

Art of 'writing' with rice flour

THE Tamil month of Margazhi (Makara Sankranti), ending in Pongal, has just gone by and with it a month of the most gorgeous kolams, those wonderful paintings of rice flour which adorn the ground outside every front door. Women everywhere vie with each other to produce the most beautiful and the best.

Last month I visited Orissa where, on the wall of every mud hut and concrete house, I saw beautiful chitas (from chitra or painting) made of rice flour. And I was lost in admiration of all those illiterate and untutored women whose inherent creativity expresses itself in simple, inexpensive and exquisite art.

All over India, women decorate their homes as part of a religious ritual, daily as in TamilNadu, weekly as in Bengal and annually as in Kerala. It is a symbol of auspiciousness, but it is never considered to be an art form, for it is not a vocation. The honour of producing "works of art", such as sculptures, temple paintings, terracottas and so on, is reserved for men, for it brings home money. Yet, if you are looking for true creativity, for art to follow the natural urgings of the inner self and not for structured responses, the painted offerings of the women of India are the most natural and expressive.

Indian women celebrate auspicious occasions by painting their homes or decorating parts of them. A death in the family means that the house will not be decorated for a whole year. Apart from the daily ritual, festivals, seasonal changes associated with the agricultural cycle, important events in a person's life cycle or even the arrival of a guest or a son-in-law are sufficient reasons.

There are different names and different manifestations: kolam, rangoli, rangavali and muggu in the South, chita in Orissa, alpona and aripan in Bengal, sathiya, mandana and rangoli in the West, chowka poorna or sona rakshna in Uttar Pradesh and likhnu in the Himalayan region. In the region between Mathura (Uttar Pradesh) and Nathdwara (Rajasthan), there is the art of sanzi (floor decorations), now done with khaka (paper stencils), known as sanzi khaka, which celebrates the festivals associated with the life and legends of Krishna.

Interestingly, the decoration of the home is described as "writing", not "painting," and a woman may tell you that she "writes" her kolam or rangoli early in the morning. It is her message to a divine power for help: protection of her family, a bountiful harvest, the health of her husband and children and happiness for the whole family. Most women first imagine their picture and then reproduce it as a message to a personal deity. Their teachers are their mothers, grandmothers and great grandmothers.

Some of the designs we see are probably the most ancient manifestations of Indian art, representing an unbroken line of artists. A traveller looking for women's art will see an amazing range of traditional design, reflecting both the diversity of India and a common cultural thread. Most of women's art all over India is made with the same material: rice flour or rice flour paste. The rice flour is pounded and ground earlier. It may be used dry as rice flour powder, or wet, soaked in water overnight and made into a paste. It is a way of feeding birds and insects and thus sharing one's food.

In TamilNadu, the woman wakes up early in the morning, before the household chores begin, bathes, sweeps and washes the ground outside the front door and the family pooja, and then starts her kolam in both places. The kolam may range from the simplest or padi kolam to elaborate designs and even representations of birds and animals. Many are derived from the undulating movements of the snake.



CREATIONS
Nanditha Krishna

The kolam outside the house prevents evil wishes and vibrations from entering the house, imprisoning them within the coils of the snake. There are special designs for auspicious days: the swastika and other solar symbols for Pongal, the chariot for Ratha Saptami, the snake for Naga Panchami, the kalasham or cornucopia for Navaratri and so on.

Aadi (July-August), the planting month, and Margazhi (December-January), the harvesting month, are special months for kolams, bringing out the biggest and the best as the women pray for good rains and a bountiful harvest. The village festival is another important occasion for kolams. As the ther (chariot) is taken through the streets, women decorate the ground outside their homes with elaborate kolams to welcome the deity with auspicious symbols. Sometimes they put dots on the floor to guide the drawing. Sometimes the rice flour is mixed with red earth or kaavi to produce two-coloured kolams. The influence of the Kannada and Maharashtrian rangoli has seen the introduction of multi-coloured kolams in recent times. The tradition of the kolam is so strong in Tamilnadu that it can even be seen outside Muslim and Christian homes and shrines.

Rangoli is similar to the kolam, but for the several colours that are used to fill in the blank spaces between the designs. The many colours make the work long and laborious, so they are used only on festive occasions, leaving white and maybe one more colour to be used on a daily basis. The Bengali alpona is made of ground rice flour paste used to draw elaborate vines, creepers and flowers within a circle.

Nature in Kerala is so colourful that the people never developed a tradition of decorating the floors and walls. However, once a year, during Onam, which comes in the month of Chingam (August-September), the women welcome Mahabali — the symbol of a bountiful harvest — with intricate designs made out of colourful flowers and petals called athapoovala.

Onam lasts for ten days and flowers are collected every day — one variety on the first day, two on the second and so on — until ten varieties are collected on the tenth day. The design is drawn on the floor or scratched into the ground in concentric circles, and the empty portions filled in with flowers, petals and leaves. Earlier, the unmarried women of the tharavad decorated the athapoovala, now all the women of the family get together to do it. Each family excels in its artistic creations till, on the tenth day, the streets of Kerala are ablaze with colour.

Every Thursday morning, in the months of Margashira (December-January) and Magho (January-February), the women of Orissa decorate

their homes with chita, their local art form. The rice is allowed to soak in water overnight and ground into a paste the next morning. Fresh cow dung is mixed with water and mud and used cover the walls flanking the front door with arches of the mixture.

Dipping their hands into the rice mixture, the women fling it on to the brown walls, creating two large mounds that represent the newly harvested rice. Then, using brushes made of coconut fibre, they surround the rice mounds with rice flour paste arches, vines, lotus blossoms, flowers, leaves, animals and birds, all representing the Goddess Lakshmi. The decoration is also done on other festival days and special occasions in the family.

To be a good chita artist is a pre-requisite for obtaining a good husband, so Oriya girls spend a lot of time practicing their art. Today, synthetic paints have added colour to the chita designs. Driving through the streets of the towns and on the highways is a veritable pleasure in Orissa: the wall paintings are exotic and beautiful and add colour to the landscape.

Women's paintings can be seen in other states too. In Gujarat, particularly Kutch, the wall is covered with wet cow dung and earth, the designs drawn with a stick and filled in with colours made of synthetic dyes added to white chalk powder. Stars and geometric shapes are added with dark red paint. The Rabari tribeswomen sculpt mud shapes onto their walls. The designs could be floral, animal or geometric, but the mandatory glass mirrors are fitted into the corners. Thereafter, the whole is whitewashed.

The mandanas of Rajasthan are ritual floor designs made up of magical symbols drawn out of white clay or lime with occasional colours, the designs inherited by girls from their mothers. Each festival and sanskara has a special mandana. The wall decorations of Rajasthan are different in different areas. Shapes are sculpted into the mud in south-eastern Rajasthan. The houses of Jodhpur are divided into wide planes of white or deep red, creating geometric shapes, and decorated with simple designs.

In the Brahmin quarter of Jodhpur the houses are painted blue every Diwali, commemorating a mistake made by one woman who used too much blue one year. Near the Pakistan border, at Jaisalmer and beyond, organic earth pigments of red, yellow and white are preferred by the women to welcome Lakshmi. Walls in Sawai Madhopur are decorated with birds and animals painted with white lime. All over these two states, Diwali is painting time, although, like Indian women elsewhere, other festivals and family celebrations are also occasions for painting.

In contrast, women of northeastern Uttar Pradesh paint their walls only during Diwali, using a paste of ground rice and highlighted with designs in red. The Balmiki women of Varanasi decorate their homes in geometric shapes of blue, with bands in red, black and white. Women of Gorakhpur in UP welcome Lakshmi with wall paintings of human beings and elephants, while women in Madhya Pradesh prefer to sculpt shapes on their mud walls, generally to Durga or their family deity and, most often, during Makara Sankranti.

This article was inspired by the beautiful wall paintings of Orissa and floor paintings of TamilNadu, painstakingly created by the women to invite the Gods to enter their humble homes. So many women all over India produce exquisite works of art in their daily routine, unaware of their talent. My salutations to these unsung and unhonoured artists.

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Vivid hues, traditional themes... home decoration becomes an art in the hands of Indian women