

# KOLAM

Visual Ethnography Project  
**SHREELEKHA LAKSHMIPATHY**

# DECLARATION

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I hereby declare that this project work entitled "**Visual Ethnography : KOLAM**" submitted to IDC, IIT Bombay, is a record of an original work. This work was done as a part of a research project guided by Prof. Nina Sabnani, Professor, IDC IIT Bombay.

I declare that this written submission represents my ideas in my own words and where others' ideas or words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources. I also declare that I have adhered to all principles of academic honesty and integrity and have not misrepresented or fabricated or falsified any data/fact/source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will be cause for disciplinary action by the Institute and can also evoke penal action from the sources which have thus not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

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Date: 20.3.2016

# APPROVAL SHEET

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This report entitled “**Visual Ethnography: KOLAM**” by  
**Shreelekha Lakshmipathy (146130009)** is as partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the award of the degree of “Master of Design”  
in Industrial Design

Date :

Place :

Examiners:

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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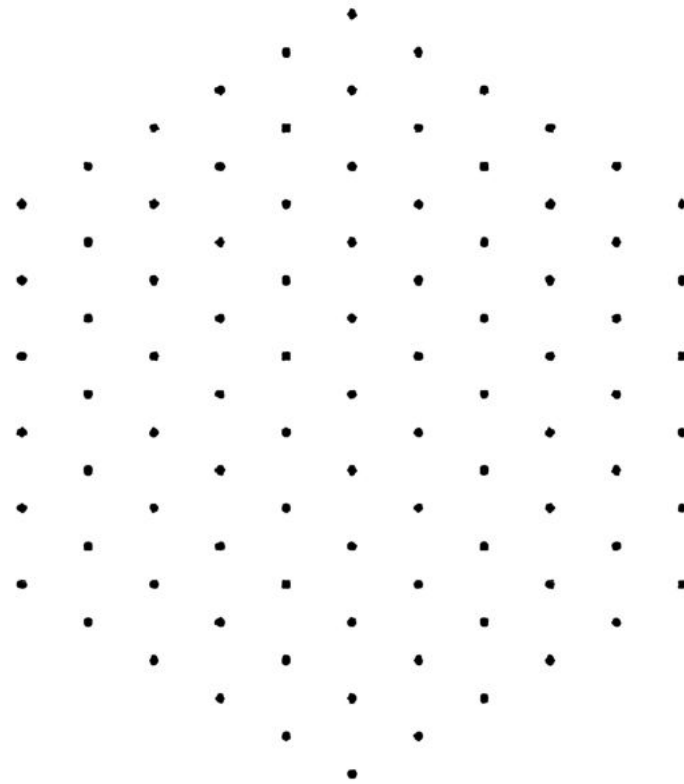
I would like to express my deepest appreciation to all those who provided me the possibility to complete this project. A special gratitude I give to my guide Prof. Nina Sabnani, who invested her full effort in guiding me in research work. Her stimulating suggestions and encouragement helped me to coordinate my project. Furthermore I would also like to acknowledge with much appreciation the co-operation of the people of Mylapore, Periyar Nagar and Perungudi area in Chennai who took out time to talk to me about their lives.

**To Amma and Ammamma**

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# ETHNOGRAPHY

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Ethnography is a collection of qualitative methods used in the social sciences that focus on the close observation of social practices and interactions.

These qualitative methods enable the researcher to interpret and build theories about how and why a social process occurs. They are particularly useful for elucidating the steps of processes that have not been well understood, and to create rich descriptions of people's experiences. Qualitative research tends to be inductive and hypothesis-generating; that is, it helps the researcher make educated guesses about how or why a process happens. Quantitative research, on the other hand, tends to be deductive and hypothesis-testing; it helps the researcher determine how true such an educated guess is across a population.

Ethnography's unique contribution to qualitative methods is that it deeply examines the context in which activities occur, usually involving work by the researcher with participants as they go about their daily lives. An ethnographer also describes a situation by asking multiple people about an event, or by analysing multiple types of documentation, such as policies or historical records. In this way, ethnography allows the researcher to make fine distinctions and see ambiguities in the way a situation is interpreted.

# WHY ETHNOGRAPHY

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Why do some cultures expect their daughters to marry before the age of 15? How does a person's specific family values impact the way he or she acts in public with friends?

These are complicated questions that cannot be answered through a simple survey or other quantitative research design method. These and similar questions are best answered through qualitative research methods of collecting, analysing, and interpreting observed information. More specifically, these questions are best addressed through the use of ethnography. Ethnography is a type of qualitative research design aimed at studying cultures and groups from a unique perspective - that of the subject.

- The word ethnographies literally means 'writing about people groups.'
- Ethnographies are holistic in nature and include a history of the culture being studied, their routines and practices, and discussion of their environment.
- Observations are the main form of data collection, but interviews are often used to clarify the researcher's observations. The researcher pays attention to the context, artifacts, and environments of the subjects in addition to their interactions with each other.
- Ethnographies are long-term studies. This allows the researcher to experience the regular patterns and routines of the community of study, as well as seeing how it responds to new or different situations.



# WHY CHENNAI

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The doorway to South India, Chennai is a miraculous gift the land of Tamil Nadu embraces. Drawing the quality of 'Unity in Diversity' from the homeland country India, Chennai carries the legacy of rich cultural heritage imbibed in its fine arts, music and dance forms, people and cuisines.

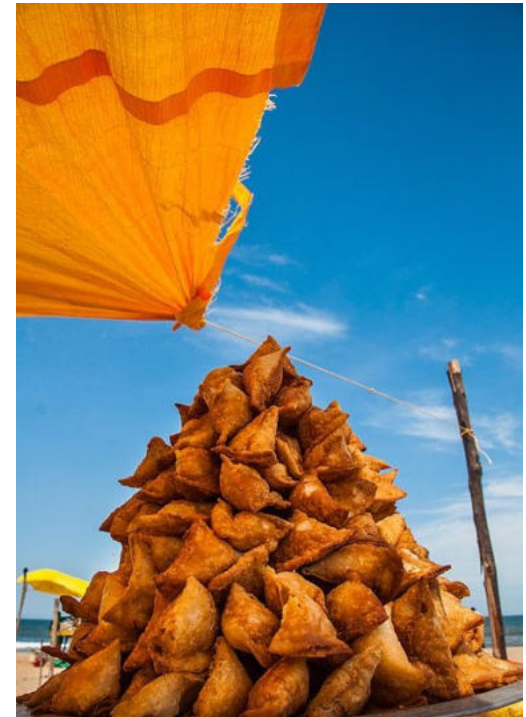
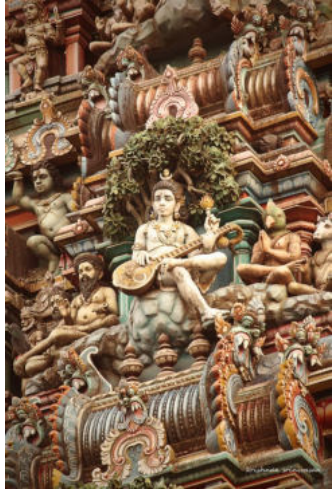
The attribute of being a cosmopolitan city, Chennai mirrors confluence of all the diverse cultures nourishing within its boundaries.

The residents of the city living in sheer harmony with each other confirm that the varied culture exists, but not at the cost of peace and tranquillity of Chennai. The festivals colour Chennai in the fun and fervour of the celebrations. A number of monuments silently express the glorious history of the city they witnessed, the traditional art forms they preserved and continued to keep it alive. The spirit of Chennai, vibrant culture and reminiscent traditions all make the city wonderful and tremendously important as a part of Indian heritage.

Indians are known for migrating, scenting out new pastures as they are always eager to better their lives. There are even jokes about it. One goes like this: "Even on the moon an astronaut will be welcomed by a Malayali tea-shop owner serving 'cha' and *nendra pazham*." In the past, the conservative people of the South - who never travelled beyond their villages - would comment about a person going to Madras with awe and sometimes scorn - "*Avan Pattanam paakka porana?*" Pattanam was the short form of Chennapatnam.

# THE PLACE

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# PERSONAL RATIONALE

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*"Margazhith Thingal mathi niraidha nannaalal"*

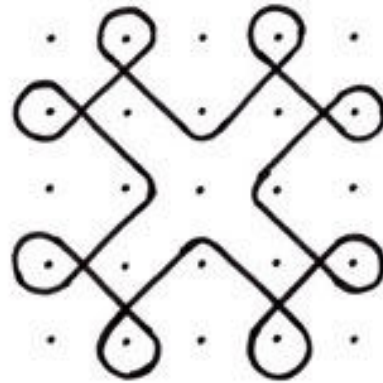
...starts the Thiruppavai verse rendered by Andal. Margazhi is the last month in the Tamil calendar starting on the 16th of December. This is the time when the otherwise sleepy streets rouse before the crack of dawn. Kolams, designs made with ground rice flour, adorn wet pavements, MS Subbulakshmi's enchanting Suprabhatam wakes the God from his slumber, freshly ground filter coffee stirs the sleepy eyed human and fragrant jasmine adorns the pictures of God and oiled braids alike. Fond memories of Margazhi mornings hunched over kolam books waft before my eyes. My maternal grandmother was deft in drawing kolams and she would expertly sketch the most complicated designs without faltering on a single curve. After the kolam, we would quickly bathe, deck up and walk up to the nearest temple. Winter breaks during Margazhi were spent lying on my grandmother's lap cushioned by her soft yet supple Sungundi saree. The scent of her sari's starch, her face glowing from the daily application of turmeric and the diamonds glittering in her nose.

This project gave me the opportunity to revisit the time, place, the Kolam and HER.

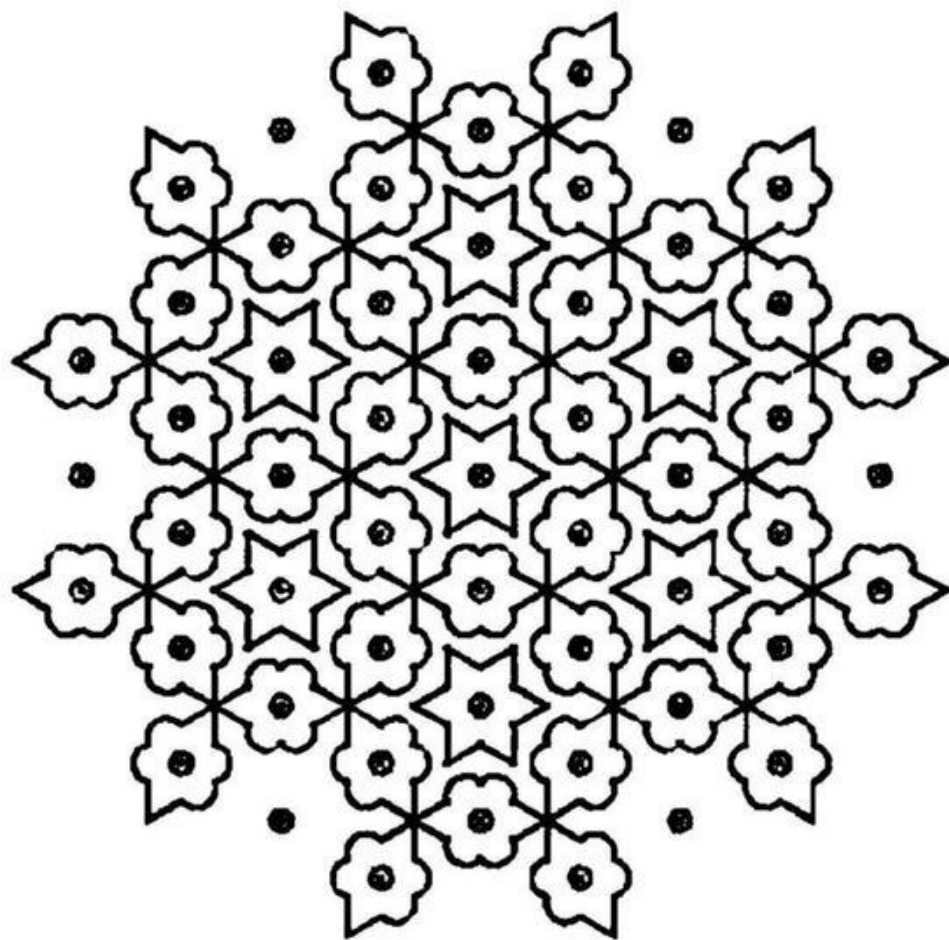


# INTRODUCTION

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In Chennai, Southern India, where I grew up, women rose before dawn. It was their quiet time with the universe; free from their hectic schedule that they face during the day, women clean and draw geometrical rice powdered patterns on the ground, at the entrances of their home. This traditional ritual of creating sacred patterns with rice powder or paste on walls or the ground is a tradition that has been passed down from mother to daughter for over two thousand years. It is known with different names in different parts of India, Kolam, Madala in Chennai, Athipu in Kerala, Alpana in Bengal, Madana in Rajasthan etc. Kolam is a ritual threshold art in India created in Tamil Nadu, Millions of Tamil women currently practice this ritual and it is embedded in their everyday life.



# KOLAM

## What the hand said

////////////////////

Where the hand goes,  
the eye follows;  
Where the eye goes,  
the mind goes;  
Where the mind goes,  
is the heart  
Where the heart is,  
lies the reality of being



# KOLAM



The divine is invoked everywhere in India, even on the ground through drawing or painting with rice paste or vegetable and mineral based coloured powders.

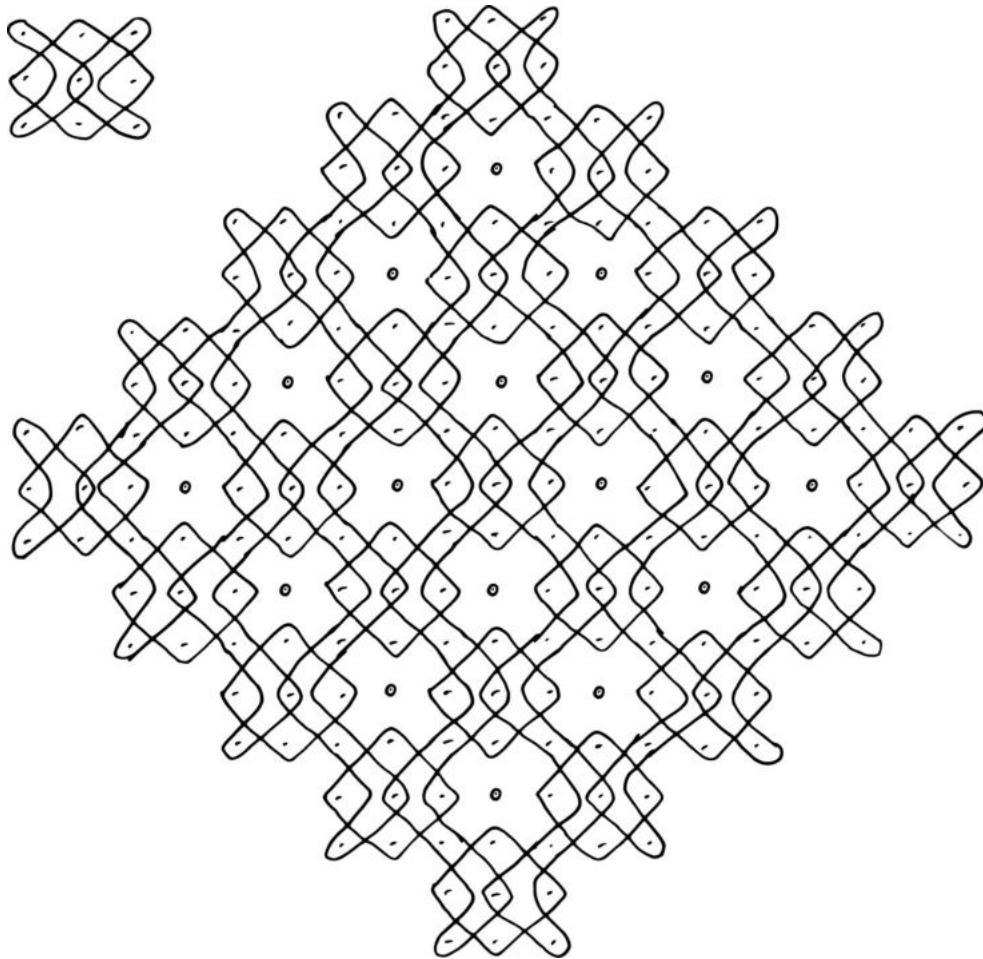
In Tamil-Nadu, these drawings are called kolam and bear testimony to the richness of Indian graphical patrimony as well as to the extraordinary feminine creativity.

Auspiciousness is not only contained within temple walls; mountains are the abode of gods, and animals and birds their vehicles. Trees, plants, and flowers are means not only to worship them but also to symbolise their vegetal incarnations.

Tamil-Nadu, essentially rural, celebrates the sun, the cattle, and the snakes. This culture owns “totemic” trees and addresses god in the temple as if he was a king, dressing him with great pomp, pampering and feeding him, and in the evening, putting him and his queen to sleep with entertaining renditions of amorous verses. It is a society where every village offers appeasing rituals to the territory guardians, and a culture still deeply imbued with the worship of heroes to whom villagers of the past venerated by erecting memorial stones. It remains a region where the roads overlap the circuits of ancient temples where poets described human emotions according to the country’s five landscapes: hills, desert trays, forests, the seaside, and fertile plains







It is there in the Southern most part of the Indian peninsula that just before sunrise, women of all communities and beliefs draw on the ground. On the earthen lanes of a village or on the carefully swept pavements of a city, female hands create with the tips of their fingers, patterns that invite the divine to protect the house and the family. With the ground as their canvas, hands as the instrument, rice paste or rice flour and coloured powders as paint, the kolam draws the viewer into a world of divine symbols and mystical attributes. The designs vary in accordance with current events or the Hindu calendar. Their silhouettes change depending on the day, sometimes figurative, sometimes sinuous, they become linear on Tuesdays and Fridays.

It is an anonymous feminine world of powder images, which border on calligraphy, geometrical diagrams, and fine embroidery. Behind every drawing, we read the story of a woman, of a mother and her daughter, and the memory of a culture through time.

The kolam is a tradition passed down the generations from mother to daughter, but each household keeps a notebook where the most difficult patterns are recorded. The girls learn by watching, and later they will create new patterns with dexterity and speed.

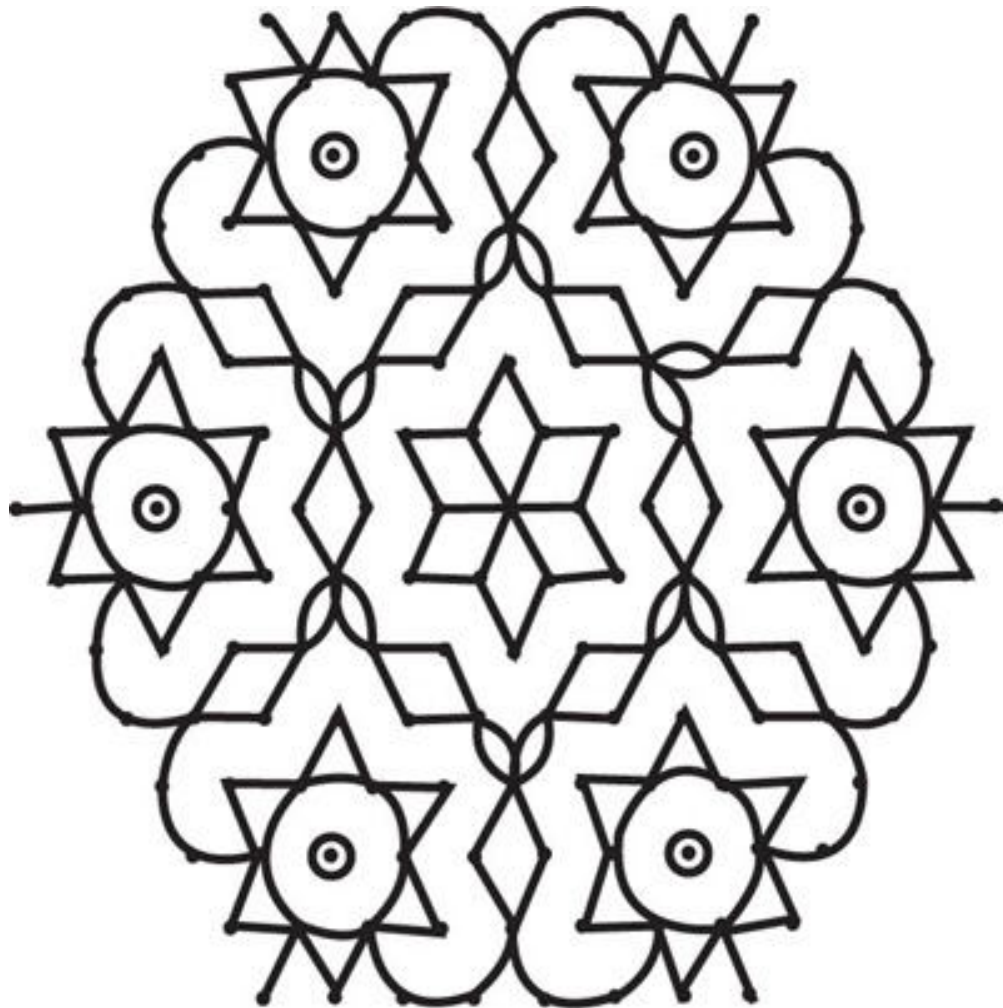
Because the kolam blossoms at daybreak and celebrates the Earth and the link that human beings maintain with her, I always compared it with a visual chant that resonates silently in the hearts of the passers-by like the painted prayer renewed every day, not unlike the Suprabhatam, Sanskrit hymns chanted early in the morning to awaken the gods. The graphic recurrences similar to the priest's incantations, punctuates the passing of time.

By repeating motifs or lines, we try at all costs to suspend the present moment. The hand tunes the breath on the delicate weft of dust which becomes a pattern and immobilizes time.

An early hour stroll through the Tamil streets captivates the ears much before the eyes can distinguish the surrounding world. Unnoticed, objects welcome daybreak and suggest their presence by assuming a rhythmic sound form. A faint whispering of the straw brooms and the splashing of water succeed the rustles of night-insects and the croaking of crows.

In the early hours, women come out of their homes with a powder-filled container. They call out to one another and one can feel the glances which gauge the spot where they will draw. Bodies bend over at right angles; the wrist induces a slow pace to the fingers, which drop down at regular intervals, discreet rice flour or quartz powder marks called pulli in Tamil. It is on this perfectly symmetrical dotted canvas that gradually, flowers, birds, divinities, or geometrical diagrams come to life.





Other women stretch out long parallel lines in a fluid and broad movement, almost as if brushing the ground. The swaying of the arms and of the whole body, the clear and wavy gesture freezes the lines that never seem to be willing to unite with the earth. When they finally land on the floor which has become powerful by the radiance of their whiteness, they elude by their modest playfulness the malevolent forces and protect the walker as well as the house members. To me, the diagrams seem like geometric metaphors used to illustrate the idea of time in Hinduism, a periodical cycle where creation and destruction alternates rhythm of the universe and human life. They are intimately linked to a life style and a culture which has always exalted the divine by drawing beauty out of disorder. The graphical exuberance akin to Tamil writing is disarming as we stroll through the streets of a city or the narrow lanes of villages at dawn.

If there is music in these lines, then it is similarly joyful and sensual. It glides under the steps of early passers-by, under the wheels of cyclists or handcarts pullers or still under those of small vans carrying away tiny grains of the rice dust as many unveiled intentions.

The surrounding noise gets louder and louder as morning breaks, throbbing trucks, piercing rickshaw horns, bicycle bell ringing, sputtering mopeds, insistent calls of chai sellers, the day has begun and the busy anthill is a whirl of activity.







## HISTORY

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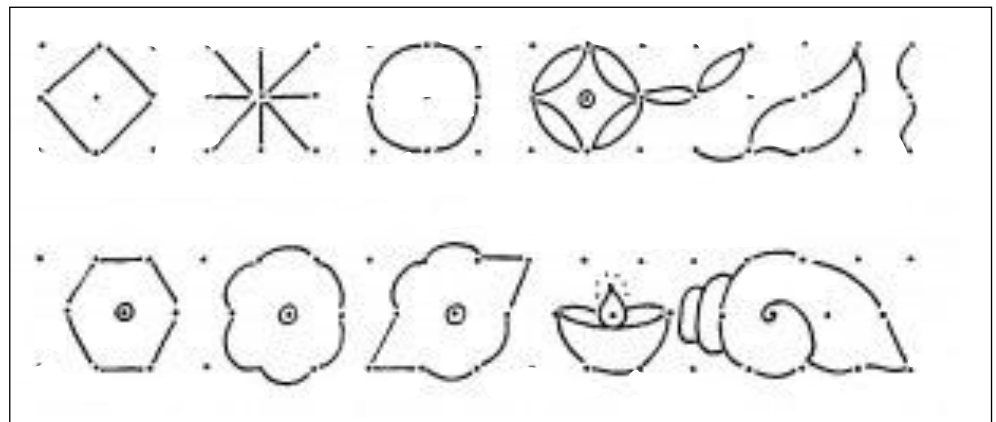
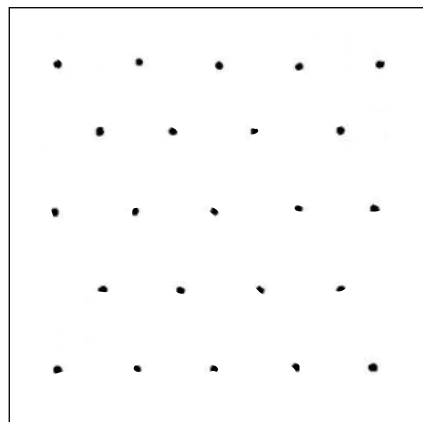
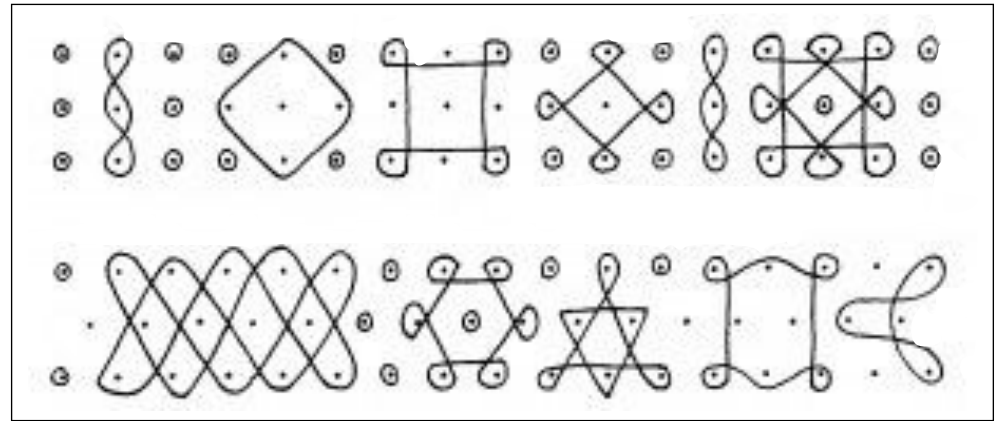
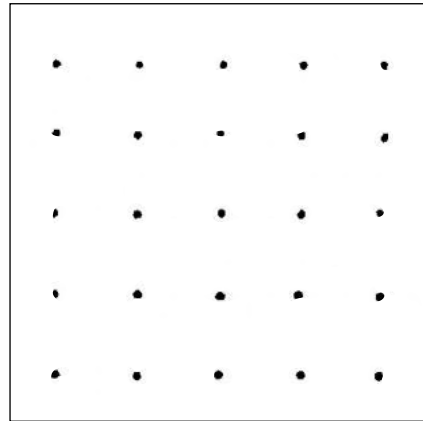
References to kolam have been found in Tamil literary works such as the 16th century Madurai Meenakshiammai Kuram and in the 17th century Thiru Kutraala Kuravanji.

The custom of drawing kolam was once believed to be very ancient. However, research has suggested that the practice of drawing designs on the floor dates back only six hundred years. Both these literary works include information as to how to prepare a surface before drawing in front of Lord Ganesh. In literary works, it has been mentioned that people in ancient days used kumkum (red powder), sandalwood, and punugu (an excretion of the civet cat) to smooth the floor. References to kolam have not been seen in any traveler's account or in ancient paintings. However, some of the geometric designs used in creating kolam have found to be carved on the walls of ancient temple gopurams (towers).

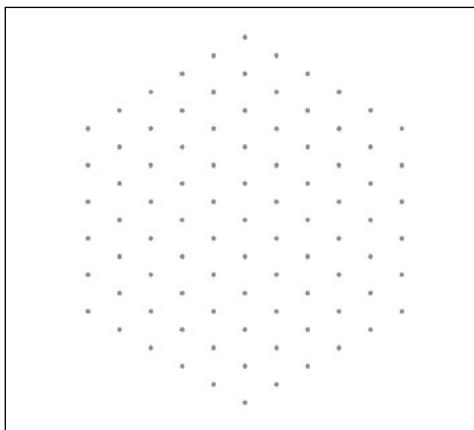
# DRAWING A KOLAM

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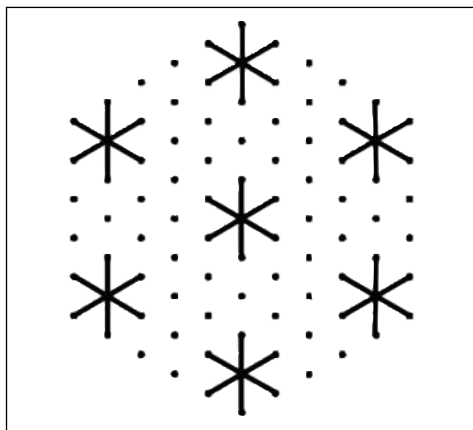
There are two types of kolam :  
One with dots and one with lines.  
The one with dots can be either face to face or in alternate rows. These dots form the background for pictures of birds, animals, flowers or gods. In order to draw a picture, you can join the dots with a straight line or a curve. You can also draw around them with a single and continuous line or several lines crossing over one another.



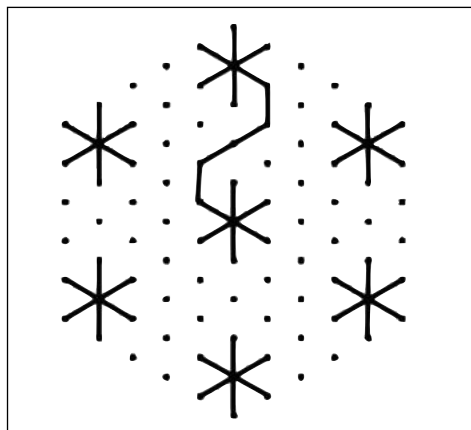
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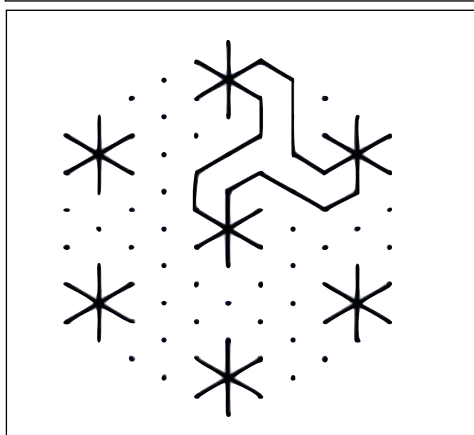
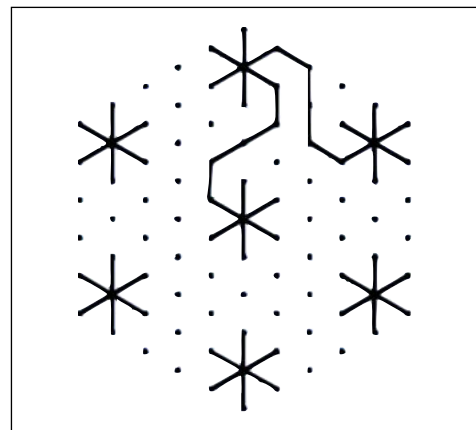
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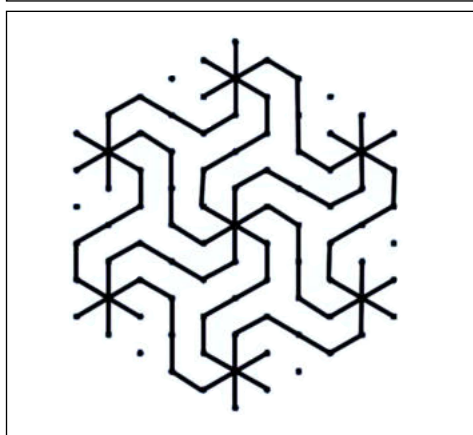
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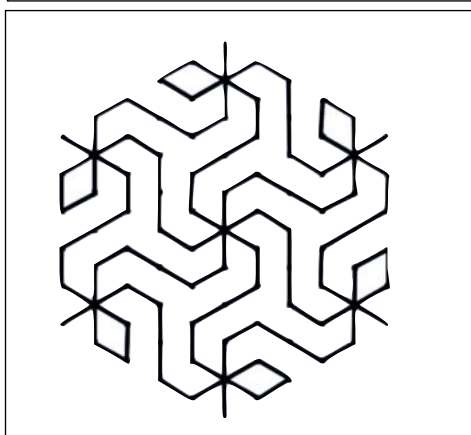
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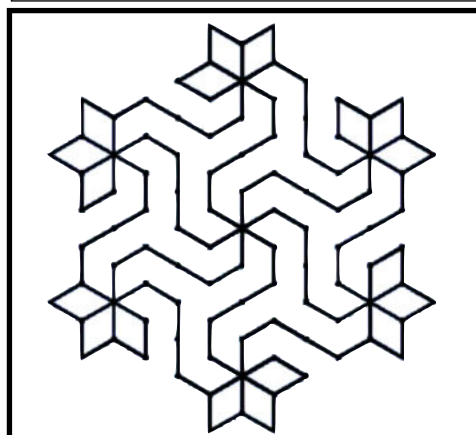
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# VARIETIES

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The number of pulli (dots) may range from 4 to 108.

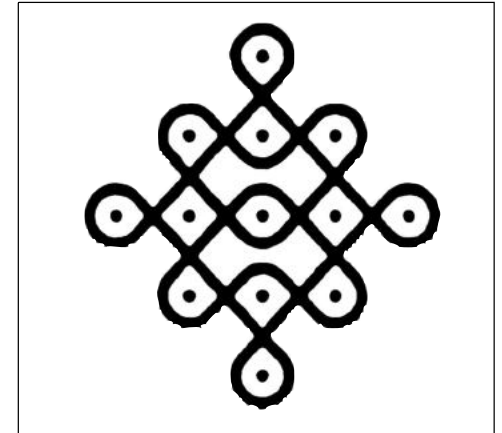
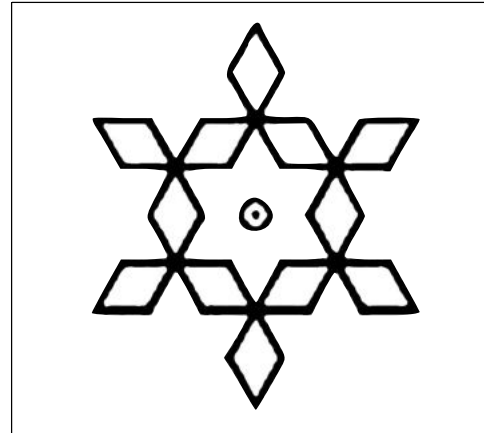
There are two varieties in pulli kolam: The dots are joined with straight lines to make the decorative pattern, or twisted chains are formed around the dots by linking one loop with another, creating intertwined patterns. The second form is also called kambi kolam, neli kolam, sikku kolam, and chikku kolam.

## LINE KOLAMS

The free hand drawing of lines, making geometrical patterns.

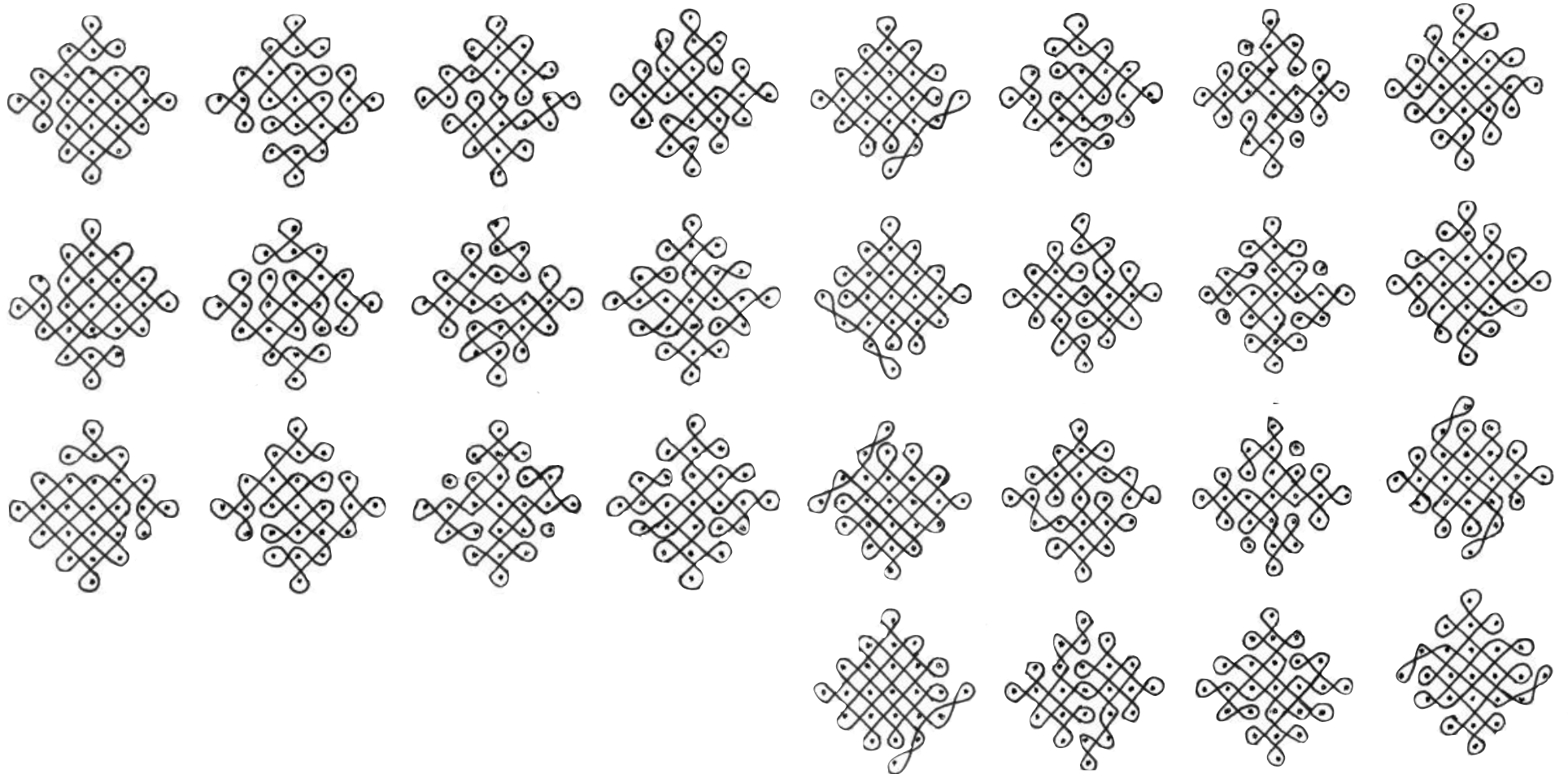
## DOT KOLAM

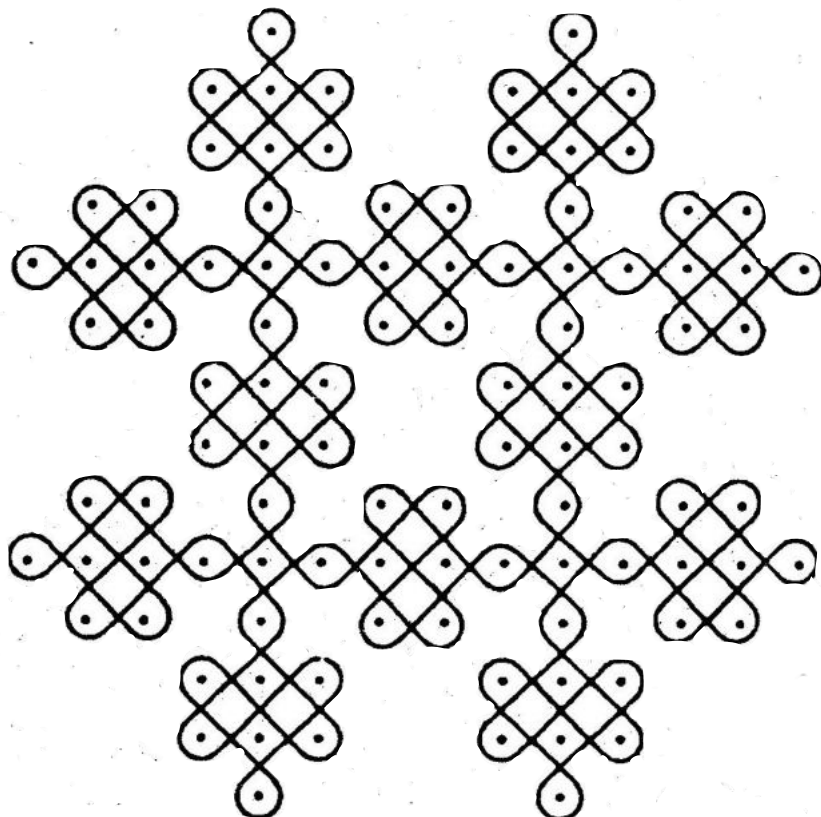
The dots are placed in a specific sequence and the lines are drawn joining the dots, revealing design patterns.





# VARIATIONS





## SIKKU KOLAM

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Kolam made by a single continuous line or several lines running around dots are called sikku kolam and exist to my knowledge only in Tamil-Nadu. They distinguish themselves from other kolam by their entangled lines. Certain local beliefs see in these uninterrupted delineations an efficient charm against malevolent forces and evil eye. Temple sculptures formed by a unique or several never-ending lines which crisscross themselves develop sometimes into complex and recurring patterns.

The meeting points of the entwined lines are knots. During certain rituals in India, the sacrificial area is surrounded by one or several ropes to prevent the entry of evil influences. Actors and dancers wear almost permanently a talisman made of several threads tied at regular intervals to ward off evil eye. Knots display mixed messages, they represent constraints, complications or union of two beings, a social link or a cosmic link. The sikku kolam directory includes nose ornaments, arm rings, crowns, thrones or ritual objects as rose water sprinkler, vases for melted butter and representation of oil lamps. We find also depictions of palanquins, temple chariot, cradles etc.

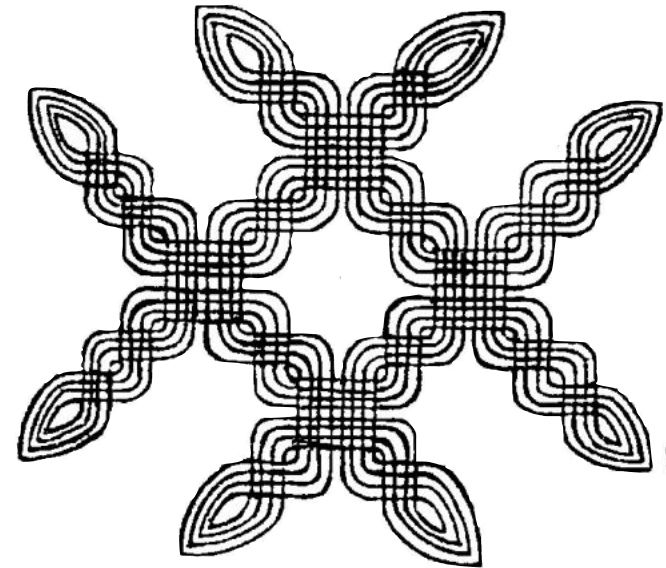
I have heard women say that drawing too many sikku kolam leads to family conflicts and conversely women capable of mastering the intricacies of a sikku kolam will be able to sort out difficult situations when they arise at home.

# PADI KOLAM

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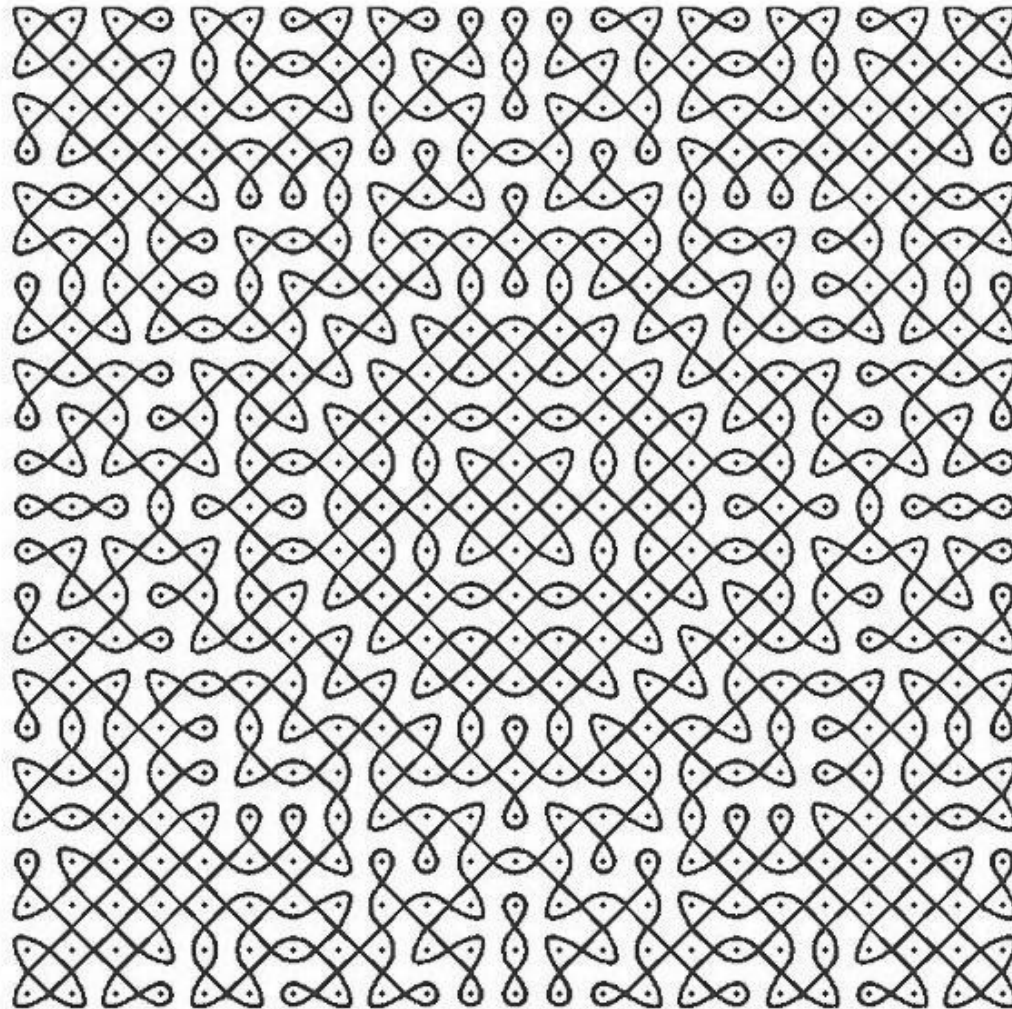
The line kolam are drawn using parallel lines which cross over at right angles or diagonally. They may start from a dot or a square and form basic structures such a square, a circle, a cross with diagonals, a swastika or two superimposed triangles. To enlarge a padi kolam, we add a series of parallels lines from which new lines join the preceding ones. Around the design, lotuses, conches or other ornamental motives complete the kolam.

These patterns are more abstract and celebrate the upstrokes and downstrokes of Hindu philosophical speculations. Undeniably, the outlines organised around the centre draw the eyes towards the heart of the drawing. Like a yantra or a mandala, negative powers are prevented from entering by the very presence of four stylized gates facing the cardinal directions. The centre of a padi kôlam is never left blank and we find one or several dots, diagonal lines, the sun and the moon, a pentagon or a star hexagon.



# The LABRYINTH KOLAM

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# SIGNIFICANCE

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# KARMA

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Kolam is traditionally made with rice flour that becomes a food for ants and birds. In Indian philosophy, there is a concept of living in harmony with creatures around you. Thus, we feed the crows before we eat, feed the dog after we eat, feed the cows and elephants when we visit the temple, etc. Its believed that if you do good karma to the creatures around you each day, they bless you and make the day less painful. (Sadly, many people now are unaware of this significance and make kolams with chemicals & stone powders - lethal for these little ants).





## WELCOME

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Kolams are thought to bring prosperity to homes. Every morning in Tamil Nadu, millions of women draw kolams on the ground with white rice flour. Through the day, the drawings get walked on, washed out in the rain, or blown around in the wind; new ones are made the next day. Every morning before sunrise, the floor of the owners house, or where ever the Kolam may be, is cleaned with water and the muddy floor swept well to create an even surface. The kolams are generally drawn while the surface is still damp so the design will hold better. Decoration is not the main purpose of a Kolam. The rice powder invited birds and other small creatures to eat it, thus welcoming other beings into one's home and everyday life: a daily tribute to harmonious co-existence. It is a sign of invitation to welcome all into the home, not the least of whom is Lakshmi, the Goddess of prosperity and wealth. The patterns range between geometric and mathematical line drawings around a matrix of dots to free form art work and closed shapes. Folklore has evolved to mandate that the lines must be completed so as to symbolically prevent evil spirits from entering the inside of the shapes, and thus are they prevented from entering the inside of the home.



# SELF EXPRESSION

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Kolam is a form of artistic expression. Women with more creativity try to draw as intricate patterns as possible and become their neighbour's envy. It is like an art exhibition, every day. Strangers and passerby could appreciate your artwork as they walk along the street. Doing artistic work early in the morning is a great boost to manage the hard work rest of the day. Such things take the attention off pains and enable them to enjoy the world.

It used to be a matter of pride to be able to draw large complicated patterns without lifting the hand off the floor or standing up in between. The month of Margazhi was eagerly awaited by young women, who would then showcase their skills by covering the entire width of the road with one big kolam







## CULTURE

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Kolam establishes a connect with culture. It enables the little kids to understand Indian culture better. As a kid, I used to watch my mom draw the kolams and she used to draw the patterns and tell the significance behind them. For instance, when there are major festivals, the kolams get bigger and made around a theme. It is a history/culture lesson on a rice flour.

# SOCIAL INTERACTION

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Kolam enables teamwork and social interactions. During winter months, women folk wake up at 4-5am in the morning in traditional neighbourhoods and you could see them all working furiously with their own Kolam. Neighbours could both comment on your work or give a hand. And you will also see some understanding husbands having an umbrella to protect the women from the dew and the drizzle. It is a great sight to watch. Again, it is all about harmony.





## COMMUNICATION

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Kolam is a silent but a very visible announcement, letting people know what is or what is not happening in the house.

In the time before phones and telegraphs, Kolam was the way we found what happened in the house, If there was a huge vishesham (special ) kolams and there was no wedding planned that day, then we may guess that the girl of the house has come of age or a baby has been born. If someone dies, then one should not put the Kolam. It represents the capriciousness of life and it helps to attract neighbours and strangers to assist those in need. The Kolam acts as a visual cue at the threshold and conveys what to expect and how to behave



# AUSPICIOUS GENEROSITY

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The auspicious power travels from the women's hands through the Kolam and upward into the bodies of those passing through its energy field, as they step over, around, or through the kolam. This capacity is especially significant during the moments of women's ritual life-cycle ceremonies, articulating how and why the household may be seen as open. At particularly important life-cycle ceremonies, an overflow of generosity is imagined, required and enacted. It is through the capacity of generosity that auspiciousness is generated.





## A THANK YOU

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Bhumi Devi (earth goddess) is our mother. She is everyone's source of existence. Nothing would exist without her. The entire world depends on her for sustenance and life. So, we draw the kolam first to remind ourselves of her. All day we walk on Bhumi Devi. All night we sleep on her. We spit on her. We poke her. We burden her. We do everything on her. We expect her to bear us and all the activities we do on her with endless patience. That is why we do the kolam



## CELEBRATION

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Though drawn throughout the year, a more elaborate version is drawn to represent a celebration within the household - wedding, anniversary, Birthdays or during major festivals - pongal, deepavali etc. Elaborate Kolams are in the form of complex designs, Colors or Event motifs or size.



## EXERCISE

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Every morning women bend to sketch the Kolam on the Threshold. This posture represents a particular asana. Kolams are a way to keep people more active. Kolam is a great exercise. When you walk by a street in the morning, you can see which women are active and which ones are lazy just by looking at the kolams. This keeps the women on their toes and motivates them to be on an active lifestyle.





## A PUZZLE

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Women find this as a puzzle.  
When they find a new Kolam, in  
a book or on a road, they count  
the number of dots and try and  
solve it at home to try them the  
next day on the threshold. Its  
their very own morning  
crossword.













# KOLAM FESTIVAL

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The Grand carpet of dots  
Kolam competition, Mylapore



What began as a simple competition with Pulli Kolam (2001) has now transformed into one of the most sought-after cultural fests of the city. With 79 registered participants, the contest began at North Mada Street with hands methodically moving to create a flow of patterns. In less than 45 minutes, the empty road looked like a grand carpet of embossed kolams.

"I was nervous initially, but, once I started designing, there was a flow," said Guna Lakshmi, a winner. Iduku Pulli kolam, peacock kolam, and other designs were created within the given time frame.

This year's contestants were a tough bunch to judge. Gayathri Sankaranarayan, one of the judges said, "Kolam is a language by itself. The designs had to be made only with pulli kolam." Jayanthi Muruges, winner of this year's contest, was ecstatic, about her win! "I checked Pinterest and found an interesting round Kolam. After practising for a week, I decided to make one and do something different from the traditional box-shaped ones," she said.

Culture buffs, photographers, kolam enthusiasts and others were seen enjoying the event. A 90-year-old man, born and raised in the area recollected how maavu kolam was a part of daily life in the city. He said it gave him a sense of joy to see the current generation showing interest in the tradition.

"In the next edition, we will set a fixed number of dots for the contest to test participants' skills," said Gayathri.

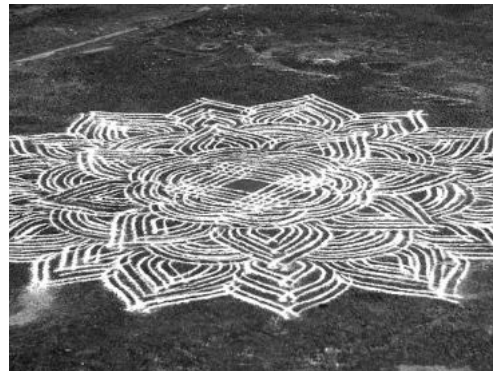














# KOLAM and POTTU

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## THE KOLAM ON THE FRONT STOOP and THE RED DOT ON THE FOREHEAD

Abounding in everyday life is the visible ritual marking of the red dot floating in the middle of Tamil women's foreheads, the potty as it is called in Tamil, or bindi in Hindi or Sanskrit. It took to many years to realise that these two kinds of ritual designs are more intimately connected. They form a kinship with each other; they mirror and echo each other as parallel ritual expressions of complicated and nuanced concepts, such as auspiciousness and inauspiciousness, purity and pollution. The visual presence of the potty, kolam and other forms of ritual traces of worship indicates that a space has been initiated for ritual purification.

The kolam is the pottu of the house and the pottu is the Kolam of the forehead.



# WOMEN

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Kolam is a form of self Expression to the Tamil women. A Kolam enables women take care of their family and immediate environment and articulate specific Tamil values, like collectivism and altruism. Performing their kolam, as part of their domestic duties, enables women to re-articulate their identities and reinvent themselves through these 'performativities'.

In South India, kolam drawing is practiced by women of all ages. Girls learn this art from childhood, taught by their mothers and grandmothers. In rural areas, a bride is judged on her talent for creating kolam, as this skill is believed to demonstrate her discipline, grace, concentration, and dexterity.





## KOLAM and MEN

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61 yr old Govindarajan  
Mylapore Festival

R. Govindarajan has travelled from the Middle East just to participate in a kolam contest in Mylapore

"Kolam can teach a person a lesson in patience," says R. Govindarajan as he connects the many dots into beautiful patterns. "In the end, a well-executed design can also give one a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction," he says, happy with what he has created.

For this 61-year-old, designing Kolam is another form of artistic expression. And his interest was kindled as a child.

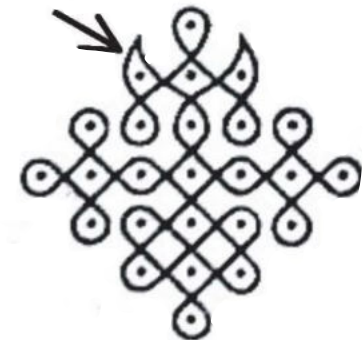
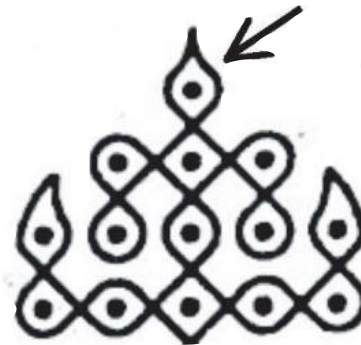
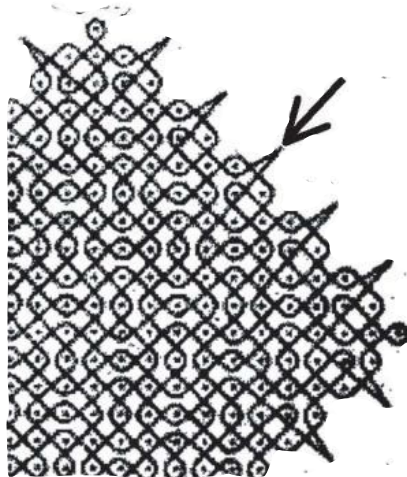
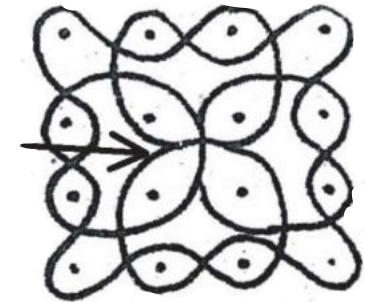
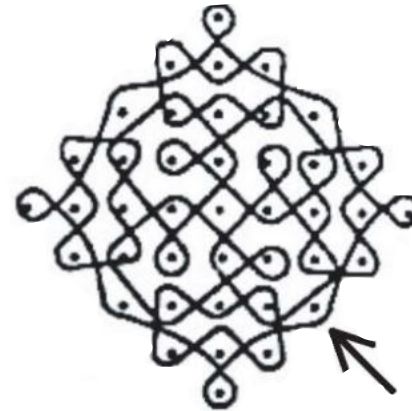
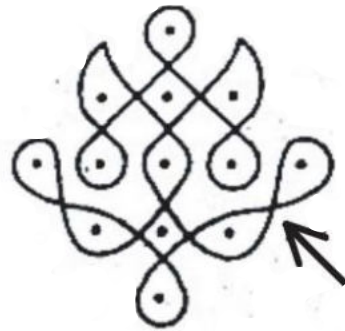
"In my family, I was the only boy who loved to make kolams. It was encouragement from parents and siblings that enabled me to make it a part of my life," says Govindarajan, who has always been interested in fine arts. He also does oil paintings.

During every festival, Govindarajan is sought by his family to make a big kolam. "I collected numerous books on dotted kolams and rangoli designs. Some kolams were just like the oil paintings I did," he says. Then in January 2010, he saw the kolam contest being conducted by the Sundaram Finance as part of their Mylapore Fest. He registered immediately. "I was the only male participant surrounded by 100 women. But I was unfazed. People were surprised to see me make kolams with such ease," he says. From then on, Govindarajan made it a point to participate in the contest every year. "I was working in the Middle East. But every year, I would come down to Chennai in January to be a part of the festival. This year, I have come back for good and am looking forward to the event," he adds.

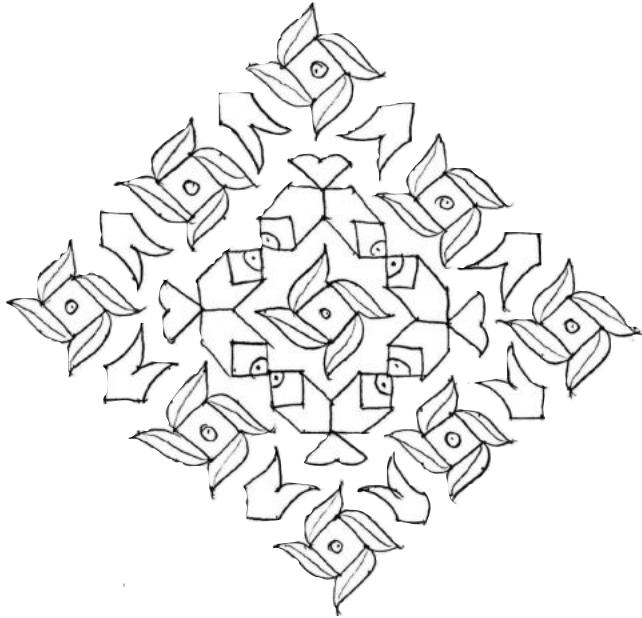
# GESTURES

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Moving away from the conventional system, certain women involve certain gestures in their Kolam that alters its aesthetics and creates interesting variations. These gestures could be in the form of creating points instead of a neat arc or horns or mixing lines and arc's







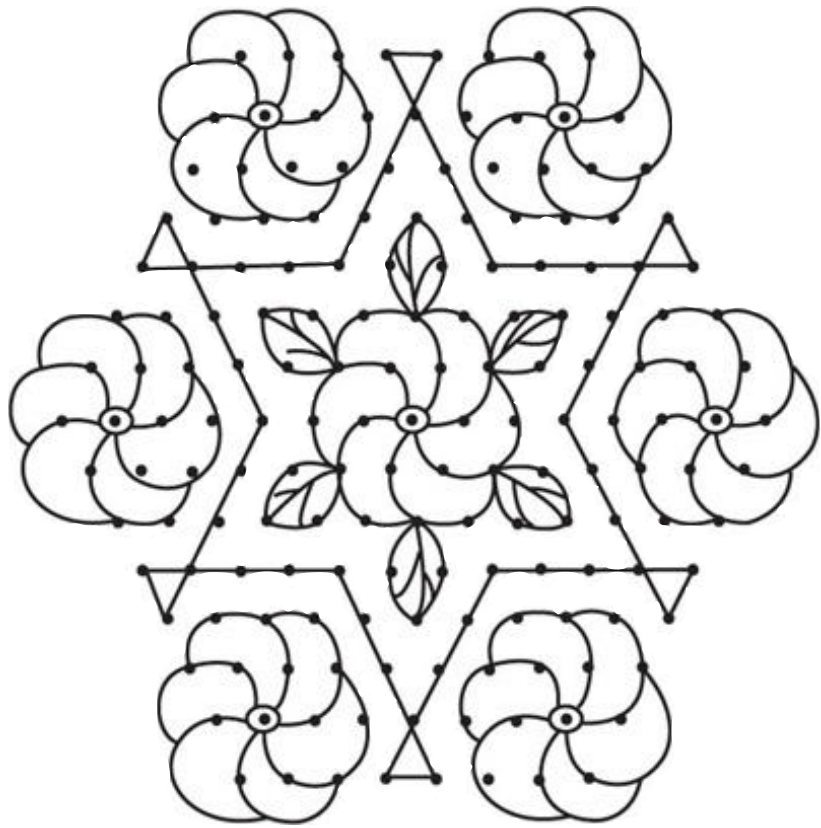
## MOTIFS

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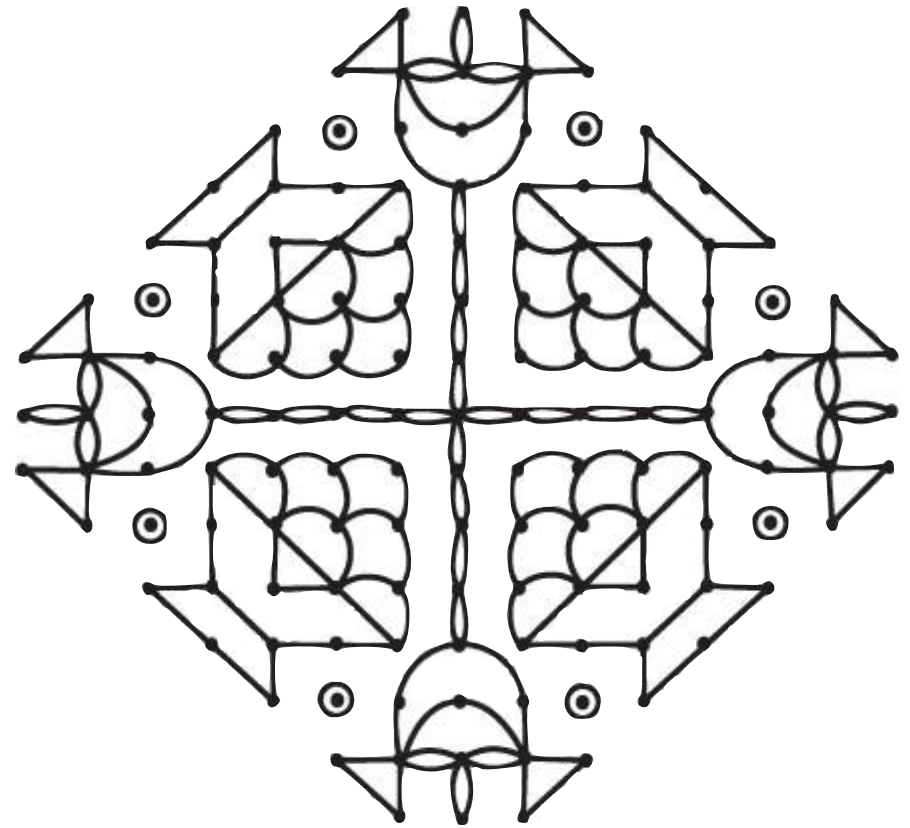
In the kolam patterns, many designs are derived from magical motifs and abstract designs blended with philosophic and religious motifs which have been mingled together. Motifs may include fish, birds, and other animal images to symbolize the unity of man and beast. Also used are designs for the sun, moon and other zodiac symbols.

The ritual kolam patterns created for special occasions such as weddings often stretch all the way down the street. Many of these created patterns have been passed on generation to generation, from mothers to daughters.

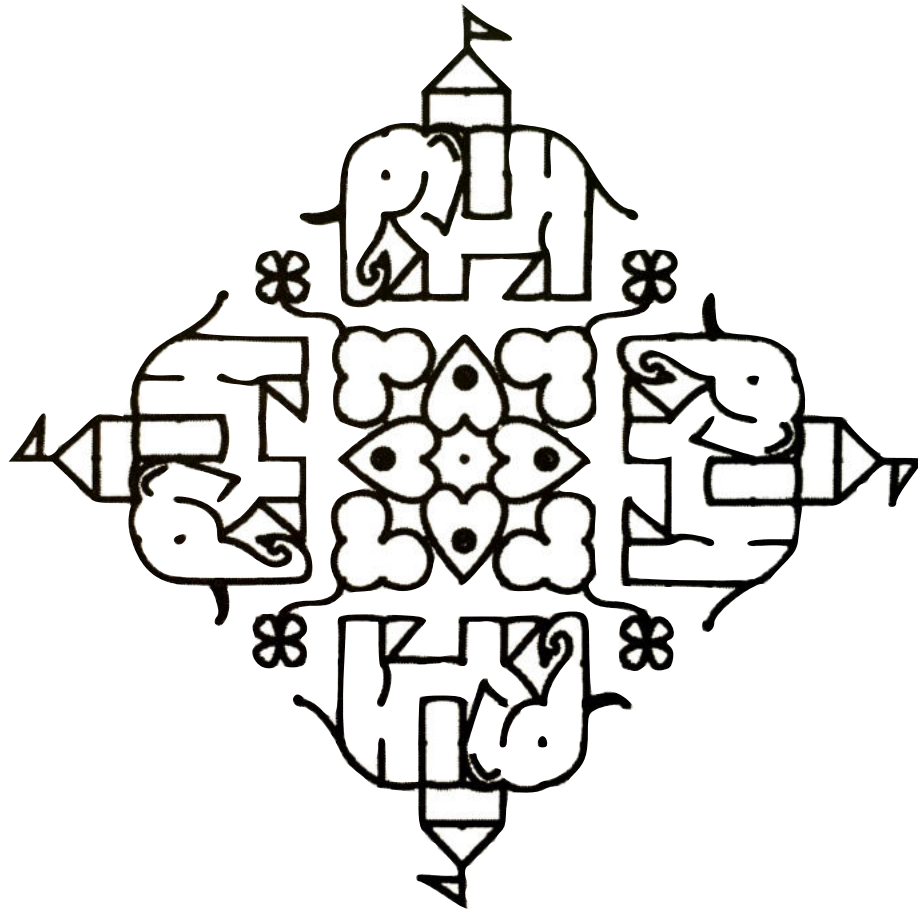
Seasonal messages like welcome (நல்வரவு) can also be used in Kolam. Volunteering to draw the kolam at temple is sometimes done when a devotee's wishes are fulfilled.



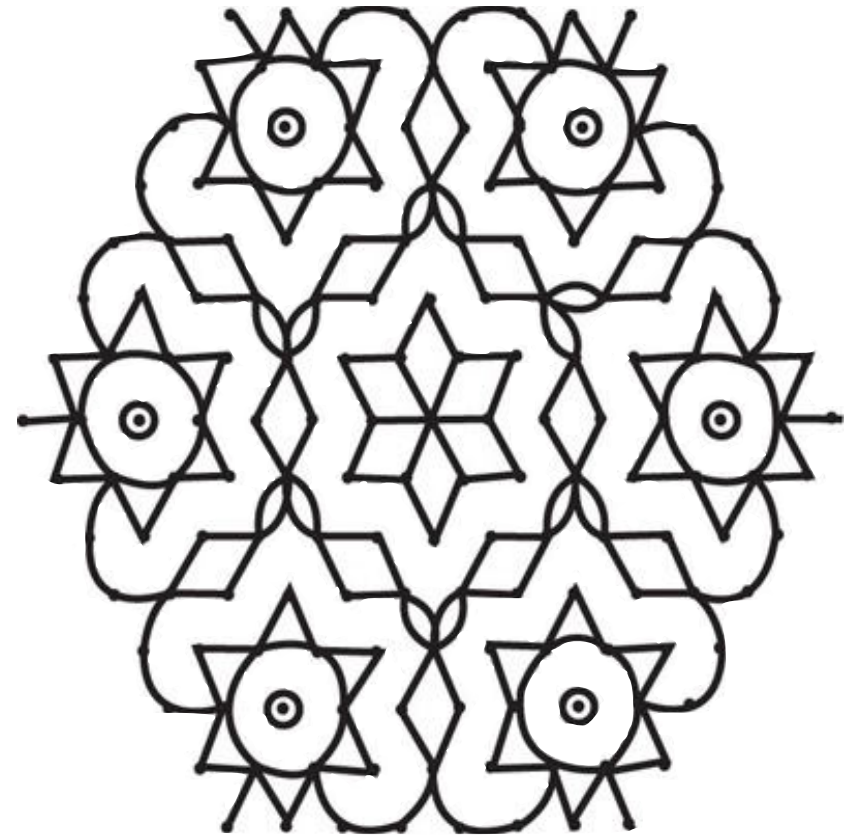
Composition with  
Flower and Leaf



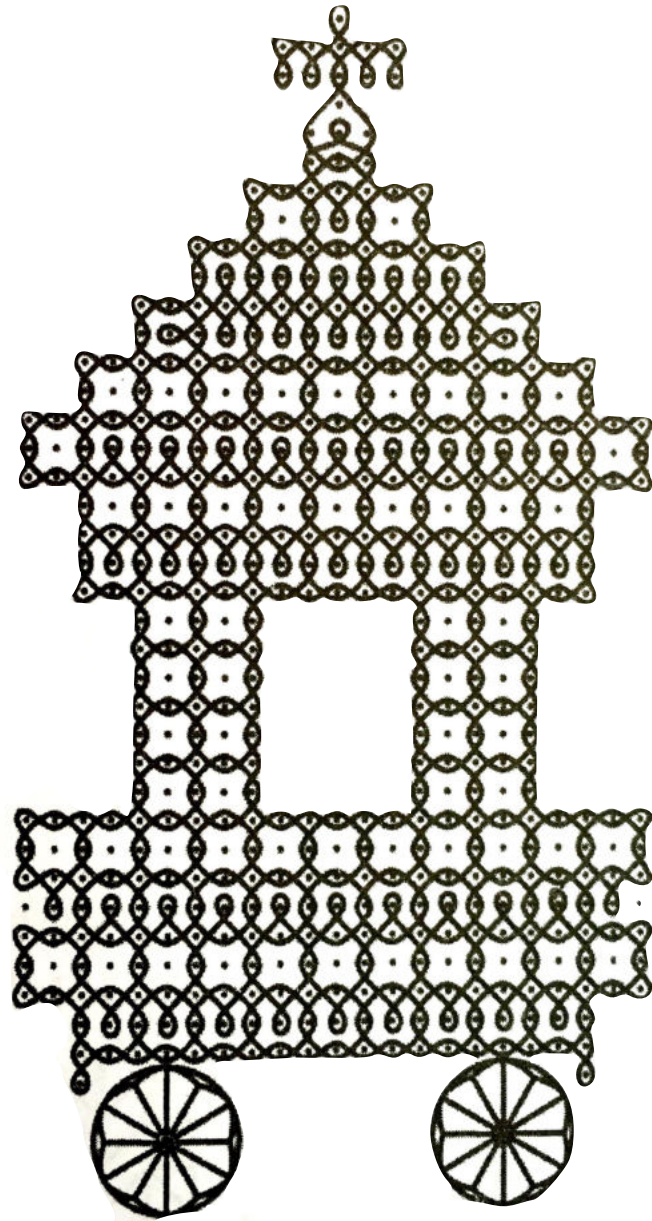
Composition with  
Sweets and Lamp



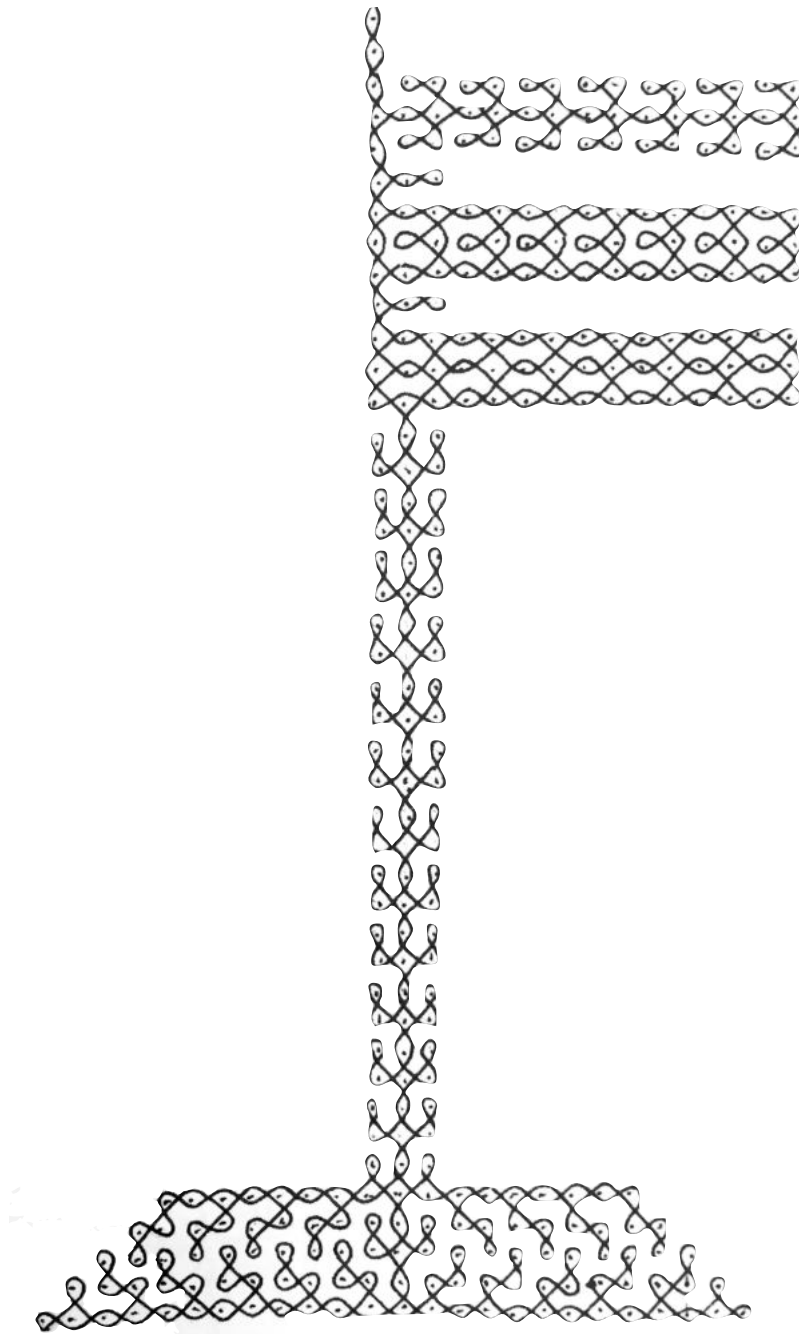
Composition with  
Elephants



Composition with  
Sun and Stars



A Chariot  
Composition



A Flag  
Composition



# A PROFESSION

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Young women transforming small dots into beautiful 'kolams' was a common sight early in the morning, especially during 'Margazhi', till a few years back. Not any more. Busy with daily chores, the young have decided to outsource the work to elderly women, who have taken up 'kolam' drawing as a profession.

The Tamil month of Margazhi is considered auspicious for girls. It is believed they would get a good spouse if they draw beautiful 'kolams' at their doorsteps and visit temple. Times have changed. Girls busy with studies or jobs find it difficult to attend early morning poojas in temples. Similarly, drawing beautiful, intricate designs in front of the house braving the morning chill is an ordeal that many wish to avoid. Here enters, middle-aged and older women, who have ample time and the necessary skills to do kolams.





Kannathal, a 78-year-old resident of Melamadai, starts her day at 4.30am and covers nearly 15 houses in Gomathypuram in Madurai. Some house-owners leave a bucket of water and a broom outside their gates so that she does not have to wake them early morning. The enterprising woman says drawing kolam is the only thing she is good at. "I don't know to read or write. But, I was taught to draw kolam by my grandmother when I was just five years old. Now, the art has come handy as it helps me to earn a good sum even at this age," she said. For smaller kolams Kannathal collects Rs 450 per month and for bigger ones the rate is Rs 800. "As I'm not good at drawing colour kolams, I take the help of a girl from my colony. I pay her Rs 250 per house," she said. Mariamma, a resident of Villapuram, has been drawing kolam for others for the past one year. "Customers started demanding colour patterns very recently. I charge them Rs 900 during Margazhi and Rs 550 during other months. Putting colour in patterns consumes a lot of time," she said. Her earnings from kolam art have already crossed Rs 15,000 this month. The kolam experts are so much in demand in the city that they are now outsourcing the orders they have received. Girahalakshmi, a resident of Valluvar Colony in Madurai, admitted a kolam is a must during Margazhi. "Kolam has to be drawn before dawn. Getting out of the house at dawn is risky due to crimes such as chain-snatching. By paying a monthly sum I can get the kolam drawn by another," she said. Sumathy, a newly-married woman, says she was happy to learn that her in-laws has employed a kolam artiste. "Firstly, I can't draw kolam and moreover, the early morning weather is too cold," she said.

# PRODUCT OUTCOMES

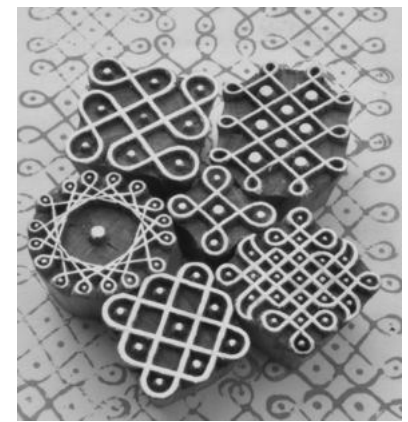
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Some people don't have time to make the Kolam but believe in the auspicious quality of the Kolams, so they come and buy these jigs so they can make it faster. Stickers are mostly used because its a one-time thing. If some days you don't have time to make the Kolam, the sticker is still there. Also the sticker can be used in many parts inside the house also. Books many people buy. They want to learn or they have a function coming and want to make something different on their doorstep.

The patterns have swept into jewellery, block prints etc. Kolam patterns are intricate and beautiful. They represent the Tamil tradition and immediately the product becomes culturally rich.













## SOUVENIRS

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The versatile kolam design, she says, is her favourite. “The kolam is always beautiful irrespective of where it is drawn. It can be incorporated in any medium.” She beams at the mention of alternate colours on the dangles. “My mother calls them the RaGa series, after the vocalist duo Ranjani and Gayathri. It was not intentional, but just happened.” says Ranjani Chandran, a Self-taught Artist.

The patterns have swept into jewellery, block prints etc. They represent the Tamil tradition and immediately the product becomes culturally rich

# THE INTERVIEW

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An avid student of kolam, Chantal Jumel found that the pictorial ritual tradition combines aesthetics with philosophy.

Freelancer, researcher and writer, who is specialising in Indian visual art, Chantal Jumel's discovery of India has been through art, specifically the floor art of Kerala's 'Kalam Ezhuthu' and Tamil Nadu's Kolam.

She has lectured, conducted workshops and created kolams at many prestigious venues in France. Chantal Jumel has lived in Mylapore since 2010 amidst the rich living tradition of kolam and continues to be an avid student of the art form: drawing, documenting and photographing this pictorial ritual tradition, which according to her connects her to the Hindu world view and 25 million women of Tamil Nadu who draw kolams every day. Excerpts from her interview.

## **What attracted you to the symbolic world of kolam?**

There were so many little touches. Amar Chitra Kathas were sold down the street where I grew up in France and as a teenager I read its Tales and Legends of India, which was a gift from my mother. Herman Hesse's Siddhartha and John Renoir's very beautiful film, The River, which opens with the shot of three very beautiful Bengali women doing the alpana, - perhaps all this had a subconscious impact! I came to Kerala in 1980 to learn Mohiniyattam and while dancing in the temples, came across kalam ezhuthu. I learnt the art, which like a kolam is drawn with fingers and thumb. Alongside, I learnt the basics of kolam from a Tamil lady in Kerala. I had been fascinated by the calligraphic beauty of kolams done in the lanes leading to the Sree Padmanabhaswamy temple and also at the Meenakshi temple in Madurai. When I came to Mylapore to stay, I literally entered the world of kolams.

## **Apart from aesthetics, what is the significance of a kolam to you?**

If you value the gesture as part of a ritual the kolam is significant. I believe that a home without a kolam does not shine! I've seen, documented, photographed and even learnt to draw so many kolams: on the threshold, in the kitchen and puja room, different kolams for different days and different communities. An old lady once told me that the pullis and the cikis- the wavy lines which go around the dots - are purush and prakriti and the repetitive act of joining them every morning is like renewing yourself every day. It is like being immersed in the here and the now. And have you observed how a women stands at right angles while making a kolam, in the process exercising unknown muscles. A kolam is not mere decoration but encompasses a whole philosophy.

### **Who taught you the art of drawing kolam?**

There are so many Tamil ladies who taught me both the basics and the intricacies and to whom I am deeply indebted. I went into an Iyer puja room and saw the lady make a kolam with two birds and a swastika to fend off separation. And a beautiful Hanuman represented by a mountain with a tail. I saw hridaya and aishwarya kolams, gopuram-shaped kolams, in exquisite shapes of twisted ribbons and so many 'pulli and cikka' kolams. I learnt by observing kolams featuring the hamsa, elephant, agni, kubera etc. Pongal kolams I found were rich in imagery as were the Christmas ones. Janaki Gopalan taught me double lined kolams, Vaishnavite kolams and other intricate patterns. Alas, what takes them 15 minutes to do takes me a full hour.

### **Your impressions of Mylapore and kolams during Margazhi.**

The streets are full of kolams. Women, including my friend Lakshmi, get up at 4 a.m. to make beautiful and huge kolams covering the entire width of the lane. By 5.30 a.m., they have all but vanished with trampling of human and animal feet, speeding cars and other vehicles. But they do create some fleeting moments of Margazhi magic!

### **Like other traditional crafts is the kolam also dying? If so, what can be done to nurture it?**

I have seen and studied kolams for the past 25 years. Kolams inside the home seem to be flourishing, but shrinking public spaces do not seem to hold much future for 'outside kolams'. Though in small towns and villages, 'public kolams' are still a way of life. I went to a small weavers' village near Kanchipuram and saw a profusion of calligraphy-like kolams in the outside space. Kolam competitions such as those organised by the annual Mylapore Festival are a wonderful way of taking the art forward. Kolam making could be taught in schools and at design institutes. Today, ethno-mathematics or teaching maths through traditional means is gaining ground worldwide.

### **Aren't ski kolams, where wavy lines go around dots, a facet of mathematics ?**

A thought to ponder on...

# THE STROLL AT DAWN

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The full moon is bright enough to lighten up the dusty street in Thiruvannamiyur, a residential area in the south of Chennai. At first sight the street seems to be deserted, only some street dogs are chasing each other and bark when a small boy on a bicycle passes them. But when I look closer, I see Randal sweeping her dusty doorstep. With a broomstick made of jute, she bends her body in a position which reminds of an asana, a yoga posture, to clean the dust and dirt off her doorstep. The next step of her cleaning ritual is to pour water on the street. Putting her right hand in a metal pot, she sprinkles drops of water onto the sandy street and uses her broomstick to make sure the doorstep is moistened by sweeping the water on the sand, which discolours to a darker shade of brown. Randal puts the semi-circular brown shell of an empty coconut, which is filled with a white colour powder, at the brick gateway on the threshold, in front of the two storey house. Her right hand disappears in the husk, putting some powder between her thumb and index finger. Again she brings her body into a position where her upper body is parallel to her legs, her head facing down towards the floor and her two feet are far apart, like an inversed V. 'The way you bend your body forward, activates the

mooladara chakra in your hip region', Randal explains, 'from head to foot all the parts are given an exercise and so it is related to yoga.' From now on we take silence, as the kolam she is drawing, is perceived as a painted prayer in which Randal needs to concentrate to replicate the geometrical designs on the pavement in front of the house, to invoke the blessings of the Gods and Goddesses, but also to embody its rhythms and allowing herself to meditate and become introspective. Randal uses the powder to create a pattern of dots on the wet sandy road. Without any hesitation she creates a web of lines around the dots, joining them properly so the end of the line meets its beginning. In a rhythmic pattern she moves her hands quickly but steady. Her body comes back in an upright position to contemplate the perfectly symmetrical image. Randal walks up to the doorstep and threshold, where she draws some simple geometrical images and lines. Randal her task is completed, by drawing her kolam Randal has transformed the ordinary space in front of her house into a sacral space and this may provide auspiciousness and well-being for their families, as well as the immediate environment.

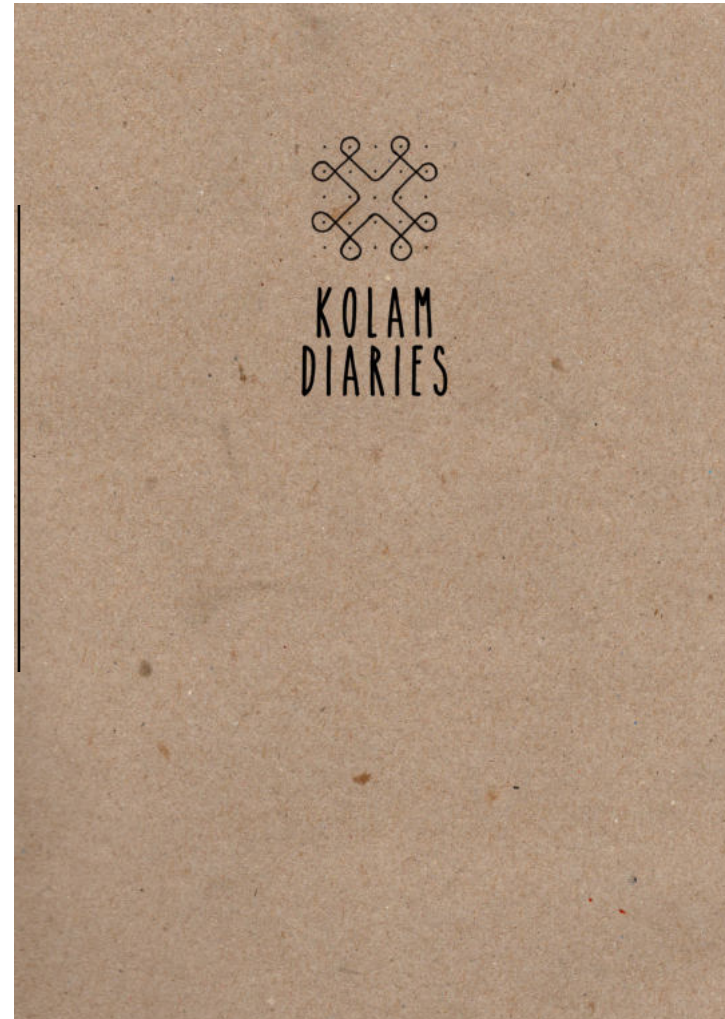


# THE NOTEBOOK

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The book, designed in the format of a notebook contains text, interviews, quotes, photographs, images and sketches collected as a result of a two week visual ethnography study of Kolam(Tamil rangoli) in Jan 2015 in various parts of Chennai, India.

The notebook format seemed to hold the flavour of the study as a 'work in progress; model and present the content as a direct representation



# REFERENCES

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## IMAGES

Of Chennai - Gopanandan Parthasarathy, July 2015  
Of Kolam - Shreelekha Lakshmipathy, Jan 2016

## BOOK

Women's lives and Religions in Hindu Tradition

## PEOPLE

Amma  
Ammamma  
Sundari Aunty  
Padma Paati  
Mrs. Janaki Gopalan  
Mr. Annajay Natarajan  
Ms. Chantal Jumel  
Aandal  
Kanchana Paati  
Guna Lakshmi  
R. Govindarajan