

A Language of Symbols: *Rangoli* Art of India

Nayana Tadvalkar

Abstract

Rangavali or Rangoli is an ephemeral floor art practiced in India since ancient times. The sources of the rangoli diagram lie in the protection sought by Homo sapiens in the magical drawings, which were believed to prevent the auras of bad spirits from coming into the house. This tradition continues down the history of man till date.

Rangoli, essentially a woman's art, carries connotations of anonymity, collective wisdom, spontaneity and simplicity. It reflects the larger philosophy of life through patterns of memory and an extensive visual and geometric vocabulary.

The art of rangoli is a storehouse of symbols. Beginning with the auspicious dot, the symbols go on expanding to form a line and the basic geometrical shapes like the circle, triangle, square and so on, each having its own significance. The geometrical figures as the point, line, circle, triangle and square, have a symbolic value in representing the basic energies of the universe.

The survival of rangoli symbols through space and time and their facility for absorption in new environments can be attributed to their simplicity, flexibility and elemental appeal and most importantly to the beliefs of the people.

This paper attempts to trace the meaning of symbols hidden in the rangoli diagrams.

Rangoli or Rangavali in Sanskrit - rang (colour) and aavali (row), is an ancient Indian folk art created on the floor. Literally, it means creepers drawn in colours. In India, traditional place to draw rangolis is the threshold of the house, a zone of passage from the known – the house, to the unknown outer world. It is also drawn in places of worship and around the holy plant of tulsi and sometimes eating places as well. The drawing of rangoli patterns is often combined with rituals associated with auspicious occasions like weddings and naming ceremonies and major festivals like Deepavali.

The women of India have kept the art of *rangoli* alive. The tradition is passed down in families from mother to daughter thus maintaining continuity. 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. The designs drawn range from geometrical diagrams to curvilinear patterns or those inspired by nature. These spell binding configurations are known under many names, such as *Sathiya* in Gujarat, *Kolam* in Tamilnadu, *Muggulu* in Andhra Pradesh, *Rangavali* in Karnataka, *Chowkpurana* in Northern India, *Mandana* in Rajasthan, *Aripana* in Bihar, *Alpana* in Bengal, *Chita* or *Osa* in Orissa, *Aipan* in the Himalayan region and so on. In fact the term *rangoli*, as the art is known in Maharashtra, is a synonym for any kind of Indian floor art.

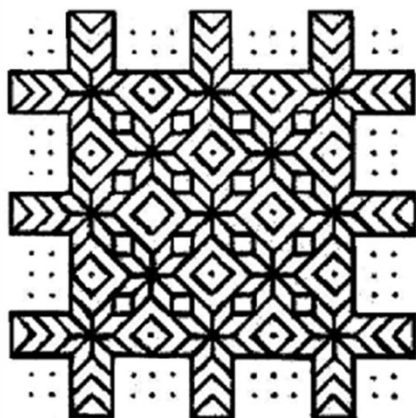
The creation of *rangoli* patterns in ritualistic and domestic settings are layered with meanings rooted deeply in culture. The significance of *rangoli* is much wider than the aesthetic and decorative purpose. Besides being a symbol of auspiciousness, it is often described as magic diagrams for rituals, to ward off evil, to invoke the deity, to fulfill the wishes when taking a vow, for meditative purposes, to create a sacred space within the confines of home and many more. These are to be drawn every morning or in the evening and at each sacrament of life, from birth to death.

The main aspect of any *rangoli* pattern is the use of symbols. All of these motifs depicted naturally or symbolically represent particular forces or qualities embodied in some aspect of creation, evolution or dissolution and are considered to be sacred.

Basic Geometrical Symbols

Basic geometrical figures as the point, straight line, circle, triangle and square, have a symbolic value in representing the basic energies of the universe.

Dot: The most comprehensive and minimal symbolic expression, the dot is the point of origin and end, all beginnings and all dissolutions. It denotes seed which has the power of recreation. The central point representing zero dimensions is the fundamental point of repose from which emerges transformation and evolution. It signifies the starting point in the unfolding of inner space, as well as the furthest



**Figure 1: Straight Line
Pattern joining the Dots**

point of ultimate integration. It is the point-limit from which inner and outer space take their origin, and in which they become one again.

Dot forms the base of geometric *rangoli* designs. A grid made of calculated dots serve as the guideline for the design. Just as the tree, flowers and fruits proliferate from the seed and sprout, the *rangoli* begins with a dot.

Each movement of the dot takes on a new graphic significance, forming line, spiral, triangle, square and so on, unfolding new vistas for visual vibration and evolution.

Line: The dot moving with length without breadth forms a line. The straight line signifies development and growth. Linear patterns suggest sound vibrations or dimensions of space. In *rangoli* the dots are joined together forming lines so as to create beautiful patterns. The lines may be drawn straight (**Fig. 1**) or curvy (**Fig.2**).

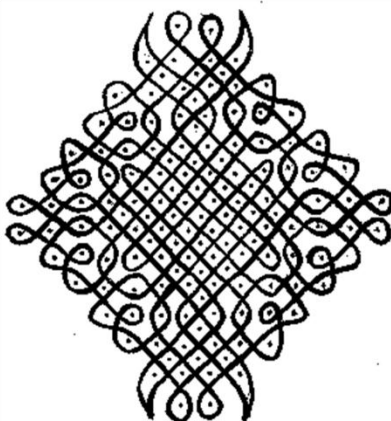


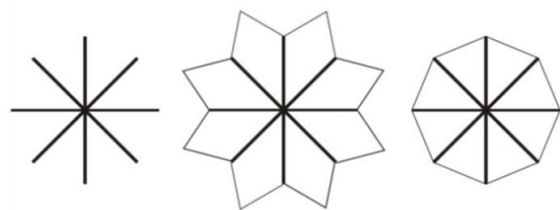
Figure 2: Curvy Line Pattern Around the Dots



Two intersecting lines forming the cross develops to form a Swastika



Three intersecting lines forming a six-pointed star and a hexagon



Four intersecting lines forming an eight-petalled flower and an octagon

Figure 3: Intersecting Lines forming Patterns

Intersecting lines (**Fig. 3**) lie at the base of some important auspicious symbols like the *Swastika*, six-pointed star or the hexagon and eight-pointed star or the octagon.

The arrangement of three intersecting lines is also known as *hagal-rune*, a Germanic letter, symbolising protection and procreation (Diringer 1949: 514-16).

Four intersecting lines symbolise the eight cardinal points, each having its own guardian or *dikpala*. These cardinal points with the centre are also identified with the nine planets.

In the representation of the *Panchamahabhutas*, or the five elements, the circle symbolises- the water, the square- the earth, the triangle- the fire, the air is represented by a crescent. The ether which is endless space is present in all the forms. Thus the geometric shapes drawn in *rangoli* symbolise the worship of the five basic elements of nature.

Symbolism of some common *rangoli* motifs:

Swastika: The term *Swastika* (**Fig. 4**) is believed to be a fusion of the two Sanskrit words *Su* (good) and *Asati* (to exist), which when combined means ‘May Good Prevail’. Thus the symbol implies auspiciousness and good fortune. The Hindus, along with Jains, Parsis and Buddhists regard it as an auspicious symbol or *mangala- chinha*. It is believed that the *Swastika* is much in favour with the gods as a seat or couch, and as soon as it is drawn it is immediately occupied by some deity. It is therefore customary to draw the *Swastika* on most auspicious and festive occasions such as marriage and thread ceremonies, *Diwali* festival and fulfillment of vows.

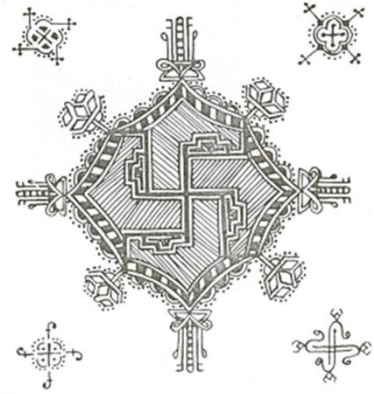


Figure 4: Swastika

Foot-print: Foot-prints (**Fig. 5**), a very popular motif in *rangoli* are drawn at the entrance of the house indicating the arrival of Goddess *Lakshmi*. If the foot marks are pointed in the right direction, i.e. towards the house, they are considered auspicious and a symbol of goddess *Lakshmi*. But the upturned feet are considered inauspicious and indicative of goddess *Alakshmi*- the negative aspect of *Lakshmi*. In another custom followed in South India at the time of *Janamashtami*- the birthday of Lord *Krishna*, small footprints are drawn with rice flour, from the altar of the house to the kitchen suggesting that baby *Krishna* after taking birth has entered their kitchen to steal butter. Thus the presence of the divine being indicated through footprints is considered to bring prosperity to the household.

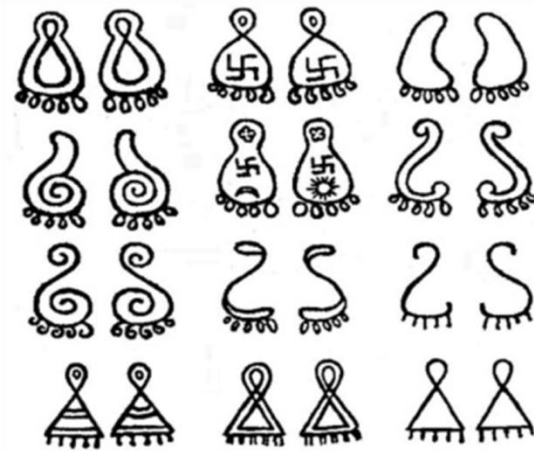


Figure 5: Footprints

Some footprints like those of a tiger are drawn out of fear and

reverence. These are believed to be especially powerful in scaring away the evil spirits and are found in the *rangoli*, tattoo as well as embroidery designs in South India.

Knot or loop motif: A knot is a complex symbol embracing several important meanings mainly related to the idea of tightly closed link. It expresses the idea of binding, of creating an enclosure and of protection. In the broadest sense, loops

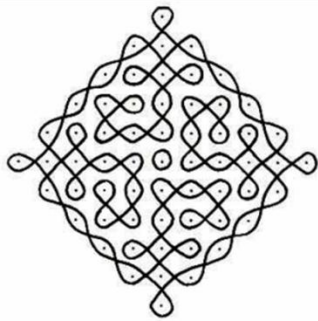


Figure 6: Kolam

and knots represent the idea of binding. Mircea Eliade has made a special study of the symbols of knots and notes that in magic cults there are two types of knots and bonds: (a) those which are beneficent and a protection against wild animals, illness and sorcery and against demons and death and (b) those employed as a form of 'attack' against human enemies (Cirlot 1962: 182). The first type applies to the knots drawn in *rangoli*, especially in the *kolam* (**Fig. 6**) of Tamilnadu. *Kolam* is believed to be a labyrinth to ensnare harmful spirits and prevent them from causing harm.

The knot used in *kolam* designs is believed to be a universal symbol of protection which originated thousands of years ago. It is seen on the seal of Mohenjo-daro in the remains of the Indus Valley and also on the shields of the Celtic people, the ancient people of Europe. It was used to ward off evil spirits. Similar patterns are common in Egypt and in the Sumerian civilisation where they are known to have had a talismanic significance.

Animal motifs:

Naga or cobra: The *naga* has the power to bestow fertility, to dispel sterility and to heal sickness. They also operate as donors of prosperity and opulence, grantors of wishes, owners and guardians of valuable treasures (Bosch 1960: 136). The *nagas* or serpents are believed to bestow all the boons of earthly happiness – abundance of crops and cattle, prosperity, offspring, health and long life on mankind. Women invoke the *naga*'s blessings of prosperity and fertility when they draw it in their *rangoli*. The polyvalent characteristics of the snake have not only led to its association with cure, life, rebirth and immortality but also with disease, death and destruction (Vogel 1972: 277). Due to its casting of its skin it

symbolises rejuvenation and as such it is worshipped as a tutelary deity. The annual rites for the *nagas* are performed for two specific reasons - for honouring and seeking blessing from them and warding off any evil from them. Besides the diagrams made by women, huge *naga-mandalas* (**Fig. 7**) in coloured powders are drawn by the priests in South India and Bengal to propitiate the *nagas* (**Fig. 8**).

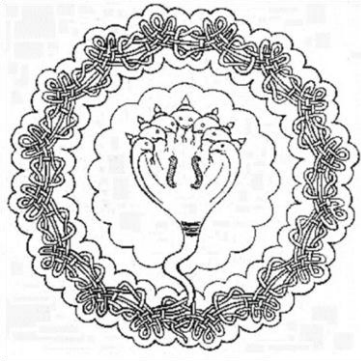
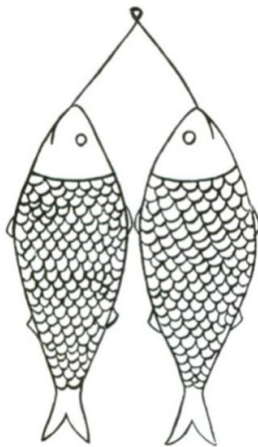


Figure 7: Nagamandala with Sixteen Knots



Figure 8: Naga



**Figure 9: Fish
Alpana, Bengal**

Fish - Fish (**Fig. 9**) is one of the naturalistic positive symbols of fertility, abundance, conjugal happiness, providence and a charm against the evil eye.

Fish are the easily gained food of all nations. As creatures of boundless liberty, not threatened by the flood, they appear as saviours in Indian myth, *avatars* of *Vishnu* and *Varuna*. The fish is considered as a symbol of good fortune among the Hindus and finds mention in the description of 108 auspicious signs in the *Harivamsa*. The *Matsya-yugma* is regarded as one of the *Ashthamangala chinha* or eight auspicious signs by the *Svetambara* Jains. The fish is also one of the auspicious symbols on the palm of Buddha in the *Lalitavistara*. The antiquity of this symbol cannot be doubted as we get representation of a fish in faience at Harappa and in ivory at Mohenjo-daro besides their representation on pottery and the seals.

Fish is a common motif drawn in *rangoli* all over India. It finds a place of prominence in the Bengal *alpanas* and the *rangoli* of the Parsis.

Kurma (tortoise) - In *rangoli*, the tortoise is commonly depicted in a hexagonal shape. In Indian mythology, it is one of the *avatars* of *Vishnu*, a mount of river goddess *Yamuna* and also a *lanchana* (cognizance) of certain Jain *Yakshas* and *Tirthankaras*. The tortoise is the Lord of creation in Vedic mythology. Because of its shape, the tortoise is regarded as a symbol of the three worlds; its lower shell is this terrestrial world, upper shell the sky and in between is the atmosphere. This concept is also seen in Chinese cosmology (Desai 2008: 36).



Figure 10: Tortoise

The tortoise (**Fig. 10**) is believed to carry the world on its back and its long life no doubt account for its appeal as longevity symbol. It is able to withdraw its limbs within its shell. This imagery gives rise to the concept of tortoise as a model of self-restrained man, who has command over his *indriyas* (senses) and withdraws from sense objects (Desai 2008: 41). *Kurma* being an emblem of stability is placed in the form of *Kurma-shila* in the foundation of buildings at the time of *Vastu pooja* or worship of the deity of the site. Due to its support the building remains firm (Desai 2008: 41). This belief is also prevalent among the Gond tribals who draw a tortoise on the floor of the house to ensure that the building will be secure (Elwin 1951:102).

Peacock – A beautiful bird that can eat snakes and therefore associated with power. In Hindu mythology, the patterns on its wings, resembling innumerable eyes, are taken to represent the starry firmament (Cirlot 1962: 239). It signifies love and beauty. It is the vehicle of *Kartikeya* and *Saraswati*. The peacock (**Fig. 11**) is not only held to be efficacious against poison but on account of its plumage, is believed to protect a person from the evil eye.

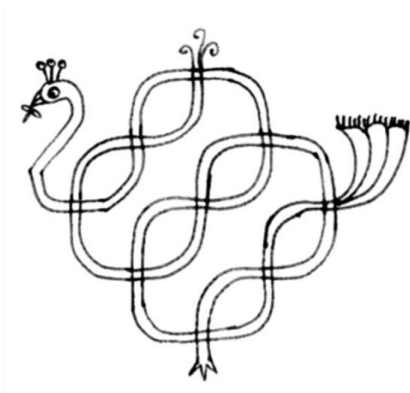


Figure 11: Peacock

Owl - The owl is a bird of ill omen and does not seem to be associated with auspiciousness except in Bengal where it is depicted as Goddess *Lakshmi*'s vehicle. The owl associated with *Lakshmi* is known as *Pechaka* and is worshipped in Bengal during *Lakshmi Pooja* (worship of Goddess *Lakshmi*). Owl is a nocturnal bird and eats rodents in the field. Thus it protects the crops and therefore must have gained importance and acquired the status of being *Lakshmi*'s vehicle. It also symbolises wisdom and intelligence because of its ability to foretell events. An owl is an indispensable part of the *Lakshmi Pooja alpana* (**Fig. 12**) of Bengal.



Figure 12: Lakshmi Pooja Alpna

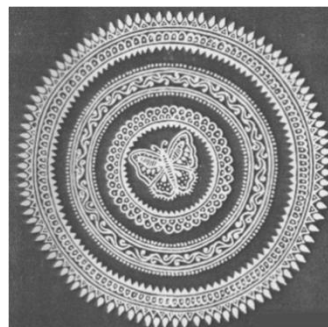


Figure 13: Prajapati Padma

Butterfly – Butterfly is a symbol of fertility. The fact that the butterfly lays large number of eggs and also the belief that the butterfly brings children supports its symbolism. In Bengal and Assam, the butterfly is called as *Prajapati*. In Indian mythology Brahma, the Lord of creation, is also called as *Prajapati*. Probably because of this association, the butterfly is also believed to be the creator of the universe. It is considered to be a good omen for marriage in Bengal. In the invitation letters for marriages the picture of a butterfly is usually printed at the top. It is considered a good fortune if a butterfly enters the room of a bridegroom



Figure 14: Vasu-baras Rangoli

or the bride before their marriage. *Prajapati Padma alpana* (**Fig. 13**) is executed on the floor on the day of finalisation of a proposal of marriage.

Cow - The sanctity of the cow is perhaps the foremost sentiment of Hindus. It is natural that in a predominantly agricultural and pastoral country like India, cows were and to some extent still are, considered to be the real wealth of the people. In the Hindu world view, to donate a cow or *gau daan* is considered the highest act of piety.

No *havan* or fire ritual is complete without the presence of *panchgavya* or the five gifts of the cow, namely milk, curds, melted butter, cow-dung and urine. In Maharashtra, on the day of *Vasu-baras*, a *rangoli* with a cow and its calf with the many auspicious symbols is drawn traditionally (**Fig. 14**). Similarly, in Andhra Pradesh and Tamilnadu cow is depicted in the *rangoli* and worshipped on *Sankranti* festival corresponding to *Pongal*.

The foot-prints of the Holy cow (**Fig. 15**) are also commonly marked in the *rangolis* at the entrance and in front of the Gods. These are made by the women as an acknowledgement of the unconditional services provided by the cow and also as a request for the continuation of those services for the well-being of their family.

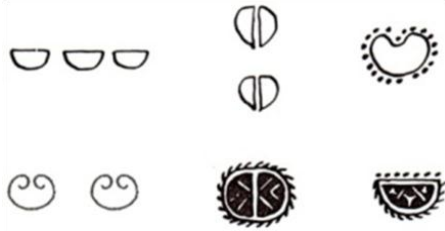


Figure 15: Foot-prints of Cow



Figure 16: Parrot

Parrot – It is a vehicle of *Kamadeva*, deity of love and sex. Parrot (**Fig. 16**) sensual desires and forms an important part of marriage decorations. The parrot is a love bird, and has special value as a charm in tattoos.

Rooster – Parsi ladies draw a *rangoli* of white rooster on the day holy to the *Yazata Srosh* (a divine being). A white rooster is the protective bird associated with the *Yazata Srosh*. The crowing of the rooster is said to frighten away the Evil spirit. The cock is held sacred to *Yazata Srosh* and is never killed or eaten after it has begun to crow. The widespread belief is that the crow of the cock scares evil spirits (Seervai and Patel (eds.) 1898: 25). Orthodox Zoroastrian would never kill a cock of any colour since he is the bird of *Srosh*, who crows to put an end to demon-haunted night and to bring in God's new day; and white being the Zoroastrian colour, a white cock is especially holy (Boyce 1977: 257).

Plant motifs:



Figure 17: Hridaya Kamal

Kamal/Padma (Lotus) - The Lotus is considered to be the most sacred flower and has great religious significance and many symbolic meanings. Rooted in the dark mud, the lotus plant grows up through the murky water to leaf and flower in the air and light, this growth represents the journey of the soul from the mud of materialism, through the waters of experience, to the arrival at enlightenment.

The faculty of bestowing life, fertility and wealth is attributed to the lotus-plant and its vital points (Bosch 1960: 49). The lotus has much importance in Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina pantheons. It symbolises self-creation; hence Brahma sits on a lotus (Srivastava 1998: 21). In the *arippan* of Mithila, the *Hridaya kamal* (**Fig. 17**), the centralised lotus motif or the *Sahasradala padma*, the thousand-petalled lotus signifies the universal life-force and the opening of the consciousness of the divine. *Padma* is also a significant *yantra* or *mandala* in the Tantric doctrine, on which all the magical creations are built upon.

The multi-layered petal structure of lotus with one layer opening into the other resembles the Sun who emanates brilliant rays from its central core. Here the resemblance or correspondence to the form or shape makes the lotus flower a potent symbol capable of representing certain aspects of the Sun, which in this case is its radiating nature. *Divakarvrata* is performed by drawing twelve-petalled lotus with the names of sun written on each petal. This lotus is worshipped with

Vedic *mantras* for gaining knowledge and prosperity (Joshi and Padmaja 1967: 374).

Tulsi or *Ocimum basilicum* or *Ocimum sanctum* – Since time immemorial, *tulsi* has remained an integral part of Hindu way of life and is considered to be one of the holiest and most useful plants. It is planted on a little mound of sand or on a square pillar of about four feet in height, hollow at the top with its four sides facing the four points of the compass. This structure is called the *Tulsi Vrindavan*. Hindus, especially *Vaishnavaites* consider it a peculiarly meritorious act to carefully watch and cultivate the plant. It is praised as destroying all the evils and it is considered sinful to break its branches. Hindu women worship *tulsi* every morning and evening and draw *rangoli* around it.



Figure 18: Tulsi Vrindavan

Tulsi Mahimamritya records that if a dying person gets *tulsi* water he goes to Vishnu Loka. It is popularly believed that *tulsi* even wards off the messengers of *Yama*, the ruler of the dead, who would not enter a house containing a sprig of *tulsi*.

However, *tulsi* worship is not limited to man's theosophical aspirations alone as *tulsi*'s curative effect has been widely acknowledged by the *Ayurvedic* system of medicine, based on the *Atharvaveda*. *Tulsi* leaves are considered as a potential preventive medicine. It has a sweet aromatic scent and act as a cough elixir. One or two leaves swallowed after meals helps digestion. Since long there is a practice among Hindus to put leaves in cooked food to prevent germination and in stored water to prevent bacteria formation during solar or lunar eclipse. The *tulsi* plant possesses many curative properties and is an antidote to snake-venom. It is acknowledged as a great destroyer of mosquitoes and other pests.

On the day of *Tulasi-vivaha*, an image of *Hari* and *Tulsi* plant are worshipped and then married. A *rangoli* of *Tulsi Vrindavan* (**Fig. 18**) is drawn.

Creeper pattern: Signifies fertility, growth and progress. In *alpana* patterns, *shankha-lata* or the conch-shell creeper and *champa-lata*, creeper of *champa* flowers are drawn. Man-made objects are also depicted in growing on creepers such as shovel or *khunti-lata*, bangles or *banti-lata*, pearls or *mukta-lata*. Sometimes the creeper patterns (**Fig. 19**) are referred to as *vansha-vel*, i.e. creepers of progeny or heir, symbolising continuity of family lineage.

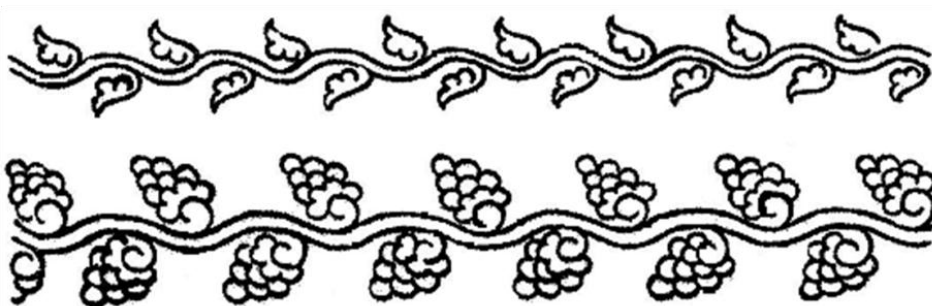


Figure 19: Creeper Patterns

Thorny or prickly plants: Prickly plants are useful guardians against evil in many regions around the world. Depiction of thorny or prickly plants is believed to ward off evil spirits. Thus we see such plants drawn in *rangolis* in various parts of India. In the *mandanas* of Rajasthan, motifs like *Baingan ka binta* (stem of brinjal) (**Fig. 20**) and *Singhada ka chowk* (water chest-nuts) (**Fig. 21**) are drawn.



Figure 20: Baingan ka Binta



Figure 21: Singhada ka Chowk

Similarly *Nimbu ki dali* (stem of lemon plant) *aipan* is made in the Kumaon region. The pineapple finds a special place in the *kolam* drawn during *Pongal* festival. *Rangoli* using thorny motifs are generally made on the occasions of marriage and welcoming the bride. These are not drawn in a natural realistic manner. Rather they are drawn in such abstract and symbolic form that it is possible to identify these motifs only through minute and repeated observations. Many times it is the name of the design which gives clue about its form.

Thus we see the symbolic ideas behind the use of various geometric and natural motifs in *rangoli* art. The understanding and interpretation of this symbolism leads to the conclusion that these motifs were employed in this ancient art of *rangoli* to denote an indirect or figurative representation of a significant idea, conflict or wish. These are symbols of fertility and procreation or the cosmic life force and regeneration and all of them are in one way or the other, 'symbols of life' and therefore highly auspicious.

References

- Bosch, F.D.K., *The Golden Germ-An Introduction to Indian Symbolism*, (Hague, 1960).
- Boyce, Mary, *A Persian stronghold of Zoroastrianism*, (Oxford, 1977).
- Cirlot, J.E., *A Dictionary of Symbols*, (London, 1962).
- Desai, Devangana, "Kurma Symbolism in Indian Art and Myth" in *Tattvabodha*, Kalyan Kumar Chakravarty (ed.), vol.II, (New Delhi, 2008), pp.36-41.
- Diringer, David, *The Alphabet: A Key to the History of Mankind*, (London, 1949).
- Elwin, Verrier, *The Tribal Art of Middle India*, (Oxford, 1951).
- Joshi, Pandit Mahadev Shastri and Hodarkar Padmaja, "Bharatiya Sanskrutikosh," *Bharatiya Sanskrutikosh Mandal*, vol. 4, (Pune, 1967).
- Seervai, K.N., and B.B. Patel (eds.), "Gujarat Parsis", in *Bombay Gazetteer*, vol. 9, (Bombay, 1898).
- Srivastava, Kamal, *Hindu Symbolism and Iconography- a study*, (Varanasi, 1998).
- Vogel, J.P., *Indian Serpent-Lore or The Nagas in Hindu Legend and Art*, (Varanasi, 1972) rpt.