

ETHNOSYMBOLISM IN CONNECTING THE DOTS: FLOOR PAINTINGS ACROSS INDIA

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Abstract

The art of floor painting evolved over time as materials and influences changed. Rangoli in Gujarat and Maharashtra, Mandana in Rajasthan, Alpana in West Bengal, Chowk in Uttar Pradesh, Kolam in Tamil Nadu, Kalam Ezhuthu in Kerala, Aipan in Uttarakhand, Aripana in Bihar, Pakhamba in Manipur, Jinnuti in Odisha, Sathiya in Gujarat, Likhnu in Himachal Pradesh, etc. are some of the floor paintings found in different states of India.

The purpose of this research study is to have a better understanding of the meaning and significance of diverse floor paintings. Additionally, emphasis will be placed on the symbols and motifs that are utilized in them in order to evaluate their meaning and importance, and lastly, the study will aid in understanding the relationship between each floor painting and mythical stories as well as culture.

Keywords: Culture, Ethnosymbolism, Floor Painting, Multi-disciplinary, Mythology.

Introduction

According to Britannica, a Painting can be described as, *“The expression of ideas and emotions, with the creation of certain aesthetic qualities, in a two-dimensional visual language. The elements of this language—its shapes, lines, colours, tones, and textures—are used in various ways to produce sensations of volume, space, movement, and light on a flat surface. These*

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elements are combined into expressive patterns in order to represent real or supernatural phenomena, to interpret a narrative theme, or to create wholly abstract visual relationships.”

Floor paintings are widely considered to be a ceremonial component of many ancient civilizations. Instead of floor paintings, which are known as Rangolis in India, Native American tribe Medicine Men draw patterns on floors to attract friendly spirits into their homes in the United States. Indeed, the importance of floor drawings varies from one person to another, yet they are always quite similar.

Floor paintings can be found in different religions and regions of India. Though some minor differences are noticed in each of them, which makes them perfectly unique in their own way, it cannot be overlooked that lots of similarities exist among them. Every big celebration in India has accompanying rituals, and each rite has its own floor design. In this way, the floor paintings are sacred and honour Shiva, Vishnu, Lakshmi, Prithvi, Nagpanchami, Diwali, and others. They are also done for marriages, good harvests, births, and removing evil from homes. Occasionally, the floor paintings are done in front of the puja ghars (worship rooms). Colors such as red, yellow, green, blue, and black are used to create them free-hand.

Floor Paintings Across India

1. Rangoli (Western India)

The term rangoli has originated from the Sanskrit word Rangavalli, where rang means color and valli means creepers thus, rangavalli means creepers drawn with colours. In the past, only finely crushed rice powder was used to create rangoli patterns, but today a variety of additional options are available, including sand or chalk powder that has been dyed or painted to create different colours. Although there was a valid purpose for using rice powder, it was also beneficial to the household since it supplied food for ants, insects, and tiny birds under the shelter of the house, which was a gift to the family.

While there are many different ways to create Rangoli patterns, diyas (little clay lamps), flowers, and even beads are sometimes employed in their decoration to provide a festive touch to these floor designs. In India, it is standard practice to hold Rangoli competitions in order to preserve this tradition alive and to encourage the younger generation to engage in them.

In cities where housing is an issue, the amount of space in front of a home is typically limited, if not non-existent altogether. Rangoli designs are printed on stickers and placed on the front door in such instances.

2. *Mandana (Western India)*

This type of floor painting is more popular in the Indian state, Rajasthan. The name of this floor painting, Mandana is derived from the word *mandan* which means 'to decorate'. For the ladies of the Meena group in Rajasthan, Diwali is a popular time to decorate their homes, particularly the walls and floors. Mandana's work is characterized by non-geometrical themes like as tigers, peacocks, monkeys, cats, and stylized Lakshmi feet, among other things.

The ground for mandana is created by mixing cow dung with *rati*, a native clay, and red ochre, and then letting it dry. The motifs are created by rubbing lime or chalk into the ground. As a brush, a bit of cotton or a tuft of hair is usually utilized. Date sticks may also be used to form rudimentary brushes, and thread can be used to create circles and triangles in the same way. Plotting the points is the initial step in creating the architectural themes in Mandana. Triangles are formed by plotting ten, eight, six, four, or two points in descending order, and receding patterns are formed by charting ten, eight, six, four, or two points in descending order. Dots of nine, seven, five, and three are used to create asymmetrical designs on the page.

Mandana has practically unlimited quality of extension because every point may be linked to any other point, and thus allows for almost limitless extension. In many cases, the primary mandana is surrounded by lesser motifs, which are frequently made up of footprints.

3. *Aripan (Eastern India)*

The Aripan artwork is considered fortunate in the Mithila area. It involves spreading the ground with cow dung and clay to purify it. Children's head shaving ritual, Mundan (holy thread ceremony), puberty, pregnancy, entrance into study, and marriage are all examples of this art form.

This Aripan Tradition is mentioned in Grihyasutra. A Vastu Purusha Mandala is a conceptual map that may nationalize any place.

It is not a measured drawing or a contour map, but a code that allows site interpretation and design resolution. A plot of land allotted for habitation becomes the Mandala within which man's universe is structured. Its features become the Mandala's shape and landscape. The Vastu Purusha Mandala operates through a site, which implies that an ordered field cannot exist without a field.

Aripan is represented to beautify and purify an area of ground. It is painted on a house's main entry gate, thresholds, and courtyards. It may also be found in the main residential room. This art form is mastered by both young and old ladies.

Aripan art is portrayed and drawn for numerous reasons. On the auspicious occasion of Tusari Pooja, young unmarried Maithili ladies draw one type of Aripan to find nice spouses. It lasts between Makar and Falgun Sankranti. A temple, the moon and sun and navagrah (nine planets) are parts of the motifs. Similarly, Sanjha Aripan, honours Sandhya Devi (evening goddess). And the universe is shown as a temple. The lotus Aripan also depicts Panch Dev (five gods) and Shapta Rishis (seven sages).

When young females begin menstruating, Sasthi-pooja-Aripan is painted. This Aripan represents the universe's birth and death. This Aripan is painted on the leaf of Makhan on the full moon day of Aswin (September). In Mithila, Sukha-ratri Aripan is painted to welcome Laxmi, the goddess of riches. Swastik Aripan is painted to bless the youth.

Aripan art is cosmic and whimsical. It's a lovely art. The medium used in such art is "pithar", a rice powder and water combination. The ladies draw elegant mathematical figures with two fingers in the pithar on the mud floor of their houses, courtyards, and thresholds. This artwork depicts the goddess's majesty.

The women often spread crimson powder on it to make it more enticing. Three inner triangles represent Gauri, the Maithil maidens' favorite deity.

The Aripanas are drawn by female household members on ritually set occasions, in the courtyards or within the house. The lady-artist should discover the Aripana's design through meditation and general yogic practice. In practice, girls learn the Aripanas through observing their moms, grandparents, female relatives, and neighbours.

4. Alpana (Eastern India)

Alpona is a traditional art form in West Bengal that refers to the custom of finger-painting beautiful designs using a paste of rice

flour on auspicious occasions. It is a traditional art form that is being practiced today. The term's origin comes from the Sanskrit word *alimpana*, which literally translates as "to plaster" or "to coat with." In Bengal, these exquisite designs are considered to be folk art, and it is thought that they keep houses, neighbourhoods, and entire villages safe and prosperous as a result.

When making *alpona* in Bengal, it is typically produced by diluting an uncooked rice kernel paste known as *aatop chaal* with water until it has a thick consistency, which is then boiled. After that, a cotton ball is dipped in the mixture and used to draw the numerous geometrical designs and motifs of flowers, animals, birds, trees, and humans on the surface of the canvas. As they are constructed of rice paste, they are typically white in color, but as times have changed, women have included colors into their creations, and some have even used fabric colors to ensure that they endure a long time. Because it is drawn with rice flour, it was once thought to be *bhutayajna*, an offering to the ants and other insects as a reward for doing a good action for the day.

5. *Aipan (Northern India)*

Aipan art is a traditional ceremonial folk art from the Indian Himalayan region of Kumaon. The art is mostly performed for special events, family rites, and rituals. Practitioners believe it summons a divine force that provides good fortune and wards against evil. The work is unique in that it is created on vacant brick-red walls known as *Gerua*. The actual artwork is created with a white rice flour paste. The art may be found on the floors and walls of Puja rooms and home entrances. It is mostly done by Kumaoni women. The art form is significant in terms of social, cultural, and religious significance.

Aipan are commonly drawn at places of worship, residences, major entry doors, and front courtyards in Uttarakhand. Some of these artistic creations have significant religious significance and are drawn during specific religious ceremonies or auspicious occasions such as marriages, threading ceremonies, naming ceremonies, and so on, to perform rituals, while others are for a specific God or Goddess, and a few are for aesthetic purposes.

6. *Likhnu (Northern India)*

Pahari women in Himachal Pradesh decorate thresholds with diagrammatic drawings called 'Yantras' on ceremonial events.

Hangaiyan is the native name for this type of floor painting, whereas Dehar (threshold), Likhnu (writing), and Chauk are the other types of floor art paintings .

Sweeping the floor is followed by “Lipna,” or plastering it with cow dung, which is then polished with a round stone as it begins to dry. Women may use their fingertip to make foliated borders on wet coatings. The background is made up of brown earth tones (Loshti). Rice or wheat flour paste, as well as white dirt known as Golu or Makol, were used to paint. The designs are usually produced using the women’ fingers in India, however here the patterns can be created with makol, which is a distinct approach. Water is added to the white clay cakes to make the makol paste. It is then placed in an earthen pot with a small hole in the bottom, which the ladies then move around to make various circular designs. An earthen jar with a spout is sometimes used for this purpose. The lady continues to move in a rhythmic pattern without thinking about it, generating a huge bold, fluent, and rhythmic pattern. Because the fingers or hands are insufficient to complete the task, the entire body moves happily to complete the task. These designs are inevitably circular, with lotus symbols inlaid.

7. Kolam/ Muggu (Southern India)

kolam is a traditional form of rangoli that is created by drawing patterns on rice flour with chalk, chalk powder, rock powder, and naturally or synthetically colored powders in the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala, as well as in some parts of Goa and Maharashtra, among other places.

When drawn around an irregular grid pattern of dots, a Kolam is made of curving loops and is geometrical in nature. It is seen as a symbol of good fortune. To the people of South India, kolam is considered to be a type of painted prayer. It is Hindu belief that the application of geometrical patterns and designs made of rice flour at the entrance to a home brings Goddess Lakshmi (the Goddess of prosperity and riches) into the home and drives out evil spirits from it.

A South Indian Kolam is all on symmetry, accuracy, and complexity, and it is not as flashy as its other Indian counterpart, the Rangoli, which is highly colorful. Because of their complexity, attempting to figure out how, precisely, these patterns were created may be a fun task that some viewers may find entertaining.

8. *Kalma Jattu*

The unique form of this art seen in Kerala is Kalam (Kalamezhuthu). It is primarily a ceremonial art done in Kerala's temples and holy groves, where deities such as Kali and Lord Ayyappa are depicted on the floor. The presiding deity of the temple or sacred grove, the religious reason that calls for the Kalamezhuthu ceremony, and the particular caste that performs it are all elements to consider while selecting the nature or figure on the 'Kalam.' Patterns, minute details, proportions, and color choices are all made according to precise guidelines in each situation. The patterns vary greatly depending on the occasion, but seldom according to the artist's preference.

Kalamezhuthu is a five-color painting technique that uses natural colors and powders. The drawing is done entirely by hand, with no use of any instruments. Patch by patch, the images are developed from the center outwards. The powder is distributed around the floor using the thumb and index finger in a thin stream. Anger or other emotions are frequently depicted in the figures. Rice powder for white, burned husk for black, turmeric for yellow, a combination of lime and turmeric for red, and the leaves of specific trees for green are all derived from plants. The colors are brightened by strategically placed lit oil lamps. The Kurups, Theyyampadi Nambiars, Theyyadi Nambiars, and Theyyadi Unnis are only a few examples of Kalamezhuthu musicians. These people's 'Kalams' have a variety of features.

On completion of the 'Kalam,' ritual songs accompanied by a variety of instruments (notably ilathalam, veekkan chenda, kuzhal, kombu, and chenda) are performed in adoration of the deity. These songs are part of an oral tradition, with the musicians themselves performing the ceremonies. Depending on the god being worshipped, the kind of music varies greatly, ranging from folk to classical. A 'Kalam' is drawn at a certain time and erased as soon as the rites associated with it are completed.

Ethnosymbolism

"Ethnosymbolism is a school of thought in nationalism studies that emphasizes the role of symbols, myths, values, and traditions in the establishment and survival of contemporary nation states". (Wikipedia)

It arises as a critical theory of modernism, arguing for the nation's antiquity and lengthy history, whereas modernists believe in the nation's completely contemporary look. Important ethnosymbolism thinkers include John A. Armstrong, Anthony D. Smith, and John

Hutchinson.

In an article by Daniele Conversi, Smith's former student at the London School of Economics, the phrase was originally used as "ethno-symbolist approach." Conversi, on the other hand, was skeptical, claiming that "if we focus only on the force of the past and its symbols, we overlook two other essential characteristics of nationalism: first, its connection with political power, notably the state; and second, its crucial border-generating function."

Conclusion

The motif division is deeper than it appears. Mountainous states like Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra and the southern peninsula have geometrical designs called *akriti pradhan*. It is found in the rich Gangetic plains of Bengal and Bihar. In the south, floral geometric motifs are more common. The floral motifs are sacred, whereas the geometric designs are tantric or bhakti-based.

Lotus, fish, peepal tree, tulsi plant, and other motifs are abstracted and stylized. Other areas have geometric designs and concentric rings with symbolic implications. The circle is a natural image used to represent the universe and God. The square, when drawn within the circle, reflects our civilization. The rising triangle denotes a mountain, stability, and the *purusha*, or eternal masculine. The downward triangle signifies the *prakriti*, or fleeting physical elements. The *purush* and *prakriti* form the universe's six-pointed star.

All of these floor paintings have one thing in common: they are believed to ward off evil spirits. In the story of the epic *Ramayana*, when Lakshmana built protective unbroken circular lines around their hut, and Sita was told never to cross those lines, the importance of these lines may be traced back to the story. They are also common household arts, which are not formally taught but are passed down from one generation to the next. The many civilizations of India all have an underlying thread that links them. They are short-lived and hence more likely to be forgotten or lost.

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