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Cultural (Re) presentations of *Alpana*: Evolution of Indigenous Forms of Geocentric and Collective Art

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India has a rich and varied indigenous tradition of floor paintings used for religious or occult rituals. *Alpana* is an indigenous household art form practiced by women in Bengal and Eastern India as the aesthetic aspect of the *vrata* rituals, i.e. rituals performed as an expression of a vow taken for the well-being of the individual, family, society and the earth, usually accompanied by fasting and abstinence. While *vratakathas* may be seen as primitive expressions of indigenous oral literature, consisting of songs and doggerel verse telling a story, their visual representations in the form of *alpana* offer a mimetic portrayal of the same. This paper aims to study the changing socio-economic and cultural dimensions of *alpana* as expression of geocentric and collective consciousness and trace the evolution of this cultural practice in terms of its dynamic re-presentations and reinventions into other cultural formations and art forms in the age of globalisation.

The origin of the art of floor decoration in India can be traced to the ancient times of the Indus Valley civilization (Gupta). However the practice of this art has come to be invested with culture-specific meanings in different parts of our country. Known by varied names such as *aripan* in Bihar and *jhuti* in Orissa, this visual art "forms a common thread that unites the innumerable cultures of India, peoples who are otherwise divided by race, language, caste, religion and occupation" (Huyler 19). Though *alpana* bears some similarities with sister arts like *rangoli* (practiced in Maharshtra and very popular all over India, especially during Diwali or Onam), *kolam* (South India), *likhnu* (Himachal Pradesh), *pakhamba* (Manipur) or *mandana* (Rajasthan), each of these

regional art forms possesses unique characteristics in terms of medium, technique, motifs, context of creation and cultural significance, derived from the place to which it belongs. For example, traditionally *alpana* is not a daily practice as in *kolam* of South India, but rather occasioned by festivals, rituals or social occasions and comprises designs drawn on the floor or courtyard, traditionally with freshly ground rice and water, as opposed to coloured powder used in *rangoli*.

The technique of creating *alpana* is also different. According to critics, linguistic roots of the word may be traced to the Sanskrit word '*alimpan*', which means 'to plaster with fingers', which distinguishes the technique of *alpana* from that of other art forms produced with brush or other tools. While some linguists have argued in favour of the "non-Aryan" roots of this word which was later Sanskritised (Dutta), alternative origins of *alpana* have been traced to the vernacular word '*ailpona*,' meaning the art of creating '*ail*' or an embankment, since these indigenous cultural forms were also expected to protect the dwelling or the community from danger. In the tribal culture of the Santhals, *alpana* is marked by mystical geometric patterns drawn on floors and walls of houses, to ward off evil spirits. The beautiful patterns of *alpana* are created by a tiny piece of cloth or cotton dipped in diluted rice paste moving between the nimble fingers. The white patterns drawn on the floor look magical after a little while, as the water evaporates leaving a dried pattern of rice flour. Since this is a transient art form that may be washed away by water or blown away by the wind as soon as the rice paste dries up, philosophically *alpana* is a reminder of our ephemeral existence on earth and celebrates the beauty of the evanescent.

Akin to spontaneous artistic expressions such as cave paintings of primitive humans, *alpana* had been "celebrated from far-off ages" (Chatterji 5). Primitive cultures such as Egyptian and Mexican tribes who "associate with or ascribe to nature or natural objects superhuman or supernatural elements" (Das 14) would worship cosmic forces and the seasonal cycle of Nature through rituals similar to the ones practiced in Bengal. Abanindranath Tagore in his *Bânglâr Vrata*, the first systematic attempt to theorise *vrata alpana* as a cultural form in the

nineteenth century, views it as an indigenous product of primitive religious impulse and desire for aesthetic creation which flourished long before its appropriation and institutionalisation by Puranic Hinduism (Tagore 39). The *alpana* was seen as a "visual form of magic" (Kramrisch 107) practiced by communities of women to evoke the magical powers of the Earth and Mother Nature.

The power of *alpana* lies in its creative spontaneity, since the motifs and designs are primarily imitative of nature and everyday experiences, while invested with symbolic and mythical values at the same time. The designs usually consist of floral or geometric patterns like circle, triangle or square, each invested with mystical significance. Since amongst various traditions of floor painting practiced in India, the '*vallari pradhan* (floral based)' designs predominate in the areas around the Gangetic plains, the patterns of the *alpana* commonly feature motifs of nature. Flowers like the lotus, with occult meanings associated with the number of petals, ordinary plants, creepers and flowers found locally constitute some of the recurrent motifs of *alpana*. As Shastri argues, the *vrata alpana* aimed to "evoke, recreate and sustain the life-bestowing/life generating forces. Nature was rendered tangible through composite symbolic images and gestures" (Shastri 5).

As an indigenous cultural practice, *vrata alpana* is most popular amongst agrarian communities, since it is a ritual celebration of the powers of the earth, fertility, abundance and prosperity. It is a collective expression of prayer to invoke the blessings of the cosmic forces like the sun, the wind and the rains. Most of the *vrata*s bear a close relationship with seasonal cycles, the sowing and harvesting of crops and the *alpana* visually embodies the veneration for the earth and nature as sources of sustenance and protection. This geocentric cultural practice is also perceived as an example of *bhutayajna*, i.e. the human householder's duty toward lower creatures of the earth, since the rice flour or paste was meant to be an offering to insects and other living beings. Therefore *alpana* is also an expression of ecological consciousness, since it stands for ecological harmony existing between humans and animals.

Attuned to changing seasons, each *vrata* tells a story through collective recitation of songs and doggerel verse complemented by visual story-telling through the *alpana*. *Alpanas* drawn on the occasion of *Prithibi Vrata* (the vow for the earth) observed by maidens from the last day of the Bengali month *Chaitra* to the last day of *Vaisakha* celebrate the powers of the earth and the harmonious relationship existing between women and the earth. In its invocation of the rains as well as a fertility ritual, the earth goddess is invited to reside in the magical diagram of the lotus drawn for this purpose. The *Purnipukur Vrata* (the vow for lakes and ponds)is performed by young unmarried girls hoping for good rains and fertility of the soil, usually during the summer month of Baishakh (between April and May) before the advent of monsoon. The *alpana* consists of recurring pattern of conch shells. Tagore points out the similarity between the rituals performed at the times of drought by the ancient Mexican Huichol tribe, descended from the Aztecs living in the Sierra Madre Mountains and the rain-bringing rituals of the *vrataalpanas* in Bengal, especially the *Purnipukur vrata* (14). The Huichols are known to draw the central image of the sun along with mountains, crop fields and rains on a round earthen plate for magical invocation of rains on the earth.

Similarly, the *Vasudhara brata* (the vow for the earth)articulates the community's prayer for good rains. These *vratas* evolved in Birbhum, Burdwan, Bankura and Purulia districts of Bengal, at a time when the agrarian economy of Bengal was entirely dependent on the caprices of the rainy season and this art form embodied a collective prayer addressed to the cosmos. One of the popular doggerel rhymes of the *Vasudhara brata* runs thus: "*Ganga Ganga Indra Chandra Varun Vasuki/ Tin kule bhore dao dhone jone sukhi*" (May the river Ganges and the Gods of thunder, moon, water and the snakes bless the entire world with wealth and happiness; self-translated) (Tagore 11). The onset of winter is associated with the *Toshla vrata* celebrating the "cult of the corn" (Chatterji 5). The rites of supplication addressed to nature to provide abundant crops involve offering of the newly bloomed yellow mustard flowers to the earth goddess.

The *alpanas* of *Nabanna vrata* and *Makr Sankranti vrata* are closely associated with the harvesting season and are prepared with freshly harvested rice paste or rice flour mixed in water. Performed in the months of November/December and January respectively, both *vratas* are directly associated with winter crops and the *alpana* embodies a prayer for good harvest. As a ritual invocation of the corn goddess Lakshmi, the most important *alpana* motif drawn during these rituals is a pot of grain or a granary. Lakshmi is also seen as the goddess of wealth, and the *alpana* motifs include granaries, agricultural tools, objects related to everyday life that are required for one's daily existence. The rituals are similar to the worship of Saramama, the corn or maize goddess worshipped by the Incas in Mexico and Peru, with maize plants dressed as emblems of the goddess. With the seasonal cycle moving to the months of February-March, *Hyachra Vrata alpana* embodies a collective prayer to the forces of nature to protect humans from infectious diseases that spread during this time. Evoking the etymological connection of *alpana* to the vernacular word "*ail*" (meaning 'an embankment used in agricultural fields to mark out boundaries of land or protecting it), this *vrata* addresses the well-being of the individual human body and the community as a whole. This concept of *alpana* probably explains why *alpana*s are most commonly drawn in the doorway to one's home and are endowed with the mythical dimension of having the magical power to protect the inmates of the house from any danger. But now *alpanas* drawn in the doorway to one's home have transcended their ritualistic function to become visually appealing aesthetic means of welcoming guests.

Abanindranath Tagore interpretes the *vratas* as primitive indigenous oral literature fusing poetry, prose, visual narrative, music and even drama moulded into a composite form (15-16).For example, the *Maghmandala vrata* celebrated in winter is an indigenous ritual, enacting the "triumph of the sun dispelling the gloom of the winter months"(Chatterji 6) in the seasonal cycle. The *vrata*virtually takes the form of a three-act ritual drama with appropriate oral songs and dialogues moving through three phases – the rise of the Sun defeating the mist of

Winter, the courtship and marriage between the Sun and the Moon, finally concluding with the birth of Spring and his subsequent marriage to the Earth (Tagore 48-61). The partly memorised and partly improvised songs/dialogues performed collectively by women range from poetic effusions to matter-of fact remarks and humorous interjections. The women performing the *vrata* impersonate characters who are also visually portrayed through *alpana* motifs, such as adult women performing *vrata* rituals, young girls gathering flowers, the flowers themselves, the gardener and his wife and objects of Nature such as the Sun, Moon, Dusk and Dawn. The *alpana* offers mimetic symbols of these characters such as the earth, sun, moon, stars and even the imaginary plants, *Ital* and *Beetal* drawn by women as part of the *Maghmandala vrata*.

Alpana was considered as a gendered art form related to women's creative expression. Commenting on the role of the woman in invoking the powers of Nature through these indigenous art forms, Shastri observes: "She alone, like the earth, was able to bring forth and invoke the life-generating forces, and was installed and deified as the primordial Mother Goddess" (8). In fact traditionally men hardly had anything to do with these rituals. Nor are there any hard and fast rules determining the content of these creations, apart from an overall narrative and repertoire of symbols connected with each *vrata*. Women have been the custodians of the skills and techniques of *alpana*, as well as the allied narratives that were orally communicated from one generation of women to another.

To Abanindranath Tagore this humble indigenous and rural art signifies the locus of desire. As he writes: "The doggerel verses and *alpanas* associated with pure feminine *vratas* carry the impression of a nation's mind, their thoughts, and their efforts" (6; my translation). Tagore found two major driving factors in *alpana*-inspiration and motion/ rhythm. The *alpana* motifs used in all these *vratas* would include simple objects of nature, granaries, agricultural tools, fish, birds, animals, human figures, kitchen utensils, and ordinary objects related to everyday life, thus emphasising the geo-centric, collective and domestic nature of the

aspirations of the female artists. In a recent study of *alpana*, Sudhanshu Kumar Ray points out that the soul of *alpana* lies in its simplicity and vigour, instead of sophistication.

Abanindranath Tagore's attempt to theorise and document this indigenous, local and spontaneous rural art was part of his project of cultural nationalism in the nineteenth century. He tries to understand the indigenous art from the perspective of the evolution of Indian art history, in his comparative study of *alpana* in connection with the paintings of Ajanta and Ellora caves. As the founder of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, his aim was to revive and conserve this art form. The spontaneous art form of *alpana* was institutionalized in response to the Swadeshi movement that was sweeping over India. Not only did this humble art gain cultural capital as part of the revival of indigenous culture by the Bengal School of Art, it actually entered into academia and curriculum of art education at Visva Bharati University, Shantiniketan. Rabindranath Tagore's experimentation with education incorporated into the curriculum seasonal celebrations accompanied by dance, songs and creative expressions of the imaginative mind. *Alpana* featured in a big way in each of these cultural formations, as an aesthetic expression of the harmonious relationship between individuals and society, between humans and nature. Nandalal Bose as the Principal of Kala Bhavan, Visva Bharati was a major proponent of this art form and attempts were made to systematically study, conserve and reinvent this indigenous art.

The institutionalisation of the amorphous art of *alpana* was a major step in the evolution of this art. Following the emergence of the new Shantiniketan tradition, *alpana* came to be characterized by abstract motifs and ordered patterns, moving away from its indigenous ritualistic origin. Instead of spontaneous and erratic designs inspired by the imagination, regular patterns and symmetrical repetition of designs began to emerge in the Shantiniketan School of *alpana*, as Ghosh has argued. The abstract patterns of the *alpana* were experimented with by notable artists like Sukumari Devi, Kiranbala Devi and Jamuna Sen. The patterns of *alpana* also found their way into *batik*, another traditional

craft using techniques of wax-resist dyeing applied to the whole cloth, officially recognised by UNESCO as a 'Masterpiece of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity' from Indonesia. This interesting cross-cultural formation indicates the ways in which indigenous art forms are assimilated into global capitalist economy. *Alpana* motifs wedded with the *batik* technique were popularly adopted in Sriniketan, Rabindranath Tagore's project for rural development and vocational training at Bolpur. Today, these *alpana* patterns are commonly found in *batik* sarees, dress material, wallets and varied accessories. The ritual meanings associated with this indigenous art have been constantly evolving down the ages and have found a new medium of expression and a new cultural value altogether. Many of Jamini Roy's paintings on canvas and cloth came to be inspired by *alpana* too, sometimes reviving mystical values reflected in *alpana* motifs.

Now-a-days, *alpana* has become part of regular cultural practices associated with any kind of celebration, be it weddings or academic events. As Archana Shastri observes, it has "survived as a decorative visual art form" which has taken a commercial turn (89). Though the occult use of the *alpana* as a geocentric and collective ritual still survives in some villages in Bengal, it has mostly acquired a decorative purpose dissociated from the *vratas*. The motifs and designs have become more abstract and sophisticated rather than mimetic representations of everyday objects. The emphasis is primarily on ordered symmetrical patterns inspired by the Shantiniketan tradition of *alpana* rather than whimsical and spontaneous expressions of desire in its indigenous form. The medium used is rarely ground rice, often replaced by paint and brush. The new tradition of abstract *alpana* created by the Visva Bharati School of Art has also a wider reach, showcased through social media.

Abstract *alpanas* have been traditionally associated with Durga Puja in West Bengal for a long time, particularly the heritage pujas organized in traditional houses of zamindars. In Kolkata, a new trend of *alpana* as a grandiose street art began in 2017 when a puja organiser Samaj Sebi Sangha Sarbojanin Durgotsav Committee decided to hire 400 artists, including students of the Government Art College of Kolkata to prepare

a colourful street *alpana* stretching over 1.2 kilometers leading to the puja pandal. It goes without saying that this cultural formation drew thousands of visitors to Samaj Sebi Club. This was also circulated in the social media, facebook and twitter, apart from regular mass media like newspapers and e-newspapers as the "longest" *alpana* created in India (Chowdhury). So a new kind of collective art had emerged, borrowing some features from *rangoli*, the sister art popular in various parts of India.

The *alpana* has transformed from a gendered ritual art practiced within the domestic spheres as an expression of geocentric and collective consciousness to become a commodity of visual pleasure. *Alpana* also appears in its commercialised form of reproducible mass production as ready-made *alpana* stickers used to decorate one's household during Diwali or weddings. However *alpana* is not a dying art. In the age of proliferation of *alpana* stickers, *alpana* competitions are still being held to encourage young artists to experiment and explore new avenues of creation. Moving away from its occult value, *alpana* is sometimes infused with new and innovative content to become a medium for articulating and circulating topical social or political messages. In rare cases, the *alpana* as a visual form of story-telling comes a full circle to its indigenous purpose in being used to address environmental consciousness or women's issues. In the age of global capitalism, *alpana* has survived through cultural assimilation and reinvention and still continues to remind us of the concerns for the earth and the well-being of its inhabitants expressed through its indigenous form.

Makr Sankranti vrata, which is celebrated in almost every state of India under different names and cultural practices, is associated with a rich food culture in Bengal. There is a tradition of preparing sweets made out of fresh rice flour and distributing them among neighbours and relatives.

Lakshmi is considered as the goddess of wealth and prosperity in Hinduism. According to some interpretations, as for example opined by S.R. Das, Lakshmi is seen as originally a non-Aryan primitive corn goddess who was later absorbed into Hinduism. Incidentally *Lakshmi*

vrata alpana is the most commonly practiced *alpana* that has survived in the age of modernisation and globalisation, though mostly in the form of alpana stickers. The common motifs used are lotus, grains or paddy, owl and footprints of the deity that are supposed to be symbolic of prosperity.

Visva Bharati became Rabindranath Tagore's site of experimentation with new techniques of imparting education as a wholesome experience that integrates the students with nature, society and the cultural expressions of the land.

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