

Cover Story

The Mystery of Indian Floor Paintings



Swarup Dutta

Dean Academics, Indian Institute of Crafts and Design

“As a child one of my fondest memories is of Lakshmi Puja. The whole household seemed transformed. There was activity all around the household. I could sense a joyous mood in everyone. But the most remarkable reminder of this day to me was alpona - the beautiful floor decorations which my mother and sisters made on the threshold of our household, on the doorsteps leading to the prayer alter...”, remembers Narayan Sinha, a renowned sculptor, who has spent his childhood in rural Bengal.

What are these floor paintings? Are these mere decorations and beautification? Do they have underlying meanings which have been forgotten with time? Are they welcoming signs; expressions of gratitude or description of desires? We will try and explore these aspects; but



Figure 1: Contemporary Alpona

before that let us explore the pan-Indian local vocabulary of these floor paintings. These ancient ritual arts are known by different names across India, *alpona* in Bengal and Assam, *aripana* in Bihar, *pakhamba* in Manipur, *jinnuti* in Orissa, *mandana* in Rajasthan, *rangoli* in Maharashtra, *sathia* in Gujarat, *chowkpurana* or *sona rakhna* in Uttar Pradesh, *likhnu* in Himachal Pradesh, *apna* in Almora and Nainital region, *kolam* in Tamil Nadu, and *muggulu* in Andhra Pradesh.

It would be interesting to trace the origin of these words, as tracing their and colloquial meaning might give us more insights in understanding their very origin. Upon investigation we can see that some of the words are rooted in vernacular languages whereas some have their origin in pre-Aryan era. For example, *mandna* in Rajasthan literally means *Mandan*—to decorate. *Rangoli* on the other hand has its origin from the

It is possible the word alpona is probably derived from 'ailpona'; the art of making 'ails' or embankments - an art practiced because of the belief that these decorative paintings keep the dwelling, city or village safe and prosperous and the cultivated land fertile and fruitful by magical representation.

Sanskrit word of *rangavalli*, which means a creeper drawn with colours. But the most interesting of them all is the origin of the word *alpana*. It is generally believed that the word derives from the Sanskrit word '*alimpan*' which means 'to plaster' or 'to coat with'. But according to some authorities it is a created Sanskrit word, and that the root of this word is non-Aryan. It is possible the word *alpana* is probably derived from '*ailpana*'; the art of making '*ails*' or embankments - an art practiced because of the belief that these decorative paintings keep the dwelling, city or village safe and prosperous and the cultivated land fertile and fruitful by magical representation. Whatever the original meaning of the word *alpana*, it seems highly probable that it is an accident word sanskritised in recent years, which in turn indicates that the practice of such floor paintings might be older than anticipated.

Most of the scholars agree that the word and the practice of floor painting proceed

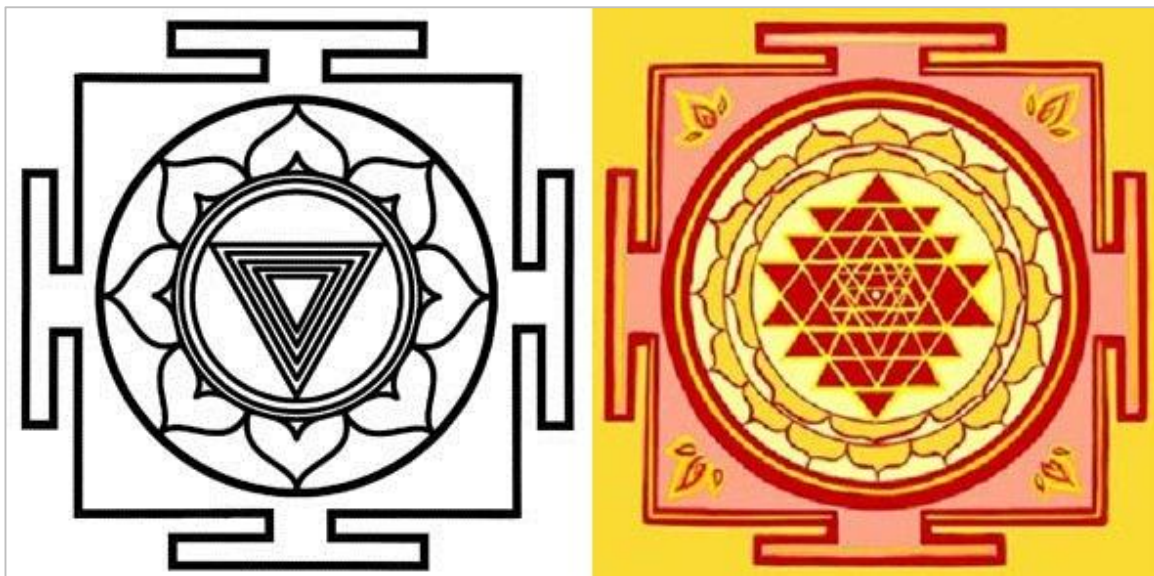


Figure 2. From left - *Maha Kali Yantra & Shri Yantra*

the Vedic age. Manu Desai explains,

The pre-Vedic folk myths and legends were so fundamental and all pervading, that they became symbols to convey complex philosophical concepts. This fusion resulted in the symbols and rituals which enrich and order the fabric of daily life.

The first visual traces of floor paintings are found in one of the seals of Mohenjo-Daro. The floor decoration in the seal according to Pupul Jaykar's, was geometric in form, and resembled a *mandala*. *Mandalas* are tantric drawing/painting meant for worshipping generic deities. The word "*mandala*" comes from a Sanskrit word that generally means "circle" and *mandalas* are indeed primarily recognizable by their concentric circles and other geometric figures. *Mandalas* are far more than geometrical figures. However, they are rich with symbolism and sacred meaning. In fact, the etymology of the word "*mandala*" suggests not just a circle but a "container of essence." Simply stated, a mandala is a sacred geometric figure that represents the

universe. When completed, a mandala becomes a sacred area that serves as a receptacle for deities and a collection point of universal forces. By mentally entering a mandala and proceeding to its center, a person is symbolically guided through the cosmos to the essence of reality. A *yantra* on the other hand is specific to a deity and has a specific purpose; it is the Sanskrit word for "instrument" or "machine". Much like the word "instrument" itself, it can stand for symbols, processes, automata, machinery or anything that has structure and organization, depending on context. This discovery is of profound significance because it not only validates usage of mandala paintings for ritual use during that time but also links the usage of floor paintings for sacred occult

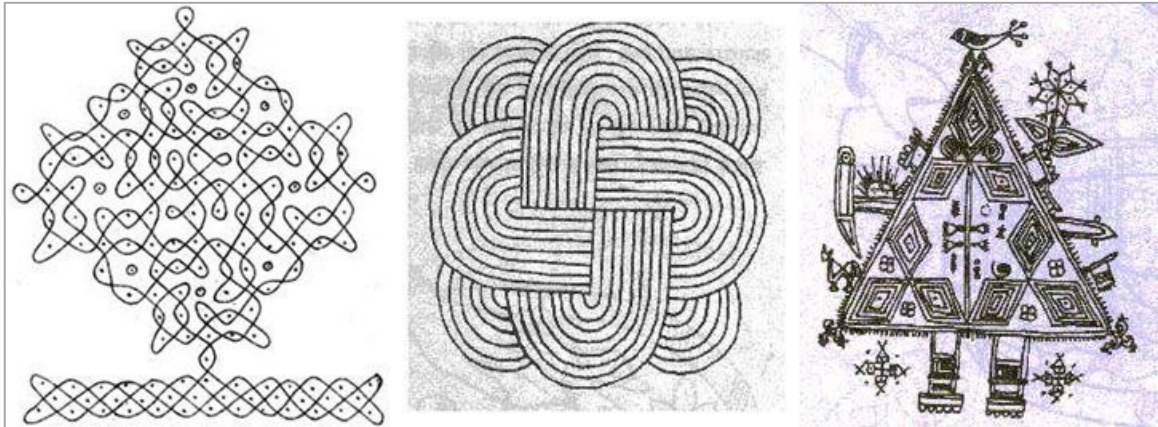


Figure 3. From left - *Muggu* from Andhra Pradesh, *Mandma* from Rajasthan and *Alpana* from Bengal.

functions in contemporary rituals. Thus, with permeation and spread of the beliefs and practices of the Indus Valley culture the geometric diagrams became absorbed into the *Vrata* rituals (period of fasting and abstinence) and observances of the *Kulin* (higher caste) society. *Vtaras* were rituals performed with the sole belief that through determined expression of desire it is possible to change destiny. Which often is still the case, an example being '*mannat mangana*' 'asking the divine' to intervene in return abstaining or giving up something which is cherished. Thus, the floor paintings practiced during *Vrata* rituals are not mere decorations but are also perhaps profound expressions of desire.

Let us now examine the visual styles of these paintings and some of the commonly used motifs across the country which may give us more insights to their existence and context. Based on appearance and regional application the



Figure 4. *Pongal Kolam*, Tamilnadu

designs can be divided into two main categories - the ones drawn in the mountain terrains and the others in the plains and the fertile regions of the country. *Akriti Pradhan* (geometrical based) designs are found predominantly in mountain terrains where as *Vallari Pradhan* (floral based) designs were predominantly found in the gangatic plains respectively. In Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra and the Southern Peninsular they are *Akruti Pradhan*, while in Bengal and Bihar they are *Vallari Pradhan*. Distinct from these two major categories, there is yet another group of designs in the South, which can be termed 'floral - geometrical'. The floral designs are mostly connected with the socio-religious and magico-religious practices, while the geometric ones appear to be connected with tantric mysteries. The geometric designs revolve around the central motif which, in its roots, contains some geometric forms concerning a particular deity. The mandana designs of Rajasthan traditionally have close similarities with the geometrical motifs, like triangles, squares, circles, swastikas, chess board patterns, multiple horizontal bands and wavy lines such as those appearing on the chalcolithic pottery type of the Indus Valley (circa 3000 BC). In fact, there are motifs in *alpana* of Bengal still being used which according to Manu Desai dates back to Indus Valley Civilization. The significant ones are fish with wings, conch, scorpion and *navagraha* amongst others. And the influence of the Tantric cult also cannot be denied.



Figure 5. Chalcolithic Burial Pottery from Indus Valley Civilization.

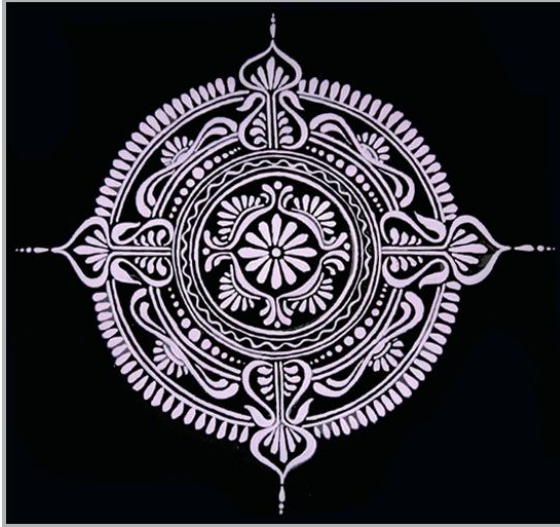


Figure 6. Contemporary Alpona

The most commonly used motif like the circle and the square have symbolic meanings. The circle is the most natural and spontaneous shape. In Hindu theology it has been used to represent the universe. The universe is the medium, they believed, through which the divine presents itself. The square on the other hand with its sharp edges is the most artificial shape. When drawn within the circles of the universe, it best represents culture. The upward pointing triangle, like a mountain represents stability and the eternal male element within us, the *Purusha*. The downward pointing triangle, like a

waterfall represents the unstable physical elements which are transient, the *Prakriti*. When united they form a six pointed star communicating manifestation of the Universe. It is significant as only through the union of the changing truth of matter (downward pointing triangle/*yonī*) and the unchanging truth of the spirit (upward pointing triangle/*linga*) does life comes into existence. The dimensionless point is the most elemental of geometrical forms. The dot best represents the *bija* or the seed of the un-manifested ... the soul.



Picture 7. Initial sketch of a Naga Kolam from Kerala.



Picture 8. *Naga Stone worship at Hampi*

It is interesting to note that these symbolic motifs have been used in floor paintings in various stylized forms. Harsh V. Dehejia notes,

The earth is adoringly referred to as mother and venerated in many different ways. One of the most evocative hymns to the earth is the "Prithvi Sukta" of the *Atharva Veda* in which the earth is invoked as a nourisher, giver, sustainer and protector.

Naturally, in Hindu theology the earth was revered as the most sacred, and so were the creatures that live underground. Thus, hooded snake known as *Nagas* are of great significance to the Hindus. A universal symbol, the snake is a complex symbol with polyvalent attributes. It is simultaneously linked with life and death, light and darkness, good and evil, venom and cure, preservation and destruction. The Vedic lores say that *Nagas* once rolled on grass on which



Figure 9. Contemporary Alpona of a fishing community in Nadia, West Bengal

Amrit, the nectar of immortality was once kept. Thus, they have the ability like the earth to renew their fertility by replacing old skin with new. So they are revered as symbols of change, renewal and regeneration and were/are worshiped for progeny, prosperity and health. No wonder then that one of the most significant symbols used in Hindu religious rituals - the *Swastika* has its origin in the snake. We find serpents represented in the form of the letter 'S' at several places. If we place two of these letters in vertical and horizontal positions we will arrive at the rough form of a Swastika. So, it is symbolic of a male and a female serpent lying one over the other. The intertwined serpent or their *Mithuna* can be traced to Indus Valley rituals. It was believed by pre-Vedic civilizations that *Sarpa Mithuna* or 'copulation of snakes' was the cause of the creation of the cosmos. Worship of this symbol should therefore represent the age old adoration of the *Nagas*. They are thus worshiped for fortune and wealth which will take the devotee to the eternal joy of the serpents at the mating.



Figure 10. Aripa motifs drawn on Tussar silk with Lakshmi Footprints at the center

Floral representations on the other hand became popular with the spread of the Vaishnavite cults along the Gangatic plains. Elaborating the nature of the deities Huyler observes,

Over the centuries, Hindu philosophers have grouped deities with similar traits under common names. Male deities worshipped for their powers of creation and destruction are considered aspects of Shiva; gods that are heroic and act to preserve the equanimity of mankind are viewed as variations (or aspects) of Vishnu. Lakshmi is the pan-Indian goddess of abundance, fertility, and prosperity, and usually considered to be the deity that protects the home.

Although, there are many exceptions, most of the household paintings and the decorations of the walls and floors by Indian women are dedicated to her.

So we can find that due to qualitative association with preservation, love, abundance, fertility and prosperity, *Vishnu* and *Lakshmi* are worshiped using motifs which symbolise the same attributes. Thus, plants, creepers, flowers etc. as motifs have predominance in floor paintings dedicated to them. Lotus - the flower associated with both these deities, symbolizing all best things that can emerge from the mire of life is shown with four, five, eight, nine, ten, sixteen or thirty-two petals. All these numbers also have occult significance.

Another the most common motif used is the footprint, which perhaps represents the arrival of a compassionate deity. For the very reason, foot prints are widely worshiped in different parts of India and widely figured in floor paintings. In Bengal, foot-prints are drawn on the ground as an integral part of alpona designs and usually these are attributed to *Lakshmi*. In Bihar foot prints appear on a long chain of lotus flowers drawn on the ground during ritual performance. The *paglya* or *footprint designs* are so popular amongst the



Figure 11: The Lakshmi Footprints

womenfolk in Rajasthan that they are attracted more to the *paglyas* of *Lakshmi* than to the *charanas* (foot-prints) of *Vishnu*. Even during *Deepawali*, the most elaborate decorations are those of *paglya* designs. As *Lakshmi* never dwells in a dark and dingy place, the women take much pain to decorate their houses during *Deepawali*, and it is for this reason that *mandanas* found drawn on this occasion are superb, and surpass those found during other festivals. Traditionally in south India, the footprints of Goddess *Lakshmi* are drawn and then it is harmoniously juxtaposed by Lord *Vishnu*'s.



Figure 12: Contemporary Alpona

The pot, representing the container of personal wealth is also a popular motif. Unlike the river or the pond which is the source of all wealth, a pot represents wealth that is contained within the confines of civilization. It is not free wealth that exists in nature; it is wealth over which human has staked his claim. In all primitive food-gathering societies of the primitive civilizations *Purna Kumbha* also came to represent the pregnant mother goddess, a deity worshipped as harbinger of good—fortune and fertility. Thus, the pot or the *Purna Kumbha* in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism is regarded as an auspicious symbol.

This connection to fertility and abundance is also seen in the symbolic use of colours. According to tantric physiology, the dead are reborn when the white seed of man

successfully merges with the red seed of woman. Split semen holds the possibility of new life. Menstruation on the other hand was seen as being of same nature as birth. Seed, white or red is thus the most potent substance in nature. Devdutt Pattanaik elaborates,

White is the colour of the male reproductive fluid, representing Purusha; red, the colour of female reproductive fluid, representing Prakriti. The earth is red before rains. After rains, the earth is green. Red thus represents virginal Prakriti who holds the promise of creating new life. Green represents the maternal Prakriti who has realized that promise and created new life.

No wonder then that these have been the most predominant colours used in the floor paintings all over India.

Turmeric which was traditionally used as an antiseptic and a recommended cosmetic is said to have properties that enhance fertility. The colour yellow which has its association with turmeric also finds elaborate usage in floor paintings especially in Telengana Andhra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.

In *alpana* designs are drawn on the floor with chalk powder and filled with coloured powder or coloured rice and bits of leaves and different kinds of flowers. The background is black or yellow or red or beige, and the designs are picked out in contrasting colours. In Bengal *gam* or wheat, sago or rice is used for larger and more pronounced designs. Usually in Bengal, a flower is placed before *alpana*.

In different parts of India floor paintings apart from forms and colours also vary in frequency and occasion of the practices. In Bengal and Rajasthan, it is not necessary to draw an *alpana* design everyday. It is mainly practiced on *Purnima*, *Ekadashi*, *Amavasya*, *Pradosh* days and on some festival days. As in Bengal, in Rajasthan also floor paintings are used in occasions pertaining to marriage, first rice-eating, naming or the sacred thread ceremony. Amongst the other occasions or festivals suited for *such floor paintings*, mention may be made of *Deepawali*, *Holi*, *Makar Sankranti*, *Sripanchami (Saraswati Puja)*, *Laxmi Puja*, *Prabhodhni Ekadashi*, *Maha Ashtami Puja*, *Raksha Bandhan* and such other festivals or auspicious occasions. On these occasions the floor is replenished with cow dung and then decorated with suitable designs.

Unlike Bengal and Rajasthan, in Maharastra, Gujarat and Southern Peninsular it is a daily practice. Everyday, early in the morning, the very first work of the women in these regions is to clean a little space on the outer side of the entrance gate and make



Figure 13: Contemporary Alpana

it ready for floor paintings. On this cleaned space Gujarati women inscribe a *swastika*, whereas a south Indian woman delineates a *kolam* of her choice. A Maharashtrian woman may or may not draw a *rangoli* design elsewhere, but she must clean, without fail, the place around the *Tulsi* plant and adorn it with a *rangoli* design. Besides, she also draws a chain of *rangoli* designs around the place where the food is served. It is interesting to observe here that these decorations are transient and ephemeral in nature lasting hours, days, or weeks before being worn off by the aberration of



Picture 14: Kolam Design, Tamil Nadu

activity or weather and replaced by new interpretations of design.

As per Hindu beliefs *atma* or the soul, and not the body, is the real self of man. Though humans are rooted in material indulgences, the scriptures always warn them against the transient and towards the permanent which lies within them. One way to acknowledge this transience is by celebrating transience itself. When asked about the purpose of ephemeral or transient art in India, Rukmini Devi Arundale, a famous south Indian classical dancer and teacher had this to say,

In nature around us, beauty is fleeting; it has no permanence. Droplets of morning dew on a leaf, the billowing shapes of the clouds, the dancing movements of a bird, the soft eyes of a calf, the smile of a young child: these all change quickly. They are not frozen in time. Why should art be frozen, be still? So much of our art here is made only for the moment. It is beautiful right now. The artist knows it, and the gods surely knows it. The earth just for this moment is more beautiful because of it. What more is needed? It changes as we change, until again we make something of beauty.

Tracing mythological origin of these floor paintings Huyler said,

When asked about the origins of wall and floor decorations, women say that in the ancient Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, the goddess Sita painted her forest home with sacred designs when her husband, the god Rama, left her to hunt the magic deer.

This brings us to our most vital question, what is the purpose of these paintings? It seems like there have been many purpose of these paintings. They were not only adoration and ornamentation of the earth which sustains us, but equally a ritual invocation of the gods for acquiring their benediction, thus making these floor designs visual prayer created on the earth. Drawn with rice paste, lime or chalk, the process is as important as the finished form. The designs drawn thus on the floor have a magical power and presence. They were used as welcoming signs at the entrance of the house, for a guest must be welcomed with grace and elegance. Beauty being equated with godliness, it was also the symbol of good omen and had therefore to be associated with every phase of life.

Archna Shastri adds,

Through the rituals, myths and symbols, the universal pattern was rehearsed in order to evoke, recreate and sustain the life-bestowing/life generating forces. Nature was rendered tangible through composite symbolic images and gestures.



Picture 15: Miniature painting depicting Abduction of Sita episode.

These floor paintings have also been used as protection against evil spirits. The magico-religious significance of these paintings as protective machines can be understood through a tale from the *Ramayana*. It is said that while Laxmana was guarding Sita, she insisted that he go into the forest to investigate the cause of a cry that sounded like her husband Rama's. Before leaving, Laxmana drew some protective

unbroken circular lines around the hut and instructed her never to cross them. She, of course crossed them when *Ravana*, the demon-king of Lanka, exhorted her to give him alms, and was consequently kidnapped. But till the time she was within the confines of the *Laxmana Rekha*, the protective *mandala* prepared by Laxmana, *Ravan* couldn't touch her. Thus, while drawing these designs special attention is paid to the fact that the entire graph must be an unbroken line not having any gaps for an evil spirit to enter.

These floor paintings are still revered as folk art and used as pleasingly decorative designs. But studies show that it was once deeply linked with occult rituals. It is difficult to say whether the sophisticated designs, known as *yantra* in esoteric practices by few initiates, slowly became *rangoli* when used by many and in the process lost its deeper significance; or whether the popular form of art became charged with an esoteric significance during a certain period. Investigating this phenomenon further, Archana Shastri said,

The non-Aryans, as the findings from Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa suggest, were agriculturists and functioned as a matriarchal society. The domain of agriculture being universally associated with women, their preoccupations was with the natural and human fertility. Their cults and various objects of veneration were all associated with the Mother Goddesses.

No wonder then that even today these ritual arts are transmitted through women from one generation to the next (and not the men). Explaining this phenomenon Hulyer rightly summarizes,

It is possible that this tradition of ornamentation has been passed down from mother to daughter for thousands of years. It forms a common thread that unites the innumerable cultures of India, peoples who are otherwise divided by race, language, caste, religion, and occupation. In a society dominated by



Picture 16. Contemporary Alpona of a fishing community in Nadia, West Bengal

men, it is the inheritance and artistic expression of the woman through their own techniques and symbols - prayers painted or 'written' from the heart.

Dehejia further adds,

The many ritual earth diagrams that they made must have preceded the codification of Vedic hymns, but in the coming together of the spells and the floor diagrams we see one of the earliest attempts in India to contain and coerce divine energy in a yantra or an *akriti* and its transmission through a woman.

It seems that with the advent and spread of new social structures, contextual and environmental mutations, advancement of technology and disintegration of the context in which the floor paintings flourished, the floor paintings have lost their original meaning. The floor paintings employed many symbols, which represented a way of seeing, a different perception of life. Mythologies and historical experiences assimilated and enriched its vocabulary for centuries. But it is on its way to oblivion. It is a languishing practice. As Archana Shastri correctly summarizes,

The floor paintings of India have survived as a decorative visual art form. Even as a ritualistic practice it is not motivated by the original compulsions. It continues as a formal ritual. The formal ritual has, in turn, given rise to commercialization. The result is mass production that is stale and monotonous.

She further adds,

In this commercial grab the emphasis is only on the visual appeal...today the floor paintings of India are only a feeble reflection of the perception of life in the distant past, where the cosmic forces at work were looked at with awe and reverence, fear and hope.

The whole concept of making while you are praying is going away, often we see plastic rangoli decals (stickers) just stuck on doorsteps now. In the words of Stella Kramrisch,

The hurried, mechanized life of the present has little time for such ritual and visual celebrations. The practice ... will not survive.

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Figures 2 are courtesy Swarup Dutta.

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Pictures 9 and 16, documented by Biswendu Nanda. The alponas have been drawn by the womenfolk of a fishing community of a village on the bank of the river Jalangi in the district of Nadia, West Bengal.

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Swarup Dutta is an alumnus of NIFT and Nottingham Trent University, UK. His formal education was in the field of fashion and textiles but he has been actively involved in the education and handicrafts sector. He is presently working with Indian Institute of Crafts and Design as Dean Academics. His passion for people has drawn him to Fashion Photography. He has styled and shot campaigns for Sabyasachi, Anamika Khanna, Kiran Uttam Ghosh, Shantanu Goenka, Dev r Nil etc. His desire to express himself has taken him to different mediums, from Photography to Styling, from Crafts to Clothes. But photography still remains his passion.

Email: swaruphullo@gmail.com.
