



Hindu floral decorations

(Kolam or Rangoli)

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Imagine, it is dawn! You walk on the street of a South Indian city and you see the floor in front of the house washed, cleaned and designs with beautiful shapes and curves drawn with a white powder. They seem to greet you whole-heartedly. These designs are called *Kolam* in Tamil or *Rangoli* in Kannada or Telugu (the South Indian languages). They are not only beautiful but also attractive and captivating that makes you feel hesitant to walk over them. Yet, since they are drawn in front of the main entrance, which often is the street, you might not be able to by-pass them. In fact, it is also a good omen to see people walking over these creative floral arts. It is one of the daily morning rituals of any Hindu lady, even though, unfortunately, it is disappearing gradually owing to her modern day activities. *Kolams* are an auspicious sign to the house in particular and to the street and the community in general.

On festive days, these *kolams* are filled with red border made up of red clay, or they are filled with flower petals of different colours giving them depth and life.

Why are these *kolams* laid before the sunrise?

It is an invitation to the Sun God welcoming him every day: Oh! Sun God, you are the most handsome, the most intelligent, you who dispel the darkness and bring the light, you who chase the darkness and ignorance and shower us light and knowledge, welcome to our home, please remove our darkness and give us right knowledge.

In olden days, these decorations were laid in rice floor to feed ants and insects. It is like giving feast to ants and insects in the joy of welcoming Sun God. The white of the rice powder represent peace and harmony. These designs thus represent not

only peace and harmony, but also auspiciousness and greetings to partake the joy of the family.

There are days when the *kolams* are not laid when the family observes mourning or conducts rituals for the departed souls. In a Hindu house, even if the visits are informal, people do not pay visits to a house where the frontal floral decoration is not laid because it indicates that the people living in the house are conducting death rituals. Even the beggars do not ask for alms in those houses.

The *kolam* or *rangoli* represents the two aspects of the creation: the Creator and the created. The centre point (or *bindu*) is the potential force of the Creator. The design around the central point represents the complexities of the created world; beautiful yet dependent on the Creator. No floral decoration is laid without the central point, to remind us that the creation is dependent on the Creator. Just as these decorations wash away with rain and wind, so too the created world, a mere illusion.

These floral designs are based on some basic geometrical forms: triangle, inverted triangles, square, and half circles. The entire design completes to form a circle called *mandala*. Of late new forms are introduced like the design of birds, images of gods, flowerpots, and garland. On the day consecrated to the Sun God, these designs would be drawn as a Sun Chariot with seven horses, four wheels, twelve spokes and so on.

On very important festive days, designs specific to the festivity are drawn like the chariot of the Sun, Baby Krishna's feet, parrot and so on. Mud lamps are lighted and placed on the *kolam*.

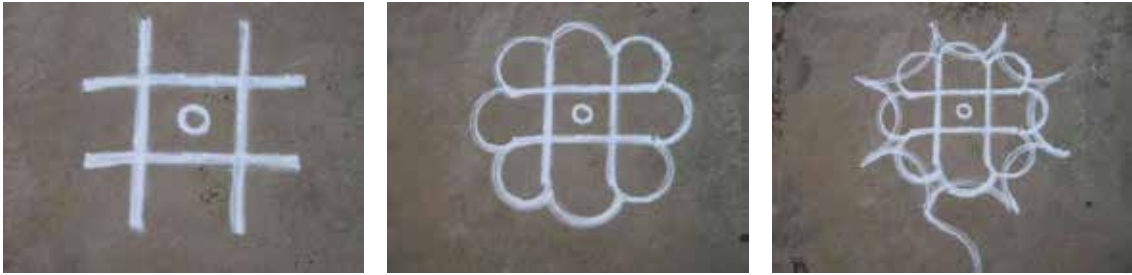
Some of the earliest designs used in the Vedic rituals are: two inverted triangles super-imposed with a very small circle or a point in the centre; the Swastika sign or two parallel lines intersecting with a point in the centre of each angle. From these basic Vedic symbols, many complex designs came in to vogue.

Just like the created world is complex, multifarious and unlimited in its expression, so too are the *kolam* designs: there is no limit for the creativity of these decorations, so the lady of the house, be it a young girl or the eldest of the family, is entirely free to express her creativity.

At present, Hindus are also adhering to the consumer society and assume the stress of the modern world. So, many *kolams* or *rangolis* are pre-laid on self-adhesive plastic sheets which are pasted in front of the house, or tin plate stencils are used to create a perfect floral in a few seconds which would otherwise take fifteen to twenty minutes to draw with one's own fingers. There are also regular classes conducted so teach the technique and the art of these beautiful floral decorations.

Rangoli or Kolam in South India is called Chowkpurana in Northern India, Madana in Rajasthan, Aripama in Bihar, Alpana in Bengal.

Why don't you have a try with a very simple design?



Verify that you have at least a four to six square meters of clean space in front of you. Take a piece of chalk (preferably white). First, draw in the middle of this space, two parallel lines horizontally, with a space of five centimetres between the lines and a length of twenty centimetres. Then draw two parallel lines vertically with the same length and breadth. Mark a thick point or a very small circle (*bindu*) in the middle of the square, formed by these two parallel lines. Join one point of a line to the immediately next one with a semi-circle until you complete all the points. Then from the middle of one of the semi-circles, draw an inverted semi-circle and continue until you complete all the semi-circles. Join the extremes of each semi-circle with an inverted semi-circle. Continue as long as you wish to expand the circle or *mandala*. Complete your circle in such a way that no point of the semi-circle is kept “open”, that is to say, your *mandala* should only have a closed half circle.

To make your *mandala* more lively and attractive, fill in the empty spaces with the powder of colour chinks (yellow, red, crimson and so on). Place a flower like the chrysanthemum in the middle. If there is no fire hazard, then you may even place lighted candles inside the designs.

Congratulations! You have not only drawn your first *kolam* but also made your home auspicious!

A piece of advice: do not scold the visitors, if they walk on your floral decoration. It is meant for them to walk over before entering your house!