Kathak an axis and Odissi evolves its distinctive basic motif of the tribhanga.

The Shilpaprakasha and a few other texts explicitly focus on the basic geometrical motifs (yantras) which govern the composition in sculptures. About the sculptures, Kapila Vatsyayan says that, what has hitherto been understood as a figure of great plastic beauty and as a symbol of cosmic rhythm is primarily a perfect visual diagram or yantra. About the mithuna sculptures, Devangana Desai says that for the uninitiated these are only erotic figures but for the initiated these are kamakala yantras, the lines of which are hidden by the mithuna sculptures.

On studying the complex system of classification of images and the proportions and the measurements of the different types of images, it appears that the codifiers were perhaps with purpose concealing or camouflaging the basic motifs and were deliberately listing details in a manner which would be an invaluable guide only to those who were ‘initiates’ and confusing to others. This is perhaps accounted for by the fact that the written word was not comprehensive. The tradition was passed on from one generation to the other by word of mouth, and the written word presents only part of the truth. ¹⁰¹

The training of the craftsmen was in keeping with the tradition of the old methods of teaching in other disciplines. Knowledge was communicated from father to son from master to disciple by formulas recited in Sanskrit. Sometimes this was supplemented with diagrams and sketches. The tradition continued in spite of the political conquests and social upheavals. The closely guarded formulas, designs and diagrams presenting forms, symbols and techniques were preserved in the family traditions. ¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Vatsyayan, op.cit., p.105.

At this point, it is necessary to mention that the *rangoli* diagrams having architectural motifs and *yantras* appear to be reminiscences of this family tradition. There seem to be no other reason for women to draw such technical diagrams in their day to day ritual of *rangoli*.

Jogendra Saksena while discussing the science of folk-symbology,\(^{103}\) points out few motifs of *mandana* which show close affinity to some scientific structures. He says that these geometrical forms used and known differently in art, science and *tantra* have a common purpose and end, which is nothing but auspiciousness and it ultimately points to one integral whole and that is ‘life’.

He explains this principle taking the example of *bavari* motif drawn in *mandana*. This motif known as *bavari* in folk art is known as *Sarvatobhadra* in *tantra* and scientifically, it is a porphyrin structure which is obtained from haemoglobin or chlorophyll. The *bavari* meaning step-well or a water reservoir is auspicious from practical view as water is the elixir of life. The *Sarvatobhadra* meaning auspicious on all sides is a mystical diagram generally signifying a temple having doors on all four sides, thus signifying its auspiciousness from spiritual point of view. The structure of porphyrin, one of the constituents of haemoglobin and chlorophyll, is very much associated with life-sustaining traits in plants and animals.

As mentioned above, all these diagrams are highly symmetrical, perfectly balanced and orderly composition. The basic principles of design, i.e. proportion, symmetry, repetition, radiation, balance and harmony as seen in nature are applied in all these diagrams.

Such structures are very much visible in nature like the hexagonal shape of the basic component of bee-hive and also of the foam and snow flake.

\(^{103}\) Jogendra Saksena, *Art of Rajasthan*, Sundeep Prakashan, Delhi, 1979, p.15.
A sacred geometry pervades all the Indian arts. The *Vishnudharmottara* mentions the inter-relation between and inter-dependence of various arts and mentions that no art is complete on its own. The same is true about the art of *rangoli* which has many facets. The geometry of *rangoli* besides its close relation to mathematics and science is also closely linked with the arts like architecture, textile weaving, sculpture and dance.

**Rangoli and writing:**

Writing in the beginning was ideographic and pictographic. In ancient times writing was considered to be a mysterious and magical art. In the ancient world the fact that most people could not write or read what was written, and those who could were usually priests, brought writing a reputation as a great hidden wisdom. It was a common belief that, to write down a wish or a curse in symbols automatically gives effect to what is written.

Anthologists propound that before man could develop the coherent mode of a written language and script, pictorial symbols were the means by which man recorded his thought process. In short, visual symbols were a form of ‘language’ in the early or proto-literate societies. As picture-writing grew, the pictures became more abstract. According to Raphaelian, these pictures were put in simple combinations, easy enough for the primitive to understand, although today only the most educated can solve their message.

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This provides a link between the art of writing and rangoli. Rangoli making all over India, is always referred to as ‘writing’ and not ‘drawing’. Thus in Maharashtra it is referred to as ‘rangoli lihine’, in the North as ‘chowk likhna’, ‘kalam ezhuthu’ in Kerala and so on. This is an indication of its hieroglyphic nature. The hieroglyphic picture script is understood to be the origin of many languages in the world. Some of the existing scripts still in usage support this observation, for instance, Chinese as well as Egyptian scripts are pictograms, i.e. each alphabet is a pictorial motif illustrating a whole statement or a situation. Similarly in India, a Maithili script called Mithilakshara has developed in imitation of the tantric yantras. The floor art of Mithila known as ‘aripans’ or ‘alimpan’ also reflect the prevalence of the Shakti cult there and is tantric in nature.

Inscriptions in shell script or Shankha-lipi are found in different parts of India and also Indonesia. Shell script is a term coined by James Princep for the cursive script he discovered, the characters of which bear apparent similarity to the shape of a shankha or conch-shell. Shankha is a very common motif in rangoli. It is very likely that the script has an impact of tantric or folk beliefs.

Rangoli in earlier days must have been a sort of picture-writing and must have preceded the development of actual writing script. Scholars from Bengal believe that certain forms and motifs in alpana drawings are hieroglyphic in character and that alpana can be traced to pictographic representations of ancient times. The vrata mandalas, were always considered as a kind of ‘writing’. Similarly various rangolis from different regions like Karnataka, Maharashtra and Rajasthan are hieroglyphic in nature and are discussed in their respective chapters.

Sign language (sanketik bhasha), verbal and written is known in India since ancient times. There is a belief that rangoli was used as a medium to pass on secret messages by the spies in olden days. It is mentioned in the Arthashastra of Kautilya that secret servants were employed in the house of the enemy and certain rules were set for them. Humpbacks, dwarfs, eunuchs, women skilled in arts (ganikas), dumb persons and different types of Mleccha races, were employed as spies, living inside the

109 As per surveys and interviews conducted.
enemies houses.\textsuperscript{110} Rules were set for secret servants as to carry out the transmission of spied out news by means of sign-alphabets (samjnalipibhih).\textsuperscript{111}

The usage of rangoli to pass on some message was employed till recent times. There are references to simple kolam motifs drawn on the threshold in olden days which were indicators of the member of the respective family suffering from disease like small-pox. Thus looking at the kolam the people avoided entering the house.\textsuperscript{112}

\textit{Rangoli and mathematics:}

The main structure of the rangoli consisting of forms such as dots, lines, squares, circles, triangles, octagons, hexagons and so on are all geometric shapes employed in rangoli.

It is apparent that the early trigonometry and geometry are as basic to the traditional arts as they are to science. The system of moving from one fixed point to another is as much a mathematical and spatial understanding as an artistic one.

The South Indian kolam patterns with their orderly and often highly symmetrical designs, which frequently group into families, are also expressive of mathematical ideas. The high artistic quality of their graphical structure has attracted and aroused intellectual curiosity. In the last few decades, kolam


\textsuperscript{111} \textit{Ibid.}, p.25, ft. nt.

figures have attracted the attention of computer scientists interested in describing images with picture languages. Different picture languages have been developed to describe different kolam families.

Prof. Gift Siromoney of Madras Christian College initiated the use of kolam patterns in the study of picture languages. For Gift Siromoney, working with his wife Rani Siromoney and other computer scientists, like Kamala Krithivasan and K. G. Subramanian, the kolam patterns became a rich source of figures that could be used as examples of existing types of picture languages and also served as a stimulus for creation of new types of languages. He developed these picture languages after closely studying the technique of making kolam designs by illiterate village women. He carried out a variety of interesting studies on kolam patterns both in the field and in the laboratory, about the manner of learning and memorizing the individual patterns and their reproduction.\(^{113}\)

Reuven Feuerstein, one of the leading psychologists has developed programmes which consist of 14 instruments focusing on various mental operations such as comparison, spatial orientation, analysis and so on. His methods are recognized around the world as effective in schools, adult education programmes, therapeutic programmes and industry.

Feuerstein uses the concept of connecting dots as one of the tools of enrichment. It is observed that Indian teachers trained in the use of Feuerstein’s module have further improvised upon this module and as an extension to it, use worksheets of rangoli designs. These worksheets make the mathematical and spatial concepts interesting and easy to understand, for children in general and those with special needs in particular.\(^{114}\)

With respect to mathematical concepts, it is also observed that the basic dotted grid of kolam gives scope to create patterns with various Permutations and Combinations.


\(^{114}\) I am grateful to Mrs. Usha Rajaram, who tutors children with special needs, for having brought this to my notice. She has developed worksheets with rangoli designs and uses them frequently in her training programme.
Rangoli and the decorative aspect:

As per traditional Indian ideology, only things or places covered with ornaments or decorations are beautiful. Just as *alankara*, the metaphors, alliterations etc. adorn poetry and music, decorations adorn the house of god and men. Ornamentation on the house of god and also on the houses of men is believed to be auspicious and to promote prosperity, well-being etc. and to avert bad luck, poverty, calamities and evil spirits. It is believed that the ornamentation facilitates the process of conjuring or inviting the divinity into a statue, place or residence.\(^\text{115}\)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{115}}\) Zimmer, *op.cit.*, p.318.
Alankara conveys mangalya or auspiciousness in the pattern of Indian culture. J.Gonda has discussed the semantical development of words alankara, abharana and bhushana, and from numerous examples of the use of the words in Sanskrit Literature he demonstrates that decoration is associated with luck and prosperity.\textsuperscript{116} In the Rigveda, a-bhar means to “bring near”, especially things that are desired or that have a strengthening or invigorating power. In the Atharvaveda the word is used by preference in connection with words denoting magical power or a thing that possesses such power. The words alankrita and alankara not only denote the idea of “adorn, beautify, ornament, and add grace or beauty” but also of “provide, make ready and fit for a purpose, prepare etc.”

Alankara is also termed as Raksha bhushan which means that it protects the part of the body where it is put. It was used to ward off evil and formed a protective layer around the wearer.\textsuperscript{117} It is seen that the tattooing is done by the ladies as a permanent form of alankara.\textsuperscript{118} Similarly ornaments like mangalsutra, bangles, ear-rings, etc., are worn by women not only to enhance their beauty but also because the ornaments are auspicious and ensure security.

References from Rigveda and various other ancient texts also point to this. Modeled on the ornamentation of the human body with jewellery, the alankara of the temple was obligatory and was enjoined to be fashioned as a richly decorated human form.

Similarly, houses were decorated to convey the mood of gaiety and auspiciousness on festivals like kaumudimahotsava which were celebrated for general well-being and appeasement of evil.

\textsuperscript{116} J.Gonda “Abharana” New Indian Antiquary, Vol.II, 1939-40, pp.69 to 75.

\textsuperscript{117} Dr. Sadashiv Dange, Ashvatthachi Pane, Hindu Dharma-Sanskruti Mandir, Nagpur, 1974, p.237 also Zimmer, op.cit., p.236.

\textsuperscript{118} Dange, op.cit, p.238.
The word *mangalyalekhyam* is used by Bana in the 7th century when describing the decoration of houses with paintings on festive occasions.¹¹⁹

Dr. Devangana Desai in her studies on erotic sculptures quotes the significance of *alankara* from various ancient treatises. The *Shilpashastras* and the *Puranas* emphasize the importance of *alankara* on the houses of gods and men and point out that it leads to prosperity. The *Vishnudharmottara* prescribes auspicious depictions on houses of men. It states that by good depictions carried out according to the knowledge of *Shastras*, *Lakshmi* (prosperity, fortune etc.) is invited and *alakshmi* (bad luck, poverty etc.) is averted. The *Samaranganasutradhara* speaks of *ashtamangalas* (eight auspicious objects) on the door and says that the auspicious *Shri* is to be carved on the entrance.¹²⁰

The *Pramanamanjari* a Shilpashastra text from Western India dated not earlier than the 13th century, which concerns itself mainly with domestic architecture, prescribes depiction of *alankaras* on houses of men. It is enjoined there that the pillars should be decorated with figures in dance-poses. The threshold should be decorated with flowers and leaves. Following of the prescribed practice would lead to happiness and would give wealth and success.¹²¹

Thus from the above examples one can infer that decorations either permanent or temporary served the same purpose that of being auspicious, promoting prosperity, well-being and averting bad luck, poverty, calamities and evil spirits.


In Tamilnadu, the house without a *kolam* is called *muli*, which means ‘a woman devoid of ornaments and who if married, is not adorned with *kumkum* on her forehead.

*Rangoli: creating a sacred space*

Hinduism is a non-congregational religion, based on individual worship rather than collective prayer, so though visits to the sacred space of the local temple may be frequent, the primary sacred space for worship is in the home. Temple visitations are not mandatory, nor is there a specific day of worship, so every day prayers and rituals are enacted in the sacred space in the home.

The area for worship:

The sacred domain in a traditional Hindu house consists of the *pooja* area, the kitchen and the threshold. The *pooja* area is the most sacred space and it symbolically constitutes what can be called ‘the temple of the house’. It is the home of the household deities, and the repository of all sacred objects. It is therefore imperative for Hindus to maintain the ritual purity of this area at all times. It is here that domestic sacred rituals are performed both on daily basis and on holy days of the Hindu calendar. Locational norms dictate its seclusion and separation in order to protect its sanctity from defilement through contact with profane spaces, people, activities, and behaviour. Many times, when separate *pooja* room is not available, the *pooja* space is incorporated in other ritually pure spaces such as the kitchen.

The *pooja* area is not exclusively a female space, because it serves the religious and ritual needs for the entire family, but it is seen that generally the senior female of the household manages this space,
establishing it each morning through ritual performance. She is in charge of the daily maintenance, cleaning and care of the deities. She may rise before the rest of the family each morning and after completing her cleansing bath she enters the pooja room wearing clean clothes. The area is swept with a broom followed by thorough scrubbing/swabbing with water. She cleans the ritual vessels; the household altar, offers fruit and flowers, and anoints the deities with sandalwood paste and kumkum. She creates the rangoli on the floor to establish the sacred space. In some houses in the rural areas, this ritual is continued in the evening when the lady brings the deities their evening meal, lights the lamp and incense, blows the conch shell, and sweeps the rangoli away.

In the kitchen, particular attention is given to the traditional Indian clay stove. It is washed everyday and given a fresh coat of clay and rangoli drawn around it.

Threshold:

The threshold of the front entrance also constitutes a sacred space of importance. It is identified with every change (pause) in the cosmic cycle. When seen in an individual’s life, threshold ceremonies are performed to initiate him and help him to overcome and adopt a new identity, a new role. Every change is seen in the nature of a rebirth. The threshold ceremonies not only initiate the individual but also protect and sanctify his journey into a new and unknown phase of life, be it puberty, welcoming the newly married couple or death. The threshold is symbolic of the passage from the mundane to the sacred. Thus, the sanctity and efficacy attached to the threshold is explicit.

The threshold (at least theoretically) is supposed to rest on the place where the foundation stone had been laid. It is the demarcation between the exterior and the interior of the house.
Women are the primary caretakers of the threshold, in charge of its ritual maintenance and decoration. Since the threshold is considered the gateway for both good and evil, women as ritual protectors of the home take special steps to facilitate the entry of good and inhibit the evil.

*Rangoli* being one of the mediums to attract the auspicious is religiously made on the threshold everyday. On festivals and other happy occasions, elaborate patterns are executed marking an auspicious event. As an expression of hospitality, many times the wordings like *Suswagatam* meaning ‘Welcome’ are added to the *rangoli* in the respective languages. According to Indian tradition, a guest is believed to be equal to god and is therefore received with great honour. *Rangoli* is one of the important sources of fulfilling the social function of welcoming the guests in the house.

**Courtyard:**

In the traditional Indian setting, courtyard is also one of the places to carry out the rituals related to the sacraments of life. On a chosen auspicious time, the courtyard, after being ritually purified, is transformed into a semi-public congregational space by erecting a *mandap*. Many important segments of the rituals like marriage or birth of a child, involving primarily the females of the house are conducted in the courtyard. These are called *stri aachar* or the female rites. Elaborate, ritualized, decorative patterns are executed on the floor by the women during these rituals.

**Around meal plates:**

Rangoli is also drawn around the meal plate – be it in the traditional leaf form or the modern plate, on festive occasions. This is again to sanctify the special meal prepared on these occasions and at the same time to create a pleasing environment at meal-time. At the time of performing shraddha ritual, rangoli is drawn using ash and with chanting of mantras, around the meal plate arranged for the priest. This rangoli is drawn in a clockwise direction around the food offering plate arranged for the deity (which is later consumed by the priest) and in the reverse direction around the plate arranged for the ancestors’ soul (which is supposed to be consumed by the crow).

Ritual actions that perform and change space into sacred space can change people’s physical, emotional and metaphysical experiences within that environment and their behaviour within and around that space. The creation of sacred space within an environment changes not only people’s experience of and within that space, but the persons who perform the ritual action to create that space construct for themselves a special identity as creators and maintainer of that space, which includes the position of mediator between those who use the sacred space and the divine presence within the space.

Women across India create rangoli daily or occasionally to sanctify the ritual spaces.

Through the daily action of establishing and maintaining ritual domestic geography, a woman declares her role as household ritual specialist, maintaining and demonstrating her personal relationship with the household deities, and establishing her relationship with the society outside the house. Men traditionally do not create rangoli. Girls practise drawing rangoli, and may become proficient at it by the time they are married, but because the duty of maintaining the ritual spaces cannot be regularly performed by women during their menstrual years, the senior women assume the position of being intermediary between the deities and the members of the household, and they can assert some authority through this privileged position. Young girls are initiated into the ritual arts by them either through observation and or partial participation. Through rangoli, elder women instruct and socialize
the younger women of the household into place-oriented sacred traditions, ensuring continuity of culture within space.  

*Rangoli* can be viewed as crucial to a woman’s bonding to the place and relationships in her household that enhance her identity, self-esteem and sense of capability, promoting mental, emotional and physical well being. A woman would not arise before the other members of the family and create patterns that would have to be renewed again the next day if there was no significant benefit to be gained from this exertion. Creating beauty and orderliness for self-soothing, the pleasurable and playful quality of drawing, the healthy physical activity of bending and stretching, and constructing something that has a beautifying impact on the environment are certainly good reasons for making *rangoli*.

It gives pleasure and satisfaction to the lady who creates it. Also, the act of drawing with the thumb and the index finger forms a type of *Hasta Mudra* called *Gyan Mudra*. As per yogic practices, this *mudra* is effective in cases of mental ailment, imparts happiness, develops intellect and sharpens memory. *Rangoli* diagrams drawn with full concentration also helps the artists achieve meditative state of mind with focused attention, thus further enhancing her well-being.

Many foreign scholars have conducted research work on Environmental Psychology and Domestic Geography with special reference to rituals of Indian women. In their work, a few of them have stressed on the effects of the process of creating *rangoli* on the women. Deriving from their work one can summarize that, *rangoli* provides an object for fascination or effortless attention in the sacred space, in an atmosphere without distractions, which results in relaxation and directed attention. The eye follows the orderly pattern of the *rangoli* which is filled with culturally recognizable symbols for comfort, protection, and wish fulfillment. It is a visual encounter with an aesthetically pleasing, moderately

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122 As per the interviews conducted, many elderly ladies said that in earlier days, the mother-in-law used to like that daughter-in-law the most, who was better skilled in drawing *rangolis*. The daughter-in-law always tried to excel in the art to win the favour and consideration of the mother-in-law. Often, mothers on the lookout for a prospective bride for their sons would read from the *rangoli* a girl’s maturity and suitability for marriage.

complex pattern with a focal point. These characteristics are associated with a stress reduction framework. Gazing on the rangoli in the sacred space can provide restorative process within the domestic quarters. Stress reduction and restoration enhance one’s mental, physical and emotional health.

Through the activity of ritual maintenance of the family sacred spaces, these elder women avert their risk of becoming marginalized as they age. They perform a necessary action benefiting their family when they as caretakers of the family's domestic sacred space, maintain the relationship of the family to the divine. Their rangolis have the characteristics of emotional regulators, which manage the family's behavior and stress levels, the patterns defining a space for reflection and devotional activity that can restore emotional calm through the experience of beauty and order. The woman who creates the rangoli and maintains the sacred spaces remains involved and sensitive to the stresses and needs of her family, increasing the complexity of rangoli for more stressful occasions, celebrating family events with special designs. Her rangoli daily assert her identity within her family and neighborhood at large, establishing that she is the caretaker of orderliness and appropriate relationships between her family and the divine.

Rangoli serves the social needs as well for a traditional Hindu family. It is generally believed that the rangoli drawn in front of the house is a reflection of the good culture prevailing in the house. A house whose front door has fresh rangoli each morning and is swept clean each evening is a home where religious duties are being properly enacted, evidencing internal orderliness and self-respect. A home without attention to religious ritual would be seen as a home where religion is disregarded, or where disorder was interfering with appropriate actions, or a home occupied by members of another religion or ethnic group.

Thus rangoli serves as one of the significant mediums of ensuring religious, psychological, physical, social and cultural welfare of a traditional Indian family in general and the women of the family in particular.
**Rangoli in Literary Sources:**

Given the ephemeral nature of *rangoli* art, no direct and clear source of information is available on its history. Fortunately few literatures have taken note of this art from time to time. The references to *rangoli* in these literary work enables us get some idea as to the significance of this art in that particular period. The chronological order in which it appears in the literary sources can be considered but it is not possible to place this art in strict historical perspective.

Parshuram Krishna Gode, in one of his five volumes on *Studies in Indian Cultural History* has attempted to trace the history of *rangoli*. In his article ‘History of Rangavalli Art between c. A.D. 50 and 1900’,\textsuperscript{124} he chronologically lists down the references of *rangoli* deriving from the classical Sanskrit or Prakrit literary sources. Besides these, few more literary sources are traced and an attempt is made to place these in chronological order so as to reconstruct the history of this art in a systematic manner. Beginning with the literature on Vedic rituals and then the *Puranas*, the art can be successfully recorded from the literary sources from about 1st century A.D. to the 19th century A.D.

Some literary sources are discussed in this chapter whereas few sources from the Jain literature and also references found in the regional literature are mentioned in the respective chapters.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Chronology</th>
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<tr>
<td>1\textsuperscript{st} to 3\textsuperscript{rd} century A.D.</td>
<td><em>Pauma-chariu</em> by Vimala Suri (Jain) (mentioned in Chp.3)</td>
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<tr>
<td>50-400 A.D.</td>
<td>Though the 64 arts or the <em>Chatuhsashthi kala</em> are mentioned in various ancient treatises, the <em>Kamasutra</em> by Vatsyayana and its commentator Yashodhara are the most reliable authority on the subject. The <em>Kamasutra</em> mentions 64 arts among which the sixth ‘<em>Tandula-kusuma-bali- vikara</em>’ is making temporary diagrams on the floor using rice grains and flowers. It is mentioned as “<em>Tandula-kusuma-bali- vikara</em>”</td>
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\textsuperscript{124} P.K. Gode, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-102.
iti. Akhandatandulai: nanavarnai: sarasvatibhavane kamadevabhavane va manikuttimeshu bhaktivikara: tatha kusumai: nanavarnai: grathitai: shivalingadipujarth bhaktivikara:”.

Yashodhara says that Tandula-kusuma-bali-vikara means to make different artistic designs with the help of multi-coloured unbroken grains of rice on the jeweled floors of Sarasvati temple or Kamadeva temple and the designs made with many –coloured flowers for the worship of Shiva-linga.

Some scholars are of the opinion that this art meant making beautiful display for naivedyas or offerings, using rice grains and /or flowers, as the word ‘bali’ suggests.

Few Jain literatures also point out to the execution of rangavalli by a person (balinvidhijna) who was well versed in the art of oblations (discussed in Chp.3). Even today the Jains make diagrams of these types for offerings.

3rd Century to 6th Century A.D. In the Mrichchhakatikam by Sudraka, the house of Vasantsena is described as – where the entrance was washed with water, smeared with green paste, and decorated with floral designs in several colours. Sudraka describes, “Aho Salilasikta marjitakrita haritopaleponasya vividhasugandhi kusum- opaharachitra likhitabhumibhagasya Vasantsena bhavanadvarasya sasrikata”, in the fourth act of the play.

Varahamihira in Brihat Samhita describes a very auspicious ceremony called Pusyasnana as a remedy for all kinds of disturbances and planetary

125 Kedarnath (ed.), Kamasutra, Nirmaya Sagar Press, Bombay, 1900, p.34.
conflicts. For this a *mandala*, which represented the earth was to be
drawn on holy ground with perfumed powders of different colours in
which positions were to be assigned to gods, planets, stars, etc. and
worshipped.\textsuperscript{128}

\textit{7\textsuperscript{th} century A.D. Varangacarita} a Sanskrit text by Jata-Simhanandi (Jain) (mentioned in Chp.3)

\textit{Harshacharita} by Banabhatta describes vividly the preparations in the house of
Prabhakaravardhana of the Vardhana dynasty at Sthanvisvara. The palace was
beautifully embellished for the marriage of his daughter Rajyasri. He refers to
the minutest details, the activities of the craftsmen, architects and masons
engaged in repairs, construction and white washing of the palace; craftsmen
preparing \textit{vedi}, painters drawing auspicious symbols on walls and floors; and
sculptors modeling auspicious toys such as fishes, tortoises, crocodiles,
coconuts, bananas, beetle-nuts, etc. He also mentions that women were busy in
preparing patterns of ground-rice paste and stamping hand imprints on walls,
mortars, pestle and grinding stones and painting lime-coated water-pots with
colourful designs. He writes “\textit{pistapanchangula mandamanolukhala musala}

\textit{siladyupakaranam, and chitrapatra latalekhyakusalabhh kalasanscha}

\textit{dhavalitan sitalasarajirasreninscha mandayantibhih}” and uses the word
\textit{mandayanti} for making designs. Similarly, the word \textit{likhana, alekhya, lepya}

\textit{(lipana), chitrana, and ranjana} for making designs and paintings are used in the
descriptions of activities during the marriage of Rajyasri. These activities
indicate that women were making designs on pots, painters were painting
auspicious symbols, the floors were smeared and decorations were made for
welcoming the guests. The word \textit{mangalyalekhyam} is used by Bana when
describing the decoration of houses with paintings on festive occasions.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{128} Ajay Mitra Shastri, \textit{India as seen in the Brhatsamhita of Varahamihira}, Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, 1969,
pp.182-183.

\textsuperscript{129} P.V. Kane, (ed.), \textit{The Harsa-carita of Bana, loc.cit.}
The Harshacharita also refers to a large ritualistic *mandala* being drawn in several colours.

915 A.D.  
Trivikramabhatta in his *Nalacampu* refers to *rangavali* in front of houses on occasion of marriage as:  

“Mandyantam Masrumnuktaphalkshodarangavalibhih: pranganani“

959 A.D.  
Yashastilakacampu by Somadeva Suri (Jain) (mentioned in Chp.3)

Late 10th century A.D.  
*Tilakmanjiri* by Dhanapala (Jain) (mentioned in Chp.3)

11th century A.D.  
The *Sharadatilaka*, describes the drawing of the sacred *Sarvatobhadra* mandala in five colours – the white of rice, the red of the *kusum* flower, the yellow of turmeric, the black of burnt cereal and the green of the leaves of the *bilva* tree.

After 1050 A.D.  
In Vadibhasinha’s *Gadyachintamani* – we find a reference to drawings with some red powder on the ground of a dining pavilion as follows – “likhyamaan-mangalchurnarekhanivedyamaan-bhojanabhuvi”

1088-1172 A.D.  
*Deshinamamala* by Hemachandra Suri (Jain) (mentioned in Chp.3)

1100 A.D.  
Apararka in *Yajnavalkyasmriti* quotes Baudhayana who prescribes *upalepana* of ground followed by drawings of geometrical figures on it like square, triangle, circle and crescent shapes.

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130 Shivadatta (ed.), *Nalacampu*, Nirmaya Sagar Press, Bombay, 1900, p.140.

131 P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmashastra*, *op.cit.*, p.1133.


Baudhayana – “Upalinte same sthane shuchau shlakshanasamanvite |

Chaturashram trikonam tu vartulam chardhachandrakam ||

Kartavyamanupurvya brahmanadishu mandalam ||”

Abhilasitartha-chintamani or Manasollas is an encyclopaedic work by King Someshwara III who belonged to the Chalukya dynasty which had its seat in Kalyani (District Bedar). The treatise throws significant light on the cultural conditions prevailing in Deccan before the Muslim advent. The work consists of 20 chapters, its Prakarana III being devoted to the description of architecture, picture-drawing and painting with minutest details, iconography and pleasures of domestic life. The types of chitras are enumerated in the following verses\(^\text{134}\):-

‘Bhavachitram tad-akhyatam chittakautukakarakam

Sad-uchchair-varnakair-lekhyam dhulichitram vidur-budhah

Supramanam tatha viddham-aviddham bhavachitrakam

Rasadhuligatam proktam Manasollasapustake’

Which means- “The bhavachitras are known to arouse emotion in the chitta. The wise know that dhulichitras are painted in pure and bright colours. The (paintings) made according to proper (canonical) measurements (supramanam) are called viddha, whereas bhavachitra is avidda and so are the rasa and dhuli (chitras).

Thus in the Manasollasa or Abhilasitartha-chintamani, the types of paintings

are classified as five-fold-

1. Viddha-chitra
2. Aviddha-chitra
3. Bhava-chitra
4. Rasa-chitra
5. Dhuli-chitra

While *churna* or powder is employed in *dhuli chitra*, *drava* or solution is employed in *rasa chitra*. In *Manasollasa*, *rasa* has been explained as –

“sadravair-varnakaih lekhyam rasachitram vichakshaniah’ i.e. “the experts should paint *rasachitra* with brush and liquid colours”.

After 1130 A.D. Sri Kumara, from Kerala, wrote *Shilparatnam*, the 46th chapter of which is entitled ‘Chitalakshana’. It gives all the salient features of both, the technique as well as the conventions of the painting. The text treats painting as an accessory to architecture of human and divine dwellings. In the end of the chapter are given the three famous types of paintings – the *Rasachitra*, the *Dhulichitra* and *chitra* proper \(^{135}\)–

“rasachitram tatha dhulichitram chitramiti tridha”.

The *Dhulichitras* are naturally short-lived. So, Sri Kumara calls them ‘*kshanika*’ chitra. *Rasachitra* could have had a relative permanence. He gives the details of media, execution and antiquity of paintings as \(^{136}\):-

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\(^{135}\) Srikumar, *Silparatna*, Trivendrum Sanskrit Series, No.75, 1922, Part I, Chapter 46, verse 143.

“Etany-analavarnani churnavitva prithak prithak

Etais-churnaih sthandile ramie kshanikani vilepayet

Dhulichitram-idad khyatam chitrakarath puratanaih

Which means- “these five colours should be separately powdered. With these powders the paintings of the temporary class should be made on beautiful platforms. This (kshanika class) is called dhulichitra (powder painting by the ancient painters)

Chapter 71 of the Narada-Shilpa is devoted to the paintings (Chitralankrutirachanavidhkathan). Narada gives a new kind of classification of pictures, from the point of view of the places where pictures are drawn, i.e. the floor (Bhama), the wall (Kudyaka) and the ceiling (Urdhvaka). These again are classified from another standpoint, i.e. its durability, into two kinds- shashvatak and tatkalik meaning permanent and temporary. The temporary ones since drawn on the floor, Narada calls this variety of chitra as ‘Bhama’ i.e. ‘of the floor’. The Dhuli Chitra and the Rasa Chitra belong to this class.

Narada says that these types of chitras are drawn on the door-steps of the main entrance and also anywhere on the interior floor of the house. In these chitras, birds, snakes, elephants, horses etc. are drawn.

137 Adyar Manuscripts of unknown date quoted by Dr. V.Raghavan in “Some Sanskrit Texts on Painting” Indian Historical Quarterly, Calcutta Oriental Press, Vol.IX, 1933, p.910.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author/Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1250 A.D.</td>
<td><em>Munisuvrata-kavya</em> of Arhaddasa (Jain)</td>
<td>(mentioned in Chp.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1273 A.D.</td>
<td><em>Shishupalavadha</em> by Bhaskarabhat Borikar</td>
<td>(mentioned in Chp.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1278 A.D.</td>
<td><em>Lilacharita</em> by Mahimbhatt</td>
<td>(mentioned in Chp.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1270-1350</td>
<td>Sant Namdev</td>
<td>(mentioned in Chp.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1400-1600</td>
<td><em>Akashbhairavakalpa</em></td>
<td>is an encyclopedia of all the departments of state craft, giving detailed knowledge of the inside working of each department and detail rules for ceremonial duties. The manuscript appears to have been the text studied by the princes from the superscription that it belongs to Tulaja Maharaj who ruled in Tanjore in the 18th century.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Akashbhairavakalpa**

Pg. 25 – *Patala* 7 – “Saṃrajyalakshmimātramānaswaroopkathanam”

- “Tatkundam vedikam chaiva gomayenanulipyavai |
  
  Rangamalyadibhih: saṃyagalankṛutyath mantravit ||”

Pg. 55 – *Patala* 16 – “Mahashantyangavastuhomaswaroopkathanam”

- “Radnya sankalpitamahashantyangam vastupoojanam |
  
  Karishya iti sankalpya vedyam dakshinabhagtaḥ ||
  
  Gomayenanulipyaurvi rangavalli nidhaya cha “

Pg. 60 – *Patala* 17 – “Mahashanti – anga grahayadnya swaroopakathanam”

- “Vedyam paschimdigbhage gomayena savarina |
  
  Samlipya samalankritya rangavalya samantataḥ ||”

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138 *MS No.43 of 1925-26 at the BORI, Pune.*
Pg. 157 – Patala 51 – “Anantavrata swaroopakathanam”

-“Maasi Bhadrapade shuklachaturdashyam grihangane |
Karyitva pushpamayam mandapam sumanoharam ||
Tadantare sarjakshi gomayena savarina |
Sanlipya Sarvatobhadram rangavalya vilikhya tu ||”

In all the above mentioned rites for auspicious sacrificial rituals, it is described that the kundas and vedikas are decorated by rangavalis like Sarvatobhadra, after urvi or bhumi is smeared with cowdung.

Pg.215 – Patala 66 –“Kumaripujamantra swaroopakathanam”- This Patala specifies the forehead marks (Tilakani) and seats (Asanani) for the worship of unmarried girls of different castes during the Navaratri festival.

Regarding the asanas, it says –

“Ashtapatram shadashram cha trikonam cha chaturdalam |
Chaturashram swastikankam kramasho mandalani vai ||
Kalpayedasnartham vai shalitandulchoornatah ||”

Powdered rice is to be used for marking on the ground different seats for different girls. These asanas are of different patterns:

1. Ashtapatram- Having eight petals
2. Shadashram- Hexangular
3. Trikonam- Triangular
4. *Chaturdalam*- Having four petals
5. *Chaturashram*- Quadrangular
6. *Swastikank*- Of the form of a Swastika

Pg. 292 – *Patala 85* – “Nrupabhisheka-kartavya-mandapa-vedika”

– Altar in the coronation pavilion.

- “Evam kundam vedikam cha karyitva sushilpibhihi |
   Lepayitva gomayena rajobhihi panchavarnakaihi ||
   Alankrutya purodhashadabhishechanikandinam ||”

which means, powders of five colours to be used for decorating the ground besmeared with cow-dung.

Pg. 316 – *Patala 92* – “Nrupapattabhishekangamandapa”

- “Karyitva gomayena lepayitva savarina |
   Panchavarnarajobhistam alankrutyatu mandapam ||”

- Coronation pavilion decorated with (drawings with) powders of five colours on the ground smeared with water mixed with cow-dung.

Pg. 377- *Patala 108* – “Nanashakunshantividhanam” – Description of an altar which is to be smeared with cowdung and decorated with *rangavali* for the
- Description of an altar (the ground near the altar was smeared with cow-dung and **rangoli** decorations were drawn on it).

1400-1650 A.D. *Parijata*\(^{139}\) prescribes the drawing of **Swastika** etc. with **shilachurna** (powder of quartz) in a temple in order to achieve merits (**punyam**)

*Parijate – “Shilachurnena yo martyo devatayatane nrupa |

Karoti Swastikadeeni tesham punyam nishamaya||

It also refers to the fruit (**phalam**) that one gets by following the **rangavali** rituals as follows:

“Devatayatane rajan krutva sammarjanam narah|

Yatphalam samvanpoti tanme nigaditah shrunu||

Yavatyah pansukanikah samyaksammarjita nrupa|

Tavadyugasastraanee vishnuloke mahiyate||

Mruda dhatuvikaraairva varnakaigomayena va |\(^{139}\) Gode, *op.cit.*, p.91.
"Upalepanakrudyastu naro vaimaniko bhavet ||"

It says that one will live respectfully in Vishnuloka for as long as thousand eras (yugasahastrane) and rise higher in life (vaimaniko bhavet) by conducting the rituals like smearing the ground with cowdung and decorating it with dust particles or powders (pansukanikah)

16th Century to 17th Century A.D. Gift Siromoney\(^{140}\) has pointed out that the earliest references to kolam drawing in Tamil literary works occur in Madurai Meenakshiamma Kuram (16th Century), and later in Thiru Kutraala Kuravanji (17th Century). These references include a description of the manner of preparation of the surface before constructing the kolam patterns. In both these works the reference is to the preparation of the floor and the drawing of a kolam as a prelude to the worship of Ganesha.

1608-1682 A.D. Manasapuja & Dasbodh by Sant Ramdas (mentioned in Chp.3)

1729-1794 A.D. Virataparva by Moropant (mentioned in Chp.3)

1807 A.D. Hindu manners, customs and ceremonies by Abbe J.A. Dubois written before 1807 but published later.\(^{141}\) (mentioned in Chp.3)

1858 A.D. The Parsees: Their history, manners, customs & Religion by Dosabhoy Framjee Karaka (mentioned in Chp.3)

1867 A.D. Rangavallika by Godavaribai Panditin (mentioned in Chp.3)

1884 A.D. Note on rangoli in the Bombay Gazetteer (mentioned in Chp.3)

1896 A.D. Poem by Keshav Sut (mentioned in Chp.3)


\(^{140}\) Siromoney, loc.cit.

The literary evidences point to the antiquity and continuity of this art in the Indian sub-continent. Though the earliest literary reference to this art dates between 1\textsuperscript{st} to 3\textsuperscript{rd} century A.D., it should be noted that the literary works do not necessarily derive from or depict the contemporary practices, rather they draw from earlier existing traditions. Thus one can conclude that the \textit{rangoli} art must have been a well established practice much before it found a place in literature.