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Narratives Behind The Kolam Practice In Tamilnadu

BIJU CHACKO KUNNUMPURATH
Christ Deemed to be University, Bangalore

JOHN SEKAR
Christ Deemed to be University, Bangalore

Abstract

The Research analyses the narratives behind the Kolam practice in Tamilnadu. Kolam is a threshold design drawn at the entrance of the houses in Tamilnadu and other parts of South India. It has a long history of origin and evolution and the researcher examines the various available narratives behind the Kolam Practice. Though Kolam has evolved with the time, the stories behind its practice have become unknown; hence, this work aims to unearth various narratives associated with the Kolam. The researcher has undertaken an analysis of various stories which elucidate the practice of Kolams. This research will certainly throw light into how the Kolam as a practice came into existence and how it was construed in the earlier period.

Keywords: *Kolam, Narrative, Story, Tamil Nadu.*

Introduction

Threshold designs in Tamil Nadu, Southern India known as Kolam. In Tamil language, Kolam means beauty, play and form. The Kolam is ubiquitous in its presence. As one walks down the streets of a village in Tamilnadu one cannot but notice these elegantly drawn small and giant Kolams. These designs are not only found in rural areas but these are also found in urban Tamilnadu. Kolams have various shapes and designs. The Kolams are drawn in manifold symmetries such as horizontal, vertical and rotational. The Kolams are figurative, geometric and abstract images.

One of the most traditional structures in drawing Kolam is what is known as continuous loop design which is drawn by one or more continuous loops winding around a structure of dots.

A woman first places the dots on the ground which helps her as guidance for the circling lines. Holding a small bowl full of rice flour in her left hand, she trickles through her thumb and index and middle finger of her right hand in quick and well measured movements. She maintains beautifully an even flow of the powder

There is no established school for the Kolam. Neither there is a proper curriculum nor is a training programme where one can academically learn. It's only through the oral culture that knowledge about Kolam can be gathered.

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Review of Literature

Thamizhar Panpattil Kolangal is a book compiled by Dr. S. Sakthivel who has brought together various articles of experts on Kolam. This book is a collection of twenty-one articles. These articles discuss extensively on every minute detail about the practice of Kolam, from its origin and evolution to its mathematical dimensions. This material is a careful analysis on how Kolam has come to occupy an important place as a Tamil traditional practice. An author also examines the place of Kolam in Tamil literature. There are various references to Kolam in ancient Tamil literature, which is evidence that Kolam has been a part of Tamil culture from time immemorial and it offers the readers various stories associated with Kolam. This book explains the types of Kolams according to their kind, days, festivals, castes and stages of life. It also offers information about Kolam as a practice, which has been incorporated by other religions especially by Christianity. There is also philosophy behind Kolam, which is delineated in this book. Various beliefs associated with Kolam are dealt with too. The book has also a section on Kolam and Narratives which deal with various narratives behind Kolam.

The author gives a detailed analysis of twelve mythical narratives. They narrate the stories behind the character of Kolam which has divine power within. Folk Tales about Kolam is another rare material by V. Shanmugam Pillai and Saroja that presents a clear picture about the meaning and narrations behind Kolam practice. The Kolam is also a manifestation of one's devotion to the Divine. This material deals with the divine character of Kolam. There are various Gods and Goddesses in Hindu Mythology. This material explains the numerous stories associated with Kolam. This literary work elaborates 29 stories collected from eight different castes in and around the city of Madurai and a few from outside too. These narratives deal with the purpose why the Kolams are drawn. This work examines the caste differences and how Kolams are divided according to the caste lines. The author speaks also about the materials that are used to draw Kolams, like Red-sand, cow-dung, rice-flour and stone-powder. The stories that are found here can be categorized into imaginative, real and dream stories. The author also further divides the stories into puranic stories, ithihasa stories and social stories. Under ithikasa stories, the author delves into Ramayana and Mahabharata stories.

Exploring India's Sacred Art by Stella Kramirsch is a rich literature that offers insight into the sacred art that is part of India's history. The book deals with the art that is created on the ground by the rural women. This is how Kolam is also created as a floor design. The author sees such designs as magic designs. This book thus enables the readers to understand the ancient traditions and their importance in the societal life of the mankind. This book also deals with the other forms of art like textile art and it explores the meaning of these arts and their symbolic implications. Rural practice and their rich traditions make up the subject matter of this book.

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Objectives

The researcher has familiarity with the Kolam and its forms as he hails from Madurai where the practice of Kolam is very common till date. It is his interest and curiosity to know more about the subject matter that has led the researcher to choose the topic. Since narrations mark the important dimension of the study, an analysis on the narratives behind the origin, evolution and meanings of Kolams will be analyzed. The historical perspective of Kolam is essential to understand the significance of Kolam. Since it is an age old practice, it may not be possible to date its origin precisely but tracing the origin will reveal various stories associated with this practice. There are mythical stories which enumerate the presence and significance of Kolam in human life. It is these narratives that the researcher wishes to study in detail.

Limitations

The research has however limitations. The major limitation is the unavailability of literature as there has not been much done about the practice of Kolam. The Kolam has evolved over the ages and the practice of Kolam has been passed orally from one generation to the other. To find out the stories and narratives behind this practice, we need to take recourse to the older generations of people who know about it. The present generation lacks the stories behind the Kolam. Since there is not much written down about this, the researcher finds himself limited to few available sources.

Methodology

The researcher has adopted the qualitative research methodology to analyze the research question. The researcher has explored the issue in question, namely the narratives behind the practice of Kolam, by understanding the phenomena of Kolam with the help of content analysis and thereby has collected material. Content analysis includes the analysis of texts of various types, writings and images. Since the subject matter is a discussion about the narratives, the researcher has made an in-depth analysis of the texts which are about the stories. As intended, the researcher has followed the qualitative analysis and has explained the research question.

Analysis

Narrative: Term and Its meaning

The Kolam which is a cultural product of South India has innumerable patterns, symbols and stories. Hence it is essential that the researcher first explains his manner of conducting his study on Kolams. He employs the narrative methodology.

Roland Barthes defines Narratives as "…able to be carried by language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures and the ordered mixtures of all these

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substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy, painting, stained glass window, cinema, comics, news item, conversation." (Roland, 1977) Narratives therefore are to be found not only in stories but also in the images, painting and even in a stained glass window. Deriving from this thought, Kolam which is primarily an image consisting of dots and lines has a story within. The narrative deals with how this story is being told by means of Kolams.

A story is an image constructed in the mind, a creation of the intellect and a narrative deals with some material medium like words and images. (Ryan, 2005) This would mean that narrative becomes the form and the story is the content. In Kolams, the content is present in their patterns and symbols and the narrative is the form how the content is explained. Narrative therefore is primarily an explanatory device. (Snaevarr, 2010) The Researcher employs this device in order to conduct an in-depth analysis on Kolams

Kolam: Its Socio-Cultural Context

Kolam literally means "guise" which indicates also its character. Kolam is an exterior structure, manifestation or a style of presentation typically concealing a story in its patterns and symbols. At dawn and dusk, the women of South India adorn the threshold of their homes with the complex designs drawn using the rice flour. The rice flour is used as the drawing material because the household offers Kolam itself as food to the small flies and insect besides as an offering to the deity hoping an abundant blessings in return. (Laine, 2014)

The ground is first made clean with the cow dung which reflects the act of purification in order to draw the sacred Kolam. The beauty of Kolam is that it is not taught formally but it is learnt by observation. The women learn from their mothers and other female members of the family. It is a tradition that is handed down from one generation to the next. (Maria, 2002)

It is considered as one of the important and household duties and a first one that a woman must perform every day. Kolam besides being an aesthetic beauty possesses the divine character to fill the homes with prosperity and sanctity and to destroy the evil forces. Drawing Kolam provides the families and their surroundings auspiciousness. The very act of drawing a Kolam is itself an invitation to deities like Lakshmi who is the Goddess of Prosperity. The threshold of the house thus becomes a ritual and sacred space (Laine, 2014).

Kolam Patterns are very traditional propitious designs practiced for generations in South India. Kolam possesses a highly artistic nature accompanied with geometrical structures which not only appeals to senses but arouses intellectual curiosity. (Nagata, 2007) The art form Kolam involves primarily designing elements dots, lines, shape, form, space, colour and texture and designing principles rhythm, pattern,

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movement, balance, proportion, variety, harmony, emphasis and unity. (Chacko, 2014) The foundation of Kolam art form is dots (Pulli) which are arranged in various numerical combinations of horizontal and vertical linear form. The lines then are drawn intertwining the dots producing in the end an artistic pattern entrenched with meaning.

The specialty of this floor art Kolam is that it is drawn solely by women. It is a traditional practice among the Tamil society that Kolam must be an artistic work of women alone. In a society that is very much patriarchic, Kolam as a ritual enables women to explore the world of art. (Thirumurthy & Simic-Muller, 2012) Kolams vary according to the festivals. The most elaborate Kolam adorn the households during the most important cultural festivals of Tamil society namely Pongal, the harvest Festival. The Kolams have a particular rhythm in their appearance. Their rhythm is characterized by annual, monthly, weekly as well as daily importance. These rhythms are also overlapped by yet another rhythm of life-cycle of family members.

As a girl enters her womanhood, her house is decked with a particular Kolam representing a blooming flower to symbolize that a girl has bloomed into a woman. As a woman performs this art of Kolam, she also carries out the ritual of purification. Women draw specific Kolams during the marriage, child birth, house warming and funeral. During the inauspicious occasions such as death, even if it has occurred during the festival season, the family does not participate in the Kolam practice. Kolam as a ritual also reveals the element of play which is not noticed often. While a woman is deeply immersed in this ritual of Kolam, she at the same time enjoys performing this act as it involves wonder and creativity.

The practice of Kolam reflects among women the rhythmical manner of rising as a feminine being. It is important for a girl to participate in the practice of Kolam to develop into womanhood. In so far as a girl is able to produce on her own a well refined Kolam with a complex nature, she is said to possess the capacity to be a good wife and mother. The girls undergo no formal training but being present at the time when womenfolk of the family draw Kolam, they imbibe the art gradually. They begin by assisting the master and it is only when they are fully proficient, they are allowed to perform the Morning Kolam. (Laine, 2014)

Significance of Kolam

This floor art is present in other parts of India and known by various other names: Alpona in Bengal, Juntiin Orissa, Kolam in South India, Rangoli in Maharashtra, Sathiain Gujrat and Chowk-pujan and Sona-rakhna in Uttar Pradesh, Alpana in Bihar and Mandanain Rajasthan.

Kolam is created at three important places: Household shrine in the kitchen, the entrance to the main house and the entrance to the main village temples.

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The Kolam in the kitchen denotes that it is woman's domain. Creating a Kolam here separates this place from the other places. Kitchen is said to be the place where gods reside compared to other places in the house. Kitchen being a place where food is prepared, it becomes the centre of all the ritualistic activities of the family.

It is here that the rituals are begun, maintained and completed. The Kitchen is the essential site for the production of auspiciousness. Drawing a Kolam here thus brings out its sacredness.

The Second type of Kolam is made at the entrance of the house, facing the village separating the known and unknown, inside and outside and safe and unsafe worlds.

Kolams are also drawn on household shrines the interior thresholds which indicate the movement of the members of the family from the inner sanctuary through all the other thresholds to the entrance of the house – the front door which is the place of meeting between the interior and the exterior world. Kolam on the entrance of every house on the village street symbolizes that every house is in a state of auspiciousness. Thus the sacred Kolam protects the household from the chaos of the world outside.

The third type of Kolam is drawn at the entrance of the temple. The function of the Kolam here is that it separated the temple threshold from all the others. It is quite common that the Kolams are drawn at every successive threshold in a temple leading to the Sanctum Sanctorum. This denotes the sacred path of the devotee as he journeys to the innermost sanctuary. Kolam here marks the journey from the ritually polluted outside space to a ritually pure inside space.

Kolams at the entrance of house are drawn as an offering to the Divine and these Kolams are to be stepped upon. It is ironical that Kolam while being loaded with rich meaning and aesthetic beauty, it is physically weightless.

It is considered that stepping on a Kolam is like taking a holy dip in the sacred river of Ganges. It is a creation of shadowy body movements and hand strokes which appear early morning.

Kolam is ephemeral in the sense that it soon gets worn away as the passersby trample upon it. It is also believed that whoever steps on it receive the blessings too.

However it is also true that many do not step on the Kolam and they move around it for they consider that it is too sacred to be trampled upon. Kolam drawn at the household shrine or in a temple should never be stepped upon because it is believed that these Kolams are highly charged with divine energy. (Pintchman, 2007)

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Narratives behind Kolam Practice

Invoking the Presence of Bhumadevi

Kolam Narratives revolve for the most part around four Goddesses: Bhumadevi, the earth goddess, Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, good fortune, propriety and rice, Mudevi, the goddess of laziness, sleepiness and poverty and Thulsi Devi, the Goddess of Indian basil. The reason why the women draw Kolam as the first thing in the morning is to remember that they owe a debt to the earth Goddess, who bears all beings upon her. Whenever a woman makes a Kolam, she is supposed to think of Bhumadevi. The earth Goddess is seen both as the physical earth, as a living being in possession of soul as well as the specific soil wherein a woman stands. Bhumadevi is considered as the mother, source of existence and sustenance. The practice of Kolam is in an offering of thanksgiving to the earth Goddess. The practice of Kolam thus brings to more conscious level the relationship and dependence that the humanity has on the earth. The Kolam is thus considered to be a painted prayer as women recognize the earth goddess and invoker her divine presence in that particular space where the Kolam is drawn. This is indeed a request from the womenfolk to Bhumadevi to forgive the transgressions of mankind. The presence however is temporal as far as the Kolam exists. (Alaine M. Low, 2001)

Invoking the Presence of Lakshmi

Kolams represent essentially the spirituality. The Kolam is drawn using the rice flour precisely for the reason that insects, ants and birds like sparrows may feed on them. In this sense the woman of the house becomes Annapoornaeshwari herself. Kolams thus become the source of living. Kolam represents the man's concern for the creation and through Kolam one performs the act of annadana. Kolams are also drawn in order to welcome Lakshmi, the Goddess of prosperity to one's house. There is a Puranic story which refers to this. Devas and the Asuras were at work making nectar from the ocean of milk and at that time there emerged many things from the ocean. Goddess Lakshmi also emerged from the ocean and asked Lord Vishnu for a home to live. The Lord told here to find her home in houses where the entrances are made clean with cow dung water and adorned with Kolams.

Keeping the Evil Away

There emerged from the ocean also Mudevi – the Goddess of misfortune who also asked for a residence. Lord Vishnu told her that she could find her home in those houses whose entrance are not clean and not decked with Kolams. Hence people believe that while Kolam is invoking the presence of Lakshmi to their houses, it is also at the same time warding off Moodevi from their houses. (Saroja, Folk Tales About Kolam)Tulsi Devi is another wife of Vishnu who is also the goddess of goodness and who ensures the protection from evil. Kolams are drawn invoking her presence too.

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There is yet another description on the same. Kolam drawn at the threshold has also to do with the Tamil concept of evil eye. The Kolam is there drawn with a purpose to ward off the ill effect of the evil eye for one makes the Kolam as well as everyone who crosses the threshold. It is believed that an evil eye cast upon a family member as an individual or as a family, it wreaks chaos in the family just as a sickness devastates the health. When someone casts his evil eye on a desired object, that eye has the power to destroy the well being of the object. It is here that Kolam functions as a net, a catcher of that evil eye and a protected screen for the negative emotions and thus protects the members of the family.

Kucela and Kannan

Kucela and his family were suffering from extreme poverty. Even though Kucela's wife had no rice to cook, she saw to it that she drew Kolam with rice flour. Seeing this, the villagers made fun of her. Kucela's wife however continues to draw Kolam so that the insects and ant may feed on it and thus invoked the presence of Lakshmi. The Lord Krishnan saw that his friend Kucela and his wife continued to draw Kolam despite their poverty. Kuchela's wife sent him to Lord Krishana with a handful of beaten rice. Even before Kucela could ask the Lord Krishna to eat the beaten rice and bless his family in return, Krishna began to eat the beaten rice and Kucela is blessed with immense riches. (Sakthivel, 2004)

Saradha Devi

Saradha Devi, wife of Ganapalam, the King of Parvathipuram was childless for years. They carried out penance and prayed to Sivan incessantly. Sivan appeared and said, "You should build five houses for five families. You need to observe the regulations of the puja as per the instructions of the lady of the house where Lakshmi makes her home and then you shall beget a child."

Akkammal, the resident of the last of the five houses, used to clean the entrance of her house with cow dung water, draw Kolams and light a lamp in front of the house because of which Lakshmi came and resided in her house. Saradha Devi heard of this, learned from Akkammal, the art of Kolam and performed it along with the puja.

First year she drew Kolam to have a baby and had puranakalasham over the Kolam; in the following year, she made Kolams to become rich and she set up a stole of sandal paste over the Kolam. In the third year, she drew Kolam for prosperity and set up palkalasham over the Kolam. In the fourth year, she made Kolam for long life and set up beetle leaves and performed Puja. She received all the benefits and comforts and lived long happily. (Saroja, Folk Tales About Kolam)

Red Sand Kolam

Ravan comes as Veedanan and deceives Hanuman and takes Ram and his brothers as prisoners to sacrifice them as an offering to goddess Kali. However the daughter

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of Ravan falls in love with Ram. Hanuman takes her help and finds out the place where Ram and his brothers are imprisoned and Hanuman gets them released. This causes war. Every drop that falls from the body of Ravan, rises as another Ravan and fights against Ram and His brothers. Hanuman then rushes to the daughter of Ravan seeking her help.

Hanuman finds out from her the place that is in a bee, where his heartbeat resides. He crosses seven mountains and kills the bee. As blood of the bee is frozen on the ground, Ravan dies on the battlefield. In order to commemorate this event, Red sand Kolam is drawn. This story is orally passed on. (Sakthivel, 2004)

An old woman drawing Kolams becomes young

TirumalicaiAlvar was an ardent devotee of Tirumal-vishnu who was residing at Kanchipuram. There was a devadasi who used to clean the temple and draw kolams everyday. As she became old, she could not do anymore the service that she had been doing all along. Kanikkannan who is one of the disciples of Alvar changed her to a virgin young girl. When the King of Kanchipuram learned this, he wished to remain young as well and so he asked Kanikannan to restore his youth which Kanikannan refused because the King had his own motives to remain young. The king became furious and banished Kanikannan away. As Kanikannan and his guru TirumalicaiAlvar and Tirumal left Kanchipuram, the entire town found itself in pitch darkness. The king then apologized and the three came back. This is a story which has no direct link to Kolam but the woman's ardent desire to serve the lord by means of drawing kolams brings her youth back. (Saroja, Folk Tales About Kolam)

Drawing Kolams around the Oven

After having smeared the sides of the oven with the cow-dung, a woman was about to lit it but then she heard a crying sound aloud. When she looked at the direction where it came from, the woman saw the Goddess Lakshmi with a baby in her hands. The woman was taken aback and was at great wonder. Goddess Lakshmi said that she wanted to let the baby down to which the woman did not agree. Lakshmi said that she could not leave the child on a floor that is not decked with Kolams around the oven. From then on the woman began to draw Kolams around the oven which in turn brought to family all prosperity and wealth. The purpose behind the above narrative is that the Kolam has to be drawn around the oven too only then the home will have the privilege of being an abode of Lakshmi. (Saroja, Folk Tales about Kolam)

Cow dung as the place where Lakshmi Resides

Cow is considered to be a mother by the Hindus and hence it is called as Komata and Kamatenu. Kamatenu came out of parkatal which means milk ocean even before Goddess Lakshmi rose from there. The thirty three crores of gods could not find a

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place on earth and therefore they asked Kamatenu to give them places to reside. She protected them all and gave them places over all her body, in each part of her. In the end, Lakshmi arrived and asked for a place too. But only the back of her body was available for Lakshmi and she agreed to stay there. Since the back of Kamatenu has become the abode of Lakshmi, the cow-dung has been considered as auspicious and sacred. It is for this reason of auspiciousness that people sprinkle cow-dung in front of their houses. The use of cow-dung before drawing Kolam is to invite the Goddess Lakshmi to come and reside. The presence of cow-dung at the entrance of the house removes all evil power and inauspiciousness. This story is found in Mahabharata where we find that Kamatenu gave place for Lakshmi to stay. (Saroja, Folk Tales about Kolam)

Lotus Kolams

Raman neared the place of king Janaka of Mitilai with Vishwamitra and Latuchmanan. Raman saw Janaki standing on the balcony and was enchanted by her beauty. She saw him too. However Raman had all the admiration and love and care for Sita and when he looked down he saw the Lotus Kolam. Vishwamitra immediately asked a question to Raman: Which is beautiful – the Lotus in the balcony or the Lotus on the ground? Raman was very ashamed as his mind went wandering. (Saroja, Folk Tales about Kolam)

Conclusion

Kolam has been an essential part of Tamil tradition for ages. The origin of Kolam takes us back to the mythical narratives. The practice of Kolam has undergone an evolution of growth. An analysis on the narratives signifies the importance of Kolam in the lives of people of that age. Besides being an aesthetic exemplification of floor art, it has various implications spiritual and social. Kolam as we have seen is a means to invite auspiciousness, blessings and divine presence to the homes. Various stories associated with the Kolam prove

how Kolam has become not just an art but also a prayer invoking the presence of Deities. It has been understood that drawing Kolam on the threshold is like going to the temple and having adarshan of God himself. Such is the spiritual power and radiation of Kolam.

The presence of Kolam at the entrance of the house is like having a fortress which cannot be penetrated by any evil power. Similarly, the evil powers have an easy access to a house which does not have a Kolam.

It is believed that Kolam serves as an angel who carries human petitions and prayers to Gods. Kolam is also a bridge, some believe, between God and mankind. Kolam is drawn with rice powder so that Kolam itself becomes food for the creatures on the earth such as ants, insects, squirrels and birds.

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These narratives have helped the researcher to understand the rich beliefs associated with Kolam. Kolam is not just a floor art but it is endowed with stories, narratives and meanings.

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