

# The Kolam Tradition: A Tradition of Figure-Drawing in Tamil Nadu

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**Abstract—** *The Kolam tradition is a tradition of figure-drawing in Tamil Nadu. It is a folk art, which means that it has been passed down from generation to generation, and it has not been created by any one individual. The kolam tradition is based on the idea of creating images from geometric shapes such as circles, triangles, squares, and other symmetrical shapes. The kolam artist will draw with chalk or charcoal on a flat surface such as floor, a piece of paper or cardboard. The artist then uses his imagination to create an image that represents what he wants to draw. They will then color the image by adding various shades of color along with watercolor paints. This article figure out the historical and origins of traditional Kolam art of Tamil Nadu.*

**Indexed Terms—** *Kolam Art, Tamil Nadu, Imagination, Traditional Art*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In Tamil Nadu, a state in southeast India, women traditionally remove their thresholds every morning, shake over them with a combination of cow dung and water, then cover up the area with elaborate, regular patterns made of rice powder. They use their thumbs to control the rice powder's flow as they stream it between their middle and index fingers. The use of rice powder is said to start the day with a kind deed by giving food for ants and other insects, while the cow dung is said to clean and purify the earth. Tamil Hindu women in Tamil Nadu, in southeast India, produced the daily ritualistic art form known as kolam. Millions of women across Tamil Nadu (and Pondicherry) draw kolam on the thresholds and floors of homes, temples, and businesses every day before dawn, all through the Brahma muhurtam (made-up to

be the time at what time Brahma and all other deities move down to the earth), and irregularly before sunset. Kolam is one of the numerous ways that the threshold, which serves as the intersection of the internal and exterior, is significant in Tamil culture. With pinches of flour held among the thumb and first finger and let the powder fall in a nonstop line by moving the hand in preferred directions, ladies skillfully make the kolam patterns with the tips of their fingers. A grid of pullis (dots) is the foundation for the patterns of lines and curve, which are then surrounded, looped, or linked by straight or curved lines. Concentration, reminiscence, and a sequence of controlled hand and body movements are all essential for the process. The women make particularly detailed and complicated designs that change depending on occasions or days of the Hindu calendar as working quickly and with amazing skill.



Photo source: Google

Daily variations in the patterns range from a straightforward star pattern made up of opposing, interlocking triangles to extremely intricate, difficult-to-understand labyrinthine patterns [Brooke (1953); Kramrisch (1983), (1985); Layard (1937); Nagarajan

(1993), (1998a), (1998b), (2012); Pillai & Saroja (1987); Saroja (1992); Steiman (1988); Thiruvengatampillai et al. (1884)]. Women learn about Kolam patterns orally through generations as they watch their relatives do this daily practice, passing down this knowledge to the next generation. Although the patterns initially seem rather simple, it takes years of instruction and practice to master the intricate Kolams. In the majority of households, women particularly keep their practice notebook, a record book of kolam drawings in pencil, pen or coloured pencils, and replace in sequence about the most compound and difficult traditional patterns.

The most noticeable aspect of kolam may be how transient, temporary, and ephemeral it is most of the time. The kolam can be constructed in a few minutes or a few hours, depending on the ritual occasion and the time of day, and it can vanish under someone's feet in a matter of hours. In the process of making kolam, the process of making and losing is repeated in a rhythm where new patterns are created as the old ones lose their identity at different times of the day. The cycle is repeated the following morning as ants, birds, and other small creatures consume the rice flour. Wind and human footfall further damage and eventually destroy the kolam.

From a common point of view, the kolam can be considered as one of several women's ritual art practices that are carried out by Hindu women across the many states of India as transitory drawings on thresholds. These parallel women's floor art traditions are known as Ipan or aripan in West Bengal [Das (1957), (1943); Das Gupta, (1960); Chatterji (1948); Gupta (1983)], aippan in Himachal Pradesh, chita in Orissa, Pookalam in Kerala, Chowkurna in Uttar Pradesh, and others (Kramrisch 1983, 1985; Mill). They also exist in several other parts of the country. For one example, rangoli.

## II. ORIGINS AND HISTORICAL REFERENCES

The origins of the kolam tradition in Tamil Nadu can be traced to the ancient Sangam literature, which is a compilation of poems, songs and narratives from among the Tamil people. The Kolam tradition has its origin in this literature.

The kolam tradition is one of the oldest forms of art in Tamil Nadu. It was believed to have originated in India and spread to other parts of Asia. Traditionally, it was a form of religious art that depicted scenes from nature like animals and flowers, as well as divine beings like Gods and Goddesses. The Kolam tradition is a traditional figure drawing form in Tamil Nadu. The tradition developed over the centuries, and there are different styles of it. Some of them are folk arts, some are formalized arts, and some are practiced only by artisans. It has been passed down from one generation to another through oral tradition.

The earliest reference to this art form comes from the 18th century British historian James Forbes in his book *Anecdotes of Indian Life*. Forbes wrote that kolam figures were used for divination by women during festivals like Thiruvalluvar's day (April 13) and Pongal (January 14). He further mentions that kolam figures were also made as gifts from kings to their queens during weddings and other ceremonies. In his book *Figures and Designs of Ancient India*, author A.Srinivasan describes how kolam figures have been found on coins minted during the Chola period (8th-11th centuries AD), which indicates that they were already being made at that time.



Photo source: Google

The origins of kolams are unclear but they may have been first used by farmers to mark their fields (orchards), or as a means to record the name of the house that owned them. Most scholars believe that these drawings were made between the 11th and 15th centuries AD. The earliest surviving kolams date back to around 900AD. They were used for a variety of purposes including mapmaking, navigation and recordkeeping. Many kolams are also associated with Hinduism as well as Buddhism and Jainism – three

religions that share many beliefs about life after death (previously known as rebirth).

The origin of the Kolam or figure-drawing tradition in Tamil Nadu is shrouded in mystery. The earliest references to this art form are found in ancient Tamil literature, where it is mentioned as a classical art form. The Pangalakaravarnan kolam is one of the earliest forms of kolam, which is still practiced in some parts of Tamil Nadu. It can be traced to around 500 BC, when Tamil Sangam literature was composed by poets like Sangam literature and Tirukkural literature.

The practice of drawing figures with colored sand or pigment on a black board has been documented since early times, but it was not until the 14th century AD that these drawings were made public and spread through various social groups. According to legend, Kolam originated from a village called Periya Pallivasal near Thiruvallur in Thanjavur district, which had a large number of devotees who lived there for around 400 years from 1450 AD onwards. These pilgrims would come from all over India to pay homage at this temple every day.



Photo source: Google

The Kolam tradition is an artistic tradition of Tamil Nadu which has evolved over time. The art form was probably born out of the need to depict religious figures in miniature during the Sangam period (first century BCE to third century CE). This is evident from the use of black and red colors in its paintings.

In the Sangam period, scholars and sages made use of clay to make figures of gods and goddesses and

sometimes humans. They would also use these figures to decorate walls and buildings as well as for offering rituals. The kolam tradition was transmitted through oral traditions until sometime in early 20th century when it began to be documented by scholars such as A. Srinivasaraghavan Pillai, who wrote on various aspects of Kolam art including its history, iconography and symbolism; J. Natesan who had written a book called "Kolam"; K. Vaniyambadi Ammal who had published several books on Kolam painting technique; etc., Some other important scholars who have written extensively on this subject include Dr Ramesh Kumar Singh, Dr M S Subramanian, Dr Sowmya Ramanathan Nair and Dr Poornima Chaudhary.

### III. SOME REVIEW BASED ON KOLAM ART

Anbalagan et. al. (2022) classified the kolam images viz, footprint, swastik, geometric, plant and animal motifs in this article. Inspired by the performance of deep networks in most of the vision-based problems, we developed a new kolam Net to classify the different motifs of kolam. KolamNet is attained by incorporating attention mechanism into Efficient Net. Attention mechanism assures lightweight functionality and refines the deep feature along with end to end training. To validate Kolam Net, Kolam dataset is created to accomplish the classification task. Extensive experimentation is conducted on Kolam dataset to prove the effectiveness of the Kolam Net to classify the motifs. Kolam Net shows better capability in terms of performance metrics – accuracy-97%, precision-0.96, recall-0.97 and F1score-0.97 when compared to related state of the art deep network architectures.

Ascher (2002) focused on exploring the diverse expressions and cultural settings of mathematical ideas. Complementing the historical development of modern mathematics, these studies are concerned with oral traditions and cultures that have not been viewed as part of the mathematical mainstream. As a guiding definition, researcher take mathematical ideas to be those involving number, logic, spatial configuration, and more significant, the organization of such ideas into systems and structures. Of particular interest are cases in which the people

themselves view the ideas as important knowledge to be carefully learned and carefully passed on.

Kannabiran & Reddy (2022) presented Kolam, a visual art form originating in Tamilnadu, South India, as an eco-feminist computational art practice. They provided a visual documentation of Kolam's Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) through eight characteristics based on existing research and authors' personal experiences as Kolam practitioners. They were framing Kolam as an eco-feminist practice, highlighting cultural and ecological characteristics of Kolam as a Tamil tradition. They illustrate evolving hybrid multimedia and contemporary technological practices that characterize Kolam as computational art. Their aim is to present a cohesive and compelling visual narrative using the artwork of authors and four contemporary Kolam practitioners to inspire creativity and highlight challenges for relational knowledge production in design and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) research

Kunnumpurath & Sekar (2019) analyzed 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.

Murugan et. al. (2021) highlighted the challenges the Indian women encounter in practicing the traditional Kolam in the Klang Valley, Malaysia. A purposive sampling technique was used to collect data online. The questionnaire prepared was validated by Kolam experts. An online questionnaire was used because of the current COVID-19 pandemic where face-to-face survey is not feasible. The online questionnaire received 203 responses. This study employed the quantitative methodology using the SPSS software

and tested with the Cronbach's alpha tool. The result shows that Malaysian Indian women faced challenges of difficult to draw, time constraints, lack of interest, materials preparation and limited space in drawing Kolam during festivals. These challenges have an impact and have posed a serious threat for the survival and maintenance of the form of traditional Kolam. Preserving traditional Kolam will give future generations the opportunity to enhance further their knowledge of traditional Kolam drawing.

Sarin (2022) looked inward into the design ethos and tools present in Indian arts and crafts and present its application in contemporary design practice.

## CONCLUSION

The Kolam tradition is a form of figure drawing, which was originally practiced by the Dravidian artisans and sculptors. It is a traditional art form that has been preserved in Tamil Nadu for centuries. The word Kolam means 'line' or 'mark' and it is a way of drawing figures on the ground or walls with chalk or charcoal. The tradition of figure drawing has been prevalent in Tamil Nadu for centuries, especially among the Dravidian people who lived in southern India. The practice of this art form was believed to be developed by the ancient Tamils during their migration from Sumeria to India and it has since then evolved into a popular art form across various parts of the country.

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