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Exploring traditional and metropolitan Indian arts using the Muggu tradition as a case study

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EXPLORING TRADITIONAL AND METROPOLITAN INDIAN ARTS USING THE MUGGU TRADITION AS A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The past century has witnessed fervent debates about dichotomies in Indian art, articulated variously as high and low art, art and craft, and fine and decorative art. The current avatar of such dichotomies is expressed as a divide between metropolitan and traditional art. The former is understood to be that which is displayed and marketed in urban art institutions and associated with individualism; the latter is generally qualified by terms like folk, religious, ritual, rural or tribal, displayed and sold in non-institutional contexts and associated with a collective identity. Despite frequent attempts to resolve the above-mentioned dichotomies, such hierarchies persist. Indian art is currently experiencing a resurgence, which some see more as a by-product of a rapidly growing economy, rather than as an explicitly artistic maturing. Notwithstanding this recent boom, many writers and artists lament the state of Indian cultural institutions. One such critic is Rustom Bharucha, whose essay on Indian museums provides one of the starting points for this study.

The difficulty of reconciling the modern and the traditional appears to lie at the heart of these issues – a problem that both metropolitan and traditional artists face. In this project, I consider myself as an example of a metropolitan Indian artist and the issues I encountered as possibly characteristic of those that other metropolitan artists face. As a case study of traditional arts, I look at *muggus*, floor-drawings made by women in Andhra Pradesh, south India. Their ephemerality, ritualism and aesthetics furnish relevant instances for a discussion on metropolitan and traditional arts, challenging existing stereotypes and prejudices in the display, production and discourse of traditional arts. This study crosses the academic boundaries of anthropology, art-practice, art history, cultural theory, ethnography and visual culture to allow for a more layered exploration of Indian metropolitan and traditional arts.

KEYWORDS, FIELDS

1. **Indian art**

     a. **Metropolitan Indian art**

     b. **Traditional Indian art**

2. **Floor-drawing**

     a. **Muggu**

     b. **Rangavalli**

3. **Anthropology**

     a. **Ephemerality, ephemeral arts**

     b. **Ritualism, ritual arts**

     c. **Threshold, liminality**

4. **Cultural Theory**

     a. **Tradition**

     b. **Colonialism, postcolonialism**

     c. **Modernity/modernism, postmodernism**

5. **Art history**

6. **Visual culture**

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INTRODUCTION:
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I a. INITIAL IMPETUSES AND INTENDED OUTCOMES

Three impetuses initiated this project; while they may appear divergent in sensibilities, their synergies will become progressively clear. The first was photographs of the *kolams* of Pondicherry, India and my wonder at their beauty.[1] *Kolams* are ritual, ephemeral floor-drawings that women in Tamil Nadu and in neighbouring Pondicherry make in threshold spaces, with rice-flour or a lime compound; they make these daily at dawn and dusk. Growing up in Pondicherry, I saw these every day but the framing device of photographs invited a critical gaze after I trained as a printmaker, studied Visual Culture and started living in Mumbai, where I had not seen similar drawings.

Kolams, Pondicherry.
Photo: Raja Mohanty

Note that while floor-drawing may seem to refer to a 'drawing' made on the floor or the act of drawing an image on the ground, since the southern floor-drawings are traditionally made with powder, they are usually *poured*. The act of drawing

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[1] Now renamed Puducherry. Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, which have been renamed as Kolkata, Mumbai and Chennai respectively, are referred to both by their old and new names. For maps showing locations of the places mentioned in this study and notes on Yanam, see Appendix 1. While I appreciate the diverse spellings and pronunciations of regional terms used across Indian states, in the interest of consistency, except for bibliographic references, I have standardised spellings of all non-English terms, italicised them and removed trans-phonetic symbols, even within quoted passages. In some cases – especially in the case of non-native English writers, spelling and grammar errors have been corrected, only inasmuch as was necessary to make the text readable. No disrespect is meant to the original authors.

with a pencil, pen or finger is associated with the qualities of inscribing; as such, it is closer to writing than painting is. 'Pouring' involves rolling and releasing the powder with the thumb and index finger, the pressure applied being commensurate to the thickness of line desired.[2] It may be worth emphasising that floor-drawings differ not only from images made on other supports but also from wall-drawings. Wall-drawings can and do wear off; however, due to pedestrian traffic, a floor-drawing can often last for little more than an hour, so it is truly ephemeral. I was therefore intrigued by the women's motivations in making drawings that lasted for such a short time.

I must clarify that for several reasons, I eventually decided that instead of *kolams*, I would study *muggus*, floor-drawings made by women in Andhra Pradesh, my mother's native state. *Kolams* had been written about, but there is no known doctoral study of the *muggus* in English and only one academic paper (Kilambi 1986). Access in Andhra was easier than in Pondicherry because I speak fluent Telugu – the language spoken in Andhra (also the adjective of Andhra) – but my Tamil is halting. Andhra's floor-drawings used to be called *rangavalli*, a term that I explain in subsequent chapters. In written Telugu, they are still called *rangavalli* but colloquially, they are usually called *muggu*, a term derived from the white material Telugu women commonly use to make the floor-drawings. Floor-drawing traditions from other regions differ from those in the four southern states, among which Kerala's floor-drawings differ considerably from the other three. At the outset, I understood that *muggus* resembled *kolams*, though whether or in what way they differed from *kolams* was difficult to say, especially as both traditions are transitioning in various ways, such as the advent of competitions. I have looked at other Indian floor-drawings here but as comparative projects require corresponding analyses of all traditions within a comparable time frame, this does not qualify as a comparative exercise.

It is sufficient to note that like Tamil women, Telugu women tend to 'pour' their drawings with powders, and also make them in threshold spaces and at threshold times. While Telugu women make drawings on the piece of wood or stone forming the bottom of a doorway, they also make the drawings more generally in any entrance space. The threshold, or the 'liminal' space, is thought to be imbued with danger in many cultures,

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[2] However, as we will see, other meanings connoted by the verb 'draw' may be inferred in the southern floor-drawing traditions, such as 'to move in a certain direction', 'to open or close', 'to attract' and despite my earlier caveat, also 'to write'.

engendering a whole class of rituals. Liminal times are considered to be imbued with as much uncertainty as liminal spaces and these are equally significant in Andhra's floor-drawing tradition. Threshold times do not fall into any customary division of time – season, month, fortnight, or times of the day. Furthermore, the liminal is a complex construct that may be negotiated. As we shall see, a threshold space is like the architectural claustra; it can simultaneously hinder and allow passage. Anthropologists have often regarded rituals as 'windows' to view the cultural dynamics by which 'other' people construct their worlds. In this respect, I was an anthropologist interested in what floor-drawings' ritualism could help me understand about this tradition's place in the lives of the makers. To clarify, by 'ritual', I mean a formal set of actions and/or words, prescribed by a community and habitually repeated by members of the community towards the preservation of a belief system shared by all, and characteristic of the community – religious or otherwise. I was interested in understanding what kind of belief system encouraged women to make these beautifully elaborate floor-drawings that were then swept away by wind, rain and traffic.

Jangarh Singh Shyam (Pardhan-Gond), *Bhains Deo*. Reproduced from Swaminathan 1987: 9, from the section 'Plates in Black and White'

The second impetus stems from my experience as an artist. Before this project, European movements had dominated my arts education and training; my strongest exposure to Indian arts had been my postgraduate research on Pardhan-Gond tribal art in Madhya Pradesh, which sparked an interest in traditional arts that I hoped would help me overcome the impasse I had reached in my art practice. The impasse was partly responsible for a seven-year hiatus from art-making, when I became an arts journalist and editor. My exposure to the work of scores of artists made me conversant with metropolitan arts discourse and gave me access to various artists. My identity as an artist was as a 'metropolitan', i.e. one who displays work in the museum and gallery circuit, whose work circulates in a 'market' and is evaluated within the framework of urban art discourses. This discourse tacitly assumes metropolitan Indian artists to be committed to universalism and modernism. It may be useful to clarify this alignment of the metropolitan with modernism, especially as the terms 'modernity' and

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'modernism' remain open to complex interpretations. Since 'modern' derives from the Latin *modo*, meaning 'now', it is of course often used to mean just that, i.e. 'contemporary' differentiates from anything in the past, commonly considered as something rejecting tradition. This is generally how I have used modernity and modernism. Modernity is associated with individualism, innovation, technological advances, industrialisation, science, rationalism, the development of nation-states, democracy and capitalism; these are further associated with a 'universal' idea of progress and a unified purpose for humanity, generally projected as having originated from Europe and North America. Since contact between these regions and the so-called developing world was most sustained during colonialism, the modern period is often perceived as having started around colonialism, though the dating of modernity is much debated and believed to be a much longer period by some and by others not a period at all. These notoriously divergent views are indicated by the difficulties authors face when they attempt to explain such terms. Appadurai, who feels that there is a "general rupture with all sorts of pasts", thereby indicating a shared condition, nevertheless emphasises that modernity today is "irregularly self-conscious and unevenly experienced" (1997: 3).

Modernism, which is generally – though not always – differentiated from modernity, to mean a movement in the humanities, including art, literature and philosophy (more a canon than a period) remains a highly contested term. Despite modernity's 'unified' idea of progress, perhaps because of its repudiation of the past, modernism is associated with intellectual alienation – formally often believed to be expressed in radical distortion and fragmentation. Mitter avers that Indian artists in the colonial period were not able to resolve the contradiction between "a modern sense of alienation and the cultural cohesion expected of a nation engaged in an anti-colonial struggle". Dating the birth of Indian modernism to 1922, when Rabindranath Tagore was instrumental in organising an exhibition of works by Klee, Kandinsky and other Bauhaus artists in Calcutta, Mitter states that international modernism only gathered speed in India after 1947, when it added a dimension "to the earlier dialectic between colonial and indigenous art. The problematic relationship between global modernity and national identity was the dominant theme of Indian art through the twentieth century" (2001: 189). I would argue that a significant part of analysing Indian postcolonialism is an ongoing effort to establish what Panikkar calls a creative dialogue between tradition and modernity (2007: ix-x). This is moreover a troubled dialogue for both traditional and metropolitan artists with the

former being regarded as safeguarding an Indian past and associated with the local – even ethnic – and the latter as forging new paths towards modernism and universalism, and thereby having a more global reach. Of course, the ethnic can sometimes become an aesthetic value in a global market. For example, more than a decade ago, I was told that if I made my art more 'Indian', I could participate in an artist residency and exhibition in Amsterdam. I did not comply with this request partly because what constitutes 'Indian' art is debatable and partly because I felt it would be insincere to ethnicise my art merely to advance my career. Idealism aside, I believe that metropolitan artists are short-sighted when they ignore extant hierarchies in Indian arts, which they obviously benefit from.

I must clarify that in this study, 'Indian art' refers exclusively to the subcontinent's visual art, though it sometimes references performance arts. I do not explore classical arts, which much Indian art-historical writing focuses on. I instead focus on contemporary Indian art, both modern and traditional. To reiterate, 'modern art' dates from the colonial period but consists largely of art produced in postcolonial India, up to the present day. 'Traditional art' covers myriad arts that are generally qualified by the terms 'folk', 'religious', 'ritual', 'rural', 'sacred', 'tribal' or 'village'. Since I focus particularly on 'ritual' arts, in many instances, I discuss traditional arts that are active within the framework of Hinduism, or derived from such practices. Floor-drawing traditions are commonly perceived as being an amalgam of tribal, folk and Sanskritic or Brahmanical traditions. *Muggu*-makers rarely described the *muggu* as explicitly Hindu, though their discussion of *muggu*'s purposes often related to religious observances. I do not equate Indian traditional art with Hindu art. However, while people of other faiths – such as Islam and Zoroastrianism – also make floor-drawings, such traditions have been most active among Hindus. My discussions therefore reflect this; when I examine other arts, such as tribal and metropolitan, the association with Hinduism does not apply.

While I had an informed appreciation of many Indian arts, I realised that even heightened engagement would not equip me sufficiently to draw on traditional arts as a resource for my own practice. Had I been brought up in a traditional Telugu household, I would have learnt *muggu*-drawing from my mother but as I had only lived with her infrequently, I was not taught *muggu*-drawing as a child. In the absence of an embedded

experience of such a tradition,[3] I felt that to use traditional arts as a resource, it was important to understand their genesis, development, purposes and contemporary practices and learn their formal idioms. At the time, I was questioning the context in which my work was produced, displayed and discussed, perhaps seeking alternatives. As an artist trying to make a living, I wondered whether it was not the elitism of metropolitan art that caused widespread insecurity in a highly competitive market. This was partly why I thought it important to understand traditional arts, which – though not regarded seriously by the art establishment – enjoy popular patronage.[4]

The third impetus was a stimulating essay by Bharucha (2001), which challenged the status quo of Indian museums and suggested that ephemeral arts could perhaps help re-imagine their abysmal models of exhibition. His intriguing essay nevertheless consisted primarily of provocations and did not draw any definitive conclusions, thus encouraging other writers to develop his suggestions. Drawing on my observations and experience as an artist and arts journalist, I have taken Bharucha's essay and the first two impetuses as a starting point.

While making art and writing about it gave me empirical experience, my MA in Visual Culture helped me develop research skills and critical thinking. To understand Indian floor-drawings' display, production and discourse, I have tried to bring to this project my training and experience as artist, arts editor and Visual Culture student. These different perspectives sometimes emphasised some sensibilities over others but I believe such tensions compelled me to produce more multilayered work.

I started with an appreciation of southern floor-drawings' visuality and added an interest in their ritualism and ephemerality, believing that exploring these interests may help me with my art. So while my impetuses may seem varied, they actually lead to one intended outcome – to enhance my art-making. I attempt to achieve this outcome by:

   i)   providing an insight into the institutions where I am likely to exhibit work;

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[3] Such as London-based artist Prafulla Mohanti's embedded experience of the rural arts of Orissa, his native state. I use the word 'embedded' to suggest intimate, tacit knowledge that comes from first-hand experience and participation in a culture.

[4] As with all research projects, this study has been conducted within a certain time frame – October 2006 to December 2010. The scenario described here is one that was prevalent when I started this project. Attitudes towards traditional arts are changing and I mention some of these changes in my conclusion.

ii)   improving my access to art-historical and cultural resources (i.e. not only understanding the development of traditional arts but acquiring an ability to use traditional idioms in my art);

iii)   understanding better – and simultaneously contributing to – the critical discourse that contextualises my art.

This study is thus motivated by a practitioner's interest, even if it is not a practice-based project. It is not my intention to limit this project's value by focussing its outcome exclusively on my own work. I hope that by enhancing my work and understanding its context, I will make a contribution to Indian arts discourse that will be equally useful to other metropolitan artists. So while the *muggu* tradition is an appropriate case study for me because I am a Telugu-speaking woman artist with easier access to it, I hope that the *process* of achieving my outcome will have wider application for metropolitans turning to traditional arts as a resource, or even to those who wish to understand the scenario they must survive in.

Explaining these impetuses defines my positioning in this project. As many authors have pointed out, in all the stages of constructing knowledge, it is important to be aware of how the outcome is shaped by myriad subjective factors.

> . . . not even procedure-driven qualitative (or quantitative) research . . . can avoid letting value-judgements, interpretations and a whole host of – often subconscious and non-reflected – choices as regards language, perspective, metaphors, focus, representation and so on pervade the whole research process. (Mats and Sköldberg 2004: 168)

My three impetuses determined my research questions; the interests and questions shaped this project's methodology, all of which consequently influence this study's outcome. I think of impetuses, research questions, scope, methodology and outcomes as being constructively aligned. I apply Biggs' principle of constructive alignment – used in pedagogy – to the research process, despite differences between research and pedagogic components. Biggs proposed aligning learning topics, intended learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, assessment tasks and grading criteria so these would form a 'web of consistency' for students. The idea is that each component supports the others and addresses the same agenda, giving students little opportunity to wander off the agenda (Biggs and Tang 2007: 54). This project's interdisciplinarity could

easily distract me, so I have tried to align the above-mentioned research components to the intended outcome. Since my intended outcome could be regarded as subjective, it is useful to consider the answers to the research questions I shall outline shortly, as this study's outcomes, keeping in mind the perspectives lent by the impetuses. These answers thus become outcomes with a broader relevance. My purpose in this introduction is to reveal how my research components align constructively:

Prior knowledge, experience and interests
       ↓
Initial impetuses
       ↓
Intended outcomes   *(subjective to some extent)*
       ↓
Research questions *(these simultaneously help me achieve my intended outcomes*
       ↓   *and make the research outcomes less subjective, thereby*
                 broadening their relevance; they indicate this project's aims)
   Scope   *(fixes this study's boundaries for my benefit; additionally*
       ↓   *clarifies the research context for the reader)*
Methodology   *(tailored to suit this study's interdisciplinarity, helps answer*
       ↓   *the research questions; includes methods of primary and*
                 secondary data collection and interpretation)
Research outcomes *(consists of answers to the research questions, reviewed with*
                 reference to initial impetuses and intended outcomes; constitutes
                 an original contribution to knowledge)

I b. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

One would have assumed that as an art student, then an artist in India, I would have been quite familiar with Indian art history; I should have at least had a broad overview. This was not the case, possibly because of the alternative institutions I studied in.[5] When

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[5] The Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, where I boarded and attended school, is founded on the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, which – as I understand it – is a reformation of Hinduism. Yet, the Ashram does not allow its students to observe Hindu festivals or rituals. It proscribes the worship of Hindu deities, the exception being Durga – who is briefly venerated within the main Ashram building. Still, residents are discouraged from worshipping Durga in their homes. Christmas however, is celebrated with enthusiasm – although minus the religiosity – with all the festive trappings, i.e. Santa, a Christmas tree with gifts, etc. Worship of – or prayer to – Sri Aurobindo and The Mother (the co-founder of the Ashram) is strongly encouraged. French and English are each allocated six hours a week but the study of Sanskrit and an

I read contemporary Indian arts discourse, I found that much of it repeatedly referenced Western art theories and movements.[6] If they referred to Indian art movements at all, it was to modern Indian art, from the Tagores to the present. Other literature tended to be about classical Indian arts such as temple sculpture and architecture, or the arts of the royal courts, mostly Mughal and Rajput. Traditions like floor-drawing were only discussed in books on craft, folk or ritual arts. There was little critical discussion of contemporary floor-drawing, despite its continuing vibrancy. When I tried to grasp how a tradition like floor-drawing functioned, I found many suppositions in popular literature like tourist brochures and newspapers and only partial answers in anthropological texts. As Mitter states,

> There is a curious silence in Indian art history about these groups [tribal art, women's art, and the arts of everyday use] 'hidden from history'. Their arts, as part of social rituals, have an ephemeral character and are therefore considered to be merely functional and appropriately the preserve of anthropologists. . . . Yet they have produced an enormous variety of arts, and in order to appreciate these so-called minor arts, which do not conform to the canon, we need to turn to the artists, their intentions, and the aims of those for whom their art was created. (2001: 157)

During my postgraduate research, I came across what I perceived as condescension towards folk, religious, ritual and tribal arts, which I felt was a part of the problem with metropolitan arts – one that I was affected by as an artist with a stake in this field. If I wanted to use this project's outcomes to overcome the impasse in my art-making, it was essential to address this lacuna in traditional arts' documentation and criticism, because as a metropolitan artist seeking direction, I could look at:

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additional Indian language are each allocated only three hours a week. Furthermore, students are fairly isolated, being discouraged from interacting with local Tamil residents or other school students in Pondicherry and elsewhere. I believe this upbringing contributed to what I now perceive as a lack of engagement and understanding of mainstream Indian culture; for example, life outside the Ashram was frequently referred to as just that – 'outside'.

My stay in the Ashram was followed by a three-year, practice-based residency programme with virtually no theory, in the Kanoria Centre for Arts. The modicum of theory was more European than Indian. My exposure to Indian art may have been greater had I studied in a regular art college but circumstances determined that I study in Kanoria instead. Notwithstanding the fact that my educational path was not the prevalent one, pedagogy in Indian art colleges has been questioned in recent decades. For example, Baswani questioned why Indian art colleges do not teach the miniature format, given that "India can boast of a very strong heritage in miniature art". She pointed out that in the Lahore College of Art, it is taught at Bachelor's level (2003: 104). So I acknowledge that my understanding of Indian art and culture may have been particularly limited, but I still maintain that the literature reviewed suggests that contemporary Indian arts discourse ignores – at best, is condescending towards – traditional Indian arts.

[6] When Indians use the term 'Western' in everyday parlance and in academic discourse, they refer to Europe and North America. This is how I have used it.

i)   classical temple sculpture and architecture (an option that held little appeal, among other reasons due to my preferred medium being two-dimensional);

ii)   metropolitan art (I had tried this but while I responded enthusiastically to many of my contemporaries' work, I was puzzled to find it replete with references to Western art, which I felt were often contrived and moreover made it inaccessible to most Indian viewers);

iii)   traditional arts (an option I had begun to explore but found challenging because of the dearth of critical literature and my lack of knowledge; I had, however, developed an appreciation of traditional arts).

Drawing on my initial impetuses, the following research questions therefore also seek to address the gap in critical, contemporary discourse on traditional arts and the associated marginalisation of these arts by metropolitan institutions:

1) Does the *muggu* tradition's ritualism influence *muggus*' interpretations? If so, how?

2) Does *muggus*' ephemerality influence their interpretation? If so, how?

3) Do *muggus*' forms influence their interpretation? If so, how?

4) Who comprises the audience for *muggus* and how do they influence the meanings generated by *muggu*-drawing?

5) How do metropolitan artists and theorists view traditions like *muggu*-drawing?

Answering questions 1-4 – which beg an ethnographic enquiry – would have been demanding enough, since this is the first doctoral study on *muggus*. By asking the fifth question, I chose not to treat *muggus* as a subject deserving only an anthropological enquiry. Vatsyayan points out that research methodologies have differed in the study of Indian classical, contemporary and tribal art, usually producing one-dimensional views of these three subjects (in Jain 1984).[7] Students of classical art tend to use aesthetics (especially iconography and symbolism), archaeology and art history. Contemporary metropolitan art is also studied from an art-historical perspective but here the emphasis appears to be on situating art in nationalist, colonial/post-colonial, modern/post-modern narratives. The study of traditional arts tends to be undertaken either from an

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[7] It seems that even the Vedic traditions differentiate methods, or levels of interpretation. Referring to scriptural interpretations mentioned in the *Vedas*, Grimes (1995) speaks of three levels of simultaneous interpretation: *adibhautika* (the extrinsic or physical), *adhidaivika* (the intrinsic or cosmic), and *adhyatmika* (the transcendental or spiritual). Presumably, the best approach would be to integrate the three but maintain differing emphases.

anthropological perspective or as part of nationalist discourses. In the latter case, resistance to colonisation and a certain element of jingoism colours the nationalist, revivalist writing on traditional arts. In the former, these arts' ritualism tends to overshadow a consideration of their aesthetics and form. Too many studies of folk, ritual and tribal arts are taken up from a strictly anthropological perspective; it has been suggested to me that this study should have been conducted under the aegis of an anthropology – rather than an art – department. I felt it was important to refute such a view and argue that the scope of art as currently understood should be broadened; such an argument is most effective when presented in an art department.

By relating the *muggu* tradition's contemporaneity to metropolitan art, I used it as a case study for a possible re-conception of contemporary Indian art. The fifth question thus involves others, such as whether a better understanding of traditions like *muggu*-drawing could equip metropolitan artists to use traditional arts as a resource. Floor-drawings are appropriate as a case study because of their ephemerality, which – as Mitter suggests – results in their being marginalised in contemporary art discourses. Indeed, although Bharucha refers to floor-drawings as 'art-works', I have seldom heard any metropolitan referring to them as such, without describing them as 'ritual'. The last question therefore also involves another query: Can floor-drawings be considered art? If so, what qualifies them as such?

I have referred to three sites of interpretation above – the sites of production, display and discourse. Rose's methodological framework for the critical analysis of images considers that "there are three sites at which the meanings of images are made: the site(s) of production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences" (2001: 16). If one uses Rose's framework, the sites of display and discourse may be considered as complementary components of the site of reception; audiences' discussion of images relates to where and how they have seen them. Rose, who defines visual culture as "paying attention to the effects of images" (2001: 9), emphasises that in doing so, one must remember that an image contains something that is irreducible in words, i.e. images – which may be said to produce or reproduce visions of social difference – have their own visual effects which mobilise ways of seeing. These effects intersect with the social context of the ways of viewing images, and with the visualities that viewers bring to their experience of viewing images. So she suggests that

visual culture should be thought of neither as 'a singular whole' nor as constituted merely by material objects but "as the range of meaningful social practices in which visual culture images' effects are embedded" (2001: 14-15). It may be helpful to identify which site of interpretation each of my questions relates to. At the site of *muggus'* production, I ask what implications their ritualism and ephemerality have for their interpretation; at the site of the image, I ask whether their forms contribute towards their meanings; and at the site of their reception, I ask who comprises their audience and how they influence *muggus'* meanings. The fifth question that asks how metropolitans view *muggus* also relates to the site of reception. These sites evidently share multiple intersections.[8]

The multiple interests in this project demanded a fairly open, customised methodology, paradoxically compelling me to define the scope of this study, so I could identify pertinent methods and frameworks. It is important to acknowledge that there are several relevant approaches for studying Indian floor-drawings, which I hope others will explore; I regret that it was not feasible to accommodate them all, given the resources I had at my disposal. *Muggu*-drawing is predominantly the prerogative of women, so one may reasonably ask why I did not adopt a gender studies perspective, since I am well-placed to do so as a Telugu woman with access. To such a query, I would respond that I have paid attention to *muggu*-maker's discourses but my interest here was as a practising artist. Similarly, this study could have focussed on spatiality. As some writers on the *kolam* have shown – Dulau for example – the relationship between floor-drawing and the architectural threshold may be read as a social commentary on spatial categorisations. But probing how *muggus* may contribute to constructing notions of spatial hierarchy and ownership, would have meant foregoing my other interests. I have therefore merely touched upon architectural space in the *muggu* tradition.[9] My project could have likewise looked at the performative aspect, considering *muggu*-making as an embodied practice. Pinney (2004: 6, 9) who developed the concept of corpothetics (corporeal and embodied aesthetics) argues that not paying attention to some aspects of Indian visual culture as

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[8] Rose includes three modalities – technological, compositional and social (whose relative importance differs for each site), which I have considered when forming fieldwork questions, so for example, a question about production may have concentrated on all three modalities, a question about the image may have emphasised the compositional and a question about reception may have sought clarification on the social. These questions, moreover, can be as much about the research topic as about the researcher's positionality, the tension hinging between the two oftentimes directing the research process.
[9] Nagarajan (1993, 1998a and 1998b) offers an ecological reading of southern Indian floor-drawings, in her work on *kolams*. One might thus argue that an ecological perspective is also a valid approach to studying floor-drawings, but my informants' answers did not privilege such a reading. I will explain this further in my fieldwork chapters.

embodied practice over-textualises the image. Nagarajan, who studied *kolams*, avers that the *kolam* "is shaped and performed by the human body" and as she says, it is only relatively recently that authors have begun to consider "the human body as a site of knowledge production" (1998b: 42). She even argues that this is possibly one reason why practices like floor-drawing have been marginalised in academia. This is an aspect of *muggu*-drawing I did not consider as I was actually looking at the image as much as the ritual. Apart from my interest in *muggus*' aesthetics, ritualism and ephemerality, an additional motivation developed after I started researching *muggus*. I realised that I wanted to understand Andhra culture beyond the perspectives that my holidays, my mother and matrilineal relatives gave me. After all,

> Even one's own tradition is not one's birthright; it has to be earned, repossessed. . . .
> One chooses and translates a part of one's past to make it present to oneself and
> maybe to others. (Ramanujan 1985: xvii, quoted by Nagarajan 1998: 25).

II a. INTRODUCING THE 'FIELD'

Hammersley and Atkinson's view of ethnography as an approach that "exploits the capacity that any social actor possesses for learning new cultures, and the objectivity to which this process gives rise" (1997: 9) applies here, despite my intention to reclaim my own culture. Due to sparse documentation and the unavailability of critical discourse on *muggus*, I had to collect primary data.

Of the 23 districts in Andhra, I travelled across four for my fieldwork: Karimnagar, Warangal, Khammam and West Godavari.[10] After an initial reconnaissance of Manthani, Dharmapuri, Vemulawada, Vijayawada, Palakollu and Poduru – suggested as possible fieldwork locations because they were considered still sufficiently traditional to offer a view of both the traditional and the more 'modern', urbanised practice of *muggu*-drawing – I decided to focus my research in Palakollu town and Poduru village in the West Godavari district. This decision was determined by issues about safety and access. I additionally did some fieldwork in the vicinity of Palakollu and Poduru, in Gummaluru, Vedangi, Jinnuru, Ullamparu, Kavitam and Maruteru.[11]

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[10] I had visited other districts such as Hyderabad, Krishna and Vishakhapatnam in the past, on school holidays and visits to relatives, so I was already familiar with Andhra to some extent.
[11] Buses from Palakollu to Poduru were less frequent than long-distance buses from Palakollu to other destinations; the latter frequently stopped at Kavitam, which is so close to Poduru that I usually walked between these places. Kavitam is a half-hour bus journey from Palakollu; Maruteru is a half-hour bus

Introduction: *Muggus* and Metropolitan Art: A Methodological Framework

West Godavari, as the name may suggest, is a part of the Godavari Delta in Andhra. It neighbours Khammam on the north, Krishna and the Bay of Bengal on the south, the Godavari on the east and Krishna again on the west. Poduru, which is located two kilometres east of the Kavitam junction on the Narasapuram-Nidadavole canal road, is closest to the Palakollu railway station (10 kilometres away on the Narasapuram-Vijayawada railway line). According to the District Collectorate, West Godavari spreads over an area of 7,742 square kilometres. Its population is 35.18 lakhs, with a population density of 454 per square kilometre.[12] Out of 35.18 lakhs, 27.90 lakhs is rural (about 70%) and 7.28 lakhs is urban.[13] The revenue officer of Poduru estimates Poduru's population at 12,000 and Palakollu's population at above 60,000 (it is now closer to 80,000). He explained that the difference between a village and town can be determined – administratively – by whether a place has a municipality or not. Poduru has no municipality and is therefore a village. Palakollu is a major trading town, and in addition to paddy, it also trades coconut, lemon and orange crops. Poduru means little forest and was named so because it used to be a forest before it was cleared for cultivation. Although weaving and tailoring are common professions in Poduru, the main occupation is paddy cultivation. West Godavari is often called the granary, or the rice-bowl of Andhra as most of Andhra's paddy is supplied by the district, which is covered by crops of paddy (82.80%), tobacco (4.86%), sugarcane (4.73%) and chilies (1.29%). A large percentage of West Godavari's population directly or indirectly depends on agriculture for its livelihood – more than 70% of those working are engaged in agriculture and allied activities – so education has not been a priority. West Godavari has a tropical climate; it is hot and humid for most of the year and barely has a winter. It is because of Poduru's fertile agricultural lands that many Rajulu *zamindars* (land-owners) built bungalows in the village. West Godavari's average annual rainfall is 1,076.2 mm, most of which is received during the south-west monsoon (it also has a north-east monsoon). West Godavari has 15,84,065 literates forming 53.38% of the population of the district, excluding the 0-6 age-group. There is a difference of about 14% in the male to female literacy ratio, with males rating higher.

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journey from Kavitam; Gummaluru is a half-hour bus journey from Palakollu; and Vedangi, Junnuru and Ullamparu are on the Palakollu-Kavitam bus route.

[12] These figures are as provided to me during my fieldwork (2007). Newer figures released by the collectorate suggest that the population is now closer to 38 lakhs with a population density of 491.

[13] A lakh is an Indian numerical, denoting 100,000.

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For the following reasons, it would be more accurate to say that I adopted a qualitative approach that borrowed from ethnography:

i)   ethnography was not the sole methodology used to construct knowledge;

ii)   the 'time-period' of engagement – a little over two months – was not sufficient to qualify my fieldwork as a traditional ethnographic study;

iii)   due to my interests, the process was directed to some extent;

iv)   so it could be argued that I have not privileged the voice of my informants, unlike in the classical canon of ethnography.

I have previously explained why this study uses several methods. My fieldwork was relatively short due to limited resources, though I hope prior knowledge compensated for this. To minimise directing the process, I asked a comprehensive range of fieldwork questions.[14] Prior to fieldwork, my review of existing literature helped me gain an overview of other states' floor-drawing traditions, which I used to formulate fieldwork questions and ensure that I did not undertake redundant research. Primary ethnographic material was thus complemented by reviewing literature on art, anthropology, aesthetics and ritual studies. My approach may be contentious. After all, by presenting informants' stories, ethnographers are expected to help

> marginal groups intervene in global narratives by putting into circulation alternative circuits of discursive power . . . there is a . . . betrayal in allowing our personal doubts to stand in the way . . . [of recognizing] informants as active cultural producers in their own right, whose voices . . . can make a difference in the way we think about their lives. The most critical point is . . . to disseminate their views and . . . [to] do so without betraying their political interests as narrators of their own lives. (Ong and Peletz 1995: 354)

To begin with, 'pure' ethnography – where informants are assumed to construct the outcome of research – can sometimes be a myth. In many ethnographic contexts, especially where activist interventions may be required in some manner, rather than be represented, it is indeed preferable for 'subjects' to assert their legitimacy as cultural producers. But in many other ethnographic contexts such as mine, where intervention is unnecessary, subjects do not usually 'theorise' their behaviour in the manner that we expect them to. If, as an ethnographer, I had asked my informants to deconstruct their

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[14] See Appendix 2 for a list of fieldwork questions.

actions, this would have constituted making an impact in the field – something that I feel ethnographers should avoid when intervention is not required. Any direction that serves the *ethnographer's* purposes should ideally occur *outside* the field, not *on* the field. So the research questions I asked *before* fieldwork determined my fieldwork questions and interpreting collected data *after* my fieldwork helped me form an overview of the subject, which was then reviewed with reference to my interests. Without such mediation and interpretation – even in extended ethnographic studies – a framework would be impossible. Although in other instances, traditional Indian artists can benefit from intervention, I do not believe that *muggu*-makers need intervention or representation. Their discourses need to enter into global narratives not so much for their sake but for mine and by extension, other metropolitan artists. Moreover, I was comforted by the realisation that several informants were eager to know what I found, and asked me to report my findings to them.[15]

The other limitation, if it can be called as such, resulted from the field being a residually oral society; the transmission of songs, myths, forms and techniques have passed down generations through oral means and printed matter is a relatively recent phenomenon. Such knowledge is not transmitted solely by women practitioners, but also by their husbands, male priests and itinerant bards, though of course the fact that it is principally women who make *muggus* has contributed to the lack of documentation. Edwards and Sienkewicz state that "a literary study of oral culture is basically a contradiction in terms and . . . the literate observer's understanding of oral performance is inevitably a limited one" (1990: 1). As a literate observer of a residually oral society, I wondered whether my mere presence as a researcher and my questions about *muggu*-making would alter it in any manner; was I perhaps betraying the *muggu* tradition by documenting it in writing? By explicitly drawing the metropolitan world's attention to it, was I objectifying it? I needed to ensure that I was not inadvertently wedging the very divisions I was arguing

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[15] My primary concern was that my informants would regard my departure as a form of desertion. After all, I participated actively in their lives and in their rituals, received numerous invitations to meals and on one occasion even received a *saree* as a ritual gift on the completion of a ceremony. Stacey argues that "beneficiaries of such attention may also come to depend upon it, and this suggests another ethical quandary in fieldwork, the potential for, indeed the likelihood of, desertion by the researcher" (1988: 26). Although Stacey's statement applies more to informants who are vulnerable in some manner, I was aware that this may be an issue in my doctoral project because my informants from my MA research – whom I continued to interview for a book project – had occasionally indicated that they felt deserted by my departure. It was due to this anxiety that I made efforts to continue to remain in contact with my key informants, even after leaving the field. As it happens, four of my key informants have remained pro-active in maintaining contact.

against. I am satisfied that I am not doing so, as the *muggu* tradition is already transitioning. *Muggu* competitions and the proliferation of mediated material on *muggus* testify to the inevitability of it encountering the chrono-politics of the secular mainstream. So if my study contributes in any way to mediating between traditional and metropolitan arts, I can only ensure that I respect divergent views. This is challenging partly because of the reductionism inherent in approaching even a residually oral culture from the literate perspective, not to mention the preoccupation of trying to take notes or fiddling with audio equipment, which often distracts the observer from fully participating in the oral or the oral-visual event.

Writing is frequently regarded as more static than the oral, which tends to be regarded as more dynamic. Other contrasts that are pointed out between the literate and oral worlds are that the latter can be so contextually specific and esoteric that it excludes the literate observer.

> . . . Not only is the terminology of oral events contextually specific, so is the event itself. Understanding a performance in an oral culture requires a special mindset, a cultural harmony which excludes from the oral world any outsider, whether literate or not. (Edwards and Sienkewicz 1990: 3)

On occasion, I felt excluded from the cultural harmony of the oral event and the religious mindset. Of course, as Goody points out, the orality-literacy contrast is a tendency rather than an absolute, a continuum rather than a shift. West Godavari's literacy figures indicate that it is residually oral so it is not surprising that it retains characteristics of oral cultures. For example, continuity is still emphasised and knowledge acquired from one's elders is respected, for it is generally believed that the older you are, the more knowledge you have. There are no experts on the *muggu* tradition, so one defers to elders.

> Clearly, there are other ways of knowing . . . that . . . it is time to plant the maize because of the appearance of some insect. This is basic primary knowledge, knowledge through experience . . . [which] is often provided by the elders in the form of a history . . . or by placing a particular incident in a wider frame . . . (Goody 1988: 150)

It is perhaps because there's a limit to how much primary experience one can collect that there is now so much printed matter among *muggu*-makers. Besides, writing has

Top and bottom right: Woman using a broom, a stainless steel *chembu* (pot), a practice slate, a *sudda* (drawing material) and a sheaf of practice *muggu* drawings, Palakollu, Sankranti morning 2008

much to recommend it. It "makes explicit what was otherwise implicit" and in making the implicit explicit, it "extends the possibilities of social action" (Goody 1992: 97, 175). Printed matter forms a part of my fieldwork 'collection', which also includes materials *muggu*-makers use, which I now introduce.

II b. FIELDWORK MATERIAL AND DOCUMENTATION METHODS

This inventory of material I collected is included at this stage to complement my introduction to the field.[16] Many of the following materials will be elaborated upon in subsequent chapters:

i) <u>Audio recordings</u> include interviews with *muggu*-makers and metropolitan artists.

ii) <u>Films</u> like *Undamma Bottu Pedata* (Vishwanath 1968) and *Muthyala Muggu* (Bapu 1975), which feature songs on the *muggu* tradition, indicate *muggus*' popularity in Andhra culture. I also made <u>videos</u> to document *muggu*-making.

iii) <u>Notes and notebooks</u> of *muggu* forms I learnt from informants.[17]

iv) <u>Photographs</u> (over 2,000) I took documenting the *muggu* tradition are useful for identifying formal praxes. Photos and videos I shot were equally useful visual registers that triggered my memories of the field, furnished primary material for interpretation post fieldwork and provided illustrations for this text.

v) <u>Printed matter</u> includes articles from newspapers, women's weeklies and monthlies, which constitute popular media discourses on the *muggu* tradition and Andhra culture.

vi) <u>Stencils and stickers</u> are short-cuts used to make 'modern' *muggus*.

My fieldwork collection was essentially a material archive that proved useful during analysis, but objects – and all forms of documentation are objects – can capture a living tradition only partially. My ethnographic engagement may have helped me to determine the decisive moment to capture *muggu*-drawing and related rituals but the frame is still a reduction. Although I recognise that documentation and academic writing used to complement or form empirical observation are reductionist in some measure, I would argue that they constitute a necessary framework.

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[16] Appendix 6 includes most of the fieldwork material listed here.
[17] To see how drawing helped me during fieldwork, see the section 'Knowing through drawing'.

Taking photographs made me a part of my informants' *muggu*-making process but the camera initially hindered the process of establishing relationships with *muggu*-makers, whose gradual acceptance of me required effort. After a while, I found that they were more comfortable if I took a notebook rather than the camera. A Dictaphone proved even more awkward because they regarded a recording as infinitely more formal than note-taking. Some *muggu*-makers explained that a recording would suggest that I regarded them as experts – a burden of responsibility they were unwilling to assume.

II c. 'KNOWING' THROUGH DRAWING

It was partly because the camera was initially unwelcome that I started drawing *muggus*, as a way of establishing relationships with my informants. This broke the ice, because the women promptly volunteered to become teachers; it also gave me insights into the *muggu*-making process that I would have otherwise missed, such as being the *muggu*-maker and receiving comments from the 'audience'. By the end of my fieldwork, I had three notebooks of drawings I made whilst walking around Poduru and Palakollu. While I did not succeed in memorising *muggus* like my informants, I learnt to competently copy *muggus* onto a notebook. I made a New Year's *muggu* and other trial *muggus* on the floor but my efforts to make *muggus* with powders were rather clumsy. I will explain the difficulties of drawing with powders later in this text.

The process of drawing also helped me think through the medium. We are so used to associating writing with the construction of knowledge that I think we tend to underestimate the possibilities of using activities like drawing to construct knowledge. Although Cain refers to the relationship between thinking and drawing in a different context, some of her comments are useful for thinking about drawing not just as a process that complements other methods of knowledge construction but as a legitimate tool of knowledge construction in its own right. "The practitioner's voice . . . [is] often filtered through the investigative lens of methodologies designed to establish objectivity by reference to scientific method" (2010: 31). Cain investigates the notion of embodied thinking through the experience of drawing, seeking to understand it as a generative process of knowledge construction. This in turn involves dialectics between the explicit and the implicit, between knowing and not knowing, activated through engagement with the process, to advance the maker's personal knowledge. Drawing may be regarded as

a tool that helps the maker to know, because in the process of drawing, the mind and the body are part of the same thinking system. Here,

> knowledge is formed through letting go of the metal hold of intellectual-analytical knowing which keeps subject and object separate, in order to evoke an ambiguity involving the interrelated 'loop' of knowing (self), and not knowing (other), as an essential element of thinking from sources other than the head. (Cain 2009)

I will not conjecture to what extent – or if at all – drawing is an enactive process for *muggu*-makers but I believe, for several reasons, that my first-person experience of learning how to draw *muggus* – however rudimentary – contributes substantially to this project. First, "there is little in this medium that intervenes between the artist and the marks that are made" (Cain 2010: 32). Second, my interest in *muggu*'s forms risked overshadowing the women who made them, thus 'over-textualising' the images, to use Pinney's term; learning *muggu*-drawing from the women served as a useful reminder to focus equal attention on the makers. This underlined the distinction between floor-drawing as verb and as noun. Learning how to draw *muggus* also confirmed my role as a participant observer, which helped my approach to the field as an artist seeking to
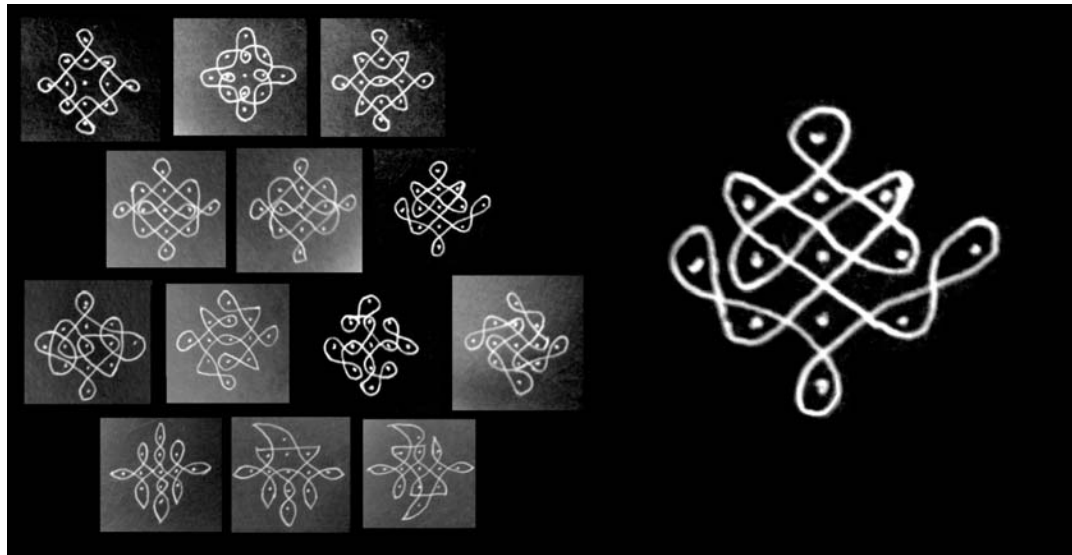
Muggus using a grid of 1-5 dots, learnt from my informants. From my fieldwork sketchbooks

reclaim my culture. In addition, drawing *muggus* contributed to my aim to learn how to use floor-drawing idioms in my own work.

II d. PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION: POSITIONING MYSELF AS A RESEARCHER

I was told that West Godavari is relatively more Brahminical than other districts in Andhra. While this may have presented me with a biased picture of the *muggu* tradition, any other place would have presented me with an equally partial view. Given the brief fieldwork period, it was impossible to cover all of Andhra. West Godavari's alleged Brahminism may even have been advantageous to me as I was accepted as a Brahmin. This does not mean I interviewed only Brahmins. On the contrary, I saw little evidence to support the claim that West Godavari is comparatively Brahminical, since most of my informants were non-Brahmins.[18]

I have inevitably been asked about what role casteism plays in floor-drawing. The Indian social system has four major castes believed to be strictly hierarchical and hereditary, with Brahmins (priests, scholars) at the top, followed by Kshatriyas (warriors, rulers), Vaishyas (businessmen, traders) and Shudras (manual workers). Harijans (untouchables) were considered as being outside the pale of the system. I do not belabour specificities of caste in this study partly because to tease out casteism would have done a disservice to my interests and partly because I feel that divisions of caste were often more lenient than is acknowledged. The very existence of several sub-castes in West Godavari, which moreover differ in some towns and villages, points to some permeability.[19]

It is impossible to say to what extent my access to informants was facilitated by their acceptance of me as a Brahmin – which, due to my mixed parentage – I am not. If I am privileged in terms of 'cultural capital', I have tried to ensure that it has benefited rather than constrained my understanding of the *muggu* tradition. Without exception, my informants assumed I was a Brahmin because of my accent and clothing, which I was told – much to my initial surprise – identified me as a Brahmin. While I was at first reluctant to disabuse their assumption because I was uncertain of how my mixed parentage would be received, I eventually explained that my father was a Bengali Kshatriya and my mother a Telugu Brahmin. I was in uncharted territory as I had seldom considered issues of caste with reference to my own identity, hence my initial reluctance.

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[18] I did, however, discern a note of respect that seemed to be reserved for Brahmins.

[19] Birdwood (1880: 137-140) and Coomaraswamy (1989: 5-11) – though admittedly swayed by protectionist agendas and nationalism – provide some evidence of the caste system's benefits with reference to art and craft guilds in the subcontinent. Also see Dirks (1990: 63), who refers to the fluidity of the caste system more generally.

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It is important to consider how to represent oneself to informants, since the knowledge they impart may depend on how they perceive the researcher. Wolf feels that researchers are in a position of power when it comes to such decisions.

> . . . our . . . control offers us the choice to construct and (re)shape our selves to our subjects, playing on the different positionalities of the researcher and the researched. This is particularly the case when researchers are far enough from home that the researchers do not encounter many of their family members or friends, whereas our respondents are usually surrounded by kin and friends and cannot similarly withdraw, hide and alter aspects of their identity. (1996: 11)

However, as Henry argues, it is not a given that it is always the researched who are unveiled, genuine, and vulnerable to the researcher's gaze. It is a mistake to assume that the researched do not "participate in the performative act of representing themselves. . . . Participant accounts, like researcher accounts, are also contextually and historically specific, mediated versions of experience" (2003: 230-231). She also points out that researchers' representations of themselves in their home territory can be equally complex. My experience is startlingly similar to Henry's. When asked where I am from, I am often in a quandary. Should I say Pondicherry – where I grew up, Bengal or Bihar – where my father hails from or Andhra – where my mother hails from, or even Delhi – where I found my place professionally? My answers are not simple, even outside the field. Thus, my decision to withhold personal information, be it about my caste, university affiliation, ancestry or marital status, was made to suit the field, which I treated no differently than other contexts where I have had to make critical choices about what to reveal and what to hide. As it happened, when I explained my parents' inter-caste, inter-state marriage, it made little difference to my informants' perception of me. Indeed, while discussing different *muggus* drawn by different castes, some Rajulu (Kshatriya) women felt that it was unusual for Brahmin women to draw as meticulously as I did, but other interviewees like Bappani Seetamalalakshmi retorted that they knew many Brahmin women who were more skilled than Rajulus.

I am inclined to think that Palakollu and Poduru residents' acceptance of my work stemmed from my willingness to learn *muggu*-drawing from them. My relationship with a well-recognised family in Palakollu, who were hosting my stay in West Godavari, also lent me local credibility, which I emphasised whenever I needed to. More importantly, my questions about how caste influenced the *muggu* tradition were met by informants of

various castes and sub-castes by something akin to indifference. Although some women admitted that there were *muggus* made by particular castes, most agreed that these distinctions – if ever they were rigid – were no longer strictly adhered to; they generally survived as individual preferences rather than a community requirement. I therefore concluded that if caste had ever played a major role in floor-drawing, this no longer seemed to be the case in West Godavari. The absence of casteism may of course be explained by the fact that floor-drawing falls under the category of domestic rituals, which – one may argue – have been less affected by social structures. At any rate, women across all castes are expected to draw *muggus*. One of the most skilled *muggu*-makers I met was a former Harijan who had converted to Christianity.[20]

While the above-mentioned limitations may have compromised this study in some ways, I think they were amply compensated for by ethnography's advantages. Ethnography's chief strength, for me, is participant observation. If ethnography involves listening to what informants say and observing what they do, I did both. Having observed *kolam*-making in Pondicherry, my lived experience gave me a head start. Being busy with household chores, childcare and often jobs as well, *muggu*-makers conversed with me while they made *muggus*, discussing their choices of drawings, offering me tips about *muggu*-making techniques, and generally allowing me a glimpse into their lives. I thus experienced their thinking aloud about the act of *muggu*-drawing and gained an understanding of the belief system in which this tradition plays out. In such conversations, I noticed keywords that recurred in the women's responses. These served as conceptual landmarks for interpreting diverse fieldwork material, helping me recognise *muggu*-makers' embedded knowledge about *muggus*. Unlike many ethnographers' experience, with one exception that I discuss in Chapter 5, my experience with Telugu women was that they did what they said. I did not detect a desire to be portrayed in a good light. In fact, many women were self-disparaging when they spoke of changing lifestyles that had affected the floor-drawing tradition.

Being of Telugu descent obviously conferred enough insider status to make me more than an observer. As an artist-ethnographer, I adopted a heuristic approach, so that on one level, I was a metropolitan artist-researcher but on another, I was quite simply a

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[20] According to my informants, among them K. Saraswathi, there are two instances when Christians make *muggus* – if they are maidservants in Hindu households or if they are Harijan converts to Christianity. Unfortunately, statistical figures for caste break-ups in West Godavari were hard to obtain.

Telugu woman learning how to draw *muggus* from other women, instead of being a Telugu girl learning how to draw them from my older female relatives. I am not unique in doing so. Due to urbanisation, fast-paced lifestyles and the increasing phenomenon of nuclear families, I did come across adults who had learned *muggu*-drawing from published sources or from women who were unrelated. I also met elderly grandmothers who taught their visiting grandchildren how to draw *muggus* because these young girls did not learn them in the cities, where their mothers probably juggled homes and careers. But being an adult Telugu woman and not knowing what most Telugu women knew, was not simple.

Ethnography is underpinned by its own theories, which I found relevant to my experience in the field. Foremost of these theories is the origin of ethnography as an anthropologist's methodology to study 'the other'. So I now elaborate on what makes participant observation so fundamental to ethnographic method.

II e. SELF AND OTHER ETHNOGRAPHY

While ethnography as a methodology to study the other – which could be called self *and* other ethnography – has been around since the inception of ethnography, ethnography can also be perceived as a methodology to study the self *as* the other. Indeed, it is often argued that the other is only defined in relation to the self, by identifying what is not the self; therefore, in theory at least, any study of the other is as much a study of the self.

> . . . it has become clear that every version of an 'other', wherever found, is also the construction of a 'self' and the making of ethnographic texts . . . is the constant reconstitution of selves and others through specific exclusions, conventions and discursive practices. (Clifford 1986: 23-24)

The 'self and other', 'self as other' ethnographies are particularly relevant here not least because I am attempting to appropriate my culture, so through the duration of my fieldwork, I found myself trying to distinguish what was different and what was shared between my informants and me. The other reason these complementary approaches are highly pertinent is because this study's eventual outcome was – through the process of studying the *muggu* tradition – to be able to enhance my own art. One might even say that this study constituted a quest for my identity. So while the *muggu* tradition is a case study of a traditional art, I myself am a case study of a metropolitan artist turning to

traditional arts as a resource. In this section, I unpack the practice of participant observation as the study of both self *and* other, and self *as* other.

Questioning empathetic versions of ethnography, Back feels that it is important to achieve a balance between proximity and distance, between dialogue and critique (2009). However, Hall, when discussing racism, stated something that could well be applied to ethnographic practice, that is, proximity to the other can and does reach the point where you find yourself becoming the other (2009). Wolf asserts that while the ethnographer observes the informants, the ethnographer becomes 'the other' when he/she is being observed and analysed by the group who are the subject of ethnographic enquiry. In such a scenario, the ethnographer deals with reflexivity of two kinds: the self as subject and object, and the other as observed and observer (1996: 35). I knew that my informants were scrutinising me, from observing their reactions to – and questions about – me.

I could also identify with McKenzie, who refers to her shifting perspectives when she moved between her place of residence and her ethnographic 'field', as 'reflexive mobility' (2009).[21] I was constantly shifting between my multiple identities and positions – both physical and psychological – when I travelled between Pondicherry, Palakollu and Poduru; with each journey and change of location came a readjustment of positionality. This happens to all of us and not just during ethnographic enquiry, but a heightened awareness of such adjustments can be exploited by ethnographers, for example, to question their motivations in the field.

Madan (1975 and 1994), an anthropologist who studied his own Kashmiri Pandit community and Srinivas (1996) who studied the Coorgs of south India, both wrote about the ability to study the self as the other, provided one is capable of – among other things – critical self-awareness, distance, and anthropological doubt. Several authors, including Madan and the Rudolphs (2003) have suggested that the trope of the self and the other in anthropology, begun when imperials adopted ethnography to study the colonial subject, was eroded after the Second World War, when the so-called natives began studying their own cultures. Wolf avers that researchers who study their own groups

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[21] McKenzie uses the work of authors like Bauman, David Harvey and John Urry to define her term 'reflexive mobility' and especially Nielsen's *Social Perspectives On Mobility*, 2005.

have the capacity to move between two worlds and identities, thereby disrupting traditional anthropological boundaries between the self and the other. Such researchers

> often claimed to have an advantage that led to a privileged or more balanced view of the people/society under study. This perspective includes arguments that native or indigenous researchers would offer a critique of colonialist, racist, ethnocentric, and exploitative anthropology, balance the distortions presented by white or Anglo researchers, creatively use their special standpoint or double consciousness, or be privileged to a more intimate view. (1996: 15)

It does not follow that the two worlds be necessarily White and indigene. They can be any two worlds seemingly in opposition, such as metropolitan and traditional. Questions about authenticity generally crop up in such discussions. Can I as a woman who is only part Telugu and brought up in a Westernised boarding school, legitimately lay claim to being a Telugu? I believe so because I speak Telugu with my family, my life has been significantly shaped by my mother's and matrilineal relatives' identity as Telugus, and I have experienced Andhra culture at close quarters. Moreover, who is to define Andhra culture, which is itself in transition? My Telugu ancestry need not be my only claim to authenticity. After all, should authenticity lie in the agency of the teller – or as the Rudolphs put it, the quality of the telling – or should it lie in the identity or provenance of the teller? Should it lie in the capacity for empathy or the degree of objectivity? What is important is that viewing ethnography as a methodology of simultaneous study of the self *and* the other and the self *as* the other, makes room for my lived experience and my subjective knowledge as a Telugu woman and a metropolitan artist, to be viewed as a legitimate source in its own right. I am as much an informant in this study as are my ethnographic subjects, because I have turned myself into a case study. The construction of knowledge here is located in a time, place and circumstance. This raises questions about the value of such a contextually specific study, but I would argue that by knowing the situated as thoroughly as possible, one can learn something of tremendous value.[22]

Another question that arises then is whether the outcomes of this research are compromised by this inflection of subjective knowledge. I believe in what Clifford refers to as rigorous partiality, i.e. that the best I can do is to explain my purposes and interests, clarify why and how I sought and acquired knowledge. The Rudolphs refer to

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[22] Such an approach is supported by a firm belief in the value of qualitative research, in the search for interpretive meaning, not absolute truth.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's stance that an ideal of objectivity is always compromised by personal experience, cultural tradition and prior understandings. They also cite Clifford's notion of rigorous partiality, which "recognizes and validates the situated, inflected nature of truth", "self-consciously acknowledges that context shapes why and how knowledge is acquired and what it is taken to mean", "signifies that which is not whole, complete, or capable of being carried to completion", and "makes the epistemological claim that knowing the whole truth is a capacity not given to mortals. The best they can do is to strive for partial truths" (Rudolph and Rudolph 2003: 682). This is what I have attempted to do in understanding Andhra culture, the *muggu* tradition, Indian metropolitan arts and myself.

III. ACCOMMODATING DIFFERENT TRUTHS

I have tried to recognise and foster the fluidity and transference of different methodologies, approaches and interpretational models. Academic disciplines do not merely reflect the division of areas of life, but also different approaches to understanding these areas. In other words, what is accepted as knowledge and construction of knowledge varies in myriad contexts. I agree with the Rudolphs, who say

> . . . there is room at the roundtable of knowledge for the imaginative truths found in literature, myth, and memory; for the archival truths of history; for the spiritual truths of religions and religious experience; and for the aesthetic truths of the visual and performing arts. (2003: 683)

However, there are some truths that are more difficult to accommodate than others. The cultural context is especially pertinent. If an observer attempts to understand the practice of the cultural 'other' through the prism of his/her own experience and understanding, it is probable that he/she will miss its point entirely. Indeed, the term culture itself is interpreted in myriad ways:

i) "a form of highly participatory activity in which people create their own societies and identities" (Kellner 1995: 2);

ii) "The production and circulation of sense, meaning and consciousness. The sphere of meaning, which unifies the spheres of production (economics) and social relations (politics). . . . culture is the sphere of reproduction . . . of life" (Hartley 2002: 51);

iii)   "an evaluation of the relationship through which objects are constituted as social forms . . . always a process" (Miller 1994: 11);

iv)   an "immanent construct whose form and substance are comprehensible only in terms of the wider systems of human relationships with which it is bound up" (Scott 2000: 30);

v)   Williams offers four connotations: "a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development; a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group – a way of life that is informed by a 'common spirit'; the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity; the signifying system through which . . . a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored" (1976: 80, 13);

vi)   Brooker's definition of culture includes various representations, from the earliest usage where it meant cultivation, to human accomplishment, to Williams' later definition of the arts in general, and even as high culture (canon of selected works), "valued above commercial or popular artistic forms" (1999: 50).

I take culture to have elements of all the definitions above but subscribe most to Geertz's semiotic interpretation; believing that "man is . . . suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun", Geertz takes "culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of a meaning" (1973: 5).[23]

Geertz asserts that despite its universal characteristics, the cultural significance accorded to art is always local (1976: 1476). According to Maira, the unique purpose conceived for art and art-making in India was to "enable the experiencing of profound joy (*ananda*) and integrative response to Nature of which we are a part" (2006: 18). "[Indian] culture developed . . . an understanding that 'beauty' is less a property of things, art or otherwise, and is more an experience and a state of being" (2006: 3). In India, visual practices have been theorised frequently in several canons, like *Chitrasutra* of the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* (a treatise on painting), *Abhilashitarthachintamani*, *Sivatatvaratnakara*, *Silparatna*, *Naradasilpa*, *Sarasvatisilpa*, *Prajapatisilpa*, *Rasasutra*

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[23] What interests me further is societal contexts in which the term was not required. Critiquing 'culture' as a commodity in a capitalist society, Read (1963) points out that the cultured Greeks did not have a word for 'culture'. They lived it, so it could not be extricated to be pontificated over by academicians.

from the *Naṭyashastra* (a treatise on emotions in the sacred science of dance), *alamkara*-texts (theories of formal construction), and *Shilpashastra* (the sacred science of sculpture). General themes include the technique and process of painting, colours, tools, conventions and canons of art criticism.[24] Among other things, the *Chitrasutra* of the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* stresses suggestion as an important element in art. Methods for suggesting distinct facets of nature are elaborated on; for instance, "portraying lotuses in bloom, *rishis* hurrying for a bath and so forth" can be used to suggest daybreak. Lotuses, however, can also be used along with aquatic creatures, to suggest water. Overcast clouds and white cranes flying in the sky are suggestive of the rainy season. Depicting travellers who are weary and oppressed by the heat would suggest summer (Sivaramamurti 2002: 3-4).

Let me cite the theory of *rasas* as another example of a culturally situated term. Although all Indian art cannot be explained by the theory of *rasas* (Goswamy in Karp and Lavine 1991: 73), it is frequently used in performance and visual arts.[25] Abhinavagupta translates *rasa* as 'feeling mixed with intelligence'. Eco, who interprets it as 'sense of beauty' and 'aesthetic response', illustrates the difficulty of translating culturally situated terms by asserting that the theory of *rasa* can be interpreted as 15 different concepts vis-à-vis Western thought and aesthetics, which still do not exhaust its semantic scope (2001). Further, as Anantavardhana suggests, language can convey literal, metaphorical and implicit meanings, thus making it harder to translate culturally specific terms. One could resort to Wittgensteinian family resemblances, taking into account different semantic structures in different languages. Questioning whether it is possible to clarify without using comparison, Wittgenstein wonders whether comparison is central to clarification, in which case, it would be important to isolate differences before comparing them (1953: 65-69).

Translation can also involve disciplinary differences and issues that relate to historicity, which plague any attempt to interpret texts from distinct chronological periods in India

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[24] "[India's] ancient heritage . . . [is] highlighted in the pursuit of fine arts, in aesthetic expressions of different varieties. . . . It is traditionally known that ancient Indian fine arts were as many as sixty-four in number. Vatsyayana has given an enumeration of these sixty-four branches of fine arts in his remarkable work, *Kama Sutra* or *Kama Shastra*" (Ganguly 1979: 16). These 64 arts were part of the required syllabus of study for children of high families.
[25] The *navarasas* are nine emotions identified in Indian performance arts theory as those that art can and should elicit in the viewer's mind.

because time, the past and history as a discipline are interpreted differently in various cultures.[26] Due to the paucity of historical records, the perception of the Vedas as timeless, and the notion that India's concept of time is cyclical,[27] many authors assert that India is devoid of historical consciousness. Thapar nevertheless argues that in India, time has been "seen in diverse forms, such as abstract, as a calendar, as cosmological time, as part of eschatology and as historical chronology" (1997: 563). Distinguishing the Western concept of 'linear', 'evolutionary' time from India's concept of 'cyclical time', Zimmer illustrates India's concept of space and time – which applies equally to individuals, society and the cosmos – by referring to the symbolism of a myth. In *Parade of Ants*, the mountains – permanent when considered from "the standpoint of our brief human span" – are transitory when seen from the perspective of millennia. "They would rise and fall like waves. The permanent would be seen as fluid" (1963: 23).

Zimmer's discussion of the polarity of male and female genders illustrates that even interpretations of nature can differ.

> The noun Brahman is neuter . . . beyond the differentiating qualifications of sex, beyond all limiting individualizing characteristics . . . Out of Brahman . . . proceed the energies of Nature, to produce our world of individuated forms, the swarming world of our empirical experience, which is characterized by limitations, polarities, antagonisms and co-operation. . . . Brahman (neuter) and Brahma (masculine) are not to be confused with each other. The former refers to the transcendent and immanent Absolute; the latter . . . [to] an anthropomorphic personification of the Creator-Demiurge. Brahman is properly a metaphysical term, Brahma mythological. . . . [It must be understood that in Sanskrit, grammatical gender is not always a sign of physical sex. Gender infers function, sex infers form; so that an individual may be masculine from one point of view and feminine from another . . .] (1963: 123)

Zimmer feels that instead of trying to limit Oriental notions into the frameworks familiar to the West, they should be allowed to expose the West's unconsciously limited approach to the enigmas of man's existence (1963: 12).

Differentiating perceptions of superstition, faith and knowledge presents challenges too, particularly because of the chasm between the language and approach of science,

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[26] For example, Okri feels that for Africa, the past, present and future are not distinct matrices but belong to a continuum. They merge into the present; the past *is* the present, which is why they are indistinguishable in the tales and stories in Africa, whereas in the West, they are most frequently regarded as distinct periods that need to be reconciled in some manner (2009). Okri's statement is borne out by the Zulu/Ndebele tongue-in-cheek proverb that states that 'history is a philosophy of verifications'.
[27] As suggested by the philosophy of the cycle of rebirth.

which one might say operates on doubt, and the language and approach of spirituality and religion, which operates on what is arguably the antithesis of doubt – faith. This does not mean that doubt is completely absent from faith; after all, metaphysical enquiry does involve doubt. There is a fine line between faith and dogma. Although Indian culture is commonly perceived as spiritual and religious, it includes secular discourses. "Sanskrit and Pali have a larger atheistic and agnostic literature than exists in any other classical tradition" (Sen 2005: 285). To clarify, the term secular in this study refers to beliefs and discourses that occur outside the purview of religious institutions. In some cases, it refers more particularly to a gradual waning of religious belief and a moving towards the approach of science and atheism. *Muggu*-makers' statements do not always relate to religious beliefs, but when they do, they can be hard to translate in a secular humanistic discourse. Nagarajan faced the same predicament: "They believe and act out of faith . . . What in Tamil is an ordinary comment will seem 'superstitious', 'unbelievable', . . . even 'fantastical' . . . in English translation" (1998: 29).

In a piece on superstition which we titled 'My faith is enlightening, your faith is superstition' (*First City* 2003), Pattanaik asserts that both superstition and faith are products of 'belief' systems; neither has a logical or rational foundation. Yet, the former is associated with the uneducated, while the latter is projected as the path to enlightenment.

> To presume that logic will help us outgrow superstition or faith is to believe that logic will take away the inherent insecurity of our lives. It is from this primal insecurity at the core of our being, spawned by the uncertainty of existence that superstitions and faith emerge. . . . all superstitions and faiths are grounded in a cultural or religious context and belief. Many of the superstitions are rituals, and rituals are culturally choreographed actions through which one communicates one's desires with the cosmos. Superstitions are really an expression of the recognition of man's inadequacies . . . From the point of view of psychology, superstitions emanate from man's primeval fear of the unknown and a hope that there are ways . . . of pacifying the hostile. (2003: 24)

According to Das, religion's role in legitimising a society's particular institutions as axiomatic lies in its unique ability "to 'locate' human phenomena within a cosmic frame of reference . . . [which] endows the inherently precarious and transitory constructions of human activity with a security, durability and permanence . . ." (1987: 116). We will see how this role of religion in helping us deal with the insecurity and precariousness of some human phenomena, is crucial in the *muggu* tradition.

Citing Durkheim and Wittgenstein, Das also writes of the concern in distinguishing religious discourse from other kinds of discourse. Wittgenstein suggests that because religious beliefs are marked by an axiomatic character, they are characterised by words like 'faith' and 'dogma' instead of 'opinion' and 'view'; in other words, religious discourse belongs to an altogether different plane (1966: 53, 57).[28] To resolve the issue of how to accommodate religious discourse in a secular humanistic discourse, Heehs – a biographer of the Indian mystic Sri Aurobindo – questions what sort of material is permissible in a scholarly publication.

> But what sort of objective data was I to look for? . . . If I wanted to discuss this inner [spiritual] event, did I have to switch (in mid stream) from the conventions of scholarly biography to the conventions of spiritual biography, that is, hagiography? Or could I get beyond the conventions of both genres? . . . What distinguishes the hagiographic from the critical approach is not that hagiographers are sympathetic to their subjects, but that they base their accounts on unverifiable assumptions that are likely to be accepted only by members of the discursive community that they belong to. . . . It certainly would be uncritical to accept at face value all that Aurobindo wrote about his inner life; but it would be a different sort of negligence to refuse to consider accounts of inner experience a priori grounds, or to explain them away according to the assumptions of one or another social-scientific orthodoxy. (2010)

This seems a viable solution to this predicament, i.e. one recognises that certain statements are not explicable from any social-scientific orthodoxy but one does not accept them at face value. The view of Steinman, another author who studied *kolams*, that many phenomena in Indian village culture touch almost all spheres of life (1989: 488), applies to the *muggu* tradition, whose multiple strands are hard to identify and separate without damaging its very fabric. This underlines why accommodating different truths is essential in this project, especially as I wanted the methodological process to be led by the material – a decision that yielded diverse primary and secondary material.

Sustaining a coherent narrative without ironing out complexity or falling prey to reductionism is only possible by remaining receptive to diverse material – an approach

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[28] "Suppose someone were a believer and said: 'I believe in a Last Judgement' and I said: 'Well, I am not so sure. Possibly.' You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said, 'There is a German aeroplane overhead', and I said, 'Possibly, I am not sure', you would say we were fairly near. It isn't a question of my being anywhere near him, but on an entirely different plane". "This is why one would be reluctant to say: 'These people rigorously hold the opinion (or view) that there is a Last Judgement.' Opinion sounds queer. It is for this reason that different words are used: 'dogma', 'faith'." (Wittgenstein 1966: 53, 57, quoted by Das 1987: 116)

that unfortunately presents structural problems. I am aware that a thesis usually begins with a literature review and then a methodological chapter. Incorporating the methodological framework into the introduction made it easier to explain how I have constructively aligned this project's research components. Also, since I found only one academic text on *muggus*, I felt justified in offering a literature review on Indian floor-drawings further on in the text. The physical shape of a page demands a linear, narrative structure that determines – even limits – each narrative element's possible range of significance. My ideal scenario might have been to present this project in a hypertextual, multimedia format, to reflect the subject's richness; clicking on one link would have led to a multiple choice page and so on. I have not done so because I found the page's demand for a linear cause and effect narrative helpful; it forced me to develop clarity, which I previously lacked. As I crossed several academic boundaries, I adopted the following conceptual frameworks to help me present my findings.

IV. THE STRUCTURE OF THIS THESIS

Every chapter consists broadly of a framework, each of which informs the others. As we have seen, the introduction presents a methodological framework. The first chapter constitutes a critical framework, where I explore models of exhibition of traditional and metropolitan arts, through a discussion of Bharucha's essay on Indian museums. The second chapter reviews literature on floor-drawing traditions across India, and identifies gaps and problems that I then address in subsequent chapters. Indian floor-drawing has thus far been regarded predominantly as a ritual activity, so the third chapter adopts a ritual framework. Drawing on primary research that explores *muggus*' ritualism, I then assess the suitability of some ritual theories for studying the *muggu* tradition. The fourth chapter assumes an aesthetic framework, where I explain my informants' taxonomy of *muggu* forms and explore the meanings connoted by each category. By highlighting the integrative function of ritual, I consider my informant's taxonomy with reference to *muggus'* ritual purposes, thus formulating a ritual theory for the *muggu* tradition. Foregrounding newer forms of *muggus*, especially as seen in *muggu* competitions, the fifth chapter applies an art historical framework as such forms cannot be properly accommodated in the ritual framework. As I review popular media discourses on the *muggu* tradition, I ask why metropolitan art discourses continue to ignore such vibrant traditions and attempt to answer this question in the sixth and final chapter.

Introduction: *Muggus* and Metropolitan Art: A Methodological Framework

Each research question relates to the above-mentioned conceptual frameworks. My questions about *muggus*' ritualism and ephemerality inform the ritual framework. My question about their forms informs the aesthetic and art historical frameworks. By allowing me to identify *muggu*-makers' discourses, my question about *muggus*' audience links the ritual, aesthetic and art historical frameworks. The last question that indirectly relates to art's valorisation informs the art historical framework in Chapter 6. What may be regarded as distinct areas are, in these frameworks, used in conjunction.

I do not regard my methodologies, interpretive models and conceptual frameworks as oppositional. If the preceding chapters do not elucidate the overlapping concerns of what may appear as separate strands, the conclusion weaves them together. In doing so, I attempt to arrive at some broad conclusions about how a traditional art can assume contemporary avatars and how metropolitan artists may draw on such traditions as a resource. Finally, I reflect on how this study has contributed to my growth as a researcher and artist, shaping future directions in my work.

CHAPTER 1: INDIAN ART INSTITUTIONS: A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. BHARUCHA'S "MUSEUM OF THE FUTURE"

Bharucha's self-confessed 'amateur' reflections in a provocative essay on the need to re-conceptualise the role, indeed the very raison d'être of Indian museums, warrant closer scrutiny. Referring to other authors to support, challenge and develop his points, I unpack Bharucha's assessment of Indian museums' audiences, their models of collection and exhibition and his suggestions for their re-conceptualisation. I touch upon his first suggestion, i.e. that Indian institutions become less elitist and more communitarian by opening themselves up to the socio-political possibilities of museum spaces. I then explore his second suggestion, where he urges us to consider how ephemeral arts might counteract the 'fixed assets', i.e. the material, in institutions and the art market, thus allowing us to imagine new ways of structuring museum spaces. This entails taking a closer look at some ritual, ephemeral arts that he cites as examples, which reveals some issues in Bharucha's argument. For reasons that become self-evident, I have also dovetailed fleeting references to the Indian gallery scenario. Note that of Rose's three sites of interpretation of images, this chapter deals with the site of reception, specifically the site of the display of images.

1.1a. Indian museums today

Asserting at the outset that Indian museums are colonial relics and bureaucratic nightmares, Bharucha opines that millions of Indians are unacquainted with the very idea of museums. Punja's (1998) and Guha-Thakurta's (2007) assertions endorse the idea that museums are foreign to most Indians. Referring to their total want of accountability and transparency, Bharucha wonders whether museums are in any way important to public manifestations of Indian culture. This seems a reasonable question. After all, in India, museum studies are a neglected area in higher education and there has not, for example, been a single analysis of visual literacy in a study of museum reception. Is this surprising in a country high on visual literacy, where a spontaneous and richly layered visual theatre is created with throwaway ease? As Rahman avers, "We surround ourselves with images, reflecting a mass visual language tradition much stronger than the written word, perhaps because mass formal literacy is a distant goal. . . . I revel in the manner we inscribe our public and private histories on the very walls and spaces of our public life" (2003: 84).

As many authors point out, most Indian museums receive government grants and do not generate an income through their own programmes; further, motivation levels are low among inadequately trained museum personnel. With some exceptions, such as the Crafts Museum (Delhi) and the Calico Museum (Ahmedabad), most Indian museums receive insufficient media attention, have poor exhibition programmes, few exhibition catalogues, guides or other publications.[29] Exceptions include the Picasso and Nizam's Jewels exhibitions at the National Museum in Delhi (both 2001), K.G. Subramanyan's retrospective at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) in Delhi (2003) and Jehangir Sabavala's retrospective at the NGMAs in Mumbai and Delhi (2005-2006). Often, well-designed museum exhibitions are collaborative efforts (in the case of Sabavala's retrospectives, between the NGMA and Sakshi Art Gallery, a private institution). However, proposals for such collaborations meet with stiff resistance from government museums. As Vadehra of Vadehra Art Gallery recounted, "My father went to a lot of trouble to convince the NGMA in Delhi to hold an exhibition of Husain. In 1993, the NGMA held its first exhibition of a living artist" (2010). Moreover, with the exception of the Nizam's Jewels exhibition, which – as one journalist put it – turned 'a monumental morgue' into a centre of 'great excitement and activity', most exhibitions remain culturally inaccessible to the majority of the Indian public.

Inadequate funding is often cited as "one of the many reasons for poor maintenance and display, though these [state] museums have very valuable collections" (Punja 1998: 16). In 2005, I found that the annual maintenance budget of the Orissa State Museum equalled the monthly domestic expenses of a modest estate in Bhubaneshwar. Insufficient funding is perhaps partly to blame for problems like the "absence of new interactive technologies, or . . . basic user-friendly conveniences – a tea-room or a gift shop, for instance, would be hard to find within the precincts of any Indian museum" (Bharucha 2001: 26). That poor funding is symptomatic of more deep-rooted issues, is suggested by Punja's assertion:

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[29] During 1984-2002, the Crafts Museum was run by the arts scholar Jyotindra Jain. According to museum consultant John Reeve, since Jain's departure, the Crafts Museum has reverted to being a 'dead place'. The Calico Museum is privately funded and run by the Sarabhai Foundation, set up by an industrial family who have made significant contributions to cultural life in Gujarat.

> The government has to fully realise the educational potential of museums and make them an important aspect of public life in India. . . . [It] needs . . . to urgently address the needs of museums: their security, documentation of objects, publications, educational programmes, scientific conservation, design and display of these priceless collections. (1998: 17)

One may reasonably assume that this potential has yet to be realised. Bharucha additionally points out the disparate economics of government museums and other venues of 'leisure' in India. The former operate on meagre government subsidies; in contrast, shopping complexes, cinema theatres, games stadiums and amusement parks have considerable resources at their disposal; the income the latter generate clearly reflects their popularity.

1.1b. Museum audiences

More importantly, can these different types of venues "be assumed to exist in the same public sphere regardless of their different economies and divergent accessibilities to communities discriminated on the basis of class and education" (2001: 25)? Appadurai and Breckenridge state that Indian museums are repositories of informal learning. Bharucha contends that this is an unrealised theoretical desire, although he agrees with their suggestion that given India's population, drawing an audience does not pose a challenge, so Indian museums do not so much need to find an audience as to make them (1992: 36, cited by Bharucha 2001: 25). In other words, a crowd is not a public, something Bharucha implies when he refers to 'communities discriminated on the basis of class and education'.

Bharucha's essay repeatedly throws up questions about who constitutes Indian audiences. Because of scant literature on the subject, it would be useful to cite conceptions of 'the public' in the West, where the formation of museum audiences has evolved with time. If the public consists of citizens, let us consider that when the Louvre was nationalised, only fully propertied males were considered citizens of France. Although citizenship is not determined solely by voting rights, it is significant that at some point in Britain too, only fully propertied males had voting rights. It seems that until the advent of bourgeois democracy and the suffragette movement, only male aristocrats were considered as responsible citizens. Thus, cultural institutions that became 'public' spaces effectively mapped out social circuits of class. Speaking of the inception of the British Museum, then the National Gallery, Duncan says, "Our notion of the 'public' dates

from a later time, when . . . the category of citizenship [opened up] to ever broader segments of the population and redefined the realm of the public as ever more accessible and inclusive" (1995: 36). So early nineteenth century Britain's efforts to make private collections public could be regarded as 'political', as they "furthered a larger project to expand the conventional boundaries of citizenship" (1995: 40). I would argue that in India too, museum audiences can be said to map out social circuits of class.

Indeed, exclusiveness and inclusiveness is debated as often with reference to Indian galleries. As Jhaveri suggests, "We also need to ask ourselves how to go beyond the White Cube museum and gallery space. So far, the art space in India has been exclusive rather than inclusive" (2010). Gandhy of Gallery Chemould and Vadehra felt that the "common man would feel too intimidated to enter an art gallery" (2010). Vadehra added, "So . . . [our space in Emporio] was opened as a window. . . . we don't even have a door, so it's easy to walk in." As an artist and collector, Baswani feels optimistic about the Indian art market, which she sees as stabilised, healthy and growing, in for the long run because of India's rapidly growing economy (2008).[30] However, Gandhy believes that for the Indian art economy to be self-sustainable, Indian art needs to emulate mainstream cinema, i.e. become more accessible to the common man. Note that the use of the word 'common' implies an elite. The gap between a public and a crowd is widened because museums are trapped between the advocacy of 'specialized knowledge' and the need to satisfy a mass public through visual stimuli. "This 'knowledge', which has its origins in the orientalist production of history, continues to exist today in almost grotesque forms of pseudo-scholarship and unconscious parody" (Bharucha 2001: 26). Here, he implies that the parody is of the West.

Let me digress a little here to underline Bharucha's use of the term 'orientalist'. It could be argued that Bharucha's essay contributes to a post-colonialist discourse since it

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[30] "If . . . [an artist] is not getting financial recognition, how does he earn a living? If he earns a living by other means, . . . [he] needs a job . . . [Today,] an Indian artist is at a stage where he can sell [work] without having to do a job . . . [I think this scenario] will last. Art has already become a statement. . . . [As a buyer, I see that] the Indian now knows that beyond his fridges and microwaves, . . . [art] is his next step. This is a sign of a country that is high on development. . . . When the economic needs of a house are fulfilled, the cultural needs [will be met]. . . . [When a country develops,] you take your kids to puppet shows, to concerts and museums. I don't remember our parents doing that for us. . . . There wasn't enough money to do that. . . . [Art] is here to stay. That's a given . . . We are growing at a great rate – at 9% every year. . . . Think of the growth that our country is going to see." (Baswani 2008)

broadly analyses the cultural legacy of colonialism. It is widely acknowledged that Britain and India have been significantly shaped by their colonial relationship.[31] This relationship has been analysed at length in several disciplinary contexts, for example in the strand of subaltern studies, which may be regarded as a platform for the formerly oppressed, a means to clear "the way for a politics of difference and respect" (Rudolph and Rudolph 2003: 681). This is of course a particularly difficult process because it entails the reclamation of a collective identity. After all, "In any society the denial or marginalisation of histories and cultures other than those of the dominant group has profound implications for subjectivity and identity" (Jordan and Weedon 1995: 3). It is therefore likely that the denial of the subcontinent's history, experienced during colonisation, still profoundly influences the Indian self-image. Bharucha suggests that the absence of a museum culture in India is predominantly caused by our museums adamantly resisting being decolonised (2001: 24). Miyoshi aptly describes the difficulties of decolonisation:

> Once absorbed into the chronopolitics of the secular West . . . once dragged out of their precoloniality, the indigenes . . . have to deal with the knowledge of the outside world, irrespective of their own . . . inclinations . . . (1996: 80-81)[32]

Decolonising is a challenging task also because it involves trying to resolve the apparent dichotomy between tradition and modernity, which has – as I have suggested in the introduction – often been articulated as the opposition between the local and the global. Panikkar argues that Indian resistance to imperial Britain (which took on many forms: armed uprising, intellectual dissent and cultural protest) was informed by a vision of a condition beyond colonialism in which tradition and modernity could come together in a creative manner, albeit selectively (2007: ix-x). This evidently had wide-ranging manifestations in several fields of cultural and intellectual concern. But as Miyoshi suggests,

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[31] Jasanoff avers that Britain "became a nation state consolidated in part around empire . . . For Britain . . . [imperial] collecting was a means of acquiring power, status and a new self-image" (2004: 114). It is also generally acknowledged that while colonialism contributed greatly to developing India's political and cultural consciousness, post the transfer of power, its effects continue to be felt in India. While the focus of postcolonial theory – and this project – is on the *cultural* legacy of colonialism, for Indian scholars, postcolonialism really involves gauging the continuing effects of colonialism on the interwoven socio-cultural, politico-economic fabric of India.

[32] He adds that Western nations had the "luxury of several centuries to resolve civil strifes, religious wars, and rural/urban or agricultural/industrial contradictions"; former colonies had much less time to work these out, and even post Independence, had to contend with continuous interventions by the Western nations and were thus "structurally denied a peaceful progress" (1996: 82).

> [While] struggling against the oppressors, self-definition was not difficult . . .
> opposition articulated their identity. Once the Europeans were gone, however, the
> residents of a colonial territory were thrown back on their old disrupted site that had
> in the precolonial days operated on a logic and history altogether different. (1996: 80-
> 81)

In other words, the 'vision of a condition beyond colonialism' that Pannikar speaks of,
becomes harder to sustain now that it is no longer driven by opposition to Imperial
Britain. In a certain sense, Bharucha's essay tries to revive or perhaps *revise* this vision
of a condition where tradition and modernity can come together creatively, as for
example when he links Indian museums' resistance to decolonisation to the lack of "any
sustained attempt to re-imagine their postcolonial condition" (2001: 24). Bharucha
repeatedly uses phrases such as 'colonial relics', 'pre-colonial modes of perception' and
'colonial hangover'. However, since he does not explain them, it may be useful to
consider what he might intimate by these phrases, in the context of museum culture.

Guha-Thakurta, who traces modes of convergence in the twin histories of museums and
archaeology in colonial India, points out that the institution and the discipline arrived
well-formed in the colony. She explores their distinct genealogies and thereby the
different processes of the transplantation of Western knowledge in a colonial setting:

> . . . the official harping about the lack of a close link between the Archaeological
> Survey and the Imperial Museum – was underwritten by their close approximation of
> each other's functioning. A framing theme here, clearly, is the elaborate axis of
> colonial power and knowledge. It is apparent in the museum's system of assemblage
> and ordering and in its invocation of the field around the collected, displayed, and
> labelled object. It is equally visible in archaeology's driving urge to name, describe,
> and document as it swept through India's virgin terrain of ruins and relics. (2007: 44-
> 45)

Given the bewilderingly exotic corpus of material India offered for various sciences,
Guha-Thakurta questions how the forms assumed by archaeology and museums
developed in this locus of knowledge. She then links the conception of 'specialised
knowledge' with the formation of a museum public, suggesting that the failure of Indian
museums during the colonial period was most significant in the

> . . . self-positioning of the museum and its objects vis-à-vis the public for whom they
> existed (a public ranging from the "ignorant native" to the new "knowing subject"). It is
> in this unbridged gap between its actual and intended public that one can perceive
> the pith of the tensions that marked the colonial birth and location of the museum in

> India. The issue of failure and incompleteness can then be reconceptualised as one of hybridity and difference and placed in the hiatus between the intended role of the museum in India and its many unintended meanings throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (2007: 45)

Questioning what can be done to re-invent their postcolonial conditions under these circumstances, Bharucha reiterates that if Indian museums wish to contribute more meaningfully to public culture, they would be well-advised not to emulate Western paradigms of success.

> . . . this could only result in yet another unproductive manifestation of postcolonial mimicry. It is not that museological models from other cultures do not matter. The point is that it would be more useful to posit different grounds and principles within our own context . . . (2001: 27)

1.1c. Socially engaged art

> While museums are traditionally located within the domain of civil society, they are increasingly more insulated from the emergent cultures of struggle in political society . . . [that cut across] nations, languages, and constituencies, [and are] . . . bringing together unprecedented alliances of activists, environmentalists, and cultural workers . . . (2001: 30)

A possible redress Bharucha proposes is that Indian museums position themselves between the civic and the political. He cites Cape Town's District Six Museum as one such successful intersection. Formerly a church in a working-class neighbourhood, it was converted into a museum that became much more than a mere memorial space. Catalysed by the mass eviction of an entire neighbourhood by an apartheid administration, it began with humble inputs.

Floor map of former district, District Six Museum, Cape Town. Photo by Michael Wohlfarth, Source: Flickr.com

> . . . a floor-map of District Six on which the former residents marked their homes, along with an installation of discarded street signs . . . Far from being a mere experiment in nostalgia, it offers its space as an interactive site for . . . discussions, hearings, and policy-making decisions for the rehabilitation of the neighbourhood. (2001: 30)

Bharucha underlines the need for Indian museums to adopt such alternative models, believing that by being "communitarian, dialogic, and engaged in the making of a more culturally sensitised public", they could counter "the gentrification of museums advocated by the Indian metropolitan elite" (2001: 31). Again, the use of the word elite implies divisions of class, which would seem to reinforce the idea that India museums can map out social circuits of class. To accommodate new, popular culture inputs into existing spaces, in order to broaden audiences, is not sufficient; what Bharucha advocates is a new socialisation of the radical possibilities of museum spaces, because the public has a right

> to interrogate the assumed privileges and reading of history in any museum space . . . instead of replicating the ultra-white, air-conditioned, dust-free box of the Eurocentric museum, we should open ourselves to those seemingly disruptive energies 'beyond the box' that can enable us to forge new links between the public and the private, the civil and the political. (2001: 30)

Street signs of former district, District Six Museum, Cape Town. Photo by Kristien Kahn. Source: Flickr.com

In her editorial introducing Bharucha's essay, Adajania recounts how, when she chose to feature the District Six Museum on the cover – a garland of chipped street signs cascading from the ceiling to the floor – her graphic designer seemed baffled, perhaps because she had expected something "more along the lines of Gehry-like grandeur, expanses of glass and steel housing magnificent artefacts of high culture" (2001c). Khubchandani speaks of several 'alternate' art spaces such as the District Six Museum, where the community are not only encouraged to get involved in art spaces but where their inputs become central to the art-making process. Many such

initiatives – like Sarai (Delhi), Sandarbh (Banswara, Rajasthan) and Khoj – develop site-specific projects. For example, Periferry (Guwahati), which "works as an incubator for transforming cultural productions" (2010: 144), recently held a residency called *Shifting Anchors: Floating Memories*. Initiated in December 2009 by Shantiniketan-based artist Sanchayan Ghosh and organised in collaboration with Lalit Kala Akademi's regional centre in Kolkata, the residency explored the transforming relationship between the river and the city, throwing up issues about urbanization, labour, economy and migration. Khubachandani describes how Ghosh's residency evolved from the community space of the riverbanks, where discarded ferries, jobless launderers, and workers from the steamers gathered. Creating a space for interaction for the people who gathered there, Ghosh made the ferry a focus for these people, and over a period of time, built an archive of possible documentation of different ferries that lay stranded on the riverbank, thus activating a strand of memories of what existed and what will survive in visuals, beyond the life of the ferries themselves (2010: 144).

Bharucha's proposal is pertinent; however, there is something mildly disquieting about what I think has become a forceful trend in Indian art – the artist dons the mantle of an activist. This is not incongruous per se; several artists and organisations have tackled socio-political causes with intelligence, passion and sensitivity and there are many causes to fight for – terrorism, fascism, child labour, female foeticide and infanticide, human trafficking, domestic abuse, unemployment, casteism, land reforms and environmental perils. For example, the Delhi-based artist collective Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) uses the arts to protest against right-wing religious fanaticism and threatening fascist forces. An alternate model of exhibition is SAHMAT's inspired travelling show on Delhi's pushcarts (Art on the Move, 2001).[33] Notwithstanding such

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[33] Founded in 1989, SAHMAT grew from a resolve "to resist the forces threatening the essentially pluralist and democratic spirit of creative expression". From its inception, SAHMAT "has been a platform with a shared perspective" and has, "over the years, consciously decided to act in, and for the defence of cultural space. With the firm conviction that all creative endeavour in India both traditionally and contemporaneously upholds the values of secularism and cultural pluralism, SAHMAT has undertaken activities . . . to underline the concept of unity in diversity of the Indian nation and the people. As art historian Geeta Kapur put it, "SAHMAT has worked to build solidarity among the artists and intellectuals on questions of conscience in current politics, especially in the areas of communalism. It has attempted more ambitiously to build a movement where an alert consciousness will anticipate fundamentalist tendencies in our national cultural life and provide a platform for those of us who should want to intervene in the social processes through their own practice…'" SAHMAT's members, who number in the hundreds, have sustained their campaign against any attempt to proscribe creativity and "impose on people a conformism of beliefs and practices which is alien to the pluralist and secular culture of this country" (www.sahmat.org).

examples of socially engaged art, I would caution that in the zeal of activism, other purposes for art-making should not be sidelined.

Sundaram – a member of SAHMAT – feels that when artists reflect social concerns in their work, whether directly or metaphorically, it is sufficient that they respond to social issues through their art. "Everyone cannot become social activists. In such cases, an assessment of the quality of their reflection should not be of paramount importance. That they reflect it is enough, because that is how people become aware that these issues exist" (2003a: 87). But it is precisely because art-makers have chosen to be artists, rather than social activists, that a qualitative assessment of their work *should* be paramount. For activist art to be truly effective, the social purpose ought to challenge the boundaries of form and/or the processes of technique; otherwise, not only would the artwork fail to capture and hold the viewer's attention but also, what would justify calling it art? Harshavardhana likewise believes that art should not use any 'crutches' (i.e. concepts): "A painting isn't good because of what you thought. By itself… it should stand. . . . Unless your painting is strong enough, it cannot be appreciated" (2007). To cite a successful example of activist art – albeit drawn from theatre – Sarah Jones's play *Women Can't Wait…* (Das 2001) raised awareness of the inequality of women's rights but could be enjoyed as a piece of theatre in its own right. People did not necessarily watch it with any interest in advocating women's rights but due to the efficacy of Jones' form and technique, they almost certainly left the theatre sensitised to the issues raised.[34] If the artwork's form and technique is not essential to its message, the viewer may as well pick up a leaflet. What made Jones' play so effective was that it blurred the lines between art and activism.

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[34] *Women Can't Wait…*, which is scripted and performed entirely by Jones, uses humour, an admirably simple narrative structure and just three props: a scarf, a podium and a microphone. It portrays eight women rehearsing their recitals of real-life atrocities, who intend to remind the United Nations that it promised to revoke any laws that still discriminate on the basis of gender, such as those relating to "marital rape in India; rape exemption in Uruguay . . . ; female circumcision in Kenya; a law that until recently, forbade women to work at night (France); the Japanese law that requires a divorced woman to seek government approval for remarriage . . .; a Jewish one that vests complete power in the man, giving him sole rights over the decision to divorce; the Jordanian law that allows a man to commit murder in the name of family honour; and in the United States, loopholes in the judicial system that effectively deny a woman the right to self-defence . . . The scarf ingenuously serves as a veil, a fashion accessory, handcuffs, a sling, a *dupatta* and even a doll!" With a single, unswerving spotlight focused on her, she switched chameleon-like, "between being a timid woman from Jordan, a 14-year-old child from Kenya to a strident swearing gal from the United States," adopting the accents, tones and mannerisms of the people she portrays. (Das 2001)

At any rate, the decision to use art as a platform for activism ought to remain a personal choice. Sabavala, who agreed with my contention that Indian artists can feel compelled to jump onto the bandwagon of socially engaged art, asserted that unless one were passionately committed to socio-political causes, it would be presumptuous to tackle them in art. Referring to Diego Rivera's murals and Honoré Daumier's satirical works as successful examples of socially engaged art, he also recounted how art college examiners in India unthinkingly give students subjects to portray, including large-scale disasters, "for example something [that] happened in Bangladesh". Given such a subject, Sabavala recalls how one student "made a grotesque mess. And I couldn't feel the tragedy at all, I felt nothing". Asked whether he knew anything about the disaster in question, the student replied that he did not but used the colour red to depict anger, despite having no strong feelings about the event. Sabavala, who is of the opinion that young artists often feel tempted to paint something "outrageous" in order to shock, stressed that "it's got to be genuine, you've got to have a socio-political conscience. [You become an activist painter only if] you feel that strongly and [you are] able to [express it as art]…" (2007).

Bharucha's proposal pertains to museums but I allude to artists because museums play "a crucial role in the relationship between art and its dissemination in the public sphere. When it names itself, it has a presence [so artists position themselves for it, or against it]" (Sundaram 2003a: 87). Furthermore, while apartheid South Africa's media when the District Six Museum was founded, was censored and therefore biased, I would question whether such initiatives are as imperative in India, which has a lively and vocal media. This is not to say that socially engaged art is irrelevant in India, but rather to point out that this is only one viable alternative.

To return to what I think is a pivotal issue, i.e. Indian museum audiences, what Bharucha finds most problematic is that Indian museums end up assuming a public, since they do not confront the difference between 'finding' and 'making' an audience. He traces this problem to implicit colonial prejudices about who constitutes 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' subjects (2001: 26). By declaring that Indians refuse to be homogenised into a receptive museum-going 'public', Bharucha is really echoing Guha-Thakurta's proposition that 'the failure of Indian museums can be reconceptualised as a problem about hybridity and difference'. He concludes that Indian museum bureaucracy "has

'failed' within the parameters of its own national preoccupations to disseminate knowledge to its citizens . . . " (2001: 26).

1.1d. Museum narratives

Since art collections and exhibitions have often been employed to construct ideologies of nation-states – presented as a repository of the spirit of the people – I would like to emphasise Bharucha's reference to 'national preoccupations'. As Guha-Thakurta alleges, "while art objects are always set up in museums and exhibitions as evidentiary artefacts, as representations of some 'real' history, they constitute a particular mode of fiction" (2007: 184). Moreover, this brilliant and remarkable mode of modern fiction "has become an indispensable component of statehood and of national identity in every corner of the world" (Preziosi 1995: 13).

Mulholland echoes this when he says,

> The transformation of the princely galleries of Europe into museums was one that served the ideological needs of the middle classes and nation states, providing secular civic rituals. . . . Public museums not only displayed the nation's power and wealth, in the form of objects taken from colonies, but provided a platform upon which to establish a historical canon of 'national' culture. . . . Such museums were public rather than private; they were often state-owned and had an educational role and responsibility. They were credited with the ability to escort an unsophisticated public into a new comportment and higher echelon of moral and civilised behaviour. (in Rampley 2007: 23)

It would be useful to consider the above-mentioned 'hybridity and difference of Indian museum audiences' against the backdrop of this genre of fiction, where museums can represent art institutions as repositories of 'high culture'. If such modern narratives are driven by the belief that exposure to high culture and fine arts "could enrich the quality of national life", to promote a love of art in nation-states would be recognised as work that is political in nature (Duncan 1995: 43). Art being regarded as a sign of wealth and power and a source of valuable moral and spiritual experience, progress "in art could be taken as an indicator of how far a people or epoch evolved toward civilization in general" (1995: 25).[35] Once such a purpose was attributed to a museum's existence and its

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[35] It may be worth recalling – as mentioned in the introduction, that one of the many meanings of culture is almost synonymous with civilisation.

'public' broadened accordingly, its new pedagogic role entailed considerable changes in the way collections were hung.[36]

> The earlier, aristocratic installation addressed the visitor as a gentleman and reinforced his identity by enabling him to engage in and re-enact the kind of discerning judgements that gentlemanly culture called 'good taste.' By asking him to recognize – without the help of labels – the identities and distinctive artistic qualities of canonized masters . . . the visitor-cum-connoisseur could experience himself as possessing a culture that . . . marked its possessor as a member of the elite. In contrast, the public art museum addressed its visitor as a bourgeois citizen who enters the museum in search of enlightenment and rationally understood pleasures. . . . [The citizen] also encounters there the state itself, embodied in the very form of the museum. Acting on behalf of the public, it stands revealed as keeper of the nation's spiritual life and guardian of the most evolved and civilized culture of which the human spirit is capable. (Duncan 1995: 27)

I have offered some definitions of culture in the introduction; I now consider Appadurai's politically charged definition. Resisting ideas of culture "that tempt us to think of actual social groups as cultures", he prefers culture to be regarded "as a dimension of phenomena . . . that attends to situated and embodied difference". He therefore prefers using the adjectival form 'cultural' "which stresses . . . contextual, heuristic, and comparative dimensions and orients us to the idea of culture as difference, especially difference in the realm of group identity" (1997: 13). From the idea of culture as substance, he moves to the "idea of culture as the dimension of difference, to culture as a group identity based on difference, to culture as the process of naturalizing a subset of differences that have been mobilized to articulate group identity". Culturalism then, is "identity politics mobilized at the level of the nation-state" (1997: 14-15).

The formation of nation-states, which has emphasised the mobilisation of group identities, influences definitions of culture itself, thus complicating any attempts at shaping cultural narratives. After all, the volatile process of defining the fluid identity of nation-states is predicated on the notion of difference. I should think that discussions on 'national' art scenes are complicated in large part because geo-cultural boundaries are dynamic and subject to negotiation. Using Appadurai's meaning of culture and culturalism, one might then argue that museums contribute to the mobilisation of identity politics at the level of the nation-state; i.e. museums can and do construct historical narratives of a nation-state. However, with their post-colonial role as yet undetermined,

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[36] One only has to remember that museums today are viewed as higher education institutions – the .ac in the web domains of British museums indicates their 'academic' responsibilities.

most Indian museums do not seem to construct any coherent narratives. Sundaram asserts, "The NGMA does not even have a vision of itself and if it has had a vision, it has not been able to implement it . . . It is vitally important that [a museum] develop a vision of itself; it must develop a presence that is strong enough to withstand political ideologies and a capitalist market" (2003b: 64). Mediation and representation remain largely absent and unlike in the West, exhibition design and object labelling, for example, are mostly neglected areas. So we are left with what Bharucha terms as 'postcolonial relics and grotesque parody'.

According to museum consultant John Reeve, "When Jyotindra Jain was director of the Craft Museum, he expressed frustration at his biggest problem – ministry bureaucrats who interfered with his efforts and had no empathy for his initiatives." Indeed, some museum directors are themselves bureaucrats. As Sundaram states, "There is only one museum of modern art [in India] and that is the NGMA, which is a part of the Department of Culture. This means that someone at the level of the Deputy Secretary more or less calls the shots. . . . [The museum director needs to assert his autonomy from the Department of Culture]" (2003b: 64). Affirming that Indian museums' desuetude has deteriorated with the rise of the Indian bureaucrat masquerading as a museum director, Bharucha despairs of the specialised knowledge addressed to the Indian elite, as for example in Calcutta's Indian Museum,[37] which still

> . . . displays inscrutable hand-written Latin inscriptions attached to thousands of indistinguishable rocks, stones, and fossils. There's a time-warp in this colonial spectacle that could be the subject of a postmodern fiction were it not so depressingly evocative of the ruins of a (post)colonial present. (2001: 26)

1.1e. Models of collection and exhibition

These assertions about museums' modern narratives are compelling but one might argue that material collections have been employed in constructing fictions before the development of nation-states. The pomp and splendour of Indian royal courts – in particular durbars, where members of the public could seek audience with their rulers – were possibly designed for the same purpose that Duncan attributes to the use of early royal and church art collections in the West, which she believes had much to do with

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[37] Although Bharucha's essay cites the Jadu Ghar here, he is actually speaking of the Indian Museum (instituted in Calcutta in 1814), which was – as he points out – memorialised as a *jadu ghar* (magic house).

consolidating power and even reinforcing rulers' legitimacy of rule.[38] She stresses that with princely galleries, the point

> . . . of such show was to dazzle and overwhelm both foreign visitors and local dignitaries and, often – through special iconographies – the rightness or legitimacy of his rule . . . public art museums both perpetuated and transformed the function of these princely reception halls wherein the state idealized and presented itself to the public. (Duncan 1995: 22)

Similarly, citing the material collections of the East India Company, the British empire and colonial individuals, Jasanoff (2004) investigates the construction of narratives in relation to ideologies of power. She demonstrates how collection and exhibition can be powerful means of cultural identification and self-fashioning used equally successfully by empires and individuals. Among the individual collections she explores is Asaf-ud-Daula's extraordinary amassment of European objects. Also a patron and collector of Mughal arts, he was politically unsuccessful as the *nawab* of Lucknow but ultimately left behind an impressive cultural legacy that overshadowed his political failures. Despite their shared desire to form new identities, the individuals Jasanoff discusses adopted distinct models of collection and exhibition.

> The Aina Khana ('Mirror Hall') of Asaf's palace must have presented an extraordinary sight, packed with English objects of all kinds . . . all crowded together with the confusion of a lumber room. To many European visitors it seemed merely to embody the *nawab's* clumsy efforts to ape European ways. . . . Yet the contempt of European visitors notwithstanding, Asaf's Aina Khana was more than an ignorant piece of emulation. It also fitted into a specific Mughal genre of collection: the *tosha khana*, or treasure house. In much the way that European princes assembled cabinets of curiosities, various Indian rulers collected rarities from Europe and beyond. (2004: 120)[39]

Note Jasanoff's reference to the *tosha khana* as a Mughal genre of collecting. Bharucha mentions other eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century models when he states that Indian cultural institutions can no longer be affectionately evoked with colonial nostalgia as the *ajaib khana* (wonder house) or *jadu ghar* (magic house) – the latter with reference to the Indian Museum (2001: 26). Punja (1998) and Das (2000) mention various

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[38] Swallow uses the phrase 'rituals of power' when she speaks of *Hathi Pol* (elephant gates) of Rajput palaces. While durbars are interior spaces, visual symbolism has obviously been used in exterior spaces too. Swallow mentions how the painted elephant motifs "reinforce the function of the structure", which allowed passage to caparisoned elephants – "a critical royal symbol" especially in a period of decline (1998: 60-61).

[39] These rarities often tended to be mechanical objects, such as Tipu Sultan's tiger, seized by British forces as the spoils of war after his defeat at Seringapatnam.

museological models adopted by Indian museums, such as ethnological museums, archaeological site museums, palace museums, thematic museums (e.g. scientific or railways museums), natural history museums, museums of antiquities and public art museums. Despite the existence of such varied models, Guha-Thakurta feels that a strong case can be made about their failure to transform themselves effectively from wonder houses to new centres of disciplinary specialisation (2007: 45).

I do not wish to suggest that material collections always relate to ideologies of power, merely that Indian museums' dependence on government subsidies automatically involves a fundamental issue: Is the meagreness of public funds allocated to museums a reflection of how the government perceives the role of museums in national or in public life? Das' historical essay on Indian museums presents far more optimistic views than other texts but even he admits that at the start of the 21st century, the state of our museums became a cause for concern. Among other things, he mentions that a lack of proper policies and unsuitably old buildings crippled most of our museums. Highlighting inadequate funding as a problem "because they [museums] are not in the priority zone of public funding", he suggests that museums look for alternate means for raising funds (2000: 44).

The iconography of public art museums evidently centres on artists and the abysmal state of affairs in museums results in an anomaly that has repercussions for artists:

> In India, the museum, even as an institution which has a presence, is so low-key that it is just virtually a storehouse – things are just stacked there. It has no energy in itself. . . . The fact that museums are not indicators of quality demonstrates this. Institutions – the National Gallery of Modern Art is a case in point – have not served as benchmarks of artistic standards. (Sundaram 2003b: 64)

As Baid of Gallery Sumukha said with reference to this expectation that public art museums ought to be barometers, even preservers and promoters of artistic and cultural life, "In India, the galleries are actually doing what the museums ought to be doing" (2010).[40] This is problematic for several reasons; clearly, even with the support of corporate organisations, private galleries have limited resources, which seriously

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[40] The role of the museum can be perceived by the following statement: "A museum by definition is a 'permanent establishment set up for the purpose of preserving, studying, enhancing by various means, and in particular, of exhibiting to the public for its delectation and instruction…artistic, historical, scientific and technological collections'." (Schommer 1960: 28, cited by Das 2000: 39)

constrain any attempt on their part to carry out the function of a museum.[41] As ML affirms, "Galleries are commercial in nature and any art activity happening within these galleries is a commercial act . . . " Since their commercial interests invariably influence their agendas, ideological manipulations by galleries can often be detrimental to artists' careers. Given Baid's statement, ML's assertion that Indian galleries play a major ideological role "in the production of meanings, values and paradigms of monetary exchanges" (2010: 39) assumes new significance; i.e. Indian artists looking for representation face the complex task of ascertaining galleries' ideological machinations. Sundaram likewise points out the pitfalls of galleries standing in for museums:

> It is only recently that private galleries have come up and the market has acquired an image of itself. The circulation of the art object in a capitalist market has to do with the art object as a commodity, which has to do with its speculative nature . . . [this can have a detrimental aspect]. When a market just starts naming itself, there will always be a free-for-all phase; it is democratic. . . . So, it is nothing to do with what could be an assessment of an artist in a historical context. In the West, you have many institutions . . . – museums, for example – which now have a certain pressure to steer and to support many initiatives, to divide what is in the museum and what is outside it. We unfortunately are at a time . . . [when] the state's institutions are crumbling. . . . Most Indian artists have to create works, publicise them, mount exhibitions on their own, and [even] then, they do not always get returns. . . . It is very difficult for individual artists to contribute, so they give up. Patronage and institutional support is important because you cannot make art out of thin air. (2003a/b)

The above discussions, however, focus explicitly on material objects. Stating that for many of the museum-going public, the items on display are still part of a living tradition, Swallow feels that the strength of cultural continuity in India may obviate some of the local visitor's need for extensive object labelling (in Punja 2008: 12). Indeed, perhaps it even obviates the need to visit museums at all? Labelling evidently pertains to objects but living traditions can be represented only partially by material culture. How do cultural institutions engage with ephemeral practices, which also play a significant role? To determine this, I consider Bharucha's second suggestion for Indian museums, i.e. that ephemeral arts can provide new principles for visualising Indian pasts by resisting museums' conservation and commoditisation.

> . . . use the principles of this art to critique the commodification of these spaces themselves. Can the pre-modern principles of erasure, impermanence and renewal

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[41] Note that despite the growing number of private galleries across India (particularly in the past two decades), there is scant literature on the gallery culture of India.

be permitted to challenge the very hermetic confines of museum and gallery structures, reinforced through the 'fixed assets' of permanent collections and vested interests in the art market? (2001: 29)

Here, it would seem that Bharucha proposes regarding ephemerality, which he calls 'erasure', as the antonym of permanence and ephemeral practices as counterpoints to material objects.

1.2. THE EXHIBITION OF EPHEMERAL, RITUAL ARTS: THREE CASE STUDIES

I would argue that examining the ritual arts that Bharucha cites would reveal that the ephemeral is not so much an explicit antonym of permanence but a by-product of ritualism, i.e. the realised creation is ephemeral so that the ritual action can be repeated. With both his examples – Durga idols and *kolams* – at the culmination of an elaborate process resulting in something visually attractive, ritual demands that the idol or drawing be erased, by immersion in the case of idols and by washing away in the case of *kolams*.

> . . . I have in mind the traditional clay modeling of Hindu deities like Durga, Kali, and Lakshmi during the *pujas* in Kolkata. . . . these exquisite figures of the goddess are meticulously designed and shaped by the traditional artisans of Kumartuli, following which they are transported to roadside *pandals* on the streets of Kolkata, where they are worshipped with celebratory fervour and the active involvement of entire neighbourhoods of people. . . . it would be hard to think of a more 'public' form of worship . . . Following the . . . worship of the goddess, . . . they are unceremoniously tossed into . . . [the Hooghly River's] muddy waters. This immersion of the goddess can be read as another kind of erasure, where the very 'object' of the 'art' produced by the Kumartuli artisans, is ultimately cast into the waters, leaving no trace beyond its accessories. (2001: 28-29)

To probe Bharucha's suggestions a little further, I now examine Durga idols, Ganapati Utsav idols and *kolams*.

1.2a. Guha-Thakurta on Durga Puja idols

Guha-Thakurta's article *From Spectacle to 'Art'* (2004) looks at the Durga Puja's changing socio-aesthetics in Kolkata.[42] Every year during Ashvin (September-October), Durga's martial role of Mahishasuramardini symbolises the victory of good over evil for 10 days, until Bijoya Dashami – when Durga's idol is immersed into water. The set-up for each *puja* celebration consists of the main Durga *murti* (idol) – usually depicted slaying a

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[42] *Pujas* can best be described as a prayer ceremony to a specific deity. There are many that are domestic, and others that are communal.

demon – and a *pandal* (tent or canopy, which becomes an elaborate tableau/structure for the idol).[43] The first lavish family Durga Puja was documented in early 17th century Kolkata, but its passage from "exclusive households to the open streets, from *zamindari* patronage to community sponsorship, is recognized to be largely a late 19th and early 20th century phenomenon" (2004: 34).[44] Guha-Thakurta feels that the Durga Puja is now aspiring to become Kolkata's public 'art' event, with the visual' dimension becoming its key characteristic.

> This new 'artistic' identity . . . is one that has been struggling to assert itself, both within the body of the urban spectacle and within the structure of the religious and ritual event. (2004: 34)
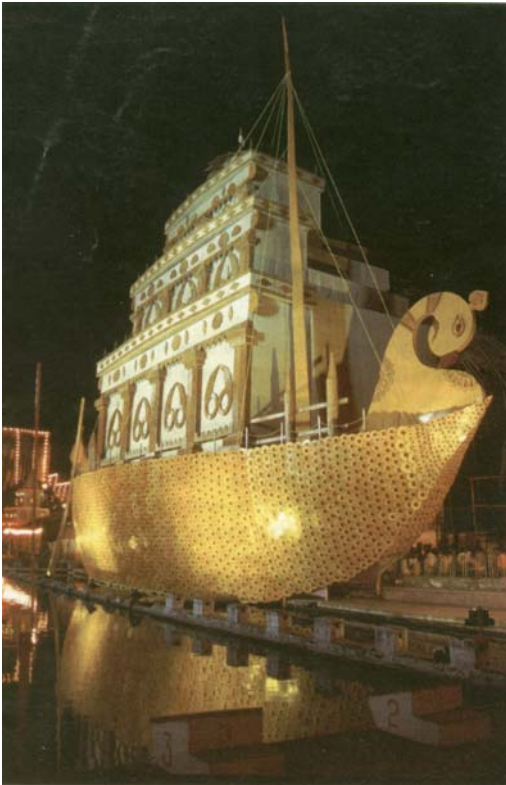
Durga Puja *pandal*, 'The College Square Puja by night, with the pandal designed in the form of a glittering golden barge, 2002'. Reproduced from Guha-Thakurta 2004: 35

Two interlinked aspects of the *puja* are relevant, the first being the formats it has adopted in its transitions from ritual event to mega-spectacle to aspiring public 'art' festival. The second is the various kinds of personnel involved in each stage of the transition, especially the struggle of the ritual idol-maker – generally known as Kumartuli artisan – to claim for himself a new artistic identity.

As public spectacles, *puja* tableaux have been transformed into, among other structures, make-believe temples, mosques, churches and palaces – a hybrid mélange of histories, styles and objects, transforming the city into an ephemeral fantasyland.

Over the years, we have seen the palaces of Rajasthan, the ruins of Nalanda . . . the temples of Khajuraho and Thanjavur . . . even . . . a remake of the massive capsized Titanic in a *pandal* at Salt Lake . . . (2004: 35)

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[43] Sometimes, Durga is accompanied by smaller idols, such as her children Kartik and Ganesh. Ganesh is also called Ganapati; in south India, he is also called Vinayaka. Kartik is called Kartikeya in south India.
[44] *Zamindari* may be translated as feudal. It is an adjective of *zamindar*, a feudal landlord.

Critics frequently lament that the *puja*'s religious dimensions have been pushed to a distinct second place, that the *puja* has "become a new kind of ritual site, a site for visiting and touring, much like a museum, exhibition or theme-park, where viewing and wonderment seem to entirely supplant worship" (2004: 35). In attempting to define the format that this new public festival has adopted, Guha-Thakurta wonders whether one might compare it to theatre, as the *pandals* are no more than simulations of real places and structures, but her second comparison – that of fairgrounds – seems more apt. The heterotopias that the *pujas* offer appear as ephemeral illusions comparable to fairgrounds, "experienced by fair-goers . . . as a passing event" (2004: 36).

Traditionally, ritual may demand that every idol be immersed but ironically, within the new festival dynamic, police regulations ensure that every *pandal* – regardless of how elaborate it is – comes down within a stipulated time. This new kind of ephemerality enhances the frenzy of mass participation in the *puja*'s public spectacle.

> . . . there is immense scope here for . . . rethinking the notion of the 'spectacle' – not as a 'specious form of the sacred' . . . but rather as a space of intense engagement and interaction, as one suffused with meaning for the communities of creators and viewers . . ., involving both parties in new practices of artistic production and spectatorship. (2004: 36)

Guha-Thakurta uses the term 'socio-aesthetics' because the *pujas* are often neighbourhood *pujas*, which – funded by local bodies to which residents pay a membership fee – produce new boundaries of exclusion and cohesion for residential community apartment blocks. Although each club's subscription fees are nominal, this small percentage of community funding retains high symbolic value when compared to the megabucks of corporate sponsorship. The *pujas* thus reflect contemporary Kolkata's changing sociology of neighbourhoods and collective public life. The *puja*'s escalating 'artistic' profile, which is hard-earned, seems increasingly defined by competitions between neighbourhood clubs. The 'award-centric' *puja*, as Guha-Thakurta calls it, is partly an outcome of the corporate sector's growing involvement since the 1980s. Once criticized by *puja* organisers, today, the competition ethos and the institution of various prizes for the 'best, biggest and most artistic' Durga Puja is accepted "as the central platform for the mobilizations of funds, fame and publicity" (2004: 37).

Guha-Thakurta contends that corporate-sponsored competitions have led to new kinds

02/10/2006

Durga Puja *pandal*
Ekdalia Evergreen
2 October 2006
Photo by Sandip Kundu

30/09/2006

Durga Puja *pandal*
30 September 2006
Photo by Sandip Kundu

01/10/2006

Durga Puja *pandal*
Mohammad Ali Park
1 October 2006
Photo by Sandip Kundu

66

Durga Puja *pandals*, 2 October 2006
Photos by Sandip Kundu

of producers entering the *puja*'s socio-cultural space. This is particularly evident in the category of 'art-designer' *pujas*, where community clubs try to outdo each other by commissioning new artists and designers (2004: 37). Here, the artists and designers often conceptualise reconstructions of ethnic arts, and employ communities of craftsmen to execute the *pandals* and idols.[45]

Durga Puja *pandal*, 'Durga and her entourage in various Kerala-based dance poses, designed by Subodh Ray for the 'Kerala dance village' created at the Suruchi Sangha Puja in New Alipore, 2003'. Reproduced from Guha-Thakurta 2004: 50

Such ethnic reconstructions in metropolitan Kolkata can raise questions about authenticity because they become popular surrogates for the urban crafts emporium, where folk arts and crafts can be bought. The socio-educational capital of artists/designers gives them an advantage over the Kumartuli artisans; *puja* organisers and their targeted public likewise seem convinced that the artists/designers are a cut above the folk artists they employ. Guha-Thakurta underscores

> . . . the way this mounting trend of deployment of crafts and folk arts have . . . worked out various new fine lines of distinction between 'art' and 'gimmickry', between what an initiated few would recognize as a markedly 'artistic' venture, and what the masses would respond to for its sheer novelty and sensationalism. This is, of course, an ever-ambiguous and contested line of divide, where we have, broadly speaking, the same resource pool of artists/designers operating at both ends of the spectrum. (2004: 38)

Such statements recall Bharucha's distinction between specialized knowledge and visual stimuli but here, such a distinction is applicable not only to the viewers but to the producers as well. Ethnic reconstructions aside, the Durga Puja also continually reinvents itself by frequently portraying contemporary local, national and global events, such as the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the glorification of Princess Diana and Mother Teresa in the year of their deaths and the World Trade Centre attacks. Moreover,

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[45] This is not unlike the Delhi-based scenographer and designer Rajeev Sethi, who is seen as a keen supporter of craftsmen and frequently designs sets that are constructed by communities of artisans whom he sub-contracts.

just as *kantha* embroiderers in eastern India juxtapose images from different contexts in a single quilt, without attempting a coherent narrative, within the secularized Durga Puja, the traditional single-frame ensemble of the goddess has given way to myriad filmic interpretations. All too often, this leads to the media, organisers, sponsors and the public to raise the trope of the "distinction between 'art' and 'gimmick'" (2004: 39).[46] Many idol-makers persistently try to move away from the labels of gimmickry and design and towards the label of 'artist'. This, I think, reveals their awareness of a hierarchy.

Guha-Thakurta presents a multilayered world of idol-makers:

i) Kumartuli artisans;

ii) College-trained sons of Kumartuli artisans, who are introducing new dimensions to their family profession;

iii) Professional, metropolitan, college-trained artists who either choose, or have to – due to lack of success in the gallery circuits – align themselves with the traditional practice;

iv) Metropolitan designers (e.g. even a mainstream film set designer).

The most interesting emergent group is perhaps the one "which stands ambivalently strung between identities of 'artist' and 'artisan'" (2004: 38). The younger generation of Kumartuli artisans seem to covet the label of 'art college-trained'. As Guha-Thakurta emphasizes, "The Kumartuli identity today can be seen as a highly fluid and nebulous one: a lineage, which many are ready to shelve in their aspirations to be 'artists'" (2004: 54). For example, Sanatan Dinda, who hastens to subtly gloss over his Kumartuli background, attributes his transformed self-identity and professional standing as an 'artist' to his training in Kolkata's Government College of Art. Dinda feels that his identity as a successful exhibiting artist in the metropolitan gallery circuit brings a new order of "artistic conception, knowledge and research, especially about the traditional Tantrik iconography of the Devi" to the new field of 'theme' *pujas*.

Not unlike many of his art-school trained co-workers on the scene, his discourse on

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[46] The sheer gimmickry or absurd novelty is demonstrated, for example, by the use of materials such as peacock feathers, earthen tea-cups, and sugarcane fibres, homeopathy medicine bottles, playing cards and broken gramophone records for the construction of *pandals*. I would suggest that this attempt at novelty is not dissimilar to the shock-value quotient in the work of some metropolitan installation artists whose work seeks to be interventionist or conceptual.

>the ideas he conceives and the work he executes, is thick with the rhetoric, on the one hand, about his artistic genius, and, on the other hand, about his deep religiosity and spiritual understanding of the cosmic forms of the goddess. (Guha-Thakurta 2004: 47)

Another example that illustrates the drive for 'artistic conception, knowledge and research' is Subodh Ray, who works as a team with his wife and artist Ramnarayan Ray; each is responsible for different aspects of the creative process. Subodh's wife researches the theme, Ramnarayan – who is knowledgeable about Hindu scriptures and iconography – is mainly responsible for conceptualising the forms and Subodh, who executes the idol, also participates in its conceptualization. One can infer from Guha-Thakurta's fleeting references that there are other idol-makers like the Rays, who I think are gradually moving away from a hereditary, artisanal process towards a self-consciously research-oriented process. Ray's team seem to be aiming at contemporarising their idol-making by re-infusing symbolic meaning into forms that are perhaps perceived as having become repetitive. This kind of exercise has been attempted by the metropolitan Neo-Symbolists but in their case, ultimately, Tantric forms triumphed over Tantric meanings. Guha-Thakurta's study indicates that this has not happened in the Durga Puja arts, despite the fact that in some cases, Durga's idol has clearly gone beyond its ritual status as a worshipped icon to be considered a collectible artwork.

This transition is predictably contradictory. Some idol-makers stress that their creations are made first and foremost as divine images of Durga, for the purpose of ritual worship, with the more stringent amongst them choosing clay (the traditionally prescribed material) as the sole medium for modeling and sculpting. In 2002, when the Bangkok National Museum wanted to buy one of Dinda's idols from the *puja* committee it was commissioned by, he firmly resisted their lucrative offer "on the grounds that his Durga Puja image, however artistic, was created to be worshipped and immersed, and that he could not allow it to be reduced to a 'sale item' or a 'prize category'" (2004: 48). However, in stark contrast, his colleagues and rivals do not share his reluctance to allow Durga idols to be bought and museumized as art products. They even bid for their Durga images to be bought for city hotels and theme parks, taking care to make their idols in more durable material like teak and fibre-glass in the expectation that they would not be immersed at the end of the *puja*. One artist, Bhabatosh Sutar, went so far as to arrange

for a small substitute set of idols to be immersed after the rituals were performed, leaving his larger idol untouched by worship. That the formerly ephemeral Durga Puja event is harbouring dreams of permanence is especially clear when Guha-Thakurta says,

> The fact that the West Bengal government or Calcutta's municipal authorities have taken no initiative towards the acquisition, preservation and display of these artistic creations in a museum or public park in the city is today being decried by many in the media and the Puja profession. (2004: 50)

Aware that ephemerality, which Bharucha terms as erasure, "can be essentialised as a primary principle on the basis of which the integrity of an art practice can be guaranteed", Bharucha nevertheless feels that one may reasonably ask why Kumartuli artisans should

> think of 'erasing' their art-works when their very identities have been so ruthlessly marginalised by the art establishment over the years? Why not claim the most prestigious museum space in order to display one's work with all the trappings of social and artistic recognition? (2001: 29-30)

But instead of Kumartuli artisans changing their modes of practice, and making more permanent creations so they can be museumised, Bharucha urges us to continually translate and retranslate the "metaphor" of erasure "within the mutations of specific practices and the structuring of new art institutions". He seems confident that "different kinds of erasure . . . are open to being imagined within the specific materials and constructions of different modes of art practice". However, when Bharucha asserts that "the principle of erasure needs to push the boundaries of the imagination, not lend itself to being neutralised in the process" (2001: 30), the question that he does not address is the economics of such practices. What form of patronage does he imagine for contemporary practices of erasure? How would they differ from the current forms of patronage of community club membership fees and corporate sponsorship, which – in however complex a manner – have developed from previous models of interdependent patronage? If such arts remain ephemeral, how are cultural institutions to present them – as performance, as installation? How would such installation or performance differ from what one may call the current site-specific installations of community Durga Puja *pandals*, which – on the basis of Guha-Thakurta's text – seem to be thriving without the involvement of museums? Does Bharucha feel that the museum would encourage more

intense engagement and interaction with these creations? Besides, it would be naïve to assume that it is ephemerality alone that marginalises Kumartuli artisans. If it were, to make durable idols would be sufficient, making it unlikely that Kumartuli artisans would covet art college labels and defensively explain their artistic choices to a new metropolitan public. Bharucha must be aware of the more entrenched prejudice of metropolitans against traditional arts, which deems them as collective, hereditary, and repetitive. After all, he hints at such power differentials when he alludes to 'prestigious' museum spaces. He recounts how Kumartuli artisans are 're-inventing their skills for other purposes'.

> During the lean season of the year, when they are out of business, they have taken to sculpting contemporary figures relating to vignettes from everyday life . . . [which] were prominently featured in their first public exhibition in Kolkata (April-May 2000). Here within the precincts of a make-shift 'art gallery' in Kumartuli itself, it was clear that the artisans wanted to be recognised as artists, not least because they wanted to display and sell their 'art-works', which necessarily had to be permanent. (2001: 29)[47]

Competition against college-trained artists and designers may present Kumartuli idol-makers with new aesthetic choices such as these, but Bharucha feels that "we need to question the implications of disseminating" their new art-works in "the metropolitan gallery" circuit in India and

> through diasporic representations in global art forums . . . Given the growing interest among multicultural curators in featuring subaltern art from the Third World, the possibility of transporting 'Kumartuli Art' to Western centres does not seem to be unduly bleak. Off-beat, yet 'neo-traditional', this work could also attract the growing demand of the Indian elite for more *desi* variants of kitsch – . . . the more 'authentic' output of contemporary indigenism. (2001: 29)

It is unclear whether Bharucha supports this or is warning us against such possibilities. It seems that whether they make newer kinds of Durga idols or venture into other artistic avenues, the Kumartuli artisans do not escape metropolitan labels of gimmickry and kitsch. On the one hand, Bharucha wisely advocates a revision of metropolitan views about erasure: we should recognise that "erasure as a creative principle need not deny either the significance of an art-work or the recognition of an artist"; therefore by "erasing

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[47] The appellation of Kumartuli artisan derives from what was traditionally the neighbourhood where these artisans lived; for the most part, they continue to do so. Hence Bharucha's reference to a make-shift gallery within Kumartuli itself.

our work, we do not necessarily erase ourselves" (2001: 30).[48] On the other hand, he does not clarify how catering to diasporic and metropolitan consumers in the above manner is any different than specially designed museum encounters with the 'past', which he censures. These

> inevitably ethnicise cultural difference, and thereby, reduce the folk to the cottage industries. What is worse is the live participation of traditional craftsmen and artisans, who are made to 'informally' demonstrate their skills within the precincts of the museum. Such instances of manufactured 'contemporary relevance' merely enhance the divisions between the 'real' folk and their urban clientele, while appearing to ameliorate the conditions of the rural poor. (2001: 27)

It would appear that he is highlighting the threat of 'allowing' Kumartuli artisans to enter into metropolitan gallery and museum circuits. Yet, his arguments remain inconclusive since he also warns that separating

> between 'them' (the Kumartuli artisans) and 'us' (the cosmopolitan interlocutors of contemporary art practice) . . . would seem to deny a 'cosmopolitical' status to the artisans themselves, apart from undermining the metropolitan possibilities of negotiating the 'pre-modern'. (2001: 29)

I consider metropolitans who ignore extant hierarchies in Indian art to be short-sighted precisely because marginalising traditional arts limits our own 'possibilities of negotiating with the pre-modern'; most metropolitans seem to overlook this. I agree with Bharucha's contention that neither position need be absolute because both are "capable of being implicated in each other's scenarios with the appropriate mediations and dialogue" (2001: 29). Of course, Kumartuli artisans generate their own discourse on artistry and creativity, on tradition and innovation (Guha-Thakurta 2004: 54). But the scope of Bharucha's essay does not allow him to spell out what the appropriate mediations and dialogue would entail and his argument begins to crumble when he suggests that pre-modern principles of erasure could intersect with post-modern, Derridean ones; such a suggestion seems untenable without further explanation.

Despite these problems, Bharucha's essay is undoubtedly useful in provoking us to think out of the box, to recognise that Indian pasts challenge "the very grammatology of the Euro-American museum structure (and its non-Western derivations), which continue to

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[48] Besides, "even as erasures get materialised in practice, they inevitably leave traces" (Bharucha 2001: 30).

rely on the periodisation, classification, and categorisation of its artifacts" (2001: 27). Speaking of the Durga Puja, Guha-Thakurta recognises that only a contemporary lens allows us to see how 'tradition' is "continuously mobilized, reinvented and innovatively packaged" (2004: 34); Bharucha makes a similar point with reference to museums.

> If museums are repositories of the past, they risk being redundant in countries like India, where the past is alive in any number of unprecedented ways. Mutating, hybridising, and getting juxtaposed with modern and postmodern incursions in our public sphere, the past is less a repository of seemingly eternal resources than a dynamic, even interruptive element in the shaping of new narratives. The 'pre-modern' can catalyse conflicting modernities, as indeed, the 'folk' can defy the nomenclature of 'folklore' by assuming, if not asserting, a contemporary significance. (2001: 27)

As Bharucha peppers his essay with the terms pre-modern and post-modern, it may be useful to explore what he may mean by the post-modern, especially as one may wonder whether his essay leans towards a post-modernist reading of Indian museums. This is difficult to determine particularly because modernity is assumed to be such an embedded notion that our thinking about it is jaundiced by its very condition; this is one reason for disagreement about the terms 'modernity' and 'modernism' – usually cited by those disenchanted by modernity. Another reason is that those opposed to Western imperialism question Europe and North America's perceived dominance. Here, modernity is thought to be more diverse, complex and ambiguous. This view, sometimes termed postmodernist, is frequently associated with fragmentation, pluralism, ambiguity and an absence of belief in any universal truths, which makes it a difficult concept to grasp. Bharucha challenges the relevance of the Anglo-American museum's grammatology in the Indian context, thereby generally questioning Western hegemony; as he urges more diverse readings of the possibilities of museum spaces, one could argue that his view is post-modernist.

However, postmodernism itself is a nebulous term. Parikh attempts to justify the use of a single term 'postmodernism' for such notoriously different frameworks as Habermas', Lyotard's, Baudrillard's and Jameson's (1997: 1). While modernism at least had a common, recognisable core – rejection of the past, commitment to progress, and an overarching concern with form, postmodernism's sceptics contend that there is no consensus on the term. Parikh offers Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances as one way that postmodernists can have both coherence of meaning and diversity of

reference; in other words, postmodern objects and ideas are linked directly or indirectly, often with overlapping attributes. So if A connects to B due to some shared characteristics, and B connects to C by virtue of other shared characteristics, A connects to C indirectly even if they do not share any attributes. One can thus have long chains of endlessly polyvalent postmodernist referents connecting to one another, without all of them sharing common properties. This might conceivably be one way for the pre-modern to intersect with the post-modern in the diverse manifestations of Indian culture. Parikh argues that this model gives postmodernism "a rich, imbricated conceptual structure", allowing it to acquire a *geography* of plural attributes, "with a *local* distribution of each attribute".

> This conceptual geography requires us to carve out overlapping regions that identify clusters of similarity amid areas of difference. . . . these chains of resemblance extend in time as well as in space. Indeed, postmodernism is not a term that is fixed once and for all and then applied to a domain of objects. It is rather a concept that evolves in space and time to include new attributes and new objects by the simple device of extending the network of family resemblance. In this sense, its evolution is neither predetermined nor arbitrary. (1997: 4-5)

With the Durga Puja's bewilderingly complex avatars that weave together the seemingly disparate formats of religious worship, public spectacle and art festival, it seems that this event may dynamically connect the pre-modern and the post-modern in ways that Bharucha has just begun to hint at. At any rate, it seems evident that the Durga Puja provides a relevant example of how a ritual, traditional art asserts contemporary significance. In Guha-Thakurta's critical scrutiny of the many discourses converging around the *puja* as a public art festival, the many competing narratives of 'art' and the many contending identities of 'artists' force us to reflect on what we exclude and include in defining the category of 'art'.[49] Guha-Thakurta's concluding remarks highlight the complexity of the Durga Puja's transition:

> Here is an event that stands at the interstices of certain defined zones of 'art', 'religion' and urban 'popular culture', defying any easy categorisation under any of these heads – an event that can be seen as actively corroding the boundaries between these zones. Repeatedly, we find that the differentiations between the 'high' and the 'low', (like the divide between the 'religious', the 'artistic' and the 'secular'), blend and blur within the body of the event, even as other subtle hierarchies and

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[49] One of the additional points that I have not developed in this project, but which Guha-Thakurta's essay touches upon, is a need to re-evaluate the responsibilities of artists and the purpose of making art. To what extent is a traditional community art – in its new avatar of public art – responsible for forming new aesthetic tastes and generating new levels of visual literacy among 'the public'?

gradations fall into place. While the Durga Puja clearly belongs to the realm of the 'popular' and the 'public', it also demands a continuous redefinition of the scope of these terms, as it claims for itself newer and newer kinds of aesthetic profiles. What can still be coded as a religious and ritual event has, over many years now, reinvented its identity as a 'secular' public festival . . . (2004: 56)

1.2b. Kaur on Ganapati Utsav idols

Although Bharucha does not cite the example of Ganapati idols, I consider Kaur's work on the Ganapati Utsav in Mumbai and Pune[50] because it reveals striking parallels with, and significant distinctions from the Durga Puja. Kaur echoes Bharucha's and Guha-Thakurta's points about how the pre-modern may assert contemporary significance when she says that the Ganapati festival provides

> . . . a means of 'retrieving' perspectives on the past that flow into the here and now, but also a mediation on how the present retrospectively frames the past for contemporary agendas . . . (2005: xvii)

We will also see how, as with the Durga Puja, the competition ethos increasingly defines genres of display in the Ganapati festival. Ganapati is considered a *vighnaharta* (the remover of obstacles), *dukhaharta* (remover of pain and sadness) and *sukhakarta* (promoter of happiness and peace). Although as a *dukhaharta*, he is considered fearful and warrior-like, as a *sukhakarta*, he is portrayed as benign and munificent. Being the scribe of the *Mahabharata*, he is believed to embody wisdom. The Ganapti Utsav is otherwise called Ganesh Chaturthi because it begins on "the fourth day (*chaturthi*) of the bright half of the lunar-solar month of Bhadrapad", corresponding to August-September. Months before the festival begins, "meetings take place amongst police, district officials, and *mandal* [neighbourhood committees] representatives to facilitate a trouble-free festival. Permits must be obtained for setting up a public *pandal*, procession routes verified, and programmes overseen" (2005: 97). Entire communities participate in preparing food offerings, flower arrangements and the erection of canvas and bamboo structures that protect the *mandap* (platform or tableaux)[51] from the torrential monsoons and the anticipated crowds of viewers. Loudspeakers are set up, decorative lights strung across as well as cloth banners announcing advertisers, sponsors, competitions and posters that advocate social improvement. The idol, of course, is the most important

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[50] Also known as Ganesh Chaturthi. Unlike *puja*, which means 'worship', *utsav* translates literally to 'festival'.
[51] Kaur uses both terms: *pandal* and *mandap*. Given that *mandap* means stage, perhaps the *utsav's* adoption of the performative is not entirely coincidental.

element in the whole set-up. This is reflected in the fact that even seasonal *murtikar* (idol-makers) turn full-time during this ritual period, often taking on assistants to meet the "exorbitant demand for the first day" (2005: 98). A "space for the Ganapati *murti* is defined and decorated, ready for installation on the first day of the festival" (2005: 97).

Ganapati Utsav tableau, 'Ganapati overcoming Kaliya, Mumbai, 1996'. Reproduced from Kaur 2004: 67

After the idol is installed, the rite of *avahan* or *pranpratishtha* is carried out, during which life is breathed into the idol for the duration of the event. "The image or icon (*pratima*) installed for worship is not taken to be divine in itself, but is the *pratika* or symbol of the godhead" (2005: 99). Once life is breathed into the *pratima*, the idol is treated as divine and worshipped for the duration of the festival with all the attendant rites; then, as in the Durga Puja, the tableaux are dismantled and an immersion party carries the Ganapati idol to the Arabian Sea, where it is submerged in the water. Although smaller, ephemeral idols are traditionally made with clay, Kaur mentions some larger *murtis* that survived; annually repainted, they were made with wood pulp for the express purpose of conserving them (2004: 64). These older, wood-pulp idols enable a study of the idol's antecedent forms, some of which Kaur references.[52] Today, larger *murtis* are made with Plaster of Paris (PoP), "although in recent years the trend has been to make large hollowed-out . . . [clay] models on an aluminium armature. This fulfils revivalist expectations, as well as counteracts latter-day concerns over PoP pollution of the sea" (2005: 98).

Three aspects of Kaur's work are pertinent: her framing of the Ganapati Utsav within a nationalist agenda, her discussion of the festival's competition ethos and her sophisticated analysis of audience responses to the Ganapati *mandap*.

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[52] Not surprisingly, the three roles played by Ganapati are represented in the idols made for the *utsav*, with the *vignaharta* and *dukhaharta* roles being portrayed as one and the same. Kaur points out that among the early public Ganapati idols in Pune, two types of 'poses' predominate. The conventional one shows a cherubic Ganapati sitting, displaying a beatific smile. This type expresses the *shantabhava* (one of the *navarasa*, *shantabhava* represents tranquillity, compassion and benevolence). The second type is a prototype that emerged in the 1980s, which showed Ganapati as an active and martial warrior. Invoking the *veer rasa* (victorious), this prototype portrayed Ganapati in the act of overcoming a *rakshasa* (demon).

Although Kaur does not emphasise the ephemeral in the Ganapati festival, she does confirm that extant literature on Indian art and nationalism generally ignores ephemeral arts. Such literature emerged from two groups, one spearheaded by Havell's revivalist interests in indigenous aesthetics and Indian craftsmen, which involved Coomaraswamy's 'purist protectionism' against Western influences, and the other led by artists like Abanindranath Tagore who wished to create "a nationalist aesthetic through the portrayal of Indian history as well as epic and religious literature", but concentrated mainly on art produced by the elite (2005: 71).[53]

> There is little reference to the continuity of festive artworks, for instance – work that, rather than needing to be 'revived' or collected in accordance with patronising interest by the artistic intelligentsia, was relatively ephemeral and tied to the annual necessities and attractions of community practice. . . . eclectic borrowing from diverse sources were an integral part of Ganapati festival artworks. It was not so much revivalist styles and subjects per se that were at issue here in terms of categorising them as national arts, but more the nationalist agendas that they were allied with. (2005: 72)[54]

The festival's socio-cultural contribution to the nationalistic movement was aided by political stalwarts like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, who played a substantial role in its mobilisation into the public sphere in the 1890s.[55] Ganapati was adopted as a patron god of the political movement perhaps because "the legend of slaying the elephant-headed demon, Gajasura, is interpreted by his [increasingly numerous] worshippers . . . as being the deliverance of the people from the national oppressor" (Underhill 1921: 50). As a *vignaharta* and *dukhaharta*, Ganapati was widely recruited by the world of performative politics for the cause of national justice and self-determination. Ganapati's legend served another purpose – being devotional and intimate, this allegorical trope could secrete a political message, thereby precluding "straightforward incrimination or accusations of sedition by Colonial authorities" (Kaur 2004: 65).

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[53] E. B. Havell was an arts administrator, educator and historian who served as a principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta and is generally credited as having founded the Bengal School, along with Abanindranath Tagore. Ananda Coomaraswamy was an art historian and critic whose writing will be discussed in Chapter 6. His work is viewed mainly within the revivalist, nationalist framework. Both Havell and Coomaraswamy championed the Indian artisan.
[54] Note that her use of the phrase "artistic intelligentsia" again points to an elite.
[55] This explains why Tilak is still so popular in historically themed displays.

Chapter 1: Indian Art Institutions: A Critical Framework

After Independence, the nationalistic movement subsided but in the 1950s, post-Independence Hindu revivalists attempted to mobilise the *utsav* as a platform for anti-Muslim campaigns. They did not succeed, as several Muslim neighbourhoods themselves participated quite enthusiastically in festival celebrations. When the *utsav* gradually lost its political emphasis and descended into hedonistic entertainment, it still retained its popularity, though some felt that in this process, commercialised entertainment eroded its once high moral tenor. By the 1960s, although some organisations used the *utsav* to dramatise local and international current affairs, with the 'versatile' Ganapati presiding over tableaux depicting support for, or opposition to international political figures, most celebrants preferred returning to the classical epics, depicting the deeds of Rama, rather than contemporary figures (2004: 65). Towards the late 1960s, the previous political thrust of the festival had generally been subordinated to its increasing entertainment value. Innovative measures used to draw in public engagement included sensationalism as in public spectacle, sentiment as in drama, and entertainment as in the Bollywood industry. Professional artists began to get involved, materials used to make the tableaux became more expensive, the scale became larger, and the *utsav* increasingly adopted the format of the performance arts, appropriating elements from Mumbai's thriving film industry. For example, "some of the [tableaux] figures were made as hardboard cutouts, similar to cinema hoardings . . ." (2005: 91). Today,

> . . . celebrities are invited to the 'opening' events . . . The direct influence of the Hindi and Marathi film industry is evident when film scenes get copied in the tableaux, or when the images of actors are blended with the *murtis* of Ganapati by artists. . . . Not surprisingly, these practices are not always appreciated by the more orthodox members of the society. (2004: 66)

Kaur feels that the "performative in the [Ganapati] festival context pertains to the (re)-production and effects of words (written and spoken), religious rituals, artworks, dramas, political strategies, processions, and other public displays" (2005: 26-27). Further, the festival's potential as an event-space encourages "heightened and charged sensibilities", providing it polyvalency, and thus making it a useful tool for political propagandists (2005: 28). Consequently, in the 1970s, the efforts of the Shiv Sena (right-wing political party that operates at the state-level in Maharashtra) to utilise the potential of religious festivals and icons for political ends were more successful than the 1950s attempts to

use the festival to incite anti-Muslim sentiment. As Kaur avers, ". . . the art of stage-craft is elided with the art of state-craft as Sainik *mandal* chart their version of the history and character of the region/nation through . . . politically partial . . . displays" (2005: 177).[56] While the "political lexicon" was visible in the festival, the latter's ritualistic elements, such as songs, the religious materials used, the "celebratory processions" and the "iconic displays" also influenced political campaigns (2005: 75).

> Thus, the conventions of religion, culture and politics overlapped in the struggle to make claims on, and on behalf of, the public – public used in its spatial, corporeal and mediated senses. Representation was to be taken not simply in terms of display, but also in terms of demonstrative visibility . . . (2005: 76)

One tableaux viewer felt that an exceptional work of art, combined with the nationalist sentiment, fostered cultural unity (2005: 115). For example, in a *mandap* themed 'The Golden Anniversary of Indian freedom', designed by Digambar Chichkar and featuring an idol executed by the prolific *murtikar* Vijay Khatu, small vignettes symbolically visualised the three colours of the Indian flag, with an audio-taped narration from the point of view of the flag.

> The Shri SGM tableau was appreciated by the judges for its unique perspective on the Indian flag. Rather than taking the more sectarian view that the three colours were emblematic of different communities of India – saffron for Hindus, green for Muslims, and white for all other communities – this *mandal* preferred to highlight a more poetic, yet equally valid look at the three colours. In this case, saffron represented bravery, renunciation and knowledge; white alluded to peace, truth and holiness; and green referred to fertility and beauty of the motherland. (2005: 144)[57]

There are many categories of prizes, and prizes for national integration are awarded primarily on the basis of a nationalist display's educational potential (2005: 138-139). Post the 1990s, the newly liberalised economy meant that advertisers and sponsors increasingly invested in more lavish 'productions'. With Rajiv Gandhi's economic policies, which subjected India to the logic of the global market, commercialism became rampant, a new capitalist society encouraged competitiveness and there was an

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[56] *Sainink* is the adjective for *sena*, meaning 'soldier' and 'army' respectively.
[57] Kaur adds that this "view is endorsed by The Congress Working committee of 1931. . . . The judges appreciated the anti-sectarian sentiments displayed in the tableau, for, as one judge opined, to equate the colours with distinct communities is far too common. The tableau was also represented in an interesting fashion, with the prime focus given to the flag flanked on both sides by three levels of vignettes. Then the sides of the flag opened up to reveal the Ganapati *murti*." (2005: 144)

"acceleration" of media organs – both print and broadcast (2005: 128-129). Moreover, "Competitions also add to the continued interest in and revitalisation of the religious occasion" (2005: 133). Panikkar, who feels that the possibility of a creative dialogue between tradition and modernity was crowded out of public space by the dual pressures of revivalism and colonial modernity, asserts that the void created by these dual pressures has been filled partially by the culture of the capitalist West (initially provided by colonial modernity) and partially by the obscurantism of tradition, currently advocated by rightwing Hindutva factions such as the Shiv Sena. The failure of alternative modernity, according to Panikkar, has led to an uncritical acceptance of globalisation and a decidedly sympathetic response to cultural revivalism (2007: ix-x).

However, despite her emphasis on the festival's penchant for performative entertainment and her framing of it within the nationalistic agenda, Kaur feels that to propose that the Ganapati *utsav* has been commercialised,

> or to simplistically assert that it has fallen into the hands of Hindutva revivalism is to ride roughshod over the evidence. Regulatory bodies have been put in place for the festival, with the remit to act as a kind of corrective invigilator over the pace of commercialism on the one hand, and the resurgence of communalism on the other. The need for balance has arisen not strictly from governmental policy but from forces alive in society that desire an antidote to the perceived excesses of market and political expediency. (2005: 128)

It appears that civilian regulatory bodies have been active since the mid-1990s. Indeed, even competition judges, who are chosen on the basis of a number of qualities, "adopted the role of patron of the arts and culture in the face of what they considered the forces of social destruction – corruption, political manipulation, and communal tension" (2005: 135).[58] But the judges are not only safeguarding against such forces but are also arbiters of artistic taste and look out for gimmickry. For example, Kaur states with reference to criteria for art direction, that judges look for ". . . an original topic and presentation without appearing gimmicky; the dynamic of the narrative's plot and its charismatic effects but without the sense of sensationalist, attention-seeking devices, not too extravagant a display . . ." (2005: 151) Indeed, competitions seem to increasingly define the aesthetic choices of *mandaps*. The earliest competition seems to have been the

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[58] Judges, who are usually from a middle-class background, are chosen "for their background knowledge, wisdom and seniority, political impartiality, education, and familiarity with the Marathi language . . . These qualities, along with an 'artistic eye', were rated important criteria for the effective judging of *mandal*". (2005: 135)

Girnar-Loksatta Ganeshotsava, which was initiated in the mid-1980s by its sponsors Girnar Tea Company, after its director observed crowds lining up to see *mandap* displays.

> He realised the great potential for marketing his company during the festival and asked Jaya Advertising to help organise the competition. Later they teamed up with *Loksatta*, the newspaper organisation which was in a position to facilitate widespread publicity in Maharashtra. This was also a strategic way of being seen to promote ethical business, some of the business profits being thought to be ploughed back into a socially purposeful activity. (2005: 135)

One reason why advertising on such a platform may be effective, is because the "festival displays are examples of collective artworks, the premises of which are also shared by a large number of *mandal* visitors from the neighbourhood" (2005: 202-203). This is also why incorporating socially relevant messages through this platform is deemed

appropriate. While there are many criteria of evaluation for different categories of prizes, one criterion stands out because it seems increasingly a criterion for overall performance, i.e. to what extent social awareness and cohesion is demonstrated by the scenes selected for the *mandap* and by the decorations (2005: 138-139).[59] As Kaur affirms,

Ganapati Utsav, 'A display featuring social problems in the city of Mumbai, 2001'. Reproduced from Kaur 2004: 67

> . . . over the years, more and more *mandal* consider social themes for their *mandap* tableaux in order to stand a good chance of winning recognition and prizes in competitions. It then becomes the task of the judges to work out which *mandal* are, in their opinion, sincere about their demonstrations and which are not, in what might appear as a hall of mirrors that reflects genuine sentiment interspersed with token gestures. (2005: 149)[60]

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[59] Other criteria include to what extent the scenes were consistent with the general theme of the *mandap*, the cleanliness, organisation, ambience of the entire setup, and even the public service record of the *mandal* who commissioned the *mandap*. (2005: 138-139)

[60] Categories of evaluation for the idol were divided into traditionally beautiful, innovative, proportionate, harmonious in colour, complemented by the scenery, and any unique aspects. Criteria of evaluation for the scenery included not only the beauty and innovation of the execution of its decoration but also how well-placed the idol was (2005: 138-139). Elsewhere, Kaur states, "Each of the *mandal* was noted for its degree of religious veneration, audio-taped commentary, socio-political awareness and educational potential, and the artistic and entertainment features of its display." (2005: 141)

Note that such attempts to distinguish between genuine sentiment and token efforts at social relevance, seem absent in the metropolitan equivalents discussed earlier. At any rate, we will see how the *samajik* (social) is now a defined, thematic *mandap* type. Kaur feels that increasing sponsorship, the influence of theatre, music and film, newspaper-run competitions, the extensive media coverage and elaborate productions have resulted in the development of thematic tableaux (2004: 66). She identifies key types of *mandap* that have emerged as this annual festival has developed over the past century. Apart from a 'simple' *mandap*, i.e. displays of just the *murti*, there are theme tableaux that tell specific narratives; these in turn can be either static representations (single narratives), or they may incorporate moving models and scenes designed to surprise the audience. The multiple narratives, termed by Kaur as "'*masala-pandals*' after the appellation that describes formulaic Hindi films" (2004: 66), are – unsurprisingly – more common in Mumbai than in Pune, the former city being the hub of the Hindi film industry.[61] Kaur identifies several categories of *masala-pandals*:

(i)   The *dharmik* and *pauranik* (religious and mythological) themes narrating stories about the gods, usually taken from the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*;

(ii)   The *aitihasik* (historical) theme, which might, for example, narrate episodes from Shivaji's life or events from British India, especially about the freedom struggle;

(iii)   The topical theme (sometimes described as *rajnaitik*, or the political theme) where one might have *mandaps* revealing a propagandist agenda, such as incidents from Kashmir's civil war;

(iv)   The *samajik* (social) theme which focusses on the greater public good, for instance public health and environment;

(v)   The *rashtravadi* (nationalistic) theme that is embedded with explicitly patriotic messages; this theme often overlaps with the historical and political themes;

(vi)   The 'special' theme, which "have 'walkthrough' sets that give spectators the

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[61] These *masala* displays relate a story or stories, "through the use of sound, light, narration and special effects . . . [are sequential in their coverage of various themes,] deploy a multitude of vignettes and are indebted to the idiom of popular film format and content. Tableaux reception is more centred on the performative residues of the whole show, where the displays are lent further argumentative value due to the conjunction of image, sound, narration of festive context. The tableaux encourage a dialogue amongst spectators after the event – based more on the sedimentation of the effects of the show, or the memory of particular components of the whole show." (2005: 103)

vicarious pleasure of visiting monuments like the Ajanta caves or the Sai Baba Mandir at Shirdi" (2004: 67);

(vii)   The entertainment-oriented theme that might depict scenes from circuses and dances.[62] These may even have novel forms of the deity, such as brightly-lit 'disco' Ganapatis, which are presented with great fanfare.

Note how the 'special' theme tableaux may be compared to Durga Puja *pandals* reconstructing Indian monuments. Kaur mentions the Rameshwar Mitra Mandal (established 1967), which

> has a track record of displaying large models of famous monuments in India, exquisitely sculpted out of thermocol. . . . Not only did this offer an opportunity to display community artistic skills, it also provided a means of mapping the nation with a series of monumental representations of the subcontinent. (2005: 110)

Similarly, Kaur mentions the *mandap* of Patil Estate Sarvajanik Ganeshotsava Mandal, whose theme in 1999 was the Halebid Shiva temple.[63] Kaur avers that this theme "served an educational purpose in that it informed people of Hindu relics of the past" (2005: 140-141). Indeed, historical themes, as she points out, overlap with the national theme because:

> Reviving national histories ensures not only the vitality of memory, but also injects meaningfulness and a sense of purpose into contemporary life – vitality used here in its sense of energy and vigour, and in its related form, as vital and essential. The *mandap* display provides triggers for the remembrance of further valorisation of key figures, sites and events . . . Legends are of great significance when they are constantly reproduced through narratives, such that they become part of lived praxis – 'living legends re-enacted for contemporary scenarios'. (2005: 116)

However, it is not only past figures, sites and events that are re-enacted and revived; current issues are also tackled. For example, with reference to one *mandap* that featured an Agni missible replica, Kaur opines that it has "conflated nuclear weapons with the discourse of national development". Similarly, industrialisation,

> literacy, and family planning are invoked to pursue the path of national strength. Interestingly, this is combined with a plea to 'take care of the environment'. Science, along with economic development, is held to be in the nation's interests and for the people's good. (2005: 203-205)

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[62] Kaur also uses the term 'commercial' for this category. (2005: 94-95)
[63] It was designed by the art director, Chandrakant Palo and the idol was made by Vijay Khatu.

Another tableau, which evoked Pokhran – the site of India's nuclear tests – presented it as an important scientific and quasi-sacred site. A Shiva lingam at the centre of the *mandap* was likened by some viewers to an atomic reactor, because of the association of both with energy, thus presenting India as being a part of the "world nuclear club" (2005: 206). As a means to sanctify and naturalise a nationalistic tableau, so that it "can assume an anomalous position – demonstrably politicised yet avowedly apolitical" (2005: 224), such a tableau relies upon

> a combination of an elaborate sanctification discourse, a recollection of India's independence struggle, and the allusion of keeping up with other foreign nuclear powers . . . Not only is the display sanctified by virtue of being part of a Ganapati festival display, there are representations of other deities giving their blessings to the tests. (2005: 206)

While Guha-Thakurta speaks of how museum displays are often presented as evidentiary material, as representations of some real collective history, referring to Benedict Anderson (1983), Kaur points out that a nation is "an entity that can never be seen as a whole" but it can nonetheless be "imagined as a whole", through a "repertoire of imagery" which "coalesces to (re-)produce the nation as a visualised and thus 'real' entity" (2005: 265).[64] Kaur believes that since the 1890s, the Ganapati Utsav has become an event that exemplifies an interweaving of visual culture, festival praxes and nationalism. There are implied conversations between the Ganapati Utsav tableaux, theatre, film and broadcast media (television and newspapers especially), which she views as popular, socio-cultural, religious and political commentaries, constituting "a major focal point not only for veneration but also for entertainment" (2004: 67-68). Like Guha-Thakurta's summation of the Durga Puja, Kaur also stresses the multivalency of the Ganapati Utsav:

> Part of the success of the festival lies in its collusion of various elements, yet it is amoeboid enough for one aspect to be accentuated while others lie low. The performative milieu does not lend itself to a straightforward correspondence of intention, forms or reception of constituent activities and artworks. (2005: 272)

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[64] "The already known but inchoate national imaginary is visualised, normalised and then subjected to variant creative and interpretative representations. In the picturing of the nation, the national imaginary is further congealed. As the old adage goes, 'seeing is believing'. . . . The visual repertoire of the festival *rashtriya* displays are premised on interrelated themes to do with" (2005: 225) figurative ideals or heroic figures, iconic events, presentations of space, nature and territory, gendered tropes of the nation, constructions of the Other, indices of national progress and modernisation, and abstract and totemic emblems that evoke the national ideal.

As we can see, there are significant distinctions between the Durga Puja and the Ganapati Utsav, despite their striking parallels. Both may be suitable for Bharucha's suggestions to use the ephemeral to counteract the fixed assets of museums and the art market and in their own ways, both demonstrate Panikkar's point about the dual pressures of revivalism and modernity.

What is equally useful in Kaur's work is her nuanced analysis of how audiences engage with what she terms as the 'collective artworks' of the Ganapati Utsav. In general, a pleasurable satisfaction was implied when viewers' premeditated, idealised expectations were met, although the element of surprise played a part when tableaux exceeded expectations due to their uniqueness, novelty and innovation, for example by being unusually skillful or when they ingenuously reworked familiar narratives (2005: 114). Citing Walter Benjamin's work, Kaur speaks of three different kinds of audience engagement, ranging from concentration to distraction. For example, with *masala mandaps*, the engagement veers towards distraction (2005: 104). However, she makes a distinction between Benjamin's type of concentration which "concerns mainly cerebral activity whereas in the Ganapati *utsava* the concentration involves a fusion of intellectual and emotional sensibilities, the festivity being premised upon religious beliefs and moral values" (2005: 105).

Kaur feels that when 'associations with divinity' are combined with the 'power of artistic imagination',

> the artworks lend themselves to both cognitive and emotional effects. In so doing, the mind-body dualism which pervades a lot of the arguments on 'meaning' is counterveiled . . . Imagination or idea, in this case, is not distinguished from passion and emotion – a dichotomy which infuses a lot of Christian as well as 'secular' ideology in the West. Here the notion of idea and passion is fluid, polymorphous, partaking of each other. . . . Mind (*man*) is considered the ultimate decider of the scenery in terms of aesthetic evaluation, but significantly, *man* here does not refer to the mind alone, but also to the heart of the work's emotional impact and, on more metaphysical planes, to a moment, however brief, of 'transcendence' of the mundane – that is to say, mind, body and soul as understood in Western discourse are entwined in the indigenous notion of *man*. (2005: 113)

This reaching for transcendence is particularly important in Indian art. Much of my issue with metropolitan Indian arts today, especially in the trend of conceptualism, stems from the emphasis on the intellectual to the exclusion of the sensual, or what Kaur terms as

emotion and passion. This is why form is important. Also, in the Indian notion of *man*, "Words are considered inferior to the experience of the person" (2005: 113). This is because transcendence is beyond words. With reference to one *mandap*, audience members stated that despite their attempts, they were unable to express their response to certain artworks because they were so beautiful as to be beyond description. "The implication was that displays that are less outstanding lend themselves to description, whereas those that incite wonder and awe raise the level of spectatorship to a different plane . . ." (2005: 110)[65]

While Bharucha focuses on display and suggests that ephemerality marginalises such ritual arts, I would argue that the differences between the reception of metropolitan arts and the reception of ritual, ephemeral arts like the Durga Puja and the Ganapati Utsav, are caused in large part by the distinctions between the nature of the works themselves, specifically, the mind-body dualism in conceptual works, which alienates the majority of Indian viewers.

1.2c. Nagarajan on *kolam* competitions

Bharucha's second example of a ritual, ephemeral art is the *kolam*. Since I discuss *kolams* further in subsequent chapters, to provide a point of continuity with the general theme of 'display' and the competition ethos of traditional arts, in this section, I only discuss *kolams* through a discussion of one of Nagarajan's chapters in her doctoral study, which is dedicated to *kolapottis* (*kolam* competitions). Nagarajan suggests that although the competitive spirit is naturally fostered in young girls and women drawing daily *kolams*, an important framework for *kolam*-making is the *kolapotti*, which throws up questions about display in myriad contexts. Competition among women across the rural-urban spectrum is intense.

> . . . all the *kolapottis*, from village to urban contexts, can be viewed as "exhibitions" in which ritual has become an aesthetic value. The women have a sense of displaying themselves and their skills in the public context. . . . The qualities of exhibition, critical examination, and aesthetic evaluation are consistent from the ritual context of the

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[65] Kaur adds that discussions "of the tableau allude often to the fact that the feelings it generated were not just internalised, they were not amenable to verbalisation, the ecstasy on seeing the scene being beyond all attempts at articulation . . . This gives another dimension to the hypothesis that 'art is, by itself nature, not reducible to words' (O'Hanlon 1989: 18), and that art reception surpasses the realm of language. In this case, however, it is not to say that all artworks are beyond verbal description, only that greatly evaluated artworks are most likely to surpass articulation" (2005: 113). I will be discussing this incompatibility of word and image in Chapter 5.

> village competition to . . . [the modern context]. Such adaptability is possible because exhibition is not alien to the traditional ritual practice of the *kolam*. (1998b: 212)

This reference apart, Nagarajan does not draw any conclusions in this area. Although she asks "How does aesthetics relate to cultural narratives? What are the categories of evaluation of aesthetic judgement? How do aesthetics reproduce culture?" and claims to include "theoretical voices" from – among other fields – "art history and aesthetics" (1998b: 35), she only discusses aesthetics in the chapter on *kolapottis*. Even here, it is not so much art history but aesthetics that she explores. Her emphasis on the *kolam*'s ecological readings unfortunately results in her ignoring the traditional aesthetics of *kolams*. So, when she discusses aesthetics, she claims to be exploring *kolams*' *transitioning* forms but fails to do so seriously, because she has not explored traditional *kolam* forms, which are actually still visible in contemporary drawings. Visual symbolism – an intrinsic part of the southern floor-drawings – is not examined.

The underlying cause for her serious omission becomes clear when she states that such a "tradition must be studied as an embodied, living practice rather than a visual art form or historical artefact" (1998b: 43). Her point is valid, in that the floor-drawing tradition should not be regarded as culminating in artefacts – historical or otherwise (its ephemerality alone clearly demands other interpretations), nor should it be considered as part of a fossilised heritage. However, to say that it should not be considered as art, is to ignore the richness of traditional Indian arts, which are not produced or displayed in a White Cube context but are living traditions resonant with multiple purposes and interpretations. The terms 'art' and 'tradition' are arguably regarded as antithetical in the West's current perception of art. This is, at least partially, due to something Krishen Khanna told me, namely that the "latter part of the twentieth century was . . . overburdened with the idea of originality. Everything had to be original, and original meant different from everybody else" (2003a: 89). Obviously, with such an emphasis on originality and innovation, the notion of 'tradition' is challenged in modern art.

I would suggest that Nagarajan's dismissal of the artistic value of *kolam*-making perhaps stems from her understanding art through a modernist lens. She applies her definition of art as artefact and form to the *kolam* tradition and rejects it as inappropriate. Thus, her attention to *kolams*' forms in her chapter on competitions is explained by the fact that she feels form is only privileged in the competition context, whereas in reality, form has

consistently been crucial to the ritualism of floor-drawings. The lack of any reflection on form in other chapters is therefore a serious shortcoming. It is not so much that Nagarajan's understanding of *kolams* is limited. She ably demonstrates her grasp of the richness of the practice. It is rather that India's multiple artistic traditions do not fit into her narrow definition of *art*.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, Nagarajan's work is undoubtedly layered, and her work on *kolapottis* presents an exciting juncture in *kolam*-making. Among the conclusions she draws from her empirical observations, a few are useful to consider here. Nagarajan speaks of the range of contestants increasing, believing that this inclusiveness reflects the expansion of Tamil identity itself. Men, Christians and Muslims are often welcome to participate in *kolapottis*, and particularly in such cases, ritualism seems to take a backseat to aesthetics (1998b: 23, 214). This phenomenon of ritualism slipping to second place vis-à-vis form and aesthetics is repeatedly referred to, such as when she says, "In the public spaces of the *kolam* competitions, the artistic form has become the primary focus, secularising its religious beginnings" (1998b: 47). This emphasis on aesthetics in the competition context is related to two other phenomena. First, the traditional role of the threshold becomes irrelevant in the non-sacred space of a *kolapotti* (1998b: 211). However, because she does not sufficiently reflect on why the threshold is so crucial to *kolam*-making, her observation about how the threshold becomes irrelevant in the competition context is not as useful as it could be. Second, "*kolam* competitions . . . provide multiple sites for observing the ways in which women are constructing a secular modern identity" (1998b: 208).

In one competition Nagarajan attended, she recounts a disagreement among the judges, where one felt that the traditional geometric *kolams* were more challenging and should be awarded first place and another preferred modern, colourful and figurative *kolams*. The aesthetic criteria that determined the winners were a) brilliance and lustre b) density – layers used to cover or construct the surface and c) newness, or how 'modern' they were (represented in this instance by cartoon-like figures and complex pictorial scenes). Although I witnessed a remarkably similar disagreement, the criteria and the outcome were different from Nagarajan's experience, where in the end, "it was innovation, variety, difference, and notions of modernity that prevailed . . ." (1998b: 198) Colour was clearly regarded as a later addition, possibly introduced from north India. For example, one of

Kolams, Pondicherry
Christmas Day 2007

Nagarajan's informants comments, "'Soon these old *kolams* will not even be drawn anymore. How can we compete with colour? If they wanted colour *kolams*, they should have called it a *rangoli* competition'" (1998b: 200-201)![66] According to Nagarajan, the competition judges ignored contestants' debates and concerns that colour and design at *kolam* competitions were symptomatic of a larger malaise, namely that Tamil culture was being dominated by north Indian culture (1998b: 201). But on the whole, she felt that competition judges were aware that they had a responsibility in guiding the future of the *kolam*. In another competition, a male journalist featured a matador fighting a bull in a competition entry and the judges concurred that such a 'Western-style' creation was inadmissible as a *kolam* (1998b: 205).

1.2d. Conclusion

Nagarajan briefly mentions the economics of *kolapottis*, stating that advertisers and multinational corporations are alert to the potential of such events to further their commercial interests (1998b: 202). It is important not to underestimate economics in the new competition ethos of the Durga Puja, the Ganapati Utsav and *kolams*, because with the gradual waning of traditional systems of patronage, where community members commissioned traditional artists to make idols, alternate systems of patronage had to develop. Of course, this is not the case with *kolams*, since domestic floor-drawings rarely involved monetary exchanges.

Although Bharucha suggests that ritual, ephemeral practices resist conservation and commoditisation and thus may provide us with alternate imaginaries for museums, we would do well to remember that such arts have been shown in museum contexts for some time.

> The Crafts Museum . . . provides a place for artisans and designers to demonstrate their skills before the visiting public. . . . Both these museums [the Crafts Museum and the Calico Museum in Ahmedabad] have been influential in developing new forms of display for the Indian context. . . . The Crafts Museum . . . sets its objects in groupings that sometimes evoke their original contexts, and sometimes highlight the hand-skills involved in their making, New crafts museums and crafts villages have been set up in recent years. (Das 2000: 44)

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[66] The etymology of the north Indian term *rangoli* is traced by some to the word *rang*, meaning colour.

Since Bharucha censures such practices, he is clearly aware that attempts to show such arts in museum spaces have thus far been unsuccessful. With reference to the Pardhan-Gond artist Jangarh Singh Shyam, Jain complains that despite Jangarh's long stay in a city, metropolitans attributed his authenticity to the past. "One of the galleries in Delhi even asked him to strip his European clothes in favour of a bare chest, a loin cloth and kerchief on the head while posing for a photo" (2001: 23). So notwithstanding Das' optimism, like Bharucha, I would question how successful such museum displays have been. While Jain champions tribal and folk arts as being innovative, the irony remains that the Crafts Museum lays emphasis on the nomenclature of 'crafts', with its pejorative associations of skill-based artisanal processes. In most cases, the above-mentioned exhibitions result in folk and tribal artists making works on paper for sale as 'crafts objects' at museum shops. Furthermore, 'demonstrating their skills' in such contexts is not about skill alone, as is the case with glass-blowing displays in art fairs where the focus is on a highly specialised skill. Here, I would argue that this display turns into a semi-anthropological performance, where the displays complement 'craft villages' that evoke a by-gone era. As such, they only reinforce what Jain argues against, i.e. that their authenticity lies in the past.

At the Business of Art Conference (London, 2010), most Indian gallerists agreed that showing ephemeral work was difficult as they were 'not charities' and had to 'make money'. This highlights the difficulty of how to generate funds to support ephemeral work, without introducing products that can be sold in the art market. As we have seen with the Durga Puja and the Ganapati Utsav, such attempts often take on a performative quality. This is one reason why a community festival or public spectacle is so hard to accommodate in a gallery or museum set-up, without compromising its authenticity. Bharucha states,

> . . . in the rich gamut of ritual and cultural practices like *kolams* . . . the entire point of the art-work lies in the erasure of the floor-drawing after it has been completed, following hours of meticulous work. In such practices, which have a continuing significance in the cultures of everyday life, the resistance to conservation and commodification provides a useful provocation in re-imagining new ways of visualising Indian pasts (and their concomitant presents). (2001: 27)

However, I think Bharucha's claim that the entire point of the drawing lies in its erasure is a gross oversimplification. To consider whether his suggestion is at all viable with

reference to floor-drawings, Chapter 2 examines floor-drawing traditions and their contemporary manifestations.

CHAPTER 2: INDIAN FLOOR-DRAWINGS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. INTRODUCTION

Drawing on secondary research, this chapter introduces pan-Indian floor-drawing, especially in Rajasthan, Bengal, Orissa, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. This introduction highlights gaps and problems in previous authors' work that I then address in my study of Andhra's *muggus*.

According to Swarup, floor-drawing in "its most developed form . . . is found in Bengal, Orissa . . . [Tamil Nadu], Maharashtra and Gujarat . . . in regions along the coast . . ." (1968: 238). She feels that in the interior, floor-drawings are not as skilful or varied as those along the coast. Nagarajan (1998b) similarly claims that she found that floor-drawings in Tamil Nadu were more scarce where rice was scarce, associating the fertility of the fields with the presence of the drawings.

Although floor-drawing is assumed to have been a vibrant pan-Indian tradition at one time, today, some writers believe that it tends to survive in the more tradition-bound communities in the country. Over time, it took on "distinct regional and provincial flavours that can be identified by their treatment, motifs used, colour palette, and manner of execution" (Dakshinachitra n.d.: 2). However, "Any comprehensive survey of the multitude of types, styles, patterns, and symbols used in the household wall and floor decoration of India would fill volumes" (Huyler 1993: 180).

Indeed it would, but to highlight some regional characteristics, let me cite a few examples. Gangaur – a festival celebrated in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat – is observed differently in each state. In Rajasthan, married women and unmarried girls celebrate it during a 16-day period, whereas in Maharashtra, married couples observe it for 30 days (Saksena 1979: 117). Floor-drawings made for Gangaur are similarly characteristic of each state; furthermore, since state borders were drawn relatively recently, such characteristics may still overlap. To mention another example, to celebrate Krishna's birthday, women across India draw tiny footprints to indicate the infant deity's presence; however, in south India, women additionally draw a cradle. Local

deities and symbols may often figure in regional drawings, such as during Holi in Madhya Pradesh, when women draw "triangles symbolising the drum of Palani" (Charles n.d.: 47), a deity particularly important in the state.

Kolam, Pondicherry, 2007

Although each state's floor-drawing tradition – where it is still active – differs, there are broad similarities across India. For example, stylistically, the drawings in the southern states Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh are predominantly geometric, often made with white (rice-flour) and red (red earth) on a khaki background of smeared cow-dung. As Steinman points out, the diffusion of floor-drawings "throughout India and the fact that these arts share certain motifs and symbols point[s] to a common origin . . . intimately linked with agricultural life and village tradition; they are connected with folk rituals and archaic beliefs in magic" (1989: 477).[67]

What is often contentious is that many authors – even when highlighting regional, religious and cultural differences – use the nomenclature of a regional tradition to connote pan-Indian practices. Kramrisch, for example, generally refers to 'Indian floor-drawings' as 'magical diagrams'. One must assume that this description applies to *alpanas*, as her text is about Bengal's floor-drawings in particular. She seems aware of regional variations, yet, such usage suggests that she applies to Indian floor-drawings the purpose and meanings that she attributes to *alpanas*. Kaushal (2007) similarly uses *mandana* even when she is referring to pan-Indian, rather than Rajasthan's regional floor-drawings. This is problematic, as the richly evolving floor-drawing traditions in different regions almost certainly have distinct meanings. To avoid such errors, it may therefore be useful to look at the terms specific to each state and region.

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[67] Steinman believes that with political and economic upheavals disturbing the socio-cultural fabric of traditional society, floor-drawings are becoming scarce in many Indian states. However, he remains optimistic about the fate of Tamil *kolams*, as the agricultural foundation of Tamil culture "has shown a great resistance to change over the past millennia" (1989: 491). This is a pointer to his emphasis on the role of agriculture in the maintenance of the floor-drawing tradition.

2.2. ETYMOLOGIES AND TERMS

Floor-drawing is not a practice exclusive to the Indian subcontinent; it has been practised – possibly synchronously – by cultures the world over. In India, floor-drawing traditions are widespread, though they may be known differently in each state. In the western Himalayas, floor-drawings are called *apna* and *likhnu*. In Himachal Pradesh, they are known as *likhna*; in Uttar Pradesh, as *sanjhi, sona rakhna, chowk purna* and *chowk pujan*. In the Kumaon, Almora and Nainital regions of Uttar Pradesh, they are called *aipan* and *apna*.[68] In Rajasthan, they are called *mandana*.[69] In Assam, floor-drawings are apparently called *alpana*, as they are in Bengal and Bihar. Bihar uses several terms: *aripana, aripan, aypan* and *rangoli*. Although others have referred to Orissa's floor-drawings by various names, for the purpose of convenience, I refer to them as *chita*.[70] In Madhya Pradesh, they are known as *mandana* and *chowk purna*; in Gujarat, as *sathya* (particularly in the Saurashtra region) and *rangoli*. In Maharashtra, they're called *rangavali* and *rangoli*; in Karnataka, as *hase* and also *rangoli* and in Tamil Nadu, as *kolam*.

The etymology of some of these terms indicate the regional floor-drawings' differing characteristics. Both '*likhnu*' and '*likhna*' have to do with the root '*likh*' (to write or inscribe, possibly pointing to hieroglyphic origins); '*sanjhi*' probably derives from '*sanjh*' (evening), and connotes floor-drawings made exclusively in the evening; '*sona rakhna*' possibly means retaining gold (metaphorically, wealth),[71] suggesting the belief that floor-drawings invite auspiciousness and bounty into the home; '*chowk purna*' and '*chowk pujan*' mean 'filling up' and 'worship' of the 'courtyard' respectively, suggesting the courtyard's importance in these regions' floor-drawing traditions. '*Rangavalli*', apparently mentioned in several early arts treatises and often used as an umbrella term for pan-Indian floor-drawings, is commonly believed to have derived from Sanskrit,

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[68] Following the division and reformation of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, floor-drawings are called *alpana* in Uttarakhand (Dakshinachitra n.d.: 2) and *aipan* and *chowk purna* in Uttaranchal (Kaushal 2007: 19).
[69] Although *paglyas* specifically mean 'footprint' *mandanas*, because of their importance and ubiquity in *mandanas*, Rajasthan's floor-drawings are also sometimes referred to as *paglyas*.
[70] Kaushal (2007) refers to Orissa's floor-drawings as *jhoti* and *muruju*; Steinman (1989) refers to them as *jhetti*; Swarup (1968) refers to them as *jhunti*, and Dakshinachitra refers to them as *ossa, jhunti* and *jhetti*. It is unclear whether these are regional terms referring to the same practice or whether they refer to distinct practices. One could assume that *jhoti, jhetti* and *jhunti* possibly refer to the same practice. Huyler's clarification is useful, though he also uses the term *chita* in a generic sense: "Orissan *chita* may be divided into two types: *jhoti*, painted with rice powder on walls or floors; and *muruju*, drawn with stone or rice powder upon the ground" (1993: 180).
[71] sona=gold+rakhna=retaining or keeping

ranga=colour+avali=lines, rows or creepers.[72] "Although associated with 'floor art'",
'*rangavalli*' broadly refers to all such practice "that sanctifies a defined space"
(Dakshinachitra n.d.: 2). Although Bairi's 1968 text offers the above-mentioned
etymology for '*rangavalli*', in a later text, he offers a completely different etymology for
'*rangoli*', claiming that it means 'to please god', ranga=god+oli=be pleased (2007: 3).
Desai also briefly suggests the same meaning (1985: 56). Although '*ranga*' does refer to
god, and in south India, specifically to Vishnu, in view of the phonetic similarities of these
two terms, these etymological explanations warrant scrutiny.

The term '*kolam*' has diverse meanings; even with reference to patterns, it does not
apply solely to floor art but also to wall-drawings, body markings, "and a kind of 'wavy'
pattern found on mortuary pottery" (Layard 1937: 121). *Kolams*' decorativeness is
suggested in the term itself, its primary meanings being beauty, grace and
handsomeness. Secondary meanings include colour, form, shape, external or general
appearance. Tertiary meanings include nature, costume and appropriate dress. "Only as
further meanings [do] we have . . . 'ornamental figures drawn on floor, wall or sacrificial
pots . . .'" (*Tamil Lexicon II* 1982: 1195, cited by Steinman 1989: 482). These meanings
can suggest further metaphors, e.g. 'beauty' can be nuanced as "that which gives the
sentiment of beauty equally well to the exterior as to the interior of the house" (Dulau
n.d.: 174).[73]

The terms employed for 'floor-drawing' as verb, also differ; '*mandana*' for example, derives from the root '*mandan*', meaning 'to decorate'; in Orissa, the verb used to describe the act translates to 'painting' (according to Huyler, everywhere else, the verb employed translates to 'write', though as we can see, that is not the

Chitas made for Mana Basa, Orissa, 2007. Photo: Raja Mohanty

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[72] The term '*rangarekhavalli*', ranga=colour+rekha=line+avali=creeper, is more specific, denoting coloured lines, drawn as creepers.
[73] Dulau's original text is in French; all the passages quoted here are my translations.

case);[74] *kolam-potu* translates to 'putting' or 'placing' a '*kolam*' (Steinman 1989: 480).

Evidently, these linguistic terms and etymologies suggest characteristic regional traditions. In view of such differences, the above-mentioned lexical slips suggest that many authors do not delve sufficiently into the unfolding of the regional traditions. In using the English term 'floor-drawing' to denote pan-Indian floor-drawing, I make the same error. However, because English is widespread but was introduced relatively late, the term 'floor-drawing' is more an external referent and therefore not as culturally loaded as any regional term.

2.3. ORIGIN, ANTIQUITY AND TRANSMISSION

Archaeological evidence, hagiographical accounts and literary references can suggest Indian floor-drawings' antiquity,[75] which is hard to establish due to their ephemerality, sparse documentation and the diverse hermeneutic interpretations and propositions regarding their origin. General consensus nonetheless dates them to the pre-Aryan agrarian culture (5,000 years ago), which had matriarchal traits.[76] Writers suggesting that some *alpanas* have hieroglyphic traits, have pointed out that *alpanas*' "lotus flower designs . . . are an exact continuation of the lotus designs employed at Mohenjodaro" (Swarup 1968: 239). Others date Indian floor-drawings' first appearance to the Indus Valley Civilisation (2,500 years ago).[77] Scholars trying to establish *mandanas*' connections with ancient magical rites have found parallels on Indus valley amulets and early Indian rock paintings. "Evidence of . . . this art form is also traced to Vedic altars, which were decorated with lines, triangles, circles and squares drawn with the help of grains, flour, turmeric, vermillion, flowers and leaves" (Kaushal 2007: 19).

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[74] "Women say that they will write the patterns and symbols of a *rangoli* or *alpana* to honour the goddess. For a people who are largely illiterate, these designs may be likened to pictographs or hieroglyphs which convey their message directly to the gods" (Huyler 1993: 175).

[75] Though early Indian literature can itself be hard to date.

[76] Although some authors, such as Steinman, attempt to trace the origin of *kolams* to the earliest mention of floor-drawings in Sanskrit treatises on art, this is problematic because the Tamil civilisation is Dravidian and it is not clear how the Darividian tradition relates to the Sanskritic one. The practice is also likely to have pre-dated literary references, though the latter do suggest its relative antiquity.

[77] According to Dakshinachitra, in its present form, Indian floor-drawing originated in the region that is now Maharashtra, though it is unclear where they source this information from (n.d.: 2).

Chapter 2: Indian Floor-drawings: A Literature Review

Floor-drawings are mentioned in the *Silparatna* as *dhulichitra* (dhuli=dust+chitra=image), applied as powdered colours on the ground. According to Kramrisch, "the most ancient Sanskrit treatise on Indian painting" – she does not specify which but is probably referring to the *Chitrasutra* from the *Vishnudharmottara Purana* – "prescribes the worship of the sun god through an eight-petalled lotus . . . drawn on the ground" (1983: 107). The *Chitrasutra* "lays down instructions on how to prepare the ground before painting the *bhumichitra* (earth-image), the *yantra* or thought diagram, of the *navagraha*, the nine planets" (Desai 1985: 56).[78] The poet Shudraka's play *Mrichakatikam* refers to floor-drawings made for Bali Puja. His verses refer to the gateway to Vasantsena's house being beautified by floor-drawings made of green leaves and scented flowers, on earth that had been sprinkled with water and smeared with cow-dung (Kaushal 2007: 20).[79] The Chola and Vijayanagaram emperors reportedly popularised floor-drawing among their subjects and the Buddha, as prince Siddhartha,

Surya Puja *alpana*. Reproduced from Das Gupta 1960: 31

was rumoured to be a floor-drawing expert. Such claims are hard to verify. However, a key reference can be found in Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*, which lists the 64 arts "imperative for women to master. . . . the fourth is *alekhyam*, or writing with lines and colours, the sixth is *rangoli*, . . . the ninth is *manikarma*, or arranging coloured stones in a design" (Desai 1985: 56). Other oeuvres that mention floor-drawings include the *Chitralakshana*, the *Tilakamanjari*, the *Kadambari*, the epics of the Jain *sevacharyas* (disciples) and the episode section of the Jain *Prathamanuyoga*.

Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* refer to floor-drawings. In one of the epics, floor-drawings made of powdered camphor adorn the front of a hermitage (Bairi 2007: 3). In the *Mahabharata*, in one incident, upon hearing of Krishna's return, Vidura joyfully creates threshold floor-drawings to welcome him; in another, the milkmaids forget "the anguish of their separation from Krishna because they were engrossed in creating elaborate *rangolis*" (Desai 1985: 56). In the *Ramayana*, Lakshmana draws a line – the well-known Lakshmana *rekha* – instructing Sita not to step beyond it. By neglecting his

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[78] The eighteenth-century work *Narada Shilpam* apparently refers to *bhauma chitra*, consisting of *dhuli*-(powder) and *rasa*-(liquid)*chitras* on the floor, *chitras* on the wall and decorations on top of pillars. The first two, i.e. *dhuli*- and *rasa-chitras* form the category of ephemeral decorations called *tat-kalika*, with the latter lasting longer (Jaganmohan 1999-2000).
[79] See Appendix 4 for Shudraka's verses and Kaushal's paraphrases.

warning, she places herself in danger. I believe, as does Desai, that this is an early reference to the apotropaic character of floor-marking.

Scene from the Ramayana, folio commissioned by Rana Jagat Singh of Mewar, 1649-1653. Reproduced from Losty 2008: Plate 10. Note the floor-drawings in the foreground.

Since the eighth-century saint Antal's songs refer to offerings of *kolams* to lord Vishnu, women across Tamil Nadu told Nagarajan to visit Antal's birthplace Srivilliputur. However, "references to the word *kolam* in Sangam Tamil Literature of the third century B.C. to the fifth century A.D. suggest" that the *kolam* may pre-date Antal (1998b: 133).[80] Pillai and Saroja believe that the *kolam's* migration was aided by temple culture, resulting in *kolam*-drawing being practised as much by the lower castes as the higher ones in Srivilliputur, where Antal is believed to have married the lord at the temple (1995: 44). Tamil word lists called *nigandus* do not refer to the term 'kolam' (Jaganmohan 1999-2000), which first appears in Tamil literature as it is understood today, in the sixteenth-century *Kuravanji*, *Madurai Meenatchiammai Kuram* and a century later in *Kutrala*

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[80] See Appendix 4 for extracts of Antal's translated poems mentioning *kolams*. Antal does not use the semantic term *kolam* in her hymns but instead uses the Sanskrit word *mandala*. "This suggests that the *kolam* may have originated in the migration of the Sanskritic based Brahmins, with their *yantras* and *mandalas*, from northern to southern India in the early part of the first millennium A.D. It also seems very likely that the *kolam* could have arisen independently from or as an adjunct to the *mandala* tradition" (Nagarajan 1998: 140). According to Pillai and Saroja, it is only as late as the ninth century that *kolam* as it is known today, is mentioned in Antal's hymns (1995: 44), though Siromoney clearly believes it was first mentioned much later.

Kuravanji. In both works, the reference is to the floor's preparation for *kolam*-drawing as a "prelude to the worship of Ganesh" (Siromoney 1978).[81]

Kolam, Pondicherry, 2007

Pillai and Saroja's collection of folktales mentioning the *kolam* predictably have many incidents from the epics and other classical literature, adapted to local contexts. Legends on the *kolam*, its perceived origins and efficacy include the story of Savitri and Satyavan and Puranic tales such as the emergence of Lakshmi and Kamadhenu from the ocean of milk. Other tales are entirely folk in origin. These references can be interpreted to symbolise *kolams*' life-affirming force (except the water *kolam*, which is said to wreak havoc and destruction) and its efficacy in driving away Mudevi, the dirt goddess (its absence invites her presence). Some tales seek to explain its origin in specific places, such as on the cooking pot and the hearth. *Kolam*-drawing's material benefits is a recurrent theme. Several of these references are probably later insertions into the epics, such as Draupadi drawing *kolams* so her *akshay patram* (boundless rice pot) be effective in the forest; Savitri drawing *kolams* for Yama, the god of death, to get her husband Satyavan back; even the destructiveness of water *kolams* drawn by Draupadi in Indraprastha, which caused Duryodhana to step over water, and then again after the game of chess in Hastinapur (with her foot, from her tears); or the tale where Rama compares Sita's beauty to that of a *kolam's* when he first sees her. Although I agree with the authors' contention that the classical editions of the epics do not necessarily include such incidents since there are no references to semantic terms like *kolam* and *rangavalli*, I am not convinced that the mention of the Lakshmana *rekha* in the *Ramayana* is also a folk insertion (1995: 29).[82]

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[81] In both these instances, the floor has been described as being made smooth with a paste of *kumkum* (red pigment formed by mixing turmeric, alum and lime), *chandan* (sandalwood) and *punuku* or *puluku* (civet). These are used for the preparation of the ground for certain *yantras*, possibly even for drawing them (Steinman 1989: 481). Siromoney, who has also said this elsewhere, nevertheless also refers to these materials being used in contemporary village floor-drawing. "In villages, nowadays, the floor is made smooth by a paste made of *kumkum* and sandalwood as well as *punugu*, a product of the civet cat. . . ." (1978)

[82] In summary, the folktales highlight the beliefs that *kolams* benefit the makers by giving them *darshan* of the deities they are praying to; help them get love and find marital happiness; help wives get their husbands back – whether lost or dead; benefit fertility; give them better health and material wealth; and protect people and households in general by keeping away evil (Pillai and Saroja 1995: 45).

Detailed references to *alpanas* can be found in old Mymensingh ballads and other Bengali works. Among origin-myths, there are some that refer to floor-drawings' life-affirming qualities, such as a Bengali tale in which a priest's son dies prematurely and is revived when his father draws his outline on the floor.[83] An origin-myth from Rajasthan that reinforces *mandanas*' life-giving qualities is significant, considering that one of its meanings is 'creation'. "[Brahma] in his enthusiasm during the process of creation extracted the juice of a mango tree and drew a female figure with it on the ground. The woman came alive and was named Urvashi" (Kaushal 2007: 18).

The tendency of origin-myths to perpetuate an existing practice is well-illustrated by two Rajasthani tales. One of them links the origin of *mandanas* with Shiva and his consort Parvati. Following an argument, Shiva challenges Parvati to beautify their courtyard, threatening that if she did not succeed, he would retire to the Himalayas. Parvati mixes and spreads fresh cow-dung over the whole house but Shiva is not sufficiently impressed and starts leaving when Parvati runs after him, leaving footprints that look like flowers. Astonished by their beauty, Shiva tells Parvati that these would henceforth be known as *mandanas* and that forever after, he would enter any house so adorned. The second folktale begins with an old woman's successful quest for a superlative daughter-in-law, who is efficient at housework, respectful to elders and well-versed in increasing the prosperity of her marital home.[84] When Diwali approached, the bride found that her mother-in-law did not know how to celebrate it, so she

> cleaned every nook and corner of the house and gave it a new plaster of . . . [cow-dung]. It began to sparkle. The old woman and others . . . [were surprised]. People began to praise her as . . . Lakshmi. The daughter-in-law further beautified the house by drawing . . . designs with *geru* and white powder.
> The mother-in-law asked, "What are you doing?" The daughter-in-law replied, ". . . I am preparing to welcome and worship Lakshmi, as Diwali is round the corner."
> On the new moon day of the month of Kartika the daughter-in-law drew *mandanas* in the worship area and at the threshold. In the evening, she lighted lamps in the entire house and placed some near the door.

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[83] Dakshinachitra mentions the same tale as an origin-myth, apparently recounted from what they refer to as 'the earliest Indian treatise on painting', the *Chitralakshana*: "When the son of a king's high priest died, the king made an appeal to the gods to return life to the priest's son. Brahma, lord of the universe, responded to the prayer by asking the king to paint a likeness of the boy. The king drew a *rangavali* image of the dead child into which Brahma breathed a new lease of life. Ever since, all happy and auspicious occasions are celebrated with *rangavali*" (n.d.: 2).

[84] 'She is the Lakshmi of the house' is a widely-used phrase, used to describe good daughters, wives, and especially good daughters-in-law in India; it means she is a superlative daughter-in-law and bride, who has brought good luck and prosperity to her marital home.

> At night, . . . Lakshmi visited the village . . . [which was] merged in darkness. Nobody there knew how to celebrate Diwali. At last, she noticed an illuminated house. She was very tired and her feet were bleeding. . . . [Desperately wanting to rest] she decided to go inside that house. It belonged to the old woman. As she put her foot on the threshold, it landed on the white *mandana*. The *mandanas* . . . [began] to shine as if many flowers blossomed at once. She peeped inside and saw the lamps burning in the entire house. . . . She went inside [the worship site] and sat in the *mandana* called . . . [Lakshmi *rath* (Lakshmi's chariot)]. The daughter-in-law was awake and alert; she quickly got up and wiped . . . [Lakshmi's bleeding feet]. Then she took some white paste and started elaborating the red footprints with beautiful designs. Lakshmi was amazed. She asked, "What are you doing?" . . . [The bride] politely replied, "O mother, you've drawn outlines in my courtyard. You may rest while I fill the design."
>
> Lakshmi understood . . . that the daughter-in-law would never finish completing the design and would keep the tradition of *mandana* for generations to come, . . . that she would have to stay there forever. She instantly blessed her, ". . . May you see your grandson playing in a golden cradle . . . I will always remain here in some form or the other, till these . . . [footprint *mandanas*] are drawn."
>
> From that day, the tradition of Lakshmi worship and footprint *mandanas* came into being. (Kaushal 2007: 25-26)

As in many oral folktales, there is a chicken-and-egg question here; note the reference to the 'tradition' of *mandana*. If *mandanas* did not exist before this, why is it that the young bride found that the women in her marital home did 'not know how to celebrate Diwali' properly? The cyclical quality of such folktales, which end with 'and that is how such and such practice began or came into being', points to the very real difficulty of tracing 'origin' in oral traditions – even if residually oral. Origin-myths can therefore often be later explanations for extant practices, usually designed to perpetuate the practice for the community's benefit.

Although Sanskrit treatises described how the ground ought to be prepared or how a drawing should be made, until recently, the knowledge of techniques and forms was only transmitted orally.

> The wisdom of India was transmitted orally and visually, written texts were resorted to only when memory . . . weakened. Visual transmission was relied upon far more than the written word. The making and beholding of symbols and images were part of living. (Kramrisch 1983: 117)

Given the generally perceived rigidity of rules and regulations in ancient Indian art practice, Kramrisch's view of theory's relative importance is refreshing. "Valuable as these various kinds of information are, we have to be aware that, like all theories, they are derived from, and subservient to, the practice" (1983: 264).

Modern writing on Indian floor-drawings also often reveals their cultural significance. In one poem, a girl's *kolam* expresses longing for her future partner; in another, a male poet pays homage to his mother's *kolam*-drawing, which he regards as an illiterate woman's means of expression, as valid as any other (Dulau n.d.: 184-186). In Parthasarathi's romance *Manipallavam*, an "unfinished *kolam* is used as a simile for . . . broken love" (Steinman 1989: 484).

2.4. MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

The first act in floor-drawing is the preparation of the ground. Most women sprinkle plain or cow-dung water,[85] or for special occasions, they "[scoop up sticky mud-and-dung paste] with their fingers . . . smoothing it over . . . cracked and flaking surfaces" (Huyler 1993: 174). It is only then that the drawing is made, while the ground is still damp.

Materials and tools required for floor-drawing practices across India are simple and inexpensive. As Huyler points out, Indian floor-drawings have tended to be predominantly white in colour. Although rice-flour or paste is most commonly used for white,[86] even traditionally, several other materials have been used, including it seems, gram, corn, sago or wheat-flour, chalk, *choona* (white lime),[87] burnt flint, stone powder – including pulverised marble – and *vibhuti* (ash) and in Rajasthan, *pandu* (white soil). The material may differ depending on the occasion the floor-drawing is being made for. For example, material for daily *kolams*, Friday *kolams*, *kolams* for sacraments of life and festival *kolams* may differ, "the last made with rice-flour instead of powdered stone, when possible" (Dulau n.d.: 178). Substitute materials are often used in the absence of a favoured material.

The other predominant colour has been red, for which organic vermilion (from mercury sulfide), haematite (ferric oxide), burnt brick, *kumkum* (lime mixed with turmeric) and

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[85] Steinman mentions that preparations for *kolam* drawing begin in the evening, with the threshold being cleaned with water, and the drawing itself follows the next morning (1989: 479). This is highly unlikely. The general belief – which is strong – is that the cleaning or sprinkling with water must immediately precede the act of drawing.

[86] For rice-flour, sunned rice grains are powdered, or rice-paste is allowed to dry before being pulverised. Rice-paste is made by soaking sunned rice grains in water overnight and then grinding them into a paste that is sufficiently runny to enable painting. According to *Indrama* (1980), in Bengal, rice-paste is called '*pithali*'. Various kinds of gum are often added to make a paste last longer.

[87] A variety of calcium compounds are used in floor-drawing: powdered quicklime (calcium oxide), slaked lime (calcium hydroxide – essentially quicklime mixed with water) and chalk (calcium carbonate). Even old mortar is sometimes ground to a fine powder to be recycled for floor-drawing.

various red soils are used. In Tamil Nadu, this is often a reddish brown paste called *chemmam*, made from *kavi-kal* (top-soil). In Rajasthan, it tends to be haematite mixed with cow-dung and either *geru* (red ochre) or *rati* (red earth available in Bundi). Associated with deities and their worship, red is rarely the dominant colour in traditional floor-drawings and is more often used to highlight details, especially central motifs. However, in some states, such as Rajasthan, red is also used to fill in outlines.

Blue, extracted from the *datura* flower, is also known to have been used in floor-drawings, though traditionally, the characteristic *panchavarna* (five colours believed to have magical significance) tend to be used. These are white, red, black (coal dust or the ash of paddy husk), green (*manayola* or from a variety of leaves, including powdered

Albizzia lebbek leaves, or simply dried herbs) and yellow (dried herbs or powdered turmeric).[88] The colours in a floor-drawing can often be indicative of the occasion for which is it made. *Mandanas* specific to certain seasons, for example, have shades of blue, green and yellow (Kaushal 2007: 22-23). Other materials less commonly used for making floor-drawings include coconut husks, sand and flowers. Today, of course, "a whole palette of artificially produced coloured powders" has been introduced (Charles n.d.: 48).

Flower *kolam* with colours, Pondicherry, Christmas 2007

Mohanty's notes on Orissan *chitas* highlight the agrarian culture of village life and its close relation to floor-drawings – to the very material used for them.

> [Passing by] . . . golden-brown fields . . . one sees people bending over to harvest the fruits of toil. On the road, . . . [we] had to slow down to allow [passage to] a person carrying an ample load of grain that shall be threshed to rice and pound into a paste that . . . [will be used] to make *pithas* (traditional cakes) and *chitas* . . . (2008)

The tools used by women across India are as simple: bits of cloth, sticks, tufts of hair, and less commonly, brushes. A *neem* or date twig could be used as a brush, sometimes with a piece of cotton tied around it. For making an *alpana*, a cloth piece "is immersed in

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[88] *Indrama* (1980) states that while *alpanas* are generally made with *pithali*, for some *vratas*, such as the Ara and Magh Mandal *vratas*, dry colour powders are used. It is unclear from the text but perhaps the magical significance of particular colours is required for specific *vratas*.

the paste . . . [that] is released and allowed to trickle down the ring finger, which moves along to make the design" (Das Gupta 1960: 23).[89] For finer lines, experienced Rajasthani women often skilfully use a tuft of hair that acts as "an ink filter in a fountain pen . . . [with] the third finger serving the purpose of a nib" (Saksena 1985: 3 and Kaushal 2007: 23). Whenever possible, a *mandana's* initial lines should be drawn by the eldest *sumangali* (auspiciously married woman) in a household. While older women generally draw the outlines, young girls fill them in. In south India, the most common technique is to roll powder between the thumb and index finger, letting it fall like 'dry water' from the hand.[90] When one says that the ideal *kolam* is unilinear, it does not mean women have to draw a *kolam* in a single stroke. Having to replenish powder at intervals ensures that her hand moves across the surface in fits and starts.[91]

> One section has been . . . nearly completed when the woman moves to another . . . , facing an entirely different direction. With each swerve of the pattern . . . [her] body shifts and turns, since it would be physically difficult to execute the overall design in one continuous line. . . . The *kolam* [ritual] is both a bodied and imagined practice . . . as much [a sequence of bodily movements] as a visual art form . . . requiring a quality of attentiveness akin to dance or yoga. (Nagarajan 1998b: 57-58)

Kalams are drawn without the aid of brushes or tools; using the thumb and forefinger, the maker releases powder in a thin stream. Beginning with black outlines from the centre, the coloured image gradually grows outwards and can take up to two hours to complete.[92] Once drawn, a canopy of palm fronds, hibiscus garlands and holy basil leaves is hung above it. Despite its elaborateness, each *kalam* is invariably erased immediately afterward.

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[89] According to *Indrama* (1980), it is the middle finger and not the ring finger that is used for tracing the *alpana*.

[90] Cammiade told Layard that he was "once shown how to make lines, and attempted to follow directions. I could not make a line of more than a few inches at a time and was told that would not do, 'the line must run'" (Layard 1937: 122).

[91] There are many beliefs connected to *kolam*-drawing, for example that one should stand upright and bend to the front while drawing; that if one draws the *kolam* after sunrise, one must do so by facing the spire of the temple; that one must not yawn while drawing; that one must not draw the *kolam* or wash the entrance after having lit the lamp (with reference to the evening), nor after having lit the hearth (with reference to the morning); and that if one draws the *kolam* while seated, one's wealth will decrease. (Dulau n.d.: 175)

[92] Colouring is sometimes achieved by filling up powder in bundles of muslin, and then beating the bundle to fill colour into an outlined shape. (Bairi 2007: 1)

Floor-drawing can be accompanied by praying, singing, dance, game-playing and story-telling. A "primary means of communication between . . . women . . . and their deities" (Huyler 1993: 175), floor-drawings were as much a means of offering to the divine as the devotional hymns praising the deity (Bairi 2007: 3). The most remarkable example of the performative aspect of floor-drawing practices is the *kalamezuthu*, around which ritualistic dances such as *attam*, *theyyam* and *mudiyettu* have evolved. These are performed to goddesses whose visual manifestations the drawings are (Archana 1981: 23). Performing multiple roles, the priest conducting the religious ritual draws, chants, sings and beats the drum. Sung in honour of the ritual's presiding deity, *pattus*

Kalam dedicated to Kali. Reproduced from Archana 1981: 23 (Fig.50)

(songs) – which are reportedly from an oral tradition and range from folk to classical, depending on the deity being worshipped – are played to several instruments, such as *ilathalam*, *veekkan chenda*, *kuzhal*, *kombu* and *chenda*. The ritual includes rice grain offerings which, consecrated by ritual, are later offered to the worshippers.

Floor-drawings also have a social significance. While *mandanas* contribute to our understanding of Rajasthan's culture, the inverse is also true, i.e. familiarity with Rajasthan's culture would make it easier to analyse *mandana* motifs.[93] This is applicable to the study of floor-drawings from other states as well. The drawings inform the culture they are a part of, and vice versa. Suggesting that the competitive spirit was not necessarily precipitated by modern contests, Huyler mentions that women in Orissa take immense pride in their finished handiwork, often competing "with each other for the most satisfactory results, which remain crisp and clear for only a short while before the activity of the family smudges them". Wandering Oriya mendicants prefer not to ask for alms at a house with an intact *chita*, as this probably signals "the absence of children who would have smeared it", i.e. marking the house as inauspicious due to the absence of offspring (Huyler 1993: 180).

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[93] While they do not do so deliberately, women also document Rajasthani culture through their *mandanas*. There "are a good many motifs drawn around the main central design which speak of various aspects of the social, political and religious life . . . [that] the land had lived through [during] the successive stages of her cultural development. They. . . maintain a record of many social customs and usages, observed by women-folk . . . indicate the crop that is standing in the fields and the season to follow . . ." (Saksena 1979: 53)

Girls usually start learning floor-drawing from their female relatives around the age of six, the practice thus being passed down successive generations of women (Swarup 1968: 238).[94] They tended to become competent in their twelfth year (Kramrisch 1983: 107), though this is not necessarily the case today. Although adolescent girls attend school and college and have active social lives today, the *kolam* in other times gave them a chance to show themselves in public.[95] "The *kolam* used to be viewed as something that . . . [she] had to excel at before puberty, one of the many aspects of her skills to run a household." Prospective in-laws often ascertained a bride's qualities by studying her *kolam*; if it was "particularly detailed and complex, she was interpreted as someone with 'a lot of patience' and the will to create beauty around her . . ." (Nagarajan 1998b: 56).

Floor-drawing is most common among Hindus but is also practised by Jains, Buddhists and Parsis. Considering that it serves as a springboard for any ritual ceremony,[96] floor-drawing is also quite egalitarian, "a symbol of an inter-caste practice . . . carried out by all women, regardless of their [age, social status], origins and conditions" (Dulau n.d.: 188).[97] However, according to one text, the *kalamezuthu* ritual is generally performed by members of castes such as the Kurups, Theyyampadi Nambiars, Theeyadi Nambiars and Theeyadi Unnis, each community's drawings possessing distinct characteristics. Note though, that the case of Kerala is different in many respects; e.g. in this southern state, it is the men who draw the floor-drawings. Unsurprisingly, the men are 'professional' *kalam* artists.

Although Kramrisch claims that floor-drawing in rural India was the prerogative of women, it would be more accurate to say, as Swarup does, that it has more or less become their monopoly. Male priests make ritual floor-drawings to consecrate space

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[94] According to Charles: "No responsible mother would ignore this aspect of her daughter's education for it is considered an important feminine art, and one requiring more subtlety and refinement than cooking or keeping house" (n.d.: 47).

[95] Also ". . . *kolam* art . . . offers the . . . [Tamil] woman a means to develop her personality and to raise her self-confidence, aspects which due to woman's subordinate role in society are generally neglected. A woman's actions and behaviour are largely circumscribed by social and ritual factors which leave her little room for individual expression. *Kolam* art can therefore act (though notably again within the framework of social conventions) as a means of sublimation of her frustrations and unfulfilled wishes (Steinman 1989: 483).

[96] "With the exception of . . . *sraddha* rites, all ritual ceremonies seem to include the *kolam* in one way or another. Be it a . . . [*homa*], a temple ritual, . . . [*samskara*] or the daily *puja* at home, all begin with the placing of a *kolam*" (Steinman 1989: 486).

[97] Kaushal mentions that widows can also draw *mandanas*, though on certain occasions such as the arrival of the bride and groom into the marital home, she is prohibited from drawing them. (2007: 21)

either in the inner sanctums of temples or in homes. Mohanti, who believes that *chitas* primarily serve a sacred and religious function, recalled an incident in his village when a *puja* was performed to help his nephew's wife recover from cancer. The priest, who came in to remove the 'evil powers', "asked for colours and covered the whole floor with beautiful drawings" (2008).

Feldhaus also refers to men in Maharashtra being hired to draw in others' homes.

> 'Right behind them would be the people in charge of the *rangoli*, ready with the . . . powder. When the plates were arranged, they would draw the *rangoli* . . . around them. . . . His quote is for however much is needed. At that time the contract for the *rangoli* would be one or one and a half rupees – very little. But, however few or however many [people ate, the family with the contract for the *rangoli* had to be prepared to decorate each place].' (1995: 152)

The most striking example of men making floor-drawings is found in Kerala, where the practice has become their bastion.[98] While conducting religious rituals, the male priest worships the *kalams* and the '*velichapa*' (oracle) gets possessed, rubbing off the drawing while in the possessed state (the erasure of the drawing forms a key component of the practice). Vestiges in *kalamezuthu* indicate that it may have once been the prerogative of women. For instance, *velichapas* wear a skirt and hold a crescent-edged sword, and in the Jambukeswara temple at Srirangam, the priest "dresses up as Parvati to perform daily oblations to Shiva". Archana argues,

> The crescent is the embodiment of the female principle. The moon regulates the women's periodic functions. It is the guardian of the embryo and the placenta. . . . All through the year, corresponding with the moon cycle, various *vratas* and *pujas* are performed by the women for fertility, material prosperity and later on for . . . [their husbands' longevity]. (1981: 24-25)

She reiterates that in earlier times, it was understood that anyone wearing the distinctive dress of a sex was engaged in occupations particular to that sex (1981: 25). Guillebaud also refers to a specific caste of Keralite men, who draw *kalams* in service to other castes (usually higher in rank).

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[98] Kerala was for a long time, and retains traces of, a matriarchal society. It is difficult to say whether this contributed to the men becoming the principal floor-drawing practitioners.

Kramrisch suggests that during the pre-Vedic period, when "visually conceived and executed rites were performed . . . by specialised practitioners, like . . . women trained to celebrate the visual rites", inasmuch as they created form, those women were artists (1983: 113). However, while most women practitioners today are not professionals in the modern sense of the word, it does not follow that male practitioners are amateurs, as is illustrated by the references in Maharashtra and Kerala. Described by some writers as a beautiful blend of Aryan, Dravidian and tribal traditions, one Keralite writer felt that unlike elsewhere in India, where floor-drawings are regarded more as a part of women's domestic routines, in Kerala, *kalamezuthu* has found pride of place among their rich artistic traditions. What was not discussed however, is that it may have been accorded the status of 'art' partly because in this state, it is the men – rather than the women – who practise it.

Nagarajan refers to *kolams* being made by *alis* (hermaphrodites), when they wish "to identify themselves as female-gendered for that day" (1998b: 4),[99] so floor-drawings may in fact be made by males, females and hermaphrodites. Although not exclusively their prerogative, floor-drawing is nevertheless the bastion of women of all ages and castes. For "most Hindus the guardian deity of the home is female . . . a caretaker, nurturing and benevolent"[100] so it is still the women who govern the Indian home, who "as the inheritors and prime practitioners of tradition and ritual" ensure that their home is protected against harm and the evil eye (Huyler 1993: 174).

Furthermore, floor-drawings provide women with a means of expressive worship that does not require the mediation of men. This is especially the case in their celebration of *vratas*, as priests are not required for the maintenance of these domestic vows. This allows the women "to add and develop the symbols and motifs from their imagination", culled from local legends and the community's *gramadevatas* and *gramadevis* (village god-lings and goddesses) (Desai 1985: 60).

Kilambi, who is perhaps the only author who has privileged the feminine, qualifies her position thus:

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[99] See Nagarajan 1998: 247-249, Figures 8, 8a and 9 for images of hermaphrodites making *kolams*.
[100] "Having many names, she is most often referred to as Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, fertility, and abundance, the supreme provider and protector of the family" (Huyler 1993: 174).

> My emphasis on the Feminine Principle is, however, not meant to imply an
> opposition between male and female. It is meant only to keep us conscious of the
> importance given to the feminine essence in conceptualising both cosmic and this-
> worldly reality. This could help to shed some light on the significance of the *muggu*
> and their authors, in terms of archetypal referents. It must be remembered that in a
> truly non-dualistic perspective, there is no room for absolute oppositions; the male
> and female principles themselves should be viewed as a dynamic fusion of
> temporarily differentiated manifestations, a fusion that even obliterates the opposition
> itself. . . (1986: 73)

Nevertheless, her emphasis on the Feminine Principle is extremely useful, and will be
further cited in subsequent chapters.

2.5. TAXONOMY

Being richly layered, Indian floor-drawings seem to defy classification and any attempt to
do so – such as Kaushal's and Saksena's – inevitably results in frequent overlapping.[101]
Just as an indication of possible classifications, I provide two examples here. *Mandanas*
can be classified by:

   i)   their compositional function;

   ii)   their root design or motif;

   iii)   the place they are drawn at;

   iv)   their essential formal characteristic;

   v)   the presence or absence of a grid of dots;

   vi)   which season they are made in;

   vii)   occasions they are drawn for (sub-divided into a. festivals, b. rites of
           passage).

Generally, *kolams* may be classified into:

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[101] Kaushal's classification derives much from Saksena, particularly his later text, in which he states clearly
that *mandanas* can be classified according to festivals, ceremonial occasions and seasons (1985: 2). While
Saksena's 1979 text additionally compares *mandanas* to hennaed hand decorations, his 1985 text – while
offering much less information – is undoubtedly more focussed and developed, at least in classification.
Saksena's taxonomy is simpler and differs considerably from Kaushal's. He provides more analysis of
geometric *mandanas*, relating them to Tantra. According to him, the drawings can be classified into three
groups: geometrical, floral and floro-geometrical, the meanings associated with each category being distinct,
although they are all related to magic and mysticism. He feels that floral *mandanas* carry socio-religious and
magico-religious meanings while both geometric and floro-geometric are "shrouded in Tantric mysteries,
having that mystic aura about them which pertains to various divinities, and who are symbolically
represented through them" (1979: 51).

i) *Pulli* (dot) *kolams*: Made of a dotted grid, with intricate and sinuous lines weaving around the dots; for daily *kolams*, skilful women often dispense with a grid, making freehand *kolams*;

ii) Line *kolams*: Can be symbolic, figurative or abstract; *kotu-kolams* (stripe *kolams*), which are formed by alternating red and white stripes[102] – "red and white being the colours of the mother goddess and of light and purity respectively" – may be included in this category (Steinman 1989: 481);

iii) *Isai* or *saptaswara kolams*: Synchronised with the seven musical notes, as is suggested by the word *saptaswara*;

iv) *Nirmer-* or *nieukkut-* (water) *kolams*:[103] A distinct category because they can be considered inauspicious. I have come across relatively few references to these, though they were clearly being made as late as 1998, despite the mysterious belief that they may invite misfortune.[104]

Although taxonomies are useful, it must not be assumed that floor-drawings across any state share the same style or repertoire of forms, nor that their symbolism is consistent. Huyler's descriptions of *mandanas* in various regions of Rajasthan illustrate this amply.[105]

2.6. SPACE AND TIME

The spatial canvas of floor-drawings is vast. In public spaces, they can be made in front of a temple, for example, or at wedding halls.[106] In domestic spaces, they can sometimes spread into every nook and corner of the house, as Kaushal says with reference to *mandanas*.

> Beginning at the threshold of the house, they expand and spread . . . [to the] courtyard, stairs, doors, rooms, store house, kitchen, hearth area, *puja* room,

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[102] Archana quotes a folk belief, according to which white earth dust and red soil represent husband and wife. The red and white stripes are particularly used in festive periods on the exterior walls of homes and temples (1981: 11).

[103] Also called *punal-oviyam*, literally 'water-picture' (Steinman, 1989: 481).

[104] Nagarajan refers to a woman showing how to make images of a butterfly, a lotus, and the Tamil poet Bharatiyar on still water (1998: 331, Fig.68). "A broad-mouthed vessel was filled with water and a few drops of milk were poured on to it. Rangoli was drawn on the surface of the water very carefully, using coloured powder. But a strong current of wind would shake the water, displace the powder and spoil the design" (Bairi 2007: 3).

[105] For a detailed taxonomy of *mandanas*, drawn from Saksena and Kaushal, see Appendix 5.

[106] Other spaces where they are made are discussed in detail in the following chapter.
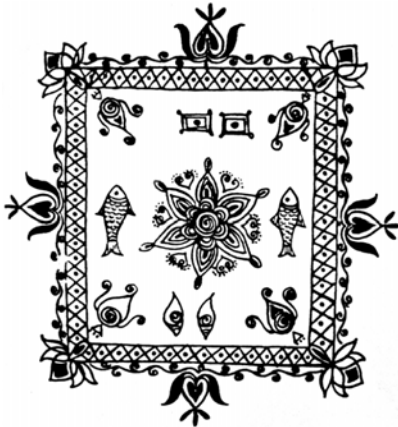
treasure chests and pots. The main *mandana* however, is drawn in the centre . . . of the room or the courtyard from where it spreads and expands . . . (2007: 22)

Wedding ceremony *alpanas*. Reproduced from Das Gupta 1960: 36

In the case of *mandanas*, the *del* (threshold) and the *chowk* or *angan* (courtyard) serve as focal points, with the latter being more important. We shall see in subsequent chapters how the threshold, both spatially and temporally, is a powerful concept in south India. Apart from commonly known spaces, such as *kot* (the ground where rituals are performed and prayers offered), *alpanas* are drawn to mark the seat of a distinguished gues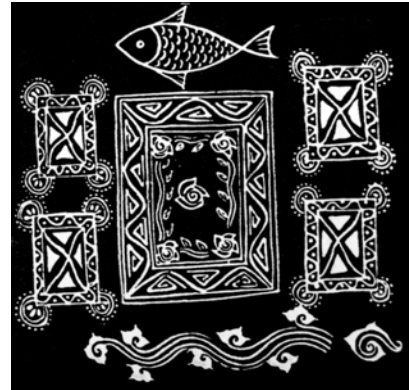t during a special meal, the seat of the idol to be worshipped, *piris* (wooden seats on which a bride and bridegroom sit during a wedding) and winnowing fans.

Floor-drawings often consecrate space but can also be made to distinguish between inside and outside space or to demarcate ritual from non-ritual space, or to mark territory. For example, like the *pandals* (canopies or tents) that annex public road space, thereby creating a single spatial unit of residence,[107] the *kolam's* latent elasticity and fluidity enable "it to change form, vary its motifs" and extend domestic space, resulting "in a veritable arterialisation of the urban landscape". While the *kolam* as a daily domestic rite is usually simple, on special occasions it can expand to adopt more space and colours; adapting "itself to the rhythms of the celebrations . . . [it is part for]" (Dulau n.d.: 115-116). The *kolam's* elasticity is complemented by a more discreet spatial annexation from the odours released during *kolam*-drawing, i.e. the water sprinkled on the ground before drawing the *kolam* evokes a subtly blended odour of wet earth, cow-dung and dust.

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[107] Rather than the absence of clear limits between individual and public spaces, this extension is actually evidence of this latent propensity of the house to extend its territory by creating, on this occasion, a privileged space for the establishment and the reinforcement of the gregarious relations that the house fosters. This temporary annexation enables the family to ostentatiously carry out the festivities linked to the commemorated event (Dulau n.d.: 117).

Chapter 2: Indian Floor-drawings: A Literature Review

Over time, specific drawings have developed to mark waxing and waning lunar cycles, weekdays, months and seasons. The drawings for weekdays are believed to invoke the beneficiary influences of the ruling planet of the day, whose symbols they are. Huyler suggests that in the far south, some women draw a different pattern every day of the year (1993: 175). Some are "identified with man in relation to cosmos, . . . oneness with nature. Others with the northward and southward [solar] journeys . . ." (Desai 1985: 58). There are also drawings that are specific to Hindu festivals and ceremonies. The drawings – usually symbolic of the occasion they are made for – are "believed to aid the process of transformation" (Huyler 1993: 178).

Sanj Pujani Vrata *alpanas*. Reproduced from Das Gupa 1960: 34 (left) and 33 (right)

As previously stated, floor-drawings are also made to mark *pujas* or *vratas*.[108] Abanindranath Tagore, according to Das Gupta, believed that *vratas* were of ancient origin. In the past, *alpana*-painting may have been a daily ritual, performed at dawn and dusk, but if so, this is no longer the case. Although *alpanas* are made for several festivals, *pujas* and sacraments of life, Das Gupta feels that to understand a village's arts, customs, religious faiths and social history, a study of *vratas* is 'indispensable'.[109] Whatever "their origin and early development, the *vratas* provide the clue to the meaning and significance of *alpanas* in the religious and social life of Bengal" (1960: 8). The great importance she attaches to *vratas* possibly stems from the fact that *alpanas* are indispensable to about 10-12 of the 40 or so *vratas* and *pujas* observed by Bengalis – some by all and some by specific groups. *Indrama* (1980)

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[108] These *pujas* and *vratas* include Nagapanchami, Rathasaptami, Onam, Suryanamaskara, Lakshmi Puja and Shanipuja.

[109] According to Pearson, *alpanas* were originally drawn "to keep dwelling place, city, or village safe and prosperous, and to make the cultivated land fertile and fruitful" (1996: 156, quoted by Nagarajan 1998b: 75). Floor-drawings made to complement or accompany vows are not restricted to Bengal. Nagarajan mentions vow *kolams* in several instances (e.g. 1998b Figs.85 and 86).

also affirms that *alpanas* are crucial for many *vratas* observed through the year. Important ceremonies include the Shiva *puja* observed throughout the month of Baisakhi; the Manasa *puja* on Nag Panchami, the Itu or Surya *puja* during the month of Kartika and the Magh Mandal *vratas* observed through the month of Magh.

Orissa's residents – called Oriyas – dedicate every Thursday to Lakshmi. During Gurubara Osha (the coming of Thursday), women fast, paint *chitas*, and offer the goddess cakes and other delicacies that can only be partaken by family members.

Mohanty feels that festivities during the last Thursday of every month are most elaborate.[110] As with other states' floor-drawings, *chitas* are linked to agricultural cycles. Lakshmi is represented by a special kind of whitish paddy placed in a grain measure called *mana*, from which Orissa's most important agricultural festival derives its name. Mana Basa is celebrated at "the time when the paddy in the low-lying fields is ripe

Chitas for Mana Basa, featuring several pairs of stylised Lakshmi's feet. Photo: Raja Mohanty

and harvesting has begun. Lakshmi . . . has blessed the cultivator and is to be thanked by the family members who rejoice in the bounty" (Mohanty 2007).

The simple gesture of drawing the *kolam* "constitutes the first act of the domestic routine. It signals . . . that the day has begun and that other ordinary, essential gestures will follow until nightfall" (Dulau n.d.: 126). Nagarajan points out that while *kolams* are drawn early in the morning, it is in the peak afternoon heat that women start chatting about *kolams* made in the morning, remarking on new designs or particular skills.

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[110] Mohanti recalls a childhood story read during the ritual worship of Lakshmi at harvest time, which hints at the egalitarian potential of *chitas*. "Lakshmi . . . was visiting a village one Thursday night. The housewives of all castes had decorated their houses to welcome her. But the goddess found the house of a sweeper woman the most attractive and entered that" (2004: 68). Apart from honouring Lakshmi every Thursday, *chitas*, as abstract images of Mangala, are also especially drawn every Tuesday.

Kalams are drawn primarily during the Malayalam month of Vrichchikkam (October-November), during which Kali is worshipped.[111] Although they are not necessarily drawn only during threshold hours, they are always begun at an appointed time. Swarup also mentions *phook kolam*, primarily rice-flour drawings decorated abundantly with coconut husks and floral arrangements of myriad colours – all laid out on the main doorway's outer courtyard. Although these are for festive occasions, they are particularly used during Onam, celebrated by Malayalis in honour of their legendary king Mahabali, whose reign coincided with Kerala's golden age and who therefore symbolises prosperity. Significantly, Onam is celebrated in the month of the new harvest.

The Indian year is generally divided into two halves, one auspicious and the other inauspicious. Margali, the month of the dying sun, which marks the end of the inauspicious half, is often called *pitai-matam* (unlucky month) because infectious diseases are common during this winter period, making it especially important for the *kolam* ritual, which is made at this time to appease disease goddesses. The festival of Pongal, during which *kolams* are most beautiful, marks the end of Margali and expresses joy and thanksgiving at the rice harvest. On the main Pongal day, each household cooks a pot of rice (often grown in their own fields), placed on top of their *kolam* in front of the house; the rice is cooked until it boils over, signifying hope for abundance in the new year (Nagarajan 1998: 76). On the second day, Surya Pongal, which celebrates the sun's rebirth and the beginning of the solar year, the *kolams* have predominantly swastika symbols that form "an essential part of the sun worship . . . of that day" (Steinman 1989: 487).[112] As we shall see in the following chapter, the *muggu* tradition shares a great deal with the *chita*, *kolam* and *kalam* traditions.

2.7. PURPOSES AND MEANINGS

Floor-drawings are drawn for various purposes. While some of them serve an apotropaic function, others propitiate and celebrate the beneficence of the deities that protect the

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[111] Malayalam is both the language and adjective for Kerala; natives of Kerala are called Malayali. I am not certain Archana is right when she states that the worship of Kali lasts almost five months in Kerala. If this were true at the time her text was written (1981), it is unlikely that this would still be the case today. It is more probable that one would see *kalams* in abundance only during Vrichchikkam. Another text mentions that *kalamezuthu* is performed as part of a festival held in most Bhagavathy temples in Kerala, which apparently starts on the first of Vrichchikam and lasts 40 days.
[112] Steinman states that the Surya Pongal day is also the Tamil New Year. This is a common error. Puthandu, which is the Tamil New Year, usually falls some time in March. However, *pongal*, which is also a rice dish, is cooked on Puthandu as well, which may explain his confusion.

home and bless the residents with progeny, wealth and health (Huyler 1993: 174). Indian floor-drawings have often been called painted prayers, bringing the divine into the sacrosanct Hindu home.

> As ritual is the heart of Hinduism, so the home is the heart of ritual. . . . Hindus believe that spirit is present in all matter, that every aspect of the universe, animate and inanimate, is imbued with life. . . . The home is the sanctuary . . . from the outside world, the realm of . . . privacy in a world run riot . . . The boundaries of that sanctuary must be safeguarded against the incursion of unwanted elements, both mundane and spiritual. . . . The most common rituals . . . to protect the home involve the decoration of its . . . floors with sacred patterns . . . which prohibit the entrance of evil and encourage the proliferation of good . . . [Malice] is conquered and the health and welfare of the inhabitants secure[d]. (Huyler 1993: 173)

Fusing ancient cultural concepts of art, the sacred and everyday life, this humble yet profound practice requires and encourages "grace, dexterity, creativity, a refined aesthetic, and an undivided attention on the part of the person executing it". The other refrain in discourses about floor-drawings is that despite its complexity, it is a commoner's art that is "characterised by the unsophisticated candour of its creators" (Swarup 1968: 241).

Jayakar believed that floor-drawings were "man's earliest attempt to communicate . . . [his] perceptions of the cosmos and of the . . . [imponderable] processes of birth, death and existence . . . [which] could only be explained or revealed non-verbally through geometry and the magical abstractions of mathematical form" (1989: 109). While these mysteries may have prompted the earliest drawings, the purpose, forms and practice have continually evolved, resulting in diverse interpretations about what constitutes their purpose.

Anand saw women's floor-drawings as their means of expressing exuberance, offering them respite from the monotony of their daily lives.[113] The motivation for *mandanas* is perhaps threefold: desire for aesthetics, superstitious belief, combined with – perhaps resulting in – a need for ritual action. Beyond the ritual, it is a woman's innate urge to create, and her

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[113] ". . . even when she is dominated by hereditary and current symbolism, she [seeks to] free herself from the routine continuum, through a kinetic impulse which drives her hand … At the root of . . . [her expression] may be . . . sheer exuberance, . . . [the expression of] shared experience and values, which comes through in million forms" (Anand 1969: 5-6).

desire for prosperity and fertility that serve as the primary impulse for creation. . . . By decorating and enhancing the beauty of their houses the women try to arrest the auspicious by binding the protective deities in these sacred enclosures. (Kaushal 2007: 25)

Cheeda Chowk *mandana*. Reproduced from Kaushal 2007

That *mandanas* are believed to secure the safety and fortune of family members is suggested by the belief prevalent in Rajasthan that *mandanas* are the courtyard's luck-lines, its *suhag* (the auspicious state of marriage). The more beautiful the *mandanas*, the more effective their ability to secure prosperity for the family.[114]

It is pertinent to mention here that the floor-drawing tradition is occasionally compared to the tradition of body-marking and wall-drawing.[115]

Although a sanitising substance, cow-dung is supposed to make the floor unusable unless adorned with a purifying agent. Even today, there is a belief prevalent in Rajasthan that a freshly washed, unadorned floor must not be walked over until first

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[114] It is said that it may be acceptable for a son to remain *kunwara* (unmarried) but a bare courtyard unadorned by a *mandana*, is a *kunwara, basi angan* (unmarried and un-plastered courtyard) – an inauspicious sign. Another song states that a courtyard without a drawing is as lifeless as the veranda without toys. It is also said, '*Angan ka chowk kantha tumhara*', meaning the *mandana* that is drawn in the courtyard "has the same significance . . . in the household, as has the husband in a Hindu family and in a Hindu woman's life" (Saksena 1979: 47).

[115] In communities, sects and cults across India, the belief that a variety of '*namams*' and '*tilakams*' (body-markings of sacred ashes, turmeric and vermillion) help protect, heal, commune, beautify and usher benevolent influences into our lives, is strong. '*Drishti*' markings protect one from the evil eye of the envious passersby; '*mehndi*' (henna) decorations beautify the exposed parts of the body; and '*mandalas*', '*beejaksharas*' and talismans are all practices closely related to floor-drawings (Dakshinachitra n.d.: 2). Tattooing, according to an early Mysore Census, is usually done by women. Furthermore, tattoo patterns, some of which are identical to *kolams* – though "the tattoo technique seems to result in squaring many of the lines which in the threshold designs are curved" – are connected to Ganesh and to averting the evil eye; they are also regarded by some as a "passport for the forgiveness of sins and for admission to heaven" (Layard 1937: 161).

Kramrisch mentions how Brahman and Kayastha women, in Mithila, north Bihar, use *aripana* symbols on the wall as well. Wall-drawings last longer than floor-drawings "whose dried rice-paste or coloured dust lasts only for the occasion, because the floors are trodden on – dust which has been trodden on has mystical powers – and the image wiped off" (1983: 113). "The exterior walls of the farming and fishing villages of coastal Orissa are resplendent with elaborate *jhoti chita*" (Huyler 1993: 180). Layard also mentions wall-drawings, which he mistakenly believes are confined to north India. According to him, materials used for wall-drawings include whitewash and ochre (1937: 120). So clearly there is often a parallel or complementary practice of wall-drawing. I have focussed on floor-drawings because I am especially interested in their ephemerality.

strewn over with green leaves or some corn (Saksena 1979: 46). According to Saksena, in Maharashtra – and I have heard this in Andhra too – there is a popular belief that by

> smearing the ground with cow-dung, lines are traced on the surface which criss-cross by overlapping sweeps of the cow-dung wash. . . . These lines – though imperceptible – emanate light waves which, by crossing each other in an irregular manner, prove injurious to the sight and the health of the people. To undo this effect, well-composed lines are drawn resulting in beautiful designs. (1979: 46)

The key words in Kramrisch's discussion on floor-drawings are 'magic' and 'power'. Tribal societies painted pictorial mosaics on the floor as magical diagrams and indeed their material itself – rice-flour – is believed to have magical powers that scare away evil spirits. Into the magical field, the invoked presence of god is bound to an enclosure of intricate lines, so that it cannot "escape into the ground where, like lightning, it would be rendered impotent". Further, these diagrams bring the invoked presence

> into the power of the person who has made the diagram . . . Originally far removed from decoration, . . . these ritual magic designs are [the] form of a will directed to an end which is to confine and control a supernatural power and isolate it from the ground. . . . They are intuited and functional diagrams transmitted by women. . . . [This practice is therefore a] visual form of magic . . . [a] delineation and a coercion of the presence of the numinous. . . . Its diagrams avoid becoming stereotyped, they are enriched and evolve where, as in the *vrata alpana* of eastern India, the hopes and wishes of the artist are precipitated into the design on the floor. (Kramrisch 1983: 106-107, text edited)

In other words, one of the purposes of *alpanas* is wish fulfilment. As previously stated, Das Gupta also starts by emphasising that *alpanas* are an integral part of '*vratas*' – which she defines as 'domestic religious observance by women'.[116] That she assigns such importance to *vratas* suggests that she perceives wish-fulfilment as a key purpose of the practice.

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[116] Huyler explains the particular function and nature of a *vrata*: "Although some *vratas* are pledged and conducted by men, they are generally the province of women. . . . *Vratas* are a form of direct interaction between the devotee and her deity without requiring the intercession of a priest and, as such, stand in distinct contrast to . . . hierarchical male-dominated Brahmanism. *Vratas* govern specific requests to the gods. . . . In return for receiving a divine boon, the devotee promises to honour the petitioned deity with ritual acts annually on a certain auspicious occasion, or sometimes once a month or even once a week. This requires the strict adherence to carefully prescribed ceremonies, usually arduous fasting, and sometimes severe penance. Aside from fasting and prayer, most *vratas* include the drawing of a magical diagram, the repetition of specific mantras, sacred words or formulas, and the recitation of a *katha*, story or legend associated with the particular deity beseeched" (1993: 178).

Chapter 2: Indian Floor-drawings: A Literature Review

Although Lakshmi worship is prominent in discourses on floor-drawings, Laksmi is not the only goddess venerated with floor-drawings. For example, according to Mohanti, *chitas* are especially made during the ritual worship of Ganesh, the remover of obstacles and Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom.[117] Mohanti, who writes that *chitas* are made during festivals and ceremonies, emphasises the difference between *yantras* and *chitas*, often confused as the same. He feels that while *yantras* are geometric abstractions representing the deities, *chitas* invite the deities to grace Oriya homes.

Mohanti, Prafulla, *Chita*, 'A village woman decorating the floor with rice-paste to welcome the goddess of wealth.' Reproduced from Mohanti 2004: 45

Speaking of the bright colours of *chitas* made during festivals honouring Durga and Kali, and the above-mentioned *chita* made for his nephew's wife in their home, Mohanti suggested that the function of floor-drawing is the sanctification of space; this makes the floor-drawings contextually very specific. ". . . had I brought these drawings to London – they would have been [considered] a work of art, but he [the male priest] would not draw them anywhere else or for anyone else" (2008). But the sanctification of space is only one of floor-drawing's multiple interpretations. Believed to possess the ability to invoke the auspicious, the *kolam* is also believed to have the power to deflect malevolence and envy; its craftiness is suggested by the Tamil proverb, "If you crawl under a tiny mat, I shall hide under a *kolam*" (Steinman 1989: 483).[118] Dulau feels that multiple kinds of intentions drive domestic rites and rituals. Some that are allusive declare themselves openly. For example, the lamps placed in niches that flank the doorways of houses, and mango leaves hung from lintels. Others, such as the *kolam*, carry subtler, more intimate intentions (n.d.: 167).

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[117] This applies to regional floor-drawings as well. Daily *kolams* in Tamil Nadu, for example, are most often made for Lakshmi, who – for women of all castes, is the guardian of prosperity and health. However, *kolams* also pay homage to Ganesh, who is especially important as he is prayed to for a suitable husband (Dulau n.d.: 178).
[118] "The *kolam's* apotropaic function, which today is only subconsciously realised, has to be understood against the background of a deeply rooted belief in ghosts and demons still prevalent amongst most villagers: through the *kolam* . . . any evil spirits are prevented from entering the house. Even a neutral observer will have difficulties to extricate himself from the . . . labyrinth of the loop *kolam* (Steinman 1989: 485).

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Kolams are also barometers conveying the emotional, physical and monetary state of a household. While their presence signifies auspiciousness or indicates normalcy – signalling to visitors and tutelary deities that the house is hospitable, to mendicants that they may expect alms at the house, its absence conveys misfortune and tragedy, often illness or death.[119] "By its absence, the *kolam* prescribes a supportive response to suffering, engendering a responsibility to enter the ritually polluted household in an empathetic emotional state" (Nagarajan 1998b: 100-101). The absence of floor-drawings was therefore perceived as a sign of sorrow or misfortune. Their presence on the other hand, signified welcome to all guests, especially Lakshmi, the deity of beauty, plenitude and prosperity.[120] As the *kolam* is also a marker of gender, its absence can signal the absence of a woman in the house or suggest that she is too busy working.[121] Women's prayers move from their hands to their *kolams*, to the feet that walk over them, transporting their prayers through the day. "In a context where suffering, death, illness, and poverty are everyday realities . . . [the] assumption is that weaving thoughts and words into designs has the [positive] power to shape reality" (Nagarajan 1998b: 61, 116-117).

Several authors echo Dulau's feeling that it is impossible to exhaust the *kolam's* interpretations and intentions (n.d.: 188). Nagarajan, who believes that *kolam*-making "revolves around key Tamil notions of work, play, hospitality, celebration, prayer, sacred space and time, the goddesses of earth and wealth, the evil eye, and the threshold" feels that at "the most conspicuous and accessible level, the *kolam* acts as a semiotic indicator of auspiciousness" (1998b: 44 and 223). Such complexity can seem confusing and prompts the obvious question: If Indian floor-drawing traditions are so open to interpretation, how does one determine whether an interpretation is valid? One thing however, is certain – floor-drawing is part and parcel of Hindu ritual life but as with all other aspects of the practice, interpretations of ritualism also differ. For example,

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[119] "Together with *neem*-leaves, which are attached to the door-frame, the absence of the *kolam* signifies that Mariyamman, the goddess of small pox and other diseases, has visited the house" (Steinman 1989: 485). *Kolams* in the form of smallpox are meant to welcome the goddess into the threshold, with the hope that she will then "not feel the need to inhabit human bodies" (Nagarajan 1998: 350). Women in Madras reminiscing about the *kolam's* past significance, state: "[Before we had a steady postal system, TV or radio] . . . a person would walk for days to come to a relative's house, and they would first look at the *kolam* to see if everything was okay. . . . The reason that you put that sign out is to have the visitor or the guest match the mood of the household" (Nagarajan 1998: 68).
[120] Floor-drawings were also considered *bhoota yagnyas*, one of the sacred *pancha maha yagnyas* "intended to create in people the spirit of sharing with all living beings" (Dakshinachitra n.d.: 2).
[121] This is not necessarily applicable only to urban women. Women working in the fields often have no time to make a *kolam*.

Archana suggests that *kalams* are drawn primarily in propitiation of Kali and 17 other goddesses worshipped for their power to inflict and cure epidemics, including Vasoorimala whose origin as the goddess of small-pox is explained in a legend featuring Kali, Parvati, and Shiva.[122] However, other texts, including Guillebaud's, suggest that snake deities are more central to Kerala's floor-drawing ritual.

2.8. RITUALISM

Many authors tend to view the ritual and aesthetic elements of floor-drawing as distinct, with some even according one more importance than the other. Saksena believes that in *mandanas*' auspicious-cum-decorative aspect, the auspicious always outweighs the decorative. Kaushal's opinion that aesthetics supersedes ritual in *mandanas* is similarly problematic in view of her later statements, because it suggests that she has not analysed the elements that constitute a ritual. Indeed, both Saksena's and Kaushal's texts suffer from the lack of definition of key terms, especially 'ritual' and 'aesthetics'. Neither author has probed the role of form and aesthetics in ritualism, though Saksena's text is indicative of the connections. This attempt to accord one element priority over the other appears futile but it suggests a dichotomy that cannot be ignored and which I tackle in following chapters.

Alpanas formally vary in different places, on specific occasions and according to the taste and skill of the individuals painting them. Swarup divides *alpanas* into two classes – ceremonial and ornamental. The first is strictly traditional and always includes motifs related to the occasion. For example, ". . . on the occasion of the worship of Manasa, the goddess who presides over snakes in Bengal, . . . the *alpana*['s] . . . designs and patterns must include figures of snakes" (1968: 239). Swarup feels that ceremonial *alpanas* do not offer


Naga Panchami *alpana*. Reproduced from Swarup 1968: 240

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[122] These 'disease' deities include Aryasastav, Bhadrakali, Bhagavati, Puthiya Bhagavati, Sri Kurumba, Vetakorumakan and possibly Ayyappan.

much scope for innovation, while 'purely ornamental' *alpanas* are more fascinating as they allow the women drawing them to express themselves. The less religious occasions offer opportunities to draw creations "unfettered by any convention or rules of ritual decoration" (1968: 240). Ornamental *alpanas* thus encourage more competition among the women, than strictly religious *alpanas*.

Although *alpanas* for each occasion must include specific symbols that carry ritual significance, the artist enjoys a certain degree of freedom and is allowed to incorporate new features. This may suggest that the aesthetic motivation in *alpanas* is greater, or at the very least equal to its ritual purpose. However, that the ritual force of the *alpana* can supersede its formal considerations is also indicated by the fact that in some places "it was found that a daubing of rice-paste served as a substitute for an *alpana*, but a *puja* would not be complete without even this poor substitute" (Das Gupta 1960: 10).
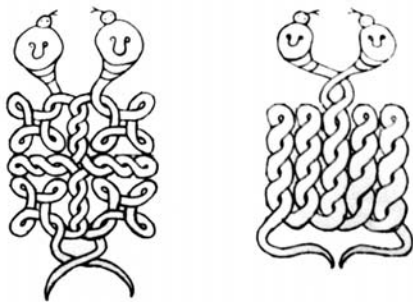
M. G. Ramakrishnan *et al*, 'Two forms of *kalam* with two heads.' Reproduced from Guillebaud 2006: 22 (Fig.2)

Most authors believe that *kalamezuthu* is "essentially ritualistic and never performed for purely decorative or secular purposes" (Archana 1981: 24) and most agree that it should be called a ritual art, perhaps even a 'temple art'. Several mention that when not made as part of temple festivities, *kalams* are drawn in connection with major rituals, the most important of which is the worship of Naga (the snake deity). Hindu families across Kerala worship the snake as a household deity. One text states that in coastal Karnataka's South Kanara and Udipi districts and the neighbouring regions of Kerala, "a spectacular and elaborate ritual of snake worship [is performed] . . . The central ritual involves the drawing of the Nagamandala, an intricate, maze-like, brilliantly coloured drawing of intertwined snake-coils . . ." (Dakshinachitra n.d.: 2-3) Guillebaud focuses on the complex interdependent relations between song and image in the *pambin tullal* ritual (*pambin*=snakes+*tullal*=trembling).[123] This ritual, which she classifies as domestic, is also known as *kalameluttu pattu*.

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[123] *Naga, sarppa*, and *pambin* all refer to the snake. While *pambin* is a distinctly south Indian term (Telugu and Tamil have words that are phonetically very close, also meaning snake), *naga* and *sarppa* are more

It is interesting that websites offering detailed information on *kalamezuthu* emphasise the traditional rigidity of *kalams*; in stark contrast, Guillebaud highlights the importance of variation and indeed how variation here is almost synonymous with beauty. According to Guillebaud, *kalameluttu pattus* are performed by low-caste Pulluvans who are in charge of the cult of snake deities.[124] Pulluvans work for upper caste families, providing musical services and performing various rituals for a number of purposes – chiefly, keeping away misfortune and maintaining general prosperity. Guillebaud describes the *kalam* as representing the deities "invoked in complex interlaces which are several metres large. . . . Epicentre of the whole ritual action, it is used as a privileged means to call the deities or make them appear". Erased after every – apparently nocturnal – ritual, the *kalam* is invariably complemented by instrumental and vocal music. "The songs. . . usually narrate the origins of the deities and their acts. They comment also upon the ritual actions which are performed simultaneously, for instance details of offerings, prayers and the attitude of the audience" (2006: 21).

Indian floor-drawing, probably *kalam*. Reproduced from *Indrama* 1980: 42

The most striking aspect of *kalameluttu pattus* is the Pulluvan's belief that only by referring to "an external component, the visual medium, or the plasticity of drawing" can music be provided with concepts (2006: 22). While explaining a principle of variation in music and graphic activity, a *kalameluttu* practitioner, Pulluvan Ramakrishnan drew variations of *kalam* in a notebook, which Guillebaud describes as the musicians' 'reflexive' support. This aid facilitates their memorisation of song lyrics and graphic

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Sanskritic and variants of both are used in many states across India, including in the south. Nagadev or Nagadevata refers specifically to the snake god.

[124] Layard cites an extract from Thurston that he believes describes the Tamil *kolams*:
". . . a never-ending doubled line interrupted at one point to form the head and body of a snake. There are the usual dots, and a central star-like figure. 'A Pulluvan whose caste is said to be descended from the snake deity, acts as the *pujari* or officiating minister. On the day appointed, he draws a geometrical design of a snake on the floor. . . . [drawn with rice-flour] the spaces between the coils are filled in with burnt rice-husk, turmeric powder, powdered green leaves, etc. . . . The Pulluvan plays on his earthen pot-drum. . . . Gradually the seated woman becomes possessed . . . Moving backwards and forwards, she rubs away the figure of the snake with the cocoa-nut flowers. . . . It may be necessary to rub away the snake as many as a hundred times, in which case the ceremony is prolonged over several weeks. Each time that the snake design is destroyed, one or two men with torches in their hands, perform a dance, keeping step to the Pulluvan's music" (1906: 290-291, quoted by Layard 1937: 156-158). The mention of the Pulluvan and the possession of the woman with men dancing in accompaniment, indicates that Thurston may be speaking of *kalamezhuthu* and not of Tamil Nadu *kolams*, as Layard states.

techniques but also their experimentation with and innovation of new *kalams*, yet to be drawn in the courtyards of patrons. Guillebaud believes *kalam* patrons are sensitive to the beauty of song and image, choosing a Pulluvan for his skills in creating both. In the *kalamezuthu* practice, variation not only guarantees ritual symbolic efficacy but also constitutes what is beautiful in both sound and image. The more varied the interdependent *pattu* and *kalam*, the more beautiful they are considered. "The search for 'beauty' is embedded in the ritual necessity to please the deities. Here, aesthetics and ritual efficacy proceed from the same intention" (2006: 22). It is in this complex relation between aesthetics and ritualism in the *kalamezuthu* practice that *kalams* offer a fertile field for understanding the nature of the floor-drawing tradition.

Kalam depicting Naga Yakshi. Reproduced from Archana 1981: 57 (Fig.161)

That ritual and form are inextricable is glaringly evident even in newspaper and magazine articles, yet with few exceptions like Guillebaud's short text, this has not been taken up in academic study. For example, women often make specific *kolams* for different weekdays, 'Shiva Peeth' on Mondays, 'Kalipeeth' on Tuesdays, 'Swastik' on Wednesdays, and 'Lakshmi *kolam*' on Fridays (Swarup 1968: 239). Other times, when a divine favour is sought, "such as the granting of a male heir", the *kolam* – like the *alpana* – can become a visual prayer, a means to wish fulfilment. "If the boon is granted, the *kolam* indicated for his initiation ceremony contains seven stars and hexagons representing the seven *rishis*, or holy men, of the sacred texts" (Charles n.d.: 47).

2.9. FORM AND SYMBOLISM

Indian floor-drawings can be geometric, abstract or figurative, or they can be symbolic representations of deities and their seats or vehicles. Geometric designs use a wide range of shapes, including triangles, circles, hexagons, squares and a rhombus. Desai surmises that floor-drawing grids helped teach basic calculation. The simplest grid consists of 3x3 dots. It can be extended to 108x108 dots.

Symbolism is deeply embedded in Indian arts and even the geometry of floor-drawings can be highly symbolic. For example, many believe that no floor-drawing can be started without a dot being placed at the centre. The dot, according to Tantric symbolism, is the point where the individual soul merges with the universal consciousness and where all living beings unite (Desai 1985: 61). While in Tantric symbolism, a dot "is the supreme reality, from which each and everything emanates and in which each and everything merges . . . the mysterious matrix, i.e. the *bija* (kernel or seed)", a line, whether "straight or curved, is the element of a composition, deriving its meaning from the position it is set in" (Saksena 1979: 53).[125] Around the central dot, you may have motifs representing the deities' protective energies, enclosed within a circle or a square. Floor-drawings often use symbols that are essentially manifestations of divine powers. When evoked, the deity "enters and blesses the home" (Desai 1985: 63).
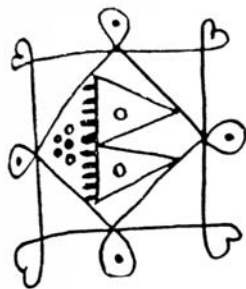
Extreme left: Rangoli from Gujarat and from West Bengal invoking Lakshmi to cross over the altar, come into the house and bless the family

Left: A square Yajnakunda
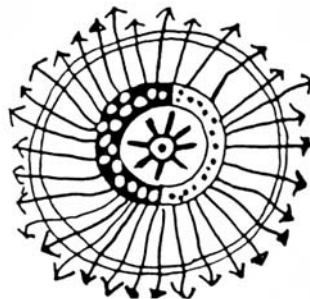
Extreme left: A tantric geometric form of female energy with the five basic senses of perception and knowledge. If the inverted triangles are drawn in pink or red they symbolize creativity using the five senses

Left: A tribal rangoli from Kathiwara in M.P. symbolising the Sun

Right: Aspects of the universal forms of Shiva and Shakti, Rangoli from Gujarat
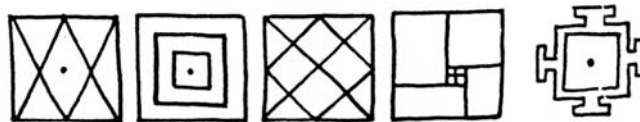
Symbolic floor-drawings from different states. Reproduced from Desai 1985: 63

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[125] ". . . if you make [a circle] more abstract, it becomes a point. Absolute abstraction . . . turns it into *shunya* [zero, nothingness]. And then from the *shunya*, it becomes a point, it becomes a circle, it expands and becomes the whole universe. . . . Everything begins with a dot, even a line begins with a dot. . . . [The line is] called the continuation of a dot. . . . And then, that circle becomes a square, becomes a triangle, becomes a rectangle…" (Mohanti 2008)

Saksena believes that though patently decorative, Rajasthan's *mandanas* are latently Tantric in nature. Their geometric shapes, e.g. quadrangles and polygons, can also be compared to the structural composition of minerals and chemicals.[126] In Tantric philosophy, geometric floor-drawings could be known as *yantra*, *chakra* or *mandala*. Tantra is a philosophy that has much to do with energy and its manifestation as sound and light. Sound in Tantra is called *mantra*; its complementary visual aspect is called *yantra*. No Tantric worship is truly complete without the drawing of a *yantra* and the chanting of a *mantra*.[127] Significantly, each *mantra* – complemented by a *yantra* – is believed "to contain the quintessence of the power of the god it represents . . . endowed with occult powers . . . [each *yantra*] may be used either for good or for evil purposes" (Saksena 1979: 51-52). The movement of the planets and their spherical shapes – including that of the sun – is represented by a circle, as is creation itself. Desai – who believes that the primary geometric forms used in Tantra contributed a sacred beauty to floor-drawings – says that the square, unlike the circle, was adopted as a symbol for the earth and for Yajnakunda (fire sacrifice, or later, any ceremony requiring fire).
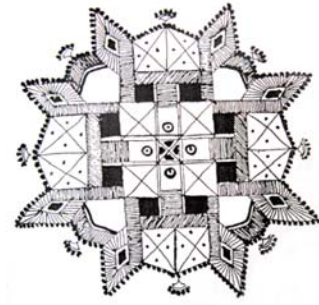
Chopad Chowk *mandana*. Reproduced from Kaushal 2007

> [The square] . . . becomes the pivotal form in religious ceremonies, rites and rituals. The four equal sides becoming a stable form, was attached to four *dharmas*, four *purusarthas*, four *Vedas* – four gates of knowledge, four *asramas* and four priests required for the Yajna sacrifice. A number of pure geometric forms were derived from a square and each form was assigned an appropriate symbol. (1985: 63)

Abstractions can be derived from the study of leaves, flowers, creepers, birds and animals. However, abstracted forms derived from nature can also be symbolic. The scorpion, drawn often in the *chowks* of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to ward off evil, symbolises human suffering that can be alleviated with divine intervention. The fish is thought to symbolise auspiciousness. Conch shells symbolise the ocean and therefore

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[126] "The diamond, which is the crystalline form of carbon, is the hardest known mineral. It is essentially the formation of a group of triangles. The triangle is considered to be the strongest combination of three equal lines resulting into the hardest form which can break, but which cannot change its formation, in spite of the crushing pressure applied to any of its three corners or angles. Under such a pressure, a square, instead of breaking, is reduced to a rhombus, whereas a rectangle changes to a parallelogram. That is why a diamond is called the *vrajra*, i.e. the hardest and strongest strike weapon used by Indra against his foes." (Saksena 1979: 53)

[127] For more on Tantra art, see Mookerjee 1994.

Vishnu, as the ocean is his abode. Lakshmi's seat, the lotus, is often drawn to adorn the place where the newly wedded couple stand or to mark the space the idol is to be worshipped (Swarup 1968: 240). Its powerful symbolism derives partly from the fact that its beauty triumphs over the murky waters that surround it. Gujarat alone is believed to have more than 1,000 variations of the lotus.[128]
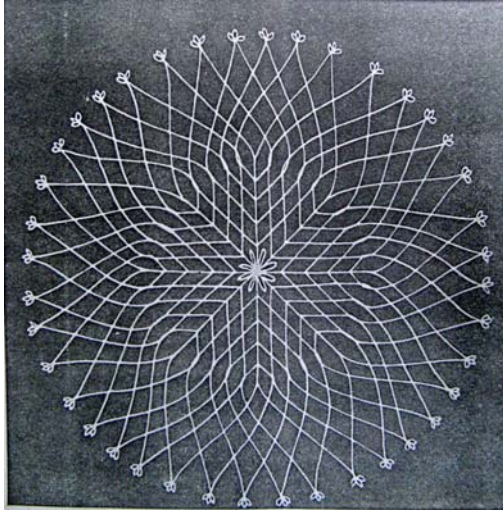
Sahasradala Padmam (thousand-petalled lotus). Reproduced from Archana 1981: 75 (Fig.231)

Other forms that are symbolic include deities' footprints. Desai, who believes that the essence of Indian art is transformation, cites a drawing that is based on a grid of 5x5 dots, "the feet of Lakshmi are first drawn, overlapped with those of Vishnu. A protective border is then drawn around it. This symbol . . . invokes harmony. It appears as a simple abstract pattern but is symbolic of . . . Lakshmi and the preserver, Vishnu" (1985: 58).[129] He felt that the floor-drawing tradition was slowly dying, taking with it "a whole vocabulary of philosophy, values, ethics, and beliefs that had manifested themselves in a visual form" (1985: 63).

Swarup feels that although the floor-drawing tradition is a ritual homage to god, it is also what she calls part of the 'socialisation of the arts'.

> Indeed, the Indian has responded to the instinct for artistic embellishment in his everyday life with so much vigour that there is no fast, festival or social event in the family which is not celebrated with all the traditional decorative ritualism. (1968: 238)

Although they do embellish homes, as we have seen, floor-drawings can be complex manifestations of deeply embedded cultural beliefs. The often apotropaic function of floor-drawings is discussed in detail in subsequent chapters, but it is sufficient to note here that "on days . . . when vows were observed, symbolic motifs were drawn to ward

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[128] Comprehensive research of Indian floor-drawings has just started, so the subcontinent's astonishing repertoire of popular floor motifs has not really been tapped (Dakshinachitra n. d: 2).
[129] Footprints of cows, India's sacred animal, are also used, and in some regions are called 'gada' or 'gopad'.

away evil spirits and bad omens" (Desai 1985: 58).[130] I believe it is especially revealing, furthermore, that on "specific festivals, the essence of the auspicious day was represented by a special pattern or design", as this is indicative of the significance of form within the practice. These forms, though often so conventionalised, have "been maintained in a fluid tradition" (Swarup 1968: 238).

> *Mandanas* are iconic representations . . . of various gods and goddesses drawn during specific festive and ceremonial occasions to secure their blessings. These drawings are at once the seat on which a specific deity is invoked and also a symbolic representation of the deity. They are also indicative of the presence of the deity. (Kaushal 2007: 16)

A *mandana* is usually composed of different parts; at the very centre is the root *mandana*, which is enclosed in a geometric shape (a square, triangle, quadrangle, hexagon, or octagon), expanding into an intricate pattern. *Bharan* (filler *mandanas*), as the name suggests, are used to fill compositional gaps – for example the space between a root design and the shape enclosing it; these can be flowers, creepers or leaves, or even simply dots and lines.[131] Sometimes the *mandana* is made decorative "by drawing semi circles around them called *laddoos*" (Kaushal 2007: 23). *Chhote-mote-mandane* (numerous small *mandanas*) should not be confused with filler *mandanas*; they can be drawn anywhere with the main *mandana* and include decorative creepers, stars, flowers, betel leaves, a chessboard, sweets and special hangings symbolizing the ears of wheat and barley. Among these, the *paglya* (footprint) occupies a significant position. Lastly, there are *mandanas* that serve as outer borders. Some compositional parts may be used independently, such as the borders or a root *mandana*. Others are interdependent, such as the main *mandana*, which – in theory – cannot be drawn without a root *mandana*. Kaushal and Saksena do not clarify whether a motif used as a filler *mandana* for example, can be used in the border too, or whether they are strictly allotted. I assume that some motifs can be in multiple categories.

There are several root *mandanas*, including *chowks* (squares), circles, *paglyas*, swastikas, eight-cornered stars and lotuses. The outer parts of each *mandana* "revolve round the central motif which, in its root, contains . . . [a form relating to] a particular

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[130] "The reasons for doing the *rangoli* and motifs and patterns used in it are all symbolic . . . [and their symbolism is part of] an unbroken chain of philosophic and religious thought, an integral part of the ethos of the subcontinent" (Desai 1985: 56).
[131] In some places *bharan* is also called *bharat*, *bhante*, or *sevra* (Kaushal 2007: 36).

deity . . . [which is] his or her *bija* . . . [(matrix)]" (Saksena 1979: 52). It is very likely that the root is actually the most symbolic and significant part of each *mandana*. A swastika is, if not the only root motif, certainly the most important one. Kaushal's field researcher Nirgune feels that each *mandana* is developed from the swastika and expanded until it is completed by drawing *kangoore* – ornamental spikes at the outer border, beyond which a *mandana* must not expand.

> The four arms of the swastika symbolize four protective arms of lord Vishnu. In the middle is the dot (*bindu*) symbolic of creation. The intersecting vertical and horizontal lines symbolize the male and female. The four lines of the swastika are also compared to four *ashramas* (four stages of life), four *varnas* (castes), and four Vedas. (Kaushal 2007: 28)

The four arms also represent the four cardinal points, which are compared to the four '*purusharthas*' – *dharma, artha, kama* and *moksha*. Symbolising auspiciousness, the swastika can be drawn independently or with other motifs. "The . . . depictions of mangoes, star, stool and other geometrical motifs around the main [swastika lends] . . . the drawing its specific nomenclature . . ." (Kaushal 2007: 32)

Satia Bajot *mandana*. Reproduced from Kaushal 2007

Formally, Kaushal divides *mandanas* into floral or geometric ones. Although she places *mandanas* resembling architectural plans into a separate category, I feel they are a sub-division in the geometric category. In folk terminology, they are called *kila* (fortress) or *durg*.[132] *Mandanas* drawn with the aid of dots (*tapaki*) usually start with a dotted grid with straight, horizontal, diagonal, vertical and curvaceous lines linking the dots; the lines forming "angles, motifs, [and] figures, each having a specific meaning" (Kaushal 2007: 24). With the exception of *tapaki-ke-mandana*, *mandanas* generally do not use grids.

Kaushal elaborates on the symbolism of several common *mandanas*, including the *chowpad chowk* (chess board motif representing four directions but also simply a chess game, connotative of marriage and fertility), the *bajot motif* (depicting a wooden stool "used for serving meals to guests, especially a son-in-law", symbolic of hospitality), *divlo*

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[132] For more on *mandanas* resembling architectural plans, see Chapter 3 in Saksena's 1979 text, where he speaks of how *tapakis* (dots) were used in architectural and town planning as a visual syntactic aid or a grid for designing. Bairi also mentions briefly that *rangavalli* designs are useful and applicable to engineering but does not explain how they are so (2007: 2).

(depicting and representing earthen lamps widely used on religious occasions and festivals across India, but also symbolising light that dispels any kind of darkness), *mor chowk* (figurative motif depicting the beauty and splendour of peacocks but also symbolic of love, grace, beauty, auspiciousness, knowledge and wealth), *hathri chowk* (geometric motif representing shops), and *sitara chowk* (geometric motif depicting stars, denoting the night sky filled with stars, also symbolising light) (2007: 32, 34).

Both Saksena and Kaushal elaborate on the symbolism of *paglyas* (footprints motifs), which is very useful because although *paglyas* constitute a special category in Rajasthan, footprint motifs are actually commonly made on the floor in some form or other across India. Saksena believes that no *mandana* is complete without a *paglya*. I believe that footprints and their representation not only signify the presence or passage of deities but also evoke the gesture of a devotee bowing at a deity's feet, which suggests humility. One has only to remember that scores of Indian temples and religious sites feature sculptural representations of a pair of feet or even sandals. In the prevalent Buddhist belief that after his birth, the lord "took seven steps . . . from his mother's womb" (Saksena 1979: 131), I believe the 'steps' represent both presence and passage. Footprints "are symbolic of *mangal* (auspiciousness)" (Kaushal 2007: 27), health and prosperity. They "also denote expansion of family lineage" (2007: 34); she does not explain how or why. Is it perhaps because footprints are also associated with the infant Krishna, often symbolising a child's footprints, and therefore indirectly lineage?

Thirty-five *paglya* types had already been collected and classified by 1979. Ranging from the simple to the intricate, the figurative to the symbolic, *paglyas* can even be rendered as suggestive abstractions. In Bengal and Bihar, one generally does not find figurative drawings of footprints (Saksena 1979: 128). In Rajasthan, "The simplest form of *paglyas* are footprint

Footprint *chitas*, Orissa, from photos by Raja Mohanty

impressions made by dipping a clenched fist in *rati* and stamped on the ground" (Kaushal 2007: 27) or "they are symbolically represented . . . by a row of inverted triangle[s]" (Saksena 1979: 173-174). Types of *paglya*

include *solah-bijani-ka-paglya* (composed of 16 fans), *sankal-ka-paglya* (of *sankal* or *mekhla*, links of a chain), *kali-ka-paglya* (of six-petalled flowers). While there are *paglyas* that figure in bigger *mandanas*, others such as *solah-bijani-ka-paglya* can in fact become the main *mandana*, surrounded by smaller *mandanas* or *phulara-phulari*, as with bigger *mandanas* (Saksena 1979: 128-129). Some *paglyas* can be specific to festivals, such as the *paglya gadula* (footprint with small and big carts above and below it) and *aathkali paglya* (footprint with eight-petalled flowers), both threshold *paglyas* drawn for Diwali (Kaushal 2007: 34).[133]

Saksena feels that the directionality of the footprints, in relation to their position in a house can be significant, as in the case of *paglyas* drawn by two different castes: the Vaisyas and Brahmins. Vaisya women, belonging to a trading community, tend to draw footprints with heels in and toes pointing outward, as their men frequently go out of their homes. In contrast, Brahmin women's footprints, with their toes pointing into the house, are suggestive of the occupation of the males in their households. Dedicated to learning, Brahmin men tended to stay home and were visited by those wanting to consult them on scholarly or priestly matters. This provides a glimpse into *mandana's* social context (1979: 130).[134]

Among *alpanas*, as I have already indicated, the *vrata alpanas* (*alpanas* made to accompany the maintenance of a vow) are especially important, so it is hardly surprising that they are rich in both design and connotation.

> The sun, the moon, the stars, the earth are integrated in them and also the things desired by the young girl who draws them, ornaments, a mirror and the like; and the whole cosmos is conjured up to bless and fulfil a young girl's wish – for even a simple wish is not to be fulfilled if no effort is made at the right time to communicate with the powers that work in heaven or on earth. Here it is the magic circle, in other designs – the sacred square, a concatenation of curves or an intersection of polygons – that encloses the magic field. (Kramrisch 1983: 106-107)

Illustrating the vastness of the thematic canvas of floor-drawings, Kaushal, while discussing *mandanas*, refers to a folktale in which a young woman is making an *alpana*; it echoes Kramrisch's phrase – 'the whole cosmos is conjured up'.

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[133] It is not only human feet that are drawn in Rajasthan. The nomadic Panwar tribe draw *gau-ka-khur* (footprints of cows or oxen). "It seems . . . relevant, because *godhan* (oxen) are worshipped by village people" (Saksena 1979: 174).
[134] Since footprints are usually meant to be a deity's, I am doubtful about this premise.
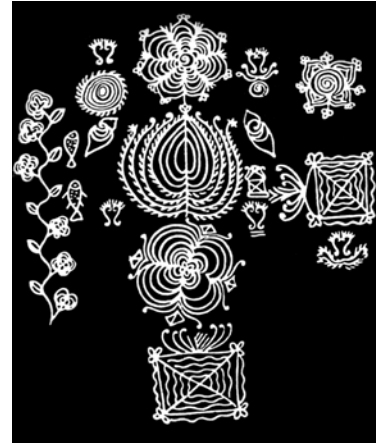
> . . . [First, Kajalrekha drew] the adored feet of her parents who were always uppermost in her mind. She drew two granaries taking care to paint the footsteps of the harvest goddess in the paths leading to them, and she introduced at intervals fine ears of rice drooping low with their burden. Then she drew the palace of the great god Shiva and his consort Parvati on the Kailash mountain. In the middle of a big lotus leaf, she painted Vishnu and Lakshmi seated together and on a chariot drawn by the royal swan, she painted the figure of Manasa Devi from whom all . . . victories proceeded. Then she drew the figures of the *siddhas*, who could perform Tantric practices and then those of the nymphs of heaven. She drew a *seora* (trophies *aspera*) grove and under it the figure of Bana Devi (the sylvan deity). Then she painted Raksha Kali, the goddess who saves us from all dangers. The warrior god Kartikeya and the writer-god Ganesh she drew next to their *vahanas* . . . [(animals they rode)]. And then Rama and Sita and Lakshmana were drawn by her admirably. The great chariot Pushpaka – the aeroplane – was sketched in her drawings and God Yama and Indra were also introduced in the panorama.
> She next painted the sea, the sun and the moon and last of all an old dilapidated temple in the middle of a woodland with the picture of a dead prince inside it. She drew all figures excepting her own. . . .
> When the painting was finished, she kindled a lamp fed by a sacred butter and then she bowed down with her head bent to the ground. (2007: 17)

Kajalrekha includes the celestial and earthly worlds in a drawing consisting of concentric circles, footprints, swastikas, floral patterns, animal and human figures. The fact that she draws the *alpana* to "activate the life-generating principle, so that her husband could come back to life" (presumably indicated by the mention of the dead prince) might explain why Kaushal refers to the tale as a '*vrata*'. Some *alpanas* include as many as 40 different motifs, "before each of which a flower is offered, and a song and a rhyme recited on important occasions" (Swarup 1968: 240). Popular *alpana* motifs include the universe (represented by circles) with the *padmalata* (lotus creeper), *samkhalata* (shell creeper) and geometrical designs inside the circles; the sun (usually painted in red as a human face and placed above the universe); the moon (always as a

Alpana for all *pujas*. Reproduced from Das Gupta 1960: 26

crescent, never a full moon, always white and placed below the universe) and the stars; chariots (often in the form of the swan); trees, plants and fish.[135] For the worship of

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[135] The fish symbolises prosperity. This is particularly unsurprising in Bengal, where fish is a staple food. Swarup avers that the fish is an especially auspicious symbol for all Hindus; I believe this may be because the *matsyavatar*, one of lord Vishnu's incarnations that make up the Hindu theory of evolution, is in the form of a fish. The figure of a fish, Swarup believes, appears "in almost all cases where water is shown or where

married women, specific motifs include the '*baju*' (an ornament for the upper arm), '*nath*' (an ornament for the nose), bangles and ear-tops.[136]
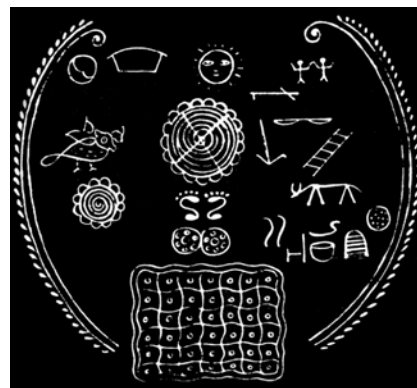

Lakshmi Puja *alpana*. Reproduced from Swarup 1968: 240

Some of the richest *alpana* compositions are made for Lakshmi Puja. Women's floor-drawings are vital to Lakshmi Puja in several states in India; Bengal is no exception. Lakshmi being the deity for every village housewife, many women across India worship her daily or weekly if they consider her their household deity; this is usually a domestic *puja* that can be elaborate or simple.[137] Common motifs for Lakshmi Puja represent elements of life considered essential for prosperity and contentment, including the paddy stalk (sometimes depicted as a granary, and sometimes as a creeper),[138] the owl (Lakshmi's '*vahana*' – vehicle), '*charan*' (Lakshmi's footprints), and the vermillion box. Also included are several objects essential in agriculture, namely the

plough, the sickle, the sun and a 'measure of rice'.

It is useful to look at the Lakshmi *puja alpanas* because they illustrate the role that the drawings play in the social life of the people. I propose that the motifs are all associated with their basic desire for prosperity – the agricultural tools help them achieve the desired prosperity; the fish, the paddy stalk and the measure of rice represent prosperity itself; the vermillion box represents a married woman's *sumangali* status and therefore indirectly fertility and prosperity, and the owl is associated with Lakshmi, who may grant them the

Lakshmi Puja *alpana*. Reproduced from Das Gupta 1960: 31

different kinds of animals are depicted" (1968: 239). I suggest that prior to colours being used, instead of colour acting as an indicator, signifying motifs suggested habitat.

[136] All these ornaments are worn by married women, and are therefore signs of the *sumangali* (. I would argue that the notion of a *sumangali* is, in its turn, intrinsically related to beliefs about fertility, procreation and lineage. It is therefore unsurprising that these signs of the *sumangali* should be included in *alpana* designs.

[137] Although the most important Lakshmi *puja* is held on a full moon night in the month of Ashwin (September-October), as a public ceremony, Lakshmi *puja* can be held three times a year in Bengal.

[138] "Paddy is regarded as the chief wealth and the symbol of prosperity and since Ashwin is connected with the ripening of the early winter paddy, Lakshmi is regarded as the presiding deity of the crop and an elaborate form of decoration is executed to worship her." (Swarup 1968: 239)

prosperity they seek. The existence of such distinct motifs indicates that *alpana* at the time Das Gupta was writing existed "more as a necessary ritual and a religious rite than as a desire to impart colour and gaiety to everyday life" (1960: 10).

When I read Mohanti (2004), I realised *chitas* were – at least stylistically – a curious blend of *alpanas* and *muggus*. Perhaps this is not surprising as Orissa borders Bengal at the northeast and Andhra at the south.[139] In Orissa, symmetrical designs symbolising Lakshmi – such as mounds of rice, maces, conches, elephants and lotuses are used. Other motifs include peacocks and sacred trees. Perhaps the most popular motif however, is a pair of footprints signifying Lakshmi's presence. Often, series of footsteps appear, possibly to show her passage into the home. The degree of abstraction used to depict the footprints varies. Some are highly stylized, graphic drawings, others – less gifted – are perhaps more playful, employing a boldness of line (Mohanty 2007).[140]
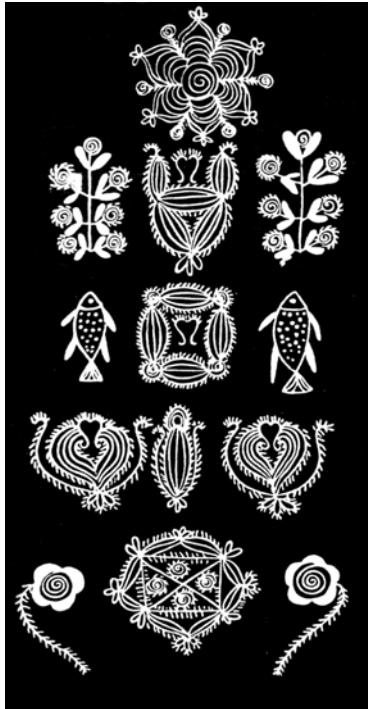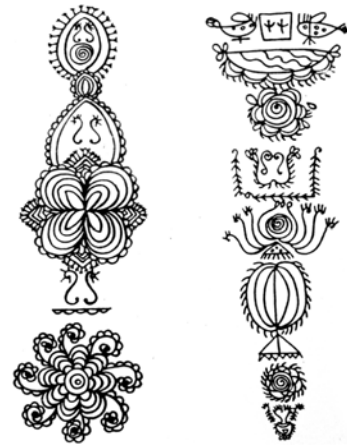
Lakshmi Puja *alpanas*. Reproduced from Das Gupta 1960: 29 (left) and 30 (right)

Some of the most interesting work on floor-drawings' forms has emerged in studies on the *kolams*, undoubtedly the floor-drawings that have been researched the most. Siromoney traced antecedents of some *kolam* forms to a variety of possible origins, including "the Jain temples of South Kanara and at least one to Mahayana Buddhism".

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[139] Mohanti concurred when I commented on this during one of our conversations, stating, "Unlike in Andhra, Orissa drawings are less geometrical, more fluid." I believe *chitas* combine the pattern of Andhra's drawings but tend towards the predominantly freehand style of *alpanas*. Music in these three states shows similar tendencies, i.e. Bengal's tends to be free-flowing, Andhra's far more structured, and Orissa's a blend of the two.

[140] Mohanty adds: "Increasingly one finds manufactured templates that work as sieves with patterns. This makes the drawings easier . . ."

Although dots now seem an integral part of dot *kolams*, "similar designs carved on the walls of temple *gopurams* do not show the dots . . . [The dotted grid is a clever device] . . . used as a skeletal frame-work by which women are able to memorise the design" (1978). Siromoney also studied *kolam* patterns from the perspective of computer mathematics, establishing simple mathematical properties of common *kolams*. Although it is beyond my understanding, I provide it here as an indicator of the broadness of perspectives that apply to studies about floor-drawings.[141]

> A two-dimensional formal language theory was developed in Madras and now there are a number of powerful results that deal with the generative capacity of two-dimensional grammars defined in a fashion analogous to the one-dimensional grammars of Chomsky. (1978)
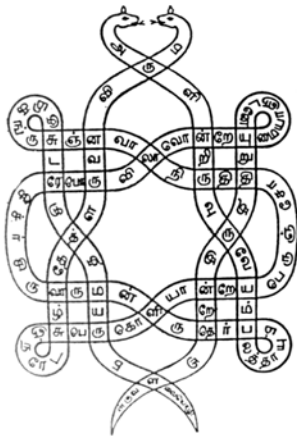
Walldén (1997) has made a fascinating study of the relation between military arrays and *kolams*. The connection –
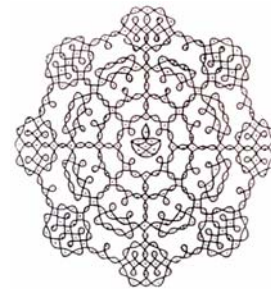
Nagabandha (left), *chakra-vyuha*, an eight-spoke wheel used in poetry (centre) and *sikke kolam* (right). Reproduced from Walldén 1997: 545 and 551 (from Tantinurai: 223) and 552 (from B. Sandblad)

though slender – cannot be overlooked, as the *Tamil Lexicon*, under the term *caruppatopattiram*, offers the meaning, 'Array of any army with fronts in all directions' as well as the following: 'Figure drawn with powders of varied colours on the floor of a sacrificial ground'. According to Walldén, there have already been studies connecting patterns of poetry and military array; considering that Tamil aesthetics has much to do with order, this is not unexpected. As previously mentioned, connections have been made between town planning and floor-drawing, particularly with *sarvatobhadra*, a drawing mentioned in many Sanskritic texts. Walldén finds no reference to town planning in *kolam* discourses but her premise cannot be ignored

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[141] "The number of *pullis* plus the number of crossings is equal to the number of edges plus one. For example if there are five *pullis* in a *kolam*, the number of crossings is four and the sum of these two is nine. Furthermore the number of edges is twice the number of crossings and it is eight. Eight plus one gives the same number nine" (Siromoney 1978).

because *nagabandha,* a diagram of two intertwining snakes – common in military and literary fields – bears a striking resemblance to several *kalamezuthus* and *kolams*. Another less obvious example Walldén offers is *chakra vyuha*, a wheel-array mentioned in a Tamil work as the eight-spoke-wheel in poetry. An untitled illustration in a *kolam* book of an eight-spoke-wheel design closely resembles the poetic one. Perhaps Walldén is unaware that the *chakra vyuha* is also a military formation, cited in the *Mahabharata* in the verses recounting Abhimanyu's death. He gets trapped in its intricacy, knowing how to enter but not how to retreat.[142] Bearing in mind that Siromoney explored theoretical models for generating two-dimensional arrays or matrices and has stated that each *kolam* can generate infinite patterns (he classified *kolams* as finite matrix *kolams*, regular matrix *kolams*, and array *kolams*), Walldén's premise does not seem as far-fetched as one might first suppose it to be.

Although these ramifications on the *kolams*' forms are intriguing, I am particularly interested in their symbolism. Steinman, who interprets unfortunately only a few of the forms, says, "almost all the motifs are symbols of fertility and procreation or of the cosmic life force and regeneration . . . all of them (including the snake in its positive aspects) are 'symbols of life' and therefore highly auspicious" (1989: 479). However, *kolams'* multiple meanings and purposes do not overshadow their sheer beauty. Indeed, their symmetrical, mathematical properties are not coincidental. "In Tamil Nadu, the fundamental aesthetic idea of beauty is intimately linked with a traditional concept of order: for instance, *ur-kolam-vatal* signifies a village procession in rank and file on festive occasions . . ." (Steinman 1989: 482). Characteristics that determine the *kolam's* beauty are repetition of motifs, proportion, symmetry, radiation and colour.

In stark contrast to floor-drawings in the other southern states, Kerala's *kalams* do not seem to have diverse motifs. There seem to be two distinct groups of *kalams* – one depicting goddesses exclusively and the other clearly related to snake worship but not necessarily depicting snakes. One may assume that unlike in some other states, where there are general motifs and specific ones for particular festivals, perhaps Kerala only has specific motifs relating to occasions. Certainly when I visited Kerala in November

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[142] This episode in the *Mahabharata's Bhagavad Gita* recounts the death of Arjun and Subhadra's son, Abhimanyu on the Kurukshetra battlefield. Having heard how to get into the *chakra vyuha* while in Subhadra's womb, he does not hear how to get out of it as Subhadra is interrupted at this point of the narrative; he is thus trapped in the military formation.

2007, there were no *kalams* adorning thresholds; only in villages bordering Tamil Nadu were there drawings looking exactly like the Tamil *kolams*, bearing no resemblance to either the drawings associated with snake worship or to the goddess drawings commonly called *kalams*. Most texts on *kalams* seem to be illustrated with drawings from either of the above-mentioned two groups.

Kalams are often characterised by oil lamps glowing in strategic spots, which add to their

Kari Nagam *kalam* (left) and *kalam* depicting Bhadrakali that accompanies the Mudiyettu dance performance. Reproduced from Archana 1981: 7 (left, Fig.6) and 24 (right, Figs.51-54)

allure and expressive figurativeness. *Kalams* can in fact express a range of emotions, for example anger. Most texts, except Guillebaud's, suggest that the *kalam's* sequence of lines, patterns, colours and even dimensions are traditionally stipulated, and must be adhered to. Formally, every *kalam* must apparently include three factors: it must portray or represent the presiding deity of the occasion; indicate the ritual's religious purpose as well as the caste of the person the ritual is being held for.

It would appear that the variety in *kalamezuthu* derives not from the artist's imagination but from the available repertoire of motifs associated with myriad occasions. However, in Guillebaud's article, which discusses the sound and visual components of the '*pambin tullal*' ritual involving '*kalams*', a *kalamezuthu* practitioner clearly states that they are allowed to draw any form, and even the snake *kalam*, traditionally limited to one form, is now being experimented with.[143]

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[143] During an interview in 2000, Pulluvan Ramakrishnan states, "According to the imagination of the artist, any form of *kalam* can be drawn. . . . The snake *kalam* is one, but we are drawing it in different forms, *rupam*." (Guillebaud 2006: 22)

2.10. CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES

Many authors feel that modernity has eroded the very notion of the sacred, resulting in floor-drawings fast fading in their traditional forms. With the rapid expansion of mass media, urbanisation and industrialisation, values are questioned, aesthetics change with urban housing and fewer floor-drawings are made.

> Cement walls and floors are less conducive to ephemeral art than are those of mud-and-dung. Many urban women say the tradition is representative of beliefs which are no longer important to them. Some view it as symbolic of an unproductive superstitious mentality. Others remark that it may be a pleasant 'folk art', but it is rarely worth the trouble. . . . The most lingering traditional forms are *vrata* diagrams and those *kolams* and *rangolis* used on wedding daises and altars, as each is integral to rituals which are still deemed of vital importance. . . . [This ancient form of 'writing' pictures] may not be of value much longer. (Huyler 1993: 190-191)

Bairi feels that interest in this indigenous art needs to be revived. Sidhartha believes that the practice has become a formal ritual lacking symbolism and sanctity. Once also a daily ritual, in some states floor-drawings gradually began to be drawn only to mark
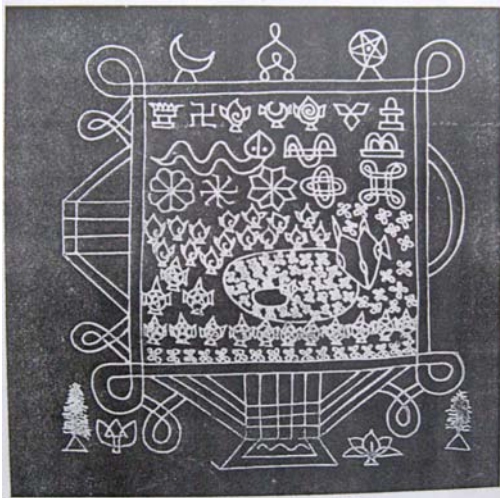
Gopadma Vrata *rangoli*, Karnataka. Reproduced from Archana 1981: 13 (Fig.19)

major sacraments. However, this does not mean that floor-drawing practices are disappearing. In the 1970s, a survey revealed that new *kolam* patterns were still being created in Madras (Siromoney 1978). The *kolam* today has taken on many avatars, and is included in school and college curricula as well as craft institutes such as the Dakshinachitra Art Centre near Chennai.[144] "What was traditionally the woman's forte is now being challenged by male experts; scientists and mathematicians are probing its complex logic; engineers are exploiting its hidden possibilities in creating sophisticated software" (Dakshinachitra n.d.: 3).

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[144] Interestingly, a workshop conducted by a university's school of performing arts – where students from 41 Tamil universities made traditional *kolams* and innovative ones with flowers, grains and vegetables – spearheaded a syllabus for degree courses in *kolam*. "The vice-chancellor of the university . . . viewed *kolams* as . . . embodying scientific, mathematical and artistic values and as a medium of visual communication." (Kavitha 2006)

Chapter 2: Indian Floor-drawings: A Literature Review

I believe floor-drawing is adapting to changing contexts; for example, floor-drawings are now quite popular at conferences, state events and house-warmings and its forms have been adopted as symbols of ethnicity. In Gujarat, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, annual competitions are held on a grand scale, resulting in rising interest among the Indian Diaspora in the West.[145] This has also encouraged the publication industry to produce a large variety of floor-drawing chapbooks. This may raise concerns as to the nature of the tradition that survives but "the soft splash of water on the threshold of homes in the early dawn and the shadowy figures bent over elaborate patterns" offer some hope (Sidhartha 2001). I find two authors' – Das Gupta's and Nagarajan's – discussions of contemporary floor-drawings very relevant to my study, though their discussions focus on entirely different aspects of the practice. I have already discussed Nagarajan's work in the previous chapter; I now outline Das Gupta's discussion.

In addition to discussing origin, purpose and practice, Das Gupta, who studies *alpanas* to chart a policy for their revival, examines their forms and their sources of inspiration; the probable causes for their decline; and provides an overview of a newer form of *alpana* taught at Kala Bhavan, Shantiniketan. It is her additional discussions that are particularly relevant to my study. As early as 1960, Das Gupta believed that the art of the *alpana* was getting lost and that if nothing were done to revive it, only vestiges would linger. As a tradition deprived of its ritual significance, it would lose its creative force. The decay of the art had composite causes: industrialisation and resultant competition between machine-made and hand-made goods, the break-up and disorganisation of the rural economy and social life; the replacement of vitally inter-dependent family units in a self-sufficient village economy by a commercial and individualistic order; urban culture and the educational system the British introduced, resulting in a complete divorce from the soil; consequent ignorance among the elite of the vital art traditions of the people; and the loss of faith in older values among the intelligentsia.

Shantiniketan *alpanas* provide an interesting case study for attempts made to guide the transition of traditional arts into modern practices. At Shantiniketan, white chalk powder was already being used instead of rice-paste, presumably even before 1960. Several

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[145] In the 1980s, floor-drawing workshops were apparently held in community galleries such as the Whitechapel Art Gallery and I know of Indians living in the West who teach Indian floor-drawing to those not of Indian origin.

other coloured materials were also used, such as lamp black, charcoal powder, red soil, yellow soil and brown or emerald chemical powder. Apart from these 'attractive' colours, it was common to find students making *alpanas* with flowers and leaves.

Das Gupta appears critical of the *alpanas* taught in Shantiniketan, which she describes as a highly decorative art, bearing little resemblance to the *alpanas* made in rural Bengali homes. She hastens to add however, that this does not mean that there has never been or that there cannot ever be any point of contact between the two kinds. Further, she hopes that a new kind of *alpana* may be evolved by synthesising the best of the old and the new. Pointing out that certain basic elements are shared by the two, such as "the derivation of abstract decorative forms from a study of . . . [nature], reliance on circular curves and various traditional representations", she states that for Shantiniketan artists, "beauty has been the only consideration and they have been eclectic in attitude". Although she struggles to refrain from criticism, she is disparaging about the formal results of an art that, for all its intricacy and careful planning and execution, suffers from a lack of religious significance and ritualistic meaning. Being "free from the demands of religious ceremonies, they have dispensed with the symbolic representations which are an indispensable part of any *alpana* meant for a *puja* or *vrata*" (1960: 11).

The *alpanas* made in rural homes, by contrast, are spontaneous freehand paintings deriving inspiration from, and being a continuation of, traditional designs handed down from generation to generation. Abanindranath Tagore, who made a pioneering study of the traditional *alpanas*, also felt that the graceful lines painted with admirable ease by the rural folk, did "not suffer for the lack of mathematical precision" (Das Gupta 1960: 11). What is even more significant is that in Shantiniketan, despite the fact that *alpanas* were used on all ceremonial occasions, no particular motifs were related to any particular occasion; tellingly, Das Gupta calls them 'secular' *alpanas*.[146]

Believing that rural *alpanas* "have certain qualities . . . well worth preserving", she warns of the pitfalls of attempting to introduce new forms of *alpanas* into the villages, without

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[146] Writing in 1968, Bairi (2007) mentions that in Shantiniketan, students made *alpanas* not only on traditional auspicious days but also on festive occasions such as New Year's, Vasanta Utsava, Tagore's Birthday, Shilpa Utsava (industry festival), Vriksharopana Utsava (tree planting festival) and even to honour dignitaries' visits to Kala Bhavan.

first devising "an approach that will bring fresh life to this old art, and not supplant it by a new one" (1960: 12). She cautions repeatedly that any revival of the *alpana* must infuse new forms into the old so as to make the new *alpanas* recognisable to the villagers, for whom their role is primarily ritual, the purpose fulfilled religious and social. The new *alpana*, were it to be merely decorative, would be rejected by them as it would then not fulfil their needs. She also urges that the material should continue to be rice-paste instead of chalk, because rice and paddy are symbols of life; similarly, *alpana* patterns should reflect the life around them. "They should include symbols like the fish, the sickle and the plough", which lend meaning to *alpanas* (1960: 15).

Having identified probable causes for *alpana's* decline, and having understood that the ritual forms part of culture – an acquired habit that plays a crucial role in the maintenance of a social structure – Das Gupta's suggestion for its revival comes as a surprise. She feels that a well-considered introduction of *alpana* into school syllabi for girls would contribute greatly towards its revival. She rightly supposes that one of the most significant causes for *alpana's* decline is probably a waning of religious faith. Considering that India, and in particular West Bengal, is attempting to transform itself into a secular society, the desire to revive an art that was an integral part of religious rituals seems odd.[147] One must assume then, although she does not explicitly state as such, that the revival is therefore being attempted because the form of the art is considered worth the effort. The question of why the art is considered worth reviving is crucial. As part of a school syllabus, *alpanas* would automatically be part of the 'modern' division of areas of life into specific subjects – in this case, the fine or visual arts are divorced from the life that supports, surrounds and supplements them and indeed in the case of floor-drawings, the context perhaps determines the very form of the text.

Indrama (1980) credits the revival of the dying *alpana* practice to the efforts of Rabindranath Tagore and his students at Shantiniketan, which in the 1960s, was the only place in the country where floor-drawings were a subject in an art curriculum.[148]

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[147] West Bengal has been led by a Leftist government for several years, and India is officially a secular nation-state.

[148] "Now a popular art, some four or five decades back, *alpana* was confined to the villages and was a dying folk art. At that time, poet Tagore invited Sukumari Debi, a young widow from East Bengal to teach the art of of *alpana* drawing to the students of Kalabhavan at Shantiniketan. Under the guidance of . . . Nandalal Bose, Sukumari Debi etc., later, the Kalabhavan artists considerably enriched *alpana* designs by introducing a large variety of new motifs and features" (*Indrama* 1980: 44).

According to Guha-Thakurta, during the 1920s, "the *alpana* was transformed into a potent symbol of cultural and political resistance by Bengalis fighting British colonialism" (cited by Nagarajan 1998b: 83).

When Das Gupta warns that 'merely decorative' *alpanas* would not be acceptable to the villagers, the subtext seems to be that the villagers want to hold on to the ritual, while the policy-makers, using art schools, want to focus on the form. The point that she does not seem to consider is that any tradition that is divorced from social life will sooner or later again require a revival. Despite grasping the context of the traditional art so well, she fails to question whether focussing on the art as text will yield to any self-sustainable practice. It is hardly surprising that following an experiment such as in Shantiniketan, *alpana* designs are now "also popular on leather, textiles and many articles of interior decoration" (*Indrama* 1980: 44). Any attempt to revive a traditional art needs to critically evaluate what position the 'new' art will have in its modern context and whether that position can sustain the revival. In other words, what is it to mean to its practitioners?

2.11. CONCLUSION

The earliest reference to *kolams* by an anthropologist was at the Cambridge Anthropological Club on 19 October 1927, where a Dr. Haddon presented a paper on A. B. Deacon's investigations in Malekula in which he referred to and showed examples of the geometrical diagrams which Deacon had discovered on the archipelago (Durai 1929: 77). These were later sent to Layard, who compared Tamil *kolams* to Malekulan geometrical diagrams that Melanesian women apparently drew following the death of their men-folk. Although Layard's detailed analysis of forms is extraordinary for its time and still very pertinent, his interpretations are undoubtedly compromised because they were based on the typological and mythological analysis of material he was furnished by others. For example, he avers that the snake motif must have been picked up because of the aptness of the snake's long curling body for a continuous-line motif and acknowledges that its sacredness must have contributed to its adoption as a threshold motif, but he does not discuss its symbolism any further (1937: 153-156). There are also a few obvious errors, such as his assumption that *kolams* are only drawn during Margali (1937: 121).

Chapter 2: Indian Floor-drawings: A Literature Review

In contrast, Archana's (1981) ethnographic work appears to have been extensive and was carried out in all four southern states – including Andhra Pradesh. Although her text remains significant, it is essentially a semi-philosophical essay on floor-drawings in which she offers interpretations on concepts of time, space and culture embedded in the drawings – focussing on cultural metaphors of death and rebirth and their visual symbolisation of fertility and regeneration (in the form of snakes and dots). It lacks academic rigour and does not reference the practitioners' viewpoints but makes up for these deficiencies with sensitive perception.

Kramrisch (1983) was possibly the first Western art historian who mentioned Indian floor-drawings (specifically *alpanas*), covering early literary references to them, their perceived origin, purpose and a brief description of the tradition but her writing on floor-drawings – although insightful – remained insignificant in the context of her other work. Moreover, like much other writing on floor-drawings, it was woefully short; indeed Durai's article is less than a page long, and most others (including those by Desai, Charles and Guillebaud) are no more than four pages in length. Although these various short articles provided a useful springboard, none adopted a holistic approach. Dulau's writing – so wonderfully evocative – focuses on spatial considerations in the *kolam* tradition.

Thus far, Kilambi (1986) is the sole author to have discussed *muggus* in an academic paper in English. Unfortunately, she also appears to have based her paper on secondary and even tertiary sources. She also admits that her knowledge is restricted to Hyderabad, an urban context, where many of the rituals that persist in villages had already faded at the time of her writing. Describing her paper as a "tentative laying out of feelers to understand the belief process underlying the making of the *muggu* and the rapport of the divine, to the objects/gestures that mediate between the divine and the human, and to the believers themselves", she states that a "deeper analysis of the nature of this [magico-religious] intent must await the opportunity to hear firsthand the ideas and conceptions of the contemporary authors of *muggu*" (1986: 98-99). As she did not subsequently publish more, one must assume that she did not have the opportunity to carry out her intentions. Moreover, she questioned whether such an understanding is even possible, "especially when the one seeking to understand is an outsider, either to Indian culture and the manner in which it expresses belief, or to belief itself, or to both". This suggests that she was an expatriate, which may explain why she did not rely on

empirical experience in the first place. However, such cultural distance resulted in her turning to Hindu canonical sources, which prove useful; her privileging of the Feminine Principle is also pertinent to my study, as will become clear in subsequent chapters.

Similarly, Steinman (1989) was by his own admission handicapped in the field – among shy Tamil women – by his male, foreigner status. His paper is nevertheless comprehensive and nuanced (I would say even holistic), though unfortunately the bulk of his research remains inaccessible in English. Nagarajan (1998) is the next significant author to have studied Indian floor-drawings (*kolams*).[149] She contributes significantly to Steinman's work with her ecological reading of the earth goddess Bhu Devi's significance within *kolam* discourses and her concept of intermittent sacrality (discussed in Chapter 3). Although she achieves her admirable intention of privileging the voice of *kolam*-makers, I cannot help questioning whether her ecological focus did not direct her interactions with the authors of the *kolam* to a significant extent, for – on the basis of the other texts on *kolams*, including Steinman's – it is difficult to believe that *kolam*-makers did not offer other interpretations for *kolam*-making. As I have already indicated in Chapter 1, her study of aesthetics in the *kolam* tradition is also seriously flawed.

Although many of the above authors have appreciated the symbolism inherent in Indian floor-drawings, those who have focussed on form and symbolism have often overlooked other related meanings, thereby compromising their interpretations. Guillebaud's brief paper begs a pertinent question: What role does form play in the ritual efficacy of a floor-drawing? Authors discussing the apotropaic character of *kolams* (such as Gell, Desai, Huyler and Steinman) either do so briefly, or like Gell – whom I discuss in Chapter 4 – do not relate it to other interpretations. Authors like Kaushal and Saksena have not sufficiently analysed the ritual purpose of floor-drawings, whereas authors like Nagarajan have barely touched upon their visual symbolism. Floor-drawings' ritualism and aesthetics are almost divorced; although Nagarajan's paper is supposed to explore *kolams'* embedded ritualism and aesthetics as well as ecology, her religious conceptions are clearly chosen and oriented towards her ecological perspective, so there is little analysis of how their formal language contributes to their ritual purpose. Indeed, the

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[149] Nagarajan points out that most writing on *kolams* until Archana's 1981 text – including Layard and Durai – was not based on fieldwork but library materials (1998: 33-34). What she does not question is where the library material came from in the first place; after all, these writers presumably used existing photographic and illustrative documentation on the *kolam*.

word 'contribute' is not appropriate in this context, because I suggest that ritualism and form are not only complementary but ultimately indivisible in the southern traditions; when studied in isolation, they reveal but a partial picture of their significance in the lives of their makers. In order to determine the significance of form in what has often been called a 'ritual art', I will therefore first explore its patent ritualism.

CHAPTER 3: *MUGGUS*: A RITUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1. THE SANKRANTI FESTIVAL

As indicated in Chapter 2, each state's floor-drawing tends to be most prolific during a particular festival. In Andhra, this is Sankranti. Without exception, my informants expressed surprise that I was researching *muggus* in September and urged me to wait for Sankranti, which is celebrated in mid-January. As Lakshmi (Poduru) stated,

> . . . the ordinary *muggus* are not worth studying; the Sankranti *muggus* are special. For Sankranti, women enthusiastically draw *muggus* on the street, during the whole month [leading up to Sankranti]. On the three main days of the festival – Bhogi, Sankranti and Kanumu – the streets are literally 'filled' with elaborate *muggus*.

Muggus for Sankranti, Poduru, January 2008

However, many of them understood when I explained why I wanted to study the non-festival *muggus* as well as the Sankranti *muggus*. Lakshmi's statement was nevertheless echoed several times, even by non-Hindu *muggu* practitioners. Kempuratnam, a former Harijan woman in Kavitam who had converted to Christianity, emphasised that "during Sankranti, the *muggus* would be far more beautiful and complex". In many wealthy and upper middle-class households across Andhra, *muggus*

are drawn often by maidservants rather than by women of the household, though it is difficult to say how widespread this is. Gayatri Jaggurotu (Palakollu) indicated Sankranti's ritual significance when she explained that "as soon as Sankranti started, it is the owners themselves who will start drawing *muggus* and that's when you will get to see really elaborate *muggus*". As mentioned earlier, Inasmuch as *muggu*-making is a ritual activity, my approach is anthropological, and I realised that to grasp Sankranti's significance in the *muggu* tradition, it would be necessary to understand its importance in Andhra culture. This is not easy, because Sankranti is described in myriad ways.

3.1a. Sankranti as the marker of the winter solstice

'Sankranti' can refer to a day, or a period lasting a month. The Indian zodiac has 12 parts called *rasis*, which in Telugu are called Maeshamu, Vrushabhamu, Mithunamu, Karkatakamu, Simhamu, Kanya, Tula, Vruchchikamu, Dhanussu, Makaramu, Kumbhamu and Meenamu. The Sankranti day occurs when the sun moves from Dhanussu to Makaramu, so it can be referred to as Makara Sankranti.[150] Makaramu (corresponds to Capricornius) lasts from 21 December to 20 January. The word *sankranti* (incoming) denotes the sun's entry into each zodiacal sign and thus marks a threshold, when the sun is neither – in this instance – in Dhannussu nor in Makaramu. Most Indian festivals are determined by the lunar calendar, so there can be significant variations in dates as per the solar or Gregorian calendars – by as much as a month. The dates for Sankranti are relatively constant however, because it is marked by the solar calendar.

It is believed that the Sankranti day once coincided with the winter solstice, though it does not any longer. In Indian astrology, the year is divided into two halves (marked by the solstices that are determined by the sun's changes in direction). During Uttarayanapunyakalam – considered the more auspicious half – each sunrise is more towards the north and during Dakshinayanapunyakalam, each sunrise is more towards the south. Sankranti marks the first day of Uttarayanapunyakalam. One purpose offered for *muggu*-making is thus related to the end of the darker months of the year. Indeed, in Telugu, the sun is sometimes referred to as Sankranti *purushudu* ('man', from Sanskrit

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[150] In Sanskrit, Makaramu is referred to as Makara, literally meaning 'crocodile'.

purush). Consequently, one of the gods worshipped during Sankranti is Suryudu, the sun god.[151]

> [During Sankranti, everybody] welcomes the appearance of the auspicious rays, with joy and happiness, by drawing *muggus* on the earth, wishing to dispel darkness and bring goodness. What is said in the Vedas, *tamasomajyotirgamayah* (let the gloom and slothfulness be dispelled by light), is applicable here. . . . (*Andhra Bhoomi* 2006a: 34)

'Nelaganta' refers to the ritual month leading up to Sankranti, though many women use the terms 'Sankranti' and 'Nelaganta' interchangeably when they refer to this month. As Madugula Satya Sri (Gummaluru) explained, "The Sankranti day falls any time between 14 and 16 January, so Nelaganta lasts from 14 December to 14 January, or 15 December to 15 January or 16 December to 16 January." Because the ritual month overlaps with the zodiacs Dhanussu and Makaramu, Nelaganta is also referred to as Dhanurmasam (the 'month' of Dhanussu). What complicates this further is that Nelaganta – although a 'ritual' month – is not a regular month. This can be confusing because Nelaganta overlaps with more than one regular month.

Sun *muggu*, Poduru, Sankranti morning 2008

The 12 Telugu months – which do not correspond strictly to Tamil or Hindi months either in nomenclature or in dates – are: Chaitramasam (March-April), Vaisakhamasam (April-May), Jyeshthamasam (May-June), Ashadamasam (June-July), Sravanamasam (July-August), Bhadrapadamasam (August-September), Asvayujamasam (September-October), Karthikamasam (October-November), Margasreemasam (November-December), Pushyamasam (December-January), Maghamasam (January-February) and Phalgunamasam (February-March). '*Masam*' means month, so Chaitramasam for example, could be referred to simply as Chaitramu. Since all these dates are highly variable and my informant's discourse equally so, I am uncertain about which specific months Nelaganta overlaps with. One would assume that it could only be

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[151] *Surya* in Sanskrit.

Margasreemasam and Pushyamasam, but a few informants referred to Karthikamasam as well; I have therefore not attempted to 'fix' what seems to be a fluid period.[152]

What remains relevant is that the sun god is privileged this month. However, according to *Bhakti Today* (2003), who confirm that the sun god is worshipped during Dhanurmasam, "The sun is considered as nothing more than Vishnu's reflection." As it happens, *muggu*-makers propitiate many deities during Dhanurmasam but Vishnu – one of the Hindu *trimurti* (trinity) – features prominently.

3.1b. Dhanurmasam, lord Vishnu's favourite month

One story figuring Vishnu that is frequently cited in connection with *muggu*-drawing is the legend of Ballichakravarti, a king who had become too powerful due to a boon granted to him for his penance.[153] When he gained control over the world of the gods, they approached Vishnu, beseeching him to deal with the problem. In the Hindu mythology of evolution, Vishnu is believed to have appeared on the earth in several avatars; each of these stays – some of which were deemed necessary to restore equilibrium to the earth – is referred to as a period, one of which is the Vamanavataram, when Vishnu appeared as Vamana.[154] Srinivasula Vijayagopalacharya (Poduru Devasthanam) recounted the legend of Ballichakravarti.

> During Vamanavataram, a king called Ballichakravarti was granting requests, when Lord Vishnu, in the form of Vamana, asked for three feet's space. Shukrachari [the king's advisor] cautioned Ballichakravarti against granting the request, warning him that the man asking for them was no ordinary man. But Ballichakravarti said, "If Lord Vishnnu, who has come down on earth, is himself asking me for something, who am I to refuse? Whose hand is at the top, whose below?" Saying thus, he granted Vamana his request. Vamana then placed one foot on the earth, and his entire foot covered the earth; so he placed his second foot on the heavens, and it occupied the heavens. He then asked Ballichakravarti where he should place his third foot. Ballichakravarti offered his head, and when Vamana placed his foot on Ballichakravarti's head, the weight of his body caused Ballichakravarti to descend

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[152] It is of course possible that I have failed to grasp the intricacy of these periods. However, as there is no 'expert' in such discourse, it is impossible at the present time, to verify such information.

[153] The legend of Ballichakravarti can be found in the *Puranas*, in the *Vishnupuranam* or the *Vamanapuranam* (See Mani 1993: 103-104 or Mazumdar 2005: 246-248). In Indian mythology and hagiography, the English word 'penance' is used to translate a religious form of devotion carried out for a long period; it may take the form of self-punishment though this usually does not relate to sin. Instead, this 'penance' is usually performed in the hope of receiving *darshan* (seeing or being granted an audience with) a deity. In most cases, the deity is then expected to grant any boon that is requested.

[154] The 10 avatars are Matsya (fish), Kurma (turtle), Varaha (boar), Narasimha (half lion, half human), Vamana (human pigmy), Parasurama (valorous *brahmin*), Rama (virtuous king), Balarama (noble agriculturist), Krishna (divine human) and Kalki (future king).

into *patalam* (equivalent to Hades), and he thus became *patala-raju* (the king of the netherworlds). But while leaving, he told Vamana that he wished to be allowed to serve him [Vishnu] for a month every year, and Vamana granted the wish, decreeing that this month should be Dhanurlagnam, as it was his favourite month. So Ballichakravarti roams on earth for this one month, serving Lord Vishnu. That is why we call him Haridas, *das* (the servant) of *Hari* (the Lord).

Haridas, Palakollu, Mukkanumu morning 2008

According to *Andhra Bhoomi*, Haridas is believed to be a manifestation of Narada Muni, the great sage often portrayed as messenger of the gods in Indian mythology (2006a: 35). But this may be assumed due to the itinerancy attributed to both Narada and Haridas. Professional itinerant Haridas' are partly responsible for the transmission of mythological tales related to the Sankranti festival. Beginning at four in the morning, they sing *keertanas* (devotional songs), creating an auspicious early-morning atmosphere (*Andhra Prabha* 2008c). Payment to Haridas is most often given in kind today – a pot or even a fistful of rice – though money is also offered. Haridas' are very familiar figures during Sankranti, easily recognisable because they all dress similarly.

Singing Hari *keertanas*, wearing *ghungroos* (anklet of bells) on the feet, *akshay patra* (rice pot) on the head, *chirutalu* (castanets) in one hand, *tampura* (stringed instrument) in the other hand, guarlanded and wearing yellow *dhoti* (garment draped around the legs), Haridas is welcomed in Andhra households during this festive month. Sangam Appana Pennigonda, who is a Haridas, said: "Generations of my family have been Haridas . . . Half of my earnings from this month are given to the Bhadrachalam guru who teaches Haridas songs . . . People's generosity has decreased even in villages nowadays. I feel sad about that. In earlier times, people used to beg me to sing more." (*Andhra Jyoti* 2008c)[155]

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[155] In Telugu, the suffix 'lu' is used to convert the singular into the plural. So *chiruta* singular becomes the plural *chirutalu*, singular *muggu* becomes plural *muggulu*. It can be used equally for nouns and for adjectives. However, every word ending with 'lu' is not necessarily a conversion into the plural.

As we shall see, the mythology of Ballichakravarti and Haridas, which is woven into *muggu*-makers' discourses, is visible in *muggu* iconography.
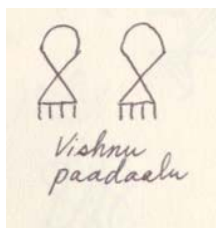
Vishnu's feet, Palakollu, 2007. From my fieldwork sketchbooks

At any rate, Dhanurmasam – referred to above as Dhanurlagnam – is deemed to be Vishnu's favourite month because his *nakshatram* (birth-star) Shravanam is located in Makara *rasi*; indeed, some argue that Makara *rasi* is the most significant among all the *rasis* (*Andhra Bhoomi* 2006a: 33). Vishnu is therefore especially venerated during Dhanurmasam, which is often described as 'his' month. According to several women in Palakollu, *dhanurkalam* is the time of day that Vishnu 'resides' in and the best time to draw *muggus*; this suggests the ritual importance that is attached to certain hours and periods. Vijayagopalacharya explained,

> You have the *rshikalam* at 3 am every day, which is followed by *dhanurkalam*, which . . . [lasts until *suryodayam* (sunrise)]. The ideal time to worship Vishnu is during *dhanurkalam*. If one worships him at that hour, before sunrise, i.e. approximately between 5 and 6 am, one's worship yields a great deal and is most fruitful.

Equally often, tales about Vishnu that are recounted during Dhanurmasam relate to Goda Devi, who is believed to be an incarnation of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and Vishnu's spouse. Mythological discourse about Goda Devi emphasises that she was ordinary – an abandoned girl adopted by Vishnuchitta – who ended up marrying Vishnu because of her virtues and devotion and was eventually worshipped as a goddess in her own right. This tale, which is recounted often in Tamil Nadu as well, states that Goda Devi was found by Vishnuchitta in Srivilliputur. According to *Bhakti Today* (2003), *goda* means *bhoomi* (earth). This is the only link I found to Nagarajan's reference to the story of the eighth-century saint Antal in Srivilliputtur.[156]

Vaikuntha Dwaralu *muggu* (the 'gates of Vishnu'), Palakollu, 2008. According to Subbalakshmi (Palakollu), this is most often drawn on Mukkotu Ekashi day. It can be extended to become as big as one wishes. From my fieldwork sketchbooks

Since Nagarajan's informants seemed to have privileged the earth goddess Bhu Devi as the primary purpose for *kolam*-making, I had included

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[156] In Nagarajan's thesis, the hagiography of Antal presents the eighth-century saint as Goda Devi herself.

her in my questions but unlike other purposes offered for *muggu*-making, Bhu Devi was only mentioned by my informants after prompting. Even then, there were only two isolated references to her, despite the fact that Goda Devi figures quite prominently in *muggu*-makers' discourse. Pinninti Ramana (Palakollu) said,

> Yes, it is good for Bhu Devi also. Because Bhu Devi is greater than our mother, she carries our burden all our lives, from the moment we are born to the moment we die. So it is our duty to decorate her (*alankarinchadam*) as best as we can. Usually, *muggus* are meant for both Lakshmi Devi and Bhu Devi.

Paidikundala Padmavathi (Yanam) echoed Ramana's remarks,

> Bhu Devi is linked too because it is on her we walk! That is why we must do *pranamam* (bow down, join our hands in revered greeting) to Bhu Devi first thing in the morning. Bhu Devi is one of the five elements – each of which is very important. Without any of them, we could not live. Nowadays people are ignorantly cutting trees but trees are essential for clean air, which we need to breathe.

Sesharatnam (Gummaluru) said, "Vishnu fell in love with Goda Devi during Dhanurmasam and it is believed that if the mud (ground) is left undecorated, Goda Devi will not come into our household." Godadevi is said to have worshipped Sriranganathaswami (Vishnu) during Dhanurmasam, finally marrying him on the last day of the month to achieve a prosperous life (*Swati* 2008). Propitiation to Vishnu and Goda Devi is therefore offered as another principal purpose for *muggu*-drawing. Eranki Nagamani (Palakollu) emphasised,
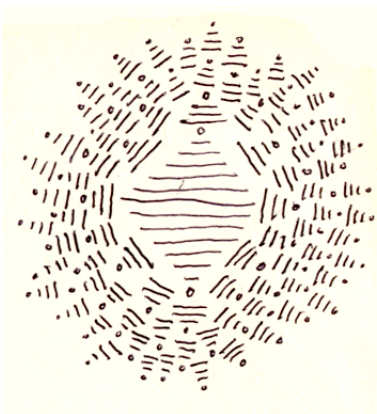
Lakshmi *muggu*, Palakollu, 2008. It can be extended to become as big as one wishes. This *muggu* has many variations. From my fieldwork sketchbooks

> . . . This is Vishnu's month. [*Muggus* are drawn] . . . because Vishnu likes them, and for Goda Devi. Everything we have is due to her graces. Nothing is ours. She is the benefactress. She gives us everything we have. . . . Goda Devi is a manifestation of Lakshmi. This entire month is for Lakshmi Devi. [Lakshmi Devi is always there but for Vishnu,] this is a special month. . . . [*Muggus*] are for both. The threshold that is beautiful is visited by Vishnu.

Vishnu and Goda Devi are also worshipped through the month with special temple ceremonies that include chanting and the offering of *tulsi* (holy basil) leaves.

3.1c. Sankranti as the annual harvest festival

It may reasonably be asked whether the summer solstice is as celebrated as the winter
solstice. Vijayagopalacharya pointed out,

> There are two changes of the six-month cycles and you may wonder why the other
> one is not marked as significantly. Actually, it is equally important but most people do
> not realise it. This change in cycles is marked so significantly and celebrated with so
> much ceremony because it also coincides with the new crops.

Many Hindu gods and goddesses – including
Lakshmi, as we have seen above – have
several names and manifestations. One of
Lakshmi's manifestations relates to harvests.
Although the solstice, Surya, Vishnu and Goda
Devi all feature prominently in Sankranti
discourses, it is most popularly characterised
as a harvest festival. "This month heralds the
harvest, which means farmers and people are
happy, which is why sweets are distributed
and people wear new clothes to celebrate the
festival (*Swati* 2008: 57). Sesharatnam
asserted that *muggus* were drawn during
Dhanurmasam, "because the new crops are
harvested at this time, during Sankranti, so
Dhanyalakshmi comes during this period".

Bapu, 'The fruits of a year's labour,
happy people', illustration featuring eight-
petalled lotus *muggus*, a happy family,
two bulls, sugar cane and a sheaf of
paddy. Reproduced from *Swati* 2008: 64

Dhanyalakshmi, as Eranki Suryaratnamalati
(Palakollu) explained, is one of the *Ashtalakshmi*.[157] These eight manifestations of
Lakshmi are usually grouped together in temples, and preside over differing sources of
wealth:

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[157] Temple booklets like the *Sri Ashtalakshmi Pooja Vratakalpam* state that worship of Ashtalakshmi, in
which eight married women are considered as the eight Lakshmis, involves preparing a *mandapam* (square
space used for worship). "The *mandapam* should be prepared thus: In the house, it should be placed in the
north or the northeast. After cleaning the space, one must draw the *ashtadalapadma-muggu* (the eight-
petalled lotus *muggu*). A white, bordered cloth measuring two forearm-lengths in width and four forearm-
lengths in length should be folded into a square and placed over the *muggu*. It is essential that the cloth not

- Adilakshmi (standard);

- Dhanalakshmi (goddess of material wealth);

- Dhanyalakshmi (goddess of grains and crops, essentially agricultural wealth);

- Dhairyalakshmi (bestower of valour and courage);

- Gajalakshmi (goddess of animal wealth, literally, elephant-Lakshmi, relates to army infantry, also associated with Indra's elephant Airavatam);

- Santanalakshmi (bestower of progeny, hence relates to fertility and lineage);

- Vijayalakshmi (bestower of victory, both in battle and otherwise);

- Vidyalakshmi (bestower of knowledge, not to be confused with Saraswati, Brahma's spouse and goddess of wisdom).

Therefore, wealth translates here to prosperity, good health, progeny, knowledge, strength and power.[158] Each Lakshmi is worshipped with specific verses and has a distinctive iconography. Dhanyalakshmi, who is also known as Sankranti Lakshmi, is usually portrayed as an eight-armed goddess clad in green garments. One hand forms the *abhaya mudra* (hand gesture in iconography symbolising peace, protection and the absence of fear), while another forms the *varada mudra* (symbolising welcome, offering, charity and compassion). Other hands are shown carrying two lotuses, a mace, a sheaf of paddy, a sugarcane and a bunch of bananas, the latter three attributes explicitly signifying crops. One temple priest said, "When the crops are harvested, it is understood that Lakshmi Devi has arrived." The tradition of paying Haridas with grains thus forms part of a greater tradition of charity during Dhanurmasam. As K. Satyavati (Palakollu) said,

A reader's contribution to a women's magazine, for a *muggu*, featuring an unusually figurative Lakshmi holding sugar canes and flanked by overflowing pots and oil lamps. Reproduced from *Andhra Bhoomi* 2006a: 75

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be of a single layer and that it be a square. On top of the cloth, nine *saulas* (a *saula* is a measure, a box which, if filled with rice grains, would measure about a quarter of a kilogram) of rice grains should be spread on the cloth."
[158] Other Lakshmis frequently referred to in Andhra are: Aishwaryalakshmi (goddess of riches) and Varalakshmi (goddess who bestows boons).

> And then . . . Haridas comes all month and we give him rice grains and fruit. . . . He sings songs and he comes for grains. . . . You see, this month is when the crops are harvested, so people have grains in plenty. . . . So during this month, we cook special foods and we offer *naivejyam* (food offered in prayer) to our ancestors – *pindi vontallu* (special, festive foods).

Indeed, the ingredients of the dishes prescribed for ancestor worship are largely determined by the crops harvested during Sankranti.

3.1d. Sankranti as the ritual month for ancestor worship

Sankranti is often called *peddapanduga;* while *pedda* means big, *panduga* means festival. Depending on the context, *pedda* can also mean 'grand' or elder (in this case, elders who have passed away, i.e. ancestors) so while *peddapanduga* can mean 'grand festival', *peddalu(ku) panduga* means festival 'for ancestors'. Satyavati said, "During this month, we revere our ancestors and pray to Vishnu."

Article featuring Haridas. Notice that the section image features a woman making a *muggu*, indicating how interrelated these traditions are.

Reproduced from *Andhra Jyoti* 2008c

As Dharmaraju (Palakollu) averred, *muggu*-making constitutes an essential part of this veneration.

> Our *pitrudevatalu* (ancestors, literally father-gods) decreed that this month should be put aside for remembering them, lest we forget them. A washed threshold that is left undecorated with *muggus* is equivalent to Rudrabhoomi (cremation ground), you know – *smasanam*, when we die... [when we are taken by Yamaraju (god of death)].

Ramana explained further,

> On Sankranti, we propitiate our ancestors and cook food for them, feed them first – that gives us *trupti* (satisfaction and fulfilment), when we imagine they have eaten the food we have prepared. We also give them clothes. If we do not, it is bad for us, because we feel our ancestors would be angry. . . . So we cook food for them, offer it to Lord Vishnu, then we offer it – mostly fruits – to the Brahmins, then we offer it to our ancestors, and finally we eat the food ourselves.

However, while ancestors are considered important throughout the ritual month, the offering of consecrated foods in an act of worship occurs on a specific day. Bhaskaram

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Sharma (Poduru) specified, "Makara Sankranti is the chief day of the festival and that is the day we revere our ancestors."

3.1e. Main festival days of Sankranti

Although Sankranti is observed in various ways throughout the ritual month, most informants contended that the main festival consists of three days: Bhogi, (Makara) Sankranti and Kanumu.[159] However, I found that Mukkanumu – the day following Kanumu – is also significant; indeed, because the Telugu *panchangam* (calendar) can vary, Mukkanumu can often blend into Kanumu. Different Sankranti rituals are observed on specific days of the festival. Bhogi, for example, is characterised by the lighting of a fire. Padmavathi explained,

> On the day of Bhogi, the threshold is washed thoroughly, a *muhurtam* (appointed time) is chosen, and the drawing of the *muggu* and the lighting of the fire is almost like a *puja*, like a *havan* (sacred fire). Young people must not light the fire; elders of the house must light the fire. The *gobbillu* (cowdung balls) . . . and *piddakkalu* (cowdung cakes) are also put into the fire; they serve as fuel. The [everyday] ritual lighting of the lamp becomes a big fire on Bhogi day.[160]

Dying Bhogi fire fuelled by old wooden furniture, coconut shells and cowdung cakes, Palakollu, Bhogi morning 2008

According to *Divyadhatri*, old or broken items in the house – particularly inflammable ones like old furniture and rags – are also thrown into the fire. "This act symbolises the shedding of all that is old and bad within us, difficulties and problems" (2008: 51). Similarly, wearing new clothes on Bhogi day symbolises starting anew. The word *bhogi* is believed to come from *bhogam* (luxury, hence prosperity). The Bhogi Pallu ceremony, observed on the evening of Bhogi, is described below since it

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[159] This contention is amply supported by literary evidence.
[160] When she refers to the 'everyday ritual lighting of the lamp', she is referring to a practice of lighing earthen lamps every dusk – a practice that persists especially during Kartikamasam.

relates to Gobbillu Perantalu, a tradition that used to be observed throughout Dhanurmasam and is nowadays inceasingly observed only on Bhogi morning.

The "elders say that the doors to heaven open" on Makara Sankranti (*Swati* 2008: 57), which might explain why ancestors are worshipped on this day. Sankranti is also the day that Ballichakravarti is said to have granted three boons to Vamana. According to *Swati*, on Kanumu, "women create three *gobbamas* (cowdung figures) and worship them. These three *gobbamas* represent the cow, Krishna and Govardhanagiri (the mountain Krishna held up). On this day, people invite others to their homes and distribute gifts" (2008). The rituals observed on Kanumu are the ones that most define Sankranti as a harvest festival.

> Kanuma is considered a festival for farmers. The *chakrapongal* (rice dish sweetened with jaggery, mixed with coconut) which was fed to the Lord as offering is sprinkled over the farmers' fields to bring them a good harvest. . . . *vadas* made with *urad dal* are made and given as *prasadam* (consecrated food offered to celebrants). Cows are also worshipped on this day. Bulls are also decorated and are made to pay obeisance to the Lord. (*Divyadhatri* 2008)

Gangireddu, Palakollu, Sankranti morning 2008

On Kanumu, Gangireddu, an *eddu* or *bassavanna* (bull) is led from house to house, with the man leading the bull playing the *nadaswaram* (pipe-like wind instrument)*.* Gangireddus are characteristically draped with multicoloured clothes; Gangireddu *atta* (play) – a rural form of entertainment where they are made to 'perform' – is closely associated with Sankranti. This obviously relates to the role that cattle play in agriculture.[161] Kanumu is known as the last day of Vishnu's month, when Dhanurmasam ends. The morning of Mukkanumu

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[161] Srinivas' description of Sankranti in Mysore, in the neighbouring state of Karnataka, mentions a strikingly similar ritual. ". . . expressing a wish for abundance of the rice crop and increase of the herd was also part of Sankranti. Another element of the festival was the expression of thanks to the cattle. Bullocks and cows (but no buffaloes) were washed clean, and their horns painted a variety of colours. Gold and silver paper were

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therefore heralds the departure of Vishnu. Also, on Mukkanumu, "Newly married brides pray to Savitri Gauri Devi [in the form of a *vratam* (vow)] . . . to increase their love for their husbands" (*Swati* 2008: 16). Beginning on Mukkanumu, the vow lasts nine days. Marital felicity and fertility, as we will see below, plays a significant part in Sankranti.

3.1f. The Gobbillu Perantalu and Bhogi Pallu ceremony

As previously mentioned, cowdung is essential to Indian floor-drawing. Although Andhra women nowadays usually sweep and wash the ground with plain water before drawing a non-festival *muggu*, traditionally the ground was washed with *kallapu* (cowdung water) even for daily *muggus*. During Sankranti, women still make an effort to do so, possibly because most

Woman sprinkling *kallapu*, Dharmapuri, September 2007

muggu-makers believe that Lakshmi Devi, or Goda Devi, 'resides' in cowdung. I use the word 'washed' because of urban hard surfaces but when the ground is made of 'earth', women usually dip into a bucket or a *chembu* (pot), stand in one spot and gradually turn an arc to sprinkle water in a semi-circle.

It is clear that cowdung is considered sacred because one goddess who repeatedly crops up in Sankranti discourses is Gobbamma. Cowdung cakes or figures, for example, can symbolise Gobbamma, who appears to be a folk goddess and is most often cited as a manifestation of Lakshmi. Most sources corroborate this, yet one woman – Bappani Seetamahalakshmi (Poduru) – insisted that "Goda Devi is a proper deity . . . she is considered a form of Lakshmi Devi. Gobamma on the other hand is only a personification of cowdung and no more."

According to Vijayagopalacharya, throughout Dhanurmasam, the *gobbillu* were traditionally placed twice a day and were called *udayangobbillu* and *sandigobbillu* (dawn and dusk-*gobbillu* respectively). These were collected every day and eventually served

stuck to the horns, and turmeric paste (a symbol of auspiciousness) was rubbed on the animal's body. Some of the new rice which had been cooked was offered to cattle as also was sugar cane, banana and jaggery. In the evening the animals were taken in procession with band and pipe, the beating of tam-tams, and light. Small piles of straw were placed in a line and set on fire, and the animals were made to jump over the flames." (1976: 128)

as fuel for the Bhogi fire. Children made cowdung cakes, smeared turmeric and *kumkum* on them, decorated them with marigold and pumpkin flowers and placed them on the centre of *muggus*. Satyavati stressed that it was children who had "not yet had their periods" who "place the *gobbillu* on the *muggus*" and "sing *gobbillu* songs". Padmavathi also underlined that *gobbillu* were only placed by prepubescent girls. Bhaskaram explained the ceremony further:

> During the entire year, there are [few] ceremonies held for children. It is only during Sankranti that *gobbillu* are placed on the . . . [*muggus*] and children pray that they should obtain good husbands and good children.

However, this tradition seems to be fading. Shaking her head, Nagamani lamented that during her childhood, girls used to place *gobbillu* the entire month of Nelaganta but that children did not do this so much anymore.
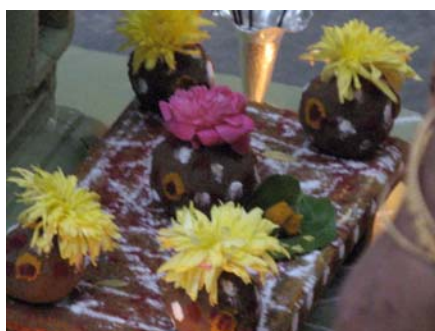
Gobbillu Perantalu, Sharma house, Poduru, Bhogi evening 2008

> My granddaughter should be doing this some time soon . . . Yes, [she will sing songs] if she does it this year. . . . Children do it usually [only] on Bhogi day now. It depends on their whim. Children place the *gobbillu*, they sing songs and they pray that they should get husbands like Dharmaraju (king of principles) and children like Bangaramma (golden girl) . . .

It is unclear why the ceremony is becoming infrequent. One woman in Palakollu said, "It is not so easy to find cowdung in the town anymore. At best, one may find buffalo dung. So obviously people have stopped placing *gobbillu*." When I asked my neighbour in Palakollu why they were not doing it for her granddaughters Sathika and Vaishnavi, she responded that it was "because the children in the other apartments never attend any communal ceremonies and there is no point in holding a children's ceremony without

other children participating. In any case, the children cannot sing very well". She nevertheless lent me her booklet of *gobbillu* lyrics and sent a group of children around to teach them to me. Her daughter-in-law Krishnaveni commented that the content of these songs was gradually changing. She said,

> It is like a wedding I recently attended. Instead of singing the traditional wedding songs, the bridal party sang a song with lyrics saying something like: "We wouldn't mind a groom who is a collector. We wouldn't mind a groom who is a doctor. We wouldn't mind a groom who is an engineer. …" and so on and so forth. The qualities that people look for in future grooms are nowadays very different.

At the Gobbillu Perantalu (cowdung rites) I attended at the Sharmas' house (Poduru), which was held for three children aged six to 10, the repertoire of *gobbillu* songs ranged from traditional to modern.[162] Some of the traditional ones seemed to revolve around the god Krishna, who is characterised as being mischievous and a charming flirt; many others invoked Gobamma and praised her qualities. As *Swati* (2008) stated, worshipping Gobbama is thought to facilitate marriage. "[It] is believed to bring them good fortune in terms of marriage. This idea springs from the fact that Vishnu is Godadevi's husband, so it is believed that these girls will get husbands who are as good as Vishnu if they worship Godadevi" (*Divyadhatri* 2008). I mentioned a fieldwork collection in the introduction; this includes a booklet of *gobbillu* lyrics, and lyrics I copied from a woman's notebook. I also shot a video of the Gobbillu Perantalu.

Cowdung balls with marigolds and roses placed on a *muggu*, Palakollu, Kanumu morning 2008

What is intriguing is that despite the waning of this tradition and the fact that Gobbillu songs may include references to modern lifestyles and altered expectations about potential suitors, the underlying mythology is still reflected in the ritual as currently practised on Bhogi day. According to Krishnaveni, the Gobbillu Perantalu is usually

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[162] One of my interviewees, Ramalingeshwar Sharma kindly invited me to a private ceremony being held for his niece.

performed by placing five or more cowdung balls or cakes in the centre of a *muggu*, which is adorned with a *banti puvvu* (marigold flower) on top. The cowdung ball in the centre is said to sybolise Goda Devi, and the ones around it symbolise her friends.

Although the Bhogi Pallu ceremony differs from the Gobbillu Perantalu, they are often paired together – probably because they are both meant for children. The Bhogi Pallu ceremomy, traditionally held on the evening of Bhogi, is also declining.[163] The ceremony essentially involves young children being blessed by married women (mothers being the most important) by pouring *regipallu* (jujube, referred to as *Bhogipallu*) over her head.

Bapu, 'In front of married women, with the affection of an elder sister and with little ones surrounding him, the young boy is blessed by his mother'. Reproduced from *Swati* 2008: 10

On the evening of Bhogi, *Bhogipallu* are poured over children at an event. Married women pour new copper coins and *regipallu* and flowers over children. It is believed that doing this increases the children's longevity, health, wealth, knowledge and wisdom. (*Divyadhatri* 2008: 50)

Sankranti discourse is peppered with the phrase 'encourages good health' and many of the prescribed rituals relate explicitly to the body, including the special foods prescribed for ancestor worship.

3.1g. Prescribed diet and special foods during Sankranti

While rituals are prescribed for better health throughout the year, such rituals intensify during festivals; Sankranti certainly abounds with them. For example, it is believed that inhaling "smoke from fire fuelled with cowdung cakes . . . is . . . beneficial for those suffering from lungs, ear, nose and throat problems", so on Bhogi day, one is supposed to apply sesame oil and powdered sesame seeds on the body and sit by the Bhogi fire, after which one bathes with hot water.

> During winter, the body develops acidity; sesame oil decreases this and prevents
> mucus formation in the body. It does not merely exfoliate, but also softens the skin

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[163] The reason cited by my neighbour may be pertinent. My mother, who held the Bhogi Pallu ceremony for me in Bengal, when I was a child, remembered that "it was not much fun, because there were not too many people I could invite. Had we been in Andhra, it would have probably been different". *Pallu* is the shortened form of *pandullu*, plural of *pandu*, meaning 'fruit'.

and prevents cracks in the feet. Eating food prepared with wheat and *urad dal* (a lentil) also decreases mucus formation. (*Divyadhatri* 2008)

I have suggested above that traditional Sankranti recipes develop from crops harvested during this period. As Vijayagopalacharya pointed out, "You get new rice at this time, you get new jaggery . . . This is why you have *parvannam* (rice *payasam* or rice pudding) as *naivejyam*." The main *naivejyam* for Sankranti is called *chakrapongal*. Significantly, *pongal* comes from the word *pongindi*, which means to boil over, signififying bounty. While *pongal* is a savoury dish, *chakrapongal* is sweet. Note that magazine cuttings of Sankranti recipes form part of the fieldwork collection.

It may be worth underscoring that food is one context in which caste was overtly mentioned. Ramalingeshwar, a Brahmin, said,

> The other castes have specific *naivejyams* and in fact, all the castes have specific *naivejyams* . . . the other castes offer food to others after offering it to the deities but what we get from other castes is not cooked food but things like grains, pulses and fruit because we Brahmins do not eat food cooked by other castes.

According to Sesharatnam, also a Brahmin, Brahmins offer the *naivejyam* to *chaikalu* (washerfolk) on any occasion, before serving it to family members. She specified that the prescribed *naivejyam* for the three main days of Sankranti differs.

> On the day of Bhogi . . . we make *chakrapongal* as *naivejyam . . .* for Sankranti, it is principally *pulihara* (tamarind rice) and *bobatlu* (fried sweet dish made of lentils, jaggery and flour); for Kanumu, it is *garulu* (fried savouries made with lentils)*, tair vadalu* (fried savrouries with yogurt), [and] as sweet dish – *minappasunni* (sweet lentil balls) – basically items made with *minapappu* (black gram).

Other prescribed foods include *appalu* (a sweet made of jaggery and pumpkin), *bellam panakam* (jaggery syrup) with *mirialu* (peppercorns), coconut, chick peas and turmeric balls for fever prevention. In most Indian cultures, eating seasonal foods is considered healthy. So for example, pumpkins, which are also especially common during this season, feature prominently. While Ramana averred that gourds are offered to Brahmins during Dhanurmasam, according to Padmavathi, the "*gummadi* (ash gourd) is served to

elders during this month, in *pulsus* (sour stews), etc. It is also given as *danam* (charity) during Dhanurmasam. It is healthy to eat this season."[164]

Note that the discourse above presents foods prescribed for Sankranti rituals in two ways – in relation to health and in relation to giving. As we shall see, the same distinction is made vis-à-vis materials employed in *muggu*-making.

3.2. PURPOSES FOR *MUGGU*-MAKING NOT SPECIFICALLY RELATED TO SANKRANTI

Many of the puposes offered for *muggu*-making are not specific to Sankranti, though most of those mentioned above are indeed particular to Dhanurmasam. In this section, I look at other purposes that can apply equally to non-festival *muggus*.

The materials used to make *muggus* can often determine the *muggus*' ritual status, characterising them as:

- health-related;
- related to what I have called 'charity' but is really conceived as 'ritual generosity';
- predominantly for aesthetic purposes.

3.2a. Materials and beliefs: Prophylactic purposes and ritual generosity

Several *muggu*-makers referred to cow-dung variously as antiseptic, hygienic (Suryaratnamalati) or anti-bacterial (Bhaskaram). In India, cow-dung is widely believed to be a natural fertiliser. Because dry cow-dung contains ammonia, it is also considered a sanitising substance.[165] Certainly, notions about hygiene seem to be embedded in *muggu* discourse.

Muggus on freshly applied mud and cowdung mixture, ledge around a house, Kavitam, day before Bhogi 2008

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[164] One origin myth from *Margasreemasam Lakshmivaralu* that was recounted to me by Suryaratnamalati mentions the *gummadi pandu* (pumpkin fruit) as an offering made to Lakshmi but the edition I looked at did not mention pumpkin.
[165] Ramalingeshwar referred to 'bleach' when speaking of cow-dung, saying, "Lime is bleach, is it not? Lime is anti-bacterial too."

Gayatri, who felt that a scientific reason for *muggu*-making might be to encourage cleanliness, stated, "The threshold is the main point of entry into the house. It has to be clean."

Illustration for a short story about *muggus*, featuring Gangireddu and Haridas in the background and a woman making a *muggu* in the foreground. Notice the brooms and auspicious mango leaves hanging from the lintel. Reproduced from *Swati* 2008: 44

Kilambi refers to human excretions, which – because of the scarceness of sanitary facilities – "are frequently part of the very ground on which one walks – hence the necessity to purify the area before the house against the uncleanliness that threatens its sacred interior" (1986: 74). I was reminded here that the Telugu word *doddi*, meaning the garden, came to mean human excrement because the toilet was traditionally located outside the house, in a separate structure usually at the edge of the back garden or backyard. This does not explain why the *front* threshold, rather than the back, is so significant but Kilambi's point may be relevant.

Shesharatnam mentioned a tale about Daridradevi (goddess of poverty and slovenliness) and Bhagyadevi (goddess of good fortune, manifestation of Lakshmi).

> Once, the two goddesses were arguing about who was greater, so Daridradevi said, 'Okay, to determine who is greater, we must first define what our respective traits are. How do you define your qualities?' So Bhagyadevi said, 'Those houses that have not been mopped shall not be visited by me. In those houses where the morning *puja* has not been conducted, I shall not be present. In those houses, where the *muggus* have not been drawn, I shall not be present.' And so on and so forth.

I have already mentioned multiple manifestations of goddesses, specifically Lakshmi. In Hinduism, one also often has paired manifestations – one benevolent and the other – not malevolent, but potentially hostile. For example, Durga – in her demonic form – becomes Kali. Sometimes, the difference between such manifestations is more explicitly opposed, such as with Bhu Devi and Mu Devi.[166] It may be relevant to mention here that

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[166] In a paper on *kolams*, Nagarajan (2003) refers to 'natural opposites' among goddesses with reference to Bhu Devi and Mu Devi; as these opposites are often cultural constructs, her use of the adjective natural – which she does not explain – is puzzling.

such opposites among deities are not uncommon in floor-drawing discourses. Variants of Daridradevi and Bhagyadevi are Kulalakshmi and Sulalakshmi, who may be folk deities specifically related to the concept of hygiene. Das also refers to one such pair of divinities: Rudra, the god of death and destruction, is also Bhutanath, the lord of demons, who in his opposing form is Bholanath, the one "most easily pleased by his devotees" (1987: 102).

I suggest that the notion of opposites is applicable to the ground too. Referring to rain-ravaged houses in need of repairing, plastering and white-washing, Saksena uses the word '*kachcha*' (literally 'unripe' but with reference to the ground, 'bare'). Its antonym '*pakka*' ('ripe') could be applied to the treated and adorned ground.[167] Another example is '*khandan*'; among other things, it connotes 'to spoil' and is the antonym of the root verb '*mandan*', from which the term '*mandana*' derives. Thus one may say that cowdung repairs the 'spoilt' ground. Indeed, Kilambi describes cowdung as a component of the purificative process (1986: 73). But it is not only the material used to prepare the ground for *muggu*-making that is believed to be beneficial, but also the material used to make *muggus*.

As listed in the previous chapter, diverse materials have been used to make Indian floor-drawings. I have explained before that '*muggu*' is the colloquial term for Andhra's floor-drawings. However, according to Krishnaveni and Dikshitulugaru (Palakollu), the term *rangavalli* – still widely used in written Telugu – pre-dates '*muggu*'. It brings together the words *ranga*, meaning colour, and *valli*, which literally means 'creeper' but metaphorically means 'line'. Considering that *muggus* are usually made with white-coloured powders, I wonder whether 'colour' is a metaphor for vivacity, though '*ranga*' in '*rangavalli*' quite possibly derives from more ancient texts like the *Kamasutra*, which mention arts like *rangoli*, *alekhyam* (writing with lines and colours) and *manikarma* (arranging coloured stones in a design). Note that *muggu* chapbooks are titled '*Rangoli*'

"With the exception of water *kolams* and buffalo dung, Lakshmi resides in all *kolams* and in cowdung; she is symbolic of prosperity and all that is good. Diametrically opposed to Lakshmi is Mudevi, who symbolises dirt, disease and suffering. "Mudevi will always try to push herself into houses, very often deceitfully, because people do not welcome her . . . [in contrast] Lakshmi does not go uninvited to any house; but she is always invited . . . Even a tiny bit of cow-dung sprinkled with clean water . . . is enough . . . [to welcome her]. Achievement of one's desires too has a dichotomy . . . [To desire prosperity for oneself without causing any harm to others is difficult but] neither Lakshmi nor Mudevi will have any role in *kolams* intended for destruction. . . ." (Pillai and Saroja 1995: 45-46).

[167] With reference to buildings, the antonyms *kachcha* and *pakka* refer to structures made of materials that are not durable (e.g. mud houses) and to concrete and cement structures.

but also as '*Rangalu*'; the latter simply means colours. At any rate, as used to denote *rangavallis*, the term '*muggu*' seems relatively recent. This nomenclature derives from the powdered white material used to make the floor-drawings, also called *muggu*. This powder is usually made by pulverising *natta gullalu* (according to Gayatri, these are tiny seashells), sourced from sandy beaches and possibly even river banks. Andhra women's desciptions of materials used to make *muggus* can sound inconsistent. They are variously identified as:

- *Sudda*: A white-coloured lump found in mud, which is dried and used as is or crushed into a powder. It is difficult to say what this lump is made of because actually, *sudda* just means 'lump'. This is possibly chalk sediment, probably calcium carbonate. Note that chalk powder and sticks are also used to make *muggus*.
- *Muggu*: See above. Although women like Gummadi Suryaprabha and Koppasetti Saraswathi (Yanam), identified *muggu* and *sunnam* as the same material, I am inclined to believe that Gayatri is correct as most informants insisted that *sunnam*, *sudda* and *muggu* were not the same, despite being unable to explain the difference. Part of the problem here was translation, part of the problem was my unfamiliarity with what are deemed as extremely common materials used regularly in Hindu practices. Still, *muggu*-makers' practices can be inconsistent and their knowledge can be partial. What is still more confusing is that Annapoorna (Palakollu) referred to *mugguraiyya* and explained that what she meant was *sudda*. As *raiyya* means 'stone', this would suggest that *muggu*-stone meant the same as *sudda*, and therefore perhaps *muggu* and *sudda* were the same.
- *Pota*: *Muggu* is sometimes mixed with coarse rice powder – which is more traditional – or fine sand, for an easier pouring consistency. When it is mixed with fine sand, it is called *pota*. Andhra women normally run sand through a kitchen sieve to make it finer.
- *Beeyam pindi* or *varpindi*: Rice-flour.
- *Pasupu*: Turmeric powder, made by cleaning, boiling, drying and pulverising the rhizome of the turmeric plant.
- *Kumkum*: There are differing recipes for *kumkum*. Sources on the internet suggest that it can be made domestically by alkalizing pure turmeric powder or

by mixing calcium hydroxide, turmeric and water. Most informants asserted that it is made by mixing lemon juice and/or alum with turmeric. Sesharatnam said it was made by mixing turmeric, coconut oil and powdered *kunkapparalu*. I am uncertain about the composition of *kunkapparalu*, which are hard maroon-coloured stones. My mother, for example, is wary of using commercial *kumkum*, which contains lead and other toxic substances. I have seen her make her own *kumkum*, using powdered turmeric and *kunkapparalu*, but she does not know what the latter are composed of. She obtains both ingredients from an *ayurvedic* shop. Since commercial *kumkum* and sticker-bindis have become popular, 'pure' or 'naturally made' *kumkum* is increasingly hard to find.[168]

- *Rangulu*: Colours; nowadays, these are usually synthetic and used mostly on festival days. They are hardly ever used for ordinary *muggus* and thus rarely cited as a material. Traditionally, in instances where colours were used, they would have consisted of vegetable dyes and natural materials, as listed in the previous chapter.

What may also be pertinent is the fact that *muggu* is sourced from sandy beaches, i.e. in close proximity to the sea – Vishnu's abode. Kumari (Poduru) stated that she had been drawing with *sudda* but felt it was not correct since "Lakshmi Devi resides in *muggu*", so she switched to *muggu* for the threshold and continued using *sudda* for other spaces. There were others who faced similar dilemmas. Hemalata (Palakollu), who maintained that she did not know much about *muggus* except that cowdung and lime are both antibacterial and that it was therefore beneficial to apply these to the ground and walk on them, added,

> Of course, rice-flour also provides *aharam* (food) for insects, so it constitutes *danam*. . . . I had started using only *sudda* since there is so much traffic on this street, so my *muggu* is invariably rubbed out very quickly. But then I thought, 'It is, after all, only for a few days that one has to draw *muggus* with rice-flour' so I reverted to rice-flour.

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[168] Such inconsistency is not unusual. Sometimes, different regions make something differently. Other times, one might find differences even within the same family. My mother and my aunt for example, do not make kohl for the eyes in the same manner. My mother makes it using soot, clarified butter and jasmine, sometimes adding other ingredients.

House with *chiluku*, Vedangi, 2008

Sunnam used to be employed more often to create *chilukus* (wall-markings), according to a woman in Ullamparu, by "stirring it into hot water until it is the consistency of milk". There seemed to be unanimous agreement among my informants that *chilukus* bear little relation to *muggus*. However, *sunnam* is increasingly used to make *muggus* as well. Sesharatnam, who boils *sunnam* with sugar, though only "during the Sankranti festival", stated that she did this because "it stays better and also the line comes thinner". As Padmavathi explained, changes in housing have introduced alterations in the *muggu* tradition. "In modern life, surfaces have changed and with smoother surfaces, the [drawing] materials have changed and today, chalk is used instead. If you mix sugar with *sunnam*, it stays for ages because it becomes sticky."

According to Dikshitulugaru however, this change has more to do with economic reasons. He states,

> At one time, *muggus* were only made with rice-flour though the decorations on the wall were made with *sunnam*, because *sunnam* kills insects. Now of course, even *muggus* are made with *sunnam* but that is because the price of rice-flour has risen exponentially.

But not everyone agrees that *sunnam* is a recent material for *muggu*-making. Dharmaraju asserted,

> Actually, there is a scientific reasoning behind the practice of *muggu*. It is done with *sunnam* because this drives away and kills bacteria and mosquitoes. That is the real reason why *muggus* are drawn during this period, when we get many mosquitoes and insects. Rice-flour is only used for aesthetic purposes . . . [because this tradition] involves beauty – it must be beautiful – but also because rice-flour provides food for insects and [is] therefore *danam* (charity, generosity).

Saraswathi and Suryaprabha concurred that *sunnam* "drives away insects" adding that the Bhogi fire similarly "drives away mosquitoes and other insects, which are rampant this season". Despite the lack of consensus on what materials are prescribed for specific ritual periods and purposes, what emerges from the above is that the selection of

material is motivated by three distinct purposes: those that relate to the mythology of Lakshmi (in other words, the sacred); those that relate to prophylactic purposes and those that explicitly reference 'generosity', which seems prescribed during the ritual period.

Kumari's statement that Lakshmi Devi resides in *muggu* was repeated by other women, though not as explicitly. For example, Annapoorna informed me that on regular days, she drew with *sudda* "but on Tuesdays and Fridays, I draw with *muggu*. It would not be nice to draw with anything else on these days". In Andhra, Tuesdays and Fridays are devoted to the worship of Lakshmi, so this indirectly suggests that the choice of *muggu* as material still relates to Lakshmi.

There are other pointers to sacredness in the *muggu* tradition, not least the use of turmeric and *kumkum*, both of which are extensively used for the sanctification of objects and the sacralisation of space. Annapoorna, who invariably smeared turmeric and *kumkum* at the centre of her *muggu*, stated that it was probably because she had migrated to Palakollu from Tirupathi, "where everybody does it". She traced the habit back to when she was "living on the hill, Tirumalai. Because it is a *devasthanam* (sacred space or temple town), you know". She believes that "*muggus* must have started from the habit of smearing turmeric and *kumkum* in auspicious spaces".

Annapoorna, *muggu* with chalk, mixed turmeric and *kumkum*, Palakollu, 2007

When I expressed surprise at the intricacy of rules about materials, Dikshitulugaru emphasised that Hindu rituals were incredibly complex. He said,

> There are even rules about when you should use turmeric-covered rice grains, when you should use *kumkum*-covered rice grains, when you should use plain washed rice grains. We no longer remember why. You must ask the priests.

Bamma, *muggu* on the kitchen counter, Palakollu, 2007

Mumidu Susila (Yanam) pointed out, "It is considered that *yagnam* (sacred fire) takes place . . . [in the kitchen], so it is a sacred place; therefore a *muggu* is drawn in the kitchen too." Consecration in the kitchen thus relates to the importance of fire and food, and the presence of *muggus*, as much as that of turmeric and *kumkum*, can demarcate sacred space.

Nevertheless, *muggus* do not always sanctify spaces. "Apart from being auspicious, *muggus* – because of their lime properties – are believed to prevent insects from entering the house" (*Divyadhatri* 2008: 49). Sesharatnam feels that many Hindu customs originated due to common sense and scientific reasons,

> . . . like sprinkling water around the plate before eating. This is so that whatever insects are flitting around the plate get caught in the droplets of water and we do not end up eating them by mistake. Similarly with men stepping over the *muggus*. They are not supposed to step over a bare threshold. The dung acts as an antiseptic and I am not sure why, but it is considered good for the feet to have a little something stuck to them. They are not supposed to be bare. There is surely a specific reason which is now lost.

Many informants similarly stressed that the men of the household should step over the *muggu*, though nobody seemed certain why. One woman in Palakollu recounted how she had been chided by her Brahmin friend for not drawing a *muggu* on her threshold, particularly as she had "male children". This friend, who was present, explained that the "main reason for drawing *muggus* is so that male members of the family do not step over a bare threshold. The threshold *must* be washed, so the dust settles, then it must have a *muggu* drawn over it – even if it is just two lines". When I asked her why *muggus* were

only drawn for men, she said it was because it was the men who stepped out of the house, which is why the *muggu* was drawn so early "before the man of the house steps out for work". When I pointed out that nowadays, the women went out too, Gayatri laughingly said that in such cases, the women would have to draw the *muggu* themselves and step over it themselves since it was unlikely the men would do it. Guntur Soumarajulu (Poduru) not only said that "the *muggu* must always be drawn before the man of the house steps out" but that the "ladies of the house must – strictly speaking – draw the *muggu* before the head of the household wakes up".

Kilambi's intriguing explanation, which echoes Nagarajan's emphasis on Bhu Devi, provides some insight.

> . . . the foot is also the point of man's contact with Mother Earth, source of nourishment of the physical body. The network of invisible arteries presumed to exist in the foot is believed to draw up energy from the earth like the roots of a tree, and a person can replenish his strength by standing with bare feet on the naked soil, thus absorbing vitality from the primordial source of all terrestrial life.
> . . . the importance of the foot and its capacity to absorb terrestrial energy explains why the *muggu* must be trod upon. How much more energy can be interiorised when the foot is placed in contact not just with the earth, but with consecrated earth – the place where the *muggu* is drawn. (1986: 79)

She ascribes the emphasis on men stepping over *muggus* to Brahmanical patriarchical notions, adding that it could also have something to do with the pre-Aryan perception of the woman as 'nourisher'. But as previously stated, my informants did not underline the earth's importance in the *muggu* tradition, either in physical or in mythological terms. Instead they emphasised the medicinal and antibacterial properties of materials used in *muggu*-making.

Offering their recipes for *kumkum*, Susila and Saraswathi expressed beliefs similar to Sesharatnam's.

> *Kunkum* is also antibacterial because it is made by squeezing lemon juice into an earthen pot and soaking dried turmeric roots into it. Once the roots have soaked the lemon juice, these are dried in the sun, pounded after dry, and then strained with a muslin cloth. You get a fine powder which you mix with powdered *kunkapparalu*, which provide colour.

Turmeric's use in sanctification may have thus developed from its antiseptic properties, though its colour is often referred to when one speaks of the *panchavarna* (five sacred colours). Saraswathi and Suryaprabha emphasised,

> Earlier, one smeared turmeric on the threshold and then drew the *muggu*. Nowadays, people are too lazy to smear turmeric. The reason men were supposed to step over the threshold was because they went out into the city and roamed around and it was good for their feet to have some turmeric, which is antiseptic, and *muggu*, which is antibacterial. So, no, *muggus* were not ritually drawn with rice powder even in ancient times. They were drawn with *muggu*. Only during the month of Sankranti, to earn *punyam* (atone, accrue goodwill by performing good deeds), *muggus* were and are drawn with rice powder, as *danam* (generosity) for ants and little creatures . . . [many of which] are parasites and these are also required, so their reproduction – which is advisable – is thus encouraged. So, the men step over the *muggu* but otherwise, it should not be stepped over [presumably because it is also considered sacred].

To some extent, this explains contradictory statements by my informants about whether or not *muggus* are stepped on. Just as the use of turmeric can simultaneously sacralise and protect, the presence of *muggus* made with antibacterial materials does not necessarily exclude generosity. Saraswathi and Suryaprabha continued,

> Earlier and in some places even now, the kitchen counter is wiped thoroughly and *muggus* are drawn there too. This is also because in a kitchen, . . . some leftovers [are always left] here and there and the *muggu* ensures that ants and insects die because of its antibacterial qualities. However, it is also believed that as *danam*, one must never leave the kitchen completely empty. One must leave a rice pot, or *something* with some grains, so insects can feed off it. Earlier, the furnace also had *muggus* drawn on it. Nowadays, the stove sometimes has *muggus* drawn on it.

Indeed, my aunt's maid, called Bamma, who made *muggus* on the kitchen counter and sometimes drew a few lines on the stove as well, also referred to generosity: "During this month, we draw *muggus* only with *varpindi* so that ants and mosquitoes can be fed. It is good to feed so many creatures."

Dikshitulugaru's contention that *muggus* were traditionally made with rice-flour *throughout* the year because they fed "ants and insects, as *danam*", is impossible to verify. One article states, "As human beings, we have some *dharmas* (principles). Among such principles, one of them is to provide food for all those living creatures that depend on us. In earlier times, *muggus* were made only with rice-flour. Ants and birds used to eat the *muggus* as food" (*Surya* 2008d). This view seems reasonable and yet

Saraswathi and Suryaprabha's assertions seem equally plausible. After all, "The word '*nasti*' (I have nothing to give you) must not be mentioned during the main four days of the [Sankranti] festival. Anyone coming to one's threshold must receive charity. So says the Dharmashastra" (*Swati* 2008: 15).[169] Sesharatnam similarly stresses the threshold's significance during festival periods.

> Of course, [rice-flour] is *aharam* (food) for insects, which is *punyam*. . . . Specially on Bhogi day, rice-flour is additionally sprinkled for the insects. *Sunnam* is used inside the house because inside, the *muggus* are [drawn] for decorative purposes only but on the threshold, it must be [drawn] with rice-flour so the . . . (creatures) can eat it.

3.2b. Significance of the threshold in Andhra Pradesh

Although it is clear that the threshold holds special significance in the *muggu* tradition, like a lot of other information relating to the *muggu* tradition, the reasons for its importance remain ambiguous. We have seen that in other states' floor-drawing traditions, the threshold is not necessarily the most important space; in Rajasthan for example, the courtyard is central to the practice. In Andhra, *muggus* are made at *devalayams* and *devasthanams* (sacred places, temple towns) especially in front of the *gopuram* (temple structure), in front of commercial establishments, in *kalyana mandapams* (wedding halls), in front of the home, at side entrances, in front of domestic shrines, on kitchen counters, around the buttermilk churner, on the domestic hand-grinder (basically, a large mortar and pestle), in the courtyards (especially in front of the holy basil plant that is traditionally

Muggus around and on a tree considered sacred, Poduru, 2007

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[169] The Dharmashatra is a canonical text that lays down the principles for virtuous living.

planted in the centre of the couryard) and in front of, and sometimes *on* trees considered sacred.

Lotus *muggu* in front of a *tulsi* plant in the courtyard, Poduru, 2008

As Chatterjee and many others have pointed out, in India, many plants and trees are considered sacred, like the *vata* tree (banyan, *Ficus bengalensis*), "which is regarded as the abode of the Hindu Trinity – Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar" (2001: 81-82); the *tulsi* (holy basil) plant, presented in some mythological stories as a goddess in her own right and considered as Vishnu's wife; the "*bilva* tree (*Aegle marmelos*), which is said to be the embodiment of Shiva" (2001: 98-99); the leaves of the mango tree are used in all kinds of rituals but are especially significant for weddings; the *durba* grass, which is regarded as a symbol of immortality, is used predominantly by priests for sanctification; the banana tree can also be regarded as part of the pantheon of vegetation deities (2001: 104-105); the *soma* plant and *karpura* (camphor) are also considered sacred – often thought to be personifications of the moon, perhaps because they are both white (*soma* releases a white liquid) (2001: 106-107). The banyan tree is also considered immortal by the Hindus because it is believed that the Buddha attained enlightenment under it.

Chatterjee mentions three trees as being related to fertility and ancestor worship. "In eastern India, during Shashti Puja, the branches of the *vata* tree are used in the rituals that attend the 'fertility' *puja*" (2001: 100-101). Indeed, I do not believe this practice is restricted to eastern India, as women in south India are frequently asked to circambulate the banyan tree. The *peepal* tree is symbolic of ancestor worship. "It is believed that ancestors come down from the tree and accept its offerings. . . . Ritualistically speaking, Hindu women worship [the] *peepal* for the boon of male offspring. According to the *Atharva Veda*, [the] *peepal* tree is considered as [the] benefactor of mankind by blessing barren women with children. Thus the tree is considered [to be] potent with fertility" (2001: 103). *Pan* (the betel leaf) is also essential for most domestic Hindu rituals. "In a marriage ceremony, a ritual called *Briddhi Sraddha* is performed where the bridegroom

accepts the bride in [the] name of [the] departed souls of their ancestors. At this point, in the ancestral worship, thirty-two *pan* or betel leaves are required" (2001: 105).

As Chatterjee points out, tree-worship had been widespread down the ages, in numerous cultures, since it was believed that trees also have spirits – or in other words, have a consciousness, which is why cutting down a tree without first worshipping it and asking for its permission, is said to bring misfortune. Just as nature's elements – space, water, fire, wind and earth were personified as sacred deities, so too are trees venerated. The roots, bark, leaves and flowers of many trees are also believed to have medicinal properties, thus adding to their sanctity (2001: 81-82).

Thus, when a *muggu* is drawn in front of a tree, it participates in its consecration. This is evident when one sees that many trees considered beneficial for health or attributed symbolic significance not only have *muggus* drawn in front of them but additionally have sacred marks smeared on them – usually three horizontal lines each with turmeric and *kumkum* with one dot in the centre. Some have a little idol placed in a carved-out hollow in the trunk. This consecration possibly applies to other

Muggus around *rots* (domestic hand-grinders), adorned with flowers, Poduru, January 2008

spaces like temples, domestic shrines, kitchen hearths and holy basil plants. One of my informants suggested that *muggus* are drawn in front of commercial establishments for Ganapati (Ganesh), who is invoked in all rituals where wish-fulfilment is paramount, especially when a 'project' is initiated. Tellingly however, *muggus* drawn in front of shops and businesses are far simpler than those drawn in front of domestic spaces.

Muggus similarly participate in the sacralisation of objects, such as domestic implements like grinders and buttermilk churners. Savitri and Radha (Poduru) for example, had smeared *muggu* on a hand-grinder, considering one part to be Shiva and the other to be his consort Parvati. In this case, I do not think that the specific deities being venerated

hold as much importance as the very fact that such implements are considered sacred because they are acknowledged as providing food and sustenance.[170]

Muggu on front slope, Poduru, 2007

And yet, the sheer visual evidence points to the fact that the threshold remains the most important space for *muggu*-drawing. According to Lakshmi, *muggus* are *not* drawn at the back of the house. She explained that she had drawn *muggus* on the side of her house because she also used the side entrance frequently. This would suggest that the threshold is significant *as the regular point of entry into the home*. It might be pertinent at this point, to briefly explain the structure of a traditional house in Poduru and Palakollu, where threshold spaces are often multilevel. Andhra houses have several spaces considered to be 'threshold spaces', including:

- *Gommam*: Outer threshold.
- *Mungillu* (*Eenadu* 2007): Front courtyards, possibly derives from *mundara*, meaning front, and *illu*, meaning houses.
- *Arugulu*: Raised platforms on either side of the main doorway, on which men and women sit in the evenings and exchange news with passersby and neighbours; a house might occasionally have one *arugu*, i.e., just one side raised.
- *Gaddappa*: Inner threshold.

In Andhra, *muggus* seem to be drawn in all the above spaces, and additionally on the front slope (used for bicycles and motorcycles), and where houses have multilevel entrances, on stairs or steps such as those leading to the *arugulu* and on the path leading out into the street; the latter is sometimes as long as two metres. Traditional houses are also frequently surrounded by a ledge-like structure, which is also often marked by *muggus*. In Palakollu, I found several houses had painted 'permanent'

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[170] Because Seetamahalakshmi (Palakollu) also said to me that *muggus* were made around buttermilk churners, and because *muggus* are drawn on kitchen counters, one may assume that these domestic implements are sacralised with *muggu*-drawing because these implements help make food. However, I cannot help wonder whether the buttermilk churner's sacred status is aided by buttermilk's association with the infant god Krishna. Similarly, the pestle in the *rot* (hand-grinder) closely resembles the Shivalinga, the phallic symbol.

muggus – with enamel paint – on the ledge around, which is closer to the house, whereas the space spilling out onto the street was filled with *muggus* drawn with chalk sticks. In front of one house, I found a *muggu* drawn with a chalk stick on wet ground, and a little to one side, a small circular *muggu* obviously drawn with rice powder. Such houses, where *muggus* are drawn with various different materials, are most interesting as they emphasise the hierarchy of auspiciousness as it relates to architectural space.

Kilambi (1986) briefly mentions a belief that the threshold of the house – at least in theory – is built on the foundations of the house, thus adding to its importance.[171] What emerges is that the *gommam* and *gaddappa* are crucially important, especially the latter. Ramana stressed, "One must never draw a *muggu* on an unwashed, dirty threshold. . . . One must draw *muggus* first on the threshold before drawing them in the house. If we draw it on

Muggu on a side threshold, Poduru, 2007

the threshold, it means Lakshmi Devi is present in our house." Annapoorna stated that "one *must* make a *muggu* on the *gommam*" but added that she also makes "a small one with a turmeric dot on the *gaddappa*. Anyway, it is good to smear turmeric and *kumkum* [on the *gaddappa*]. Only problem is people walk over it. That is sacrilegious". As mentioned in my discussion of ritual generosity and prophylatic purposes, *muggu*-makers sometimes say a *muggu* should not be stepped on, though they also sometimes specify that *muggus* ought to be stepped on – especially by men. Suryaprabha's clarification proves useful here.

> The *gaddappa* is considered as Lakshmi – *subham* (auspicious) – linked to prosperity, *arogyam* (health), auspiciousness, etc. Hence the *gaddappa* must be smeared with turmeric [lines] and *kumkum* dots . . . if not every day, at least on Fridays. It is linked to Lakshmi Devi and worship, so people – out of faith or fear – follow the practice at least because it is part of tradition. Otherwise how do you ensure that the practice remains alive, is maintained? People get lazy, etc. This ensures adherence. There are reasons for these customs.

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[171] For most Hindus, laying a foundation for a house involves a ceremony where sacred materials (including turmeric, *kumkum*, rice grains and metals) are used to consecrate the space.

Her statement echoes Sesharatnam's, i.e. that some Hindu rituals attribute auspiciousness to a practice in order to ensure adherence, because it is found to be beneficial for health or even for social cohesion.[172] In other words, there are some religious beliefs that build on common sense. Yet others carry symbolic connotations. Some have a scientific basis that is sometimes obscured through time but was couched in the language of faith by the institution of religion, for wider subscription by those who do not necessarily follow scientific understanding. It does not follow that all practices established on the basis of scientific understanding are useful. Some may be valid, others may be declared as invalid when further work is carried out; in such instances, in a living tradition, old beliefs are revised. When a belief system becomes static, this revision is halted. There are of course rituals that have an overtly spiritual foundation; again, some may result from genuine metaphysical quests; others may even be instituted by individuals who gain power for a short period or in smaller groups.

Among metaphysical purposes offered for *muggu*-making, one article suggests that the forms of threshold drawings come from Hindu *yantras*, which have great power and are believed to create positive energy.

> Those same dots and lines in *muggus* also create energy. Our society has believed for a long time that whether we draw a swastika, or a lotus, those lines release positive energy, undoubtedly bettering the thoughts of those who cross them. Which is why we feel that *muggus* are auspicious on thresholds. (*Surya* 2008d)

There are several words that kept cropping up in my informants' discourse and as I have discussed above, *aharam* (food) relates to *danam* (charity, generosity) and *punyam* (atonement, accruing virtue and goodwill), but *subham* (auspiciousness) is equally important. Although it also relates to *punyam*, it is clearly not quite the same. I have

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[172] This is not necessarily applicable only to rituals that were instituted in the past. Suryaratnamalati believed that many rituals continued to be instituted for the benefit of ignorant rural folk. Such a suggestion cannot be rejected out of hand. For example, on 6 January 2002, the morning news on ETV2 reported how a doctor had established a mosquito temple, in order to raise awareness of how mosquitoes spread diseases and should therefore be feared. Apparently the people in the villages where he practised were completely unaware of how harmful mosquitoes can be. An image of the deified mosquito was enshrined, to which people offered *naivejyam*. This made me wonder whether the small pox goddess in Tamil Nadu and in Andhra Pradesh (Ammavaru) and the disease goddesses in Kerala were instituted in similar ways. Also, along with *tulsi*, most houses in Poduru now grow the aloe vera plant. I would not be surprised if 50 years from now, aloe vera enters folklore and obtains 'traditional', 'sacred' status like the holy basil. When I asked the people in Poduru why they grew aloe vera, all of them said, "It is supposed to be good." It is amazing how quickly something like aloe vera, the properties of which have been popularised as recently as about a decade ago, has spread into rural homes. Of course, as Sesharatnam pointed out, other than ritualism, festivals also serve the purpose of bringing families and communities together.

explained *subham* in the context of materials and space. However, it is not threshold *spaces* alone that are considered auspicious. As mentioned above, *muggus* are also drawn in *kalyana mandapams*. Thus, at events that are deemed auspicious, *muggus* can sometimes participate in consecrating space for a ritual event. In such cases, the sacralisation of the space lasts only for a particular period or moment. Thus it is not so much the space but the ritual event that is important here. In the next section, I therefore focus on auspiciousness related to time, rather than space.

3.2c. Auspiciousness in the *muggu* tradition, especially with reference to threshold times

I have suggested above that there seems to be a hierarchy of auspiciousness relating to space. One would assume that the household shrine would occupy privileged position in such a hierarchy. Padmavathi affirmed that "*muggus* are drawn in front of the household shrine because it is *subham*", but most informants do not especially emphasise the household shrine. Yet, it is clear that *muggus* are considered to be essential for consecrating space, as I have indicated with reference to the Ashtalakshmi *puja*. Just as they are drawn at wedding halls, they are also drawn for specific *pujas*. Indeed, according to Ramalingeshwar, the *Ashtotram*, which describes the various tasks involved in preparing for a *puja*, "one line states that one must draw *muggus* as part of the preparation for any *puja* and any auspicious ceremony".

Soumarajulu echoed this when he said,

> But no work can be conducted without the *muggu*, whether it is a wedding, a childbirth or a *puja*. A *muggu must* be drawn first because it is auspicious. . . . Without the *muggu*, bananas and betel leaves, no occasion is complete. And then of course, *muggus* are specially drawn on Fridays and Tuesdays because of Lakshmi Devi. Friday is especially important. Some people do not consider Tuesday that special. But on Friday, you will have *muggus* such as these [Points to *nindu* (densely filled) *muggus*].

There is, however, a subtle difference between special *muggus* that participate in consecrating space for *pujas* and daily *muggus* – even *muggus* that explicitly symbolise ausiciousness – such as the Tuesday and Friday *muggus* that propitiate Lakshmi Devi. This is suggested by Bhaskaram's clarification, "One does not need to bathe before drawing [daily] *muggus*, brushing one's teeth is sufficient. One needs to bathe only

before [drawing *muggus* for] *pujas* and other auspicious ceremonies." Hence, despite her contention that daily "*muggus* are drawn for Lakshmi Devi" because "the *muggu* is *subham*", it appears that even if one is propitiating a deity, place and time determine degrees of auspciousness. One could infer that having to bathe before a *puja* but not having to bathe before drawing a daily *muggu* indicates that the latter is less auspicious, but such an inference would be misplaced. Bhaskaram adds,

> The *muggu* is an essential part of our Hindu *matham* (institution). . . . Stepping on an undecorated threshold is *dosham* (sin), *viruddham* (obstruction) to our Hindu tradition. The *muggu* invites Lakshmi Devi, signifies her presence and signifies the start of the day and the start of any ceremony. Men must also not roam around without the *muggu* being drawn first.

Friday *muggus* venerating Lakshmi, Poduru, 2007

Note that purpose, place and time are inextricably linked in Bhaskaram's statement: Lakshmi, threshold space and the start of the day. Time is undoubtedly significant. As we have seen with *dhanurkalam*, deities often have specific times allotted to them. It is not only *subhodayam* (dawn) that is important in the *muggu* tradition but also *suryastamayam* (dusk) and perhaps this is because the latter is important for Lakshmi. One evening, around dusk, opening the front door, my uncle apologised that it was closed. I said I did not mind it being closed because there were too many mosquitoes coming in. He looked surprised and said, "Yes, but we cannot keep the door closed now. It is the time when [goddess] Lakshmi comes in. So we will keep it open until it gets dark and then close it, if you want."

It is instances like these that made me reflect on how I was different from my informants; this prompted me to write in my fieldwork diary:

> My impetus in wanting to study the other is an attempt to reclaim those traditions that ordinarily would have been my own and which, due to certain circumstances, I am alienated from. But I believe that even participant observation can never result in identification. The very fact that I am 'studying' a culture necessarily means that I am at least to some extent, an outsider. Being an outsider, in fact, is what enables me to 'study' the culture.

Even more tellingly, I added:

> I will never really grasp the full extent of what I am studying because there are too many underlying meanings, too many associated strands… I may, in the end, achieve a partial understanding and gain partial acceptance. I might be better exposed to this culture but I will never be a part of it as they are a part of it. They are steeped in it, they have grown up with it; they live and breathe it.

It is because of my informants taking for granted that I should 'know' many aspects of Andhra culture and the *muggu* tradition, that I had to rely to some extent on my own inferences. One of the conclusions I drew early on during my fieldwork was the importance of the threshold as a concept in the *muggu* tradition. It cannot be a coincidence that threshold *muggus* seem central to *muggu* drawing, and that they are usually drawn at thresold times of the day, and threshold times in the year (as explained above, Dhanurmasam and Sankranti mark temporal interstices). *Muggu*-makers nevertheless mentioned other occasions too, among them: Krishnashtami, Deepavali, Kartikamasam, Navaratri, Ganesh Chaturthi (not so much), weddings and New Year's Day (very few mentioned this in the ritual context). Of course, while Sankranti is the most important liminal period in Andhra, many of the other occasions mentioned here are also liminal, such as weddings and even New Year's Day, which marks a threshold, albeit not an indigenous one. Ramana pointed out that for festivals, "one has to draw particular *muggus* – the form is important then". Sesharatnam identified some forms associated with popular festivals,

> On Deepavalli, we draw *deepams* (lamps), on Krishnashtami, we draw *padalu* (feet). On Ugadi, we draw mango bunches, *toran* (mango leaves) and *latalu* (creepers). The Vinayakachaturthi is not really special for us; earlier we used to make clay idols of Ganapati.. . . Just for fun, jokers are drawn for Christmas. We have been drawing *muggus* for Christmas since my childhood.

As is evident, the purposes offered for *muggu*-making are rather heterogeneous. Indeed, I realised that often, when my informants did not have an answer to my questions, they would simply say, "It is *sampradayam* (tradition)." I therefore decided to turn to ritual

theorists in the hope that they would provide me with a framework that made sense of what I perceived as discrepancies.

3.3. RITUAL THEORIES THAT COULD APPLY TO THE *MUGGU* TRADITION

Foremost of these discrepancies, what puzzled me was my informants' insistence that *muggus* were not made when a death occurs, until the eleventh day after all the purificatory ceremonies had been performed – as the Sharmas specified, until after "the corpse is cremated, the man's soul prayed for, and the house ritually purified". This was because I had come across references to floor-drawings that had to be made near the funeral pyre.

> At the cremation ground, an appropriate place is prepared for the pyre. This place has first to be swept, then smeared with the purifying cow-dung and appropriate lines drawn on the ground with the sacred *kusa* grass. As in all fire-sacrifices, the *vedi* (altar) is established within these lines. After consecrating the *vedi* with holy water, Agni (the fire-god) is established in the *vedi*. He is worshipped with flowers and water, and a fire-sacrifice is performed to the chant of the proper mantras (sacred formulae). The theme of these mantras is a request to Agni to accept the dead man and carry him to heaven. (Das 1987: 122)

What made this more confusing was that despite qualifying Dhanurmasam as a sacred month, my informants also asserted that it was very inauspicious for ceremonies like weddings. I did not understand this until I connected it to ancestors being venerated during this period. My parents had often pointed out to me that Hinduism's prescribed rituals are mostly life-affirming, so I asked myself whether the fact that ancestors were 'elders who had passed away' had something to do with what I viewed as inconsistencies.

My premise strengthened into conviction when Gayatri and her friends informed me that when there was a death in any house "the threshold must still be washed so the dust settles but during the 11-day period of mourning, a *muggu* should not be drawn". It can only be drawn after the 11-day mourning period has passed. One woman claimed that traditionally, "*muggus* could actually not be drawn until the men came back home from the voyages they made to scatter the ashes of the dead, however long that may be". She said that the women "must watch out for the men returning, and wash the threshold afresh and draw a *muggu* just as the men returned so they did not step over a bare threshold". But this is probably another instance of Brahminical patriarchy. Note that it is

equally uncommon to make *muggus* on the occasion of the annual *shradh* (ritual commemorating the dead).

Ramalingeshwar explained the purificatory rites during the period of mourning.

> When somebody passes away, no *muggus* are drawn and no jewellery is used by the women, for 10 days. Then, on the eleventh day, water that has been consecrated in *pujas* is sprinkled on all those spaces where the family of the dead have gone since the death has occurred, purifying these spaces, so we can use them after. All the water from the *puja* is kept in a *kalasam*, and the water is sprinkled on the spaces with the mango leaf. Immediately after this is done, a *muggu* is drawn. This signals that the purification is complete and the *subham* period starts with the *muggu* being drawn.

It is only later that I realised that while floor-drawings must be made at the cremation ground, funeral rites rarely – if ever – take place in a domestic space.[173] So it would seem that my informants' insistence that *muggus* are not drawn when a death occurs may apply only to the *domestic* space.

3.3a. Srinivas' 'good-sacred' and 'bad-sacred'

Studies about Indian ritualism, including by Indian anthropologists, frequently categorise Hindu rites as either pure or impure. Srinivas (1965) refined this opposition by developing Durkheim's (1964) dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, defining the sacred as encompassing both good-sacred and bad-sacred; in other words, the sacred could in certain instances include both pure and impure. I was particularly attracted to Srinivas because his study of the Coorgs (in the neighbouring state of Karnataka) echoed many of the characteristics of Andhra culture, and I believed that his work may clarify some of the inconsistencies my informants' discourse seemed fraught with. The following references may explain my attraction:

> The death of even an unrelated adult in the house defiles it and the members of the particular household. After the corpse is removed, both the house and the members of the household have to be purified. (1965: 76)

> A part of the ancestral estate is used for burying or cremating the dead members of the *okka*. The part where corpses are buried is called *kekala* while the adjoining part

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[173] The following quote is revealing: "The Hindu ideal [is] that a person should die outside his house near some source of holy waters . . . The *Ashvalayana Grihya Sutra* also advises a person who falls ill to leave his village and go elsewhere. If he recovers, he should return and perform a thanksgiving sacrifice. If he dies, his dead body should be cremated at a suitable place." (Das 1987: 94)

used for cremation is called *tutangala*. It is sacred, but in an undesirable way. (1965: 78)[174]

The local phenomenon of the attribution of sacredness to the domestic lamp and kitchen stove is absorbed into the All-India worship of Agni and Surya. (1965: 91)

While white rice is used in auspicious ritual, rice yellowed with turmeric is used in inauspicious ritual. At the very important funeral rite of 'breaking the pot', each of the mourners sprinkles a little rice, yellowed with turmeric, on the corpse before saluting it. (1965: 92)

Food is offered to the dead ancestors of the *okka* at the periodical ancestor-propitiations. (1965: 115)

Despite the fact that the Coorg community's domestic rituals do not necessarily correspond with Telugu ones, I felt I was justified in looking at Srinivas' material because of such strong echoes of statements made by my informants. Indeed, Srinivas even mentions something that reminded me of my reflections on the hierarchy of space in relation to auspiciousness. He says, "Certain parts of the ancestral house are more sacred than the others" (1965: 76).

Although Srinivas' opposition between good-sacredness and bad-sacredness has since been challenged, his work still remains significant because it greatly refined what were previously fundamentally opposed dichotomies. In studying the main terms the Coorgs use – *madi* (ritual purity) and *pole* (ritual impurity of any sort), he identified degrees of ritual impurity, pointing out that ritual impurity, normal ritual status, and ritual purity form a hierarchy (1965: 107) and that in fact, if one considered that normal ritual status is the most prevalent one, both ritual purity and impurity are departures from the normal. In Srinivas' interpretation of the Coorgs' ritual structure, bad-sacredness is a wider concept than pollution or ritual impurity, encompassing both 'defilement' and 'inauspiciousness'. Defilement in this instance relates to all bodily functions, so faeces, urine, semen, menstrual blood, spittle, and parings of nail and hair are all ritually impure (1965: 105-106). He characterised good-sacredness as inclusive of all forms of ritually desirable states and conditions like auspiciousness and purity (1965: 102).

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[174] "*Okka*: Patrilineal, and patrilocal joint family, the basic kin-group among Coorgs. It is also a co-residential, commensal and property-owing group." (1965: 250)

Despite the usefulness of Srinivas in clarifying the intricacies of ritual, I found that his concept of the good-sacred and bad-sacred did not explain the inconsistencies in *muggu*-makers' discourse. For example, while he asserts that "birth and death both result in ritual impurity for the entire household for several days" (1965: 106), he also states,

> A man, irrespective of the caste to which he belongs, is in a condition of ritual purity while praying or sacrificing to an ancestor or deity. He attains this ritual purity by the performance of a series of ritual actions like taking a bath and wearing ritually pure clothes. (1965: 104)

If I were to apply Srinivas' ritual structure to the *muggu* tradition, it would not explain why *muggus* are drawn for childbirths, but not for deaths. It is possible that had my fieldwork been longer and more detailed, I might have found that *muggus* do not actually get drawn at childbirth but instead get drawn at the child's naming ceremony. I nevertheless felt that Srinivas' scheme had far too many exceptions to his own rules to work effectively. This is not to suggest that all rituals and cultural practices can be neatly explained away with structures, but I subscribe to Das' criticism of Srinivas' conceptual scheme, in which – as she points out – the basic isolates "are elements, not relations" (1987: 110). As we shall see in the following chapter, oppositions abound in ritualism, hence many anthropologists have struggled to find theoretical structures to explain practices and discourses that often appear so heterogeneous as to make no sense at all.

Interestingly, Nagarajan – despite not identifying her argument as such – succeeds in offering an elegant solution to the opposition she encounters in her study of the *kolams*.

3.3b. Nagarajan's 'intermittent sacrality'
Nagarajan also refers to ritual pollution repeatedly in her thesis, especially mentioning menstruating women as being barred from drawing *kolams*, and being confined to the out-house until the fourth day of their periods. Although she also falls into the trap of regarding Hindu categories of activity as either polluted or pure, she does add "depending on the time, place, or circumstances of an individual or household" (1998b: 89).

Chapter 3: *Muggus*: A Ritual Framework

Nagarajan presents *kolam*-making as a ritual that is meant to raise consciousness of our interconnectedness with the ground, through the cultural construct of Bhu Devi, who is imagined as simultaneously cosmic and local. Furthermore, Bhu Devi herself is a mnemonic device framing our understanding of the natural world.

> The earth . . . is fragile, just as the earth goddess is fragile. Both need protection. . . . An explicit language of protection and vulnerability runs alongside the mythologisation of the earth as goddess. . . . The making of the *kolam* is then clearly a way of culturally remembering the natural world. (1998a: 272)

She places *kolam*-making under the category of compensatory rituals; in this instance, the making of a *kolam* simultaneously constitutes an act of gratitude and apology to the earth goddess Bhu Devi, for the debt we owe her for burdening her through the day with our actions. Another example of a compensatory ritual to Bhu Devi is the salute of a Bharatanatyam dancer before he or she begins a performance. Although the dancer asks Bhu Devi for forgiveness for stamping on her, the dance itself is not stopped. Essentially, a compensatory ritual does not imply "a change of behaviour in non-ritual time and space" (1998a: 274).

So despite the profound symbolism inherent in the *kolam* ritual, the influence of the act lasts only for a brief time. Nagarajan's notion of 'intermittent sacrality', i.e. that the sacralisation of a space need not be permanent, is highly pertinent because it suggests that the nature of this ritual ensures that sacredness comes and goes. "The *kolam* . . . participates in this hosting and dehosting of the divine . . . the sacrality that is attached to the locus of the *kolam* is temporary . . . Soon after the *kolam* is made . . . soon after Bhu Devi is recognised, decorated, and hosted into being . . . [she] is dehosted from that space by the gradual dispersal of the rice-flour patterns . . ." (1998a: 278-279).

Her concept of 'intermittent sacrality' offers one possible reason for *kolams*' ephemerality, i.e. the floor-drawings must be made, dispersed and made again in order to participate in hosting and dehosting the divine. Nagarajan's characterisation of sacrality as something mobile, possessing volition, is pertinent to the *muggu* tradition. In rituals that host and dehost the divine as guest, sacrality is characterised by ritual hospitality. When the divine departs, and this departure "is essential to the structure of the ritual", sacrality lapses (1998a: 278). I would argue that her concept is equally

applicable to other deities, not just to Bhu Devi – such as Vishnu's departure on Mukkanumu. But since Vishnu is assumed to have resided in each household throughout Dhanurmasam – a period of a month, one cannot maintain that the hosting and dehosting of Vishnu encourages ephemerality in the *muggu* tradition. However, other deities' stays can last for a much shorter time; in fact even Vishnu's stay could in a sense be said to be temporary, if one considers that he is invited every day at *dhanurkalam*. The same could be said of Lakshmi. As *muggus* host and dehost these and other deities, intermittent sacrality offers one plausible explanation for the ephemeral nature of the *muggu* tradition as well.

Additionally, places that are considered as the seats of divinities, or objects that are considered as repositories of faith are perceived as permanently sacred, such as temples, household shrines, idols and natural spaces. Vastly influential natural spaces would include mountains, seas, rivers, trees and the earth itself. However, in the case of these natural spaces, although their sacrality does not expire, "the active human relationship acknowledging sacrality to that natural place is temporary" because while nature must be respected through sacralisation, it would not be possible to live if that acknowledgement were permanent (1998a: 278-279).

By highlighting the fluidity of spatial occupation by divinities, especially in the two perceived extremes of the natural and cultural worlds, and by framing human relationships between these two worlds, Nagarajan demonstrates how the *kolam* ritual provides meaning to its practitioners. Useful as Nagarajan's concept of intermittent sacrality is, it nevertheless does not explain *muggu*-makers' diverse interpretations.

Huyler offers another reason for floor-drawings' ephemerality,

> The constant application and reapplication of designs ensure the continuous participation of householders in the process of safeguarding their homes. It discourages the relaxation of vigilance . . . The use of materials which crumble, disintegrate, or are easily rubbed or washed away, acts as a continuous reminder to the devotee of her need to re-enact the rituals of supplication and protection. . . . Things [made of porous materials such as clay and dirt] . . . are believed to absorb not only physical filth and disease, but also bad thoughts and malignant energies. (1993: 174)

Chapter 3: *Muggus*: A Ritual Framework

As I have noted above, the materials used to make *muggus* ensure not only their ephemerality but are also imbued with their own symbolic power. Huyler's point seems an excellent one, as it implies the importance of the threshold by suggesting that the protection of the home is a primary purpose for floor-drawing. After all, the threshold is the point of entry into the domestic space. But since my informants' discourse about ritualism did not reveal the protection of the home as a purpose for *muggu*-making, I turn to their discourse about *muggu*'s forms for a better understanding of the purposes of floor-drawing in Andhra Pradesh. So, of Rose's three sites of interpretation of images, this chapter dealt with the site of production, but the next chapter deals with what Rose terms as the site of the image.

CHAPTER 4: *MUGGUS*: AN AESTHETIC FRAMEWORK

Floor-drawing is sometimes called a 'ritual' art. As Elgood states, in India, religious arts have "given boundless variation to . . . [the] fundamental core [of Hinduism] while dramatically influencing ritual development" (1999: 3). One must recognise that with such practices,

> . . . art is essentially form. An art cannot properly be called "sacred" solely on the grounds that its subjects originate in a spiritual truth; its formal language also must bear witness to a similar origin. . . . No art merits that epithet unless its forms themselves reflect the spiritual vision characteristic of a particular religion. (Burckhardt 1967: 7)

Thus, an aesthetic framework of the *muggu* tradition involves understanding how *muggu*-makers determine the efficacy and 'beauty' of a *muggu*, and additionally, how *muggu* forms relate to rituals observed by Telugus.

Pulligoru muggu, Palakollu, 2008. From my fieldwork sketchbooks

Many *muggus* have individual names, such as *pulligoru-muggu* (tiger's claw), but not all *muggus* are named. My informants' discourse soon revealed a broad taxonomy of *muggu* forms. If I asked a *muggu*-maker what sort of *muggu* she was drawing, she would usually characterise it by category:

1) Sankranti *muggulu* (as a stand-alone category);
2) *Geetalu muggulu* (line *muggus*);
3) *Chukkalu muggulu* (dot-and-line *muggus*);
4) *Kotta muggulu* (new *muggus*).

Chukkalu muggulu are occasionally called *kallapulu muggulu* (*muggus* with links).[175] Sometimes, instead of categorising a *muggu*, a *muggu*-maker would identify it by name, for example, as a *padma-muggu* (lotus *muggu*) or *tabel-muggu* (tortoise *muggu*). In Kaushal's and Saxena's taxonomies of *mandanas*, a motif can often belong to

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[175] *Kallapu* means 'to mix', so in Chapter 3, it denotes cow-dung mixed with water but here, it means 'linking' the lines around (or over) the dots.

overlapping categories. Similarly, both the *tabel-* and *padma-muggus* are *geetalu muggulu* but the *tabel* is also a Sankranti *muggu*. Women sometimes characterise their *muggus* by sub-categories, which are not as clearly identified (I explain these later in this chapter).

Tabel-muggu, Palakollu, 2007

Note that the manner in which *muggu*-makers categorise *muggus* is inconsistent. While *chukkalu muggulu* and *geetalu muggulu* are distinctions in form, *kotta muggulu*, as the name suggests, qualifies age; Sankranti *muggulu*, on the other hand, are qualified by their ritualism.

I now examine my informants' taxonomy to see what it reveals about the *muggu* tradition. For reasons that will become clear, I discuss *kotta muggulu* in Chapter 5, despite my informants identifying it as an emergent class of drawings. In the last section, I formulate a ritual theory for the *muggu* tradition, drawing on my informants' discourse and my readings on ritualism.

4.1. SANKRANTI *MUGGULU*

Due to Sankranti's significance in Andhra and in *muggu*-making, it is hardly surprising that Sankranti *muggulu* form a separate category. Indeed, according to *Divyadhatri*, ". . . Dhanurmasam is also known as *muggulupandaga* (festival of *muggus*)" (2008: 49). Further,

> During Dhanurmasam, it is not enough to draw *chukkalu muggulu* and *padma-muggulu*. We must also draw *muggus* specific to this month, such as Nelaganta, *gummadi pandu* (pumpkin) and the snake. (Durga, Palakollu)

In Chapter 3, Sesharatnam mentioned some of the forms associated with specific festivals; the numerous *muggus* specific to Dhanurmasam indicate Sankranti's importance. These include: *paon* (snake), *tabel*, Nelaganta, *nelavanka* (new moon),

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Shankham (conch) *muggu*, Palakollu, 2008

gummadi,[176] *uyyala* (cradle), *ratham* (chariot), Bhogi *kundalu* (large pots), *cheruku* (sugarcane), wheat sheaves, and Vishnu's conch, which is probably drawn for other festivals too. Christmas and New Year, which occur during Nelaganta, have their own *muggu* iconographies; as they form relatively new categories, they too will be discussed in Chapter 5.

It is believed that every day during Dhanurmasam should be marked by a different *muggu*.

Kalasam muggu, Palakollu, Bhogi morning 2008

. . . from the day we start making the Nelaganta until the Sankranti day, . . . the *muggus* we make include the *kalasam* on the first day, fish on the second day, lotus on the third day, swastika on the fourth day, bells . . . , flower-*muggus*, elephants, 16 triangles, parrot, swan, deer, rabbit, *pulligoru*, chess, *panchapadi-muggu* (snakes and ladders), *muree jugdam* (a game), *nagapaon*, hen, peacocks, *navaratnalu* (nine gems), butterflies, *dashavataralu-muggu*, birds, ornaments . . ., bananas, *gobbillu*, flowers, [and] *vaidyalu-muggu* (depicting musical instruments). Thus, one is supposed to decorate the threshold with 30 different *muggus* on the 30 days of this month. (*Surya* 2008d)

This is an ideal that is not necessarily upheld today. Just as Sankranti's four days have distinct rituals, they are also marked by characteristic *muggus*. Unlike the 30-day ideal, these four days' *muggus* are still made with some care. For example, on Bhogi, women tend to draw *kundalu* (pots), with wheat sheaves and sugarcanes. Also, "On the day of Bhogi, . . . [we] draw the *kalasam* (auspicious water-pot)"[177] (Sesharatnam); *kalasams* – being a widely used symbol of auspiciousness – are drawn on other occasions too, such as weddings.[178] Saraswathi pointed out that, "The *kalasam* is *subham* but it is also the state symbol of Andhra Pradesh."

According to her and others, "an overflowing pot is drawn on Sankranti". It is unclear whether this overflowing pot is the same as the Bhogi *kundam*. One is depicted as a

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[176] Some women – including my mother – translate *gummadi* as ash-gourd, rather than as pumpkin.

[177] A *kalasam* is not just a water-pot but a special pot used in *pujas*; it is most often metal – brass, copper or silver. Depending on the occasion, it can contain rice grains and coins, sometimes have flowers or a coconut placed on top and have mango or betel leaves arranged at the neck.

[178] Indeed, in India, wedding invitations often feature a *kalasam*.

storage pot, with a mound of sweets. The other is drawn as a cooking pot, placed over firewood, with overflowing milk to signify abundance. The *kalasam* and the Bhogi *kundam* differ slightly. The former is more a marker of auspiciousness (though coins and grains also associate it with abundance). The latter is an explicit symbol of abundance. Of course, whether the pot drawn on Sankranti is the same as the Bhogi *kundam* is immaterial; in this context, both are symbols of abundance. As Saraswathi informs, other motifs that symbolise abundance include banana and coconut trees, wheat sheaves, sugarcane and sweets. This emphasis on abundance relates to the concepts of wealth and prosperity I have outlined in Chapter 3, the chances of which are increased by the women drawing such *muggus*.

As Burckhardt reminds us, a symbol is not just a conventional sign, "a symbol *is* in a certain sense that to which it gives expression . . ." (1976: 8) Let me return to something I mentioned at the beginning, i.e. my wonder at the beauty of southern floor-drawings. While symmetry – which is often regarded as an element that contributes to the beauty of so-called decorative arts – is an aesthetic criteria of evaluation for *muggu*-makers, Burckhardt's illuminating explanation reveals a more abiding rationale for floor-drawings' beauty – one that looks beyond the oft-cited decorativeness of traditional arts.

> . . . traditional symbolism is never without beauty: according to the spiritual view of the world, the beauty of an object is nothing but the transparency of its existential envelopes; an art worthy of the name is beautiful because it is true. (1976: 8)

He asserts that while spirituality in its essence is "independent of forms, this in no way implies that it can be expressed and transmitted by any and every sort of form" (1976: 7). Thus, *muggu*-makers' symbols are transmitted by tradition for very particular purposes. It does not follow that *muggu*-makers are aware of these reasons.

> It is neither possible nor even useful that every artist . . . engaged in sacred art should be conscious of the Divine Law inherent in forms; [s]he will know only certain aspects of it . . . [it isn't necessary] for him [or her] to know the ultimate significance of the symbols [s]he is working with. It is tradition that transmits the sacred models

Following page: *Kalasam* and Bhogi *kundalu muggus*, Palakollu, 2008. Drawn with (1) lamps, (2) sugarcane, (3) lotuses, (4) an eight-petalled lotus at the centre and sugarcanes, (5 and 6) sugarcane, and (7) Sankranti greetings; (1, 5, 6 and 7) depict Bhogi *kundalu* with a mound of sweets.
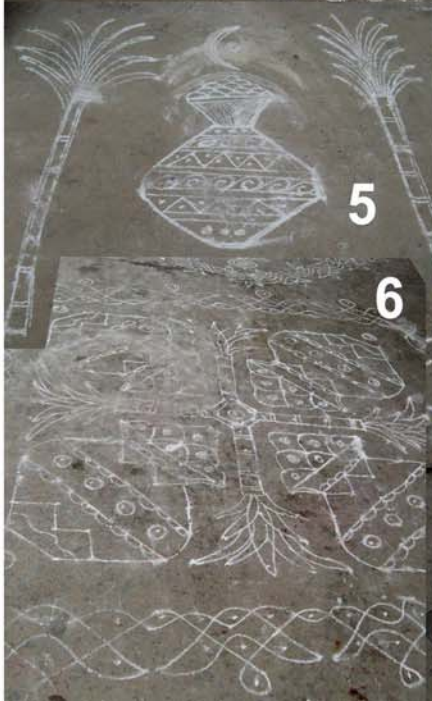
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(1), (2) and (4) Bhogi *kundalu muggus*, Palakollu, Bhogi morning 2008
(3), (5) and (6), *muggus* depicting boiling and overflowing milk,
Palakollu, Bhogi and Sankranti mornings 2008

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and the working rules, and thereby guarantees the spiritual validity of the forms. Tradition has within itself a secret force which is communicated to an entire civilisation . . . This force creates the style of a traditional civilisation . . . [which] is perpetuated without difficulty, in a quasi-organic manner, by the power of the spirit that animates it and by nothing else. (Burckhardt 1976: 8)

Gangireddu *muggu*, Palakollu, Sankranti morning 2008

While *muggu*-makers often do not remember the meanings of some forms, others sometimes name forms that do not seem to be drawn. For example, Sesharatnam mentioned that "on Makara-Sankranti, we draw the *makaram*". Although I did not see any crocodiles, Vijayagopalacharya explained, "*Makaram* is Lakshmi's son and lives in water." Indeed, the *makaram* is also cited – though rarely – as Lakshmi's *vahanam* (vehicle) though it is usually cited as Ganga or Varuna's *vahanam*. In Hindu iconography, the easiest way to identify a deity is by recognising their seat, vehicle and/or attributes (i.e. what they hold in their hands).

I observed that on Sankranti, most women tend to draw an overflowing pot of milk or the Nelaganta, which I shall explain shortly. Since consistency and strict adherence is not the norm, all women do not draw motifs associated with the day. Indeed, Durga draws only *padma-muggus* – every day of the year, regardless of the occasion, because she feels that *padma-muggus* are the ultimate markers of auspiciousness, transcending any particular ritual event. Others like Sridevi and Bhavani (Palakollu) – both in their thirties – said they preferred new 'designs'; other than two key symbols, Sridevi explained that she did not bother drawing Sankranti *muggus*. Notwithstanding the fact that such individual preferences are common, and accommodated without fuss, most women continue to draw the symbols traditionally associated with Sankranti.

On Kanumu, *muggu*-makers draw anything that symbolises a harvest, though motifs associated with Bhogi can be drawn on Kanumu or Sankranti, and vice versa, so a Gangireddu, which is really a harvest motif, may be drawn on Sankranti as it becomes a symbol of the festival itself. On Mukkanumu, women usually end the festival by drawing

the *ratha-muggu*, with the chariot symbolising Vishnu's departure; this is a widespread practice.[179] I must mention here that I felt the lack of experts on the *muggu* keenly when *muggu*-makers disagreed warmly about the manner in which a traditional symbol should be drawn, or indeed even on which day it should be drawn. Although almost all my informants agreed that the chariot should be drawn on Mukkanumu and this assertion was borne out by their drawings, one article suggested that in the district of Telangana, "on both Bhogi and Sankranti days, the chariot is drawn as coming into the house and on Kanumu day, it is drawn as leaving the house" (*Andhra Jyoti* 2008a). The *ratha-muggu* usually has a *daram* (thread), and there is some disagreement about how this should be drawn. According to Sesharatnam,

> The *ratham* is drawn on Mukkanumu. The chariot *muggu* must have a [drawn] thread linking our chariot with our neighbour's, so that we feel that Vishnu's chariot is passing through the town [or village, essentially that Vishnu visits everyone].

But when I asked Saraswathi to corroborate this, she said,

> The *ratham* is Vishnu's chariot. The thread from the *ratha-muggu* must *not* be joined with the neighbour's *ratham*; that causes quarrels. The thread must either lead away from our thresholds, crossing it laterally . . . or it must lead to the Bhogi fire.

Note that in the past, the Bhogi fire used to be much bigger and could last several days. As a slight detour, I would like to pick up on Saraswathi's reference to quarrels and mention territoriality in the *muggu* practice. For example, I noted in my fieldwork diary:

> . . . there was an effort to claim communal space (such as the road or the parking space in an apartment complex) for one's own *muggu*. Most of this was friendly banter, and consisted more of 'marking' one's territory rather than fighting for or claiming territory. One or two women however, were a little upset with the space claimed by neighbours, which cut into what they perceived as their space. *Muggu* borders seemed not only to provide a decorative finishing touch to one's *muggu* but in some cases . . . when *muggus* were elaborate and larger in numbers, clearly also served the purpose of marking territory.

Such territoriality is noticeable only during festivals, albeit in isolated instances. On Mukkanumu, I noted that one could see (in Palakollu) "a confluence of threads, like people joining a moving crowd from all directions". But in Poduru, in stark contrast to Palakollu, Vedangi, Jinnuru and Ullamparu, although "on the banks, I saw several

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[179] Note that in Hindu iconography, a chariot is often depicted as Surya's vehicle, but as we have seen, Surya may sometimes be considered as no more than Vishnu's reflection.

Jayadev, An image that was inserted in an unrelated article, it makes a humourous point about women sometimes getting territorial about their *muggu* canvas space. Reproduced from *Swati* 2008: 28
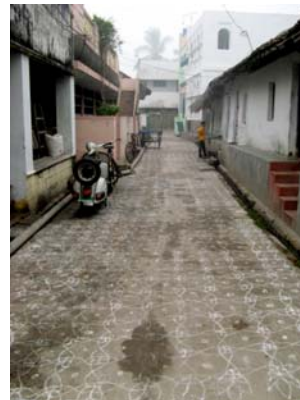
Mallipandir muggu, Palakollu, Sankranti morning 2008.
The residents of this street made the unusual decision to all draw the same *muggu* and connect it up to each other's, so that the entire street looked like it was covered with a *mallipandir* carpet.

chariots had 'threads' leading into the canal", I also

> . . . found threads attached to any *muggu*, as though this was enough to suggest departure, and any *muggu* could replace the chariot's symbolism! I could not figure out why there were . . . [so few] chariots here, and . . . [few people] seemed to be home. The street was deserted. Perhaps . . . after all the festivities and the elaborate *muggus*, they were too tired to draw an elaborate chariot. Then again, perhaps not. After all, the small, simple chariots are quick to draw.

Women drawing threads away from their chariot *muggus*, Palakollu, Mukkanumu morning 2008

Although Mukkanumu is not always identified as a Sankranti event, the *muggus* drawn for this day – in Palakollu, if not in Poduru – suggest otherwise. In other words, it is in the context of *muggu*-making, and not the discourse about Sankranti that my informants privileged this day. Due to such inconsistencies, I asked Vijayagopalacharya about the chariot's symbolism, and he explained,

> The start of the new cycle is marked by Rathasaptami, hence the chariot is drawn on Mukkanumu. The chariot simultaneously signifies the departure of Ballichakravarti and the arrival of Rathasaptami, the start of the summer.

For many women, the *ratha-muggu* is thus important because it signals the end of the ritual period. Several of my informants emphasised this, including Bhaskaram, who asserted that "the new moon, the snake, the *tabel* and the Nela[ganta] *muggus* all stop being drawn on the Kanumu day. Kanumu is the last day when these are drawn. On Mukkanumu, only the chariot is drawn".

Rathamuggu, Poduru, Mukkanumu morning 2008

Many women are too busy in the mornings to draw their *muggus* at the prescribed hour, so they draw them the previous night instead. I discuss this in Chapter 5, but I mention it here because Mukkanumu, it seemed to me, was the only day when most women seemed to wake up extraordinarily early to draw their chariots, rather than doing so the previous night.

Seetamahalakshmi, for example, said that she had risen at 3 am to draw her *ratha-muggu*, which was why by 8 am, it was already faded and semi-erased. I asked her why she woke up so early and she answered, "*Cheyyali kada mari*? (One must, don't you see?) On this day, it is important to do it on time." When I asked women in Palakollu why they had not drawn the *rathamuggu* the previous night, as they did with other *muggus*, they exclaimed,

> But we cannot draw the chariot in the evening. The chariot leaves today. One must not get the wrong day. The Lord sleeps at night. . . . One cannot disturb him then.

Significantly, even *muggu* chapbooks sold in the bazaar feature the chariot as the last image, normally printed on the back cover. But as suggested above, there are other symbols that celebrate Sankranti, all of which are drawn throughout Nelaganta; each resonates with its own symbolism, but as Bhaskaram admitted, *muggu*-makers do not always remember their symbolism.

> But I really do not know why these are drawn this month. You must find out and let us know too. It is strange how we have never questioned it. We just draw them as part of the *sampradayam* (tradition). And you are learning all this with so much *shraddha* (care and devotion) because of your interest.

To which I responded, "No, it is not so strange. You do not question it because it is part of your tradition. I question it because my desire to understand comes from outside." She reflected on this and agreed, "That is true. Maybe if it was not so much a part of our lives, we would wonder too."

However, they do know. Their memories and their knowledge may be partial because they lack the 'privileged' vantage point I had as a participant observer. One needs both the proximity and distance that Back (2009) spoke of, particularly so in a transitioning society, where old ways are often being replaced by new ones and where knowledge is not necessarily passed down orally any longer and where written texts are yet to properly replace oral modes of transmission. When I use the word 'partial' with reference to *muggu*-makers' knowledge, what I mean is that they may still know that a particular symbol is drawn on a given day, they may draw it yet not know why the symbol is associated with a particular day. For example, when I asked Satyavati why snakes, pumpkins and Nelagantas are drawn during Dhanurmasam, she merely confirmed that

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Rathamuggus, Palakollu and Poduru, Mukkanumu morning 2008

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they "are drawn during this month". Asked whether she knew why, she said, "We do not know." While Burckhardt's point about tradition having its own special force seems to be borne out here, I would suggest that such insistence on certain norms, which they cannot fully explain, could also be symptomatic of a transitioning society.

Often, when my informants were faced with a question they were unable to answer, I would be asked to approach 'the elders'. But the elders 'who know' are hard to come by. For example, I once witnessed a disagreement between two informants: Durga remarked to her neighbour, who was drawing a snake *muggu*, that she was drawing it wrong, "Do not draw it like that. It must not face the house. Turn it the other side." Then,

Durga quickly wiped the head of the snake. When her friend asked her why she should not draw the head facing the house, Durga replied, "I do not know. But I remember my elders cautioning me against drawing the head like this. It must face outwards."[180] I asked Durga

Rathamuggus, from *muggu* chapbook back covers, 2008.

whether anyone could explain such stipulations and she said "only elders" could. When I enquired whether there were any elders in her house, she said, "not anymore". Ramalingeshwar likewise suggested that a group discussion with elders was the best way to glean knowledge about the *muggu* tradition, but despite his best efforts, he found it difficult to arrange this.

When my informants knew the answers to my questions, they responded willingly. In a way, their answers and instructions on how to draw *muggus* contributes to the transmission of the *muggu* tradition. As Susila said,

> Ask us anything you want. It is good *sanskriti* (culture) to pass on the knowledge we have, because after all, we also gained our knowledge from someone else. We are duty-bound to answer your questions!

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[180] Similarly, Subbalakshmi (Poduru) explained that in her family, everybody draws the snake with its head pointing to the house and she had in fact drawn a snake with its head towards her house. However, like Durga, her mother-in-law Seetamahalakshmi said that the snake's head must point away from the threshold.

In the absence of elders, I was sometimes asked to approach the priests for their knowledge of symbolism and their familiarity with myths and stories that converge around the *muggu* tradition. This 'scholarly' knowledge is now perhaps becoming the preserve of the *muggu* tradition, though of course the *muggus* themselves provide strong visual clues. As it happened, the Poduru *devasthanam* priests supplemented *muggu*-makers' explanations, helping me relate *muggus*' symbolism to the rituals observed during Sankranti. Among all the *muggus* drawn during Dhanurmasam, Krishnaveni felt that "the snake, the Nelaganta and the pumpkin" were "the most important". In the next section, I therefore focus on these symbols and also the new moon, because of its sheer ubiquity during Dhanurmasam.

4.1a. *Muggus* related to veneration of ancestors

As with many aspects of the *muggu* tradition and Sankranti, *muggu* forms have multiple interpretations, not least because their symbolism seems to relate to multiple rituals. An article quoted in Chapter 3 states that the doors to heaven open on Makara Sankranti. These open passageways feature in the Nelaganta *muggu*, which some may argue is the main Sankranti *muggu*. Archana relates the Nelaganta to the planets, stars and the agricultural cycles, believing that with advancing interest in astronomy, the influence of the stellar bodies was recognised and incorporated into Sankranti symbolism, to increase farmers' chances of good harvests.

> The heavenly bodies were now seen as exerting considerable influence on the course of events and a whole body of literature dealing with the beneficial and maleficial effects of planets cropped up. . . . The fructification and fertility of the earth now took into account these cyclical changes. (1981: 28)

On the same page, Archana reproduces an image that appears to combine the swastika with the Nelaganta. The caption reads:

> The Vankan Nela (curved month) *muggu* of Andhra is drawn for Sankranti. The Swastika-like form sets the cosmic cycle in motion, the bend symbolising the change and pause in the cosmic cycle. (1981: 28, Fig.65)

Another caption reads:

> Sankranti Nela *muggu*. The sun and moon in the centre with crops drawn on all sides. (1981: 41, Fig.114)

There is little doubt that Nela-*muggus* incorporate agricultural motifs and thus must relate to the harvest, but I would suggest that the Nelaganta also relates to ancestors. Indeed, this is perhaps hinted at even in Archana's references because while she calls the above images Nela *muggus*, she also refers to them "as Haridwara *muggus*. The four ends

Nelaganta *muggu*, Palakollu, 2007-2008. Two of the four corners depict a *gummadi* (pumpkin) and the other two have wheat sheaves. A *nelavanka* is at the centre. The border consists of lotuses or lilies. The lines of the Nelaganta itself are done in the style of *chukkalu muggulu* (dot and line).

are shown as broken lines, signifying heaven (Vaikunta)" (1981: 40, Figs.112 and 113).

A little later, she reiterates,

> The Haridwara *muggu* has the motif of the sun and the moon in the centre and the four ends shown as broken lines are kept open during the Sankranti month signifying the doors to heaven. On Kanumu day, . . . the ends are closed to make Kanumu the most inauspicious day to die. (1981: 42)

Dwara means doorway, and Archana refers not only to Haridwara (god's door) but elsewhere refers to 'Vaikuntadwara' (god's – specifically Vishnu's – door) and also to 'Swargadwara' (heaven's door). However, she only seems to relate what she alternately refers to as Haridwara and Nela-*muggu*, to crops and to astronomy. Given her significant analyses of the symbolism of fertility and regeneration, life and death in the southern floor-drawing traditions, this is surprising, especially as she says – in the context of Karnataka – that "the sun and the moon became recurring symbols of death and rebirth" (1981: 29). She does not appear to relate this symbolism to *muggus*.

Nelaganta *muggu*, Palakollu, Sankranti morning 2008. Note the *nelevanka* (new moon) at the centre.

Note the suggestion that the *dwaram* should remain open. If the motifs of the sun and the moon relate exclusively to crops, why must the doors to heaven be kept open only during Sankranti? Does this relate solely to the auspiciousness of the solstice? I would suggest that Archana's reference to death being inauspicious on Kanumu, relates in fact, to ancestor worship. After fieldwork, I reflected on what I had assumed was a non sequitur but was perhaps a hint at something Satyavati knew only partially and therefore could not articulate during our interview. If someone else did not subsequently explain non sequiturs, which were frequent during fieldwork interviews, I simply set aside such material. But Satyavati's reference is worth repeating:

> **Do you know the meaning of the Nelaganta *muggu*? Why is the moon drawn at the centre?**
> Because the moon comes down now. To show that there is no enmity between the moon and the earth. These are pathways between heaven and earth.
> **What are the pathways? These four sides in the *muggu*?**
> [Does not answer, pauses] During this month, we revere our ancestors and Vishnu.

One informant even stated that the moon was the abode of the ancestors. If one remembers that ancestors are venerated during Dhanurmasam, it may well be that the pathways are kept 'open' to communicate or allow passage to ancestral spirits. There seems to be a general consensus that the Nelaganta features passageways, and that a *nelavanka* should be drawn at the centre of the Nela-*muggu*. However, whether these passageways should be kept open or closed is sometimes debated, especially *when* it should be kept open and *when* it should be shut. Susila for example specified that "the Nelaganta should not be closed until the *ratham* is drawn. After that, the Nelaganta *muggu* is closed for the season". But if this were correct, I noticed that many women

drew the Nela-*muggu* incorrectly. Whether this is because they no longer know that the passageways should be kept open, or whether it is simply that there are divergent interpretations for this *muggu*, is hard to tell.

According to Subbalakshmi (Palakollu), the moon should be placed at the centre of the Vaikunthadwaram (which, though not the same, is similar to the Nelaganta). But her friend I. Raghava disagreed,

> It should not, because the moon should always be placed in open *muggu* spaces and should never be tied, or 'bound'. Although the *nelavanka* is being drawn at the centre of many *muggus*, this is being done in ignorance and the moon should always be allowed 'free passage'.

I believe that this emphasis on 'free passage' would be misplaced if the Nelaganta and/or the *nelavanka* related only to agrarian cycles. It would make more sense for this emphasis to relate to ancestors. Note that by Raghava's contention, if the *nelavanka* is placed at the

Chukkalu (dot and line) Nelaganta *muggu*, with lamps on the four sides, Poduru, Sankranti morning 2008

centre of a Nelaganta and the pathways are kept open, both Subbalakshmi and Raghava could be right. In practice however, though more women place the *nelavanka* in the centre of 'open' pathways, many Nela-*muggus* were shut. Indeed, some women draw the *nelavanka* beside a Nelaganta, as they do with other Sankranti *muggus*, where it 'accompanies' the *muggu* on one side. The *nelavanka*'s auxiliary status, as it were,
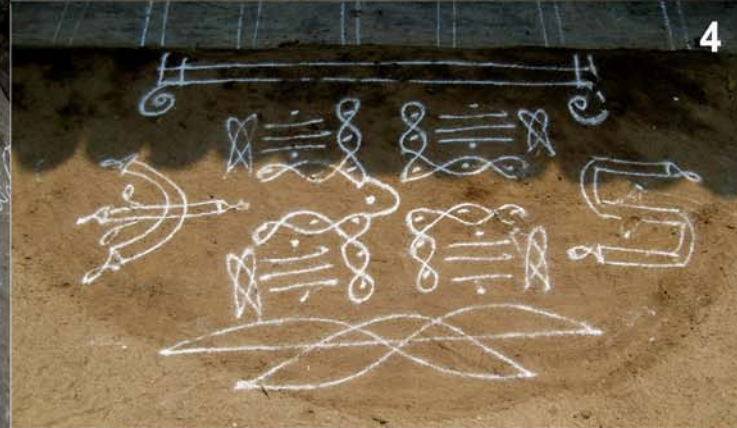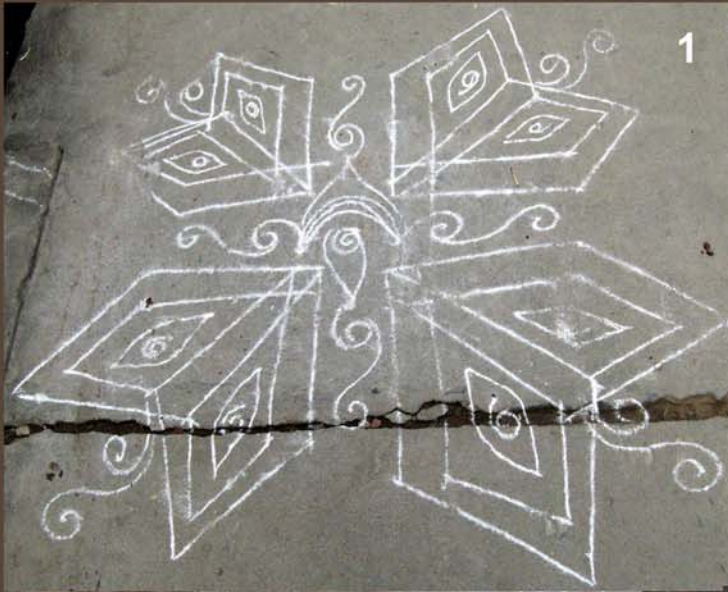
may account for why it is not identified by *muggu*-makers as a Sankranti *muggu*, despite its importance and ubiquity.

Page 210: Nelaganta *muggus*.	Page 211: Nelaganta *muggus*.
1) Palakollu, Kanumu morning 2008	1 & 2) Palakollu, 2007-2008
2 & 3) Palakollu, 2007-2008	3) Palakollu, Kanumu morning 2008
4) Poduru, 2007-2008	4) Palakollu, 2007-2008
5) Palakollu, Kanumu morning 2008	5) Poduru, 2007-2008
6-8) Poduru, 2007-2008	6) Palakollu, 2007-2008
1, 2 & 8 are in the *chukkalu muggulu* style.	7) Poduru, 2007-2008
4 blends the Lakshmi *muggu* with the Nelaganta	1, 2 & 3 are new variations of the Nelaganta.
4 & 6 are flanked by other Sankranti motifs, such as the cradle and the pumpkin.	3 & 4 attempt to use colour.
1 & 3 include Sankranti motifs like the pumpkin, wheat sheaves and a mound of sweets.	5, 6 & 7 are closed Nelaganta *muggus*.

It is not uncommon for women to draw motifs differently. They innovate an astonishing variety of open Nelagantas; once a 'new' Nelaganta is innovated by a *muggu*-maker, her neighbours may start copying her. I noticed this with what one woman called the *tricona* Nelaganta, which suddenly made an appearance in a Poduru neighbourhood. Ironically, while *tricona* means triangle, the Nelaganta – as can be seen – is a four-cornered, or at least four-sided *muggu*. The Nelaganta is drawn throughout Dhanurmasam – which is of course itself called Nelaganta, but it tends to expand in size and detail on Makara-Sankranti.
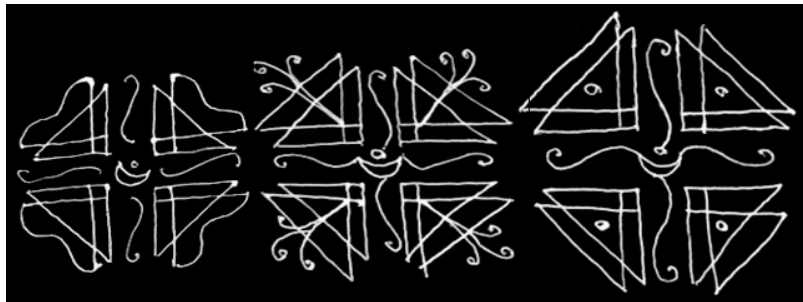
Tricona Nelaganta *muggus*, from my sketchbooks

Evidently, the Nelaganta and the *nelavanka* are closely linked. Furthermore, like the *padma-muggu*, many women emphasise that a Nelaganta should not be stepped on. When a neighbour in Palakollu chided her child for stepping over a Nelaganta and I asked her why, she answered, "One must not step over the *nelaganta*, because the moon is a part of this *muggu*."

The *nelavanka* thus occupies its own sacred status. There may be several reasons for

Nelaganta *muggu*, Palakollu 2007-2008. Here, the *nelavanka* expands to dominate the Neleganta.

this. A mythological reason may be, as Vijayagopalacharya suggests, that *chandrudu* (the moon) is considered to be the sibling of Lakshmi and is thus incorporated into Sankranti symbolism. But as this is not something that is commonly referred to, I favour other interpretations, especially as *nelavanka* is not just a moon, but a new moon. It must be remembered that waxing and waning lunar cycles are closely observed in the Indian almanac. For example, at many *pujas'* inaugurations, invocations locate the time and place that the *puja* occurs in and one specifies which *paksham* (fortnight) – i.e. whether it is a waxing or waning lunar cycle – that the *puja* is being held in. Most *pujas* tend to be held during the *suklapaksham* (the auspicious, waxing fortnight). The *nelavanka* thus marks another temporal interstice.

Note that a *nakshatram* (star) is also often drawn beside Sankranti *muggus*, along with the *nelavanka*. Stars are similarly significant, as a *puja* invocation will also specify that it is being held *subhanakshatrey* (literally, 'in an auspicious star'). The worshipper essentially needs to specify which position the moon is in; this involves naming the star – of which there are 27 in Indian astronomy – that the moon is affiliated with

Tabel muggu with a *nelavanka* and star, Palakollu

(*Varalakshmivratam*, n.d.). Archana's earlier assertion about astronomy applies here. The star may sometimes be drawn on its own when it is meant to venerate the sun god, Suryanarayanaswami, in which case it symbolises the sun, but both the *nelavanka* and the star tend to be drawn with other *muggus*, rarely on their own. While the *nelavanka* is drawn in more or less the same form, the star is drawn in very different ways and as I have said, they are both placed differently within larger *muggus*. Sometimes, the main *muggu* occupying the central space is flanked by a new moon and a star on either side, or it may have both at the top or to one side.

Detail of *muggu* depicting children (girls) with a new moon, Palakollu, Kanumu morning 2008

The other reason the *nelavanka* may be accorded sanctity within the *muggu* tradition is because it is associated with fertility. Although this is not a reason offered by any of my informants, it is an oft-cited association. Many authors have pointed out that it is the moon that regulates women's domestic rituals, that it is women rather than men who venerate the moon. One only has to recall that fertility plays a part in Gobbillu Perantalu, which is an important ritual during Sankranti.

Note though, that my informants only hinted at *muggu* forms' associations with both ancestor worship and fertility rituals. Saraswathi for example, fleetingly mentioned that while the *kalasam* may be used for deities only, the *purnakumbham* (literally filled pot) can be used for deities but is also additionally used by Brahmins for 'elders'. Thus, a filled pot drawn in a *muggu* may even reference ancestors, but it is difficult to determine this. Similarly, a pumpkin or gourd may or may not be related to fertility rituals. In the next section, I look at *muggus* that are perhaps more explicitly linked to fertility but are again not necessarily interpreted as such by *muggu*-makers.

4.1b. *Muggus* related to fertility beliefs

Pumpkins – which are fed to 'elders' during Dhanurmasam – are frequently drawn in Sankranti *muggus*. If there is a more direct link between pumpkins and ancestors, no informant mentioned it.

What may be significant is that ash gourds are hung from lintels to ward off evil. Like

chillies and limes, ash gourds are considered to have apotropaic qualities and are hung in front of homes and shops in Andhra. Palakollu's shop-keepers explained that along with a stone called *pattiki*, chillies, limes and *gummadi* are hung for *drishti* (literally 'sight', but meaning 'to cast off the evil eye'). Note that lintels are interstitial spaces, so the fact that gourds are drawn at thresholds – spaces that are neither outside nor inside – should come as no surprise. Archana states that a "*gummadi pandu* is drawn at the inauguration of a new house to ward off evil" (1981: 73, Fig.224). *Muggu*-makers however, did not mention a gourd's apotropaic qualities with reference to

Pattiki (tied in red cloth), limes, chillies and an ash gourd hung from a lintel, Palakollu, 2007

muggus. Rather, they emphasised how good it was for health or they referred to ritual generosity. Ramana explained, "The pumpkin appears in the *muggus* because we offer pumpkins to Brahmins' houses during this month." *Andhra Bhoomi* stated, "The pumpkin must be eaten and also given away to somebody on the day of Sankranti" (2006a: 35).

While the pumpkin's appearance in *muggus* seems to relate to its apotropaic qualities and to health, it may also have to do with the pumpkin flower being placed, along with marigolds, on cow-dung cakes that are collected for Gobbillu Perantalu. Unlike *gummadi pandulu* (fruits), the *puvvulu* (flowers) are commonly associated with fertility.[181] Gobbillu songs also link the *gummadi* to Laccha (colloquial term for Lakshmi).

What seems equally significant is that almost each *muggu*-maker drew a cradle as a Sankranti motif but nobody mentioned it. Does this indicate that the significance of fertility rituals is waning in the Sankranti tradition? It is hard to say but unlike other symbols, for which *muggu*-makers could not offer interpretations but which were at least

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[181] As they are in Tamil Nadu too, where they are called *parangi*.

Muggu depicting young girls, Palakollu, 2007-2008

identified, the cradle was not even mentioned, until the end of my fieldwork, when I asked one woman whether a motif she had drawn was a variation of a snake symbol. She exclaimed in consternation, "No, no. This is not a snake. It is a cradle." When I murmured that I had not seen cradles before, she said, "Oh but you must have. Everyone draws it during Sankranti," and proceeded to indicate the cradle motif in several neighbours' *muggus* as well as in my fieldwork sketchbooks.[182] I had, ironically enough – not unlike *muggu* practitioners – faithfully copied various cradle motifs in my sketchbook throughout Dhanurmasam, without realising what it was. This illustrates how *muggus* can be visual prompts; had I not seen the cradle motif, I may have never learnt its significance as a Sankranti symbol.

When this *muggu*-maker made me aware that a cradle was a ubiquitous symbol in Sankranti *muggus*, I realised why so many *muggus* feature young girls. This may be a new development, because rather than these drawings being symbolic, as most traditional *muggus* are, *muggus* depicting girls are conspicuously figurative. I would suggest that this popular motif relates to the Gobbillu Perantalu. Other women later confirmed that a cradle was a prescribed motif, so these motifs probably link to fertility. Indeed, the *Varalakshmivratam* (n.d.*),* which relates to Lakshmi worship and is observed by women, includes in its invocation the following line: "May the generations to come all beget good children . . ."

Muggu depicting girls, *tulsi* plants and Bhogi pots, Palakollu, Bhogi morning 2008. The ashes of the Bhogi fire are just visible.

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[182] Dulau (n.d.: 182) mentions that *kolams* are drawn on either side of a new-born's cradle, to avert the evil eye, and I wonder whether this has any relation to cradles being drawn as *muggus*, but given that the cradle motif is drawn in *muggus* during Dhanurmasam, I would assume that this has more to do with fertility. Note that some *muggus* even depict rabbits.

Muggu with girls in the background and a cradle in the foreground, Poduru, New Year's Day 2008

Although snakes have long been used as symbols of fertility in India, my informants' knowledge of this symbol was frustratingly limited. This may be because the snake is a symbol with polyvalent attributes. Archana explains that Nagaloka (the world of the snakes) was referred to as Pathala (nether world) and that the snake was "simultaneously linked with life and death, light and darkness, good and evil, venom and cure, preservation and destruction" (1981: 52). According to my mother, it is believed that if one draws the snake, or specifically the cobra, one need not fear premature death. This is echoed by *Andhra Jyoti* (2008a), "During the month of Dhanurmasam, bouquets of flowers are drawn with flanking snakes and these prevent untimely death."

Saraswathi felt that the "snake is related to Nagadevata (snake-god) – Seshapaon is related to Vishnu, so the snake is probably drawn this season, because it is special for Vishnu".[183] Her point is valid, since in Indian iconography, Vishnu's reclining figure is indeed depicted on a huge *seshapaon* (a coiled, hooded snake) but few others were able to explain why they drew the snake during Dhanurmasam, despite having beliefs about its correct orientation. Archana explains Seshapaon or Seshanaga's iconography further:

> Cosmologically, the snake is the primordial ocean from which all emerges and to which all returns. Vishnu resides on the coils of Anantaseshnag, the thousand-headed snake – the endless . . . infinite, whose coils encircle the basis of the world axis. (1981: 53)

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[183] *Paon* and *naga* both mean 'snake' in Telugu. *Paon* is more colloquial; the Sanskritic word *naga* is more literary. *Sesh* means 'end' though Seshapaon generally refers to a coiled, hooded snake. *Ananta* means endless so Anantaseshnaga literally means 'infinitely coiled snake'.

She believes that the earth goddess – who is herself a symbol of both earth and water – arises out of the union of fertilised waters, represented by Seshanaga's two intertwined bodies. Furthermore,

Intertwined snake *muggu*, Poduru, 2008

> The coil denotes the 'Sesh' (the end of every age) when all things are absorbed by the deity. In the interval before another periodic creative act, the God (Vishnu) reposes on the snake. . . . Each coil further represents more tangible cyclic events, symbolic of the seasonal changes. The coiled snake represents the latent forces to be roused. (1981: 53)

These seasonal changes may thus also relate to agricultural cycles. Kilambi, who believes that the serpent is identified with earth and water, feels that it evokes the Divine Female:

> If, as I was told, the threshold (at least theoretically) is supposed to rest on the place where the foundation stone had been laid, the importance of the entrance to the house becomes more transparent. Before the foundation stone is laid, the mason drives a wooden peg firmly into the ground, a coconut often serving as hammer. He is thus deemed to securely peg down the hood of the chthonian serpent – usually referred to as Ananta or Sesa – the cosmic serpent supporting the earth on its extended hoods . . .

That the serpent relates in some manner to the feminine and especially to fertility, is suggested by Vijayagopalacharya:

> You asked why the snake is drawn during Dhanurmasam. The snake is the shadow of the moon. Have you not noticed? Snakes never come out until the moon has come out. It is only in moonlight that you really see snakes coming out. . . . This is the time that children are conceived, when the snakes come out in moonlight. Hence the snake is also revered.

Chatterjee explains that the snake is the *vahanam* of Manasa, the goddess of fertility who presides over snake-worship (2001: 29). The symbolism of the snake is likely to have derived from pre-Aryan folk sources, and further developed by Sanskritic Hinduism. But to begin with, its symbolism almost certainly derived from its form. As Archana states,

Snake *muggus*, Palakollu, Poduru and Vedangi, Nelaganta 2008

Connected with the various fertilising aspects of water is the symbol of the snake that brings to life strong metaphorical correspondence with water in its varied sinuous movements. . . . The appearance of snakes in large numbers with the advent of the rainy season provides a strong suggestive connotation with fertility, rains being considered essential for the fertility of the earth. (1981: 19)

Archana goes on to suggest that the efficacy of *nagalakas* (votive slabs), which are considered as the embodiment of life-forces, is enhanced when placed under certain trees that ensure increased fertility. Such trees with votive slabs placed under them, are prayed to by barren women. As she points out, "Snake worship is often associated with tree worship, whose roots are the most natural habitat for snakes. The snake signifies the soul of the cosmic tree" (1981: 54).

4.1c. *Muggus* depicting flora and fauna

As previously discussed, certain trees (e.g. banyan), plants (e.g. holy basil), leaves (e.g. betel), flowers (e.g. lotus), and animals (e.g. tortoise) can be considered sacred. Speaking of flora and fauna drawn in *muggus*, Saraswathi said:

The fish is . . . related to *matsyavataram*. The *tabel* is related to the *Koormavataram*. Then there is the *vatapatram* or the *marriaku* (banyan leaves), which are also drawn in *muggus*. . . . The *tulsi* plant is also depicted in *muggus*.

Muggu depicting *tulsi* plants, Palakollu, Kanumu morning 2008. The *muggu* includes some *chukkalu muggulu* patterns and a floral border.

Their symbolic status aside, when trees, plants, creepers, leaves, flowers, butterflies, birds and animals are drawn in a generic manner – i.e. without defining characteristics, their symbolism is not necessarily specific; they can then be part of the general flora and fauna. But this is not to say that they are no longer symbolic. In such cases, *muggus* depicting flora and fauna can symbolise Sankranti as a harvest festival, generally pointing to growth, to the fertility of the soil and to abundance. In other words, they may be said to broadly symbolise Dhanyalakshmi and occasionally Gajalakshmi.

Muggus depicting water-birds, Palakollu, Sankranti morning 2008

Previous page: Floral, peacock and fish *muggus*, Palakollu and Poduru, Sankranti morning 2008

Another category of motifs that symbolise abundance is fruits. Mangoes, which are drawn in *muggus*, signify the summer and *toran* (mango leaves) are markers of auspiciousness as is suggested when they are hung from lintels on auspicious occasions, and as previously mentioned, they are often placed at the neck of a *kalasam*. But fruits can also symbolise abundance. On a woman's *godbharan* (when she safely reaches her seventh month of pregnancy), she sits with her *pallu* (end of saree) stretched out in front of her and other married women pour grains of rice, bananas and coconuts into her lap. Such occasions reveal that these motifs can simultaneously symbolise abundance, fertility and auspiciousness, that in fact auspiciousness is ascribed *because* the motif is associated with abundance and/or fertility.

This page: Mango *muggus*, Palakollu, 2008

Thus, *muggus* that may seem to be merely decorative may in fact still be symbolic, or at the very least derived from symbolism. In the next section, we will see how some *geetalu muggulu* symbolise deities more explicitly.

4.2. *GEETALU MUGGULU*

Notwithstanding explicitly auspicious symbols like the *kalasam*, which is also a *geetalu muggu*, in general, Sankranti *muggulu* tend to symbolise or represent abundance, fertility and ancestors; most other *geetalu muggulu* tend to mark auspiciousness. This is not to suggest that all *geetalu muggulu* mark auspiciousness or abundance/fertility. According to Vijayagopalacharya, the *pulligoru-muggu*, for example, is a *tatva* (emblem) of the *rajulu* (warrior caste), "so the *rajulu* draw the *pulligoru*". When I commented that I had seen *pulligoru-muggus* outside the houses of other castes too, he said, "Yes, now everybody does [draw them] but actually it was originally a *tatva* of the *rajulu*." It is important to recognise that with the introduction of new forms, old forms either

disappear, take on new interpretations or bring in changes of one kind or another in the floor-drawing tradition.

Padmamuggu, Palakollu, Sankranti morning 2008

Many informants averred that originally, every *puja* started with the drawing of a *padma-muggu*, which is probably the quintessential *geetalu muggu*. But other *geetalu muggulu* – even the *gummadi-muggulu*, identified here as Sankranti *muggulu* – can be markers of auspiciousness. As Vijayagopalacharya stated,

> The pumpkin is also auspicious; it is a form of the sun and is placed at the start of every ceremony. Hence the pumpkin and its flowers are associated with good health. The sun is always good. So is the pumpkin, [thus the pumpkin is drawn in *muggus*].

Just as the sinuous form of serpents is seen as a metaphor for flowing water, we see here that the round form of the pumpkin is seen as a metaphor for the sun. As I have previously stated, the sun, the moon and the stars all make an appearance in *muggus* – usually accompanying larger, 'main' *muggus*, but on occasion, they can become the main *muggus*.

4.2a. *Muggus* related to planets and stars

As seen in Chapter 3, the sun-god is venerated during Sankranti, and when a *muggu* is made in propitiation of the sun-god, rather than a side-*muggu* depicting a constellation of the sun, moon and stars, the sun or the star can become the main *muggu*. The moon, however, is rarely – if ever – featured as a main *muggu*. Note that the sun and the moon are included in the *navagrahas*, which are apparently drawn during Sankranti as a nine-dot *muggu*.

Nakshatram (star) *muggu* with a *nelavanka* at the centre, Palakollu, 2007. Stars are often combined with lotuses and can be called *padma-nakshatram*. This *muggu* additionally includes conches.

> The centre in this *muggu* is considered as the sun [drawn as a red '*bindi*' made of *kumkum*]. The nine-dot *muggu* represents the nine planets. . . . The reason for the sun being worshipped at the centre of the *muggu* is the belief that this will bring the rest of the planets under our control. (*Swati* 2008)

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Padmanakshatram muggus, Poduru, Nelaganta 2008

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According to Ramalingeshwar's son,

> The shapes of all *muggus* are related to the *yantras* of the nine planets. There is a six-line *shloka* explaining the shapes of the *yantras* and their relation to the nine planets. The first line of the *shloka* begins with *Vartulakaramandalam Adityaya* [the sun-god's round-shaped *yantra*]…[184]

Although Sharma and *Swati* both refer to nine *planets*, in reality, these consist of the following: Suryudu, Chandrudu, Mangala (Mars), Buddhudu (Mercury), Brihaspati (Jupiter), Shukrudu (Venus) and Shani (Saturn) – who are planetary deities – and Rahu (north, or ascending lunar node) and Ketu (south, or descending lunar node).

In most cases, planetary deities are invoked on the threshold by a symbol, which may be the abstraction of a shape. But in Hindu aesthetics, deities can be drawn symbolically *or* figuratively. In the former case, one interprets such images by referring to the symbolism of Hindu *yantras* (geometrical shapes related to deities); in the latter case, one refers to Hindu iconography. The former is really a particular metaphysical energy, a spiritual force or essence that is invited onto the threshold space; the latter is propitiation to a deity – the divine personified. So while Surya as a planetary deity can be symbolised by a circular *muggu* or even a star, a chariot is part of the mythological Surya's iconography and represents him. Surya is usually depicted "seated on a lotus in a golden chariot drawn by horses. In two of his hands he holds the water-lily" (Chatterjee 2001: 20). In the next section, where I look at *muggus* that participate in the propitiation of deities, we will see that Mohanti, who echoes my point above, uses the words symbolise and represent quite differently.

Lotus *muggu*, Palakollu, Bhogi morning 2008. *Padmamuggu* usually refers to an eight-petalled geometric drawing but occasionally, one may get something like this.

4.2b. *Muggus* that propitiate gods and goddesses

> In no traditional doctrine does the idea of the Divine Art play so fundamental a part as in the Hindu doctrine. . . . (Burckhardt 1976 :10)

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[184] Aditya (son of Aditi) is another name for the sun-god Surya; *mandalam* can be circumference but probably means *yantra* in this context.

As I have discussed in Chapter 2, footprint floor-drawings are popular motifs that symbolise a deity's presence or passage. Other than footprints, *muggus* that propitiate deities from the Hindu pantheon include seats, vehicles, attributes and most importantly – their *yantras*. Mohanti asserts that Indian women ritually invite an energy onto the threshold by "giving it a material form" but while *yantras represent* the deities, other drawings relating to deities *invite* them onto the threshold for a brief period.

> . . . they . . . invite that energy for a particular purpose. . . . for a moment, for a specific time . . . they say, 'this is Shiva' and when the function [ritual event] is over, they throw it away. So they bring [invoke] the energy . . . [and take it away] (2008)[185]

To clarify, Mohanti suggests that *yantras* represent the deities' spiritual essence, by giving material form to their perceived metaphysical energies; in other words, realising an energy by conceiving and executing it in form also constitutes an invocation that lasts for the duration of the ritual event. This reiterates Nagarajan's concept of intermittent sacrality, where a deity is ritually hosted and de-hosted from a space.

Lakshmi *muggus*, Palakollu, Sankranti morning 2008. The first two expand *padmamuggus* by combining them with the lines of a Lakshmi *muggu*.

Divyadhatri (2008) states that while an upright triangle represents Vishnu, an inverted triangle represents Shiva and superimposed, crossing triangles represent Brahma. According to Charles, Saraswati's *yantra* is said to be

> . . . two interconnected triangles . . . surrounded by sixteen petals . . . representing the absolute encased within a radiating circular design meant to describe growth and expansion. The goddess Durga is invoked with a design having swastikas in the centre within a geometric pattern made over a base of nine vertical dots and nine horizontal ones. This is in recognition of her nine names . . . Shiva's symbol consists of concentric circles or squares, the largest, outermost one indicating his altar, with a

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[185] It is telling that we tend to use the word 'function' when we speak of an 'event', because events are usually imbued with ritual or ceremonial 'functions'. Similarly, it is not accidental that we tend to use the word 'present' for 'gift'.

Lamp *muggus*, Manthani, Palakollu & Poduru, 2007-2008.

The bottom left *muggu* includes Bhogi pots. The bottom right *muggu* unusually depicts Shivalingas

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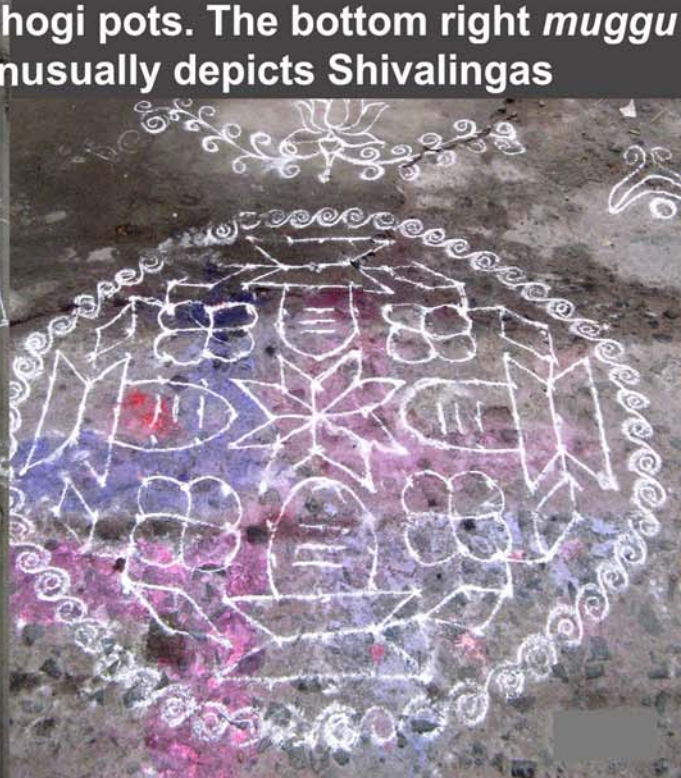
An unusual *rathamuggu* with a Shiva *lingam* at the centre, instead of something symbolising Vishnu or Surya, Palakollu, Mukkanumu morning 2008

cross at the centre from which four paths lead to the four corners of . . . [the drawing]. Zigzagging lines at the perimeter represent the ocean. The sun god, Surya is known simply by a swirl, a quick visual depiction of the centre of the universe. (n.d.: 47)[186]

Other geometric forms that are not derived from mythological figures, are more generic, such as the swastika, which marks auspiciousness, and the wheel, which represents the chariot and hence the sun and Vishnu. According to *Andhra Jyoti* (2008a), at some auspicious events, square-shaped *muggus* predominate because they symbolise stability.

Swastika and oil lamp *muggu*, Palakollu, Kanumu morning 2008
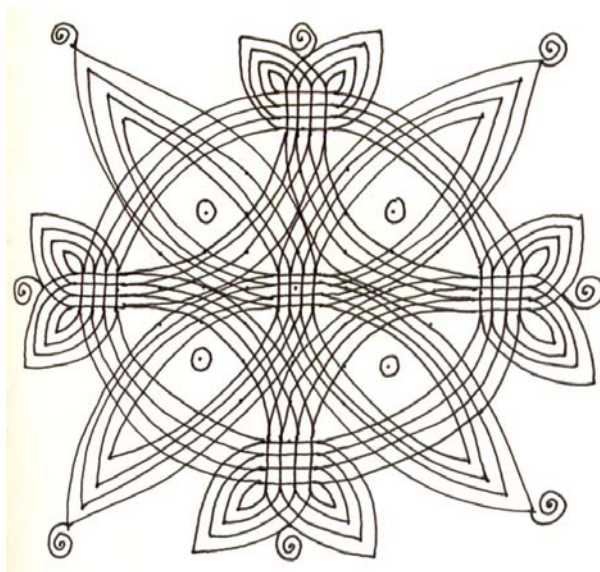
Tabel muggu, from my fieldwork sketchbook

As I have explained, divine footprints, seats, vehicles and attributes derive from the iconographic depiction of mythological figures. As we have seen, many deities hold specific flowers, which appear in *muggus*. So water-lilies may relate to Surya, as he holds one in his hand; the fish and the tortoise, via the mythology of the *matsyavataram* and the *koormavataram*, relate to Vishnu; the lotus hosts Adilakshmi but it can also relate to Vishnu as the lotus is one of his attributes – other attributes include the sacred conch, "a martial beckoning to destroy the evil" (Chatterjee 1996: 22) and the

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[186] Note that Charles and *Divyadhatri* offer different *yantras* for Shiva. It may be that these are for different manifestations of Shiva, the former being Shiva in his role among the trinity as a destroyer, the latter being Shiva in his role as Parvati's consort or the lord of dance, but it is unclear whether *yantras* may be differentiated in this manner. Incidentally, both *Divyadhatri* and *Andhra Jyoti* do not use either represent or symbolise as Mohanti and I do; instead they use the Telugu verb that literally translates to 'announce'.

Elephant and parrot *muggus*, Palakollu,
Sankranti and Kanumu mornings 2008

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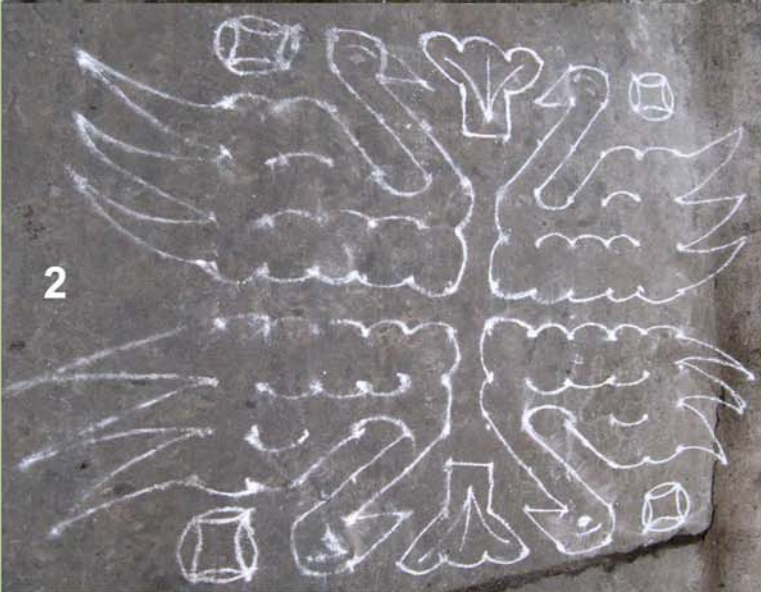
1. Peacock *muggu*, Palakollu 2008

2. Swan *muggu*, Palakollu, Sankranti morning 2008

3. Phoenix *muggu*, Palakollu 2008

4. Parrot *muggu*, Poduru, Sankranti morning 2008

phoenix; Sankranti motifs of a sugarcane and wheat sheaves relate to Dhanyalakshmi; an elephant may relate to Indra, or to Gajalakshmi, but according to Eranki Ramakrishna (Palakollu), the elephant can in fact be any deity's *vahanam*. He identified other *vahanams* I observed in *muggus*: the antelope is the *vahanam* of Vayu, the wind-god; the peacock – symbol of the earth's abundance, which also happens to be the national bird, is the *vahanam* of Kumaraswami (Shiva's son and commander of the celestial war-force); the *hamsa* (swan-goose) is Saraswati's or Brahma's *vahanam*, the deer is the *vahanam* of one of the *navagrahalu*, possibly the moon; and the parrot (also an attribute of Meenakshi Devi) is the *vahanam* of Kama, the god of love. Other *vahanams* include the snake (Manasa's), the eagle (Ketu's), the owl (Chamunda's), the water buffalo (Yama's), the ram (Agni's), the tiger (Durga's) and the bull (Shiva's) but with the exception of the snake, these do not seem to appear in *muggus*.

Deer or antelope *muggu*, copied from an informant's sketchbook

It must be noted that *vahanams*, who share a reciprocal relationship with the deities they transport, often have their own mythologies and symbolism, which naturally relates to their deities' symbolism. So the swan for example, embodies Saraswati's qualities – beauty, grace and wisdom. As Burckhardt reiterates,

> Every form is the vehicle of a given quality of being. . . . there is a rigorous analogy between form and spirit. A spiritual vision necessarily finds its expression in a particular formal language . . .
>
> The ultimate objective of sacred art is not the evocation of feelings nor the communication of impressions; it is a symbol, and as such it finds simple and primordial means sufficient; it could not in any case be anything more than allusive, its real object being ineffable. . . . It recapitulates the creation . . . in parables, thus demonstrating the symbolical nature of the world . . . (1976: 7, 9)

I would suggest that not only does the symbolism of Hindu deities and their vehicles pertain to form, but that the perceived qualities of the vehicle-animals add to their symbolism. Furthermore, a vehicle-animal can symbolise even evil forces over which the deity presides, so for example, Shani can repress his *vahanam*'s (vulture or raven's) scavenging traits. Other than an occasional phoenix, *muggus* do not tend to portray such

vahanams. However, while the latent evil forces of vehicle-animals may not appear in *muggus*, we will see that potential hostility does play a role in the *muggu* tradition. Indeed, one may argue that the very desire to promote abundance suggests an awareness that a field (or person) may not be fertile; other *muggus* pre-empt potential fissures in domestic relationships.

4.2c. *Muggus* that promote fulfilment in matrimony

Although only one informant mentioned this, I include her explanation of a separate sub-category of *geetalu muggulu*, which – though not interpreted in any other way, was included by my informants under the rubric of *geetalu muggulu*. I include this primarily because such drawings are common both during and before Dhanurmasam and no one else offered any explanations for this class of *muggus*.

According to Ramana, a threshold must never be bare – it must have a *muggu* drawn over it, even if it consists of just two lines. She warns that one line is inauspicious.

> Just as one should never light a single oil lamp, one must not draw a single line. At least two lines must be drawn, and moreover, the lines must be joined somehow. These lines are symbolic of family relationships, particularly the relationship between the *yajman* (head of the house) and his wife. After all, it is the *yajman* who ties the *tadu* (yellow marriage thread) around us women.

As she said this, she lifted her own *mangalsutram* (auspicious, sacred thread which is a key symbol of wedlock). This possibly explains the predominant 'joining' feature between parallel-lined *muggus*. It goes without saying that all *muggus* relating to fertility rituals and abundance indirectly promote fulfilment in matrimony, but as Ramana suggests, basic *geetalu muggulu* also do this explicitly, through the simple visual metaphor of two parallel lines or arcs being joined together.[187] I must clarify that in the context of the *muggu* tradition, I differentiate parallel lines from double lines.

Many *muggus*, from all the identified categories, can be expanded. Indeed, other than neatness of line, proportionality, symmetry, and denseness (the word informants use,

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[187] According to *Surya (*2008d), many *muggus* refer to the relationships in our lives, among them the *Radhakrishnula muggu*, which symbolises marital bliss. If I came across this *muggu* during my fieldwork, it was not identified to me as such.

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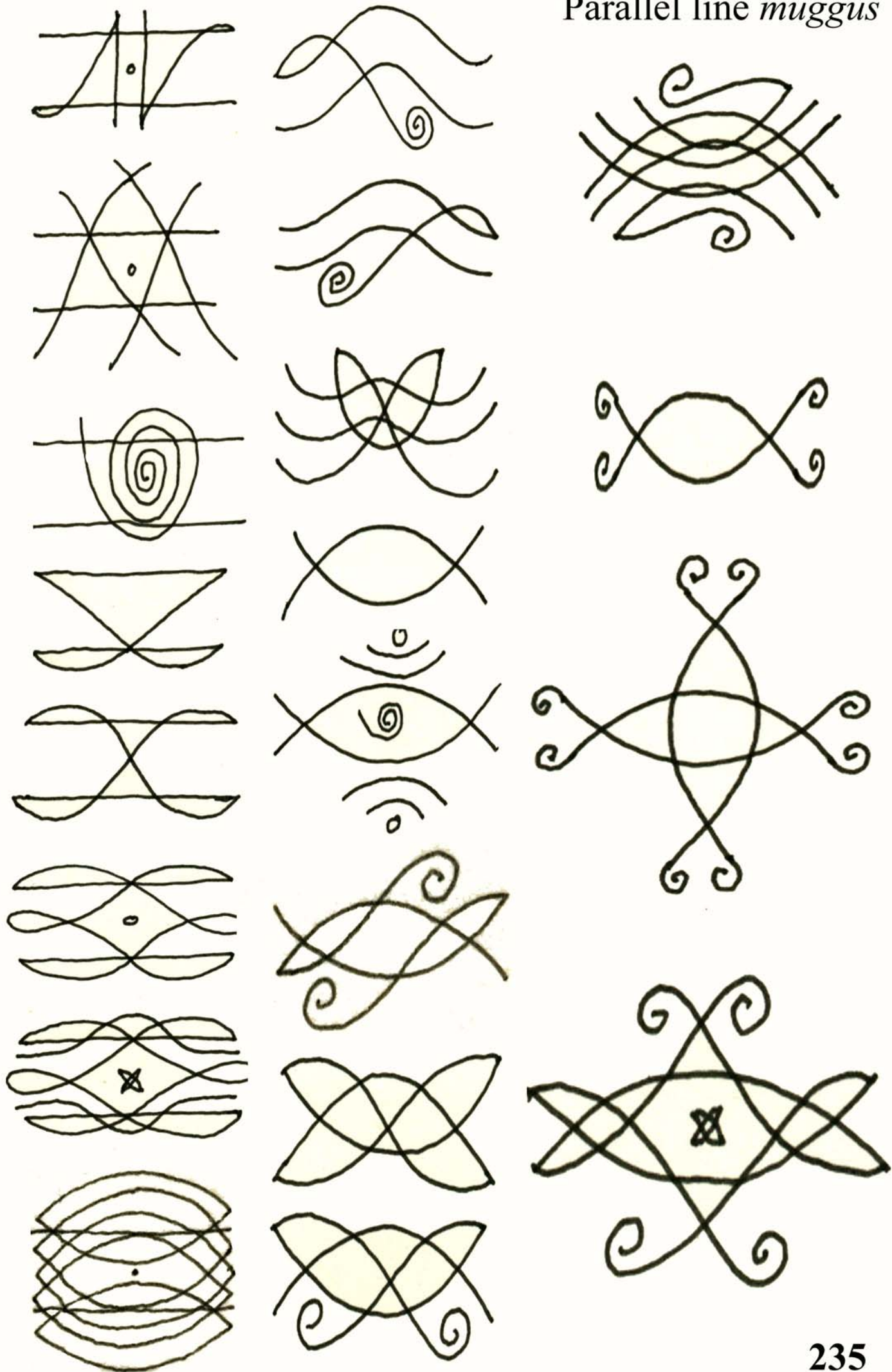
nindu, literally translates to 'full'), expansion is a criteria of aesthetic evaluation in traditional *muggus*.[188] I would suggest that the ability of *muggus* to 'grow', even 'proliferate', may in fact carry another visual metaphor – in this instance, for abundance. Expansion is one of several ways in which a basic *muggu* may be varied, including:

1) Adding small decorative features (such as curlicues or fillers);
2) Doubling or quadrupling the lines;
3) Changing the angle of the main *muggu* (e.g. turning a *muggu* by 90 or 45 degrees (I once saw Bamma turn a *muggu* by 30 degrees but this is rare);
4) Changing the scale of the *muggu* (basically making it bigger or smaller)
5) Changing the proportions of the *muggu* (this is not the same as the above but would mean that the size remaining the same, some of the lines' position in relation to others would change);
6) Expanding the drawing itself (this is not the same as point 4 either – expanding the drawing would mean that the basic *muggu* contains lines or shapes that repeat around it in numerous ways);
7) Changing the linearity (i.e. making lines straight or curved – sometimes both straight and curved lines are combined in different ways).

Thus, when I refer to parallel-lined *muggus*, I refer to a sub-category of *geetalu muggulu* and when I refer to double-lined *muggus*, I speak of a stylistic variation. In the case of parallel-lined *muggus*, it is almost always the first point of variation that applies; in this case, instead of curlicues, fillers or other decorative features, it is usually the joining feature that varies.

Note that *muggus* promoting fulfilment in matrimony and indeed *geetalu muggulu* in general – are identified as old. Although *kotta muggulu* are the only category identified by age in *muggu*-makers' taxonomy, in reality, both *chukkalu muggulu and geetalu muggulu* are also characterised by their age. When asked about the relative age of *chukkalu muggulu* and *geetalu muggulu*, one *muggu*-maker, who insisted that *geetalu muggulu* were old, but could not date them, said, "The *geetalu muggulu* are very, very old, but they are not as old as *chukkalu muggulu* . . . [which] are much older."

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[188] Although symmetry is not a criterion cited by *muggu*-makers, I have included it because it is a 'visible' criterion. In ethnographic terms, one could say that I inferred this from what I observed, rather than from what I heard.
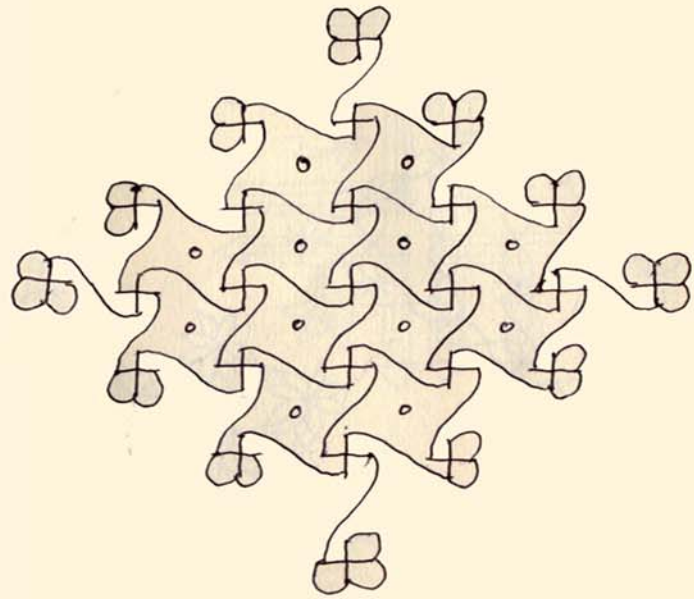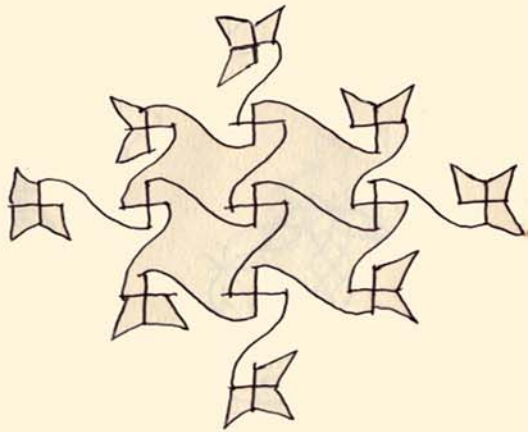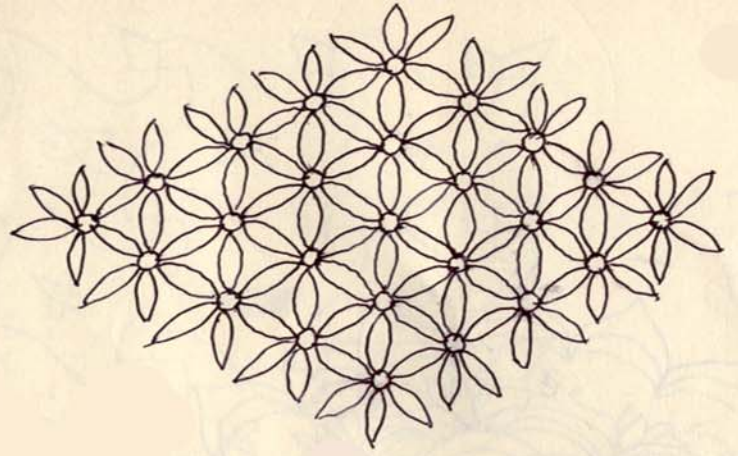
from my fieldwork sketchbooks
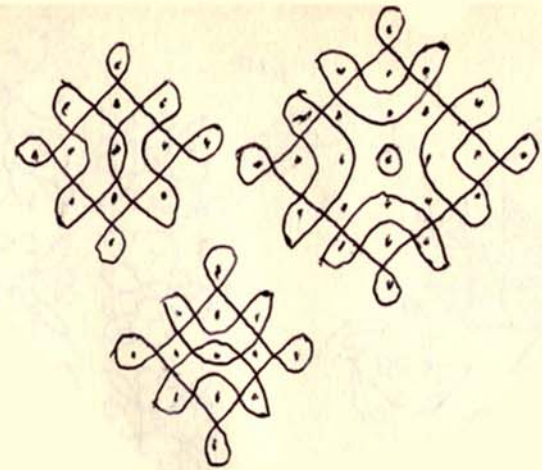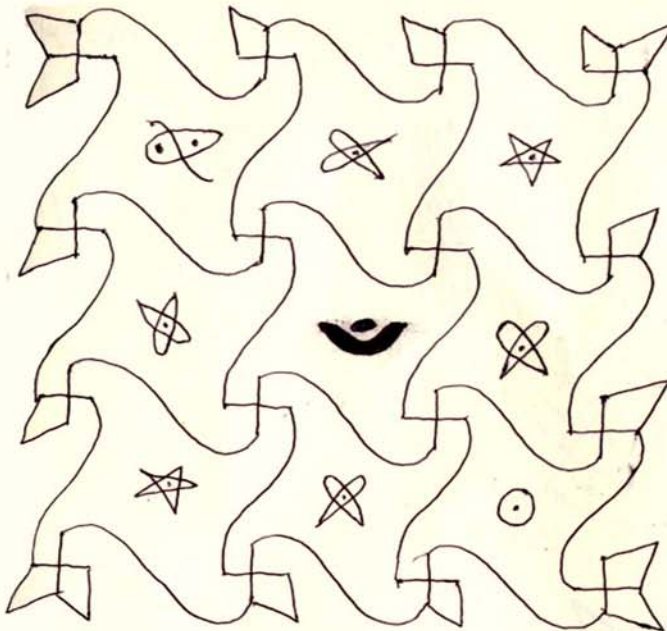
Expansion and variation
of *muggus*
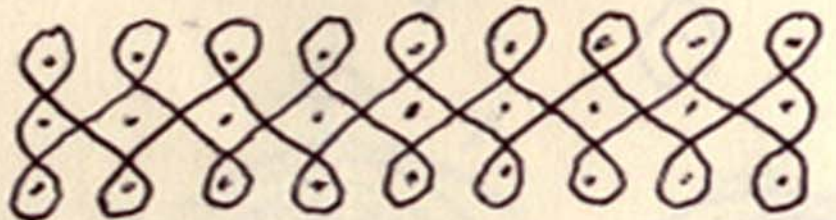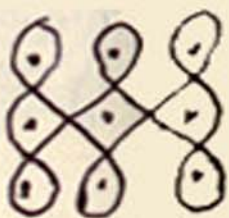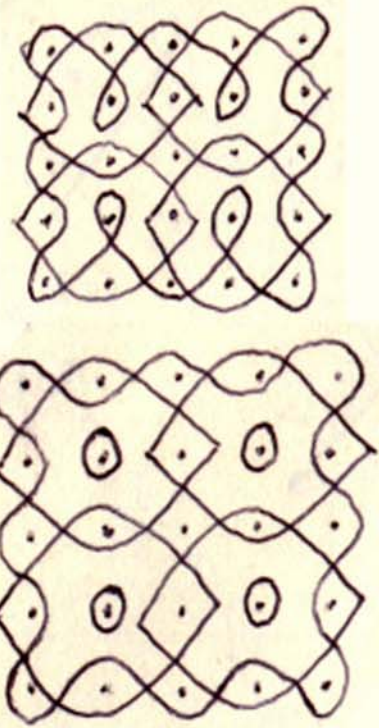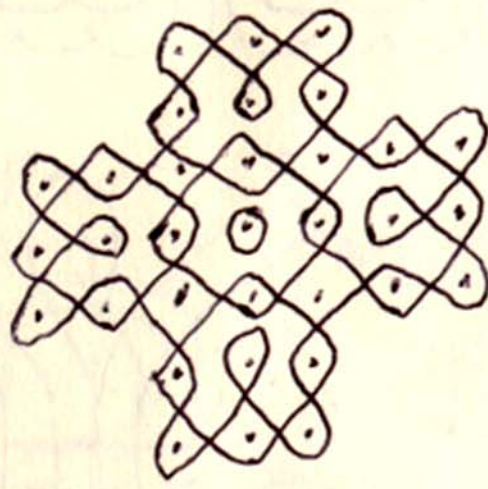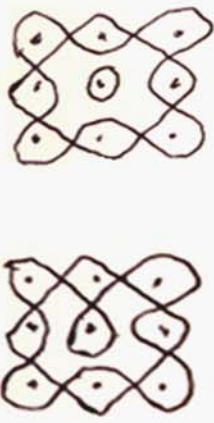
*from my
fieldwork
sketchbooks*
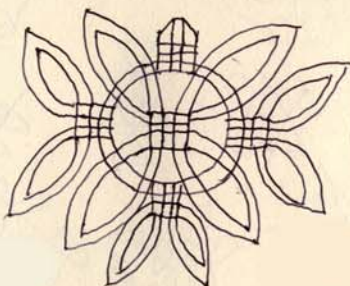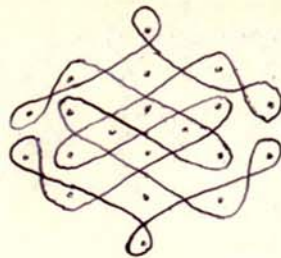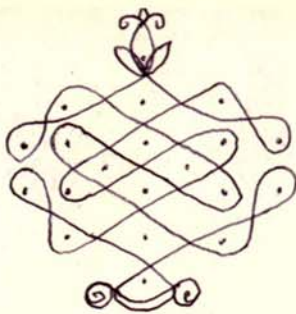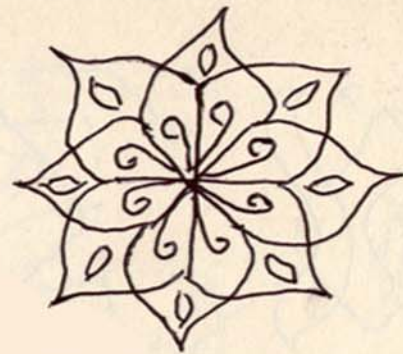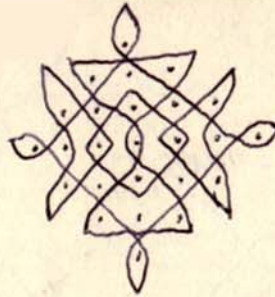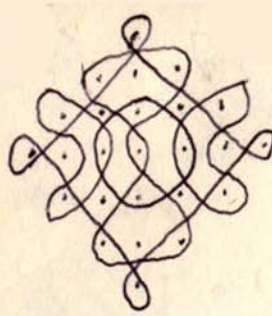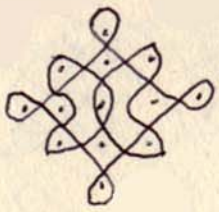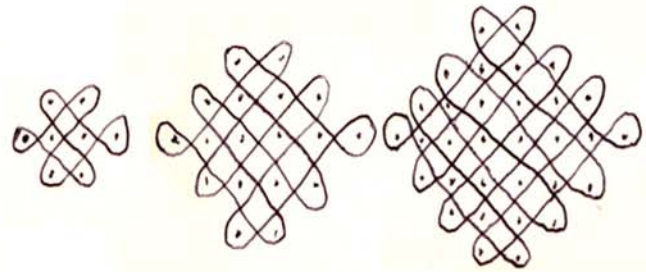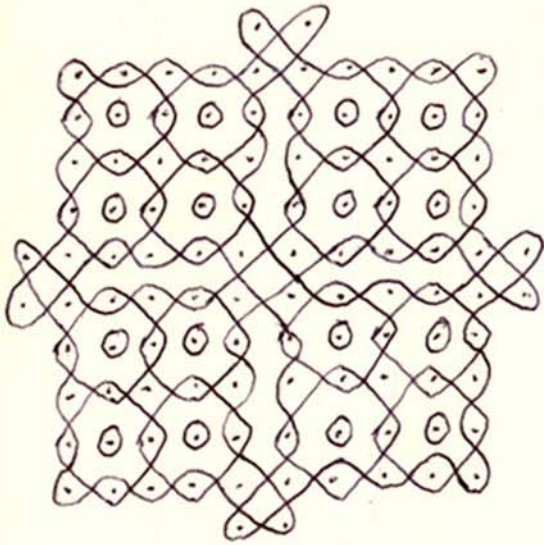
Expansion and
variation of
muggus, including
a Pulligoru and
a *tabel muggu* with
a head.
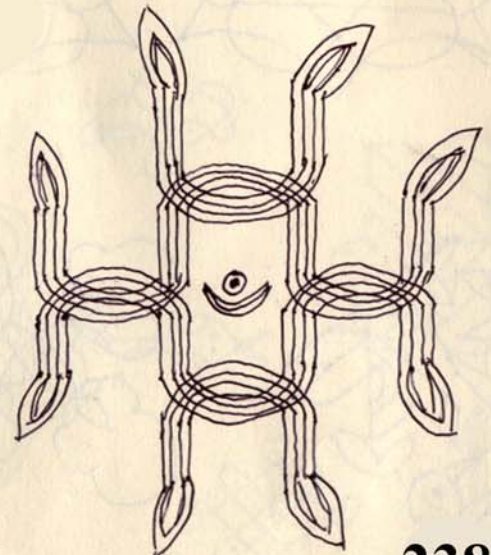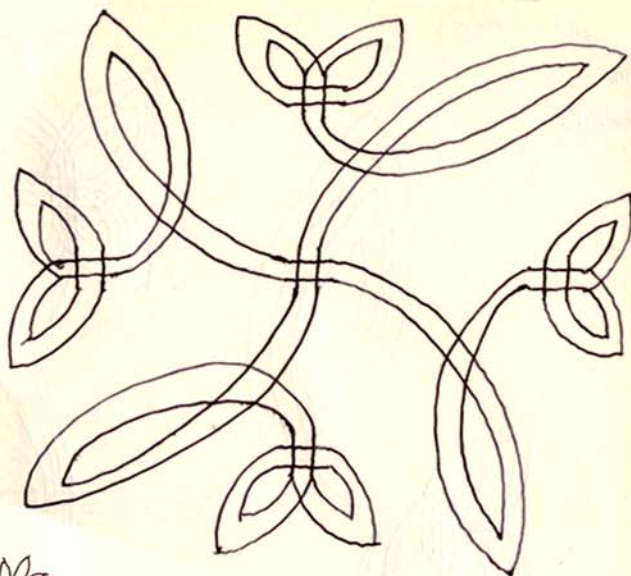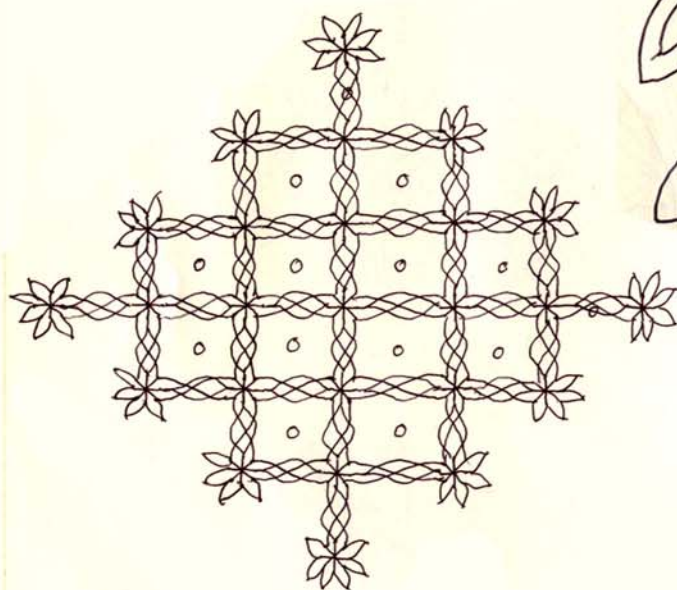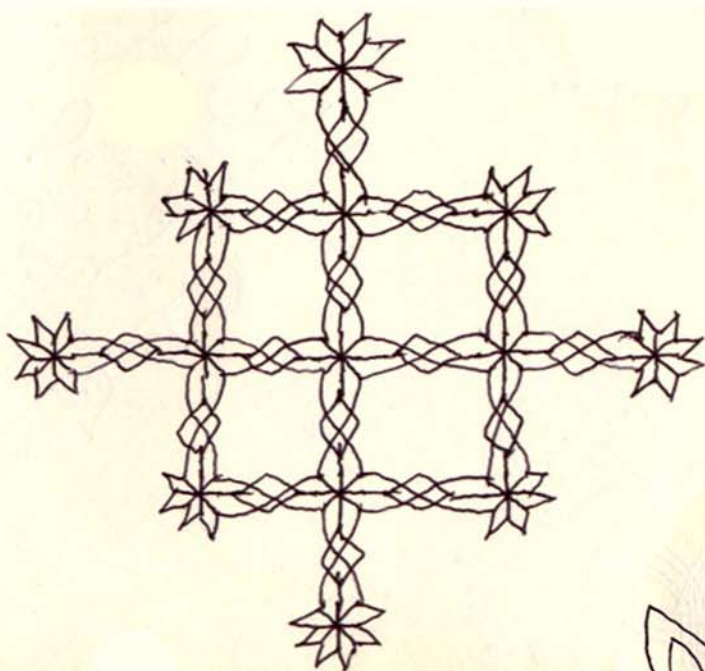
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Expansion and
variation of
muggus

239
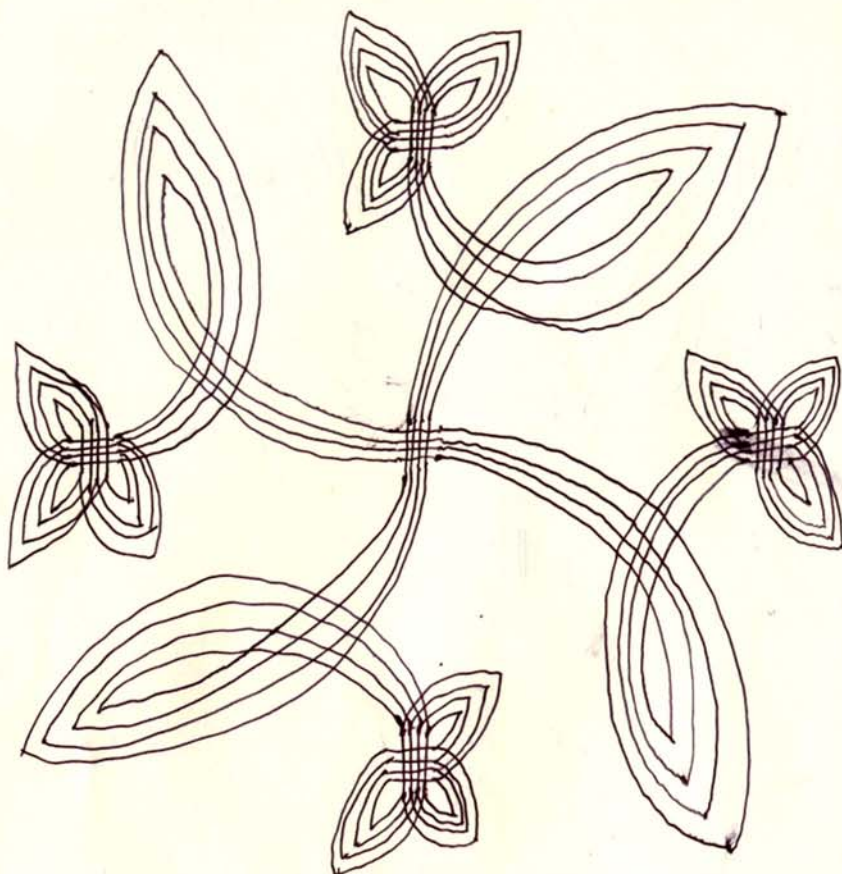
Expanded *chukkalu muggus* on festival days, Spandana Apartments, Palakollu, January 2008

4.3. PARALLELS BETWEEN *CHUKKALU MUGGULU* AND *SIKKE KOLAMS*

Although *chukkalu muggulu*, like *geetalu muggulu*, are categorised by their formal characteristics, without exception, my informants qualified *chukkalu muggulu* as 'old' – indeed, as the 'oldest' class of *muggus*.

> The real *muggus* are the older *chukkalu muggulu*. (Kumari)

> The *chukkalu muggulu* are old, they are tradition . . . they are the real *muggus* – the authentic ones. (Maruteru Grama Panchayat *muggu-poti* female judge)

Note the emphasis on 'real'; here, the age of a *muggu* lends it authenticity. Given that *muggus* are ephemeral, clearly, it is the *form* that is being identified as ancient. The qualification of *muggus* as 'old' or 'new' recurs within *muggu*-makers' discourse. One elderly woman protested apologetically, "Why are you photographing an old lady's *muggu*? An old lady who can draw nothing other than old *muggus*. I cannot draw the new designs; I only know these." When I asked Bamma to teach me *muggus*, she said, "I only know *purvakalam* (literally 'before time', ancient times) *muggulu*. Now that I am so old [mid-to-late 60s], I do not see why I need to learn new *muggus*."

However, when asked why they felt that the *chukkalu muggulu* were old, the women did not have an answer, only a strong conviction that they were the oldest drawings, most often described as *purvakalam*. They were equally uncertain about the *chukkalu muggulu*'s meanings. Bhaskaram, for example, said, "No, they have no meaning. It is an art; it is part of the Lalitakalalu, I think."[189] However, when I said to Saraswathi that no one seemed to know whether they were symbolic and asked whether they had any meaning at all, she exclaimed:

> The *chukkalu muggulu* not have any meaning? You could not be more wrong. They are the original… Oh, I simply cannot remember but I know they have meanings. I read that somewhere. You must follow up on this point because I am positive they have meaning. They are very… [important]

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[189] *Kalalu* means arts. *Kala* means art.

Some sources suggest that the dots represents stars or the spirits of dead *rishis* (ascetics) and great souls, with the lines representing passing time (*Surya* 2008d). Many others believe that the dots are representative of the forms of deities and as seen in Chapter 2, the dot can be interpreted as the *bija*, the seed of all life; in other words, a symbol of regeneration. Due to the absence of any further information on *chukkalu muggulu*, I will therefore look at some writing on *sikke* (dot) *kolams*, especially as the *sikke kolams* and *chukkalu muggulu* seem to share a wide repertoire of forms. Indeed, *muggu* chapbooks that are sold in Andhra frequently also read *'Kolam'*, and publish dot-and-line drawings. This is not to suggest that *chukkalu muggulu* are derivative of *sikke kolams*, or vice-versa, but given that there appears to have been some transmission of forms between Andhra and Tamil Nadu (it is impossible to determine where they originated with the material I have at the present time), it seems likely that what applies to *sikke kolams* may apply to *chukkalu muggulu*.
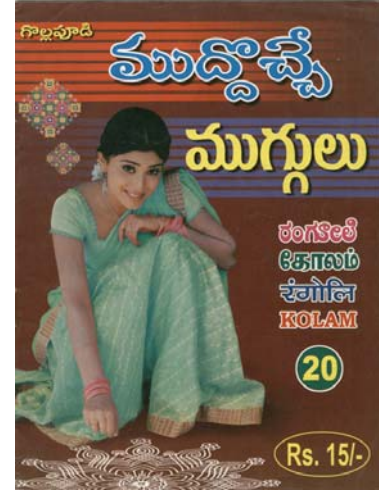
Cover of *muggu* chapbook. Although the title reads *Muggulu*, the words that follow include '*Rangalu*' (colours) in the Telugu script, '*Rangoli*' in the Hindi Devanagari script, and '*Kolam*' in the Roman script. Such chapbooks often portray Telugu film actresses on the cover.

Note also that phonetically, the words *chukka* and *sikke* are close, as pointed out to me by Vijaya Madhavane (Pondicherry). According to her husband, "What is interesting is that one of the meanings of the word *sikke* is 'a problem without a solution'." Similarly, the Telugu word *chikku*, which is again phonetically close to *chukka* (dot), means 'a knot that is difficult to untangle'. Indeed, *chikku mudi* may be translated as 'stubborn or impossible knot'. During fieldwork, I wrote: "Several terms come to mind if I try to convey the astonishing complexity of the *muggu* tradition. . . . I sometimes feel like I am trying to solve a puzzle. The *muggus* are so rich in embedded meanings, they are like a maze." While I was referring to *muggus*' diverse interpretations, as it happens, the labyrinth has been associated with the *kolam form* and it is no coincidence that such words should be used to describe *sikke kolams* and *chukkalu muggulu*.

4.3a. Labyrinthine *kolams*

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Layard compared Tamil *kolams* to Malekulan geometrical diagrams. Interestingly enough, in the Melanesian archipelago too, the man must walk over the drawing, except that here, it is the ghost of the *dead* man who must walk over it. As the spirit of the dead man approaches, the woman rubs out half the drawing which he must complete in order to enter the land of the dead (1937: 117). Thus, only the initiated – those familiar with the drawings – may safely reach the land of the dead.
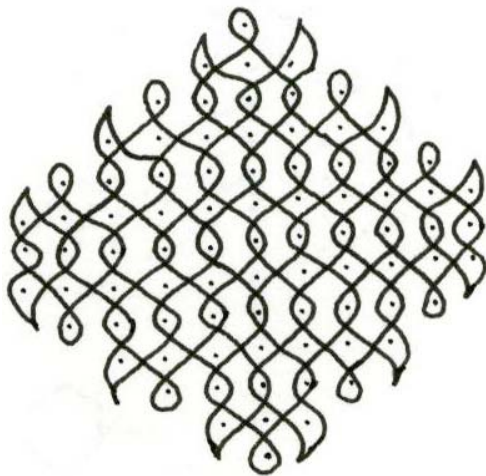
Layard, who discusses the apotropaic character of the drawings and rituals in both Malekula and Tamil Nadu, identifies labyrinthine drawings as being continuous or composed of superimposed lines that appear continuous. While he feels that in Malekula,

. . . the culture is still sufficiently archaic for the connexion of the designs with actual labyrinths to be, with the aid of mythological data, clearly traced. In South India the prototype . . . is already so degraded that, without the Malekulan evidence, the labyrinthine origin of the designs would not be traceable at all. (1937: 135)

Chukkalu muggu, from my post-fieldwork sketchbook

Despite what he reads as *kolams*' degradation, Layard still sees traces not only of their labyrinthine form but also of their association with the dead. He establishes this by referring to the Tamil designs' use on mortuary pottery, the inauspicious, disease-ridden period they are drawn in (Margali) and the fact that Margali marks the dying year (followed by the winter solstice) (1937: 124). It is therefore fitting that Gell's development of Layard's work, which I discuss in the following section, emphasises *kolams*' apotropaic function, i.e. their ability to ward off evil.

4.3b. *Kolams* and *muggus* as apotropaic devices

Huyler, as we have seen, hints at the apotropaic purpose of Indian floor-drawings by speaking of the women's desire to protect their homes. *Chukkalu muggulu* perhaps do this by being incredibly complex, and therefore by arresting entry into the home. Ramana stated, "I know only small normal *muggus*. I learnt them at home when I was about ten. I do not know how to make *chukkalu muggulu*; I feel bad that I cannot link the

dots." *Chukkalu muggulu* are therefore associated with a certain level of skill. This did not surprise me, as my own response to intricate *chukkalu muggulu* was to stop and stare, in an effort to work out how they were made. A look at the crosses in my fieldwork sketchbooks, which mark a *muggu* gone wrong, would suggest how difficult *chukkalu muggulu* are to 'untangle'.

Like Layard, Gell compares *kolams* to mazes and speaks of how difficult *kolams* are to read, using phrases such as 'topological games', 'cognitive teasing' and 'extremely frustrating' to describe attempts to understand the construction of a drawing. Referring to one superimposed *kolam*, which he sees as the "visual equivalent of a canon in four parts" where the identical components "are out of phase, not in time, but in space, being displaced by 90-degree rotations", he avers that even if one knows 'intellectually' that the drawing is composed of superimposed loops that are orientated at different angles, one cannot help trying to abstract these components from the overall drawing. While trying to understand the construction of simple *kolams* is possible by mentally projecting them, he feels that this is exasperatingly difficult to do with complex *kolams*.

> Here, seeing the figure is quite distinct from being able to mentally intend the process of its construction. Yet we 'write in' the fact that it *is possible* to construct the figure, because here it is, it has been made by someone, and we might indeed have been lucky enough to have watched, entranced, the deft movements of the woman who made it. So we end with a series of paradoxes. We want to see this figure as one continuous line, but we know it is four separate loops, which, however, we cannot separately abstract from the overall design. (1998: 86)

I have often looked at a *chukkalu muggu* and given up trying to understand how it was made, and indeed, without the aid of *muggu*-makers, there are some drawings in my sketchbook that I would not have been able to learn. In my post-fieldwork sketchbook, where I continued to draw *muggus* by copying fieldwork photographs, an entry beside a *chukkalu muggu* reads: "Actually very simple, superimposed drawing. Have to learn to see the pattern behind these

Chukkalu muggu using a grid of 15 dots. Poduru, Dhanurmasam 2008

apparently random lines." Significantly, Gell's interpretation of *sikke kolams* emphasises why it would be a mistake to regard them and by extension, *chukkalu muggulu* as 'merely decorative'. Anyone who has made a complex *muggu* cannot but agree.

> Decorative patterns applied to artefacts attach people to things and to the social projects those things entail. . . . The world is filled with decorated objects because decoration is often essential to the psychological functionality of artefacts, which cannot be dissociated from the other types of functionality they possess, notably their practical, or social functionality. . . . the distinction we make between 'mere' decoration and function is unwarranted; decoration is intrinsically functional, or else its presence would be inexplicable. (Gell 1998: 74)
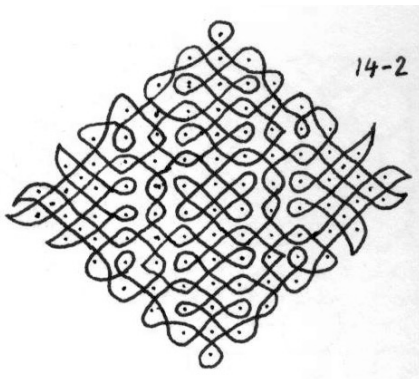
Chukkalu muggu, from my post-fieldwork sketchbook.

Rather than looking at these maze-like patterns as being merely decorative, Gell feels that we respond positively to 'the adhesive qualities of surface decoration'. As he affirms, "Most non-modernist . . . civilizations value decorativeness and allot it a specific role in the mediation of social life, the creation of attachment between persons and things . . ." (1998: 83) This decorativeness thus serves the purpose of providing 'adhesiveness'. In other words, Gell refers to the ability of complex patterns to arrest attention, as 'cognitive adhesiveness'. But while surface adhesiveness can attract us to decorative things, Gell points out that it can also perform the function of repelling.

> It might seem paradoxical that patterns, which bind persons to things, should be potential weapons in situations of conflict. . . . The apotropaic use of patterns is as protective devices, defensive screens or obstacles impeding passage. . . . If patterns attract, would not they also attract, rather than repel demons? . . . The apotropaic use of patterns depends on adhesiveness . . . Apotropaic patterns are demon traps . . . in which demons become hopelessly stuck, and are thus rendered harmless. (1998: 83-84)

As mentioned in Chapter 2, one need only remember that the Lakshman *rekha* in the *Ramayana* provides an early example of the apotropaic character of floor-markings. If one line can repel by trapping a malevolent force, how much more effective would a floor-marking be if it was so complex as to confuse a potential intruder? As Gell puts it, this 'cognitive stickiness of patterns' causes a "blockage in the cognitive process of

reconstructing the intentionality embodied in artefacts" (1998: 86). But if these old, complex *muggus* were meant to trap demons or hostile agents, there had to be a way to make them simpler for *muggu*-makers to draw. In the next section, I discuss the function of grids, which may, in fact, facilitate *muggu*-drawing.

4.3c. Floor-drawing grids as mnemonic devices

Both Layard and Gell, and indeed anyone who has studied *kolams* speaks of grids consisting of dots, or of dot-and-line drawings. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Siromoney (1978), who studied the mathematical properties of *kolams*, felt that these dotted grids were used by *kolam*-makers as mnemonic devices. To clarify, *chukkalu muggulu* normally start with a grid of dots – usually *series* of dots in rows and/or columns (depending on how a woman places them), which then get connected to create myriad patterns. Lines are either drawn *over* the dots, obliterating them, or looped *around* the dots. The dots provide points of reference, making it easier for *muggu*-makers not only to memorise the patterns but to make the drawing neater, more symmetrical and proportionate. An entry in my fieldwork sketchbook reiterates how the dots facilitate this:

> When I stopped to draw some *muggus*, a woman who noticed that I was drawing one of them wrong, explained to me that this *muggu* (I had not realised it was a *padma-muggu*) was drawn with dots. I realised that once you use dots, the proportions come out much better.

The manner in which the lines connect the dots is instrumental in lending variety to *muggu* forms; for example, an identical grid of 5 dots can be connected in seemingly infinite combinations and permutations. This is why *chukkalu muggulu* are also called *kallapulu muggulu*, the links being crucial to the execution of this class of *muggus*. Note that two videos of *muggu*-drawing, demonstrating how women use grids, can be found in the fieldwork collection.

As a brief aside, I must mention that while *chukkalu muggulu*'s grids – as the name indicates – consist of dots, I observed that in fact, *muggu*-makers use a number of grids (though these are not identified as – or related to – *chukkalu muggulu*). I referred to expansion being a criteria of aesthetic evaluation among *muggu*-makers. Concentric circles, one could argue, serve as a grid for expanding a circular *muggu*. Indeed, all grids can facilitate the process not only of drawing a *muggu* but also of possibly expanding it. Other grids I identified consisted of knots and crosses, multiple lines or
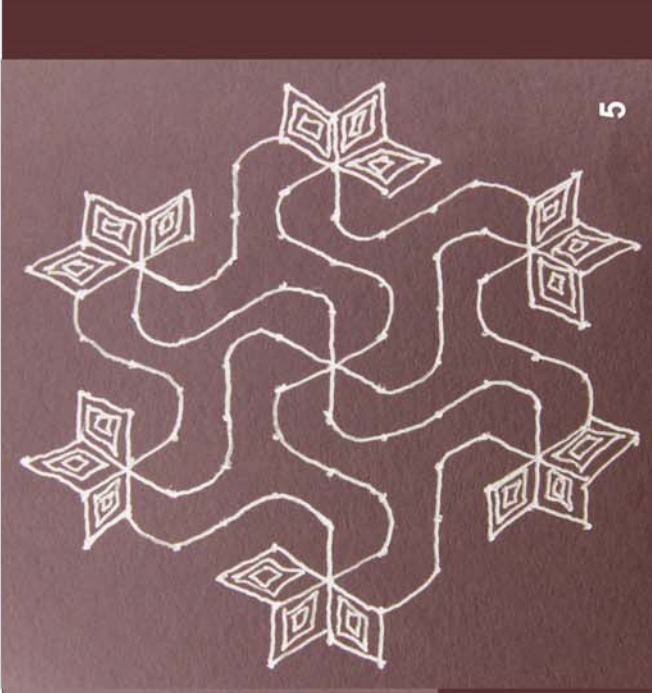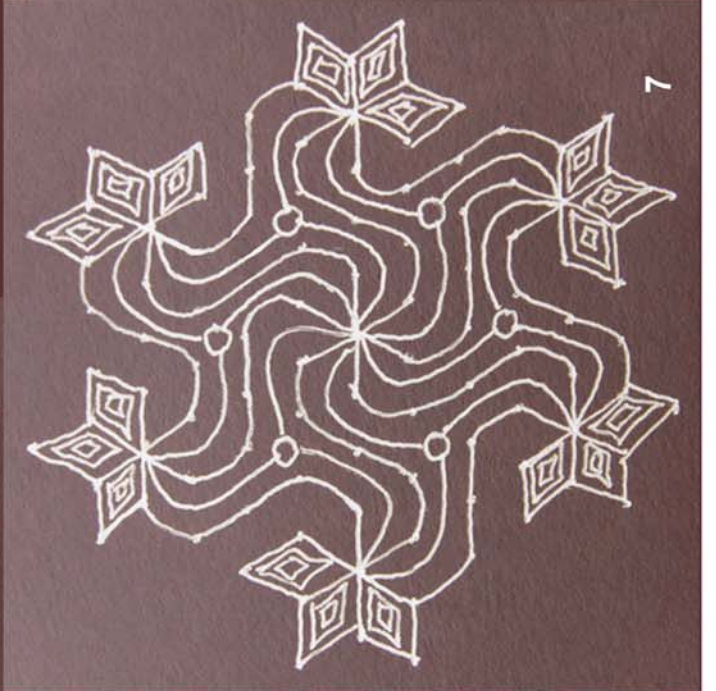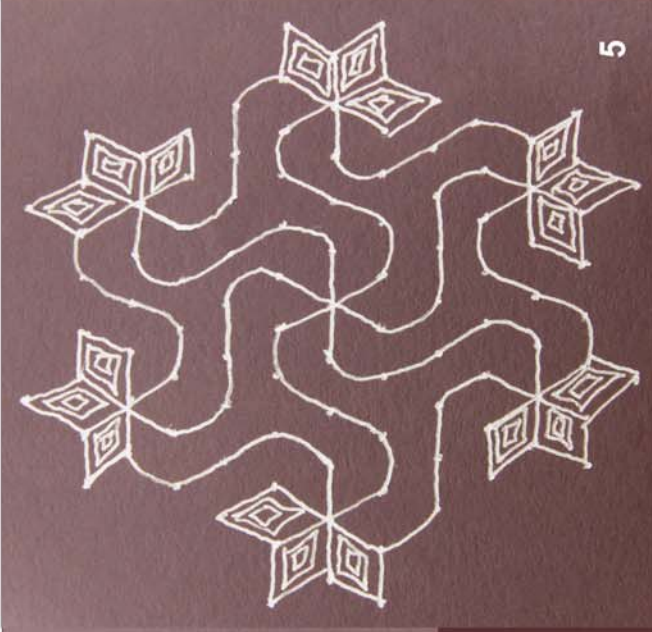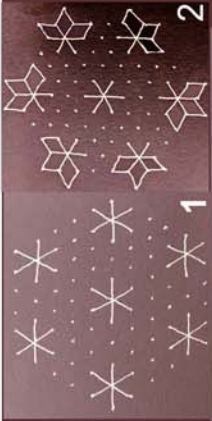
Stages of drawing a muggu with the aid of a hexagonal grid, from my fieldwork sketchbook
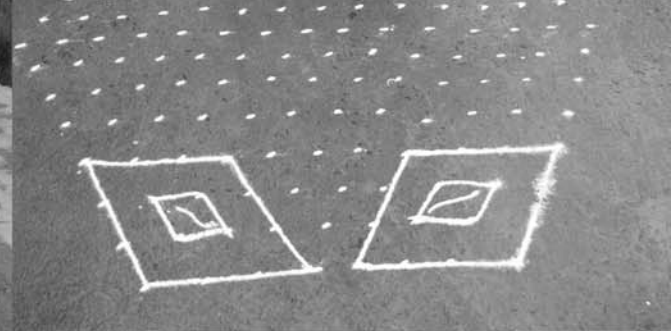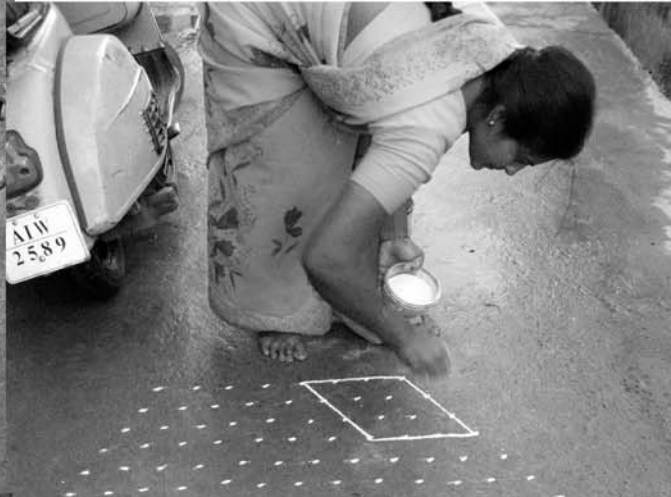
Top
Durga using a grid of dots
Left
Girls using a grid of
quadruple lines for a chariot
muggu

Left
Woman using an asterisk grid to make the 'broken bangles' *muggu*

Below
Completed variation of a broken bangles *muggu* using the same grid

Top
Muggu using concentric circles as a grid
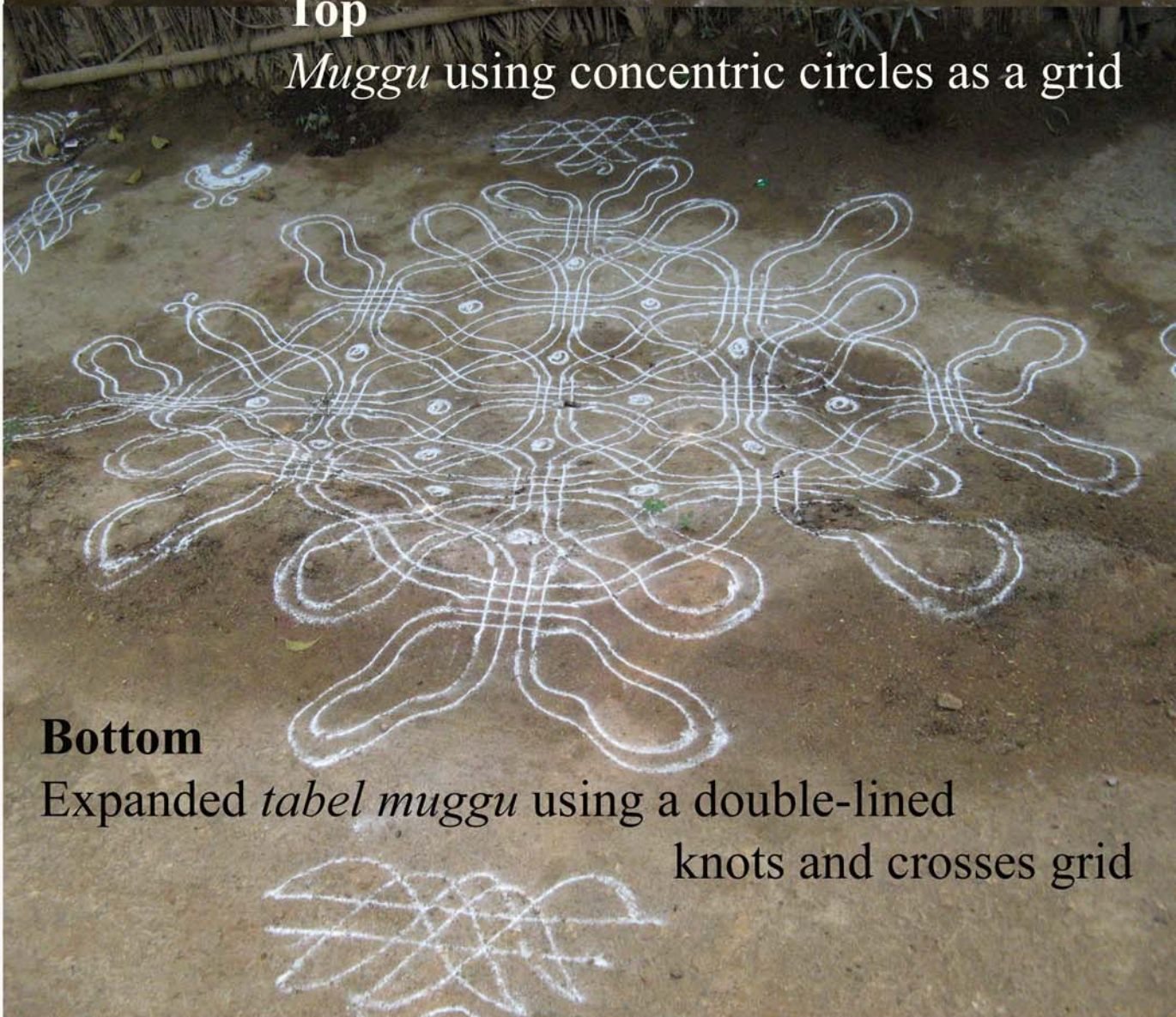
Bottom
Expanded *tabel muggu* using a double-lined
knots and crosses grid
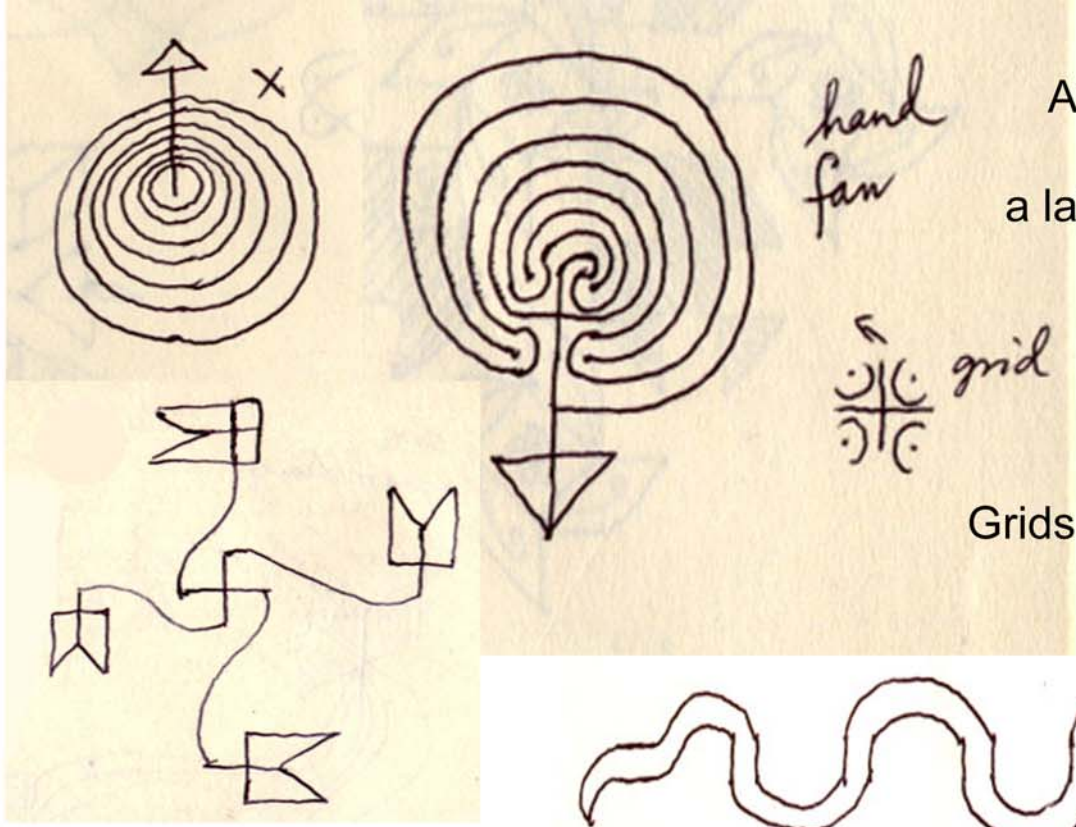
Left
An unusual
grid for
a labyrinthine
hand-fan
muggu

hand
fan

grid

Below
Grids for snake
muggus

Top
Grid of plus signs
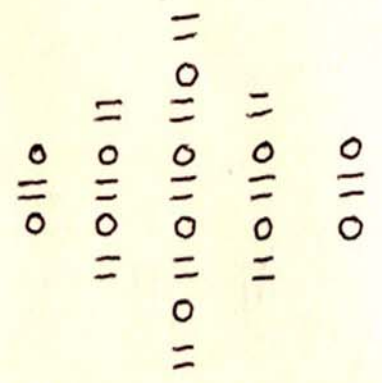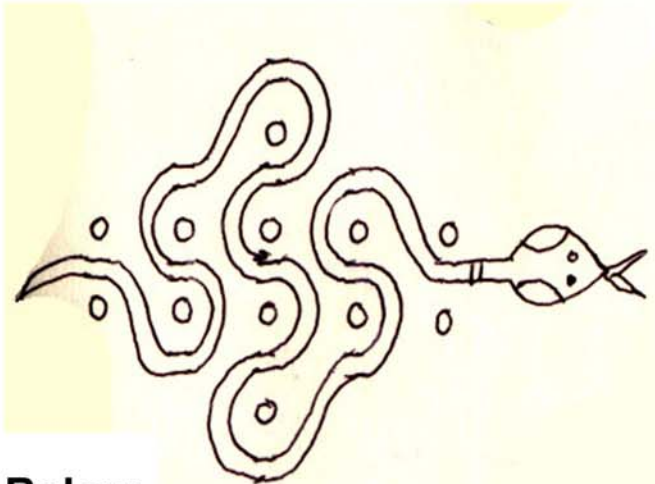
Below
Quadruple lines grid for a *tabel*.
A *tabel is* normally based on a
knots and crosses grid

251
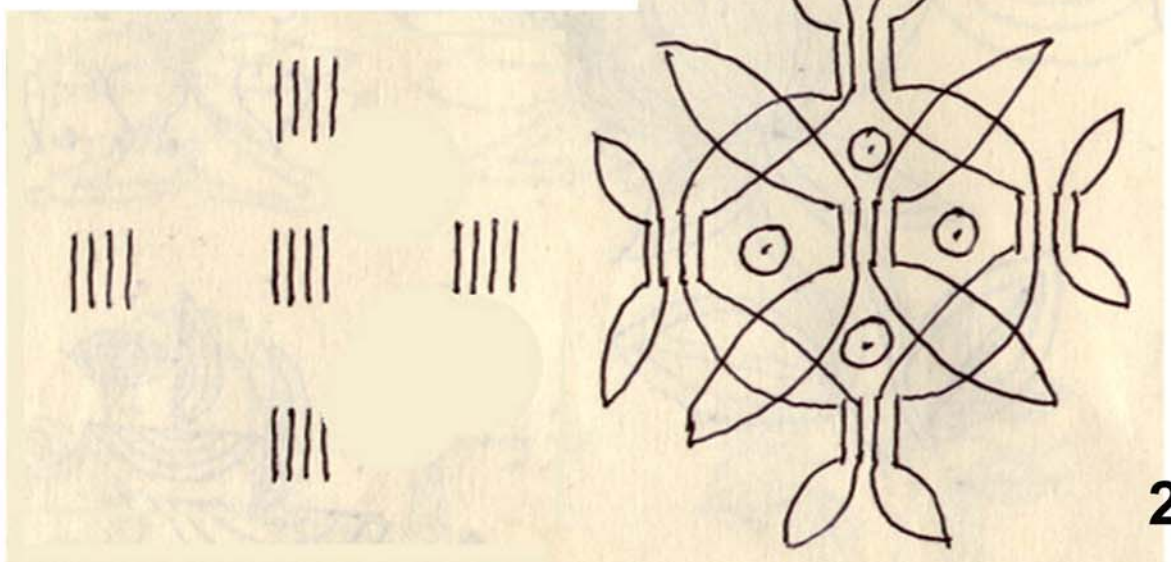
arcs (double or quadruple), plus signs and asterisks. Such grid-based *muggus* can be found in all the categories of *muggus* in the taxonomy offered here.

Various taxonomies may be applied to the repertoire of *muggu* forms: One can categorise *muggus* as being either freehand or grid-based, and among the latter, as Layard and Gell do, as continuous or non-continuous or as Durai does, as looped around the dots (these tend to be older) or going over the dots (as is the case with most *kotta muggus* that are grid-based). *Muggu*-makers themselves tend to sub-categorise *chukkalu muggulu* by the number of dots that comprise their grids and their manner of noting the grids is specific to the *muggu* practice. *Muggu*-makers usually mark grids as *x-z*, *x* being the number of dots on the 'axis' of the *muggu*, and *z* being (usually) the smallest number of dots that form the farthest point from the axis (the side). So what I refer to as a grid of 5 dots, would in fact be marked as 5-1. However, *z* is so often 1 that many *muggu*-makers identify such *muggus* as a 5-dot *muggu* in conversation, though in practitioner notebooks, where they record their *muggus*, they mark it as 5-1.

For more complex *muggus*, I found myself noting the grid as for example, 15-3-1 (*x-y-z*) but *muggu*-makers, I noticed, did not need the extra information and would instead note such a *muggu* simply as 15-1. Since *y* is also a variable, I did not understand how *muggu*-makers did not need to note this number too, but their familiarity with the drawings apparently makes this information redundant. With hexagonal *muggus*, where the grids appear far more irregular, I found it impossible to note the grid, without ridiculously extensive information, where I attempted to include the number of dots in each column of lines (in the beginning, I did this even with simpler *muggus*). Unless one possesses mathematical skills, the limitation of writing or deconstructing becomes glaringly evident here, for despite being able to eventually draw a hexagonal grid without too much difficulty, I found it hard to clarify its logic. Such instances recall Cain's (2010) argument about embodied thinking, where the experience of drawing helps the maker to 'know' through engagement with the process, rather than through any method of intellectual analysis.

This also illustrates Burckhardt's assertion that through "its qualitative essence form has a place in the sensible order analogous to that of truth in the intellectual order . . . a sensible form [may] retrace the truth or a reality which transcends both the place of

sensible forms and the plane of thought" (1976: 7-8). An under-evaluation of form in the study of ritual or sacred arts is thus problematic and I would argue that such oversights relate to a frequent tendency of art theorists and anthropologists to dichotomise ritual practices. I fell prey to this dichotomy despite my best efforts, despite recognising the importance of form in the *muggu* tradition. It is to resolve my dichotomy of aesthetics and ritualism that I started reading texts by ritual theorists and anthropologists. As it happened, this revealed an overarching ritual theory that accounts for the diversity of *muggus*' forms and interpretations.

4.4. Developing a ritual theory for the *muggu* tradition

Ritual may be defined in myriad ways; for instance, Chinmayananda feels that "in the science of religion", rituals serve "as preparatory lessons for a seeker" (n.d.: 130) and effectually aid training the mind of those who seek to master meditation. Here, ritual is seen as method. Pattanaik feels that "rituals are culturally choreographed actions through which one communicates one's desires with the cosmos" (2003: 24). Here, rituals are more particularly a culturally endorsed means for wish-fulfilment, not unlike *vratas*. Bell feels that when analysed methodically, rituals may be like cultural texts that lend meaning to experience (1992: 15). According to Mookerjee, "How a society perceives the continual process of cultural interaction determines its value system" (1985: 10) and "ritual observance is the living tradition" by which a way of life is maintained (1985: 131). Appadurai suggests that rituals transform by transcending and reframing ordinary social life, by taking recourse to expressions in art, myth and legend, wherein "the force of ordinary social norms . . . [is] deepened, through inversion, irony, or the performative intensity and the collaborative work demanded by many kinds of ritual" (1997: 5).

What interests me particularly is how common dichotomies are in ritual studies. Srinivas (1965) presents a dichotomy between the good-sacred and the bad-sacred and Nagarajan's (1998a) discussion of the cultural and natural worlds refers to the opposition between the pure and the impure, previously established by others who have studied Indian rituals. Such efforts have frequently built upon Durkheim's (1964) dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, which is useful for many reasons. To begin with, his insistence on not equating the sacred with the good is consistent with Hindu beliefs. The sacred, being that which inspires awe because it is set apart and forbidden, could be

either evil or good. The profane, understood in this context to be mundane, even secular, could also be either. However, as we shall see, in both the sacred and the profane – even in Durkheim's sense, evil or what I refer to as hostile, can be shot with sticky notions of benevolence and malevolence. In other words, while the sacred for Durkheim could be either evil or good, in fact it could assume characteristics of both in certain times and spaces. Durkheim's work is significant because it lays the groundwork for the possibility of this distinction not being an absolute dichotomy. Indeed, his suggestion of the severely impure (such as the dead) being turned into an object of veneration through the process of ritual demonstrates that his concepts are more nuanced than is perhaps generally believed. As Das says, it seems likely that much criticism of Durkheim's work has come from those who expected to be able to divide all empirical reality into the two mutually exclusive, antithetical categories of the sacred and the profane.[190] But, "The concept of sacred . . . [is] too fundamental to be discarded simply because it cannot serve as an efficient tool of observation" (1987: 115).

Geertz (1958) chose ethos (people's 'underlying attitude toward themselves and their world') and worldview (a culture's 'cognitive, existential aspects') as his dichotomy. The latter can be rephrased as a people's "most comprehensive idea of a general order of existence" (Bell 1992: 26). By their very recurrence, dichotomies in ritual studies (e.g. actor and observer, theorist and subject, and those mentioned above) suggest that perhaps the function of ritual lies in its ability to structure relationships between perceived oppositions.

Although the dichotomy I encountered between *muggus*' ritualism and aesthetics was convenient for structuring my writing (i.e. it allowed me to manage my material by dividing it into separate ritualism and aesthetics chapters), it was problematic because the *muggu* tradition actually integrates ritual and form. Indeed, this dichotomy often felt unnatural and consequently challenging. Mookerjee asserts that in the art of ritual, "every form, every action, every surrounding circumstance or event, is correlated. . . . It is the belief in a cosmic order which can be mirrored in ritual" (1985: 18). Yet, I found myself dividing my material as pertaining to religious *belief* and ritual *action* (i.e. *muggu-*

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[190] Although Goody (1961) criticises Durkheim's concept of the sacred and the profane as a theoretical Western construct that could not be universally applied to all societies, because terms for such a dichotomy did not exist in many societies, it is possible that *equivalents* existed; at any rate, parallels between extant dichotomies suggest that Durkheim's concept cannot be brushed aside as irrelevant.

drawing), between ritual action and *muggu* forms. In the following section, I use Bell's summary of ritual dichotomies where she demonstrates how such paradoxes may be resolved by recognising ritual's ability to integrate what may first appear as fundamental oppositions.

4.4a. Dichotomies in ritual studies

Bell argues that discourse about ritual operates on a rationale based on the dichotomy between thought and action, and that the discrete category of 'ritual' was historically introduced when "'reason' and the scientific pursuit of knowledge were defining a particular hegemony in Western intellectual life" (1992: 6). This raises questions about the very validity of the term, given its introduction in such a socio-historically specific context. While considering Goody's (1961) suggestion for a paradigm shift on the term, Bell feels that discarding a term is problematic when there is little consensus about its inadequacy. While she chooses to continue using the category of 'ritual', she recognises that attempting to distinguish between ritual and non-ritual (e.g. ritual belief/action and visual form) presents significant challenges to definitions and classifications of ritual actions.[191] She nevertheless feels that such challenges furnish highly pertinent illustrations for understanding what ritualisation does.

> When analysed as ritualisation, acting ritually emerges as a particular cultural strategy of differentiation linked to particular social effects and rooted in a distinctive interplay of a socialised body and the environment it structures. (1992: 7-8)

Understood in this manner, ritual becomes "the means by which individual perception and behaviour are socially appropriated or conditioned" (1992: 20). As I understand it, both the socialised body and the environment it structures consist of various processes "that are deemed to constitute religion, . . . society, or culture" of which "ritual is seen as a definitive component". Furthermore, within these multiple processes, "ritual is a type of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing social or cultural forces comes together" (1992: 16).

> Examples include . . . belief and behaviour, tradition and change, order and chaos, the individual and the group, subjectivity and objectivity, nature and culture, the real

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[191] So while ritual theorists refer to beliefs and actions separately, they recognise that in practice, they are almost always intertwined. Rituals are also often regarded as performative, allowing actors to use the theatre of ritual as a space for expression.

and the imaginative ideal. Whether it is defined in terms of features of 'enthusiasm' (fostering groupism) or 'formalism' (fostering the repetition of the traditional), ritual is consistently depicted as a mechanically discrete and paradigmatic means of sociocultural integration, appropriation, or transformation. (1992: 16)

In this study, ritual is defined as formalist, but as we will see, it may be viewed as integrating not only tradition and change but also belief and behaviour, the individual and the group. To clarify, when ritual becomes a means of 'fostering the repetition of the traditional', as witnessed in the *muggu* tradition, it participates in transmissions of different kinds, in religion, society and culture wherein it may be regarded as 'the means by which individual perception and behaviour are socially appropriated or conditioned'. However, as Burckhardt complains,

> One of the most tenacious of typically modern prejudices is the one that sets itself up against the impersonal and objective rules of art, for fear that they should stifle creative genius. In reality no work exists that is traditional, and therefore "bound" by changeless principles, which does not give sensible expression to a certain creative joy of the soul . . . (1976: 8)

He argues that in contrast, modern individualism – with some exceptions – has produced little that we can be proud of. Moreover, as Bell points out, such dichotomies result in ritual action being regarded as particularly mindless routine, "habitual, obsessive, or mimetic – and therefore the purely formal, secondary, and mere physical expression of logically prior ideas" (1992: 19). Questioning the usefulness of theoretical descriptions of ritual that consider it "as action and thus automatically distinguish it from the conceptual aspects of religion, such as beliefs, symbols, and myths", Bell suggests that consequently,

> . . . beliefs, creeds, symbols, and myths emerge as forms of mental content or conceptual blueprints: they direct, inspire, or promote activity, but they themselves are not activities. Ritual, like action, will act out, express, or perform these conceptual orientations. . . . (1992: 19)

Bell feels that the above-mentioned ritual dichotomies have all employed two structural patterns:

> . . . ritual is first differentiated as a discrete object of analysis by means of various dichotomies that are loosely analogous to thought and action; . . . [it is] subsequently elaborated as the very means by which these dichotomous categories . . . are reintegrated. These . . . structural patterns are rarely explicit . . . However, the

relationship that develops *between* these two patterns when they are simultaneously operative in a theoretical description of ritual is . . . powerful. (1992: 21)

In other words, while ritual becomes first the unmediated point at which conceptual and behavioural components are differentiated, at the second stage, it is seen as synthetic, as the very mechanism through which these components are fused. Note that Nagarajan (1998a), perhaps without realising it, employed these structural patterns by presenting the cultural and natural realms as opposed, and then positing a dialectical relation between these differentiated entities. Thus,

> Ritual emerges as the means for a provisional synthesis of some form of the original[ly] . . . opposed forces whose interaction is seen to constitute culture in some form. (1992: 23)

It may reasonably be asked what purpose is served by introducing such oppositions in the first place; perhaps it is the inherent nature of ritual theory that limits our understanding of "divisions of human experience, and our ability to perceive the logical relations inscribed within these divisions" (1992: 17). So while I used the theoretical construct of ritual to differentiate ritual and form, in reality, these converge in the *muggu* tradition. In this scenario, Bell's warning that interpretive biases blur the boundaries between theory and data is pertinent because "the concept of ritual both exemplifies and supports the discourse within which it is elaborated" (1992: 13). As she points out, the dynamics implicated in

> . . . the production of particular bodies of knowledge [are] based on particular relationships between subject and object . . . [such categories] conform to whatever subtle purposes the larger analysis serves . . . To challenge the adequacy of our categories today, scholars must attempt to track the dynamics of the discourse in which they operate and the discursive logic by which they function. (1992: 14)[192]

So dichotomies in ritualism are not only present in the research data gathered, but also between the ritual actor (*muggu*-makers, my informants) and the theorist (the researcher, me). It is assumed that ritual participants act while those observing them think, but as Bell points out,

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[192] It is this interpretive bias that I feel Nagarajan (1998a and 1998b) has not accounted for.

> In ritual activity, conceptions and dispositions are fused for the participants, which yields meaning. Meaning for the outside theorist comes differently: insofar as he or she can perceive in ritual the true basis of its meaningfulness for the ritual actors – that is, its fusion of conceptual and dispositional categories – then the theorist can go beyond mere thoughts about activity to grasp the meaningfulness of the ritual. (1992: 28)

It is thus important for me to grasp the *muggu* tradition's purpose 'as a cultural phenomenon' to recognise 'the ritual mechanism of meaningfulness' for *muggu*-makers. However, it is difficult for *muggu*-makers to help me understand the tradition's meaningfulness in their lives because 'conceptions and dispositions are fused for them'; this is made harder by the fact that Andhra society is currently experiencing significant transitions. To enable me to place a cultural focus on *muggu*-makers' ritual activities, I therefore turned to Das' formulations of Hindu belief and ritual.

4.4b. Applying Das' life and death opposition to the *muggu* tradition

> I think cultures (may be said to) have overall tendencies (for whatever complex reasons) – tendencies to idealise, and think in terms of, either the context-free or the context-sensitive kind of rules. Actual behaviour may be more complex, though the rules . . . are a crucial factor in guiding the behaviour. In cultures like India's, the context-sensitive kind of rule is the preferred formulation. (Ramanujan 1990: 47)

It is partly because of India's context-sensitive culture that Das' criticisms of existing formulations for Hindu belief and ritual are relevant. I have previously mentioned her criticism of Srinivas' concept of the good-sacred and the bad-sacred. I likewise subscribe to her view of Durkheim's theory of the sacred and the profane as being remarkably useful but ultimately irrelevant in the Hindu context, since the two are not diametrically opposed in Hinduism. The third formulation she discusses (by Dumont) "argues that events which are seen [as] imbued with danger in other societies incur pollution in Hindu society" (Das 1987: 114).[193] As she argues, the dichotomy of the pure and impure, so often cited with reference to Indian rituals (including by Nagarajan), is fraught with inconsistencies. But to explain these discrepancies, it would be useful to first introduce major Hindu rituals, which may be divided into two categories: rites of transition and rites of veneration. The former encompasses all major liminal states, except death. I will shortly explain why death – which is clearly also a transitional state – is not included.

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[193] See Dumont, Louis, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implications*, University of Chicago Press, 1980 (translated from the French by Mark Sainsbury, Louis Dumont and Basia Gulati)

Under the category of rites of transition in India, I include the following:

1)   *namakaranam* (naming ceremony);

2)   *annaprasanna* (first rice-eating ceremony, especially celebrated in Bengal);

3)   tonsure ceremony;

4)   the first piercing of the earlobes;

5)   *yajnapovita* (investiture of the sacred thread) for boys;

6)   rituals associated with fertility; this would include fertility rites performed when a girl reaches puberty;

7)   rituals associated with marriage, including courtship ceremonies involving both the future bride and groom's families, pre-wedding rituals such as the *mehendi* (henna) or *sangeet* (music) ceremonies, *vivahotsava* (the principal wedding rites), the rituals associated with the bride's first entry into her marital home, those associated with her first return to her natal home, and in Andhra, *shashtipurti* (a couple's diamond anniversary), which is actually celebrated when the husband reaches his 60th year, if both partners are alive;

8)   rituals associated with pregnancy, such as the expectant mother reaching her seventh month of pregnancy (in times when this was less certain, the safe attainment of the seventh month was an important milestone and still marks the healthy progress of foetal development);

9)   *janmotsava* (rituals associated with birth);

10)   any family member's first entry into the house;

11)   departures upon pilgrimages.

In addition to the above-mentioned domestic rituals, there are rituals that mark transitions in nature, including:

12)   threshold hours every day;

13)   the advent of waxing and waning lunar cycles;

14)   the end of the monsoons, once or twice a year;

15)   the first signs of spring, annually;

16)   the ripening of staple crops, which marks the annual harvesting period;

17)   also annually, rituals to be performed during some winter months, for prevention of disease and "for protection from snakes" (Das 1987: 93).

Das explains that transitions are ritualised because liminality is regarded as a threat in many societies; this would especially apply in cyclical societies where change is still "bound up with biological and meteorological rhythms and recurrences rather than technological innovations" (Turner 1967: 93).

> The events associated with liminal positions are ritualised, dramatised or glossed over . . . The profound threat of these liminal positions lies in their power to question the ordering of everyday reality, through their capacity to ignore or transcend normal customary divisions. (Das 1987: 120)

Rites of veneration also have to do with feeling threatened, but here the threat is associated not with a liminal state's uncertainty but with agents who are perceived as potentially hostile. 'Potentially hostile' agents are not necessarily evil; rather, they need to be appeased so their powers may be harnessed to one's advantage. Rites of veneration – which have an element of awe – include:

1)   "death rituals;
2)   rites to ghosts, demons, etc;
3)   rites to ancestors;
4)   rites to serpents" (Das 1987: 119).

I add a third category of rituals – those associated with auspiciousness and sacrality, such as those that propitiate deities. I would suggest that these may appear distinct but in a sense, they also involve veneration because the very existence of opposites among goddesses such as Daridradevi and Bhagyadevi, hints at potential hostility (when the deity has dual or multiple manifestations). Inviting such deities' benevolent manifestations onto the threshold space thus involves an awareness of the potential hostility of their malevolent manifestations.

One could argue that *muggus* demonstrate an awareness of the threat of liminal spaces and times as the threshold space is privileged, and the drawing is done during interstitial times and periods. Thus, as Huyler suggests, floor-drawing is intended to protect home

Threshold *muggu*, Palakollu, Sankranti morning 2008

and family. To clarify, Sankranti *muggus* mark transitions in nature (ritualising the threat of liminal periods), while those relating to fertility and ancestor worship constitute rites of veneration. *Muggus* that propitiate deities similarly participate in veneration. By virtue of being apotropaic, *chukkalu muggulu* simultaneously attract and repel demons so it is uncertain whether one could claim that they *venerate* demons. If, on the one hand, *muggus* seem to underline an awareness of potential hostility, on the other hand, they seem to participate in hospitality, 'hosting' divinities on the threshold, or even inviting ancestors down in the Nelaganta by allowing them free passage.

These three classes of Indian rituals help us understand the *muggu* tradition but I would question whether they account for *muggus*' diverse interpretations. As it happens, examining the exceptional rite of transition – death – leads to a framework that may explain how the three categories converge in the *muggu* tradition. As explained in Chapter 3, death presents some anomalies in the *muggu* tradition. While *muggus* are not made in domestic spaces when a death occurs, what is more surprising is that despite the auspiciousness of Dhanurmasam, it is considered an inauspicious month for rituals such as weddings. I suggested that this may relate to ancestor worship. Das, whose monographic analysis of the *Grihya Sutra* of Gobhila focuses on the symbolism of laterality in Hindu domestic rituals, explains this paradox through her analysis of death as the liminal state par excellence.

> . . . religion has to provide not only an all-encompassing sacred order which can transform the empirical tenuousness of institutions by placing them within a cosmic order, but it also has to devise ways and means by which the liminalities experienced by an individual can be dealt with without any loss of meaning. (1987: 118)

While most of the transitional states referred to above deal more with an individual's social experience (barring birth and possibly fertility rituals), death presents religion with the greatest challenge in its role of devising institutions by which an individual may experience this most potent among all liminal states. In addition to posing "an obvious threat to the continuity of human relationships", death's liminality also severely disassociates an individual's experience of his social and cosmic worlds (Das 1987: 120-121).[194]

What Das means by symbolism of laterality is the opposition between the right and the left in the Indian ritual context, which as she says "is not a peripheral distinction but is of central importance in understanding different aspects of Hindu social categorisation". Her analysis of the *Grihya Sutra* of Gobhila "shows that the opposition between the antithetical concepts of right and left and the four cardinal points provide fundamental categories for the symbolisation of ideas like fertility, prosperity, life and death" (1987: 91).[195] In addition to rules prescribing (or proscribing) the use of the right and left hand for specific rituals, there are rules prescribing the direction in which the hand must move – towards the right or towards the left – for particular rites, even the cardinal point towards which a subject conducting the rite must face.

Das' symbolism of laterality highlights what at first seems to be an irregularity. While the right hand dominates in rites of transition, for rites associated with death – also a liminal state – the left hand predominates. Yet, rites to ancestors and rites for the dead (which could – from one point of view – seem to belong to the same category, in that they both deal with beings that are not alive) are listed as belonging to separate classes in the

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[194] Hindus believe that death releases the soul, which is then free to enter the world of *maya* (play, illusion) and "return to the true and eternal Brahman. Thus, the act of dying is a very significant act for a Hindu" (Das 1987: 121).

[195] Despite the fact that Gobhila is in northern India, I have considered Das' work relevant in my discussion on Andhra's *muggus*, because the *Grihya Sutras* were compiled largely from observation of domestic rituals, so there are still recognisable similarities between the rituals described therein and "those practised by devout Hindus even today" (Das 1987: 91).

Grihya Sutra (1987: 94).[196] While previous texts suggested that the left hand is associated with the impure and the right with pure, Das argues that this is an erroneous assumption. For example, considering that for rites to ancestors, the left hand is prescribed, the left hand cannot primarily be an impure hand. The apparent contradictions in the classification of rituals in the *Grihya Sutra* are easily explained if one replaces the dichotomy of the pure and impure with the opposition of life and death. I have observed for some time that this is a dichotomy that is inherent in Indian ritual: "in Hindu cosmology the sacred is seen much more usefully as ordered with reference to life-death opposition than good-bad opposition" (1987: 111).

My belief and Das' claim are supported by her observation that the right hand is prescribed for rituals related to both pregnancy and birth, yet only the latter involves impurity. Similarly, the left hand is prescribed for funerary rites as well as for veneration of ancestors. However, while cremation is associated with the severest impurity, the latter is not associated with any impurity. Furthermore, in liminal states associated with death, rituals consist predominantly of attempting to neutralise the danger that arises out of death, yet liminal states associated with life-processes may be equally imbued with danger, such as marriage and childbirth, except that in this instance, "the danger is to the person who is in the liminal state – the new-born baby, the bride, and the new mother" (1987: 111). It would seem, as Das states, "that the state of purity is considered appropriate in dealing with the cosmic when it is experienced as integrated with the social, as in daily prayer, rites to ancestors, etc" (1987: 119-120). Clearly then, the rites imbued with impurity cut across the right-left opposition.

The fact that for rituals associated with death, the left hand is prescribed, despite the right hand dominating rites of transition, and the left dominating rites of veneration, is explained now by the life-death opposition. The right, in reality, dominates life-processes. The left dominates rites to deities who have dual aspects that are benevolent and malevolent, rituals associated with death, magic and sorcery, as well as rituals associated with ancestor veneration. The symbolism of laterality also clarifies the movement of passage,

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[196] There is even a possibility that the death rites were a later addition to the text, and this is not surprising, considering that death rites are not domestic rites, and would therefore not have been included in the original work.

> . . . connected with the continuation of the household through proper channelling of the forces of fertility and representation of death as a passage from the status of a living being to that of an ancestor. This is why so much emphasis is placed in the domestic ceremonies on ritualising the advent of the new-moon and full-moon, the events connected with fertility such as marriage and childbirth and, finally, the ritualisation of death. (Das 1987: 108)

Das uses the paradigm for liminality provided by death "and the contrast between the *preta* (ghost) and the *pitri* (ancestor) in death rituals" to examine the difference between the two types of relationships between the cosmic and the social – a relationship which is clearly played out in the *muggu* tradition by its simultaneous emphasis on fertility and ancestor veneration.

> . . . at one level, the sacred associated with life is kept completely separate from the sacred associated with death, as in the injunction that no weddings should be performed in the month of *shradha* when ancestors are propitiated. . . . Though there is a dominance of the left side in both . . . [rituals associated with the propitiation of ancestors and rituals associated with cremation], in the former case one is dealing with categories (e.g. ancestors) which do not disturb the cosmisation of social reality. On the other hand, every death (or birth) has to be legitimised by being integrated with the microcosmic/macrocosmic system of social and cosmic reality. The whole purpose of ritual in these cases is to define death away from an accidental, contingent event to one which is part of a cosmic design. In other words, while ancestors (*pitri*) as a category are already integrated with cosmic reality, a dead man as ghost (*preta*) is a liminal category and has to be converted into the incorporated category of ancestor. (1987: 120)

This clarifies the Sharmas' explanation about how *muggus* are not made until the dead are incorporated into the category of ancestors. So if one considered the *muggu* taxonomy within the framework of Das' life and death opposition, we see that all the apparently different interpretations that emerge from the tradition can in fact be explained by one ritual theory. In other words, *muggus* are all life-affirming, whether by veneration to ancestors, snakes and deities, promotion of abundance and fertility, protection of the home against potentially hostile agents or appeasing even the cosmos (through *muggus* that symbolise planets and stars). However, while this over-arching theory accounts for most *muggus*' meanings, one class of drawings identified by *muggu*-makers eludes such a theory. Chapter 5 discusses this category – *kotta muggulu* – and additionally competition *muggus*, an emergent category which is as yet unidentified by *muggu*-makers.

CHAPTER 5: *MUGGUS*: AN ART-HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

Many authors feel that 'traditional' Indian floor-drawings should be discussed within a religious framework. Some believe that 'contemporary' practices are obscuring the religious beginnings of floor-drawing traditions. As discussed in Chapter 1, Nagarajan believes that ritualism is taking a backseat to aesthetics, that artistic concerns are secularising the *kolam*'s religious beginnings and that the threshold has become irrelevant in *kolapottis* (1998b: 214, 47, 211). While my informants spoke a lot about Hindu beliefs, as I have argued, aesthetics has been consistently important even in traditional, 'ritual' *muggus*. Though *chukkalu muggulu* may be aligned with older folk beliefs, the aesthetic framework adopted in Chapter 4 privileges Hindu ritualism. As *Andhra Jyoti* states, *muggus* represent "Hindu religious principles, a worship of beauty, and health" and they can be viewed in any of "these three frameworks" (2008a).

The *muggu* tradition, however, is currently transitioning in significant ways. New features suggest that the tradition is moving away from religiosity. This is especially evident in what my informants identified as *kotta muggulu* and in others that I class as competition *muggus*. It would therefore seem that Nagarajan's three observations may apply to *muggus* too. This would also seem to be supported by the fact that the over-arching ritual theory formulated in Chapter 4 does not completely account for *kotta muggulu* and competition entries. This is partly why I adopt an art-historical framework here, to see whether regarding *muggu*-making as an artistic activity might account for newer categories of *muggu* forms. Having said that, I would argue that even as secular dimensions emerge, the auspiciousness and sacredness associated with older categories is retained in great measure; here, ritualism and aesthetics still have a symbiotic – albeit different – relationship; while the threshold space may not be as significant in the competition scenario, we will see that neither threshold space nor threshold time are entirely irrelevant.

If one studies traditional floor-drawings solely within a ritual framework, one inevitably arrives at conclusions such as Nagarajan's, where religiosity and secularism seem to collide in the contemporary practice. What would be more useful is to consider how Bharucha's, Guha-Thakurta's and Kaur's assertions apply to the *muggu* tradition: "the past is alive in any number of unprecedented ways", rather than being "a repository of

seemingly eternal resources", it is "a dynamic, . . . interruptive element in the shaping of new narratives" and asserts "a contemporary significance" (Bharucha 2001: 27); it is only through "a contemporary lens that we can see 'tradition' being continuously mobilized, reinvented and innovatively packaged" (Guha-Thakurta 2004: 34); and as with the Ganapati Utsav, *muggus* can also provide us with "a means of 'retrieving' perspectives on the past that flow into the here and now" (Kaur 2005: xvii). Green and Mort, who contend that the specificity of visual representation and power relations tends to be consistently underestimated both theoretically and politically (1996: 228), feel that:

> What we ask of the past should depend on the political present. In many respects that type of insistence can work to deconstruct the categories of past and present, and reveal them as the products of professional history. (1996: 236)

They also question what lends the definition of art coherence,

> as something ontologically constant from one historical period to the next? . . . the deconstruction of the field of art should entail the investigation of the very processes by which its nature and status have been constructed and secured through specific practices at different historical periods. (1996: 227)

Ironically, while *muggu*-making has not been conferred the status of art, its successive categories of forms demand a similar deconstruction of what constitutes a *muggu*; we need to ask what lends coherence to the category of *muggu*. As with the ritual arts discussed in Chapter 1, the *muggu* tradition's ongoing reinvention is fraught with inconsistencies, especially so in *muggu-potis* (competitions). In this chapter, I reference *muggu*-makers' interlinked statements about age and authenticity, because their qualification of *muggus* as 'old' and 'new' evidently rests on *muggu* forms, rather than on their ritual purpose. This makes it more appropriate to use an art-historical framework to understand the contemporary mobilisation of the *muggu* tradition. If, earlier, ritual arts tended to be studied within an anthropological perspective, today, practices like *muggu*-making risk being studied solely through the lens of the relatively new approach of visual culture. This is because the field of visual culture is seen as focussing on the contexts of images' production, display and discourse, especially looking at the life of 'everyday' visual objects and practices. It is thus viewed as a sub-discipline of cultural studies. Art history, on the other hand, is seen as a mode of investigation of art objects during specific historical developments. The art historian thus attempts to trace the biographies of images as objects, deals with questions of authenticity, dating or provenance,

historically situates images within art movements and even evaluates them for the market. While art history is associated with high art, visual culture is associated with low art. Criticism of the discipline of art history has resulted in many regarding visual culture as a more appropriate approach for the study of everyday images. For example, Shusterman complains that

> in defining art as a practice defined by art-historical narrative, all substantive decisions as to what counts *as* art or *in* art are left to the internal decisions of the practice. . . Philosophy of art simply collapses into art history, and the live and momentous issue of what is art gets reduced to a backward-looking account of what art has been up to the present. (2000: 44)

Perceiving the dangers of art's autonomy when it is identified as a historically defined practice, Shusterman points out that this

> effectively removes that practice from critique through a wider normative perspective which could guide the reconstruction of that practice should it become misdirected and increasingly alien to the lives and joys of most people. (2000: 46)

These are valid criticisms, but as with most disciplines that critique existing ones, I think visual culture builds upon the foundation established by art history. There are nevertheless sound arguments for perceiving the two disciplines as antithetical and I present some of them here. Like Shusterman, Green and Mort object to the self-referential, object-based focus of art history and suggest that the term art history needs to be questioned; that the polarities inherent in the phrases 'art and the social context' or 'art and its historical background' need to be rejected. Instead, what is required is a fresh perspective which views visual representation as part of "an interlocking set of histories which involve multiple relations and dependencies across a range of social fields and practices" and "the interdependence and interchange of discourses and practices, with mutually reinforcing results" (1996: 227). Corbett suggests that art history regards artworks "as cultural documents, approachable principally through their connections to history and society" (2005: 17-18) whereas visual culture is marked by its

> lack of attention to the specificities of works of art. Eschewing any interest in the material qualities of paintings or sculpture or in their aesthetics, this rhetoric concentrates instead on the extension of the work into social practice . . . once the idea of 'culture' as the totality of signifying activity in a society is accepted, art history's traditional concentration on a narrow field of canonically endorsed artworks becomes hard to sustain against the claims of 'an increasingly diversified field of

> cultural objects'. . . . When the focus of interest is on the nature of the visual as social practice it makes no logical sense to privilege one small class of objects over all others as objects of interpretative attention. (2005: 18-19)

However, contending that art history and visual culture are much closer than has been argued by many theorists, he suggests that the opposition between the two disciplines is caused by the uniqueness of art objects, which are bound – yet irreducible – to their contexts. This is the key distinction between art objects and other cultural objects. Quoting Michael Podro, Corbett points out that if a writer ignores context, he risks moving towards formalism. If, on the other hand, he subordinates text to context, he risks treating art objects as if they were the trace or symptom of their extra-artistic contexts. At the heart of this opposition is the "inherent problem which arises in applying the analytic possibilities of language to the alien medium of the visual" (2005: 21). Others describe this as awkwardness, the rebarbative qualities of the visual or the incompatibility of the visual and the linguistic. Writing about art either becomes self-indulgently subjective or requires "the external modelling of the object as a textual *doppelganger*, formed out of discursive rather than visual material, and open to exposition in language accordingly" (2005: 22). One solution of course, could be to try and recognise the visual itself as a form of knowledge. As I stated in the introduction, we are used to associating writing with the construction of knowledge, yet as T.J. Clarks asserts in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (1999):

> [A] particular character of the visual as it lives in successful works of art is to be a form of knowledge about the world – 'a way of storing knowledge', as he puts it elsewhere – and, furthermore, that this knowledge is a function of that very visuality, present in form rather than in discourse, and structured and communicated by it as its vehicle and medium. (Corbett 2005: 30)

While there are no easy solutions to the problem of writing about art, I have tried to pay equal attention to the context of *muggu*-making, as in Chapter 3 and to *muggus*' forms, as in Chapter 4. In this chapter, I consider all three of Rose's sites of interpretation. Considered as a case study of traditional arts, the *muggu* tradition has been fore-grounded in this project. Adopting an art-historical framework in this chapter allows me, in Chapter 6, to position my discussion of *muggus* against the backdrop of a broader art-historical framework, that of Indian art.

5.1. ARE *KOTTA MUGGULU* SECULAR?

Today, changes in urban housing and lifestyles mean *muggus* have spilled over from thresholds onto streets and are no longer necessarily made at threshold times; materials used are often synthetic powders, and *muggu* forms often derive from diverse sources, rather than from Hindu symbolism and iconography. The transmission and exhibition of *muggus* have also witnessed significant changes. *Muggu* competitions are held: small local contests by temple or municipal authorities, and mega-'events' sponsored by television networks or trans-national companies. *Muggu*-makers send contributions to magazines and newspapers, which – during Dhanurmasam – are often published with the contributors' mug-shots beside the drawings they submit.

Woman's contribution to a newspaper with her photograph printed alongside. Reproduced from *Eenadu* 2008a

To give an example of how the old and new interact in the *muggu* tradition, two informants in their thirties, Sridevi and Bhavani had 'permanent *muggus*' (in enamel paint) inside their houses but continued to draw ephemeral ones on the road (their 'threshold'). They felt that the practice had changed radically as the drawings had become very "design-oriented and are being copied mostly from newspapers". They admitted to regularly copying *muggus* from newspaper clippings, which they retained even from previous years, but also continued to make traditional *muggus*. In such a scenario, I question whether *kotta muggulu* are sacred or secular. Can they be simultaneously sacred *and* secular? The following section focuses on the materials and tools *muggu*-makers use to make new and emerging *muggus*.

5.1a. Materials, techniques and forms

What is perhaps most significant about new materials, forms and techniques is the debates that these changes have introduced among *muggu*-makers. When I told Gayatri that I was sometimes puzzled by people's comments that what I copied were not *muggus*, she explained that there were two possibilities – that I may have copied not real *muggus* but new "designs", which had "nothing to do with worship or auspices" or that the material used to draw the *muggus* was not *muggu* but chalk. As I have previously

discussed, turmeric, *kumkum*, rice-flour and *muggu* are all considered as auspicious, ritual materials, essential for the consecration of a space. So does the use of non-sacred materials point to secularisation?

As Padmavathi explained, one reason for changes in *muggu*-making materials is that the traditional ground – earth or mud (bare or covered with cow-dung and/or lime mixture) is now often replaced by a tar road, a rough concrete floor, or a smooth floor, oftentimes in mosaic or ceramic tiles. Such changes have other implications. For example, while washing the ground is traditionally prescribed, a wet smooth floor is impossible to draw on, so when drawing with a chalk-stick, *muggu*-makers often choose to leave the floor dry, merely sweeping it before drawing their *muggus* or at the most, wiping it with a damp cloth. The relative newness of paint is suggested by the fact that women do not as yet mention it as a *muggu*-drawing material. Indeed, many Andhra houses have even more permanent '*muggus*', in the form of ceramic tiles, or as floor inlays using *muggu* forms.

In my fieldwork diary, I note the 'art' of washing and applying cow-dung and how *muggus* "make a lovely contrast against the dark canvases of newly applied cow-dung". Wet ground, freshly pasted with cow-dung mixture, shows *muggus* to advantage; indeed, visibility is something *muggu*-makers are conscious about. Ramana, for example, stressed that she mixes *muggu* with rice-flour because the former looks "very white". This is another reason why washing the ground is important; it removes any traces of the 'ghost drawing' of the previous day and thus makes a new one clearly visible. *Muggus* on harder, paler surfaces thus have to be quite colourful to be visible. Not surprisingly therefore, women today do not shy away from applying colours even for traditional Sankranti *muggus*, including the Nelaganta and the *nelavanka*. My fieldwork diary records my attempts at drawing on hard grounds:

> . . . the floor being smooth [glossy], the colours did not stay on easily . . . [and being] mosaic, the initial lines (acting as a grid in this case) were not visible especially since the floor was wet, so it was hard to see what I was connecting my subsequent lines to. It felt . . . like drawing as a blind person, not being able to see the 'canvas'. I [also] realised that pouring powder . . . on the floor is different from applying brush and paint to canvas. . . . one of the reasons rice-flour or *muggu* floor-drawings flow more is because with powder, it is released from the hand onto the ground and therefore does not involve any resistance from the hard surface. With *sudda* or with chalk, hard

> drawing materials against hard surfaces create tension, which paradoxically does not result in a taut line but instead . . . makes the line 'wobbly' . . .

Note that drawing with powders is regarded as a skill. As Gayatri urged, "If you want to learn how to draw *muggus* with rice-flour, you must keep practising until you get the *pota*. The *pota* comes only with practice." The word *pota* connotes mixed powders here and probably relates to the Telugu verb, '*poyyadam*', meaning 'to pour'. Ordinarily, if a woman is not using *pota*, the verb used for making a *muggu*, '*pettadam*', translates as 'to put' or 'to place'. According to Seetamahalakshmi, who commented that "women who cannot pour the *muggu* properly do them the best they can, sometimes a little clumsily", the ability to 'pour' a *muggu* fluidly is one of the characteristics of a skilful *muggu*-maker. Another woman in Poduru who attempted to teach me *pota*, stressed that I should press hard while I poured the powder:

> One holds the powder between the index and thumb, with the index hooked perpendicularly below the thumb. One slides the thumb forward, rubbing it hard against the index. What is difficult, and this is much harder – some women never get it right – is pouring out curved lines, and especially the twisted lines required for *chukkalu muggulu*.

It requires skill to gauge the pressure one must apply to form a clear, uniform line. I made a few curves but did not manage to twist it around and even my straight lines were disgracefully thick. Like others quoted before, she too stressed the importance of the material, reiterating that the more sand there was, the easier it was to pour, adding that "of course too much sand alters the colour of the substance".[197] Lamenting that her granddaughters (who were visiting her from Hyderabad during their holidays) were not interested in *muggu*-drawing, she accorded it the value of a 'skill', to be learnt by all young girls.

> I have been urging my grand-daughter to learn *muggus* from me but she shows no interest. I keep telling her it is important to learn everything, to know all the household work, like being able to stitch leaves properly, the ability to distinguish between brooms used for different spaces and tasks, the ability to darn and repair folding cots, making *muggus* . . . I am proficient in all of these. But nowadays, what with the rush of modern life, especially in the cities, you young people are all losing out on our traditions.

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[197] I noted in my fieldwork diary that "being able to tell at a glance, whether a *muggu* is drawn with chalk-stick on dry ground, chalk-stick on wet ground or rice-flour is like being able to distinguish with ease whether a print is a lithograph or etching, linocut or woodcut; it is in the texture, which one learns to distinguish with engaged exposure to the different types".

Stencilled Nelaganta *muggu* made with *gottalu* (perforated tube) by Rajulu women, Poduru, Dhanurmasam 2008

This emphasis on skill, domestic or otherwise, explains why women who lack the time or skill to draw *muggus* use stickers, plastic perforated sheets, stainless steel perforated plates and *gottalu* (perforated metal, plastic or PVC tubes) to make *muggus*.[198] The demand for such bazaar alternatives rises during Dhanurmasam, when one finds the market selling numerous items relating to *muggus*, of which samples are included in the fieldwork collection.

There are three points that should be emphasised about such materials. First, the different venues selling these items might suggest that the religious nature of the tradition is being secularised. While *muggu* and *sudda* are sold by temple vendors, who sell materials used for worship, like coconuts, bananas, little boxes of turmeric and *kumkum*, betel leaves, *vokka podi* (crushed areca nut), candle wicks, oil lamps and religious literature, today, stalls outside the temple also sell synthetic colours. *Gottalu* have always been sold by shops that sell a variety of household tin and iron items (one could call them ironmongers) but stickers and plastic stencils are sold by 'fancy' shops that normally sell items such as beads, sequins and fashion accessories. During festival periods, bookshops that sell stationery, textbooks and *muggu* chapbooks also sell chalk-sticks, and powdered sequin to sprinkle on completed *muggus*.[199]

Second, in addition to underlining the importance of religious materiality, new materials like stencils perhaps provide pointers to how some forms may have migrated across

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[198] In other regions, *gottalu* are also made with wood and bamboo. Some women use perforated, stencilled boxes or tins instead of tubes or sheets, but this is more rare. *Gottam* means tube and is the most common form of a *muggu* stencil.

[199] All these vendors sell an assortment of bright colours only seasonally – at Sankranti. It appears that these colours may be meant more, or as much, for New Year's as for Sankranti, because several vendors mentioned New Year's Day in their sales pitch, yet no one mentioned Sankranti; I do not know whether this is because the three festival days were, at the time, still a while away or whether this is because colour *muggus* are not made for Sankranti. In Pondicherry, colour *kolams* are made specially for Christmas and New Year's. The vendor whom I bought my colours from said I must wet the colours so they remain longer. He also advised me to buy some powdered sequin, though he was not selling them himself.

Shop outside temple selling religious materials, literature and colours for festival *muggus*

Stencil vendor from Maharashtra with stencils and demo *muggus*

states. For example, I met an itinerant stencil salesman who spent eight months every year in a Maharashtrian village near Amaravati, perforating plastic sheets with family members. During the remaining four months, he and his brother sell stencils in states with differing ritual periods.[200] His stencils have assumed some forms and 'slogans' typical to each state; as such, they reveal one of the possible ways in which a form previously exclusive to one state may be migrating to another. A video of his sales demonstration, which I believe documents floor-drawings' transition, can be viewed in the fieldwork collection. His stencils work much like *gottalu*, except that *gottalu* are rolled, whereas these thin sheets of perforated plastic are placed flat on the ground, then powder is rubbed or better still, sprinkled evenly over it to create the image. The salesman rubbed bands of colour on the ground first, then placed the stencil over them, before sprinkling rice-flour or *muggu* onto the stencil. This created a design in white on a multicoloured background. He offered a wide range of stencils – decorative floral stencils; auspicious images such as the parrot, swan, peacocks, deer, lotus with an earthen lamp over it and women holding lamps;[201] figurative images of deities such as Lakshmi, Saraswati and Ganapati; and even lettering reading messages like 'Happy New Year', 'Welcome' and 'Happy Pongal'. I was surprised by the last message since Pongal is the Tamil equivalent of Sankranti. Such dissemination of *muggu* forms (the example of chapbooks will be discussed further on) offers a possible explanation for my frequent sightings of 'Happy Pongal' in Andhra *muggus*. It is amusing to note that Telugu women use the word 'Pongal' when they use Roman lettering, but revert to 'Sankranti' when they write in Telugu. The salesman, who spoke only as much Telugu as was necessary to sell stencils (our interview was in Hindi), informed me that during Diwali, they tour Maharashtra, Gujarat and Orissa and during Sankranti/Pongal, they sell stencils in the four southern states: Andhra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Such materials also indicate a gradual consumer market being associated with the *muggu* tradition; for example, there are women who have made a profession of selling stickers and cushions with *muggu* forms.

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[200] The stencil vendor's appearance in Andhra only during Sankranti made me wonder whether – as with the Durga Puja in Kolkata – *muggu*-making would gradually become only a festival phenomenon, celebrated exclusively during Sankranti, rather than a daily activity?

[201] Traditionally, images of women holding earthen lamps are found flanking a doorway as statues, relief work, painted images or even inlays.

Third, such changes raise questions about what constitutes the efficacy of a *muggu*. Das Gupta suggests in Chapter 2 that on occasion, even the daubing of rice paste was considered as an acceptable replacement for the ritual *alpana*. Many Andhra houses use a combination of materials for *muggu*-making, using *gottalu* to make patterned borders around their main *muggu* and for *arugulu*. According to my mother and other informants, before *gottalu* were introduced, parallel lines were made by filling one's fist with powder and holding one's four fingers palm up and moving the hand to release powder through the gaps between the fingers. Stickers are often used for interior spaces (my mother uses them for staircase landings) and painted *muggus* can be made for verandas or the domestic shrine, while ephemeral *muggus* are still made on the threshold. Significantly, while the word *andam* (beauty) often crops up in *muggu* discourses, *shraddha* is mentioned equally often. *Shraddha* moreover, seems to relate to the effort put into the act of drawing. On Bhogi eve, Seetamahalakshmi's grandson told me a trifle disparagingly that I would only see 'threads' on their street. When asked to elaborate, he said, "*Gottalu muggulu*." Seetamahalakshmi then agreed that Rajulu women tend to achieve their elaborateness with *gottalu*, the 'easy' way to make *nindu* (intricate, densely covered) *muggus*. These instances hint at the current uncertainty about what constitutes a *muggu*'s efficacy: Is it the form, the material, the intent or the very act of painstakingly drawing during a threshold hour on a threshold space?

While the antiquity of a form seems to relate to its authenticity, it also seems to be a given that the beauty of a *muggu*, or at any rate its formal features, contribute to determining its efficacy. When one informant noticed me copying her *muggu*, she said, "Do not bother to copy that. It is a bad *muggu*." When asked what she meant by 'bad', she said, "I drew a silly *muggu* – this is something I made up quickly, [just] with some dots, because there were just too many mosquitoes biting me." Here, she implies that *shraddha* is lacking, that she made a 'silly' *muggu* in a hurry. Indeed, especially on festive days, many *muggu*-makers refer to how much time a good *muggu* must have taken to make.[202]

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[202] Krishnaveni, who said she did not have enough time or energy to make good *muggus*, also mentioned how *muggu*-making is a form of exercise. "If one is used to making big *muggus* every day, it is okay, but try making a big one suddenly and you will end up with aching muscles. So obviously, regular *muggu*-drawing must be keeping one's muscles in shape."

Note that the words 'incorrect' or 'wrong' pepper *muggu*-makers' discourse. Hemalata, for example, said that she loved making *muggus* but always ended up making "some small mistake"; she said this with much regret as she was making another mistake that I could recognise. Despite frequent innovations in *muggu* forms, when a form is well-established, an informant would often say that I had drawn a *muggu* 'incorrectly'. Raghava showed me how to draw an umbrella *muggu* and what she identified to me as a hand-fan *muggu,* which I had previously drawn incorrectly, sans grid. Once shown the grid, the *muggu* seemed more logical. Indeed, many aspects of the *muggu*-making process have a specific logic. Two entries in my fieldwork diary, which draw on my experience as participant and observer, indicate why my informants develop a method to draw *muggus*:

> As I . . . [placed] dots in my notebook . . . [I] realised how difficult it is to space them evenly. If one does not space them evenly, . . . [it] affects the drawing's proportions – especially its symmetry. It is harder still . . . on the floor, where the 'canvas' is larger. Also, if you are right-handed, it makes sense . . . [with] *chukkalu muggulu*, to move from right to left, otherwise your hand obscures the dots you need to loop the lines around.

> After Sridevi finished with the dots, she drew the extremities first, then the centre and then the details in between. . . . the process . . . [seemed] similar to . . . [solving] jigsaw puzzle[s]. You finish the corners first, then the borders, and work your way in because this fixes your parameters. When the lines . . . [on one] extremity she drew came out blurred, her mother immediately remarked that she should shift to the other side. . . . the ground was very wet . . . [where] the lines had turned out blurred and the other side had dried faster. . . . if the ground is too wet, the line spreads and is blurred but if the ground is too dry, it does not hold the powder for long.[203]

Annapoorna felt that "the important thing about drawing a *muggu* is not really the *muggu* itself but whether you have managed to cover all four corners properly".[204] However, she agreed that this was only with reference to some *geetalu muggulu*. With "*chukkalu muggulu*, what is important is how well you have placed your dots. The dots must be spaced well, proportionately, so that your drawing comes out well-proportioned". As I have suggested above, the ability to pour a *muggu* well, i.e. make uniform and clearly visible lines, is a criteria of aesthetic evaluation, as is symmetry and harmonious balance. Notwithstanding such criteria that contribute to making a *muggu* beautiful, and the reference to 'incorrect' *muggus*, it cannot be doubted that new forms are innovated

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[203] This reminded me of the process of printing etchings; if the paper is too wet, the ink spreads and the image is blurred but if the paper is too dry, the paper does not catch or absorb the ink.
[204] Although I cannot say this with certainty as I do not have sufficient material to determine this, it seems possible that Brahmins have ideas about what constitutes efficacy that derive more from canonical sources.

or added on from external sources, to the seemingly infinite public repertoire of *muggu* forms. This seems permissible. After all, as Ramana states, for non-festive occasions, "any design will do". Sesharatnam pointed out that even the older *chukkalu muggulu* offer scope for innovation because while a grid can have the same number of dots, the *kallapulu* can be varied. Doubtless the number of permutations and combinations is actually limited per grid, but even a statistician like Siromoney, who would be able to calculate such variables, found in his survey that one-fourth of Tamil women in Madras continued to innovate *kolams* (Steinman 1989: 489). Although it is difficult to determine to what extent my informants were innovating *muggus*, from what I observed, most women seemed to have preferences for particular forms and specific ways of drawing a *muggu* that arguably constitute a style. Meduri Nandini (Vijayawada), stated,

> My sister and my mother both make *muggus* beautifully. . . . My sister's *muggus* look like jasmine flowers stuck to cow-dung cakes, because she makes them very clearly. Do not get me wrong – my mother also draws very beautifully but somehow, although I cannot pinpoint it, they draw their *muggus* very differently.

Individual styles clearly do differ, as I found when I observed particular women's daily *muggus*. Some women, like Durga, may have a preference for a particular *muggu* form; others may prefer to make a tableau from different categories of *muggu* forms, juxtaposing *geetalu muggulu* and *chukkalu muggulu* with Sankranti motifs. One motif may be experimented with, and in such cases a basic drawing has different versions proliferating, as with the example of Nelaganta cited in Chapter 4. My informants also did not hesitate to use traditional *muggus* with *kotta muggulu*.

What defines *kotta muggulu* is perhaps the lack of motifs associated with the occasion they are drawn for. Certainly, while associations with cultural traditions like fertility rituals, ancestor worship and the annual harvest remain strong, the emerging *kotta muggulu* seem to be more decorative, usually incorporating figurative elements. But I would argue that even the new forms continue to incorporate auspicious, symbolic motifs. *Kotta muggulu* forms are derived either from the natural world or from the reservoir of auspicious symbols discussed in Chapter 4 (*kalasam*, lamps, swastika, lotus, star, feet). It is interesting that despite the incorporation of forms that draw on auspicious *geetalu muggulu*, my informants tagged *kotta muggulu* as 'modern designs'. This may be partly because such *muggus* often include new elements like messages in English reading

New Year *muggus* incorporating greetings for onlookers, Palakollu, 1 January 2008

Top
Two women
make a
muggu
together by
first drawing
with chalk
and then retracing
the *muggu* with
powder, Palakollu
New Year's Eve

Bottom
A large *muggu* flanked by greetings reading, 'Goodbye to 2007',
and 'Welcome to 2008', followed by 'Happy New Year',
Palakollu, New Year's Eve 2008

'Welcome' or 'Happy New Year'. The other reason may be the patent decorativeness of such drawings. Shahane states,

> In speaking of contemporary art, the word "decorative" is conventionally used as a derogatory label. The disdain for the decorative originates in the divide between the "fine arts" on the one hand, and crafts, also called "decorative arts", on the other. In the conventional view, fine arts represent the imaginative and creative, whereas decorative arts consist of the repetitive and imitative. (2003: 34)[205]

Paradoxically, while traditional arts may be branded as decorative by metropolitan artists, *muggu*-makers themselves seem to think of the 'modern' *muggus* as more decorative and 'design'-oriented. Although the aforementioned decorativeness is usually easy to identify, distinctions between old and new are not always clear. Once, I was convinced that an informant's elaborate *muggus* were *kotta muggulu* but she insisted they were *purvakalam.* Bamma later convinced me that they were *purvakalam muggus* which had not been drawn for a while but were now being revived, particularly for use in wedding halls.

My youngest informant was probably about eight years old, while my oldest were in their 70s. It must be said that the preference of old and new designs did not always relate to age. For example, Kumari, who is in her late 30s or early 40s, disliked 'new-fangled designs'. Her daughter, who is about 10 and had lately begun preferring *chukkalu muggulu*, explained that nowadays, even at *muggu-potis*, the older *chukkalu muggulu* were making a comeback and were being awarded by those who recognised their significance as the 'original' *muggus*. Such revivalism is perhaps most significant at this historical juncture precisely because it counters the current transitions in the *muggu* tradition. As I have already suggested, it is not only *muggu* forms that are witnessing changes but also the spaces and times at which they are made.

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[205] Shahane adds, "In the high colonial period, the visual production of conquered nations was deemed to be allied to the decorative arts, and therefore inferior to the perspectival realism of Europe. This attitude faded a long time ago, but left its mark on the development of modern Indian art. Most metropolitan artists resisted the idea of exploring indigenous decorative traditions . . . In a later period, the reductionist imperatives of modernism, and an understandable wariness about nativist trappings and traps, took over where colonial prejudice ended, with much the same result." (2003: 34)

One may say that *muggus* are gradually traversing from domestic spaces to communal and public domains. As often as they are drawn on courtyards and thresholds, they are

Other than vehicular and pedestrian traffic, there is also animal traffic! Palakollu, December 2007

also made on the road, especially in towns and cities. Fortunately for me, this made it easier to photograph *muggus* and this is why I videoed what I call *muggu* streetscapes, which evoke the ambience of an Andhra street. Note that 'street' *muggus* last for a shorter time than threshold *muggus* because vehicular traffic rubs them out faster than just pedestrian traffic. Seetamahalakshmi pointed out that in towns, apart from women having little time to continue making elaborate *muggus*, the fact that they have far less space probably resulted in simpler and smaller *muggus*. When I asked Annapoorna whether she felt bad about vehicular traffic wiping away her *muggus*, she echoed Seetamahalakshmi's remarks:

> No, not really. If we say anything about it, people will retort, 'Who asked you to draw *muggus* on the road?' Nowadays, our *muggus* are getting smaller and smaller because the space on the road is very small. On special festival days, I used to make 32-[dot] drawings . . . but it is difficult here on account of the road being so small. If I draw a 32-[dot] *muggu* here, it would take up the entire road space . . . so I cannot make big ones here.

While such remarks suggest that urban spaces are changing *muggu*-scapes, it is clear that urban *lifestyles* are also effecting changes in the *muggu* tradition. Nagamani echoed informants I quoted in Chapter 3:

> *Muggus* . . . used to be drawn at 5, 4, even 3 o'clock, but nowadays who does that? At the most, people will wake up at 5. It used to be inauspicious to have your threshold unwashed and undecorated after 5. . . . Who does that anymore? Now, people wake up at 7, 8, even 8.30! What to do? It was because . . . people might get lazy that these beliefs were encouraged.

Indeed, according to Suryaratnamalati, in Palakollu, *muggus* are no longer made twice a day at dawn and dusk, but are instead made late in the evening for the next day, and she felt that households that manage to draw a *muggu* at dawn do not bother making another at dusk. Although I noticed that many women in Poduru still tend to make

muggus at both dawn and dusk, Suryaratnamalati's statement was borne out by my observations in Palakollu. For example, Durga, Gayatri and Nirmala all drew their *muggus* between 18:15 and 19:30 for the following day and some women drew them as late as 21:00, which made it difficult to photograph them. Gayatri's mother-in-law explained that during winters, it was more common for women to make *muggus* at night because it is "difficult to wake up early in the morning to draw them. Later, there are too many other tasks to see to, what with having to get the children ready for school, etc". Ramana said that although ordinarily, she washed the threshold and drew *muggus* in the morning, "during festivals, I draw them at night because they take longer". So if informants are not drawing *muggus* at the prescribed hours, such as at *dhanurkalam*, does this invalidate their *muggus* or make them secular?

Other contexts in which *muggus* are now made are clearly secular. While many Telugu feature films portray threshold *muggus*, a relatively new phenomenon is to hire people to make elaborate *muggus* for the sets of television programmes; broadcast during Dhanurmasam, these are often revivalist in content. Such *muggus* raise questions about authenticity, as do those made in places like 'art villages' and hotels. There is a feeling that these are not as authentic as those made on domestic thresholds. Koride Vishwanath Sharma (Dharmapuri) pointed out how "nowadays, you have spaces like the Silparamu on HiTech Road in Hyderabad, on the way to Golconda, where *muggu* workshops and demonstrations are held on how to draw *muggus*". Such instances raise debates that are most frequently articulated during *muggu* competitions but there are also two non-Hindu events for which Andhra women enthusiastically make thresholds *muggus*, which they discuss animatedly.

5.1b. *Muggus* for Christmas and New Year

According to Sesharatnam, Telugu women have been drawing *muggus* for Christmas since her childhood (at least 50 years ago). Festive occasions like Christmas and New Year – having no established, 'ritual' motifs – provide women an opportunity to draw whatever they associate with fun. I noted that there was a great deal of freedom evident in New Year *muggus*. Women felt free to apply any colour to any motifs; include a New Year message with a traditional *padmamuggu*, flanked by *chukkalu muggulu*; experiment with *gottalu* applications, freehand and grid-based drawings; or even combine these. There did not appear to be any restriction on using every possible

combination – colours, designs, methods of application, textures (e.g. plain colour for one part and colour mixed with salt crystals in another).

It is clear, however, that New Year's day is accorded the significance of a festival; the festive spirit infusing the *muggu*-drawing process during New Year's Eve is immediately palpable but more importantly, despite the freedom and variety, there are certain forms that emerge as staple favourites during these two occasions. In other words, women seem to be developing a *muggu* iconography for Christmas and New Year. So in a manner of speaking, one might say that Christmas and New Year have also been 'ritualised', albeit as a modern ritual. As both events are celebrated according to the Gregorian calendar, they are associated with the West, so my informants tended to draw 'Western' motifs for these events. Foremost among these are the joker, and cartoon figures, particularly Disney characters. Sesharatnam said, "Just for fun, jokers are drawn for Christmas." Although *muggus* for Bhogi, Sankranti and Kanumu include festive greetings, this seems especially the norm for Christmas and New Year; such *muggus* frequently greet the visitor, passer-by and neighbour. I briefly mentioned hospitality in Chapter 4. Rather than being hospitable within a religious framework, one could perhaps say that such modern *muggus* are 'socially' hospitable. Needless to say, cartoon characters are especially popular with young children. As children participate enthusiastically in *muggu*-making during New Year's (it is often the children who collectively make *muggus* without the assistance of their elders), this may account for cartoon characters' emergence as staple motifs. The New Year's *muggu* is often the culmination of a group effort, when several women per household – numbering as many as five – can be accompanied by any children in the house, including boys (I only spotted a couple of men); one woman may draw the outlines, others may fill in specific colours.[206] I heard one woman tell a child, "Fill in all the letters with colour, each with a different colour."

There is a great deal of commenting, asking for and offering opinions on what and how to draw. *Muggu* sketchbooks appear frequently at this time, others choose something from newspaper cuttings. Some women consult their sketchbooks periodically while making their *muggus*; others do not. There is also some discussion on which

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[206] Note that many families in Andhra, especially in villages and smaller towns, continue to follow the 'joint family' system, where three generations of a family all live together.

Muggus of cartoon characters, Palakollu and Poduru, New Year's Day 2008

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publications publish interesting 'designs'. One woman, who had misplaced her sketchbook, borrowed a drawing from a friend down the street. Krishnaveni asked me if I had collected any interesting, unusual drawings during my study, and wondered whether she could borrow my sketchbook. The women animatedly discuss colours and whether or not to add more decorative features. Colour *muggus* are preferred for these two events. Different women chose to mix their bazaar-bought colours with different substances – most of them did this to improve the pouring consistency of the colour, though some of them did this to modify the colouring. The substances that were mixed included: table salt, crystal salt, *muggu* (which makes the colours paler), rice-flour and sand. The grainier the substance, the easier it was to apply the colour. Some of the women explained that they added water so colours would "last longer in traffic". Others advised against mixing water as they felt that this altered the colours' "brightness". Many of the women first drew their designs with chalk, then filled in the colours, and then finished their drawings by redrawing the outlines with *muggu* or rice-flour. Others started by drawing directly with *muggu* or rice-flour, and then followed the same process. There also seemed to be some common methods in colouring, such as complementary colour schemes and alternating colours for certain patterns. Flat colour application seems to be the norm, though exceptions did occur.[207]

The camera on this occasion did not seem to be as intrusive. Rather than finding it strange that I should want to photograph their *muggus*, the women seemed to find it natural that I should want to photograph their 'special' efforts. Many of the women in areas I had not visited before assumed I was a journalist who might publish these in a newspaper and expressed pride in their work. Indeed, many women urged me to photograph their drawings at night (New Years' Eve) rather than wait for the morning, by which time they fully expected their drawings to be smeared to the extent that I would not want to photograph them. Clearly, it was important to them on this occasion to have their drawings appear as sharp as they were when just completed. On other days, when I asked them whether they did not feel regret at their elaborate drawings being smeared

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[207] I observed that a couple of *muggus* that I photographed did not have flat colours but instead had colours smeared or sprinkled as in spray-painted work. When I commented on this to Eranki Suryaratnamalati, she felt that the maker was either unskilled, or that their colours must have accidentally fallen onto the *muggu* and prompted them to sprinkle the other colours too, to make it appear as though it were intentional. I thought this unlikely as it does not take much effort to wash out such small *muggus* with a smattering of colour. It is more likely that flat colour application is the norm and that exceptions are regarded as anomalies – a result of poor skill – rather than a creative choice, but this is mere conjecture.

and swept away, they answered that of course they did not and in fact they expected them to be trod on since they were drawn on the road. But on this occasion, there were several comments made with regret, and one or two comments about insensitive men who just *had* to step or ride on their *muggus* instead of walking or riding around them.

Just as Guha-Thakurta states that in Kolkata, people go *pandal*-hopping, people in Palakollu went *muggu* sight-seeing, trying to ascertain which one is best, and generally having a good time. Once they have finished making their own *muggus*, women walk around, appraising and commenting on other *muggus* with great enthusiasm, often with the children trailing behind. Such walkabouts can sometimes continue until as late as midnight, and discussions about the *muggus* seen are carried on when people return home. Vaishnavi and Sathika, who begged their mother to be allowed to fill in colours but were forbidden from doing so for fear that they would spoil the *muggu*, had to content themselves with making a round of other houses with me, to admire the other children's efforts.

The following criteria were applied by *muggu*-makers to evaluate the excellence of the completed New Year's *muggus*:
1) The intricacy or beauty of the 'design' (this includes how *nindu* it is);
2) The choice of colours;
3) The skill in applying the design;
4) The neatness with which the colours had been filled;
5) The unusualness of the design.

Such criteria are also applied to competition *muggus*, which I shall discuss shortly but I would like to emphasise here that the fun and festivity that I have described above is not restricted to New Year's but is also present during the Sankranti festival days. For instance, on Bhogi eve, I noted:

> The Poduru residents' enthusiasm is palpable. Kumari's children were repainting their thresholds, rafters and doorways turmeric yellow. Many others . . . [used bricks to protect their thresholds while] freshly mixed cow-dung paste was applied. . . . There is a festive air already, in anticipation of the festival days beginning tomorrow. . . . I was telling the Sharmas that I would be making a *muggu* myself this evening, for fun and Bhaskaram said, "Then it will surely come out beautifully. Anything that one does with enjoyment turns out well." Everyone excitedly told me to come tomorrow as this evening they would be drawing elaborate *muggus*.

This underlines the communal nature of festivals; *muggu*-making – even when only one woman is drawing – becomes a family activity as the old women and children watch the process. Although I thought that the men are usually conspicuously absent, Suryaprabha asserted that they often do participate, "Very often, we draw the outlines and they fill in the colours – for festivals, not on ordinary days. It is the men who buy us the colours. They also keep us company when we draw big *muggus* for Sankranti." Annapoorna similarly stated that her husband often encourages her.

Despite the shared 'public' repertoire of *muggu* forms, and the frequently collective process of making a *muggu*, individualism is not entirely absent in the *muggu* tradition. Saraswathi recalled how as a child, when her mother used to clean the kitchen counter, she would draw *muggus*, "I loved it because it gave me the opportunity to display my artistic skills." When she added, "Drawing *muggus* and also looking at others' *muggus* is great fun," the other women agreed. Sridevi likewise stated how she never felt bad when her *muggus* are swept away (despite the fact that hers usually got smudged within an hour of drawing), because she enjoyed making new ones every day. Padmavathi even recounted how she usually goes "to my first floor balcony to see my own *muggu* when I have completed it, so I can see how it looks. It gives me pleasure". A competition contestant, when speaking of how women "walk about looking at each other's *muggus*" and "take great pleasure in our own – that is why we draw them", similarly recounted how the previous year, "I drew such a beautiful *muggu* for Sankranti [that] we took a photo from our balcony . . . to remember. We all enjoyed it so much". Suryaprabha added that she feels "happy when people passing on the street pause to look at my *muggu* because I know then that it has caught their attention".

Kumari, whose daughter is apparently a keen, award-winning *muggu*-maker, informed me that she does not allow her daughter to make daily *muggus*, because if she did, "I would run out of *muggu*. She fills up the entire space with her drawings! I could not afford to let her draw on a daily basis. She draws [only] on special occasions". As Sesharatnam averred, "Interest is crucial in this practice; without interest, one cannot make *muggus* well." Bhaskaram told me that her elder daughter, who enters *muggu-potis*, is so interested in *muggu*-drawing that she "keeps coming up with new *muggus*; if you give her your notebook, she will fill it up with at least 100 new designs". While those interested in *muggu*-making look forward to Dhanurmasam and the main festival days –

Bhogi, Sankranti, Kanumu and Mukkanumu as well as Christmas and New Year's, enthusiastic *muggu*-makers' biggest outlet is perhaps *muggu-potis*, which allow them to showcase their artistic skills to a wider community, and potentially – through the media's reportage of such events – to all of Andhra.

5.2. *MUGGU* COMPETITIONS DURING SANKRANTI

We have seen with the Durga Puja in Kolkata, the Ganapati Utsav in Mumbai and the Tamil *kolams*, that the phenomenon of corporate sponsorship and the institution of awards for various competitions is an emerging trend, with the competitions possibly becoming major catalysts in determining aesthetic criteria for these transitioning traditions. This is certainly the case with the *muggu* tradition, where *muggu-potis* range from street competitions judged by the residents themselves, to local contests organized by temple authorities or municipalities, to mega-'events' organized by television networks, newspaper syndicates and/or trans-national companies. Note however, that such competitions are still held during the ritual period of Dhanurmasam, just as the Durga Puja and Ganapati Utsav competitions are held during their respective ritual periods. As such, even as other secular dimensions emerge within the competition arena, the competitive event still relates to the ritual event,. According to my informants, *muggu* competitions have been organised by temples even as far back as 25 years ago, but the organisation, scale and content of early temple competitions probably bear little resemblance to those today, which are often state-wide and reported about both in print and broadcast media. We have seen with Kaur's reference to how the Girnar-Loksatta-Ganeshotsava started, that tie-ups are often formed between advertisers and newspaper syndicates. Similarly, as news about *muggu* competitions is popular, it is no surprise that media groups in Andhra often organise and sponsor the competitions.

Other sponsors – especially more local ones – often tend to be companies whose consumer base consists predominantly of women, such as manufacturers of domestic appliances, women's apparel and jewellery. In this section, I focus on the discourses *muggu-potis* generate in the popular media and among *muggu*-makers and I examine competition entries and aesthetic criteria employed by the judges, to question whether competition *muggu* forms are consistent with threshold *muggus*' forms.

5.2a. Changing context of exhibition and display

Muggu-potis can be held in various formats. When a woman in Palakollu informed me that her *muggu* "won first prize", I asked whether this was in a Lion's Club competition (since I had been told that Palakollu's Lion's Club frequently organised *muggu-potis*), but she said, "No, this was our street competition. We hold it among the residents of our street only." Another informant likewise described two kinds of competition in Kavitam: one held on grounds designated for the purpose and the other judged on the basis of threshold *muggus*. Street competitions however, are not necessarily organised and evaluated by the residents themselves. According to Savitri, in Poduru, *muggu-potis* are usually organised by the local television channel. The first year, the judges visited the village, and evaluated threshold *muggus* but the following year, they organised the competition on hired grounds. Seetamahalakshmi's neighbour spoke of a month-long *muggu-poti* in Pennugonda, a village beyond Maruteru, where temple authorities make a round of all the streets on a daily basis and take note of the best *muggus*; at the end of Dhanurmasam, they announce the winners and award prizes.

Similarly, in a village neighbouring Maruteru, Gade Venkateshwar Rao had organised *muggu-potis* for three consecutive years (at the time I met him, 2008), where judges marked threshold *muggus* every day during Dhanurmasam and totalled these marks at the end of Nelaganta. He explained why he had chosen to organise such a competition,

> Many women may not come to participate in such a *poti* [i.e. a special event held on grounds]. I am always amazed that despite their many household chores, their busy schedules, and the rampant mosquito problem, so many women, during the entire month, spend as long as 2-3 hours, drawing their *muggus* with such *shraddha*. One *must* reward that continuous effort, that *shraddha*.

The threshold is thus not entirely irrelevant even in the new phenomenon of *muggu-potis*. Such community competitions can be very small-scale. According to Sharma's daughters, it is hard to anticipate local Poduru competitions since "they announce competitions at short notice and people just gather and start; there is really no advance notice". There are other competitions which – though rural – can accommodate participants from several neighbouring villages. Such competitions are usually announced on local television channels or advertised on flyers. It is through Kavitam residents that I learnt about a *muggu-poti* that I eventually attended in Maruteru, which

was organised by the Grama (village) Panchayat.[208] Although I will refer to other competitions reported about in the media or discussed by my informants, I will evidently refer most to the Maruteru *muggu-poti*, which was held on Bhogi day 2008.

Muggu-poti prizes can be generous; when the stakes are higher, such as at state-wide contests, prizes can be worth as much as Rs.44,500 as with one competition which awarded gold jewellery and expensive domestic appliances sponsored by Vijay Home Appliances and CMR Shopping Mall; the fourth and fifth place contestants were awarded spontaneous cash prizes by one of the organisers (*Eenadu* 2008e).[209] As first prize, the Maruteru *muggu-poti* awarded an embroidered *saree* worth Rs.4,000, as second prize a mixer-grinder worth Rs.2,000 (courtesy Lakshmi Electricals, who were one of the sponsors), as third, another *saree* worth Rs.1,000, as fourth, an illuminated photograph of goddess Lakshmi worth Rs.500. There were initially five prizes but a *panchayat* official offered an impromptu sixth prize. All participants received consolation prizes – a plastic jar – sponsored by a domestic gas company. The judging process was split into two stages: the first round of marks was awarded to all entries by local teachers in the village, who then formed a shortlist, but the final selection of winners was made by *panchayat* officials, including the president K. Gowri Subhashini and the Sarpanch (*panchayat* head), Venu Babu, who also acted as the master of ceremonies.

The flyer, which I was told was distributed locally by cable television channels, invited ladies from five neighbouring villages, who are "talented in this art", to participate in the competition, to welcome Sankranti Lakshmi, by making *muggus*, which "is our Telugu tradition". It also stated its intent to encourage "women's interest", by organising the competition on the grounds where the weekly market was held, where other ceremonies like distributing blankets to the elderly were carried out on the same day. The chief guest, Pitani Satyanarayanagaru, a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) gave a speech about how such competitions, by rewarding women's talent, helped "revive and sustain the *muggu* tradition, which is so unique, . . . [and should be] maintained in the future too".

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[208] The Maruteru Grama Panchayat is a local government body funded by public taxes.
[209] These electronic appliances included a geyser, a mixer and an iron.

There are several motivations that drive the various groups that participate in *muggu-potis*. While *muggu*-makers' motivations are predominantly driven by their desire to showcase their talent, in the speeches of dignitaries invited to support *muggu-potis* across Andhra, a refrain is how such events help to sustain and revive the *muggu* tradition, thus indicating the fear that such traditions are dying.[210] It is this fear that modernity may erode the *muggu* tradition that turns the *muggu-poti* into a potent tool for the reinvention of the tradition at a time when transitions in Andhra society have raised debates about its meaningfulness. As we have seen, Kaur similarly felt that competitions contributed to revitalising the Ganapati Utsav as a religious event. However, in Andhra, despite the strong references to Vishnu, Goda Devi and Lakshmi, the emphasis is not on any deity but on beauty and the ritualism inherent in the act of making a *muggu*.

At the *Eenadu Vasundhara Magna* state final in Hyderabad, the chief invitee was as high-placed as the state's Health Minister Rangareddy (*Eenadu* 2008b); other presiding officials can include municipal officers, chairmen and vice-chairmen of sponsoring companies or local dignitaries like high-school principals. *Surya* reported how E. Bheemasankar Rao, who was a chief guest at a *muggu-poti* organised by Tadepalligudam's cable television, stated that "Rangavallis (*muggus*) reflect Telugu culture and tradition" (2008e). Such statements by dignitaries are undoubtedly absorbed by the *muggu*-makers themselves. At a state-wide final held in Hyderabad at the massive NTR Stadium, held after district-level competitions were held across Andhra, the runner-up A. Aswini from Warangal, said, "This is an effort to rescue (preserve) Telugu culture" (*Eenadu* 2008e). The article began by declaring, "If you think 'Who makes *muggus* nowadays?' you had better change your opinion." This again hints at the fear that this is a dying tradition. Archana (1981) and Nagarajan (1998b) both speak of the southern floor-drawing traditions as 'dying'. In addition to *muggu-potis* being possible vehicles of revivalism, I would question whether the presence of government officials at *muggu-potis* is a possible indicator of the state's attempts to revive 'Andhra traditions'. While it is true that threshold *muggus* may have become less elaborate, I would argue that the *muggu* tradition is still thriving, perhaps with different forms, different purposes and in different formats, but nonetheless a vibrant tradition.

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[210] Annapoorna's daughter-in-law for example, said that the *muggu* practice was almost dead on the streets that I had been frequenting in Palakollu and added, "Nowadays, this practice is slowly disappearing. People have less time, less space and cannot be bothered as much." This echoes Huyler's findings in other states.

Chapter 5: *Muggus*: An Art Historical Framework

While revivalism can motivate government bodies to organise *muggu-potis*, it is not the only motivation for other organisers like media syndicates, including Magna Publications, *Eenadu* and *Varta*, who sometimes sponsor the competitions themselves and sometimes rope in other companies as sponsors. Organisers and sponsors are invariably mentioned in both *muggu-poti* advertisements and articles reporting on the results, giving them publicity; different companies may act as sponsors for various levels of competition, so Vijay Home Appliances might sponsor the local *muggu-poti*, while Chandana Brothers (Jewellery and Textiles) may sponsor district-level *muggu-potis* (*Eenadu* 2007). In the instances where syndicates organise and sponsor *muggu-potis*, revivalism may contribute to their motivations, but commercial interests probably play a bigger role. Advertisements that announce *muggu-potis* thus,

> On the occasion of Sankranti, *Andhra Jyoti* [holds] *muggu* competitions in 60 cities across the state of Andhra Pradesh.
> Pearl *muggus* competition date: 13 January 2008.
> To find out about the *muggu* competition venues and prizes in your city, please see the *Andhra Jyoti* on the 2nd of January. (2007a)

encourage women to keep an eye out for information relating to upcoming competitions and later, for articles publishing results. While contestant numbers for local competitions can be as little as 60, such as at the Lion's Club *muggu-poti* in Tonaku, which was sponsored by an individual (*Andhra Jyoti* 2008c), for state-wide *potis*, one could have as many as 3,500 competitors (*Eenadu* 2008b). Really important *muggu-potis* are split into several stages, starting with towns, moving to districts and then finally ending with a state final where as few as 15 district semi-finalists may compete (*Eenadu* 2008e). So *muggu-poti* advertisements have developed their own semiotics as they probably aim at driving up sales; often accompanied by an image of a woman bending down to make a *muggu*, and offering details of the *muggu-poti* such as venue, date, time, level (district, etc), entry forms, deadlines, prizes, judges, organisers and sponsors, these advertisements urge women to participate by highlighting the prizes, "Will you take the silk *sarees* we are offering you to encourage your enthusiasm and your creation?" (*Surya* 2008b) or by generally urging them to be as enthusiastic about competitions as they are when drawing threshold *muggus* (*Eenadu* 2007). Rules or instructions are usually very simple, such as "participants must bring their own *muggu* and colours" (Maruteru flyer) or "Those who participate in the competition must draw and fill their drawings

on their own, in the space allotted" (*Surya* 2008b). According to Sharma's daughters, "At competitions, they fix the canvas space and the duration for the drawing but the colours are not fixed. You can carry along whatever you want." Note that the fieldwork collection includes *muggu-poti* advertisements.

Many *muggu-poti* advertisements emphasise how open they are to the age of the participants and to the kind of *muggus* contestants may wish to draw, "'Free style', '*chukkalu*', '*geetalu*' – any kind of *muggu* can be drawn. Mention whichever category you choose and send us your application . . ." (*Eenadu* 2007). The Maruteru organisers similarly announced after the *muggu-poti* started that "there is no discrimination against *chukkalu muggulu*, all kinds of *muggus* are welcome and will be awarded". Such a reassurance suggests that *chukkalu muggulu* are in danger of being passed over in favour of newer *muggu* forms. Animated discussions about *chukkalu muggulu* either qualify them as

Muggu-poti advertisement.
Reproduced from *Eenadu* 2007

truly authentic, or as outdated. Their out-datedness is discussed not only in the context of *muggu-potis* but also in the context of newspaper publications. For example, two Maruteru contestants felt that newspapers only published 'designs' and did not seem to include *chukkalu muggulu* anymore.

Despite the openness to contestants' age, in reality, *muggu-potis* can have different age-group categories. Savitri thought that although older women participate sometimes, it was mostly school children who participated in *muggu*-potis in Poduru and Kavitam, but in Maruteru as well as other *muggu-potis* that newspapers reported, the contestants' age seems to range between late teens to mid-forties. The Maruteru organisers specified that only females above a certain school-level (8th standard) could participate but four or five young, eager girls (aged roughly between 9 and 13) – though initially asked to stand

apart – were allowed to participate, especially as they were unwilling to leave. The oldest Maruteru contestant was in her sixties.

It was interesting to observe the kind of anxieties contestants felt before and during the competition. One woman, who practised her drawing in a sketchbook, was nervous because she had always drawn on cement and was uncertain about how she would cope, having noticed the earthen competition ground when she arrived. I repeatedly heard women asking each other whether they were "brain or paper", essentially trying to establish who would be relying on memory and who would refer to a sketch. Another woman who had three drawings on sheets of paper, explained that she did not yet know which she would draw – she would make an elaborate *muggu* if three hours were allotted, and a simpler one if less time were allotted. After much discussion between contestants and organisers, Subhashini firmly decided that one hour was sufficient.

Helpers – who are usually children – were allowed, provided they restricted themselves to handing and mixing colours and did not attempt to draw. About 10% of the contestants had helpers. Before the *poti*, one helper held out a paper sketch to the contestant's friend as the contestant explained what she intended drawing. When the sketch accidentally became visible to others, the contestant snatched it out of the helper's hand, warning her that others might take a peek. Such instances highlight the competitiveness of *muggu-poti* participants. Using a loudspeaker during the competition, organisers periodically warned that only participants could draw, that if any helpers were spotted near the allotted space, the participant would be disqualified. Such warnings aside, the contestants – despite their competitiveness – shared a general camaraderie. For example, one contestant who did not have a helper requested another contestant's helper to buy her some green she had run out of. A man, whose young daughter and mother competed alongside each other, was a keen and supportive helper, mixing and handing his daughter her colours. The elderly grandmother drew a *chukkalu muggu*.

In some ways, the *muggu-poti* may be compared to a game, which can include both competitiveness and a sense of play. Indeed, one elderly lady who turned up late to collect her blanket, mistook the *muggu-poti* for a game. Spaces were allotted by lottery and participants were asked to write their names and allotment numbers by their

This page
Maruteru *muggu-poti*
Top left
The Taj Mahal
Top right
Detail of 'revivalist' *muggu*
Above
Man helping his daughter
Right
The winning entry, a floral *muggu*
Bottom right
The Indian flag
Bottom left
Contestants during the *poti*

entries.[211] The *muggu-poti* started and finished much like a race; contestants were instructed to start drawing on the count of three and they worried about the deadline towards the end. An enterprising vendor set up a stall for colours and *muggu* beside the grounds, knowing that latecomers who had not thought of registering before would not have come prepared with colours; others who ran out of colours would also need to buy more.[212] Interestingly, many women arranged their colours in *masala* boxes – circular boxes in which one has smaller containers. These boxes, designed for quick access to spices during cooking, are ideal for *muggu* competitions, unlike the traditional three-part container designed for *muggu*, turmeric and *kumkum*.

5.2b. Competition *muggus*

According to Bhaskaram and her daughters, the chief criterion for judging entries at *muggu-potis* is usually instant visual impact, something visually appealing, "neatness and skill, but mainly colours" but according to Subhashini, the criteria of selection at Maruteru was, "in order of priority, creative talent, neatness of execution, and choice of colours". Subhashini clarified that 'creative talent' meant "How are they new? How do they depart from the older drawings?" One of her colleagues on the *panchayat* agreed, but another judge said, "*Chukkalu muggulu* are old, they are tradition, and many participants assume so. I would mark *chukkalu muggulu* higher because they are the real *muggus* – the authentic ones," to which Subhashini retorted,

> What do you mean, only *chukkalu muggulu* are tradition? Any *muggu*, including 'designs', is tradition. Making a *muggu* itself is tradition. Making a *chukkalu muggu* or an established pattern is easy. To apply one's mind, to come up with one's own creation is the challenge. That effort should be rewarded.

The common warning to ethnographers to beware of the difference between what is said and what is done generally did not apply to my fieldwork but I did detect a difference between competition judges' criteria as stated and as applied. Despite the announcement that *chukkalu muggulu* would not be discriminated against, I observed

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[211] The organisers kept announcing that those who wanted to draw big *muggus* should abandon the idea as everyone would be allotted the same space. But as it happened, the marker had made a mistake with his measurements and there were about four spaces that were just slightly bigger so that in the end, they did try and allot those to women who wanted to draw slightly bigger *muggus*. Most women who had wanted to draw bigger ones had changed their entries to fit the available space, so these spaces were allotted quite randomly after all.

[212] Women in the audience were encouraged by the Panchayat members and the contestants to join in. Those who explained that they did not have colours, were directed to the vendor.

that 'designs' were favoured both at Maruteru and elsewhere. Also, despite Subhashini's stated criteria, it seemed that rather than creativity or innovation, it was neatness of execution and choice of colours that were the dominant criteria. The winning entry, in my view, was not particularly creative or new. Although in practice, these criteria are perhaps not yet applied to rural competitions, the very fact that 'innovativeness' (at least in theory) has become a criterion even in a competition like Maruteru's, points to the possibility of such questions soon determining what constitutes 'innovativeness' in rural *muggu-potis* as well.

Although this does not apply to the Maruteru entries, it seems that a new kind of *muggu* is emerging. At what was possibly the biggest *muggu-poti* in 2008, the emphasis was on how "almost all the *muggus* conveyed a message". This is not unlike the emerging emphasis in the Ganapati Utsav on socially engaged tableaux. It was reported that:

> Women expressed their minds on issues such as national integrity, integral knowledge, Telugu culture, traditions, environmental issues, and societal ills, in the form of *rangavallis*. (*Eenadu* 2008f)

All three winners (two housewives and a school staffer) emphasised how supportive and encouraging their family was – parents, husband and/or children. The winner, E. Padmavati (Guntur), was a novice who said she had not expected to win, adding that she had greatly enjoyed decorating as a child.

> . . . wherever programmes were organised, I had the responsibility of decorating the stage. . . . At a time when our tradition and culture is disappearing, programmes such as these are well appreciated. With the apartment culture increasing, *muggus* have become rare. It is commendable that Eenadu organised this *muggu-poti*.

The runner-up, A. Aswini (Warangal) was a seasoned contestant and expected to win:

> I have [previously] won prizes at competitions conducted by TV channels. . . . Whatever work I do, there is always a message in it. In this competition too, I made a *muggu* depicting the problems that society is facing today. Women are not meant for the kitchen alone. This sort of platform is necessary to bring out the hidden knowledge and ability of women . . .

This additionally suggests that participating at *muggu-potis* is seen as giving the woman a voice. C. Jyoti (Anantapuram), the second runner-up, who felt that *muggu-potis*

Top

Revivalist, winning entries in a *muggu-poti*. Reproduced from *Eenadu* 2008f. *Eenadu* (2008c) likewise printed revivalist *muggus* from another *poti*.

Bottom

Activist entries in a *poti*. Reproduced from *Eenadu* 2008e

participate in an "effort to revive Telugu culture" and was not confident of her chances "because of the keen competition", stated that she "loved making *muggus* from childhood". Like Aswini and others, she stressed,

> In every *muggu*, I try to communicate a message, reminding people that the responsibility of rescuing the earth is each person's – whole-heartedly wishing to raise awareness on this issue, I drew this *muggu*.

Putta Vijayashree (Tonaku) was quoted as advising potential *muggu-poti* contestants on what to draw in order to win. She advised that *muggus* "should not have too much empty space, should feature a good choice of colours, should be distinct from others (i.e. original), and should convey a message (*Andhra Jyoti* 2008c). The first two criteria are consistent with threshold *muggus*; the third criterion is not unheard of with threshold *muggus*, although it is only referred to during festival days, especially on New Year's Day; the fourth, however, is not at all consistent with threshold *muggus*. It is well worth exploring this new, 'socially relevant' category further. It seems interesting that Kaur similarly emphasised how over the years, more and more *mandap* consider a social theme in order to stand a better chance of winning competitions. Questioning the trend of socially engaged *muggus* seems particularly relevant as their absence from Andhra thresholds may be indicative of their failure to be meaningful to *muggu*-makers. If this is the case, is this trend of activism being parachuted from the metropolitan art scenario, where socially engaged art is such a dominant trend? At any rate, if the activist zeal has caught up with the *muggu* practice, here too, the questions that I asked in Chapter 1 should be put to those who advise *muggu* competition participants, and more importantly – the judges who select *muggus* on the basis of the messages of awareness featured in the *muggus*. Why not simply put up a banner at the competition? How does the medium and form of the *muggu* enhance these pleas for, or contribute to, for example, the protection of the environment? It is a question that must be asked, if one is to determine whether such competition results are not encouraging *muggu-poti* contestants to incorporate activist messages merely in a bid to join a bandwagon. It remains to be seen whether such *muggus* will gradually be added to *muggu*-makers' repertoire of threshold *muggus*.

Chapter 5: *Muggus*: An Art Historical Framework

While *muggus* conveying messages are increasingly becoming the norm, *muggu-potis* have introduced another new category of *muggus* that I call the revivalist *muggu*, such as the entry that placed fifth in Maruteru, and another that was reported about in newspapers, which featured a cow, Gobamma, a *muggu* with *gobbillu*, a Bhogi fire and Haridas. Neither the one that was reproduced in the paper nor the one at Maruteru were declared winners but several of my informants felt that they should have. It is worth emphasising that aesthetic criteria differ, though there are general tendencies. Like the socially engaged *muggus*, revivalist *muggus* are not drawn on thresholds.

Let me briefly outline the four categories of *muggus* emerging in *muggu-potis*:

1) The traditionalists or purists tend to draw elaborate *chukkalu muggulu*. The women in this category probably belong to an older age-group, although, as I have pointed out earlier, *chukkalu muggulu* may be becoming popular again. What is significant is that efforts to 'contemporise' them fail as most women try to do this by incorporating colour, despite recognising that such attempts result in unappealing visuals.

2) Others, following the revivalist mode, make comprehensive *muggus* that are effectively tableaux of festival motifs. These may be called symbolist, in that they incorporate the symbols of the Sankranti festival, such as wheat sheaves and sugar-cane, an overflowing pot of milk, the *kalasam*, Gobamma, Dhanyalakshmi, the cow or the ox, and harvest implements. In the popularity stakes at competitions, these probably rate highest, jostling for first place with the elaborately decorative patterns. Tellingly, though, in terms of being awarded prizes (this does not necessarily correspond to popularity stakes) the activist *muggus* overrate the revivalist *muggus*. Although threshold, Sankranti *muggus* include most of these motifs, unlike Bengali *alpanas* that often incorporate the whole range of Lakshmi *puja* motifs, threshold *muggus* rarely – if ever – consist of comprehensive tableaux that depict *all* the key motifs. I would suggest that this category of competition *muggus* has developed from media interpretations of the *muggu* tradition's role within the Sankranti festival and indeed, its potential in contributing to a revival of 'traditional' Andhra culture. In addition to revivalist articles focussing on the symbols of the festival, the covers of Sankranti editions of women's magazines tend to carry comparable comprehensive tableaux.
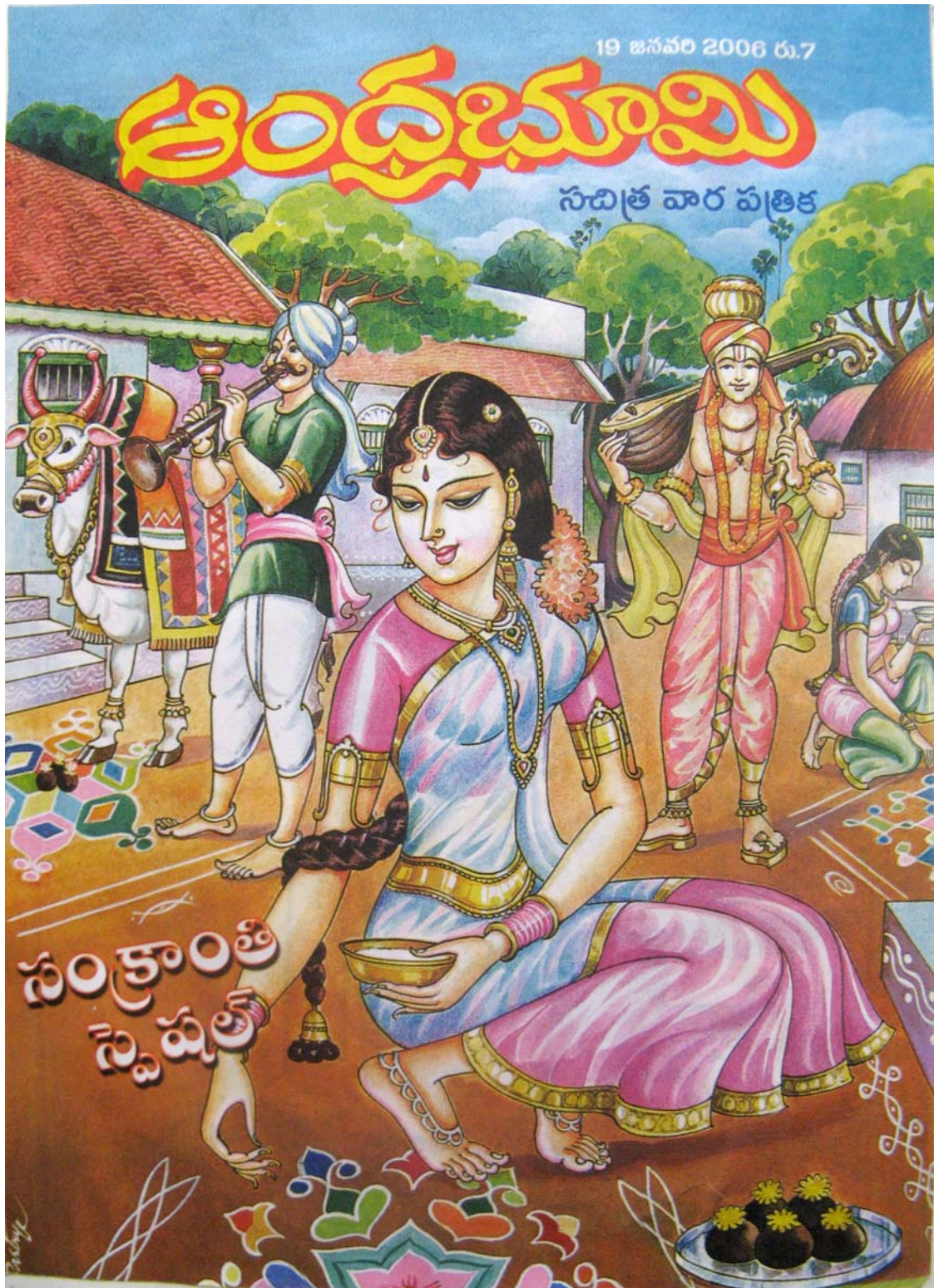
Sastry, Cover of *Andhra Bhoomi illustrated weekly magazine*, 19 January 2006, featuring women drawing *muggus*, *gobbillu*, Haridas and Gangireddu.

3) Many competition contestants make decorative *muggus*. These are perhaps the only forms from threshold *muggus* that have had some success in transitioning to the competition context. From the three categories identified in Chapter 4, neither *chukkalu* nor *geetalu muggulu* fare well in competitions. Indeed, the symbolic line drawings rarely make an appearance, except for forms such as the lotus, which lend themselves just as easily to decorativeness. Here, the addition of colour to their compositions is more assured, and has better visual results. However, I do not think it is a coincidence that this category wins fewer prizes in city centres, where there is a self-conscious emphasis on the 'messages' of each entry.

4) Although Maruteru contestants did not make these, based on media reports, it is clear that an emerging category of competition entries is the 'activist' or the 'socially engaged' *muggu*. These *muggus* are characterised by the incorporation of slogans; the cause may sometimes be political, or about gender issues, but most often, *muggu* slogans tend to be about the environment. Given that the canvas of the *muggu* is the ground, perhaps this is not surprising. It is here that I ask myself whether Nagarajan's ecological reading of the *kolams* has any bearing on competition *muggus* taking up the cause of environmentalism, or do they merely reflect global awareness of environmental perils? It is impossible to draw more definitive conclusions without extensively researching competition *muggus*. It is, however, safe to say that this category is conspicuously absent in threshold *muggus*. In other words, socially relevant *muggus* are a new category spawned exclusively by competitions.

I would say that the discourse and practice of *muggu*-making suggests that the contemporary *muggu* aesthetic is in flux. This is a tradition that is attempting to define and articulate its new identity in a transitioning society. While the recent additions of the activist and revivalist competition *muggus* may never be added on to the repertoire of threshold *muggus*, if they do, what would perhaps be useful is to consider this not as a departure from the *muggu* tradition, but merely as new categories of forms that will be subsumed in the tradition, just as the 'older but not the oldest' category of *geetalu muggulu* got added on to the existing category of *chukkalu muggulu*. In other words, with the passage of time, new categories may be seen retrospectively as constituting a continuum and not a shift. While the relatively decorative, 'design' *muggus* are today being called *kotta muggulu* by *muggu*-makers, it is quite possible that as newer

categories get added on, *kotta muggulu* will be given other names and the activist and revivalist *muggus* might be referred to as *kotta*. Instead of thinking of old or new categories of *muggu* forms as stable entities, we should consider the constantly dynamic process wherein traditions accommodate several changes and assimilate new categories of forms in what may be termed a cultural narrative. I believe it is *muggu* forms that will provide us with the first clues to its future trajectory, for form and meaning are inextricable in the *muggu* tradition. This is not to say that other factors are not important, such as the new materials and techniques of *muggu*-making, or indeed even the mode of transmission, which all provide pointers to the *muggu* tradition's future.

5.2c. Transmission, dissemination and discourse

Young girls traditionally learnt *muggus* from elder female relatives through imitation-learning, starting with simpler forms and progressively advancing to complex ones. Nagamani showed me the simple *muggus* that she had chosen to teach her granddaughter. Some children in Poduru, who heard me interview an informant, asked me
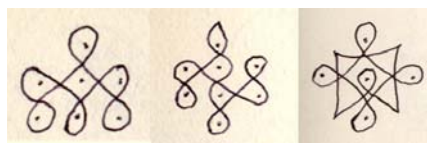
Simple, basic *muggus*. The first *muggu* was the one that Nagamani intended teaching her granddaughter.

curiously if I was learning how to make *muggus*. When I said yes, and asked them if they knew how to make *muggus*, and if so, where they had learnt them, they laughed with surprise and said, "What do you mean, where?" I asked if they had learnt them from their mothers, and they said, "Yes, of course."

Today, however, there are some changes in the transmission of *muggus* as girls and women often learn them by copying drawings from other practitioners' sketchbooks, chapbooks and newspapers. As has been suggested before, many *muggu*-makers keep sketchbooks, in which they copy drawings that have been handed down or those from newspapers and neighbours. Several informants lent me their sketchbooks, including Seetamahalakshmi who explained that she had started keeping a *muggu* sketchbook when she "started growing old, [as] I had started forgetting how to draw some of them". As we watched Sridevi place dots for a complex *chukkalu muggu*, without referring to any paper, her neighbour said that it depended on how skilled and practised one was, so it would seem that other than failing memories, sketchbooks may help less skilled practitioners by providing visual references. But for others, they can simply be

opportunities to practise, as with a young schoolgirl who showed me her sketchbook – a big textbook, half filled with school notes and half covered with *muggus* – most of them *kotta muggulu* but some *chukkalu muggulu* too. Scans of such sketchbooks are included in the fieldwork collection.

As previously mentioned, *muggu* chapbooks can be bought at stationers and bookshops and like many *muggu*-makers, I did so too; in addition, I was gifted three vintage copies by Sesharatnam and my mother. Although I found one publisher who issued copyright warnings, copyright is usually conspicuously absent in the dissemination of *muggu* forms.[213] Perhaps because of the nature of the earlier means of transmission, publications do not require copyright to publish established drawings and rarely seek any if they are publishing something new.

Several Maruteru contestants expressed surprise that I was not competing, and when I explained that I had not learnt *muggu*-drawing as a child, a young girl incredulously asked, "Do you not know even a small *muggu*?" It is partly my lack of knowledge that made me 'collect' *muggus*. When Gayatri saw my sketchbook at the end of my fieldwork, she said that if I had relied solely on chapbooks, I would have never got the *muggus* that are routinely drawn on thresholds because "you do not get that sort in books anymore; yours is a good collection. If you had not gone around sketching them directly from the *muggus*, you would not have been able to speak to the people, who will tell you what they know about *muggus*".[214] Yet, when I began fieldwork, many informants, surprised that I was 'studying' *muggus*, suggested I buy chapbooks, instead of "learning the hard way" by walking around streets and copying their *muggus*. I tried explaining that with printed books, I was not able to ascertain the direction of the lines, whereas in their *muggus* , I seemed to be able to detect directionality. Although only one woman among the five gathered around me understood my point, two informants described similar problems with 'printed' *muggus*. Madugula said, "When I look at printed books, I find it

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[213] Despite the publisher's note on copyright, I suspect that these warnings were token, and that the publisher in question was highly unlikely to follow up on any breach of copyright. This is because – although there were several 'innovated' patterns – his book had many *muggus* which are commonly acknowledged to be part of a shared repertoire.

[214] I was amused by one woman in Palakollu, who asked me whether I was planning on submitting something to the Guiness Book of World Records. When I asked what she thought I intended submitting, she said, "I do not know, but why else would you be collecting these?"

difficult to learn the designs. It is easier when I see them as *muggus*." Annapoorna explained,

> I learnt many *muggus* by looking at designs in the newspapers and magazines. My husband used to cut out the relevant pages . . . in his office . . . Then I would try and draw them but very often, I would get stuck because in these printed designs, you cannot figure out which direction your lines should go in. Then my husband would try drawing the lines. After a few attempts, he would figure it out, and say, 'Oh, it is supposed to go like this, from here to here, and I would pick it up. Nowadays, these have become even more important, these [visual reminders], because my memory is getting weak.

Several informants clearly sourced their *muggus* in newspapers because I would often see a drawing published in the paper replicated by several women on the same day.
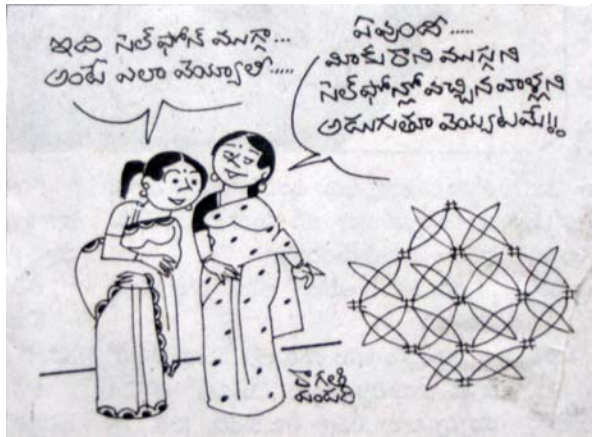
A cartoon about the changing modes of transmission of *muggus*. The blurbs read: "Is this a cell-phone *muggu*? How does one make it then?"
"It's not a big deal. For the *muggus* you don't know how to make, you simply call someone who does know, [get instructions] and make them!" Reproduced from *Swati* 2008: 72

One neighbour explained that especially "during Nelaganta, I draw designs given in the newspaper; I got this [*chukkalu*] Nelaganta from the newspaper". Indeed, *muggu* forms, information about *muggu-potis* and the tradition proliferate in the media. While Ramalingeshwar urged me to "look up the old, [defunct] *Andhra Patrikas*" for information on the tradition, Saraswathi pointed me to sources like Doordarshan Telugu (the state television channel), the *Eenadu* newspaper and *Swati* magazine,

where, "especially during the latter half of Nelaganta" I would get "not only designs but also information on customs and origins". As with *muggu-poti* advertisements and articles, newspapers and magazines that invite and publish contributions from readers, include seasonal sections to help boost sales. Several women in Palakollu told me that particularly during Dhanurmasam, they ensure that they buy newspapers for the *muggu* 'designs' they publish. I have cuttings of both innovations and established *muggus*. While *muggu* forms are regurgitated in myriad contexts today, it is feared that the tradition's purposes and meanings risk getting lost. So during Dhanurmasam, television channels, magazines and newspapers revive the tradition by disseminating information

about Sankranti and the floor-drawing tradition, including origin myths and even cartoons. I would suggest that the fact that cartoons make fun of women's preoccupation and interest in *muggus* points to the popularity of *muggu*-drawing. Similarly, the use of phrases like 'O Lachcha Gummadi' (*Eenadu* 2008e), borrowed from one of the most famous songs on the *muggu* tradition, taken from the film *Muthyala Muggu* (pearls *muggu*), indicates that *muggus* are a part of Andhra's popular culture. Samples of such materials, including a short story titled *Sankranti Muggu* published in an illustrated magazine, are part of the fieldwork collection.

Newspaper reports about *muggu-poti* outcomes usually repeat information about the organisers and sponsors, describe the magnitude of the contest, mention the dignitaries present and then list the winning entries, often with quotes from the winners, such as those cited in the previous section. Such reports are normally illustrated with a long-shot of the contest and the winning entries, sometimes a photograph of a winner receiving her prize from a dignitary. However, as I have suggested in previous

Jayadev, A cartoon making fun of the over-enthusiasm of a woman making *muggus*, despite other matters requiring her urgent attention. Reproduced from *Swati* 2008: 56

sections, while newspaper reports seem to stress revivalism, with *muggu*-making potentially becoming a symbol of traditional Andhra culture, discourse at *muggu-potis* is driven by concerns about what constitutes an authentic *muggu*, and by criteria of aesthetic evaluation.

Given the lively discourse about the *muggu* tradition among my informants and in the media, one cannot but wonder why traditions like *muggu*-drawing have held little interest for art theorists and historians. As Mitter has suggested, this is partly because traditions such as these – ephemeral, made by women and largely for the domestic sphere – are deemed to be the preserve of anthropologists. In the next chapter, I argue how such oversights are a result of long-standing hierarchies in Indian arts.

CHAPTER 6: TRADITIONAL AND METROPOLITAN ARTS:
AN ART-HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

In the past century, there has been a recurring debate in contemporary Indian arts about the dichotomy between metropolitan and non-metropolitan arts. Metropolitan art is art that is produced in city and town centres and displayed in cultural institutions. 'Non-metropolitan arts' – called 'traditional arts' in this study – is an umbrella term for arts generally prefixed by the terms 'folk', 'tribal', 'sacred', 'religious' or 'ritual' and displayed in non-institutional contexts. Despite clear distinctions among the second group, the umbrella term becomes appropriate because – as we will see below – they are collectively deemed inferior to metropolitan arts, by metropolitan critics and artists. Identifying theoretical frameworks within which previous debates have taken place, this chapter draws on art-historical and critical writing to support my assertion that there exists a clear hierarchy in Indian arts, which I suggest pushes practices like *muggu*-drawing to the margins of contemporary Indian arts discourse.

6.1. DICHOTOMIES AND HIERARCHIES

There is a conspicuous absence of representation of traditional arts in contemporary Indian arts discourse, with the few available discussions being pigeonholed in special issues. Moreover, such theme issues carry art-historical debates that remain consistently broad and generalised, featuring no prominent critiques of individual traditional artists, for example, as in *Art India's* issue *Art and Craft: Bridging the Great Divide* (1999).

It is of course problematic to presume that any group of people require representation, be they the colonized in colonial administrations, women in chauvinistic societies, adherents to oral traditions in predominantly literate worlds or ephemeral art practitioners in increasingly consumerist art markets. After all, traditional artists have their own thoughts about encountering metropolitan artists and expressing contemporary experiences. Yet, the issue of representation persistently confronts theorists arguing against valorised hierarchies, threatening to reinforce the very myths they are attempting to debunk. I venture to clarify therefore that my wish to engage in this discussion is not evangelical. It is catalysed by the recognition that if one tackled the prejudices against

traditional arts, metropolitan Indian art would undoubtedly be enriched and perhaps even be liberated from its stronghold of elitism.

Theorists like Ananda Coomaraswamy (b.1877 d.1947, see 1956a, 1985 and 1989), Jagadish Swaminathan (b.1928 d.1994, see 1987 and 1995), Jyotindra Jain (b.1943, see 1984, 1998, 2000 and 2002) Nancy Adajania (b.1971, see 1999) and Gulammohammad Sheikh (b.1937, see 1998) have each in their turn highlighted the fact that the prejudice against tribal, folk and ritual arts marginalises Indian traditional artists and craftspeople. In contemporary Indian arts discourse, 'crafts' and 'traditional arts' are frequently used as synonyms, the pejorative terms applied to one being indiscriminately applied to the other. These terms tend to be used interchangeably because the metropolitan-traditional arts dichotomy has precedents that are comparable. The theorists cited here have discussed binaries that differ subtly, and while these differences will be explained shortly, it may be useful to identify the theoretical frameworks within which their debates have been situated.

Coomaraswamy's writing tends to be regarded as motivated by nationalist sentiments against the colonial administration, distorted by an imagined ideal, pre-colonial past. Nevertheless, his distinction between *marga* (highway) and *desi* (byway) art helps to undermine the myth that folk and tribal art is created by racially different peoples or by peoples from a given social stratum. According to him, "[This] is not necessarily a distinction of aristocratic and cultivated from folk and primitive art, but one of sacred and traditional from profane and sentimental art" (1956a: 135-136).[215] This argument is cited as an important contribution to the advocacy of traditional arts. Although Coomaraswamy's writing does reflect the nationalism that coloured much writing in the early 1900s, it would be a mistake to disregard his work – as Jain does. I situate his work not just within a colonialist discourse, but more broadly within the arts and crafts binary that has been linked to industrialisation in the West. I would suggest that his work remains relevant because of his critique of individualism and its effect on traditional arts, which he regarded as expressing the governing ideology of a collective society. He also felt that the division of modern life into activities of labour and leisure meant that modern

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[215] In any case, "scientific biology no longer accepts the fact of the continued existence of a pure race, since the inter-mixture of peoples throughout history has tended to eliminate racial purity" (Thapar 2002: 25).

art had "become abstracted from the general activity of making things for human use – whether material or spiritual" (Coomaraswamy 1956a: 62-63).

While Coomaraswamy advocated traditional arts in general, including the classical arts, Swaminathan's work on tribal arts reveals a similarly derogatory attitude to be prevalent in the perception of tribal artists. As he recounts, "at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Simla … [the speakers concluded that] as all tribal art was based on superstition, to attach any abiding importance to it is to perpetuate superstition" (in Tully 1992: 271). Swaminathan's research was often ethnographic and his arguments aligned with colonialist discourses. Believing that Indian metropolitan artists were criminally subservient to the analytic tradition of the West, he avers with trenchant sarcasm,

> . . . the fact that medieval Indian painting treated painting-space as two-dimensional was interpreted by the ignorant early English as a lack of aesthetic propensity in the Indians. Thus in their misbegotten magnanimity they taught our city-bred artists the glories of English Academic realism. (1995: 22)

According to him, even well-meaning efforts to return Indian artists to their traditions were misguided because this "was done without an understanding of the spatial concepts working in traditional painting; the superficial allegorical aspect was borrowed with blind chauvinism, and rendered with an anaemic effeminacy" (1995: 22).[216] The solution he offered to the impasse he perceived was to study the folk and tribal arts. Bharat Bhavan, a multi-arts campus in Bhopal, was co-founded by Swaminathan partially as a locus to initiate such changes. However, his efforts to place metropolitan and tribal artists on an equal platform in Bharat Bhavan's Roopankar Museum of Arts were not entirely successful. Although they are located on the same campus – undoubtedly a pioneering attempt, eventually, Roopankar exclusively housed tribal art while a separate gallery in Bharat Bhavan displayed metropolitan work.

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[216] Shahane attributes the strident reaction against the Calcutta School, especially from the Progressives and Group 1890 – the latter founded by Swaminathan – evidenced in Swaminathan's trenchant sarcasm when he refers to 'anaemic effeminacy,' to the novelty of sentiment in the works of Bengal masters like Gagendranath Tagore. Sentiment is a quality hitherto lacking, according to Shahane, in traditional visual art in India – unlike in the performance arts, which were developed along the lines of the Natyashastra. While the Natyashastra recommends *bhava*, or feeling, the visual arts treatises concentrate on technique and form, rather than on any philosophy like the *rasas* – nine emotions laid down in performance arts canons as necessary components of all good art (Shahane 2003: 39).

Jangarh Singh Shyam, Untitled, Acrylic on Canvas, Collection: Roopankar Museum of Tribal Arts, Bhopal. Reproduced courtesy Harchandan Singh Bhatty.

Writing on tribal art more than a decade after Swaminathan, Jain recalls several modern Indian artists accusing him 'of subscribing to an orientalist position of the glorification of ethnicity.'[217]

> The tribal is always [perceived as] ethnic. . . . Perhaps it is for this reason that contemporary folk and tribal artists have regularly been excluded from India's national art shows. . . . When some of the global art shows, such as *Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris . . . included works of folk and tribal artists, several Indian moderns opposed the move. (2001: 23)

Notwithstanding accusations of glorifying ethnicity, Jain's research on Bengal *patua* (scroll) artists, *kantha* women embroiderers and tribal artists is unapologetically art-historical. Rather than regarding traditional artists as somehow impervious to mainstream art-historical developments, which metropolitan artists experienced during and after colonialism, Jain considers the influence of orientalist and nationalist discourses on these traditional arts, including the influence of academic realism. Despite himself however, he ends up pitting tradition against innovation, painstakingly pointing out the inventive qualities of the traditional arts he researches. Contrasting them against what he perceives as less innovative arts, he uses phrases such as:

> . . . in most parts of rural India comparatively closed and repetitive artistic conventions had brought about a certain degree of stagnancy and decadence in pictorial expression. . . . folk artists . . . are busy mechanically churning out the umpteenth version of their past artistic conventions. . . .
> Unlike the embroideries of other regions . . . which remained repetitive and utility-based . . . [the Bengali *kantha* embroiderers] did not repeat the past in one more hackneyed reproduction but forged a fresh new expression. (2002: 36-37, 41)

The fact that Jain, one of the foremost champions of traditional arts, frequently uses the word 'repetitive' is telling. Writing as recently as 1999, former *Art India* editor Adajania recalled the late eminent artist Prabhakar Barwe's response when she asked him about the nature of his collaboration with the craftspeople at the Weavers' Service Centre in Mumbai.[218]

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[217] Jyotindra Jain was formerly the director of the Crafts Museum in Delhi, after which he became the first Dean of the Jawaharlal Nehru University's School of Arts and Aesthetics. A vocal advocate of the tribal and folk arts, he is currently a Member Secretary at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Delhi.
[218] *Art India* is the premier contemporary arts journal in India, and arguably the only serious art journal dedicated to contemporary art. Other journals tend to be pan-Asian in scope, or like *ArtTimes*, fold up due to lack of support. *Art & Deal* and *Marg* have been the only other art journals, with the former having a very limited distribution. A new journal (two issues old) has been founded recently in Delhi, called *Take on Art*. The Weaver's Service Centre in Mumbai often invited prominent artists to 'collaborate' with traditional artists.

. . . 'there is a fundamental difference between the arts and the crafts. On principle, the crafts are concerned with surface. Their basic function is decoration, with a predominant stress on design. When the crafts achieve their maximum skill, they can aspire to the level of art'. (1999: 34)

As Adajania points out, Barwe's opinion may surprise those who question the hierarchy of 'high' and 'low' art, but

it is a view held by many metropolitan artists . . . [who] privileged by their training and the environment in which they operate, customarily believe that the crafts are decorative, dead-end forms. Change is considered the prerogative of the 'contemporary' artist. . . . Only recently have the two kinds of artists been able to hold a dialogue, however unequal and haphazard it may be; far more often, the possibility of collaboration has withered away in the glare of condescension (1999: 34).

As Adajania traces the history of the divide, reiterating that the primacy of metropolitan arts was initially founded on false premises, she briefly touches upon the 1990s debate on the contested notion of contemporaneity – "with the false dichotomy of tradition versus innovation at its core" (1999: 37). Adajania's discussion is nonetheless problematic in that she does not define what she means by 'founded'. Does she allude to a definitive moment when Indian modernism was born or does she refer to a rupture for which the colonial administration is generally held culpable?[219]

It is important here to take a little detour to explain Adajania's omission, which is possibly justified if one considers the widespread conviction by many historians and cultural theorists that colonialism caused ruptures in almost all spheres of Indian life. Mitter believes that one of the most powerful manifestations of the impact of westernization was on artistic taste. He states,

A close scrutiny of Indian colonial art reveals the complexity of the clash of values of British colonial rulers and those of the indigenous population. . . . Victorian academic art and the idea of artistic progress grew deep and firm roots in India during the late nineteenth century . . . In 1851 the pace [of the infiltration of Western taste] suddenly quickened because of changes that were taking place within British imperial ideology. The Victorian rulers announced their grand design of improving Indian artistic taste as part of a westernisation programme that centred on English as a medium of instruction. . . . While Indian miniature paintings, it was argued, were

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As with J. Swaminathan's efforts in the Roopankar Museum in Bharat Bhavan, Bhopal, efforts to start a dialogue between metropolitan and traditional artists have been unsuccessful thus far.
[219] See Kapur 2000 and Dalmia 2002.

> "pretty", they were merely decorative, lacking the high moral content of Victorian art, particularly history painting. As Lord Napier, Governor of Madras asserted, Indian artists had the requisite skill, all they needed was a training in academic naturalism. (1997: 42)[220]

As Mitter points out, it was with such training in mind that the Imperialists founded Western model art schools in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, which "wrought profound changes in artistic practice and production in India. Originally founded to train artisans, they became centres for the dissemination of European fine arts" (1997: 42). Mitter goes on to suggest that one of these profound changes was an introduced distinction between artisans and artists. Although the popularly held view lays the blame for these dichotomies squarely at the colonialists' door, Mitter admits the difficulties of considering the interactions between the colonized and the colonizers: "A general theory of imperial hegemony does not fully explain the hold of the western canon on the colonized; nor does it bring out the complex motivations behind individual artistic choices and the variegated responses of the colonized to western art" (1997: 42).[221]

Similarly, Shahane contends that the divide between fine and decorative arts predates colonisation. He believes it started with the asceticism of high Brahminism and Jainism and was further entrenched first by Victorian morality, then Imperialism, and lastly by Gandhian and Marxist philosophies (2003: 36-37). Due to insufficient documentation and widely differing interpretations of any material available on pre-colonial India, it is difficult to support any statement about pre-colonial Indian arts without relying on hypothesis to a certain degree.[222] I have assumed for the purpose of this study, that colonisation did cause ruptures. After all, colonialism operated – at least partially – on the principle of racism and "One of the ways in which racism works is by distorting, discrediting and dismissing the past . . . of the peoples, societies and cultures it subjugates" (Jordan and

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[220] Also see Mitter's *Much Maligned Monsters* (1992), which traces the development of European reactions to Indian art.

[221] Mohanti, whose work is shaped by the art of his village in Orissa, alluded to the difficulties of decolonisation: "When I went to JJ School of Arts [Mumbai, between 1955 and 1960] to study architecture . . . I was meant to feel that everything which came from the village was not art. . . . It was not accepted as modern. It was called folk, village and rural . . . done by the so-called illiterate, ignorant villagers. . . . What was called for was Western architecture. . . . We were *asked* to copy the Greek sculptures, Greek designs, Greek art . . . So everything Western was considered modern. . . . *Better* than Indian. [Generations that followed Independence, even those who came immediately after it would find it difficult to be critical of the Western influences] because their *identity* depends on the richness of Western culture [and] Western education" (2008, see Appendix 3 for full transcript).

[222] As Zimmer states, "Since . . . transmission has been mainly oral, there is left to us only an imperfect record of the long and rich development; certain periods, long and fruitful, are barely documented; much has been irretrievably lost." (1963: 11)

Weedon 1995: 297).

In the visual arts, rupture took the form of an overthrow of the traditional artistic system. Exploring the tangled beginnings of the modern art movement in India, Tagore argues that traditional Indian art already possessed the abstract qualities that Western modernism was exulting in and borrowing; in a circuitous process, Indian artists had to relearn the abstraction that had been eroded with the introduction of British academic realism (1997: 32).

While I have considered that colonisation caused ruptures and problems in all spheres of Indian life, including in art, I have at the same time been wary of letting this belief colour my perceptions unduly. I have believed neither in the romantic concept of the glorious Indian past nor in the Imperialists' contemptuous view of an apparently anarchic Indian past. Thapar, who has consistently warned against both the exaggerated eulogies of pre-colonial India as well as the distorted criticisms, has pointed out that the latter position is a stereotype "related to the needs of imperialism, for economic imperialism had its counterpart in cultural domination" and the former – also a stereotype – "arose in contrast, from Indian national sentiments opposed to the nature of imperial rule, and seeking justification in the reading of the past" (2002: 4).[223] Rather than indulging in what Indians colloquially call colonial-bashing, I have chosen to focus on contemporary practices. I have, however, taken it as a given that dichotomies in Indian art are symptomatic of broadly interlinked socio-political and cultural issues – past and present.

The scope of this study does not allow me to pursue these questions any further. It is sufficient here to say that Adajania believed that Jain's contributions to the debate on contemporaneity discredited the arts and crafts binary, demonstrating "that tradition and change are not opposites, but intertwined elements in the same process of growth" (1999: 37). However, Jain's impassioned arguments – though well-researched – are not convincing in this respect, as they frequently contrast words like 'repeat,' 'closed,' 'hackneyed,' 'stagnancy' and 'decadence' against terms like 'fresh,' 'innovative' and

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[223] Due to the forces of Hindutva, it is all the more important today to understand why these stereotypes developed. In any case, as Mitter and others have pointed out, most rightwing nationalist viewpoints tend to emphasise Hindu revivalism, marginalising minorities like the Muslims and thus encouraging divisive politics. To point out only one documented instance that indicates the successful assimilation of Mughal culture, one only has to look at the art commissions and integrative policies of Akbar's court, which aimed at creating a dialogue between his Hindu subjects and the Islamic conquerors.

'change.'

There are several issues at stake here. The first is that although grouping ritual, folk and tribal arts serves the purpose of advocating them more conveniently due to metropolitan arts' perceived primacy over all of them, it would ultimately be more useful to research their distinct histories, developments and purposes. There are at least two precedent dichotomies that one can compare with the metropolitan-traditional arts dichotomy – the arts and crafts binary and the fine and decorative arts binary. At the risk of inserting something here that the scope of this thesis will not allow me to develop further, I would suggest that while the arts and crafts divide relates to industrialisation, the fine and decorative arts debate perhaps developed – if indirectly – from the Enlightenment. If Shahane is correct, the role that the Enlightenment played in encouraging conceptualism is comparable to intellectual movements in Hinduism and Jainism which led to what Shahane refers to as high asceticism. It is at least evident that the trend of conceptualism challenges the decorative and the sensual.[224]

Speaking of the valorisation of arts, Barringer and Flynn refreshingly refer to *multiple* Indian traditions, not explicitly to an arts and crafts binary.

> The designations 'fine' and 'decorative' arts, which imply a hierarchy of value, prove particularly inappropriate when applied to the products of cultures where such a distinction is meaningless (such as the *multiple* artistic traditions of India). (1998: 3-4)

Non-metropolitan Indian arts are inevitably prefixed with qualifying adjectives, while it appears that 'art' sans prefixes denotes metropolitan arts exclusively, implying their ascendancy. The issue however, is not that distinct adjectives are used to qualify undeniably distinct practices; what is jarring is that arts prefixed by 'ritual,' 'folk' and 'tribal' are more often used as *synonyms* of craft; this usage ignores their significant distinctions. A 'handicraft' emporium in India is often situated as the final stop in coach-conveyor belts, particularly in cities that have proved to be tourist honey-pots. I must clarify that tribal, folk and ritual arts are distinct traditions with distinct purposes, idioms and trajectories – bearing little resemblance to the market-driven products churned out

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[224] See Shahane (2003) for the divide between the fine and decorative arts. The fact that many of the other authors cited in this study were referred to in a special issue of *Art India* titled *Art and Craft: Bridging the Great Divide* is itself indicative of my point about craft being used as a synonym of tribal, ritual and folk art. See Elwin's and Swaminathan's work for more on tribal art, Mode and Chandra (1985) for folk arts, and Mookerjee (1985) for ritual art.

for tourist emporia. There is however one factor that links these three kinds of arts, which explains why metropolitan arts are deemed superior to them. Apart from the trends of conceptualism and new media, which, I must acknowledge, play a significant role in this divide, the strongest prejudice that links these three arts is the belief that they are repetitive. While Bharucha and Mitter are correct in pointing out that ephemerality is one factor that marginalises traditional art, I believe that the perception that traditional arts are 'repetitive' causes considerable disparagement. In addition to this misconception, I believe that debates about the traditional-metropolitan art divide need to factor in the influence of the art market. For many traditional arts, Coomaraswamy's above-mentioned division of areas of life into activities of leisure and labour has meant a transition fraught with both challenges and possibilities. Sheikh explains the complex factors that lead to potential repetitiveness when traditional artists attempt to operate within the mainstream art market.

> Since making pictures . . . on walls of houses is a community act in most tribal societies, it is conducted largely by non-professionals including the residents themselves. The practice does not involve monetary transactions between the 'maker' and the 'user,' the two often being the same. Rewards, if any, may be in kind or in acknowledgment of individual skills by the clan. How would such works, removed from the site of their genesis, function when put for sale as commodities for anonymous buyers in a city art gallery? In such a set up, it is customary and part of a familiar polemic to pair 'folk' and 'tribal' with 'craft' while 'modern' and 'contemporary' remain in the category of 'art.' One, viewed as ritualistic and convention-bound is generally regarded as part of a collective tradition prone to repetition, rigid formulas and resistance to change. The other perceived as change-oriented is termed 'free,' 'dynamic,' 'individualistic,' with an accent on originality: a self-image which is part of a historical consciousness whereas the perception of the other is ahistorical and timeless. (1998: 18)

Ironically, this dichotomy is paralleled by another equally uncomfortable one between Indian metropolitan and international artists, "the uneasy relationship between the western universal canon . . . and the precolonial tastes that were lost with the spread of British rule" (Mitter 1997: 42). Many others have written on the complexities involved in dealing with this postcolonial legacy, which Mitter believes metropolitan Indians take for granted. For example, in an article where she questions to what extent classical canons and images have a place in contemporary Indian art and whether the two kinds of modernisms – Indian and western – are at all reconcilable, Sinha (1999) asserts that in the rush to align ourselves with Western modernism, a general area of evasion is Indian aesthetics. The Singh Twins feel that there is a "peculiar definition of what art is and

means that many modernist artists follow. A lot of modern art in India is derivative. . . . Instead of looking at their own traditions, many of these artists have looked at the West" (Sardesai 2003: 48). Similarly, Ela Menon speaks of how Indian artists misguidedly try to ape the West:

> In the West, . . . [the] basic human need for the visceral . . . has been sanitised out of their lives and is therefore reflected in their art. Whether it's a birth or a death, they don't witness it at all. You have Damien Hirst's rotting carcasses – a general engagement with horror because there's no horror in their lives. This was very well pointed out by Prafulla Mohanti in an east-west conference in Bombay. Beauty became a dirty word in the West. . . . We are painting in *this* milieu. We don't need the entertainment of the grotesque as they do. We are living with it and subsuming our perception of it, otherwise we wouldn't *exist*. Because the horror is all around us, Indian art has to be somewhat escapist [like Indian films are to a large extent]. The great mistake that a lot of us in India are making is trying to keep up with the West without really understanding the genesis of that art. The genesis of our work has to lie with us, whatever the influences. (2003: 68)[225]

As Sinha points out, these questions have "involved a century of debate centred on the notion of Indianness and its innumerable, unquantifiable permutations and combinations" (1999: 80). For example, Sabavala has in the past been accused of being too Western, due to his training in Europe's academies, where he was grounded in the tradition of realism. Yet, he speaks of how he wants his paintings to combine the mind, the spirit, emotion and a body; in other words, the physical, the vital, the mental and the spiritual. This calls to mind Kaur's explanation of the Indian notion of *man*, which dissolves the mind-body dualism and simultaneously evokes emotion, the mind, the spirit and the senses. It is thus ironic that Sabavala's

Jehangir Sabavala, *The Guiding Light*, Oil on Canvas, 2004. Reproduced courtesy the artist.

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[225] Other than such engagement with horror, there are also instances where the grotesque is used as an interventionist tool to question dominant aesthetic values. It may even be argued that the appreciation of modern art is preoccupied more with concept than with formal beauty. It would thus be problematic to exclusively employ aesthetics in the study of contemporary art. Any attempt to define art thus needs to focus on the dynamism of artistic, rather than just aesthetic values.

authenticity as an Indian painter is called into question.[226]

Dalmia avers,

> It has often been contended that art in India is both hybrid and imitative. That would be a contradiction in terms, for modernism as it took root in the West had avowed its affiliation to universalism and internationalism. Then again when artists like Picasso borrowed from African sculpture or Matisse from Persian miniatures it was to lead to 'high modernism.' In a similar vein, the borrowing of Picasso's inventions by Ramkinker Baij, or F.N. Souza were considered derivative art. (2002: 75)

The hierarchies implied in both national and international arts discourses may result partially from a lack of transparency in these arts' socio-political and economic contexts. Others before me have noted the frequent use of terms like 'repetition,' 'imitation,' 'derivation' and 'appropriation' in Indian arts discourse, but there remains considerable ambiguity in these discussions because they have only linked these semantics to orientalist, nationalist and postcolonial discourses. To cut through the opacity that befuddles our conception of what constitutes innovativeness in art, I propose to modify and extend previous writers' exercises by linking the semantics of these four terms to the hegemony of the art market.

Implicit in our appreciation of art is our consideration of its originality: to what extent is the artwork we are viewing 'original'? In the art market, the word 'original' is countered by the terms 'fake,' 'forgery,' 'copy' or 'imitation.' The distinction between straightforward originals and forgeries however, is quite clear-cut. I am more interested in exploring nuanced terms often used as synonyms of 'imitation' by writers attempting to either affirm or debunk the notion that non-metropolitan Indian arts lack originality. Needless to say, their affirmations feed into the market. Two assumptions, I believe, contribute to the notion that traditional arts lack innovativeness. The first is to assume that these arts are invariably 'repetitive,' their practitioners merely 'imitating' what their predecessors did. The second possibly stems from the different learning methods adopted by metropolitan and traditional artists. While the latter tend to learn by imitation-experience or apprenticeship, the former usually learn through formal study and theory. I focus now on

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[226] ". . . I am the barometer [of ethnicity]. . . . they say, 'Who is this fellow? The foreigner Indian?' Husain is a very strong pro-ethnic example. Raza going on and on about the *bindu* abroad. He lives there yet the *bindu* is his constant motif." (Sabavala 2007)

the former misconception since the literature cited in this section only substantiates the presumption that traditional arts are repetitive.

It is by exploring the semantics of contemporary Indian arts discourse that the following section challenges our underlying conceptions of what constitutes originality or innovativeness in visual art. Although I refer to various Indian arts, I use specific examples from my research on the *muggus*. To provide a point of comparison and illustrate my argument that it would ultimately be better to study ritual, folk and tribal arts separately, I also use my primary MA research on Pardhan-Gond art – a tribal art movement in Madhya Pradesh, central India. In recent years, Pardhan-Gond art has come to be known as Jangarh Kalam, after the founder of the movement, Jangarh Singh Shyam.[227] These case studies hint at the distinctions among 'traditional' arts. Lastly, in discussing the valuation of Indian arts, I pay particular attention to their socio-economic contexts and the art market's pervasive influence on this valuation.

6.2. A SEMANTIC DISCUSSION OF TERMS USED AS SYNONYMS OF IMITATION

Although the meanings connoted by the terms 'repetition,' 'imitation,' 'derivation' and 'appropriation' share some synergies, it is problematic that they are often used synonymously. While the differences between the following definitions and etymologies will soon be clear, their commonality may seem less so. I would suggest that they all relate to our concept of the 'original,' which means among other things, 'a point from which something develops,' 'first or earliest,' 'new, not copied or based on something else,' 'first version, from which others are copied.'

From the Latin, or the French '*répéter*,' meaning 'to seek' or 'to aim at,' the verb 'repeat' means 'to do again,' while the adjective 'repetitive' means 'full of repetition.' From the Latin '*īmitāre*' meaning 'to copy' and relating to the word 'image,' the verb 'imitate' means 'to take as a model,' while the noun 'imitation' means 'copy of an original.' From the Latin, or the French '*dériver*,' from 'rive' meaning a 'brook' or 'stream,' the verb 'derive' means 'to take or develop (from)' while the adjective 'derivative' means 'based on other sources, not original,' and 'derivation' can mean 'origination' (from river source), or 'deviation into a channel.' From the Latin, '*proprius*,' meaning 'own,' the verb

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[227] I believe the term Jangarh Kalam was first used by Vivek Tembe and Udayan Vajpai about a decade ago. I use it with Vajpai's permission.

'appropriate' means 'to take for oneself, to put aside for a particular purpose' while the noun 'appropriation' means 'the act of putting aside something for a particular purpose.' This would suggest in the context of art, an element of taking something for oneself to make it one's own. This further indicates a level of strength or power, in that it suggests being able to turn something to one's advantage. In art, this would presumably be achieved by choosing elements of an 'original' and assimilating it into a renewed interpretation of the original.

To illustrate how the above terms have been misguidedly applied to traditional artists in a pejorative manner, I have, as previously stated, chosen two specific examples – Jangarh Kalam artists and *muggu*-makers and I shall now briefly introduce Jangarh Kalam to place it in context. In the 1980s, during his tenure as director of the Roopankar Museum of Art, Swaminathan – himself an artist – was keen to support Madhya Pradesh's folk and tribal artists, and organised collection drives in a concerted bid to salvage folk and tribal artworks. Jangarh Singh Shyam – a Pardhan-Gond – was discovered during one of these drives by a team of urban artists.[228] Struck by Jangarh's murals, Swaminathan's recruits invited him to Bhopal. Jangarh's formal style is distinctive for his highly developed sense of colour and the profusion of dots rendering his works iridescent. Moreover, Jangarh departed from Pardhan tradition by drawing flora and fauna and anthropomorphic figures, conceiving the visual form of tribal deities Pardhans did not – at the time – depict figuratively. As he settled in the city, Jangarh invited members of his extended family to Bhopal to profit from his relative economic prosperity. Often beginning as his apprentices – mixing acrylics they had not previously used, filling in outlines and placing dots on Jangarh's larger works – many relatives became professional artists, each appropriating recognisable elements of his style yet developing their own distinctive characteristics. With approximately 30 professional Pardhan artists, Jangarh Kalam has become an art movement as identifiable as the Impressionists – remarkable, as this is a tribal tradition founded in a city, at a time when the general Postmodern diffusion means a marked decrease of art movements across the world.

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[228] The Pardhan-Gonds were traditionally minstrels and genealogists to their parent tribe, the central Indian Gonds, and as such do not have a strong history in visual art, unlike other tribes like Warlis, Saoras and Pithoras.

Jangarh Singh Shyam, Untitled, Acrylic on Canvas, Collection: Crafts Museum, Delhi. Reproduced courtesy PRO, Crafts Museum.

Bhajju Shyam, *How the World Began*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2005. Reproduced courtesy the artist. This is an interpretation of a Gond origin myth. Although many of Bhajju's works portray natural and social scenes, like Durgabai – possibly the most prolific Pardhan-Gond narrative painter – he also interprets Gond tales.

Durgabai Vyam, *Baasin Kanhiya*, Acrylic on Canvas, 2005. Reproduced courtesy the artist. I have seen three other interpretations of this Gond tale by Durgabai, which are recognisably interpretations of the same tale, if one knows the narrative, but which – from the point of view of visuals – are composed and presented very differently.

So while the *muggu* tradition dates back at least several centuries, Jangarh Kalam is a nascent movement. Most Jangarh Kalam artists are based in Bhopal, their works are made for the urban market and are displayed in galleries and museums, so one may argue that Jangarh Kalam is, in fact, a metropolitan art. Although Jangarh Kalam is only about 25-30 years old, the tribal lore it draws inspiration from, is much older, which is why some people prefer to call it Pardhan-Gond art. Although I have chosen to call it Jangarh Kalam in acknowledgement of the seminal role Jangarh played in founding the movement, in many respects, Jangarh Kalam qualifies as a traditional art because it draws from a collective memory of myths and tales. As Swaminathan states,

> Jangadh is no ordinary artist, painting in any traditional manner or style. He is not just an icon maker. Inventive and innovative, he opens up vistas which perhaps have no parallel in Pardhan or Gond art. There is no tradition among the Gond and the Pardhan of portraying their deities in painting. While simple geometric *chowk* are drawn for the various deities on various occasions, the deities themselves are not graphically represented. . . . Jangadh displays an extraordinary versatility in giving the deities their physical form . . . [giving them] individual characteristics and pictorial visages. These can in no sense be said to have originated from calendar portrayals of Hindu deities found in . . . [the] market place . . . Though immediate referents are not available, the conclusion seems inevitable that they are drawn from the deep recesses of Adivasi memory. (1987: 47)[229]

It is this paradox exemplified by Jangarh Kalam – simultaneously collective and individual, modern and traditional – that makes it so intriguing. Note that I have also chosen to qualify Jangarh Kalam as a traditional art because I believe it is marginalised by the metropolitan art world. As defined above, the terms 'repetition,' 'imitation,' 'derivation' and 'appropriation' may all be applied to traditional arts as well as to metropolitan arts. Traditional arts can be repetitive; after all, this is a key characteristic of ritual art – the ritual artist repeats the artistic action every day or every season.

> Ritual art is a . . . way towards spiritual identity . . . a state in which we can realise our oneness with the universe. . . . Traditionally, Indian ritual art . . . draws the maker or viewer into a relationship. It is an experience, daily repeated, which leads towards integration, and to an expansion of consciousness. . . . [Assembling and disposing the various objects of our awareness in a pattern of offering, the object of ritual art is] to entrap and concentrate power for the benefit of celebrant and community. (Mookerjee 1985: 9-10)

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[229] 'Adivasi' means 'tribal' and is the indigenous term used in India; it literally translates to 'first' or 'original inhabitant'.

Read in this context, the etymological meanings of 'repeat' – 'seeking' or 'aiming at' – have particular relevance; a ritual act, daily repeated, 'seeks' integration or fulfilment. An Andhra woman thus draws a daily *muggu* in a renewed effort to protect her home. Metropolitan arts are also repetitive, albeit differently. When an artist like Vaikuntham paints the same subject – with little variation – over and over again, he is repeating himself. As a gallery owner representing him believes, Vaikuntham churned out dozens of works in hackneyed fashion, despite his desire to experiment, because his purchasing audience expected paintings of swarthy southern women wearing brilliantly coloured garments. It is clear that several metropolitan artists develop this problem. As Ela Menon opined, "It is easy for an artist to find and continue with a certain genre that is successful. Some of our best artists have fallen into that trap, to go on producing that which they are best at" (2003: 67). Tewari stated something similar, "When you are preoccupied with making money, you cannot do something else. You are afraid to experiment. There is a fear that is bred out of success. That is the pitfall" (2003: 26).[230] It is intriguing that in the face of obvious repetition by many metropolitans, the belief that all metropolitan artists are collectively more innovative than all tribal or ritual artists persists, and the accusation of 'repetitive' is not generally levelled against metropolitans. Indeed, versatile metropolitans are singled out for distinction, like K.G. Subramanyan, who is admired for his willingness to learn new media or adopt an idiom in his efforts to develop a fresh visual language. If such versatility among metropolitans is thus admired, can one assume that innovativeness cannot indiscriminately be credited to metropolitan artists? Sundaram avers, "There is the notion that an artist has a stamp, an artistic signature. That is a sort of conditioning that we have acquired" (2003a: 86). Needless to say, artists' 'signature' plays a significant role in their survival in a competitive market, making them reluctant to risk abandoning an established signature that translates to economic security. Note though that with some exceptions, metropolitan and non-metropolitan artists' causes for repetition differ considerably. Indeed, in her complementary works *Confessions* (an installation) and *Black Candy* (a series of drawings), Mithu Sen (2011) subverts her purchasing audience's expectation that she should produce something beautiful, by deliberately playing on the notion of appropriation and repetition. Here, she tries to highlight her repetitiveness to her viewers, through the medium of a confession box that plays out a distorted, looped

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[230] This is not to say that repetition among metropolitans always relates to financial insecurity or the artistic signature; it may well be the consequence of a genuine aesthetic quest, but this tends to be rare.

recording which includes the phrase, "I seduce and cheat my viewer." At the same time, she caters to their expectations by accompanying the sound-piece with a series of beautiful, sensual drawings.[231]

While the ritual artist repeats his or her artistic act, he or she also imitates what the community's predecessors did. This is not lack of innovation, nor is it imitation as understood in the metropolitans' copyright-conscious market; this is a purposeful repetition of motifs in a traditional vernacular. If a woman in Andhra draws a pot overflowing with milk, or sugar cane and wheat sheaves on Bhogi day, it is not because she is incapable of conceiving a form she has not previously seen nor because she cannot draw a form she imagines. It is because she draws an overflowing pot as a symbol of abundance – a basic motif symbolising food that has remained constant for centuries, for generations of Andhra women. She may however, and almost certainly does draw a pot in a distinctive style. Moreover, if an overflowing pot served as a mark
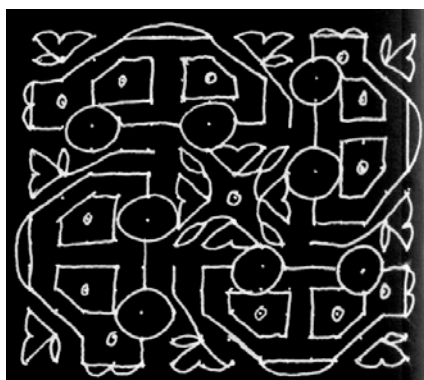
Car *muggu*, copied from an informant's sketchbook, Poduru 2008

of thankfulness for what the family has been blessed with or as a symbol of hope that they would continue to receive food and sustenance, it is hardly surprising that today, women draw cars in a *muggu* – a contemporary symbol of prosperity. Understood thus, an act of repeating what their forerunners have drawn is as much an expression of a *cultural* as of an artistic tradition. As such, it hardly constitutes an act of mere imitation. It is when the meanings begin to fade from such symbols that it may be interpreted as imitation. This is sometimes – and admittedly,

increasingly – the case, but it must be emphasised that this results from the original context of the artistic practice changing course; put another way, it is 'deviating.' In such cases, the technique and the tradition may remain while the forms may gradually die out, or the forms may survive but assume new meaning – as in the case of a labyrinthine motif that Layard (1937) believed was a mortuary drawing, but was identified to me as a hand-fan by my informants.

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[231] Sen was the winner of the first Skoda Prize in India. "Sen's work reflects an awareness of many sources and styles, and the politics of borrowing. Rather than passively assimilate her sources, in her 2009 installation 'Confession' (conceived and produced independently and exhibited with this series), Sen engages critically the notion of copying, using her own voice to raise concerns, including the fraught issue of repeating her own work." (Skoda Prize catalogue, January 2011)

Chapter 6: Traditional and Metropolitan Arts: An Art Historical Framework

Can traditional art forms that persist when their 'original' significance is either lost or altered – be called derivative? In art, both etymological meanings of the word 'derive' have relevance: to 'develop' or 'deviate' from an 'original.' From *muggu*-makers' taxonomy, I surmise that the tradition has changed course a few times already. It is because *muggu* practitioners have *collectively* changed course, or – to follow the etymology – because they have formed multiple tributaries by adding new categories of forms, that it survives to this day. To derive or deviate from a course may suggest a weakening, narrowing or lessening but surely the *muggu* tradition's resilience – notable if one considers it is an ephemeral practice persisting in an increasingly materialistic, consumer-driven society – lies precisely in its ability to change course, to adapt to new socio-cultural contexts – as the changing materials, forms and techniques of the *muggu* tradition demonstrate. It is both the cult of individualism and the market that have produced the pejorative label 'derivative.' What constitutes 'original' and what can be dismissed as 'derivative' assumes significance when their relative positions need to be established for the circulation of artworks in a market. All arts are derivative to a lesser or greater degree as each artist belongs to some tradition – artistic and cultural. In the Postmodern era, this belonging may be less apparent, but it must be recognised that no artist creates in a vacuum.

How does one determine what is appropriated in the *muggu* tradition where copyright is largely an alien notion even with the advent of *muggu* competitions, prizes, and authorship as witnessed when newspaper editors invite 'signed' contributions of *muggus* from women readers? As we have seen, chapbooks are usually published without payment of copyright fees and women regularly imitate and appropriate *muggu* patterns from published sources and from each other. When such a collective tradition exists with no need for a 'signature,' the notion of appropriation has little relevance. It assumes significance only when such arts are compared to metropolitan arts – a fruitless exercise inasmuch as they exist in different paradigms. Furthermore, it is viewers' and creators' hegemonic positions that determine whether an artist has appropriated or not.

There are several instances of metropolitans appropriating traditional arts, though they are still in the minority. In his efforts to develop a modernist language, Jamini Roy appropriated Kalighat painters' vernacular – his large almond eyes and the clothing are

Top
Kalighat, *Cat with Fish in its Mouth*, Watercolour on Paper, Calcutta, circa 1880. Collection: Victoria and Albert Museum

Bottom right
Jamini Roy, Untitled (Cat with Prawn), Painting on board, Image sourced from Aicon Gallery, London

Left
Jamini Roy (1887-1992) *Three Pujarins*, Tempera on Paperboard. Collection: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi

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Prince with a Falcon, Mughal, circa 1600-1605, Opaque watercolour, ink and gold on paper. Collection: Nasli and Heeramaneck, Los Angeles County Museum of Art

The Singh Twins, detail, *Partners in Crime: Deception and Lies*, Poster, gouache and gold dust on Mountboard, 2004. Photo courtesy the artists

329
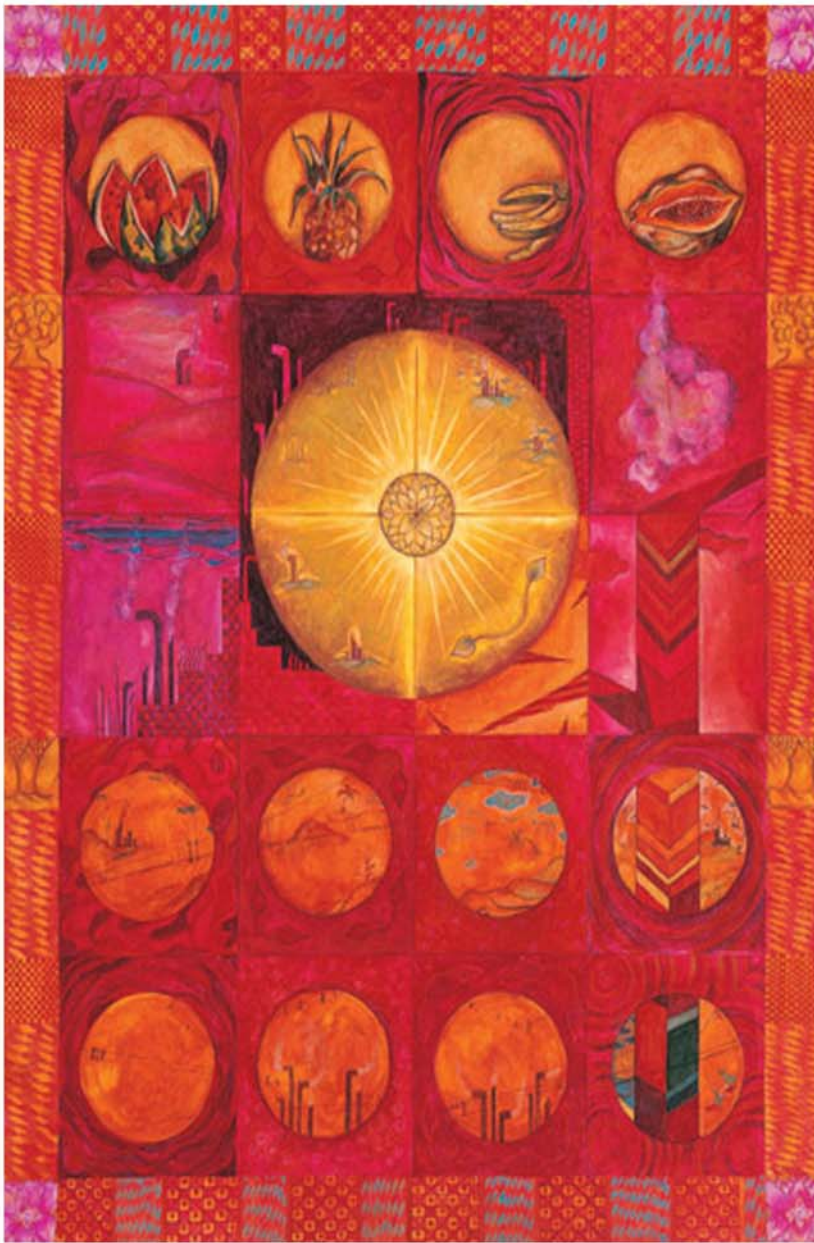
Manisha Gera Baswani, *Milestones of Memory*, Watercolour and Gouache, 20 x 14", 2000. Photo courtesy the artist.

Haku Shah, *Flute Player*, Oil on Canvas, 2007

Top
Balu Vyada (Warli),
Pani ki Manta,
Acrylic on Canvas.
Collection:
Indira Gandhi
National Centre
for the Arts (IGNCA)

Left
Arpana Caur,
Harvest
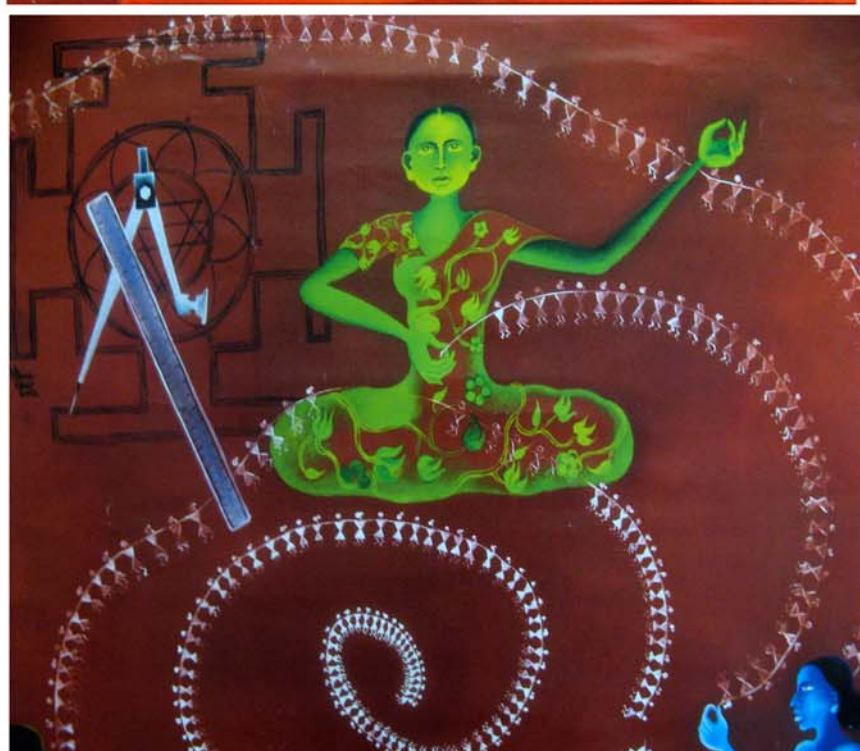
Bottom
Arpana Caur,
detail, Prakriti
(Woman-
Nature), Oil on
Canvas, 2002.
Reproduced from
Poster of Earth
Summit Rio Plus 10,
Johannesburg,
2002, courtesy the
artist

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Top: Arpana Caur, *Rites of Time*

Bottom: Prafulla Mohanti, *Lotus mutates into a dot*.
Reproduced from Chawla 1995
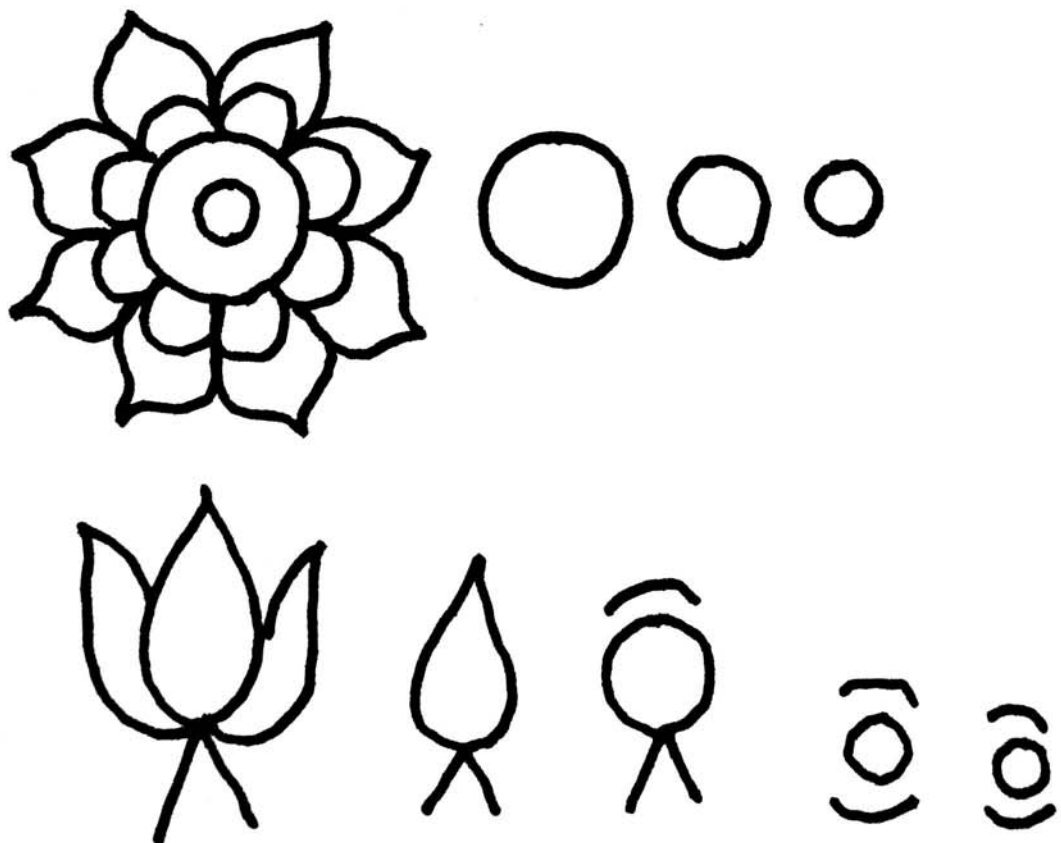
Prafulla Mohanti, *Surya*, Watercolour, Ink & Gouache on Paper, 1980. Reproduced from Chawla 1995
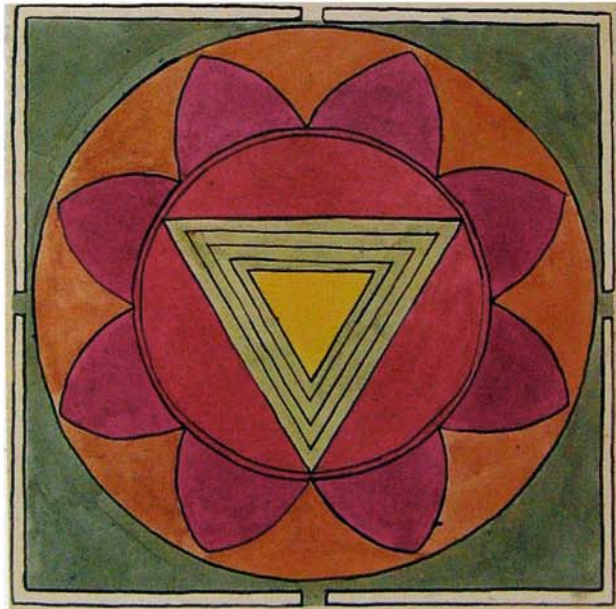
Kashi Nath Jha, *Ritualistic Mandala*, Watercolour on Paper, circa 1970. Reproduced from Chawla 1995
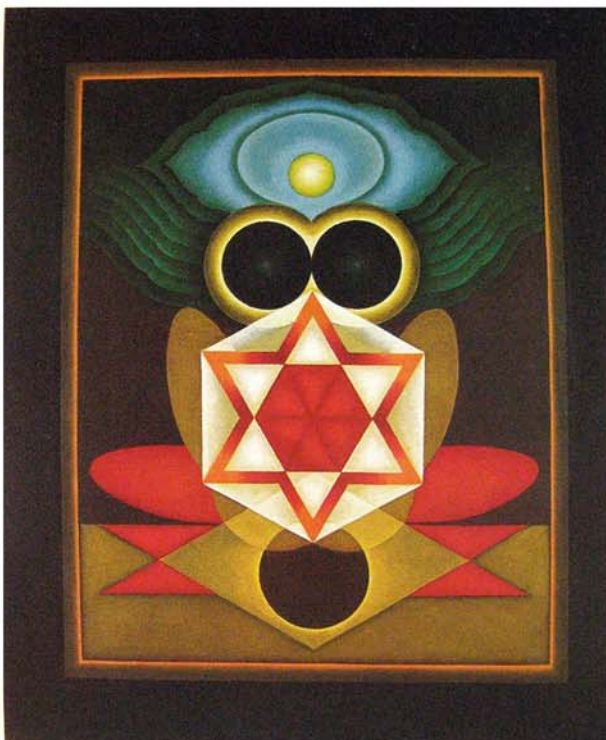
G. R. Santosh, Untitled, 1972. Reproduced from Chawla 1995

all Kalighat. The Singh Twins and Manisha Gera Baswani's formal composition and attention to minutiae is inspired by Mughal miniaturists; the twins are additionally also inspired by Mughal portraiture, as evidenced in their recent exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery (2010). Haku Shah borrowed Gujarati tribal artists' flat planes of colour and their simplicity of form. Arpana Caur used the hieroglyphic figures of Warli tribal art as motifs for works like *Rites of Time* and *Harvest* and the neo-symbolists appropriated Tantric geometric symbols, some of them retaining the symbolism of Tantra and others stripping them of Tantric associations to develop a language of abstraction.[232] These examples – like Picasso's appropriation of African art – are less controversial than Indian artists' appropriation of Picasso's idiom, because they are *individuals* appropriating *collective* traditions. The reverse also applies; just as Bengali *patua* artists appropriated popular imagery from English calendars and postcards, Andhra's women have appropriated Disney figures like Mickey Mouse for New Year's Eve *muggus*. When such reverse appropriation takes place, the results are often branded as kitsch. When Indian individuals appropriate international artists' work, such as Harshavardhana, who admits that his gurus include Paul Klee and Mark Rothko but that "what I am doing should be my own" (2007), they inevitably leave themselves open to accusations of 'imitation'.

Appropriation of course can be of different kinds; it can be stylistic appropriation, it can be appropriation of motifs or appropriation of content; it can even be authorial appropriation – in other words, an appropriation of identity.[233] The precise nature of appropriation is not under discussion here; the point is that when you have what Sheikh refers to as the familiar polemic between a collective and ahistorical tradition and an individualistic tradition focussed on originality and consciously situating itself in a historical timeline, it seems permissible to appropriate from a collective tradition precisely because such a tradition makes no claim to originality as it does not seek to situate itself in a historical timeline and thus does not stake a claim in any corpus of intellectual or creative copyrights. The reverse, however, is difficult to do without inviting accusations of imitation, or appropriation used in its pejorative sense. Furthermore, in a

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[232] Also called Neo-Tantrics. Several Neo-Symbolists belonged to Group 1890. The aim of Tantra art is to realise the formless through the form. Tantra art formalises sound and light rhythms with geometrical patterns and symbols that light up form and colour. Because Tantra art is an essential form of Tantric yoga, the Tantric artist cannot be an artist alone; the image he arrives at is related to his inner spiritual growth. The *mantra*, a chant that often accompanies the act of drawing, is regarded by Tantra art as primarily a mental sound fundamental in both the creation and the dissolution of all form.
[233] See Young 2008 and *Etnofoor* 2010.

modern, capitalist society, most creators in a collective tradition would be deemed as amateurs (with exceptions like Jangarh Kalam painters), whereas in general, metropolitan artists are classed as professionals. *Muggu*-makers do not call themselves artists but in any case, until recently, the notion of art-making as a separate activity was unfamiliar to most practitioners and remains so for many. With some exceptions, even *muggu-poti* contestants who earn prize money from their floor-drawings would not consider *muggu*-making a professional activity. But this is not to say that floor-drawing has no artistic value. This is why writing and documentation are important; while documentation in writing arguably introduces its own evils, it "become[s] an object of future reference, as a clarification, a guarantee and a precedent" (Goody 1992: 96); it thus generates a history for a tradition and thereby contributes to redressing hegemonic positions, even when such redress is not the primary object for the writing. However, "the right to define something as 'art' is typically seen as an important attribute of those dominant in society at a given moment. Only when the status of 'art' is conferred on a body of work can it begin to generate a history" (Barringer and Flynn 1998: 3-4).

To repeat, imitate or derive from, is not necessarily a sign of weakness. It can be – and very often is – a foundation to build upon. By learning skills, techniques, forms and concepts, traditional artists learn a visual art's vocabulary and grammar, building up a vast reservoir that they then have at their disposal to draw from it, as they may choose. Similarly, metropolitan artists' appropriation of traditional arts is not necessarily exploitative and their appropriation of international artists is not necessarily derivative, though it can be so in both cases. There is a fine line between the instances where imitation is used by those lacking original thought or creative skill and the instances where an Indian metropolitan artist, for example, wishes to use the arts of others – be they traditional artists, international artists or their colleagues – as a resource, to be developed further, to be re-assessed, questioned and re-interpreted, or even simply because they are attracted by the novelty of an unfamiliar form or style. In my view, appropriation of the first category in most cases invalidates their work because in essence, they are forfeiting their artistic voices – usually for material or professional gains.[234] To distinguish between these differing instances is not an easy task: to sift

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[234] In the case of traditional artists, it is more understandable when economics affect their creative output, as many of them survive on little more than a minimum wage. When asked whether he would like to continue painting, Bhajju Shyam answered: ". . . it depends on luck. There is no guarantee that the present state of affairs will continue. I cannot understand whether I should continue, and see whether something good

between those who are derivative merely to advance their careers and those who appropriate when they wish to broaden their influences.

Although unfamiliarity with an art scene is often the cause for mistakenly attributing pejorative labels to a traditional artist's work, advocates of traditional arts should beware of indiscriminately championing all traditional artists. Some Jangarh Kalam artists, for instance, are adversely affected by economic worries and the quality of their work consequently suffers. Like metropolitan artists, folk and tribal artists also fall prey to their own commercial interests. Paradoxically, it is because Pardhans are professional, 'metropolitan artists' that they may become repetitive, due to financial insecurity and the safety offered by their 'signature'. But this relates to the economics of their situation. It has little to do with the way they first developed their art by imitating Jangarh. The accusation of repetitive is hardly applicable because they are 'traditional' artists. What Shah says applies to Jangarh Kalam,

> Occasionally one individual . . . adds something new to . . . [a tribal tradition]. The contribution may not be remembered or mentioned separately; nevertheless it is valued and accepted as an enrichment of the tradition for posterity. . . . More often than not, such an enrichment of the tradition . . . becomes the distinctive signature of the whole tribe. (1996: 20)

Muggu practitioners similarly learn symbols, motifs and drawings with seemingly infinite permutations and combinations by imitating community elders but they can and do make up their own *muggus*. Ironically, traditional artists today are not overly concerned about whether their work is called repetitive, imitative or derivative, except in cases like Jangarh Kalam artists, whose livelihood suffers from such labels. This is also the case with Kumartuli artisans who are having to compete with metropolitan artists and designers and are thus subjected to comparison. In general, other non-metropolitan traditions develop – if not immune to the market, certainly resistant to it. In the long run, hierarchic labelling hurts traditional artists less than it does metropolitans, whose evasion of the past limits their historical resources and threatens their artistic integrity. With exceptions – such as those cited above – lamentably few metropolitans have

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comes along and secures me . . . or then again, it might be foolhardy to go ahead . . . It is very worrying. I got offered a job but I turned it down because I was getting all these painting assignments. So on the one hand, I am letting jobs pass me by. I have to also think of my family. I have them to support." Financial insecurity is, of course, also experienced by metropolitans, but metropolitans in general have more possibilities of engagement, and thus more avenues for earning income than traditional artists.

intelligently exploited the richness of traditional arts, and unlike in Europe, where a history is commonly learnt as a matter of course, in India, the past is almost 'the other.' Contemporary artists in the West can at least acknowledge Western canonical traditions even if they then decide to pull away from them. By and large, such is not the case with Indian metropolitan artists. At best, we face what Kapur describes as "a chopping sense of the historical in contemporary cultural practice" (2000: x).

The high conceptualism of metropolitan arts also ignores discourse about traditional arts among traditional artists. *Muggu* practitioners for example, may not talk about ephemerality in the terms we tend to use. They will instead say, 'The old *muggu* must be washed and a new one drawn every day' or they may say, 'Vishnu must leave on this day. The chariot *muggu* symbolises Vishnu's departure, so we cannot draw it after this day.' What Geertz states with reference to Western and non-Western arts is equally applicable to the cultural chasm between Indian metropolitan and traditional artists:

> [The failure to recognise variety in the cultural significance accorded to art in various cultures leads many students of non-western art to comment that] people of such cultures [who produce so-called 'primitive art'] do not talk, or not very much, about art – they just sculpt, sing, weave, or whatever; silent in their expertise. What is meant is that they do not talk about it the way the observer talks about it – or would like them to – in terms of its formal properties, its symbolic content, its affective values, or its stylistic features, except laconically, cryptically . . . But, of course, they do talk about it, as they talk about everything else striking, or suggestive, or moving, that passes through their lives . . . [but] this tends to be seen not as talk about art, but about something else – everyday life, myths, trade, or whatever. (1976: 1476)

The hierarchies and dichotomies in Indian art have been debated for over a century. By exploring the semantics of some of these discourses and linking them to the art market, I have presented here some of the issues that it may be helpful to consider so our multiple artistic traditions can continue to thrive. As religious rituals, tribal affinities and folk beliefs fade or change, these traditions may struggle to find a collective purpose for their artistic activity. Thus far, their so-called repetitiveness and tendency to 'imitate' has ensured their continued survival beyond periods of change and upheaval. We would do well to observe the current transitions of ritual, folk and tribal arts. While these – as Coomaraswamy suggested – had some governing ideology that propelled them forward collectively – allowing them to change course whenever this was required, their future trajectories will doubtless bring in new challenges as they may choose – or be forced – to participate in a competitive art market that demands 'innovation' and 'originality'.

Indeed, as we have seen in the case of Durga Puja idols and floor-drawings, this is already happening with a number of traditional arts. The parameters of the definitional terrain of the word 'art' are determined by art critics and theorists who are themselves products of the art market. I have tried in this chapter to indicate the pervasive influence of the market. After all, we are forced to make a divide between art's anthropological and aesthetic values partly because of the market's need for a hierarchy, without which it would be difficult to accord a monetary value to different arts and artists. Consequently, we fail to accord artistic value to myriad practices that would otherwise enrich metropolitan arts, guiding – or deviating – them towards more exciting directions.

CONCLUSION: CONTEMPORISING TRADITIONAL ARTS

Bharucha suggests that the very point of a floor-drawing is its erasure, but as we have seen, in the *muggu* tradition, ephemerality is a by-product of ritualism, rather than its primary purpose. Further, *muggu*-makers seem to delight in the *muggu* being ephemeral, because it gives them the opportunity to draw a fresh *muggu* every day. The degree of 'pleasure' that this affords them should not be underestimated. In other words, the act of creating a *muggu* allows a *muggu*-maker to practise and showcase her artistic skills. While the many purposes of *muggu*-making associate it with fertility rites, ancestor worship, the annual harvest, the protection of the home and mythological stories, such meanings are expressed in particular aesthetic forms, which bring their own visual dimensions to the tradition. Thus, *muggus*' ritualism, ephemerality and forms all influence the interpretation of *muggus* and the experience of *muggu*-making not only by *muggu*-makers, but – through discourses that circulate among everyday audiences and the widespread media reportage about *muggu-potis* and the tradition – by Andhra society generally. Through the phenomenon of *muggu-potis* and a broadly revivalist interest in the Sankranti festival, the audiences for *muggus* go beyond the domestic threshold to the competition ground, and via the media's coverage, they extend to newspaper readers and television viewers across Andhra households.

To reiterate, *muggu-potis* are being mobilised as a possible vehicle for the revival of 'traditional' Andhra culture. Indeed, this seems to have spawned a new category of revivalist *muggus* at competitions. While revivalism may seem to be a relatively straightforward objective, wherein past forms and traditions are resuscitated, what *muggu*-makers and audiences find more difficult is the challenge of contemporising *muggu* forms so that they continue to have relevance in a changing society – in a society that is no longer so superstitious as to believe in evil spirits and demons, and where propitiation of the deities who protect homes does not necessarily follow the religiously prescribed materials, times and places. In such a scenario, debates abound not only about the authenticity and efficacy of a *muggu* but also about its meaningfulness in contemporary society. This is one possible reason for the emergence of the new socially relevant *muggus*, which – one may argue – are more secular. As we have seen, this emphasis on social engagement is also present in the Ganapati Utsav and is advocated by Bharucha as a viable alternative for Indian museum spaces. Such a trend is likewise

discernible in metropolitan Indian arts. Seen from another perspective, one could argue that rather than becoming secular, ritual arts like *muggu*-making and the Ganapati Utsav sacralise secular issues by assimilating them within the ritual framework.

Bharucha's other suggestion, i.e. to let the ephemerality of ritual arts push the boundaries of our imagination so we can re-imagine museum spaces and mutating practices, seems pertinent, as practices like Durga Puja idol-making, Ganapti Utsav idol-making, *kolam*-drawing and *muggu*-drawing are developing counter-models for the display of contemporary, traditional arts. I must point out here that the Durga Puja and Ganapati Utsav have first transitioned into public events before assuming new identities and forms; this transition into a public event is not complete in the *muggu* tradition, nor is it likely to be properly comparable to the Durga Puja and the Ganapati Utsav. This is for two reasons:

1) Southern floor-drawings are made almost exclusively by women and they are less likely to become professional artists as quickly as Kumartuli artisans or Ganapati *murtikar*, especially since the latter already involved a relationship between patrons and makers – a relationship that is markedly absent in *muggu*-drawing practices, with recent exceptions like set decorators for television programmes.

2) While the Durga Puja and Ganapati Utsav are annual events, as is the Sankranti festival, *muggus* and indeed *kolams* as well, are not made exclusively for Sankranti and Pongal. They are made most *prolifically* at these annual festivals, but they are – on a smaller scale – made *every day* of the year. This surely has consequences for the transition, in that the Durga Puja's transition into a public art event builds upon its previous identity as an annual 'event', and not as a daily ritual. Having said that, the emphasis on *muggu*-making during the ritual month of Dhanurmasam may soon take on the seasonal character that we see in the Durga Puja and the Ganapati Utsav.

While Bharucha's suggestion is thought-provoking and merits consideration, it seems untenable without the appropriate dialogue and mediation that he advises between metropolitan and traditional artists. In recent years, several exhibitions and developments indicate that metropolitan attitudes may be changing at least in some

small measure. Traditional Indian artists have exhibited in metropolitan spaces for some time, both in India and internationally.[235] Such instances include Mumbai-based Gallery Chemould's exhibition of works by Warli artist Jivya Soma Mashe (1975); Chemould's *The Warlis: Tribal Paintings and Legends* (1985); Jangarh Singh Shyam's participation in Centre Pompidou's *Magiciens de la Terre* (Paris, 1989); the Craft Museum's *Other Masters* (Delhi, 1998 – curated by Jyotindra Jain, this show contributed greatly to raising the profile of traditional artists but as I have pointed out, I find Jain's arguments unconvincing and the exhibition still restricted the artists to the category of tribal and folk) and Museum of London's *The London Jungle Book* (November 2004 - January 2005 – from the book by Jangarh Kalam artist Bhajju Shyam, published by Chennai-based Tara Books, who have made a sustained effort to re-imagine children's literature in India and whose search for alternatives has led to collaborations with traditional artists).[236]

More recent efforts include Pundole Art Gallery's *Now that the Trees Have Spoken* (July - September 2010, featuring works by Jangarh Kalam artists – note that it was introduced by Ranjit Hoskote, possibly Mumbai's most high-brow, metropolitan art critic); the Horniman's exhibition of Jangarh Kalam artists Venkat Raman Singh Shyam and Rajendra Shyam (October 2010 - January 2011); and *Dumroo*, the storytelling workshop at Indian Institute of Technology Bombay (Mumbai, November 2010 – here, traditional and metropolitan creators came together to explore ways of tackling current hierarchies). Other spaces in London that have exhibited Jangarh Kalam artists include the Rebecca Hossack Gallery. Pundole additionally hosted *From Miniature to Modern: Traditions in Transition* (June 2010 – an exhibition of metropolitan artists who use the resources of the past, specifically the miniature genre). Pundole's exhibitions travelled to the Rob Dean Gallery (London, 2010). Publications include P.C. Jain's *Magic Makers* (Delhi, 2009 – this showcased Arpana Caur's magnificent collection of myriad traditional arts). Despite the great disparity in prices, it is still significant that recent and forthcoming auctions at Sotheby's (London, March 2010 and New York, September 2011) include

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[235] Note that metropolitan artists predominantly sell their works through galleries. Although some traditional artists like Jangarh were represented by galleries, in most cases, professional folk and tribal artists are obliged to sell their work at craft fairs.
[236] As Wolf from Tara Books states, ". . . it is the market and the media which largely decide on what is put out and what is worth taking notice of. . . . Variety is welcome, but only as long as it can be accommodated into the known. Genuine difference, on the other hand, is radical, acknowledging a multiplicity of experience that is by definition outside the normative and the habitual. This difference is a quality to be celebrated, not feared. So universality need not be a global sameness, but a recognition of common humanity that comes out of an empathy with those who are not like us." (2010)

Radhashyam Raut, cast of characters from *The Circle of Fate* (Mohanty & Rao 2009 - Published by Tara Books). Photo courtesy Raja Mohanty.

Jangarh Singh Shyam, *Tiger Attacking a Boar*, Acrylic on Canvas, 1996. Reproduced from Jain 1998: 27 Fig.2.13

works by Jangarh Singh Shyam, alongside works by Husain, Raza and Souza. Whatever the motivation of such initiatives, metropolitan artists will undoubtedly find it harder to ignore traditional artists and idioms, especially as the current international interest in Indian art regurgitates and revitalises previous debates about what constitutes 'Indian' art.

What is encouraging is that instead of being pigeonholed into the category of folk and tribal and shown as anthropological exhibits, recent efforts seem to be moving towards a dialogue, among them the refreshingly egalitarian *Through Other Eyes: Contemporary Art from South Asia* (2009).[237] Held at the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum in Coventry, this exhibition included not only marginalised folk and tribal artists, but also young college graduates who are not yet conditioned by the art market. As its curator Gérard Mermoz asserts,

> The exhibition takes a radical step by including works by folk and tribal artists alongside works by art school-trained artists *on an equal aesthetic footing*. It does so in a deliberate move to redefine 'contemporary art' in *multicultural terms*. (2009: 4)

Swaminathan's attempts to do this at Bharat Bhavan failed in large part due to pressure from metropolitan artists, who benefited from the extant hierarchy and did not desire to be exhibited alongside traditional artists. Mermoz, who cites Swaminathan's definition of 'contemporary' – 'the simultaneous validity of co-existing cultures' (1987), goes on to clarify that his exhibition offers an "alternative to the exclusive values promoted by the globalised art market" (2009: 4). He specifies that the reason he chose to exhibit works by college graduates rather than by established metropolitan artists is because their work is at a stage in their careers when it is not yet realigned, by the pressures of the art market, to artistic trends regarded as 'cutting edge'. As he points out, the "absence of public art agencies [in India and Pakistan] may explain this tendency towards homogenisation and opportunistic concerns" (2009: 14, 25). This recalls Sundaram's and ML's statements about the pitfalls of compelling galleries to carry out the function of museums. Mermoz asserts,

> [It is important to question] the arbitrary hierarchies imposed by centuries of colonialism and by ongoing forms of social discriminations. . . . [This entails]

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[237] Mermoz clarifies that the title "does not imply provincialism or exoticism of the Other, but acknowledges that cultural identity is rooted in specific geographical locations" (2009: 25).

challenging the hierarchies inherited from centuries of prejudice rooted in class and caste, and legitimised by centuries of Eurocentric art history and aesthetics. . . . Validating and celebrating cultural diversity and pluralism calls for cultural decentrings. . . . [This] exhibition takes a concrete step forward by staging a *polylogue* which unites the voices of folk, tribal and art school-trained artists in non-hierarchical ways. (2009: 4, 7)

Muggu-making takes on a visual form; it is embedded with meanings for both its makers and its audience; it generates lively discourses and enables the dedicated viewer to identify individual styles, so one may argue that despite the fact that *muggu*-makers do not identify themselves as artists, we should recognise and accord it artistic value, especially as the earliest recorded mention of Indian floor-drawings is in a treatise on the arts. While Shusterman's plea that we should redefine art as experience is made in a different context, a similar point could be made about the *muggus*. Art would benefit from a broader definition because this would help us "to recognise and valorise those expressive forms which provide us aesthetic experience but which could provide us far more and far better, if they could be appreciated and cultivated as legitimate art". Redefining art would also liberate it "from the narrowing stronghold of the institutionally cloistered practice of fine art" (2000: 57). In Chapter 6, I outlined metropolitan prejudices against traditional arts. While such misconceptions make a 'polylogue' between the various groups difficult and impede efforts to broaden the definition of art so as to include tribal, folk and ritual activities, there is another issue to consider.

If one moved away from the ritual tradition of the idol-making process or the ritualism inherent in the act of drawing a *muggu*, short of degenerating into kitsch or the gimmickry that both Guha-Thakurta and Kaur mention, how does one ensure that ritual creations remain meaningful in the lives of their contemporary makers? Ritual makers who aspire to move into the category of 'artist' walk a tightrope between the roles of traditional, ritual artists and the so-called conceptual, 'creative' artists. This tug of war between ritual authenticity and aesthetics is, I think, symptomatic of the complex struggle that will confront any ritual tradition that attempts to locate itself in mainstream, metropolitan arts. For the tradition that retains ritualism – however tenuously – it is challenging to find a new role for itself in a secular scenario, without degenerating into gimmickry. This is further complicated by Bharucha's astute perception that ephemerality (and for that matter, ritualism) can be essentialised as primary principles 'on the basis of which the integrity of an art practice can be guaranteed'. At the Maruteru *muggu-poti*,

Subhashini suggested that the very act of making a *muggu* authenticates it – regardless of form – yet she emphasised that the first criterion for judging competition *muggus* is, 'How do they depart from tradition, how are they new?' Here, it is not so much material, time of the day or the place that is debated, but the very form of the *muggu*, and as we have seen, *muggu*-makers themselves can determine authenticity within an art historical framework.

The terms tradition and contemporaneity both link to notions of time. In 'contemporary', *tempor* means 'time' and the term 'tradition' relates to transmission, which is not just from generation to generation but may also occur from place to place. In art, our perception of what is original relates to our notion of contemporaneity. When we speak of 'contemporary art', we speak of what is happening 'now', what is 'current', 'new', 'fresh' or 'original'. One way of being original is to challenge the status quo in the narrative of art history. But there are other ways to interpret the contemporary, such as Swaminathan's view, which is to recognise and respect 'the simultaneous validity' of different cultures and practices. If we adopt such a view, we find that

> imitation is about so much more than imitating; it can include copying but also innovating, sharing but also contesting, emulating but also appropriating a wide variety of cultural gestures, artefacts, and repertoires. Rather than being dismissed as mindless repetition, criticized as derivative reproduction, or policed as plagiarism, imitation is recovered . . . as a dynamic engine of cultural creativity. . . . By attributing creative force to imitation, we break the notional hold of any authenticating original – the primal scene, the paradigmatic beginning, the foundational centre . . . (Chidester 2010: 139, 151)

However, for both traditional and metropolitan artists, the biggest challenge lies perhaps in introducing a contemporary relevance to forms that have been created and nurtured in particular environments, which are increasingly less relevant even for traditional artists, but particularly so for metropolitan artists who – as Mitter has pointed out – take the postcolonial legacy of Modernism for granted. One way of ensuring contemporary relevance seems to be by interpreting a contemporary event or by tackling a contemporary issue. I would argue that the current emphasis on socio-political engagement in the Ganapati Utsav, activist *muggus*, and metropolitan arts (a metropolitan case in point is the work of Nalini Malani) stems partially from the need to contemporise the traditional. After all, barring a revivalist approach, this seems the most obvious alternative that will keep an art-form from lapsing into kitsch or gimmickry. While

these focus on tackling contemporary social *issues*, the Ganapati Utsav and Durga Puja *pandals* also portray contemporary *events*, such as the Pokhran nuclear test or Princess Diana's death. Moreover, such portrayals rely significantly on media reports of both national and international events. Sabavala's mention of how art colleges in India suggest large-scale disasters as topics for students to portray, conflates the emphasis on social engagement and the portrayal of a contemporary event. Such disasters are likewise interpreted by tribal and folk artists, as for example Bengal *patua* artist Probir Chitrakar's portrayal of the Tsunami or Jangarh Kalam artist Durgabai Vyam's interpretation of the Bhopal Union Carbide Disaster.[238] Durgabai, being a Bhopal resident, had strong feelings about it and presented a narrative composition, as a *retrospective* interpretation of an event that still lives on in popular memory. Probir's interpretation sacralises the Tsunami tragedy, by adopting the idioms of televised reports and depicting the destructive anger of Kali. Other ways to contemporise include the portrayal of a novel experience, such as a tribal artist's visit abroad, as in Bhajju Shyam's take on the Underground in the *London Jungle Book*, or Mithila artist Ganga Devi's roller coaster ride in the US. The paintings of The Singh Twins – metropolitan, expatriate artists who have adopted the format of the miniature – often critique consumerism and censure media saturation in the West as well as US and UK politics. Like Probir, they often blend two idioms, that of media reports and the miniature format. The twins, who also retrospectively portrayed the Indian army's storming of the Golden Temple in Amritsar – the Sikhs' holiest shrine – in their work *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, feel that the art establishment often finds it difficult "to see beyond the traditional aesthetics" of their work. They explain some of the difficulties they faced when drawing on traditional art.

> Tradition has a valid place within contemporary art expression. Very often the Establishment . . . refuses to . . . acknowledge that it is not necessarily the language we have chosen to use, but the universal themes and messages we explore, that make our work contemporary. However, having to fight the prejudice that exists against traditional art forms within the Art Establishment has also been an advantage because . . . it made us move away from merely emulating traditional/conventional themes and . . . it got us thinking about how we might give the traditional art style a contemporary relevance . . . [This] pushed us to develop the Indian Miniature style a lot further than perhaps we would have done had we not faced that prejudice. . . . as a result we have been able to create a unique genre, which sets us apart from other contemporary artists. . . . In effect, the work became the tool with which we

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[238] Otherwise known as the Bhopal Gas Tragedy.

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challenged the Establishment and our themes became much more politically and socially focused, exploring themes of universal concern. (2011)

However, it is not only the content – i.e. an issue or an event – that artists seek to contemporise, but also the traditional idiom itself. Shahane contends that Indian artists who have sought to tap into the resources of the past can be divided into three groups: those who have adopted and adapted the miniature format, those who have associated themselves with artisanal processes (a possible example could be Navjot) and those who use the decorative in new ways (he calls this 'hyperelaborate' art). As he points out,

> The resistance to the decorative has weakened in recent years, but there has been no coherent attempt to mine this resource. To do so would involve . . . taking over certain modes of visual representation, but modifying them and pushing them to their limits, so they address contemporary visual culture as well as contemporary society. (2003: 34)

With reference to the miniature format, Kabir points out that "to return to beauty without sacrificing ideological charge" presents the singular challenge of making "an old language speak anew", which entails "retaining its established inflections . . . without lapsing into quaintness, nativism or fetishising of past glories" (2003: 44). Citing Pakistani and Indian artists who have attempted returning to the miniature format, he feels that the latter (such as Manisha Gera Baswani, Gulammohammad and Nilima Sheikh) have tapped into the spirit, rather than the form of the miniature:

> [T]he challenges facing contemporary practitioners of the miniature genre . . . [is figured] on the phenomenological and philosophical levels rather than the technical. Divorced from a resonating "world spirit", the imitation of form, even of form and content, can debase a throbbing, resonant iconic language into cliché, and vital ornament into mere decoration. With the disappearance of the world that nourished miniature painting, and the tumultuous interventions of colonialism, empire, European-style modernity, and post-colonialism, can it speak today with any meaning beyond the purely derivative, the sentimental and the neo-traditional? (2003: 43)

Such a question could be asked equally of any metropolitan seeking to mine the resources of ritual, religious or sacred arts. Hoskote, who feels that the sublime "in all its bewildering nuances" is the heirloom "that the classical and folk traditions have bequeathed upon modern Indian art" (1998: 33), believes that in the contemporary scenario, it is vital to pay attention to form in a repeatedly renewed struggle to capture the transcendental through a material medium.

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Whitehouse and Kalshoven emphasise that "practices of imitation" can reveal how "re-experiencing is ultimately a matter of moving the present forward and of arriving at a deeper understanding of the self" (2010: 9-10). But to be able to use the resources of the past, renew them, move forward and 'arrive at a deeper understanding of the self', it is first necessary to learn and understand these resources, which is what I have attempted to do in this study.

For future research projects, it would be exciting to look at *muggu-potis* in greater depth, as it would be to study the Sankranti editions of women's magazines in Andhra. It would likewise be instructive to focus on metropolitan artists who have exploited the resources of the past. As a metropolitan artist, I have learnt a great deal from my informants. For seven years, I found it difficult to make art, but imitating my informants has given me a new ability to draw, and an enhanced appreciation of form and colour. For instance, I noted in my fieldwork diary that "their colour logic is different from mine. For me, multiple colours are in bad taste, and chaotic. . . . But for them, . . . [it] is not unusual . . . to have two or even three sets of contrasting colours in the same *muggu*. Surprisingly enough, after I had drawn my *muggu*, I realised that . . . [mine] looked tame in comparison to their wonderfully colourful ones . . . [Their] colourful designs – circulated in the newspapers – look gaudy but on the ground, they usually look very good."

However, understanding and appreciating a traditional visual idiom – even acquiring the skills to use it – does not necessarily result in adopting it, though it gives me the freedom of choice: to reject it when developing my own language or to appropriate elements of it should I wish to do so. As it happens, two installations I propose to make seek to evoke the spirit of the *muggu* tradition (see Appendix 7), while a new body of paintings draws upon the forms and techniques of *geetalu and chukkalu muggulu* (see following page). Finally, by helping me situate my work in the Indian contemporary art scene, this project has instilled in me the confidence and the ability to articulate my choices as an artist. To borrow Parikh's description of postmodernism, I would like my art to have 'coherence of meaning and diversity of reference', from cultures elsewhere as well as those from the past. This is not to say that I have achieved this, but the constant promise of a potentially versatile language in the future remains.
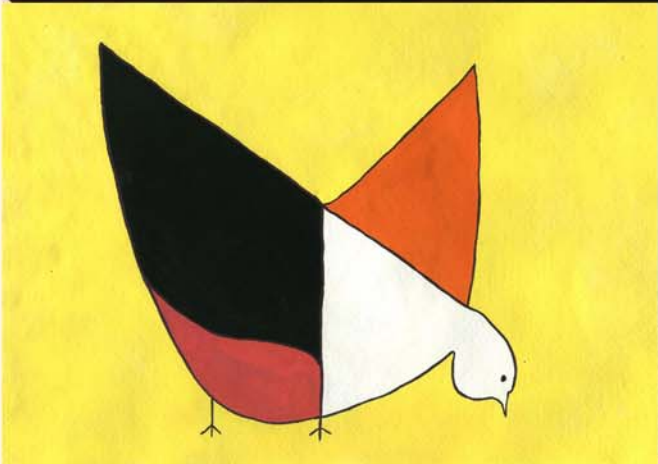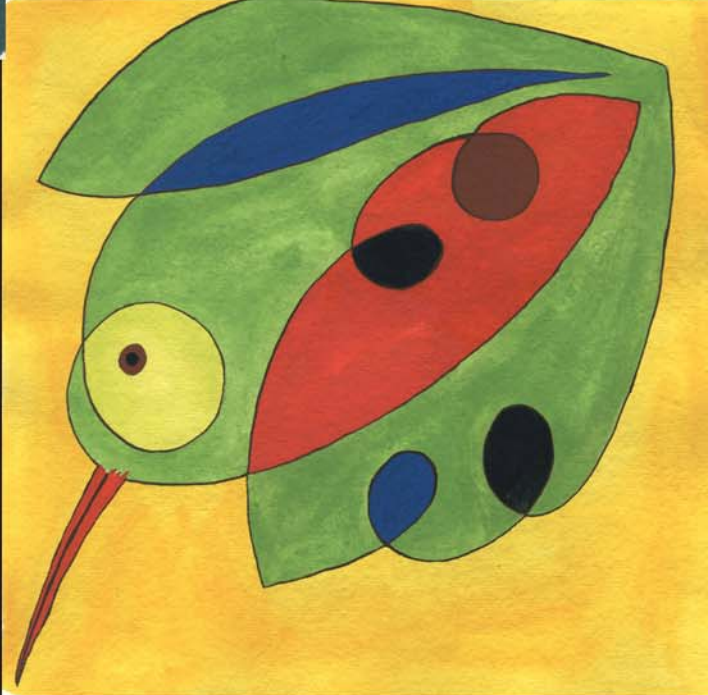
APPENDIX 1: MAPS OF LOCATIONS

Map of India, showing states and union territories

Pondicherry (now Puducherry) is a Union Territory. Union Territories have a special status in India, being more autonomous than states and in certain areas, governed directly by the central government. Exceptional circumstances determine their formation as Union Territories. In the case of Pondicherry, this is because it was formerly a French colony. Pondicherry is a distinctive case because its four districts are not geographically situated in one location. Karaikal and the capital Pondicherry are situated in Tamil Nadu, Mahe is in Kerala and Yanam is situated in Andhra Pradesh. They are in essence pockets of Pondicherry surrounded by different states. Despite their locations in three different southern Indian states, they constitute districts of Pondicherry because they were all formerly under French rule. A study of southern Indian floor-drawings would

therefore be especially interesting if conducted in the four districts of Pondicherry so as to evaluate the influence of French culture on the three states' respective floor-drawing traditions. I interviewed five Telugu women from Karaikal and Yanam about *muggus* and while they are – strictly speaking – not Andhra residents, I have considered them as such for the purpose of this study.

Map of Andhra Pradesh, showing districts
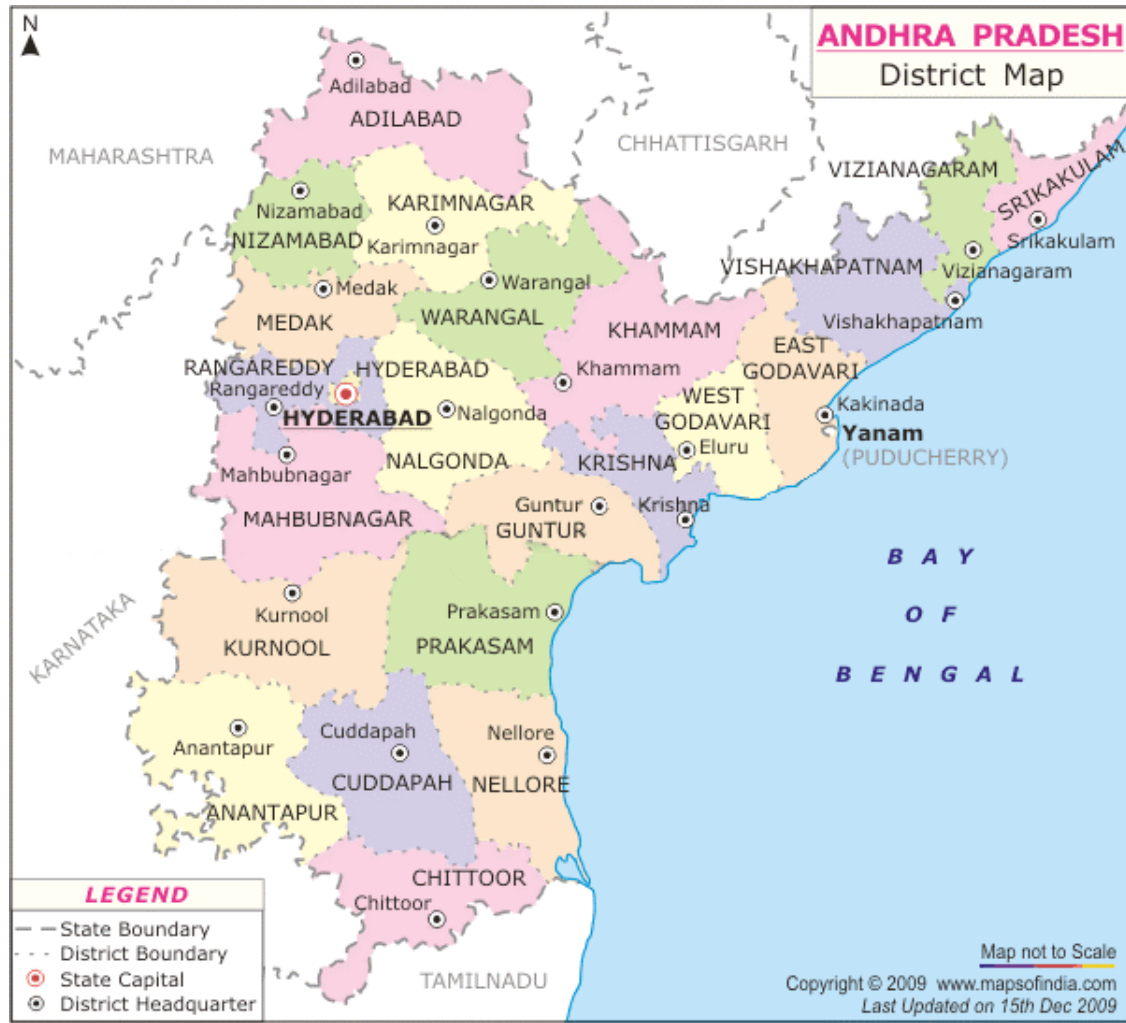
Map of West Godavari district (Poduru is not marked)

The maps above are reproduced from Maps of India, available at www.mapsofindia.com

FIELDWORK LOCATIONS MAP
indicating relative locations of Palakollu, Ullamparu
Jinnuru, Vedangi, Poduru, Kavitam and Maruteru

Maruteru

Kavitam

Poduru

Vedangi

Gummaluru

Jinnuru

Ullamparu

Palakollu

Narasapuram-Nidadavole Canal Road
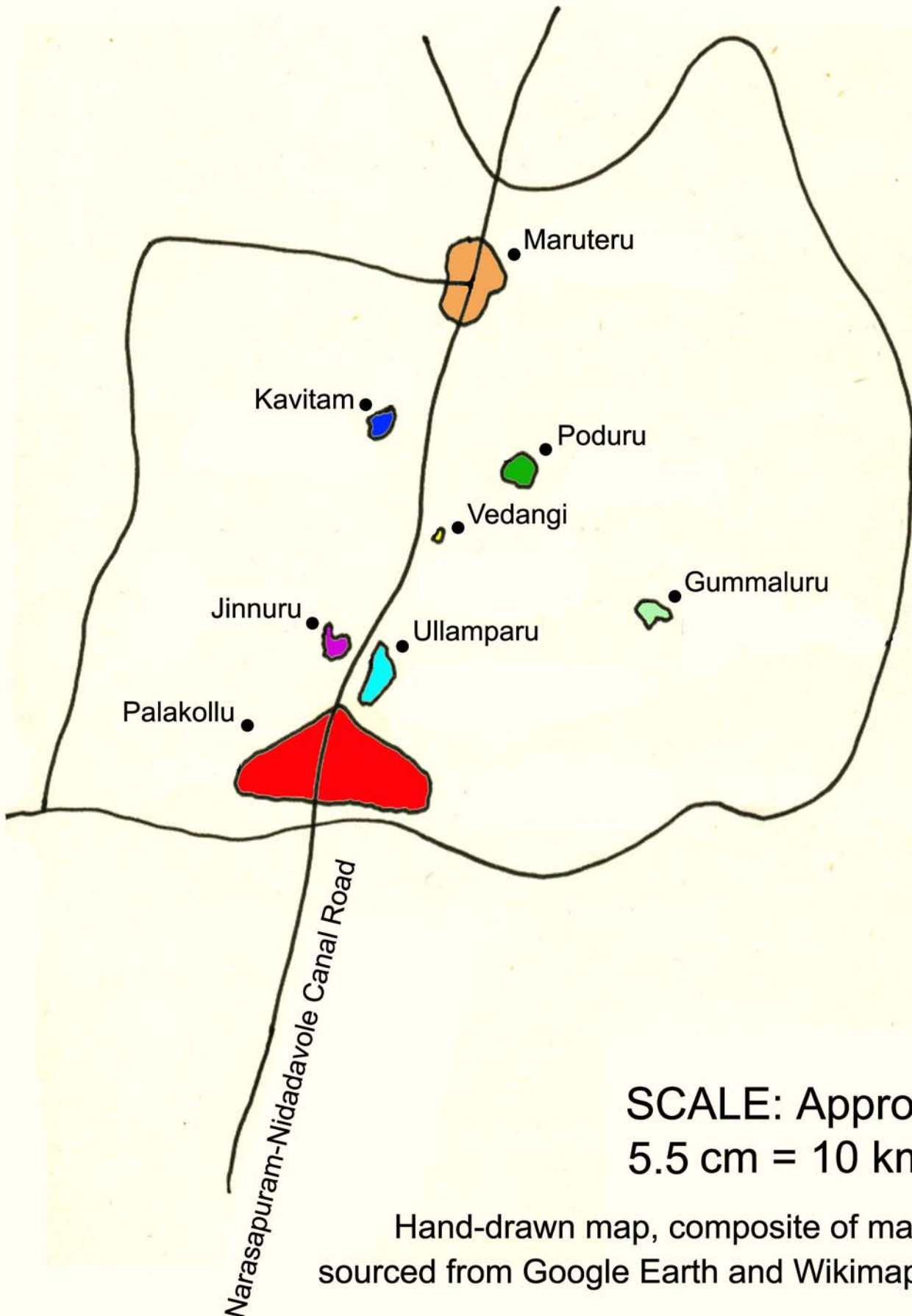
SCALE: Approx.
5.5 cm = 10 km

Hand-drawn map, composite of maps
sourced from Google Earth and Wikimapia

APPENDIX 2: FIELDWORK QUESTIONS

Only fieldwork questions are included here. For other documentation, including fieldwork videos, sketchbooks and chapbooks, refer to the DVD in Appendix 6.

Fieldwork micro-questions

1. At what age did you start learning how to draw *muggus*?

2. How did you learn them? Do the dots help in any way?

3. Where/whom did you learn them from? Do you ever look at patterns in books?

4. How many kinds of patterns are there?

5. What do you draw *muggus* with? Why do you draw them with [whatever material they refer to]?

6. Do you apply anything on the ground before drawing *muggus*? Why? [ground: *nela*, cement floor: *gacchu*]

7. Does the material you draw the *muggus* with get decided by what kind of surface you draw them on?

8. Do you draw only on the ground or do you draw on any other material?

9. Is there anything you need to do to prepare yourself prior to drawing (such as taking a shower or other 'purifying' practice)?

10. Who is allowed to draw *muggus*? Or who is not allowed to draw them? Is a visitor like me allowed to draw them in your house? Or is it limited to the family or community? [Questions about caste should be brought in at this point. Communities: *sekhaalu*]

11. What time of the day do you draw *muggus*? Do you draw them daily?

12. Are there any occasions for which you draw *muggus* specially? (If yes) Are those also drawn in the morning or can they be drawn at other times of the day? Are special *muggus* only for Sankranti, or are there other festivals during which *muggus* are drawn specially? (In Bengal, the Lakshmi Puja has become the occasion during which floor-drawing is most prolific. It may be significant that culturally, the Lakshmi Puja is not the equivalent of Pongal or Sankranti)

13. Are there *muggus* associated with specific days of the week? (If yes) What is the reason for this?

14. Are *muggus* drawn during weddings? (If yes) Is there a different one for the bride to sit on and a different one for the bridegroom to sit on? Is there any reason to the kind of patterns that are drawn during weddings?

15. Are there specific patterns for Sankranti?[239]

16. Is there any time of the day or year, or any occasion when you *do not* draw *muggus*? Why? (Such as menstruation or death; but do not prompt while asking the question. Only prompt, if necessary, after they have given an initial answer)

17. Are there *muggu*-makers who are considered experts? Are more skilled *muggu*-makers respected or admired more?

18. What determines the efficacy of a *muggu*? How do you evaluate good and bad *muggus*?

19. Do you innovate patterns?

20. Do you ever consider yourselves as artists, especially nowadays with floor-drawing 'competitions'? (Might need to explain the term 'artist' but should not do so at first. Competition: *poti*)

21. Do you know of other places where such a practice exists? How do you think the patterns circulate from one place to another?

22. What do the men in your community think about *muggus*? (Also ask the men themselves what they think of the floor-drawings)

23. Why do you think only women draw them?

24. Do you associate any gods and goddesses with the act of drawing *muggus*? Which ones? Why? (Connection or link/joining line: *kalapadam*, *kallapulu*. *Chukkalu muggulu*, or dot and line *muggus* are also called *kallapulu muggulu* by some)

25. Is floor-drawing a religious act for you?

26. Has the ritual of drawing changed over the years? Has their meaning changed?

27. What about the patterns? Have they changed over the years? (Form: *roopam*)

28. Why do you draw *muggus* only on threshold spaces?

29. What do you think about the fact that *muggus* last for such a short while? Do you not feel bad that you spend so much time and effort to make a *muggu* but it is swept away so soon?

30. Why do you draw *muggus*?

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[239] Sankranti marks fresh agricultural crops; Ugadhi is the Telugu New Year.

Interview with Jehangir Sabavala for PhD, at his studio, Ansty Road, Mumbai, 25 October 2007 – Part 1

Born in 1922, Jehangir Sabavala trained at Elphinstone College, Sir J.J. School of Art, Mumbai, the Heatherly School of Art, London and the Académie Julian, Académie André Lhote and the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Paris. He has held 35 solo exhibitions worldwide, participated in about 200 group shows and is a regular contributor to international Indian art auctions. In 1993, Arun Khopkar made *Colours of Absence*, a national award-winning documentary on Sabavala's work. In 2005-2006, The National Gallery of Modern (NGMA) in Mumbai and Delhi held retrospectives of his work.

I decided to interview him because I sense sincerity and integrity in his oeuvre. A thorough and well-planned process, combining craft, skill and technique, culminates in sensual and painterly work. Sabavala pays close attention to visual idiom and language. In a previous interview, I was intrigued by his idea that a successful work must have physicality, emotion, a mind and a soul; he elaborates on it here.

AD: Aurogeeta Das
JS: Jehangir Sabavala

AD: Do you remember what I said to you a few days ago, when I was here?

JS: About?

AD: I told you that through my study of the floor-drawings, I am questioning the dominant assumptions about art. So in some way or the other, a lot of my questions have to do with that. What I wanted to ask you was how do *you* define art, what does it mean to you personally, why do you paint?

JS: How do I define art and why do I paint? A very trite answer is that it's – professionally – perhaps the thing that one does best. I could have got into other professions too. But somehow life worked out in strange ways. I was very interested in the stage when I was young; I had this as a second string to my bow when I realized that I was an introverted person and couldn't face an audience day after day, night after night. I realized that I must be mad to think that I could, because I couldn't. Once that realization was clear, the idea of the stage, which I was very attracted to and had some experience of, faded.

AD: Yes, I just read that in an article.

JS: You read that? I had a minor talent for it but I realized that it was ridiculous for me and quite wrong. But this profession – thank god that there is something, otherwise one would have been at sea and reverted to the humdrum, which wouldn't have been suitable. I took up painting because I had also been painting – parallel to the stage thing – for quite a long time. And because it gives me, personally – this is personal – an anchor, a deeper anchor than just the fact that you paint, or you write, or you play music. It's something that holds me in my life and brings a certain balance to me as a person,

which I obviously must need. And I find that finally this is where one is happiest, otherwise one is a bit distraught with so many things that happen to others, to yourself. And how do I deal with that?

AD: Would you say in that respect, that art for you is transformative?

JS: Yes, it is. And it gives me a sense of serenity which I crave for and find difficult to achieve. One can get so easily thrown by someone *else's* problems, like this [referring to problem with a friend we'd spoke about earlier]. I was absolutely shattered when I heard this about this boy. To come through such a lot of difficulty and then . . . [to have someone die]. . . I mean you're traumatized just hearing it, about somebody *else*. So how does one then…

AD: Cope?

JS: … cope, figure all this out, put it in perspective, it can happen to me tomorrow, it can happen to you. So then how do you go on? Because otherwise you'd come to a standstill! Or things can go out of hand. I have always found that painting takes you into this other world – a world you create, for better or worse – it may not always be a good painting. The quality of the work does *matter* of course, in the final analysis but we're talking of why does one paint? You're not asking me must one paint well every time and my answer to that would be 'certainly' otherwise it would not be worth it, but that I take as understood. I paint because it's my anchor, because it gives me a sense of peace and serenity and one evens out.

And so, so within that context, your subjects can be of all kinds, the colours can be of all kinds, from the passionate to the completely lyrical, to the dreamscape. Are you capable of that? You don't know, so every time it's an experiment. There are so many younger painters who say, 'Oh I know…' and I say, 'You don't know anything. Every canvas in an absolute fresh…'

AD: A renewed experiment.

JS: Oh yes, yes. I've started… You don't know what a difficult time I've had with this thing [indicating his canvas on the easel]. It's really exhausted me. I am hoping to finish it in another 10 to 20 days, I think. It should be done. But it's been exhausting, to put it all together, to reach out to what I'm trying to get to. You're seeing it at a stage when it's very incomplete. It's plotted and planned; it's not painted yet, you see. So all of this makes you go into this other world, into your world that you hope to create.

AD: So obviously when you're talking about art providing you with serenity…

JS: To me, that's why I don't paint political or socio-political themes…because for me….

AD: I was going to come to that later.

JS: You know, what is the point? The world is full of chaos and tragedy and horror. My god, we live in India. From that point of view, we're cocooned, you and I.

AD: Yes.

JS: But still, you just step out and you're not insensitive, unless you're blind or you cocoon yourself totally… but it's there. So it's just a toss of the coin that you haven't been living the way that the majority of the country lives, so with all of this – I think – why do I want to paint? And it's got to be genuine, you've got to have a socio-political conscience. You have to be an activist painter. If you feel that strongly and [you are] able to put it down… I've judged so many examinations at post-graduate level – the MA equivalent in painting – of students who bring their work and I'm supposed to mark them…and offer them a critique…

AD: Assess their work.

JS: Assess their work and of course you pass them. The assessment goes to the university and – I've done it heaps of times but don't do it anymore. It's appalling.

AD: What is appalling?

JS: And I tell this young man who presents his work… I say, 'You've painted this thing,' and stupidly the examiners give them subjects, for example something happened in Bangladesh or somewhere, some horror story – that was given to the student, and he made a grotesque mess. And I couldn't feel the tragedy at all, I felt nothing, I just thought it was perfectly awful. I said, 'Tell me, why did you do this? I mean, I see red and is it for anger…?' There was rape and there was this and there was that… there was just about everything in that one work.

AD: [Laugh] That he thought ought to be there, because of the subject given.

JS: It's pathetic. And he said, 'But sir, you see, Bangladesh…' And I said, 'Do you know anything about Bangladesh?' And he said, 'No, no, I've never been there.' And I asked, 'Have you read up a lot about it…?'

AD: And this is at what level, did you say?

JS: MA. Postgraduate equivalent.

AD: And this was in India?

JS: In India.

AD: In Bombay?

JS: This one was in Bombay, but I've judged in various parts of India.

AD: What?! At MA level, they give them subjects?

JS: They give them subjects, apart from which the young men and women… I mean they think, 'Let's shock this man – the examiner – or let's do something outrageous; he's bound to say, "It's provocative."'

AD: It's interesting, in response to my very first question, you've touched upon a lot of the things that will come up…

JS: That you were going to ask?

AD: Yes.

JS: So I said in my report that the majority of these students – I mean I don't think they're mature men or women, to begin with; they may be 24 or 25 or whatever age they are, this is at postgraduate level, they've been given the subject and they've just used it as a bandwagon.

AD: Real maturity hasn't come. Understanding themselves and their place in the world…

JS: Or what rape means. Or whatever else happens – these awful things that you read of every day. I mean, do you have the *audacity* to paint these? So I'm answering why as a man and as a painter I wouldn't touch a subject like that. I don't think I could do it any justice. It would be totally false.

AD: I was going to come to it later but I'll come to it now. I just wrote down something here that I thought was very well-put. Subramanyan says, ". . . I do not feel that any act of history is the legitimate subject of art until it becomes an artist's personal myth and its tragedy becomes a scar on his innermost being. Otherwise it will stop short at reportage."

JS: *Absolutely*, and not good reportage at that. I *totally* agree with that statement. You've got to feel these things. And there are just a few rare painters who, according to me, truly do so. On the world scene, you take the Mexicans and that lot … and who was the woman?

AD: Kahlo.

JS: Frida Kahlo. But who was she with? … Rivera.

AD: Diego Rivera.

JS: Diego Rivera. Rivera painted those huge murals which turned him into a great *political* artist. But you see, finally he did not just impress everybody because he painted those gigantic political struggles and thoughts – the canvas almost couldn't hold what he wanted to say. But he painted portraits; he did beautiful flower studies as well. However, given a wall, he turned to the epic and became one of the greatest socio-political painters of his era. And going back much earlier…satirical, always on the topical situation in his country. I am thinking of a *talented* painter – but a satirist – [Honoré] Daumier – the French Daumier, I'm going back to the nineteenth…

AD: I'm not sure I'm thinking of the correct person.

JS: Oh, what a painter! I mean, you take a normal scene, a laundress, the streets of Paris.

AD: Hmm, yes.

JS: And the scenes from the French legal courts of those days, which were corrupt as

hell. He did these *swift* wash…

AD: Almost like a sketch.

JS: Yes, but elaborate sketches… he never left them as sketches, you know, because they said so much as they were. I mean he made the *whole country* not only roar with laughter, but with a laughter that wasn't funny, attacking the judiciary and other public institutions. And then of course, he painted other incredible paintings always with a very *human* touch. He dealt with the poor, in the main.

AD: But that's not everybody's cup of tea.

JS: That's what I'm trying to say. And they tell me, 'Why are you painting things that don't deal with the riot, or the…

AD: That's like saying an artist must be activist. And that seems to be increasingly the trend.

JS: It is.

AD: Do you know? How can an artist ignore such and such situation?

JS: Gujarat.

AD: Well, then you would have become an activist and not an artist.

JS: Exactly. Or that you are capable – there are a *very* few – who have the capacity both of the hand and the mind – I mean I think they must be expressive, *passionate*. You can't depict without a live passion and commitment.

AD: You'd rather be a genuine artist than a conscience-stricken activist.

JS: Totally. Yes, do what you can do. And today all this hype, when you have to read manifestos. They talk such rubbish. Half of it nobody can understand. The titles are illiterate. They're so elaborate. You can't understand *what* the man is trying to say but it seems impressive, all strung together, but it's *nonsense*, like nonsense verse. They don't realize that, you see. It's very difficult to…

AD: The only thing that you do sense is that they feel that they ought to be unhappy about something. *Something*, it doesn't matter what.

JS: *And* the tragedy is that it is fashionable. You're on that bandwagon. If you're not, you're *not* so fashionable. You're just a an old-fashioned painter

AD: A sign of the times.

JS: So that answers those two things: Why one doesn't touch social subjects? I don't think I'm capable of it. And why does one paint? Because of the inner peace…and strength that it gives me.

AD: And how would you define art? Taking into account its formal aspects – everything.

JS: I had a call from London yesterday. Somebody who wants me to show there. And he gave me the name of a painter, a young man who is very gifted. And then he said, 'Oh, but you wouldn't know.' I said, 'What makes you think that? Forgive me but I have seen his work, I know his work, and he is talented.' But he has a *strangely repulsive* quality that he's able to bring to the canvas. Now that depends on how you look at it. I don't think that's a weakness; it's a strength. To *me*, it's utterly repulsive, it's extremely fleshy. I'm not sure of his sexual orientation. Now, you and I both don't care what his orientation is. It doesn't worry me in the least bit. But when you present me with a canvas that after all is there for me to look at and see, it may get a little worrying – not because I am censuring it, but something about it…

AD: Makes you feel uncomfortable.

JS: Makes me uncomfortable. This is something that deals with this young man, and maybe in his own bedroom, or wherever it is. It's his business and I don't censure that part of it, but to make me see it. What my feeling is, is that he is not at all a bad painter, because after all it's not easy to have that *repulsively* sensual feeling come alive.

AD: To evoke that in somebody.

JS: To evoke that in somebody.

AD: Must have a certain amount of…

JS: Something about the way he paints flesh…and his figures… Sometimes I think are they supposed to be men or is there a *touch* of the female in them? It's ambiguous. So okay, the sexual line is not clearly defined. That doesn't worry me. But it's that *horrible*…

AD: Unease…

JS: Uneasy *repulsion*. So he asked me – this man who is showing him today, in London. He said, 'What do you think?' I said, 'He's talented. You're asking me really for a frank opinion?' He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'For me, it's repulsive. But that doesn't mean it isn't well painted. That doesn't mean your show won't be a success. Please don't think that at all.' He said that the South Asian population in London hasn't taken to it well, he hasn't been able to sell.

AD: Not surprising.

JS: Not so surprising. And I said to him, 'You know something? Try the Westerners,' I said, 'I'm sure you'll be much more successful.' And he said, 'How did you know?' I just know that for them, it's exotic, the man is Indian…

AD: The grotesque…

JS: The grotesque.

AD: I was coming to that as well. But I am going to ask you about something you said earlier about the theatre and being too shy…

JS: Too introverted, not too shy.

AD: Too introverted. That struck me in a way as an interesting comment because I wasn't intending to ask you that but… the thing is, you are present in your artworks as well, so you are still open and vulnerable there.

JS: When you say you are there, you mean the person?

AD: Yes.

JS: Yes, I think so. It happened. To be honest with you, it took a long time…

AD: Even though you're not showing [yourself] as you would show yourself on stage?

JS: That's right. That is true. But even to do that, in my paintings… I started in the fifties and it took me – it was a critic who woke me up to this fact.

AD: Yes, the Hungarian chap.

JS: Yes, a Hungarian scholar. I thought he was going to tear me to shreds. He didn't. What he said was, 'You've reached a certain point. You're going to plateau. You've got to make up your mind. Is this Jehangir?

AD: Or what now?

JS: Or what now. It really came as a … it really woke me up, to ask, 'Why am I going on this way? In a school, in a style. There are so many schools that one has followed, I got stuck in schools. And he said, 'Just try, maybe you won't succeed. But the time has come.' But it took me, Aurogeeta, a good *15* years to break through. So from the sixties to the mid-seventies, it took me that long to break from the mould of 'isms' – Academicism, Impressionism, Cubism…

AD: As long as that?

JS: As long as that. It was a terrible struggle. Because you see, I was fairly successful. So I had to take the risk of saying, 'Is there something else within? Some other way of expressing myself, or does that not exist?'

AD: Would it have been different, or would it have taken less time had you not been successful?

JS: Perhaps. You see, there is always that fear when you step into the unknown.

AD: You want the security.

JS: You want the security, you know, 'I am not doing too badly'. And this man goes and says this… I'm glad of it because it was the truth. And it was very good of him to have

seen it. He said, 'No, you've been well-schooled, well-trained, and you're a good exponent.'

AD: But of course that training and that schooling has laid a foundation, hasn't it?

JS: Oh, a *tremendous* foundation. But what…

AD: And you wouldn't regret that for anything? Even though it took 15 years to break.

JS: It comes through. And it comes through today, because today I can show you paintings which are an amalgam, *clearly*, of cubism, a play of Impressionism and a back layer of classicism. Look at these men sitting [points to painting on the easel], the way they have been distorted and been made powerful. Basically, you've got to draw hands, faces, feet. You've got to know how to do that. That's your academic background. What happened in those 15 years was that I started to find my own feet – a style which today is mine, associated with me because it worked through trial and error. I turned to [Lyonel] Feininger and his cubism, and how he softened it with wonderful shafts of light. That extended from the main subject. I read a lot on Feininger, I used to have his book in front of me. I thought, 'How do I break these very tight forms? So I began to have, sort of *wings* of light extensions… This set me off. And today, I… Well, you really never know what you want to do, even today. It's all tentative.

AD: It's a constant quest.

JS: It's constant. Every painting is a constant quest. As I say, success. What do you call a successful painting?

AD: Would you define art as a sort of…? How would you define art?

JS: Terribly trying. Difficult, lonely, frightening.

AD: How does the form help you in your quest?

JS: 'Form' meaning?

AD: Well, nowadays, after the advent of conceptual art…

JS: Yes, it's conceptual.

AD: Form has taken a backseat.

JS: Mine is the other way around. Form is very important, because all my work starts with sketches – each one, even that one…small pencil sketches – where do I put the boat, the flight of birds, is this bird flying this way or that? How to make the work more interesting for myself? Then when – say, after five or six little pencil, *humble* sketches, plotting them… the subject comes to mind. What do you do? Something sets you off, and then you put it down. And then you make these five or six sketches, and from the five or six, shall we say I'll pick this figure out of one, that figure out of another and make the final – the master sketch. Once the master sketch is done, there is confidence. I know I want to paint it. And therefore I say, in my case, I need my own navigation. I need

a chart. I can't have a blank space – Aurogeeta says she is going to sit in the room and see me paint, I wouldn't know what to do! I've got to think it out, so I have to be alone. And it's plotted, absolutely planned. Once I'm happy with my master sketch – it might change, the incidental, little things here and there, but basically the master sketch holds.

AD: How would you… To push you a little further on this – how does giving form help you in this process of finding an anchor? The form itself.

JS: Because the form, the very fact that it is a form, it's not amorphous. In itself, it is the act of creation.

AD: So physicality is important.

JS: Physicality is there. You thought of a boat. Now you shape that thought, so the boat begins… Then the sketches tie you further. You could stop but you don't want to just stop with a boat. You know what a bird looks like. Look at those [gestures to birds in his ongoing painting] for example. They're merely shapes but there is enough to suggest that obviously they are birds. So like that, you build it. Once that my chart is there, I transfer it to whatever size I want. Bigger, smaller.

AD: Yeah, the proportions can change. [Some of the interview may be lost here due to changing sides on the tape]

JS: I had to really juggle it a bit to make it suit a perfect square. But also, after that, Aurogeeta, comes colour. Colour plays an *enormous* role – [for] every painter I am sure, in some more than others but in my case it is as important as the form, as the structure. What would make that painting really evocative for me. The maximum I can do with it. Should these women be in a white *burkha*? Should they be in a black *burkha*? Which?

AD: Early in your career, especially when you came back to India – I remember reading somewhere, that you were critiqued in the beginning for being more cubist, for being more a product of the Western grand movements…

JS: Yes. True. Perfectly.

AD: And then I think you took a while…

JS: to find my…

AD: to assimilate the local…

JS: Yes, to assimilate with India, where I knew I was going to live. The idea of Europe was put away for obvious reasons. . . . I had lived here too long by then. After 10 years of being involved with life in India, life changed. You're quite right. It took me a long time. My actual colour is taken from notes I make, either of a scene in India – it could the sky, landscape, building, you, anything.

AD: I remember that from Khopkar's film. (Khopkar, 1993)

JS: Khopkar's film? That's good. I make copious notes. Sometimes it's so interesting, you write notes on a sky… Or sometimes notes on a wood – trees… these are transferred on to…

AD: Would you say your palette had been influenced a great deal by the local... by India?

JS: Oh yes. Enormously, because they are all colours that I make from my notes, say – you are wearing this bluey, navy blue trouser. People will say 'okay, this is the colour'. Not true. I see a lot of nuance in that colour, I put it down. 'Aurogeeta, the time, 6 o'clock, whatever it is. Evening, trouser.' And I make my analysis of that colour. Which may make a wonderful sky, for example. Because it wouldn't be just a blue.

AD: Yes.

JS: I would break it.

AD: A touch of grey, a touch of green, a touch of black, yes.

JS: So many…touch of green, black, I would blend several colours to make the one colour.

AD: I am quoting Subramanyan again. He has a definition of art. Most people now shy away from defining art, and yet I find that they're constantly wanting to define it. He says, 'All languages as communication systems call for constant renewal, and renewal starts with this resumption of pristine contact with things around us, and fixing our place within them.' And he says, 'I think art is language at this point of renewal.' Would you say that is one way of looking at art?

JS: One way. I can see it connecting with Subramanyan completely. The reason I brought that young man up, do you remember, was because it was the opposite of what art means to *me*. The reason I said 'repulsive', if I used the word 'repulsive' – was not because I was denigrating his talent, but I'm saying it was repulsive… So the graph was downward, I am being taken *down*. And I choose *not* to be, if it's humanly possible. Because I think we're taken down so easily by everything, in any case. So I don't want this to take me down further. So for me, it is sublimation, it's the *opposite*, it is seeking not just an empty sense of beauty, but beauty in its essence, its form, its colour, its feel…for me, beauty is integral and *not* a dirty word nor an obsolete word, which it is regarded as today.

AD: Yes, and I am coming to that as well.

JS: There is no question it has become obsolete. I don't care. I simply don't care.

AD: So beauty for you though is not just a counterpoint to functionality. It's far greater than that.

JS: Much deeper. It's like the air you breathe. And if I find it – since you are asking, then I find that I am fed, nourished.

AD: A sense of solace.

JS: Yes, and a sense of…and you know you get a little kick, you're up. When you go and see something monstrous, you are down.

AD: It's almost like paintings are like an oasis, in a very dreary…

JS: That's why, that's why landscape has given me such freedom, because it's very rare… yes you do get the barren, ugly landscape – of course, like in all things. I mean, everybody isn't beautiful. There are people who are normal, there are people who are deformed. There are people who are very good-looking. All of it is part of the whole… But normally, with landscape, you get a sunrise, a sunset, mist, the sun, the moon. The moon is much more important for me than the sun.

AD: I can see why.

JS: I am much more taken by its mystery, by its darkness, by its *wonderful* shaft of silver light.

AD: It has a great deal of subtlety.

JS: *Much* more subtlety. And there's an essential mystery. The sun is of course brilliant… But for me, it is less attractive. You see things so clearly. Sometimes in the mountains, you know these mists come up suddenly and then suddenly clear, and there's a little – like a muslin curtain with a rent in it, and you see the trees and the mountain with absolute clarity… It's just like a revelation, like a shock.

AD: Lifts you up.

JS: To me, it's important. The other, I mean okay…I am not denying the fact that after all, there are many things in life that repulse one, so it's part of life. Many things in life that are ugly.

AD: But for you, it doesn't necessarily have to be glorified and put on canvas.

JS: No, not for me.

AD: Yes, so it doesn't serve any purpose.

JS: Serves no purpose for me, but it may for *you*. I am not laying down the law, saying that Aurogeeta can't because I am a worshipper of beauty, not at all. That's me against you.

AD: Before I started my PhD, Raja asked me what I thought constituted a great work of art.

JS: That's interesting.

AD: I said that it had to have either intellectual or sensual appeal or both, that the approach to the conception of the work and the production of it, had to have integrity – which is of course, a very debatable point because how do you assess that?

JS: Yes, how do you assess integrity?

AD: But you sense it.

JS: You sense it. You know when the work is genuinely felt and done, even it is not very successful, it doesn't matter.

AD: Sincere. That has to be there.

JS: Sincerity, integrity. Just now, I wrote an article for *Tehelka*, which has just come out. For me – and I've said this so often that I'm hesitant to say the same thing to you, but I have to – it is simple: Why do you really need to paint? What makes a painting? A picture is something quite different, all these are pictures [indicates work in the studio]. But how do I change this picture into a painting? Otherwise, they are good pictures, technique is there, they're pleasant, they're attractive, they're well done – all of that. Not a painting. A painting is something that lives and speaks. It's an entity of its own; it has the quality to offer peace, serenity, or or disturb one, or be mysterious. But it speaks in many ways and if it doesn't, it's nice on your wall and you pass it . . . [by]…like your chair every day, you don't even remember it's there. That's not a painting, that's a picture on your wall. But what is it that the artist has to give it to make it a painting? If at all he succeeds. I think it's a combination. I think it does have to have a mind. I'm not one of those people who believe in the impetuous painter. I think it needs a mind. Having a mind… [indicates] that there's… a certain intellect working. It's not enough, because it can be very cold. Where does your spirit [come in] – the humanity, that spark which makes Aurogeeta, for better or worse, what she is? Doesn't mean that you're a wonderful person but that's something that has to enter. Your spirit comes in. Then there's an emotional quality, which is also necessary – which is *not* the spirit…

AD: It's the physical, the vital, the mental and the spiritual.

JS: That's it, that's what I am trying to say. So when those components – on the *rare* occasions that these come together in *one* picture, then *that's* a painting.

AD: So it's a very integrative… Nature and art and our integral response to it.

JS: I have here about 15 paintings, out of which there are one or two, where I feel I may have touched what I am talking about – but only one or two out of 15. The others are not bad, they're good, but I know that that extra something is missing. So when you tell a painter this today, they think you're mad. Because they're so busy with this brilliance of the digital, the computer that can fix it all… This is *wrong*, erase this, this, this…so that whole effect is wiped out and a new technique is brought in with new *strokes*. Whereas you, whatever you're doing is limited by your hand. You can't do…

AD: I remember seeing a work in my university, which had huge glass test tubes. Each one had badges – I think they were metal, or plastic, probably metal. There were at least six, possibly 10 of these test tubes. In diameter, they weren't very big, but they were very long. Each test tube had badges with a different slogan…

JS: On it?

AD: Yes, on the badges. So each test tube had badges of a different colour that spoke of something linking to political awareness. It could be something environmental like, 'I make a conscious effort not to waste water', or it could be something like, 'I take care about whom I vote for.'

JS: Each one carried a little…

AD: Yes, each one carried a little statement, some form of political awareness. And varying degrees and levels of political awareness. Viewers were allowed to pick out badges that they felt were applicable to them, and they were invited to wear it or go away. At the end of the exhibition, it was a sort of graph of the political consciousness of the viewers. And what kind of consciousness they had.

JS: Interesting.

AD: Because they were coloured badges, it became a graph.

JS: You picked one… the tag that you understood and that spoke to you…

AD: Yes, exactly.

JS: So they judged it and they saw how they…

AD: Because various people had picked up coloured badges and taken them away, the number of badges left… it was a sort of graph, which was very interesting. Extremely interesting. And I certainly wouldn't say that that is not art.

JS: No, very interesting.

AD: But what worries me sometimes, and in fact, you were asking me the other day how your work connects to floor-drawings. And I said I will explain at the beginning why I have chosen to speak to particular artists. Apart from sensing integrity, one of the reasons why I wanted to speak to you was because there's still a sense of craft in your work.

JS: Done by the hand, you see.

AD: Done by the hand and…

JS: And there's no extraneous material used. Today, [you can] use anything. I'm old-fashioned. But what I mean is – whether you use sand, or you use tar – Mazumdar, what's his name – the Bengali, he's 50 now or 55. Ah! Dear me, I forget names, this is terrible.

AD: Mazumdar?

JS: Anyway, he's very well-known. Chittrovanu! Chittrovanu Mazumdar.

AD: Ah! Yes.

JS: He showed me his stuff. Huge things. Hot tar, what you see on the road. I don't know how a canvas…couldn't be a canvas, must have been something else which could hold it… It was very effective… So, you can use anything but I am showing you pure classicism. These are old tools of your trade, brushes, turpentine, oils, charcoals, pastels – palette knives I no longer use but even these, I used them a lot before.

AD: What disturbs me a bit today is this – as I said the other day, this tendency to slot and this tendency to look at things as mutually exclusive. That if you are somebody who is employing craft and skill, that you are then necessarily giving up on the conceptual, or the intellectual exercise.

JS: Yes, yes. which I don't think is really so.

AD: Or the other way, for that matter.

JS: Or the other way round. I don't think that's necessarily so. That because you are using craft, the hand, doesn't mean that the head, the concept is underprivileged or undermined. But their conceptualizing is completely different from ours, to what we are talking about. It's not the same thing.

AD: Do you want to elaborate on that?

JS: I just know it's not the same thing. When they say conceptualising, they're not talking of the same thing that you and I are talking about.

AD: They're talking about the analytical tradition.

JS: Yes, no. They're talking of conceptualizing…like you open your computer, so many things come on it. Say you pick up – from the things that are happening, on that computer, they push a button which is…advertising and a million images pass through. They pick up one image, take another from somewhere else, they striate it, they do all that, they conceptualise amazingly in that way, you see. And they also use a workshop now.

AD: But that's a different sort. I suppose what I meant is intellectual…

JS: Yes, but I agree with it. Basically, it's ridiculous. That's what I am trying to say. Otherwise, it's just an empty picture. If the person seeing it feels that 'there is no mind to this artist', then I've got technique and I'm just making pictures – pretty or otherwise; this is simply not enough.

AD: It's interesting that you said that the mind has to be there. Because – as you surely know, the colonial period brought with it so many divisions, labelling, and the art and craft divide. I think that also imposed a hierarchy of value. That art is high art.

JS: And folk art and high art and…

AD: Exactly. And then of course, we were following the Western representational tradition. How do you look at craft? For me, a painter is a painter. A creative person is a creative person. It has nothing to do with…

JS: I know exactly what you are asking. For me…and I have thought of this often myself, and been asked this question often. It's not easy, the answer. You see, what you call fine art and what you call craft. Both can reach a very high level, which I don't dispute at all. To say that because you do this and the craftsman with his hand – whether he is doing a *rangoli* or whatever else, particularly in this country which is perhaps the most gifted in the world, and I think the most sophisticated in its craft tradition.

AD: And it has multiple traditions.

JS: It's a great tradition that has been handed down and it's still alive. It's being revived – [only in] pockets, but it's being revived. But then, if you tell me to define it, it's difficult. But I know there is a difference between fine art and craft. I'm not saying that they both don't reach very high levels.

AD: You're simply saying that they're different, you're not according them a value.

JS: No. Because whether it's a wonderful piece of embroidery which is a piece of art – these things that they do in Gujarat – *absolute* works of *art*. But its' embroidery, so what? It's reached up there. And then you get a painter, who has also reached up there. So I say both have arrived, but I *can't* say that it's the same thing.

AD: No, well, *obviously*, it isn't.

JS: No, a lot of people say, 'You've done this, she's done that.' The *approach* is totally different. One is a tradition, father to son, father to daughter, granddaughter…

AD: But they do innovate even within their traditions.

JS: They do innovate, now they're being taught by people who make them use more sophisticated colours, which are not their traditional colours, sometimes very well, sometimes unsuccessfully. For the market, because craft is being commercialized.

AD: But I would think…the span of innovation was perhaps much slower before, but I think that would have existed even before.

JS: No, it went on very much – in India, in the same way for generations. Little innovations, little experiments took place but not for example the way there has been a radical change within one's lifetime in painting, today's sort of painting. Radical change of styles, approach and now with this other world coming in…

AD: It's a constant renewal here, yes. Which brings me to the other two things that I said to Raja when he asked me what constitutes... The first one was, you know, intellectual or sensual appeal, and the second one was integrity.

JS: Which I agree with, completely – *both*.

AD: The third and the fourth were a little more controversial.

JS: Let's hear about them.

AD: The third was that it has to simultaneously reflect and transcend its time.

JS: Reflect and transcend its time? That's much more difficult. That it should reflect? Certainly. But that is one of the accusations, you know, which was levelled against me. Because for me, art is universal, there's no such thing as Indian art and Chinese art – of course there is, but what I mean [is], it's a *world* phenomenon. And personally, I like this feeling of the international.

AD: Something that is felt with a universal feeling, can be approached by anybody.

JS: Yes. I think it has to be a good painting first, and then you ask all the questions. Where is Aurogeeta from? Pondicherry? Oh, that's very interesting but that's local colour. First…does this painting strike you? Then of course you ask where it is from. Is it an American painter? A German painter? An Eastern painter? All that comes afterwards, but the first thing, is it capable of stirring you? But what you're saying is… its of its time and… that's difficult.

AD: As I said, he was asking about a *great* work of art. What for you constitutes a great work of art.

JS: Yes, but then you see, there again I go back because I find what you're saying… it is pretty difficult to find that which transcends time.

AD: I suppose I should actually clarify what I mean by 'transcends its time'. I do see a lot of art today which is very stimulating – whether it's intellectually or emotionally…it *stimulates* you, in some manner of the other.

JS: And it's so different. It does stimulate you because you've never seen it before.

AD: Exactly. It might give you a fresh angle or it might be whatever… But it's not a work that I would keep with me at home.

JS: No. Absolutely.

AD: And I think perhaps the reason for that is…

JS: It doesn't feed *you*, so do you want to keep it?

AD: It might interest me very much. I might react to it a great deal, but…

JS: Yes, but would you live with it?

AD: I wouldn't live with it, and the reason I *wouldn't* live with it is possibly because the value of my reaction or even response to it would not last.

JS: What is wrong with that? But that is the immediacy of today!

AD: I am not saying anything would be wrong with that but I wouldn't say that that kind of work transcends its time.

JS: No, that doesn't transcend time at all. But you see, immediacy is very attractive to today, it's very much part of today. Shouldn't last more than five years. After that, it's obsolete. Something else comes along.

AD: Which is what I meant by transcend. That it can't be something that just reflects a particular moment.

JS: That's right. For example, a Rembrandt. Why do you wait for months, queue up for hours for a damn ticket to go and see a Rembrandt? Why? If it's so old-fashioned and it's within the frame and all the rest of it? Because it transcends time.

AD: Exactly. Precisely. Yes. That's what I meant.

JS: Which I don't think we do at all, today. We're ephemeral, we're quick, we're provocative, we're sometimes exciting, we're fun! Lots of fun, and lots which is horrible.

AD: Very grotesque. That's what I remember… Anjolie told me this in one of my interviews with her, and I think she was actually speaking about something Prafulla Mohanti had originally said. Which was that, in the West, it fulfils a basic human need for the visceral. Because the grotesque has been sanitized out of their lives.

JS: Exactly, so you've got Damien Hirst, which brings you…

AD: Exactly, that's whom I was going to offer as an example.

JS: Exactly, provocative. That's why I told the man, 'I'm sure you will do better with the Westerners,' and he said, 'How did you know?' I just put two and two together.

AD: Art is always viewed in a particular context.

JS: It titillates their sensuality. I know that. I know the work. I mean, I haven't seen this particular lot which…he finds it difficult to show, you see. So I said, 'You might do very well with the Westerner.' But there you come to the grotesque. Why this chase? And not necessarily that it's pornographic or that it's erotic. Not necessarily at all. It's just grotesque. And most of the things you see in the catalogues. Documenta. Venice Biennale. Sculpture show at Munster. [Venice Biennale, Documenta XII, and the Munster Sculpture Project] All three rolled into a catalogue that's that thick. Just got it yesterday, and I'm flipping through it now. Masses of rubbish, but excellently executed. And a lot that is *grotesque*. And it attracts, because after all, the grotesque…each one of us is drawn to Frankenstein, to Dracula.

AD: It's the fascination of horror. And the last criteria I had for Raja's question, is that it had to simultaneously belong to, and transcend the location of its creative process.

JS: Geographical location? What do you mean by that? How do you mean location?

AD: I mean the place where it was made, India or wherever. I mean, not exactly, but…

JS: No. But I know exactly what you mean. You're quite right there. Of *course* it has to, otherwise it's not universal, it's ethnic.

AD: Yes, exactly.

JS: It belongs to a certain region. Whether it's South American and it *smacks* of South America. I'm not interested.

AD: And the reason I said it has to reflect, to some extent, in some way, whether it's subconsciously or whatever…is because if it didn't, it would be completely divorced from its social context.

JS: It's got to be a *natural* reflection of the region from which it is born…not forced into being Indian or Chinese or American.

AD: Not forced, yes. I remember when I was studying printmaking, my director told me that he could guarantee that I would get a grant to go to the Netherlands, to Amsterdam, if I would oblige them by making my art more 'Indian'. And I said, 'I won't. I won't because I can't. If it doesn't come naturally to me, I don't see the point of doing it.'

JS: There you are. You can't do it. You're so right. You've answered your own question. I'm in total agreement with you. You can't ethnicise, you can't force these things. Sometimes they are *genuinely* of your country. Then it speaks… It's not what I call, India as a fashion house for ethnic things, *sarees* and clothes presented in an ethnic way. That's tourist attraction. You can't take that and call it serious art.

AD: Yes, exactly.

JS: It's interesting because I am the barometer. [They ask me whether they should say Indian artist]. I say 'Of course, you have to write that, that he's an Indian painter.'

AD: Yes.

JS: And they say, 'Who is this fellow? The foreigner Indian?' Husain is a very strong pro-ethnic example. Raza going on and on about the *bindu* abroad. He lives there yet the *bindu* is his constant motif. Why did you ever leave India? After all, that's the *source* of your inspiration. Now I can't say that's true of myself. There's a lot of depiction of what you see in India, that may be so… But supposing I lived in England, I don't know *what* I would have been painting. It wouldn't be necessarily localized to India.

AD: Hmm. You respond to your environment.

JS: I respond to my environment. I respond to my own feel, which changes constantly, from subject to subject.

AD: Shakti [Maira – a writer and artist] said something in his book about the difference between Indian art and Western art, or any other art for that matter. He says that there are two differences. One concerns the formal aspect, the continuity with which pictorial space and times sequences have been handled in Indian art. The other concerns value – the notion…how we conceive the role of art.

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And he says that was *ananda*, nature and our integrative response to it, the profound joy that we feel in that. I'm still uncertain about the tension between the local and the universal.

JS: But you think that tension should be there? [Some interview lost due to tape change]

Interview with Jehangir Sabavala for PhD, at his studio, Ansty Road, Mumbai, 25 October 2007 – Part 2

JS: Aurogeeta is an example of a young *Indian*. After all, you happen to be from India, but you could be from anywhere. We could talk of a million things that are not necessarily confined to our frontiers. Ideas or books or anything. Which makes you much more *international*. As a person.

AD: And I think, in some sense, I am and perhaps in another sense…

JS: And in another sense, you're not. Yes, I sense that.

AD: In another sense, I am not, perhaps because one also has to have a sense of roots, a sense of one's context.

JS: *Yes*, exactly. As I grow older, I realize that. When I was younger, who cared? I don't have roots but I am missing them now. I miss them. Because I think you know, it's right, you *should* have roots. One was brought up in a certain way…it happened to be in a *very* small family – what is it called…?

AD: Dysfunctional. That's the word we used the other day.

JS: Dysfunctional. With the result that there is no way that you feel roots. But *now*, over the last 10 years I would say, from my seventies onwards, I think, 'How nice,' you know when you see families and they have roots. But family is family and the roots are there.

AD: There's a sense of belonging.

JS: Yes, and you get a strength from it or else you are… sort of… basically alone.

AD: I have often felt that perhaps I've sort of consoled myself, by thinking that – perhaps in the long run – if you can overcome that, and go *beyond* needing those roots and the cultural context, perhaps you are that much stronger.

JS: Of course, because then you are rich and you have another level of strength, where you're *really* at home everywhere and you don't need those ethnic roots to support you.

AD: Yes, but I doubt very much – that is a very difficult thing to do.

JS: I think that needs you to be very philosophic, a deep thinker, about *everything*. You question, you ask, you think – I'm sure you *do*, I do. But we do it to a normal extent, you know what I mean? This – what you are seeking – has to be done as a practice, till you find, 'I'm like a tree, I'll stand with just my own roots, enough to support me, till the day I am not there.'

AD: I think this sort of – one might even call it insecurity – as a person, would affect one's work as an artist, as a writer and…what kind of forms? Where do you pick up your forms from? Where do you pick up your narrative? That's where tradition starts playing a role.

JS: Of course. You see, that's where…in one's own case, forms have…through years of working and practice, forms have crystallized… I mean, I now know that I paint *my* cloud and *my* sky. You know what I mean? I know from the way that I am doing it – from the shape of the cloud. What I am doing has truly become mine] now… and I love it.

AD: Or for that matter, even work from Shantiniketan, for example. You don't have to tell me it's from Shantiniketan.

JS: That's right. You can sense it.

AD: I can sense it, I can feel it. And there I suppose – to some extent, as I said, I feel some tension. To some extent I wonder, 'Is that necessary?'

JS: It's a seeking really, and it will take a long time. I think you need to be much older. As life goes on and other experiences are lived, this will be concurrent, running with you, I am sure.

AD: Which is why, I find it interesting. The question of whether your art is Indian or not does that not preoccupy you at all?

JS: It never preoccupies me, has never bothered me. I couldn't care less… I am very concerned if that [points to work on easel] doesn't work; in *itself* it is of the utmost importance. But that's another matter, not it's Indianness… But the *strange* thing is one's hold of India. Isn't it funny? I mean, I have been *absolutely* amazed…someone was asking – I think it was Tehelka again. I mean so many of these articles… What is the strange thing that makes this artist's exhibition bring in the masses? I am talking of the people, not you or I. And they follow, they've followed my career for the last 40 years. Their grandchildren come to me now. I said, 'What are you *talking* about? How can you *possibly* know me? I am an old *man*. Your grandfather's age.' And he said, 'Yes, but grandfather knew you.' And so I said, 'How do you know?' [He had] cuttings – *Illustrated Weekly*, what's the big Hindi journal in the north? I forget.

AD: Interestingly, I took some friends out to dinner yesterday and we picked them up from their home. And there was a cutting of yours [laugh] that was stuck to their soft board. I was almost going to ask them, but then we were getting late and Raja was…

JS: How *strange* and isn't that lovely? Just lovely.

AD: And I smiled to myself [laugh].

JS: [Laughs] But look at this, one was supposed to be the candidate who was the outsider… [Referring to himself] I was the foreign one who returned, who says he is Indian… foreign-lived but he's come back to live in India, a *pardeshi* [foreigner].

AD: And the other is painting the *bindi*…

JS: They were all rooted, because all of them are very… [Referring to M. F. Husain, Tyeb Mehta, Krishen Khanna, S. H. Raza – essentially the Progressives]. They have that advantage, they *do* belong. And they think – I mean, Tyeb Mehta does all this Picasso stuff, but then he's very well-versed in mythology, Indian mythology. That always comes through.

AD: The triptych… I mean, you know. Ramu wrote an entire book on that one painting. (Gandhi, 2002)

JS: So, it cuts both ways.

AD: I think yes, it cuts both ways. I am going to move to the broader questions that I am dealing with in my PhD. Two writers – Green and Mort who write a lot on visual culture suggest that the phrases 'art and society', 'art and its historical background' – these phrases need to be done away with altogether.

JS: This jargon.

AD: This jargon needs to be done away with. What they say, and what I very much agree with is what I was saying earlier. The definition of art hasn't been constant at all from place to place, from time to time; it has changed. And they suggest that visual representation needs to be looked at more as a set of interlocking histories which involve various relations, various dependencies, fields – social fields and practices. I think personally that art can't be defined as – earlier, you yourself were saying, 'For *me*, this works for *me* but doesn't necessarily work for somebody else…'

JS: No, but not necessarily for someone else…it *can't* be defined… because what is true for me isn't at *all* true for you. That doesn't mean that you are either superior or inferior. It's just difficult to define. One can only define it for oneself. Its meaning for *you*.

AD: I think, earlier that possibly didn't pose as much of a problem as it does today. Perhaps the reason it poses so much of a problem today – the need to define has become so…compulsive almost, I think perhaps, because of the market.

JS: Yes, of course. You see, *neve*r before in art history has the market been chased, more cunningly, and more deliberately. The artist, the dealer, the gallerist, the auction house – it's all a cartel and everyone is after money. Therefore, you get this… It wasn't after all [as though there weren't] great works of art before…but commissions by the church, or donations given to the church, given to palaces, frescos, walls… And the whole school of the master was paid a pittance. But today, the whole thing…look at the market today, there's something slightly ridiculous about it.

AD: For you, the process is obviously very important and – as it would be actually, I suppose for any painter – therefore when you finish your work of art, how much importance does the object – the painting itself – take on, once you've gone through the process?

JS: You mean when the painting is finished, what do you mean by 'how much importance'?

AD: **What does the canvas then represent?**

JS: Once you're finished with it…

AD: **I mean, the culmination of an effort definitely. But what else?**

JS: The culmination of it…you've put it well. It is the culmination of an effort. I think *most* times, to be *really* honest with you, you think you've reached somewhere but the mind has raced ahead and the hand hasn't been able to follow the concept in the mind. So I always feel it's lacking. You see, it hasn't really reached… One has raced ahead of the other. You've brought it off, hopefully, but that is okay for the commercial market.

AD: **So that's a compromise.**

JS: It's a compromise. You're asking *me*, what do I think? Very few pictures… *Here*, I don't think I could have got much further [indicating canvas in the studio] but with many, I *know* it should have gone two steps further to have really arrived at what I was trying to say, spoken back to *me* with what I was *really* thinking, but it hasn't said it. Now, I know that…

AD: **Interesting you say that because Coomaraswamy says that. A painting's success can only be judged by the painter himself.**

JS: Absolutely.

AD: **Because only he knows whether it has matched his pre-conceived image.**

JS: *Very* rarely. I think every painter knows this…they speak a lot of nonsense because they're afraid, they want it to sell, so they can't say the wrong thing, you know.

AD: **[Laugh]**

JS: You have to be careful of that.

AD: **Yes, one has to live as well.**

JS: One has to live. But that doesn't mean you cannot be honest with yourself.

AD: **But if the market didn't play such a great role as it does today, can you imagine any other kind of system by which you could continue producing art and not have to worry about your living and the market?**

JS: Ye..ah, well. You see, what has happened is that – particularly in this country, an artist's living wage or what he earned was sub-standard – so he lived in poverty, the garrets and all that really applied; in Europe, it applied in the eighteenth century, never after that, never since. Here, all this sudden success is entirely new and artists have to mature to accept it in a reasonable way. They can buy an expensive car. Why not? You

have it, I have it, why can't they have it? They have an expensive flat. I mean, the other day, I saw a *young* artist and I was absolutely taken aback.

AD: Very well to do.

JS: I was shocked. I didn't think he'd live this way. Which is a very good thing. But he has to be mature enough for that… That's the good aspect, that he's being well paid now but that doesn't mean he's necessarily producing good work. He's meeting a market drive.

AD: He's meeting a demand.

JS: Meeting the demand. Therefore quality is often not sought after, it's going down. There's no question about it. And a sudden correction has come. I was talking to this person in London yesterday, and I said 20 to 30% down, and he said, 'A little more than that.' *Good*, because they're all inflated prices.

AD: It's like the internet boom again I'm sure, the dotcom bust.

JS: And it's a market that is *played* by cartels. I told you, they push *you* up or down…

AD: And you even have the share price index for artists now, which is quite an incredible idea [the share price index for Indian art and artists was introduced by Neville Tuli – founder of HEART and OSIAN's in the first years of the 21st century and was received with very mixed reviews].

JS: After all, art is right there [raises his hand high]. I found just now; I asked, 'Where's this painting now?' The man said, 'It's in the vault.' I said, 'In a vault? Why are you putting it in a vault?' . . . [Laughs] He said, the bank has bought it. It's in an art fund.

AD: What has bought it?

JS: The art fund, the bank. The bank has got an art fund. There are *several* in Bombay, art funds of different statures…

AD: I had heard of one. I didn't know there were several.

JS: I mean, one might be more powerful, a much richer consortium than the next one…

[Interruption of interview]

AD: That brings me to my last question. I had a few more comments to say but…

JS: But tell me, what's the other one?

AD: The last question is almost the crux of my PhD, actually. And it's something that's echoed by a writer whom I discovered fairly recently, during my MA. I was very delighted because he echoes my thoughts.

JS: He's an English writer?

AD: No, I believe he's American. He says that redefining art would help us to recognise and valorise those expressive forms that already provide us with aesthetic experience but would perhaps provide us with much *more* if they were cultivated and legitimized…

JS: But how can you *not* – the authorities necessary, the intellectuals concerned – how can you *not* redefine art today? Because there is virtually no connection, virtually no connection…

AD: With…?

JS: With the classic form of art.

AD: Yes, exactly.

JS: With what you're seeing and what is being done. After all, little of [the] hand, in the old-fashioned way, is used, the hand is used to work for your computer. So you've *got* to [redefine art]…

AD: Yes, earlier I used to shy away from definitions, but I think *now*, because of the situation and because of the market…

JS: It's… *Now*, it's *demanding* it, to *redefine* art. You didn't really need to define it [before]. It went on…there were several modern movements, there were modern this, that, and the other. The new movements – first Abstraction and all that came in. But that was a sort of progression, and a natural growth and break away from the classic form, from the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

AD: That is a sort of renewal of language, and form, and meaning.

JS: Renewal, revitalizing… These movements came, Cubism came, hundreds of other things came. All movements. But not this *radical* change when the *hand* isn't used, the brush isn't used and if used, it is in a radically different way.

AD: Right. Actually, that's another point that Shakti [Maira] makes in his book.

JS: What?

AD: That the West has tended to make art that is increasingly intellectual and has lost on the sensual aspect of it.

JS: I think the reason is, it's opened up the chamber of horrors. There *always* was a section – you know even among the great classics, who worked the macabre. Touched on them. But just a fringe of classic masters did this. After all, think of Bosch. He was both humourous and macabre. There was an element of… strangely done figures, you know. Figures that dealt with the Netherlands, with ordinary everyday life and its minutiae. I mean, I can think of one or two who *touched* upon the grotesque and the surreal.

AD: For want of a better word, a darker…

JS: There is a darker side. *Today*, we're not only talking of a… The darker side becomes…paramount and it's *played up.*

AD: In excess.

JS: In excess and one wonders if this young person *really* has this extravagant side or is it a technical ability which transforms it into what is fashionably grotesque. The more outrageous, the better.

AD: I'm not going to name the person, I had the experience of being asked by somebody to name somebody – an Indian artist, any Indian artist whom I admired. At the time – this was when I was distracted by my personal problems. And, at the time – I mean, I have spoken to so many artists, interviewed so many artists, I count so many artists as my personal friends…

JS: This was before you left [for the PhD].

AD: Yes. And I had just interviewed you, in January, for *First City*.

JS: And you left soon after.

AD: So I named you, your work was fresh in my mind. And this person asked me, 'Why do you like his work?'

JS: Was this another artist?

AD: No. He wasn't. But he asked me, 'Why do you like his work?' And the first thing that came to my mind was the sensual aspect. As I said, I was distracted by personal problems at the time, so that's what I said, and I didn't say anything more. But he immediately butted in, and he said, 'Oh really, you like *his* work? That's very *strange*. But that's just the sensual appeal, what else is there?' I was a little taken aback, you know. And then he named an artist who does very *clever* work, and provocative. Certainly interesting, I am not saying it's not interesting. But…as I said earlier, integrity. I don't sense sincerity.

JS: In this other person [he named]. But you did in the other person you liked – the sensual?

AD: Yes, yes, and that was your work.

JS: Oh that was my work? I am getting mixed up. It was me, my work that you said you liked and he said why?

AD: Yes, the first thing that came to my mind was the sensual aspect. So I said so, and then he said 'there's just the sensual appeal and there's nothing more'. And then, since I was taken aback, I said, 'Well, name an artist *you* like.' I just wanted to know. I was curious.

JS: You tossed the question back.

AD: I asked him, yes. And then he named an artist whom I know very well – personally as well as her work. But I've never sensed integrity or sincerity in her work. Very clever, very provocative, very interesting – all that is there. But I've seen lots of work like that in the West. It might be new *here* but it's been done.

JS: Exactly right.

AD: But what is far more important for me is that I don't sense integrity. If you asked me why… how…

JS: How can you sense integrity?

AD: I don't know. I know. I feel that it is not sincere.

JS: But that is something you feel. It's either there or not there. I agree with you.

AD: It's just not sincere for me. And then I felt that this will not survive for long. If it is not sincere, it won't last…

JS: This type of thing is not there to endure.

AD: Yes, both as a genre as well as because it is not sincere. I am very convinced that it can't last because it is not sincere. In a strange way, that was one of the starting points for my PhD.

JS: At that time.

AD: I was disturbed by the suggestion of this person, that I must like something merely because it is new and cutting edge [using a new technology].

JS: Yes, yes, cutting edge is in, absolutely in.

Interview with Manisha Gera Baswani for PhD, at her studio, Sarvapriya Vihar, Delhi, 1 November 2007
Manisha Gera Baswani completed her MFA at the Jamia Millia Islamia University, Delhi in 1992. She received a Government of France scholarship to study in Paris (1993), the Government of India National Scholarship for Young Emerging Artists (1991-93), and the Government of India Junior Fellowship (1995-97). She has exhibited widely in India and has guest lectured at the National College of Art, Lahore and Indus Art College, Karachi. She also worked as Creative Director on the *Gita Govinda* project – a multi-media initiative at the Indira Gandhi National Centre of Arts. She considers A. Ramachandran to be her guru.

I decided to interview her primarily because of the influence of miniatures – which I consider as a traditional idiom – on her work, and her advocacy for the 'decorative' to be brought back into Indian art.

AD: Aurogeeta Das
MGB: Manisha Gera Baswani

AD: The first thing I wanted to ask you was, what does art mean to you? How would you define art?

MGB: It's a meditative act for me. When I sit in my studio, away from the humdrum of life, the act of putting a brush to paper could be a silent prayer for me and when it finishes, if it finishes the way I would like it to be, it's almost like saying hello to god, and then coming back to mother earth. That's a ritual for me, and that's the kind of pleasure I derive from the act of painting.

AD: How does that work? There's a quote that says, 'Music washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.' When you say 'meditative', is that what you mean?

MGB: Absolutely. Art for me is what cooking is for my mother. If we identify what brings us peace and happiness in our life, we become better human beings. We all have it. It's probably so even for a thief, the act of stealing something and getting money [for it] is something [pleasurable]. He probably feels, 'Great, I've done it.' Each of us has it. In our mythology, in Indian philosophy, somebody is *satvik* [one who performs correct actions without the desire for reward], somebody is *tamasik* [one who performs incorrect actions with the desire for reward], but they are all acts, it gets them somewhere. It gives them a sense of elevation. If we can all identify our respective *tamasik* acts, it will make us reach higher. We also say, in our philosophy, that a *tamasik* is better than someone who refuses to work. At least a *tamasik* is doing something.

AD: If you say that the *act* is very important, if someone is just sitting in meditation, would you consider the act more effective than meditation?

MGB: No, eventually the higher state of being is non-[action], complete silence, but that is only after you have gone through the acts of *tamasik*, *rajasik* [someone who performs correct actions with the desire for reward] and *satvik*. It should not be in reverse order. [Laughs]

AD: So language becomes important at this point. Before you reach silence, you need language.

MGB: Yes, it's like grammar, you learn ABCD, then when you want to write a poem, you can afford to be ungrammatical, because you've learnt the grammar. But if my three-year old says, 'I go school to', I have to tell him, 'It's not a poem, it's not the right way.' So there is a grammar for everything in life. I think we are all eventually aspiring towards simplicity, reaching a simpler state of being, like the Zen masters. We all want the minimum, *through* having achieved the maximum.

AD: Yes, I remember David Abraham telling me once how he thinks Matisse's paper cut-outs are child-like, not childish, that he's gone through the whole process of learning and making before being able to be simple. So complexity in simplicity, or simplicity arrived at *after* complexity…

MGB: Absolutely.

AD: It's interesting you say that because even in our traditional system of learning, especially in art learning, you have to go through a rigorous structure before you're allowed out of it.

MGB: Yes.

AD: I'm jumping the gun a bit here but when you made those works with Elvis and the insects, you used something of the miniature style there. Where did that come from?

MGB: Miniature has been coming back into my work. I had worked for the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts on a project called the *Gita Govinda*, which was a thirteenth century Sanskrit poem and that poem was translated into various aspects of music, dance, literature, poetry and painting. I had to explore all these aspects. Of course in one year, you can only do this superficially, but through the project, I got to see how that thirteenth century Sanskrit poem was translated in miniature schools across the country.

AD: So you were looking at all the art forms?

MGB: Yes, how all the art forms were influenced and how the *Gita Govind* is enacted in various art forms, from Kashmir to Kerala. Having said that, *before* that, I was being given an insightful look into miniatures through my guru, Mr. Ramachandran, through my visits to his house, because he has some of the finest miniatures… He introduced me to Indian art, looking at Indian art at a very [young age]… as a student. Indian art includes murals, wall paintings, miniatures, crafts, *patachitras*, Madhubani, everything… But working on an academic project with this in mind… I think the *Gita Govinda* took my engagement with Indian art to the next step. And then my series of… It started with the lotus because I had to study how the lotus signifies god. It signifies truth, it signifies the higher being, it signifies all of that. So it started with the form of the lotus, and then I started moving from various forms and aspects of miniatures. And then of course, I've crossed miniatures. I still enjoy them but now I'm enjoying looking at Christian mythology and looking at really old books on Christian paintings, the Jewish testaments, anything which is…

AD: Iconographic.

MGB: Iconographical images, that's right.

AD: In between, you also did some work in Pakistan.

MGB: Yes, I did. I went . . . with my husband, and I was asked to give a talk on my work and how it was inspired. Pakistan is thriving in contemporary miniatures. They have taken from Indian art what we could have rightfully claimed as ours, but we haven't. We choose not to be proud of it. We still think and say that it's too decorative. I always have a problem when people say it's decorative, because decorative is not a word to be looked down upon in India. It's coming from the Western point of view. I'm not saying one is good and one is bad but categorising an art form from another context, is – I feel – the wrong way to view an art form.

AD: I was going to come to that, so I'm glad you brought it up. A couple of years ago, in *Art India*, Girish Shahane was discussing how the decorative has stopped being a derogatory term. He says that's sort of changing now and in fact I think he discussed your work in that article. Do you think that's changing?

MGB: Oh tremendously, and I think I have to give credit to the Pakistanis there. They have… It's only when people from outside come to our country and show us what has been done that we show respect, that we accord respect to it. I'm sure it would have happened anyway; if not now, it might have happened 10 years from now. But there's such good work happening in Pakistan, with miniatures and when Indian galleries started showing them, they were a novelty. I think we critics sat back in our seats and started to say, 'Wow, this is great.' That's when we started looking at artists inspired by that idiom.

AD: Any particular artist you can think of as an example, a Pakistani artist?

MGB: Well, there was a show which was… six, seven years back. It was a group artists' show, and it had Ayesha [Durrani], [Aisha] Khalid , Imran [Qureshi]. It had Waseem [Ahmed], . . . Saira Wasim. They're all now in their late thirties, early forties and they are a big name, not just in Pakistan, some of them now actually live abroad. But because Pakistani art is *so young*, by virtue of the fact that Pakistani [contemporary] art is not a very mature art, they . . . [assume] senior status in their *échelle*, although they're just 40. But yes they start… I mean, we have sat back and looked at what's happening in Pakistan and I think there is a lesson or two to be learnt from them.

AD: Could that be linked to the fact that they're taught miniature painting, I mean in college?

MGB: Yes, of course, absolutely. It's a tradition. You're taught even to catch squirrels and make brushes.

AD: Really?

MGB: Yes, yes. In the first year, you're taught to catch a squirrel, put it to sleep… they make a brush. I feel that as an artist, I don't want to be categorised as a miniature artist at all, because for me… I'm *inspired* by miniatures as by anything else.

AD: You can't categorise your work as miniatures anyway.

MGB: Yes, the scale is different. But one of the major *inspirations*…*are* miniatures. However, in Pakistan, the scale is maintained, there is a sanctity accorded to the scale of the [traditional] miniature. So one who is breaking away from the sanctity of the scale is also – I wouldn't say [he or she] is an outcaste, but questions are being raised… It's like classical music, like, '*Aap bahar jaa rahe hain*' [You are going out of it, crossing boundaries]. And they are doing it. And they need to do it, because otherwise the system [the school of miniatures] would be dead again. So thankfully, I feel in India we are not . . . [adhering to a strict grammar]. We take what we choose to, and in India, I see definitely Gulam [Gulammohammad Sheikh], Nilima [Sheikh], Amit Ambalal, Bhupen [Khakhar], Anandajit [Ray] doesn't agree but I see Anandajit definitely inspired by it [the miniature style]…

AD: Really?

MGB: …format, probably colour combination… I feel so.

AD: There is a certain compactness in his work which is derivative of the miniature style, yes.

MGB: There is. Yes, I feel that. In his line, probably N. S. Harsha, Gargi Raina…

AD: Really, Harsha as well?

MGB: N. S. Harsha, I see it in his *line*. One work I remember, he made a leaf in Khoj which was – you walk on a carpet and a section of the carpet had a leaf, which was actually the same pattern being repeated on the leaf. I wouldn't say completely but yes, I see images…

AD: More indirect input perhaps. [I realised during the transcription of this interview that I was confusing N. S. Harsha with S. Harshavardhana, who is an abstract artist, hence my puzzlement.]

MGB: Yes.

AD: I was going to ask you what you think of Amit Ambalal's work, and Navjot's work as well.

MGB: Navjot, I couldn't say…

AD: I don't mean miniatures but taking something from traditional arts, in different ways.

MGB: Yes, actually I think…

AD: Navjot not so much in the form of the work perhaps, but emotionally, in the spirit of it, in collaborating with craftspeople.

MGB: Well, it's showing in her sculptures for sure but I haven't actually followed her work enough to talk about it. I admire her work tremendously but Amit Ambalal, definitely. I know him, and he is a collector of *pichvais* and miniatures. I see it in his work, I see the direct transfer of his inspiration in his work.

AD: Including flat colours.

MGB: Yes, including flat colours.

AD: What about Arpana Caur?

MGB: Yes, Arpana's also inspired… I mean, she would be able to tell you better about it. On the outside yes, there are some artists who are visibly [inspired by traditional arts], some who are but it shows differently in their work. But in Arpana's case, yes, definitely, there is a direct correlation between her [work and traditional arts]… Quite recently, she brought out a book on her collection of miniatures.

AD: Oh. One of the reasons I am asking you about these artists' work is because I was wondering what you think of the pedagogic system here. Colleges here,

unlike the Pakistanis, don't teach any of the traditional arts. Do you think that's an advantage or a disadvantage?

MGB: It's a disadvantage, of course. I feel we have a system which is coming straight from the British point of view, you know. So… I feel it's like R. K. Narayan. Imagine if R. K. Narayan did not have an India-specific writing, how boring it would be. His speciality is… I mean, first off, he can be enjoyed *truly* by an Indian.

AD: The flavour, the texture…

MGB: Exactly, I think in our art schools, we lack this now. If it were not for my guru Ramachandran, I would not have got an insight into Indian art now. And why should I not? So whose problem is it? I believe we are not proud enough to show... Even if we are proud, we don't have a system in place.

AD: The system itself has not been decolonised, whether it's institutions of display or institutions of learning.

MGB: No.

AD: How has that affected the way institutions of display function, for example – the lack of decolonisation?

MGB: I feel that our country is so rich that an academic experience can be overpowered by our visual experience and our visual experience is fantastic. Imagine if the academic experience was fantastic too. I think that says a lot for our country. When we live, walk, breathe our air, it seeps in [even without the academic experience supporting this process]. I think in India we are at this juncture in time – as a young Indian, I feel it's a very beautiful time. We have never been so proud of our country. And it's showing in our work, in whatever we do.

AD: There's a new confidence.

MGB: It has come. So I hope the academic system improves. And I'm *sure* it will because privatisation in other areas is making a difference in scholarship, in our learning. If the government doesn't do something, private learning will. It's a matter of time.

AD: The inferiority complex we used to suffer, you think is disappearing now.

MGB: What complex? [Both laugh].

AD: Excellent. So you said for you, art is a meditative experience. I am quoting you something from Subramanyan, verbatim. He says, 'All languages as communication systems call for constant renewal and renewal starts with a resumption of pristine contacts with things around and fixing our place within them. I think art is language at this point of renewal.'

MGB: Fantastic. I think that's exactly… what I said about the visual experience… We are…an Indian is [now] breathing an air of confidence and it will come in anything and everything he does. So Subramanyan has said exactly that.

AD: What role does form play in this experience of calming you down, or rooting you?

MGB: When you say form…?

AD: Giving form, giving form to your work, expressing yourself in form, just the *visual* form. How would it be different if you were expressing yourself in writing? Why is the visual form important?

MGB: For me, visual form takes precedence in the mornings, in my studio hours and playing with my kids is a tactile form, which transports me to the *same* level – when I am with my kids! I don't want to overrate the role of a mother, but what I am saying is, whatever you do, I wouldn't say one is more than the other. I am here as a house-maker saying this. I am not talking as an artist. Because I feel I am first an individual, I am an individual playing many roles in my life.

AD: And each contributes to the other.

MGB: And one is not more than the other. You can't say… Yes, if I don't paint, it will . . . [adversely affect] my kids, that much I know. [Laughs] I need to paint for my sanity, definitely. I do. All my roles, whatever I like doing, they transport me. If I don't spend that quality time, which is a tactile role, which is a formalist role with my children, it leaves me half-empty at the end of the day. So I think we all need to learn to play with our respective forms [and roles] in the right ratios. That is the balance of life.

AD: I think that has been threatened to some extent with institutionalisation.

MGB: Hmm?

AD: What I am talking about is the interconnectedness of things. With institutionalisation, there comes – to some extent – a sort of professionalism which tends to divorce one's profession from one's intimate life.

MGB: But the bottom line is, one needs to see what will you say at 50? In retrospect, how do you see your life? But again, each to their own. In my case, I need to have these multiple roles in my life.

AD: Just before starting my PhD, someone asked me what I thought constituted a great work of art. I thought it a big question, one that needed thinking about for a bit. I came up with four criteria, and I just want your opinion on it. Today, it's become difficult to define art or to understand what constitutes art, it has become a huge question. So, the first criteria is that the work of art has to have either intellectual or sensuous appeal, or both, but at least one of them. The second one is that the approach to the production of the work and the conception of it as well, has to have integrity. The third . . . is that it has to simultaneously reflect and transcend its time and the fourth one is that it has to simultaneously belong to, and transcend the location of making the work. If you apply that to your work, say, particularly the third one and in fact, the second one as well.

MGB: Third one definitely. What was the second one again?

AD: That there has to be integrity.

MGB: Right.

AD: Intellectual and sensuous appeal, I think that many people have said that, there is some broad agreement on that. The second one – integrity – is something that most people don't really raise. For me, somehow, that has been a very important issue. If someone is doing work and grabbing attention, doing it to grab attention, that kind of thing puts me off, I can't respond to it. That's a very a subjective thing – you either sense it or you don't.

MGB: Right, right.

AD: So, that's difficult to gauge. But the third one, reflect and transcend its time, I'm asking you particularly because the last time we spoke, you spoke about the difficulties of going against the grain and not really… You know, at some point you did feel that you're not swimming with the tide and you were being made to feel that. That could be perhaps because you are somebody who is viewed as…someone who is not going with the times, someone who is [not] producing *cutting-edge* work. How do you feel about that now?

MGB: First, I will elaborate on what a good work of art is. It's something I have borrowed. There is a treatise in Indian art called the *Vishnudharmotama* [*Vishnudharmottara Purana*]. There, they ask a sage what is a good work of art, and the sage says, 'When you see a work of art and in that moment of seeing the work of art, the viewer is transported – even for a mere fraction of a second – and he forgets the physical being of his existence, if the work can transport him to a higher level and make him forget his physical reality, then the artwork has made him get a glimpse of what is high reality. *If* the artwork is successful in doing that, that is the quality of a good work [of art]. And that, I feel, is the most beautiful [view]. That is how I see my work. That is how I see a work of art, how I view it. And it could be a video or it could be a… I am not saying it has to be a painting.

AD: No, no, the form doesn't matter.

MGB: It doesn't. I remember a work by Sonia Khurana – it was a well. It was a shut well in a village environment and you enter that well, and from inside, there were cries of women. I can't forget that work. I forgot my existence and I opened the lid of the well. Now, that for me still is and will remain the way I will look at an artwork. So whatever you said stands or doesn't stand, because you know it, when you look at a work of art. Has it spoken to you or not? It doesn't need words. And that's how I would like a viewer to relate to my work.

AD: It's interesting you quoted the *Vishnudharmottara [Purana]*. In [Shakti] Maira's book that he wrote last year, he speaks of the difference between Indian and Western art. He says there is one difference that is formal, that is the continuity with which pictorial space and time sequences are handled in Indian art. And the second one is value and he calls it *ananda* [profound joy and calm]. He says that [art is made] to enable the experiencing of profound joy and our integrative response to nature of which we are a part. And so it's a very transformative

experience. I haven't thought about this in the context of *viewing* art – surprisingly.

MGB: Always…

AD: But I have thought about it in the context of *making* art.

MGB: Well, look at it this way, Aurogeeta, I have been buying art – I am a collector of Indian art – for 10 years. I wouldn't say I have a big collection, but it's a good collection. It's an intimate – but it's a very high quality – collection of contemporary Indian artists. Their work has nothing to do with my work. I buy contemporary art not because its imagery helps me in my art. I buy it because it gives me that sense of transportation. So the works I have – I feel – bring an energy to my house, because that is what the artist felt when he finished that last stroke of his brush and there is that energy. What I buy for my work is miniatures and oleographs. So I have two separate collections, mixed up and presented together, but I am speaking here as an artist and as a buyer of contemporary Indian art. So I feel… And it doesn't have to be art. It could be music, it could be *food*, your mother's *gajar ka halwa* [carrot dessert]! It could be… Has it transported you? Why do you go to some place, and without any human interaction, you sit there and you feel, 'This place gave me something more'? That is exactly what I am saying.

AD: This is very, very . . . [related?] to our Indian tradition.

MGB: It is, and that's why I feel rich – to have been born in a country that gives me so much. And I choose to take. Let me put it this way, you have to take it.

AD: It's there for us to… We have this huge resource that we can draw upon.

MGB: We do, and lucky for us! We don't have a 300-year-old…[building] that we say is an ancient monument. We have…

AD: So you would find it hard to… I mean, I am not making an assumption here. I am *asking* you… Would you find it hard to respond to a work like, say Marcel Duchamps' urinal, or even Damien Hirst's work?

MGB: You know, Damien Hirst, I haven't seen much. But Duchamps, again – how do you see a work? You know Duchamps was an intellectual, he had a philosophy. I would enjoy reading what Duchamps had to offer. If I had the money, I wouldn't buy that pot because it is a pot after all. I won't buy it but here is a man who started a movement to look at things differently, so that dynamism I have to give him. I don't want to become judgemental about things in life because that is what stops us from growing. I would like… I mean I think there is enough place for everyone.

AD: You would not want to accord values or hierarchies.

MGB: I don't want to. But I know what I want to… I know what transports me and if I have to surround myself with that, yes. That will not deter me from buying Duchamp's book to read him, I want to read him, I want to grow, I want to go beyond Duchamps to learn. But would I buy it and surround myself with it? That's different.

AD: I was telling Sabavala, when I was interviewing him, that I am not against intellectual or conceptual art. I was telling him about this work I saw in London, where you had huge glass test tubes. Not big in diameter, quite small in diameter but very long ones, about that size… [indicate with my hand]. Each was filled with differently coloured badges and each badge had a statement about something linking to political awareness. It could be something like, 'I make a conscious effort not to waste water', or it could be something like, 'I take care about whom I vote for.' Varying degrees and levels of political awareness. Because they were all coloured differently – what happened was that the viewer was allowed, was invited to pick up a badge that he or she felt represented him or her the most, and wear it or take it away. So at the end of the exhibition, because various people had picked up badges and taken them away, the number of badges left – with their colours, became a graph. You had a sort of indicative graph of political awareness, of the viewers' political awareness.

MGB: Oh…

AD: Which I thought was a very interesting concept, and I certainly responded to it. So I am not fixated on traditional art, or for that matter on form which is derivative of traditional art forms. I find conceptual art very exciting if it is done with integrity. But I think these sorts of questions arise now, at this point, because first, there has been a rupture.

MGB: . . . [Inaudible] The only thing is… and this is my view, like when we had the Triennial. I won't name the people, but I am told the works that were selected for the Triennial were all installations. The two members of the jury who were Indian – one of them vociferously said, 'We are not against installations,' because the other three jury members were Westerners, non-Asians. But by doing a Triennial which presents a comprehensive view of the art scene, if you have just installations, you're giving a college student a very wrong notion that if he does installations, he's an artist, if he does paintings, he's not. You're probably destroying someone who could have been a fantastic artist, who feels like painting, but who sees that there is no future waiting for him. So I think that every philosophy has to grow and let the other grow. But, if it's not happening, in time to come, there will be monotony, society itself will stop taking it because people will be bored, and that's probably what's happening now. People want to go back to pure painting, people want to see…

AD: Art that they can actually identify with…

MGB: Yes, and relate with. In all probability, that will also pass because installations have come as a revolt against that. They . . . got bored of painting, so they got this. So there is change, always happening.

AD: But that has always been there. You know, reactions have always been there. But today somehow, I feel there is – I don't know what you think – but today, somehow I think there is a bit of a crisis. Because first, the world over I think there is a crisis, because there has been hierarchy accorded to various forms of art.

MGB: Yes, yes.

AD: Which I think is getting into that judgemental mode, which is never ending, in anything. Second, I think in India we are facing a particular crisis because we are *completely* divorced from our tradition. That's why these issues – how do you define art, and so forth, need to be re-examined.

MGB: The only redeeming factor is the economics now. If my work wasn't selling and I was continuing to do all this, I could have been driven to despair. Every artist works towards recognition – be it financial or otherwise. If he is not getting financial recognition, how does he earn a living? If he earns a living by other means, you need a job at the end of the day. So the good thing probably is that yes, hierarchy-wise, painting is not taking precedence as it did before. Maybe it's a matter of time [before it does again] but now, an Indian artist is at a stage where he can sell without having to do a job – whether he's doing installation, video, film, painting – he can sell his work. And then therefore, if he is sure of what he wants to do, he will find his language and continue with it, come what may. I mean, I don't have to depend on any outside force, to make a living for myself, anymore.

AD: Do you think that will last?

MGB: Yes, I think it will last. Art has already become a statement. Here I am talking as a buyer. When I go to houses… The Indian now knows that beyond his fridges and microwaves, this is his next step. And that is a sign of a country that is high on development. When a country develops… When the economic needs of a house are fulfilled, the cultural needs [will be met]. And it's beginning [to happen]. And with that, you take your kids to puppet shows, to concerts and museums. I don't remember our parents doing that for us. They managed to make sure they sent us to a few arty classes. Yes, because they were trying to give us an education. There wasn't enough money to do that. But we, with our kids, are taking it to the next step. To be a better human being, if you can culturally develop, it's fantastic. And if that's happening, art cannot but be an important part of your life. So art is here to stay. That's a given, I feel.

AD: And this trend where artists are not having to worry about money, you think that is going to last?

MGB: I hope so. I *am* positive. I mean we are growing at a great rate – at 9% every year. I read somewhere interesting that China is growing at 11%, with government . . . [aid], and that India is growing at 9% *despite* the government. So imagine [what could happen] when private entrepreneurship and the government come together. Think of the growth that our country is going to see. I think that the next 20 years at least, are going to be great. So after that, at 60, when we have an interview, I don't know where we'll stand, but…by then, the bank balance would have been decent enough, so not to worry about it.

AD: [Laugh] . . . The reason I started by asking you how you define art is because I think that nowadays, we are a bit confused by what we mean by art. I am harping on the definition because of the divide there has been between art and craft, because of the overthrow of our traditional arts by the Western analytical tradition. Do you see effects of the Western analytical tradition that was introduced perhaps with Colonisation, in our contemporary arts?

MGB: Of the analytical tradition?

AD: Yes.

MGB: Yes, of course, I mean the Baroda School is all about that.

AD: Really? You think the Baroda School is all about analysis.

MGB: Yes, absolutely. Baroda… I am told that *every* work was analysed, talked about. So an artist emerging from the Baroda School is very articulate. He is *made* to speak. Analysis, yes… In any case, today's world is the world of questioning. I mean, if you see the works of the Progressives. I mean, Husain will not talk about his work, about his idiom, about a cause – nothing. He, Tyeb… their works had qualities as works of art, with painterly qualities, whatever… form. The artist today is talking about his work in another context – most of them – 80%. So the analytical world, the world today has ensured that the artist speaks. It is the age of words now.

AD: Are you comfortable with that?

MGB: I want to be but I am not, for lack of articulation of my work. I am sure it will come in the process of working. I don't want to read up books to say something. If my work gets sold, great. But the way artists talk about their work, I am always at a loss. I have less to say about my work. I am happy with the person who doesn't ask me questions. Call it a personal… How do I put it?

AD: Well, an artist is supposed to paint anyway, not talk.

MGB: For me, that's how I look at it, but it's not the case now. Today's world needs words.

AD: It's difficult to survive without it.

MGB: It is. That's the reality. And it is perhaps something that will pass, 10 years from now.

AD: Today, it is something that has become fashionable, to exhibit text along with work, as though it were a part of the exhibition.

MGB: Yes. When I am in the process of working, I might have something to say, but right now, I don't. I just don't. To some people, that comes as a surprise, they ask me, 'How can you have nothing to say?' But I don't.

AD: [Laugh] The last question I wanted to ask you was about…floor-drawings, for example. For me, people tend to view these traditional arts – floor-drawings for example. People would say… even Sabavala, when I told him that I would be interviewing him, he asked me, 'Is this for your own enjoyment or is this for the PhD?' And I said, 'No, this is for the PhD.' And he said, 'What *possible* connections can there be between *my* work and *floor-drawings*?' Which I thought was itself in some ways a very telling comment on… perhaps an unconscious thought that, 'They do that bit and where do I fit in? Is that art at all? Perhaps that is because there is perception that that sort of practice is repetitive, whereas art today is supposed to be – above all – innovative [I do Sabavala an injustice here,

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as he clarified his question in our interview]. You're a fairly interesting artist in a sense because you've looked at tradition, you've used a certain structure and form, and innovated beyond that. I personally feel that something like floor-drawings are still innovative, even today. They might have reached a point where they became repetitive, but they are not stagnant at all. For Independence Day for example, they now draw flags in the floor-drawings! So that is also innovating, in its own way. Do you think that art is just a process, or also an object, or both? What happens when something does not remain for long and so does not constitute an object?

MGB: I asked Sumant Jayakrishnan this question. I asked, 'We saw such fantastic visuals. How do you feel when in two days, you have to break it, because it's not permanent?' He said, 'It bothers me sometimes, but it has made me free in my mind.'

AD: I'm sorry, I don't know who this is.

MGB: Sumant transforms space through his work.[240]

AD: Architectural space?

MGB: Architectural space. He did the whole set of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* – the play that went to London,. The whole set was made of paper. People . . . [inaudible, saw it?] from inside. So his answer… Look, when a ritual act is done, in the end it's a process – whether it's a floor-drawing or a wall-drawing, they're rituals… or a Durga immersion. You make something, you love it, you worship it, and then you remove it. It's not that [the object], it's the act. What does it make you? I feel – I could be wrong – but you get attached, and then you [go through] the process of detachment. And then what lingers on… from that [is what remains]. These are emotional states of being. I made this work two weeks ago, and worked on it – *elaborately* – for 15 days, and it wasn't working. For the first time, I felt – Sumant's words came back to me. I said to myself, 'I can't be attached to this', and I thought, 'Let me make a coat of this gold in the middle.' Fifteen days of that work changed because I detached myself. So these are rituals that make you… I don't want to keep sounding philosophical on everything but there's a reason why these things are done. Because you experience emotions, and *that* transforms you as an individual – rituals help in that process. Why do people cry when a Durga *ma* is immersed in water? Why? You wonder.

AD: There's an emotive power in that ritual.

MGB: All these are emotive powers. If we can translate that quality into our *act* of working… 'Work, [then] detach yourself from your work.' Can you objectively say that 'this is a work which I am satisfied with' and if not, can you erase it? Can this work be transformed into another state of being? If not, immerse it. I feel rituals help you in that process. I could be wrong. I was fascinated when Sumant said what he did. Because I – as an artist – am very attached to my work. They say that you should take care of it [your work] as a nurse takes care of her child. She is a mother to the child, but the moment a child is able to be on his own, she leaves him. With a complete detachment. The mother

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[240] Peter Lathan in his review in the British Theatre Guide, 2007, says the following of Jayakrishnan's set: ". . . a fabulous but essentially simple set by Sumant Jayakrishnan of a bamboo framework covered initially in paper out of which the fairies burst, all combine to give a new slant on the *Dream*."

in her ceases. If you can live your life like that. And these are… Actually, at a higher level, these are all acts. You immerse, you become part of it, you leave it. You move on. Kavita Singh did her PhD on the tradition of singing in *pata chitra*. It's a 500- to 600-year-old tradition, where the scroll is unrolled, opened while the [bard] is singing. Now, the scrolls which used to move from village to village portray Rajiv Gandhi's assassination, they deal with birth control, they depict AIDS. I am not sure how that has transformed the tradition, but I am sure changes are taking place. Even a potter's second pot is different from his first. There has to be a change in every act within that grammar.

AD: That's exactly what I feel about a lot of traditional arts. I don't think they're stagnant.

MGB: *They can't be*.

AD: I don't think there was stagnancy really, for any considerable period of time. External pressures and influences bring about certain conditions.

MGB: I feel that our miniatures in Jaipur have stagnated – what we are selling to the tourists, because there is no personal life-blood in it, nothing.

AD: But that's because of certain influences, because of economic necessities and insecurities.

MGB: Yes. A potter enjoys the intimate act of putting a hand into a mould and shaping a bit of clay. It's a very beautiful act. So one pot *has* to be different from the other. And the potter will know which is the other pot. *We* might not. There *is* a change in that.

AD: Part of my PhD – what I am arguing for is a redefinition that will help us be a little broader in our understanding of art, our recognition of art. There's an author, Richard Shusterman, who has put it far better than I, so I'll quote from him. He says, 'Art's redefinition would help us recognise and valorise those expressive forms which already provide us aesthetic experience.' I agree with him when he says, 'Redefining art as experience liberates it from the narrowing stronghold of the institutionally cloistered practice of fine art.'

MGB: Aurogeeta, *Bahar* [abroad], life is such a structure that a procession has to have multiple approvals from the ministry, etc, even to walk down a street, so for them every [such] act becomes an experience. *Here, we live it every day. Pandal lag raha hai* [a tableau is put up], *jaagran ho raha hai* [a wake is held], so many things constantly… *sabziwala* [vegetable vendor] constantly saying *alu lo, bhindi lo* [buy potatoes, buy okra], *doodh* [milk]…

AD: It's a constant assault on our senses.

MGB: It is. All these are installations – day in and day out. If a Westerner lives here, he can have 10 such experiences every day and go back and make an exhibition of it. So we never regard them as references directly, because there [in the West] society is *completely* categorised. All this evokes a feeling. Why do you think people want to come here? Because they *live* that feeling every time.

AD: It's interesting you're saying that because sometimes I wonder whether my yearning to see these expressive forms validated is, in a way, actually a result of Western analytical thinking.

MGB: It is. We are telling them why we are okay, and they have to sign the paper, 'you screwed up here.' I know what you mean. I don't mean to be racist, or a reverse racist, but who are they to tell us? Reverse racism has started in Indians. Coming back [from living abroad] with an accent . . . [used to be something people looked up to], '*Arre* America *se aaya hai* [Oh, he's come back from the US].' Now, when an Indian comes back with an accent, you actually say, '*Kya yaar, accent aa gaya hai?*' [What, you've already acquired an accent?!]

AD: You have to work hard at it, if you *want* an accent.

MGB: Yes, but now we don't want it. I'm not saying we shun them – they have given us so much to learn from, the West, the scientific way of looking at things – but what I am saying is that an Indian has never before felt the desire to stay on here and make something of himself. Now, he no longer needs to prove himself anywhere else. He used to get bagfuls from abroad. Now half of them take bagfuls from India when they go back [abroad]. It's happening. So very soon an Indian will tell the West what is good art. *Abhi to* [as of now] the West is telling us, a curator comes from abroad to tell us, 'I am curating a show in this part of the world and I want you to participate in it.' And you go running after him. I would love to see an Indian going to Japan or America and say, 'I am curating a show in India,' and them coming here. That is what I want to see of my country, you know.

Interview with S.Harshavardhana for PhD, at his studio, Saket, Delhi, Between 4 and 8 November 2007

S. Harshavardhana gave up a successful career as a bio-scientist in 1993 to pursue his love for painting. He is the son of the late J. Swaminathan, artist and director of the Roopanker Museum of Art in Bhopal. Harshavardhana is a self-taught, abstract artist who has exhibited nationally as well as internationally.

I chose to interview him because of his exposure to, and engagement with the tribal and folk arts in India. Although he is keenly aware of these arts, he has developed his own language of abstraction. For me, what stands out in his work are his textures, colours and the painterly surface of his canvases.

AD: Aurogeeta Das
SH: S. Harshavardhana

AD: What does art mean for you? How do you define it? What makes you paint?

SH: It is creativity. I don't think of who is going to look at it, what meaning I am trying to give to other people, it is just raw creativity which… But when I am finished with it, and I put it on the wall, then I am nobody. It is between the painting and whoever sees it. So then, the dialogue is between the painting and the person who is seeing it and they have to put some meaning into it. My role is over.

AD: What do you feel when you paint?

SH: I put all my energies into it. As for purpose, you know, painting for me is not a means of communication. It…

AD: Is it a means of expression?

SH: Exactly, it is just a means of expression. It's not… If it were sending out a message, it would be a billboard, an advertisement, or something along those lines. That's not it. In the world, you see a lot of good or bad happening. I am not trying to represent anything and tell the world that this is good or this is bad, no. It is just a means of expression.

AD: I was reading Subramanyan – do you know his book *Moving Focus* – I think he is reacting a little bit to what has become a trend today – the pressure that exists, to become an *activist* if you are an artist; that you must react to all these events [disasters, political turmoil].

SH: No, no.

AD: He says 'I don't think any act of history, any event of history can be utilised in art, until that event is fully internalised by the artist and until that becomes the artist's personal…'

SH: Painting, I believe, should not have any crutches – a concept. Your concept can be very good, but when you are talking of two-dimensional painting, your painting has to be good enough. A painting is not good because of what you thought. The concept is good, so the painting is good. No. By itself… it should stand.

AD: References to the external…

SH: Those come later. There is a man who once told me, 'You have depicted Kali in this painting very well.' And I said to him, 'Well, good luck to you because I have not painted Kali but if that is what you see… good for you.'

AD: So you're saying that in a painting, the form should speak for itself? You cannot start having particular… So what about symbols then?

SH: Again, it's not a symbol, it's just a sign.

AD: Why this particular sign though?

SH: It's a form.

AD: Why this particular form?

SH: I don't know.

AD: I ask because this seems to have become a motif in your work [a polygon form consisting of two triangles joined at the apex].

SH: It has become a motif… Well, I am also a mathematician. So somehow, the triangle… [Artists have frequently been interested in geometric forms], from Paul Klee who saw cuneiform writing in Mesopotamia or wherever, to… So somehow the triangle, I find, is an alluring form. People come to me and ask me if this is Tantra – what are the two triangles. They talk of such things, but you know, [these are not deliberate]…

AD: In some, you have equilateral triangles, in others you have isosceles triangles.

SH: That is also incidental.

AD: It's almost like a *dumroo* [percussion instrument which looks like a geometric depiction of an hourglass, composed of two isosceles triangles wedded at their apex].

SH: Yes, it is like a *dumroo*, but I am not trying to symbolise anything, I am not trying to imbue my paintings with any communication or meaning. People also talk of *yoni* [literally, female genitalia, but metaphorically – among other things – the source of life; elates to various Hindu philosophical concepts] and this and that. That's not it. It's just a form.

AD: But you started out saying that 'painting for me is not a means communication.'

SH: Yes, painting is not a means of communication, I am not trying to reform anything, or convey a message. Do you know, I got a letter from somebody I don't know, a woman from England. She is a psychotherapist or something of the sort. She said, 'Mr. Harshavardhana, we have three works of yours, and peace has come into our home.' And, upon my honour, when I was painting those paintings, I had no intention of sending peace to anybody's home.

AD: Did you feel peaceful?

SH: Perhaps I did. Perhaps I did. But as feedback, it felt fantastic and I thought that perhaps I am not wasting my time. Somebody has [derived pleasure from my work].

AD: Well, the reason I was referring to your opening statement of 'painting for me is not a means of communication' is because when I asked whether it was a means of expression, you said yes. But in a sense, expression is also some form of communication, isn't it? Because with expression… how shall I put this? There is a film called *Shankarabharanam*.

SH: I have heard of it.

AD: There is a scene in this film, where a man is singing, all alone and he realises at that particular moment that with no audience, he is singing his best because in a sense, he is expressing himself.

SH: Even a performer… This is the basic difference between a performance and say… When I paint, I paint in my studio, by myself.

AD: It's like a communion with yourself.

SH: Yes! *Communion* is just the word I am looking for! Painting should achieve communion, rather than communication. That is the crux.

AD: I get what you mean.

SH: There are three points. One is the creative [creator or artist], one is the painting, one is the person who is looking at the painting. Now, at times it happens that all three are in sync. And that is communion, that is not communication.

AD: The really interesting aspect for me is whether painting is something that we do perhaps because we're not yet able to meditate in the absolute. Painting for you seems to be a meditative experience, communion with yourself. But then the question arises: What role does the object play? What role does form play… the materialisation as it were?

SH: Look, let me put it this way. If my work should have one meaning, it should have a 100 meanings. My father put it very well. 'The experience of making love is one. The experience of the child is another. The child has his or her own life, and that has to come out.' So I repeat, 'Once I put the painting on the wall, I am nobody. It is between the painting and whoever sees it.'

AD: So the object ceases to have meaning for you? It means nothing to you after you're done with it.

SH: Yes, exactly, though this is difficult, I try my best to get detached.

AD: Why is it difficult? It is because you have created something, so it becomes a material possession, something to possess?

SH: Yes, possessiveness does come into play somewhere.

AD: But it has nothing to do with possessiveness of a different kind, where the possessiveness has to do with the fact that this object is a culmination of a process. That kind of possessiveness is not there?

SH: No, no. But still, it is my child. And yet, you have to let it go into the world. I never follow the career of my painting. It is between whoever sees it and likes it, and then it becomes somebody else's responsibility. It's not mine.

AD: You started out being something else. And then you switched to painting.

SH: That's right. I used to be my father's studio assistant and when I finished higher secondary exams, I decided I wanted to be anything rather than a painter.

AD: Why? A surfeit of art?

SH: I don't know. At the time, science and biology were very interesting. And then when I went into it…. at some stage, I was differentiating leukaemia [types]! I would look at the blood clot under a microscope and it would look like a Jackson Pollock painting.

AD: So you begin painting every morning…

SH: I don't have a regimen or a routine. I don't go to the studio every day.

AD: So when do you paint? It depends on how you feel?

SH: Whenever it comes. If I paint for five days – and I am very prolific. I don't leave the painting until I feel that . . . [it is complete]. Then I put it away and begin another canvas. But if I've painted for five days, I put it away and for the rest of the month, I do something else.

AD: You know, when you were talking of detachment, I found it interesting, because for me what has become a very important question when I am looking at these floor-drawings is that floor-drawings exist in such a different… the parameters for this kind of practice… the scenario is extremely different. Here, a woman is making an elaborate drawing every day, spending a great deal of [time and effort] and there is a great deal of complexity. I mean, she might be doing it very quickly because of the fluidity with which she is doing it. But it is a fairly complex drawing, especially some of the bigger ones. But it is swept away.

SH: That's good. But with the floor-drawings, it is also… I mean, they know what they have to do. Through tradition, and [transmission], they have the – if I may use the word – design. The design is already there. But when I address my canvas, I have to first blank my mind. It cannot be some kind of representation. That is the basic difference between representational and non-representational drawing. When you get into tribal drawings, there is some kind of imagination which is working. It is not even the gods and goddesses that they paint. They are totally different from say Raja Ravi Varma's Lakshmi or Saraswati, which are anthropomorphic representations of some gods, etc. There, if you see a deity, it would be something totally weird.

AD: There is no rigidity there. There are no fixed idioms.

SH: To give the gods a human figure…

AD: You've raised an important point when you say that the woman who draws a floor-drawing knows what she has to draw.

SH: Even if she doesn't know, through what she has observed as a child – what her mother did, what her grandmother did, there is some kind of pattern.

AD: But can't a repetitive act…?

SH: No, she as an individual might improvise on that, which is great.

AD: But even if she doesn't improvise on the form that she is producing – in the *act* – even if it is a repetitive, ritual act, can't there be a creative process involved?

SH: Yes, for her, definitely, there is. This is what… When I go to shows, when I look at paintings, I am not there as a painter but as an onlooker. It can be immensely pleasurable for me to look at that.

AD: As regards the repetitive aspect, and this is something I have often heard and which you are doubtless familiar with, what with your father and…

SH: No, but when the individual comes… I can listen to Mallikarjun Mansur singing *raag yaman* [a *raag* is a tonal framework for musical composition and improvisation, and *raag yaman* is one of the most important ones in Indian classical music] a 100, a 1,000 times and every time I listen to it, I'll find something more, something different.

AD: That's a very good analogy, because our experience of it can be different every time. It's not the same thing, but I think that's where time and space and perspectives become very interesting because just as you are saying that the same piece of music can evoke different…

SH: The same recording I can listen to many times and find something more.

AD: Yes, similarly, the same recording can evoke different responses from different people at different times.

SH: Absolutely.

AD: The reason I bring this up is because of the labelling of art, the art and craft divide, but also different categories of art, folk art, tribal art, ritual art…

SH: Art is art.

AD: Yes, art is art. You can't accord values to it. And one of the arguments has been that, what these people make, is not art.

SH: That's utter rubbish. I don't believe in that at all. Only, there is one basic difference between say 'design' and 'art'.

AD: What is that?

SH: Well, if I am asked to design a chair, I will be confined because I am designing a chair. It should be comfortable for people to sit on it.

AD: Yes, there is the constraint of functionality.

SH: That's right. But if I am asked to make a *sculpture* of a chair, I am not restricted by that functionality. It can be anything.

AD: You know, I was once speaking to Anjolie [Ela Menon] and of course she was reacting to something, that is, she was speaking in a particular context. She was reacting to the Western accusation at the time that Indian art is too beautiful or just beautiful, which of course is a silly accusation.

SH: Which is not only beautiful but ethnic. Can you imagine Bhupen Khakhar's[241] work being sold in Amsterdam as ethnic art? I mean that's a big insult. [Laughs hard]

AD: That is completely ridiculous. Out of all people, Bhupen! I have never heard this. Anyway, she [Anjolie] was reacting against this charge. I think she was citing something that Prafulla Mohanti had originally said. She said that when people ask her what is art [in the context of this charge of art being merely beautiful], she said that art, for her, was a counterpoint to functionality. She takes the example of a rose when she goes to schools and speaks to children. 'Why do you want a rose? You can't play with it, you can't eat it. You can't do much with it.'

SH: Exactly, if you ask a child, or if somebody looks at my painting and says, 'What is the meaning of this?' Can you give me the meaning of a rose? What is the meaning of a rose? What is the meaning of a leaf or a tree? We are brought up in an environment where everything has to have a meaning. You know, you can say a rose is red or blue or green, but what is the meaning of that? What is the meaning of a rose?

AD: Do you think that this is – this kind of wanting to ascribe a meaning to everything – is a product of the analytical tradition in the West, where everything must be deconstructed?

SH: We should put meaning into something. Whatever meaning we invest into it, that is the meaning of it. It's not that a rose is a flower, I mean – what is the meaning of a flower?

AD: That is a bit like faith.

SH: Exactly, the same rose can be used for when somebody dies, when somebody gets married, for the birth of a child.

AD: It changes. The significance it holds for various peoples, at various times and places changes completely. It's like what you talked about a moment earlier, what you said about music.

SH: It can assume any meaning.

AD: Our *murtis* [statues, idols] for example – they may just be stone, but they are vested with the faith of so *many* people coming in [to temples, and shrines].

SH: That's what installation is [He is referring here to *prana pratishtha*, the Hindu practice of investing an idol with soul, or literally with 'life'].

AD: You invest it with your faith, or your imagination.

SH: That is where the human being grows. It doesn't have to be the Birla Mandir, where you have a beautiful Laskhmi statue. A stone can be as important, can be a deity.

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[241] Bhupen Khakhar is an artist who is remembered as an iconoclast and a maverick. His earliest work depicted everyday scenes. After his coming out as a homosexual, he went through his 'gay period' when his work was confessional and often a self-portrayal. Although his 'gay period' often overshadows his other achievements, he incorporated several traditional Indian art elements in his work and his work often engaged with social sectarianism.

AD: But coming back to this point about beauty that Anjolie said, and what you said about design and art. Coomaraswamy for example, talks about how so many Indian arts are actually functional, and yet one can't say that they are not art, because there is a great deal of…

SH: There is a great deal of faith that is placed in just a piece of stone. And that piece of stone becomes art.

AD: Let me take a different example that is functional – say a pot, an earthen pot a potter is making. It's a functional piece. And of course he is constrained to some extent by the fact that it is going to be used as a pot. But would you say that that is different from art? That is to some extent design. You said that there was a difference between art and design.

SH: Again, craft also involves… For the potter… Depending on the potter, it can be art. But for me, when I get that pot… I mean there are certain pots – earthenware pots which are used to make certain dishes; you can't make these dishes in anything else, not steel, not wood – you have to make it in that.

AD: Why?

SH: Well, I'll give you an example. There is something called the *verumkollumbul* [dish from Tamil Nadu], you can only make it in a *kachity* [a certain kind of pot used for cooking in Tamil Nadu], they call it a *kachity*. It can go on the fire, it can go on the stove, but it has to be in that pot.

AD: Is it the shape that is important or the material?

SH: Material. Material becomes very important in that. Science also tells you that if you cook tamarind for example, in a steel vessel, it can have some consequences.

AD: Yes, of course. There are chemical reactions [because of tamarind's acidic corrosion of metal].

SH: Our country is so rich in this aspect.

AD: Of course there are many reasons ascribed to the floor-drawing practice, but one of the reasons and origins offered is that they were originally made to feed ants and insects so that they don't come into the house – they remain at the threshold. That's one explanation. There have been a lot of… different levels of interpretations and origins for a lot of our practices.

SH: And also some basic 'live and let live'. It's not that you get your pest control and destroy all the insects.

AD: There is a great deal of tolerance. Co-existence with…. Not just tolerance but…

SH: A balance, the harmony of life.

AD: Exactly. But you were saying something before that that I wanted you to elaborate on. You spoke of the material of the pot. I was speaking to a woman who makes floor-drawings and I asked her why she was making it with wet rice paste rather than the rice powder and she said that on the new mosaic floors, powder does not stay, it's too glossy.

SH: We live in a technological world today. Of course, man through the ages has aspired for technology of one sort or the other. But it's important not to let technology take over my creativity. I have all the material available to me but I choose for my creativity – and not because of what you… When I make a painting, it can be as fragile or… So whoever has the painting, it becomes his or her responsibility to take care of it. I am not restricted [by this concern]. A painting has its own life. It is not as though I offer a guarantee that for the next 50 years, nothing is going to happen to it.

AD: You're not overly concerned with the preservation of the art object as commodity.

SH: No, it's just that preservation becomes someone else's responsibility. It is not mine. And I will use whatever I feel like using as material. I will not guarantee anything as to its preservation. I have never been asked for a guarantee, but nowadays – with the boom, I think people kind of expect that, if they are buying a work of art, it should last for the next 10 years, like a washing machine or something. It's not like in the West where people buy something and throw it into the bin in six months because of the rate at which technology changes there. Technology changes every two or three months. So it's because of the technology, and in that sense, we are lucky here in India.

AD: Well, that's a result also of having material excesses.

SH: Yes, that's it.

AD: We preserve or recycle. Which is interesting in a sense because in another way, there are some things that the West preserves far more and far better, for example, museums and galleries. I don't know whether that's because they commoditise more.

SH: Of course, that is one great aspect of the West. Education and art as education. They take their children to the museums and show them – art history. In India, this is totally lacking. In the village, it is fine, but the urban so-called, educated middle class, it's completely lacking.

AD: Why do you say that in the villages it is fine, but in the urban centres it is lacking?

SH: Because there – and now maybe I will sound like I am contradicting myself – but there, in the villages, there is a functionality in art. In my life, in the village… If they are working in the fields, even a stone, even if someone is breaking stones to build a road, when they are done with their day's work, she or he goes back to their hut, to this – if he has done a small work in their hut….

AD: On the wall…

SH: Yes, on the wall, or the floor. It enriches her life. Apart from the rigmarole of…

AD: It's her sort of cultural life.

SH: Yes. And that's fantastic.

AD: And that is possibly so much more connected or interlinked with her other aspects of life.

SH: With her very existence. If that were not there, then she would become a machine or something.

AD: Whereas in the urban scenario, art has become a profession. It's a profession that is slotted as a different activity.

SH: That is why I say I am a not professional painter. It's not as though I am expected to wear a pinstriped suit like a banker.

AD: I had the opposite experience, in a way. When I was at CEPT [Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology], someone asked me which school I was from, and I said I was from Kanoria [Centre for Arts], and he said, 'Are you an artist?' and I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Oh, for an artist, you are well-dressed.'

SH: I don't know why [he said that]. Why not [be well-dressed]? [Laughs]

AD: Yes, it was a very strange comment. Maybe we are not expected to wear pinstripes, but I think artists may have cultivated this image of *khadi* [hand-spun Indian cotton] and *jholas* [shoulder-slung, cloth bags]. So yes, that's there. I was going to ask you, when you spoke about the urban scenario… It is obvious that we live in a capitalist society, where we make art, we exhibit it in a gallery or museum, and we sell it. When you said that in the West, people take their children to the museums and educate them about art…

SH: When I said that, I said it with a sociological premise.

AD: How do you mean?

SH: In the sense that everybody here says that you have to… when it comes to a profession… Today, it's different but 10 years before, art was not a profession. People would ask you when I was a child… I remember when my father wanted to rent a house and he would explain he was an artist or a painter. People would ask, '*Karte kya ho?*' [What do you do?]

AD: Oh I see, '*Asal me kya karte ho*? *Kala to karte hein, haan theek hai, lekin asal me karte kya ho?*' [What do you really do? Sure, you paint, but what do you really do?]

SH: Yes, exactly. Even today, when we go out of the country, you have this little immigration form. You have 'chartered accountant', there is 'lawyer', you don't have 'artist'. So it has never been considered…

AD: Really, I'd never noticed that.

SH: Yes. Although today, with the boom, everybody has suddenly…

AD: The artist has suddenly been accorded status.

SH: Yes, and they want their children to go into art colleges.

AD: It's become a viable profession.

SH: Yes, like you used to have coaching classes for IIT [Indian Institute of Technology] and IAS [Indian Administration Service], now you have coaching classes for entrance examinations into art colleges.

AD: Really?

SH: Yes, my friend Subroto Kundu teaches these classes for two months in the summer. And I don't want to make a statement about gender bias here, but to girls especially, this remark is made often, 'Why don't you become an artist?'

AD: Oh yes, of course, I know about Subroto's classes. But I must say that when I first joined Kanoria, I was in an all-girls class. I think it may have been partly because Bhowmick [then director of Kanoria], wasn't keen on taking boys – I am not really sure why we didn't have boys. Anyway, there was this artist who never turned up to take our class. And we of course were puzzled why this tutor never turned up. When he was challenged about it, he replied, 'Why should I waste my time teaching girls who are only biding their time until they become housewives?' I found that a very condescending remark, but at least four of the girls in my class continued with art and still exhibit today. I don't know about the others.

SH: This sort of gender bias should not exist. My grandfather wanted my father to be a doctor so he enrolled him into a medical school. I think it was Basu Bhattacharya – my father was a total rebel in the family and you know as Brahmins, we have the thread ceremony. So my father said, 'I won't have the ceremony unless you buy me a bicycle.' And Basu Bhattacharya helped him sell the bicycle and my father ran away to Kolkata. And Basu Bhattacharya, after that day – and mind, he's the one who helped my father run away – he reported to my grandfather, '*Aap ka beta bhaag gaya.*' [Your son has run away]!

AD: Good god.

SH: Those were the times when nobody… As in, you applied everywhere and if you did not get admission, as a last recourse, you joined an art college. [At such a time, my father left medical school to…]

AD: Oh yes, [not just in those days]. I remember when I was trying to apply to Baroda [Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda], they wouldn't accept me because I studied in a mark-free, grade-free system [so I did not meet their eligibility criteria]. Anyway, I was waiting for Dhumal to turn up – not Rini, her husband [Rini Dhumal followed her husband P. Dhumal as head of the art college in Baroda]. I had a lot of other people waiting with me in the corridor and on the

stairs. They were all discussing how they had applied for art simply as a third option, 'if all else failed, get into this.' I can see what you are talking about. The reason I brought up museums and galleries, institutions, the art market… It appears to me that this urban scenario where an art education, or an exposure to art is lacking, could be because of a transitional phase, where we are moving to, from a time where art used to be very much a part of our lives, to...

SH: No, it still is, in our country. In that way, it has a functionality. It has a purpose in one's life, which is sort of intangible.

AD: You're making a distinction here between functionality and utilitarianism. It may not be utilitarian, but it's still functional, it performs a function.

SH: Exactly. Nature is fine. For an artist, for all of us… If you go to a hill station, the normal, average, middle-class Indian who goes to a hill station, will not see nature. They will instead ask, '*Cinema hall nahin hai yahan par.*' [There is no cinema here.] Come on. Why the hell would you go to a hill station? You go there because it has been pumped into you that this is a great destination and you must see it. For what? To sit in a cinema and watch a . . . Hindi movie for three hours?! Why can't you look around? What [is to] . . . augment [nature], what nature can't provide… You still want something. And that's where art comes into the scene.

AD: So you take the elements of nature and you recompose it for your…

SH: Exactly. But not directly. Of course, nature, literature and music are all ingredients…

AD: And our environment.

SH: And environment. They are all ingredients. But I am not trying to represent nature in my work.

AD: You are trying to transform it.

SH: All of these go into my subconscious somewhere and they are the resources.

AD: It's a reservoir of experiences that you draw from.

SH: If Lata Mageshkar sings a song… if I've heard it once, I know it. But when Mallikarjun sings, even if he does just an *alaapna* [*alaap* is a an initial vocal exercise or a instrumental prelude], every time I listen to it, I find something more in it.

AD: There's scope in it for you to find something more.

SH: Yes, for me as a listener.

AD: That reminds me of a statement of Paul Auster where he speaks of books he likes and books he doesn't, or perhaps he is speaking of his own writing, I can't remember. But he talks of how bad writing does not leave enough room in the prose for the reader to interpret it in their own way.

SH: My father used to say – and he was good at this – 'The language of painting is very formal, it is also opaque. It is a language of qualitative cognition, rather than analytical apprehension.' With analytic apprehension, *phat* [just like that], you can lay everything bare very quickly. But qualitative cognition is important. It cannot be described, or written down. Which is one's own. Which is important for that person. To be confronted with it.

AD: There is a writer – Sri Lankan origin I think – Ellen Dissanayake, who has argued in a book of hers that in contemporary society, we underestimate the value of art in society. She says that if we have a look at how *consistent* art has been, in its presence in society, then one has to accord to it a value, because it is a cognitive process.

SH: Yes, it is, absolutely. If one traces the advent of man on this earth, art has been a very important factor in that.

AD: Because it contributes as a cognitive skill, if nothing else.

SH: And much more than just skill.

AD: Yes, skill is the least of it. I was going to quote you something from an American writer called Richard Shusterman. He is keen on redefining art. I think today there is a predominant definition of art as something that exists within certain elitist circles, within an institutional context.

SH: Yes.

AD: He says that, 'Redefining art would allow us to better appreciate certain art forms that already provide us aesthetic experience…'

SH: You know 'aesthetic' again falls into the realm of analytic apprehension, I feel.

AD: How so?

SH: 'Aesthetic' is again a definition, We don't have to define, or redefine art. We have to be… You just have to have an existential aspect… you know…

AD: That's interesting. Because I have been questioning this myself…

SH: It is not that this has to be taught. It is there. When people say, '*I* discovered this artist,' I think that's utter nonsense. What they mean is that they have discovered themselves. In their mind, when they were confronted with someone's art, they discovered themselves [in confronting it] rather than discovering an artist. You know, there's a kind of apprehension in confronting a painting, people are afraid to confront a painting. What a painting brings out, that you realise, is something that you already had in you. The painting has brought forth something which you already had, which you were afraid to know, and that realisation comes to you – that you can appreciate, otherwise you would regard it as a piece of nonsense, it is so easy to make this. But just putting blobs of colour on a canvas does not make abstract art.

AD: I think it depends on identification. If you identify with something, you understand it. [I think it was Emerson who said that in every work of genius, we

recognise our own rejected thoughts; they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty].

SH: And that is how it should be. You should not be afraid of [art].

AD: I think your father was asked once by a visiting dignitary at Bharat Bhavan to explain a work of art, and he said, 'I'm sorry, I can't explain it. If you don't feel it…'

SH: I'll tell you the whole story. It was Zail Singh, the president, who went through the contemporary art section. He saw the works, then he saw my father's painting – which had some birds, etc. And he said, 'Swamiji, *yeh mujhe samaj me ata hai.*' [This, I understand.] And my father said, '*Accha, aap ko samaj me ata hai, mujhe to samaj me nahi ata.*' [It's good you understand it, I don't.] Richard Bartholomew used to be the art critic of the *Times of India*. He wrote, 'Swaminathan's paintings border on the meaningless.' So the next day, my father shoots off a letter to the editor of *The Times* and says, 'I am sorry, your art critic is sadly mistaken. My paintings don't border on the meaningless, they *are* meaningless.'

AD: [Laugh] Yes, but I think – since we are speaking of the meaningless, just before I started my PhD, somebody asked me, 'What do you think constitutes a great work of art?' So I said, 'That's a big question. It might even be pretentious to try and answer that question. . . . [bit that has been missed here because of side change?] A lot of people make art that is completely insincere.

SH: Yes. Today, I go to an art exhibition and sometimes I think it's a group show and later I find out that it is all the work of the same artist! So you just turn catalogues and you think to yourself, 'Okay, this is in fashion, so you do this, this is in fashion, do this.' This is the integrity of say, for example, Ambadas [veteran Indian artist, founder member of Group 1890] [who] has been doing the same thing for the past 30 years. So it is not the audience which makes you do this one day and that another day according to whatever is . . . [in fashion]. Again, let me return to Mallikarjun Mansur who never went abroad. And he was perfectly in sync with what he was doing. He said, 'I don't have to go. This recognition, to be… It's not necessary. It's not necessary in terms of…'

AD: Yes, I remember Adoor [Gopalakrishnan, filmmaker] said the same thing to me once.

SH: You have to be in sync with yourself as the artist. *Agar ek sur agar thoda hil jaaye*… [If one note goes off even once…]

AD: That's when disquiet comes into your mind. You're not happy with what you have done.

SH: Even for a performer. Nikhil Banerjee used to hide his face, behind the … [curtain]. And such a great sitar player. Of course, Pandit Ravi Shankar has a different role, 'Indian classical music West *me badhana hai.* [To promote Indian classical music abroad.] That is a different role. But for me, as far as sitar goes, it's Nikhil Banerjee who was [the best]. And he came from the same *gharana* [school] as Ustad Alauddin Khan *saab*. So recognition, in terms of the world recognising your work, this award and that award…

AD: That's a by-product.

SH: Totally, that's a by-product.

AD: In fact that's why I was saying that initially when I read Shusterman, I thought this desire to redefine art…. I thought, 'Here's somebody who wants to redefine art as experience' because he said that 'redefining art as experience liberates us from the institutionally cloistered practice of art.' Which is true. But as you pointed out, the desire to *redefine* is in itself the desire to *validate* certain art forms. And then, the desire to *validate* certain art forms is in its turn an outcome of existing in that circle. It's like a vicious circle.

SH: When Jangarh [Singh Shyam] first… You know during my father's travel, when he first went there to set up Bharat Bhavan, he toured the whole of Madhya Pradesh… He found Jangarh breaking stones to build a road. So, Jangarh heard that Swaminathan [was doing the rounds] so he invited him and said, 'Come to my house.' When *appa* [father] went there, it was like a museum. And he arranged a show at Dhoomimal Art Gallery.

AD: You mean because he had painted all the walls?

SH: He had painted – with the few resources that he had… I mean, he *was* an artist. He was an *artist*. So *appa* arranged this show in Delhi, in Dhoomimal Art Gallery. And nobody came. There was this big discussion taking place. *Appa* said that contemporaneity, the contemporary – whether it's taking place in a jungle, whether it's taking place in Delhi or Baroda, it's the same. You cannot… You have to have the eye to see the painting. It's not like if you are from here or there… Which is true [of all professions]. If you get an MSc degree, you don't become Einstein suddenly. Einstein's general theory of relativity was written on the back of an envelope! [Laughs] *Nobody* came [to Jangarh's exhibition]. I was there, and Amitava Das was there for that show.

AD: Really?

SH: And much later, when Jangarh committed suicide in Japan…. And then of course, he was invited to Centre de Pompidou, for the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition. . . . I get a phone call from . . . [a very prominent artist who wrote on Jangarh's work after Jangarh had an established reputation][242] and he says, '*Acchha, zara Jangarh ka phone bataana.* [Hey, just give me Jangarh's phone number.] I want to send him to the US for this scholarship.' And by that time, Jangarh had expired. [Laughs ironically]. There is a certain 'institutionality', that this institution has created such and such artist. The only thing that an institution, that an art college can do… I mean, I was lucky to be born in a painter's house. But there might be others who are children of a businessman or whatever and they are looking for some kind of like-minded… That is what an institution provides. You cannot really teach them how to paint, tell them 'this is what a painting is'. They have it in themselves but they are looking for an environment. This is what an art institution should do, provide them with the atmosphere or environment without being… It's not two plus two is equal to four. That's not it.

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[242] Harshavardhana requested that this metropolitan artist remain anonymous here.

AD: I remember somebody once assuring me that I would get a residency in Amsterdam if I would produce more Indian art.

SH: This is it, this is exactly the thing. [Shakes his head].

AD: I said I would not because I was uncomfortable with it.

SH: Okay, you are showing in New York, you are showing here and there, but you are not really making a dent into the so-called art scene.

AD: Into the global art world.

SH: *Haan*, exactly. It is just that some of your friends and some rich NRIs . . . are buying works. And such havoc. It's completely [wreaked] havoc. It has become a Western interest now.

AD: And now it's become… with the introduction of the share price index for artists' work, it's ridiculous.

SH: Exactly. And who are these people? What I say is, if somebody, if some idiot is ready to give half a million dollars for this shit, good luck to them. It's not…

AD: I think it has more to do with this apparent boom in Indian art, an increase in disposable income, not in a real improved understanding of the art.

SH: Yes, all this talk about a growth of 9%.

AD: Yes, it is an outcome of the economic situation.

SH: To reduce art to just a commodity, to just a share, is ridiculous.

AD: And yet the artist must survive. That's a given.

SH: Oh no, nothing to do with the artist. I'm not saying… If somebody goes and buys Husain from a framer's shop, he or she should get a bloody fake Husain! I mean there are these framers who go to these auctions and bid in 100s and 1000s of dollars for works.

AD: Really? I was going to say something in response to one of your remarks. When you talk of the money scenario, what I wonder is in fact that this sort of capitalist thing, this boom, has in a sense been detrimental, not just because it has reduced art to a commodity but also because it discourages genuine, good artists.

SH: Basically, my understanding is that the art movement in this country is very strong. However, there is always an insecurity within the artist.

AD: Only in India, or anywhere?

SH: In India, more so.

AD: Why?

SH: You know, in the West, society supports artists. Which is a very good thing. In India, an artist has to exist on his or her own steam. Even if I have a show in a gallery, I give 33% [to the gallery]. Slowly, the professionalism… I do very sincerely believe that for the art movement [profession to be sustainable], three basic ingredients are important. One is the artist, one is the gallery, and one is the art critic.

AD: The critic?

SH: Yes, now artists have reached somewhere because of the [boom]. But the galleries are [still] not professional about their jobs. If some painting is selling, it's not because of their [efforts]. If I were gallery staff, and if I like somebody's work, whether he or she is selling their work, I would convince my clients… I mean, do you understand what I am saying of the gallery's role? 'This is it', you have to convince them. It's not that whatever is selling, you ask him or her to have a look at that.

AD: What you're saying is that you need meaningful mediation.

SH: The roles are different, you see. That kind of professionalism is required. There are no critics today, in India. There are those who write just this and that…

AD: What do you feel is the role of the critic?

SH: He is the mediator. And the most important thing is that he should know the language in which he is writing. The artist knows his or her language when he is painting. . . . This little piece that he is writing – whether it is in English or in Hindi, should be for me to read. I should appreciate his writing first. He should know his language.

AD: The text by itself *also* needs to be a work of art.

SH: Exactly. Whether it is in prose or poetry.

AD: It cannot be just an interpretation of something. It has to be a complement.

SH: No, my painting should be mine and his writing should be his.

AD: That's when it would be a piece of integrity.

SH: Exactly. Integrity. It should not be just a description or an analysis, especially an analysis. So that little piece should be…

AD: It should almost be like a heightened response that any viewer would have. Identification and….

SH: You put it down in a language that a 100 people can read.

AD: You express the feeling that has been evoked in you when you were viewing the work. . . . That's very interesting.

SH: And then you have total freedom. It's not like you have to… If some gallery has asked you to write [a piece], you don't have to sort of glorify the work. You have to be fair with what you are doing. And nobody, nobody will have any umbrage because of that, when what you have written makes cognitive sense.

AD: I feel bad, though, about this scenario, where the global art market is sort of… We are trying hard to catch up with the global art market, god alone knows why…

SH: No, that we are not. We are just…

AD: Can you clarify what you mean, in what way are you saying that Indian art is strong?

SH: Just the essentials, they are strong.

AD: In terms of what is being produced?

SH: Yes, because I have seen the West, I have seen in the Southeast – they are much more into networking, into what is happening, into what is fashionable.

AD: You think we have much more sincerity?

SH: Much more and what is very important, we don't have to run after references and things like that.

AD: Let it be an internal…

SH: It's internal and we have to be strong about it. We should become references rather than running after them…

AD: But are you talking of references in terms of geography or also in terms of events that are going on and so forth?

SH: No, no, not really geography, because I don't consider, you know now… Indian artists…

AD: No, what about… The reason I am asking about references is, what if somebody refers to a certain idiom in traditional art…

SH: Which is… But just because you refer to an idiom and you make a painting [doesn't mean]… Unless your painting is strong enough, it cannot be appreciated.

AD: It should not stand on the crutches of something else.

SH: Exactly. The painting should become [the important thing]. Of course, I can pick up anything from the whole of history. . . . Okay, I agree one of my gurus is Paul Klee. Or Mark Rothko. But what I am doing should be my own. So just because of certain references… my painting should not be appreciated because of the references.

AD: If you find that those references have particular meaning for *you*…

SH: Precisely, for me. Not for what is coming out of me.

AD: So no matter in what, content, form, context… There is no point in taking any sort of reference as a crutch.

SH: I repeat, once I have put a painting on the wall, I am nobody. When a person views the painting, he or she can derive references from it. They can associate it with this or with my father or whatever. But for me, that should not be important.

AD: You've spoken about what you think is the role of the art school – that of providing a conducive environment. What do you think of formal training? Or training in form, rather.

SH: No, formal training you see, or training in form can never happen. Formal training is fine. There are certain technicalities, about how to use certain materials – all that should be done but you cannot really teach… If I were a professor, and I like or am doing figurative narrating. You have absolutely no right to tell the student that unless you do figurative narrative work, I will not pass you in your exam. What is this nonsense?! That kind of bias should not creep in. You can tell him that, 'Okay, if you are using oil, you cannot mix it with watercolour.'

AD: That is something that I have noticed with both Shantiniketan and Baroda – which of course have produced great artists, or perhaps, keeping in mind what you said earlier, I should not say *produced*! But I have often felt a wee bit disturbed by the fact that…

SH: Subjective biases should not come…

AD: Yes, but I think they do seep in.

SH: They do seep in, and they seep in very vulgarly.

AD: How do you mean vulgarly?

SH: Vulgarly in the sense that you hold the student to ransom, that 'unless you do my kind of work, I will not…' That kind of thing, that is total rubbish.

AD: Yes, I am sure that happens a lot, because I often look at a work of art and I have no idea who has produced it, but I can tell – just by looking at it – where the artist has studied, that it is the Baroda school or that it is Shantiniketan.

SH: Exactly. Nowadays, with the [Page 3 culture], the first thing they ask is, 'Which school do you belong to?' As if it makes a difference.

AD: You've spoken about the art school, about what sort of training should be provided, what sort of environment needs to be nurtured.

SH: I have people coming out of Baroda, my *friends*! And now they say, 'No, no, now I have run out of stories, so now I am doing abstract because abstract is now selling well.' [Laughs]

AD: They may be nice people but they are a little confused.

SH: *Absolutely* confused. So when they come out of the cocoon, or the womb, they have to face the world and then they get…

AD: The materialism, and then that pressure [to earn money].

SH: Yes, because it is not as though somebody is going to lead you throughout your life by your hand. You have to survive in the open as well.

AD: But then there are others also, aren't there? There are those who produce work insincerely to sell, and there are those who produce works sincerely *and are* selling work, and then there are those who are producing works sincerely and *not* selling. What happens to the third type?

SH: You see, an artist, when he or she confronts his canvas – I am talking of the ideal and I believe this to be true – he or she is not concerned with whether it is going to sell or not. After that, when it goes out into the open, of course he would like for his work to sell, but those are totally different things.

AD: Because he must also survive.

SH: Why not? Survive and survive well! Look, when you are into it, when you are making love, you don't think what kind of child is going to be born. The child is going to… If the child is born with some sort of deformity, you still take care of the child. That is it. You don't have…

AD: You've spoken about the role of the critic, the role of the gallery, and the role of the art school. What about the role of the museum?

SH: The museum is… I mean that is the role of society in some sense, how to…

AD: I mean, there is obviously a difference between the gallery and a museum.

SH: I think in rural India – though I am not an expert on that – they definitely have some time to devote to cultural activity, whether it is folk music or whatever and that enriches their life, although they might be just earning – as daily labourers – some 60 rupees a day or whatever. Still, culturally their lives are enriched.

AD: Very vibrant.

SH: Yes. They are very active.

AD: Earlier, when you were speaking of how you take elements of your environment, that it's a reservoir of experiences that you sort of recompose to make meaning for yourself. I was thinking about [an artist we know], how he fooled the audience, took them for a ride.

SH: Yes, he just picked up paint, threw it at… and walked out of the studio. [Laughs]

AD: He just had a white canvas…

SH: Many times, when I get stuck, I just put it away and readdress the issue, even if it is after six months. [Laughs] When he came back and looked at the work he had presented, he asked, 'What have I done?'

AD: Ram Singh Urveti, and Jangarh's nephew Bhajju [Shyam] were telling me a story about Jangarh, when he kept mixing some paint, mixing a colour he wanted. He wasn't satisfied with the colour, so he kept mixing more and more of it. Eventually, he gave up and Bhajju and Ram Singh asked him what to do with all the paint and Jangarh said, 'Oh, let's repaint the walls this colour.'

[Some recording lost here due to noise disturbance. At some point during the interview, possibly in the part that was lost here, Harsha admitted that even though his father had tried to place tribal artists on an equal platform with metropolitan artists, he had to admit there would be serious repercussions if the tribal artists, or their advocates, demanded that the market pay them sums of money equal or comparable to that of metropolitan artists for their work. By the time the recording resumed, the conversation had shifted to curation].[243]

SH: [If] I had a concept, I would *not* shoot off letters to artists saying that I have this idea and you make a painting on this idea. I would go and visit [galleries] and pick up some works that suit my concept, rather than tell an artist… So, there are a 100 *darziwalas* [tailors] sitting there, who will churn out paintings which are [asked for]. That is not curation.

AD: I have artists who are friends, and I have heard them in their studios and homes, saying, 'Oh you know there is an exhibition for which I have been asked to contribute some work and the theme is this. And then they look around their work, and ask, "Do you think that work could fit [this theme]?"' It's a sort of artificial putting together… And you can sense that when you're looking at the exhibition. You can sense that there is no unity in it.

SH: It's ridiculous. Geeta Kapur is one of the best curators around. She doesn't do this. She knows exactly what she wants and she searches, she looks for it and finds it, so that it fits her premise or whatever…

AD: In that sense, curation and even collection, collecting art itself needs to be the work of an artist.

SH: Absolutely. You know, over the years, Aurogeeta, I have been sort of buying paintings and I am going to have a show and I will write about it, I will write why I acquired them.

AD: Yes?

SH: Because that is my curation.

AD: I had seen a retrospective of K. G. Subramanyan at the NGMA here in Delhi. I went with a friend of mine and we have very similar tastes. We were surprised that

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[243] In the interest of accuracy, all transcripts have been approved by the artists I interviewed.

there were at least 10 works by Subramanyan, which we *really* liked a lot and each one of them turned out to be from the collection of [Ebrahim] Alkazi – the ones *we* liked. So we both turned to each other and said, 'It looks like our taste matches Alkazi's.' I always knew this anyway, but that's when it hit home, that if there's a certain kind of sensibility, and you respond to that when you are buying works, [the collection automatically tells a coherent narrative]. In fact, the person I went for Subramanyan's retrospective with – himself has a collection of art. In terms of media and in terms of where he's bought them – you know, they're from all over the world but I see a sensibility running through them, and if they don't have that, it is just acquisition. Yes, so curation also needs to be coherent, and it needs to have integrity.

Interview with Prafulla Mohanti for PhD, at his studio, Pimlico, London, 2 Jun 2008, 11 am

Born and brought up in rural Orissa, Prafulla Mohanti trained as an architect at the J. J. School of Arts in Mumbai and studied town planning at Leeds University. His work as a writer and artist is significantly influenced by his village upbringing. In the 1970s, quite by accident, he became associated with the Neo-Tantric or Neo-Symbolist artists such as Paniker, Santosh and Biren De when the then director of the NGMA, Dr. L. P. Sihare curated an exhibition at the NGMA titled *Tantra*. However, while the other artists in the group were deliberately using Tantra symbols in their work, for Mohanti, these were just symbols and motifs from his village. He has exhibited widely, nationally as well as internationally.

I decide to interview him not only because of his symbolism and his abstraction of Hindu symbolism, but also because he has been a vocal advocate of Indian artists looking at their own traditions for inspiration – rather than be guided by Western art movements and trends.

[Some interview lost before I turned the Dictaphone on]

AD: Aurogeeta Das
PM: Prafulla Mohanti

PM: . . . When I analysed that, I found how profound the system was, for the person who found it or used it. He must have been a brilliant educator. A child at the age of three, drawing the divine energy in the form of three perfect circles. And what happens during drawing, 'Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwara', 'Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwara' – that itself becomes a meditative chant...

AD: Mantra.

PM: Mantra, so that the child imbibes this meditative spirit, [it enters] into the consciousness of the child, from a very early age. And what he is doing, is drawing this and inviting the energy into this space. That's what most practitioners do, when they draw the circle, they invite that energy to come into that space. And so what that child – at the age of three – is doing, is inviting the divine energy, *unknowingly*, unconsciously into that space. Brahma [makes gesture of drawing a circle] – this is Brahma, that circle – inside that is Brahma, Vishnu [makes gesture of drawing a circle]… so he's drawing the circle, and bringing the energy into that circle, inviting it. Then Maheshwara [makes

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gesture of drawing a circle]. The moment he opens his eyes, and sees the presence of divine energy everywhere – always in the circular form… the sun, the moon, the lotus even… human beings are *also* circular.

AD: In terms of…?

PM: Face, body, mother's breast. So the circle, the presence of the circle is there, you know in the Indian consciousness, in the Indian environment and it is used consciously, and that consciousness has to be [or hasn't] been understood by these Westernised Indians – the middle-class living in the cities and towns and those who are writing. And they really have to go back into the spirit of India, which is – in my opinion – really in rural India, in the villages.

AD: Yes, I read the book that you wrote.

PM: *My Village, My Life*…. Yes, yes.

AD: And I was reading that [inaudible]…

PM: I was talking to my friend Dave the other day, [telling him that] my village was a green village. . . . My mother was decorating the house for festivals, and I wanted to do it, although it was not done by men or boys. I just – it came naturally to me, I just – followed my mother. And I was so good that I was invited by other villagers to decorate their homes.

AD: Oh. [Laugh]

PM: [Laughs] And I developed a style of my own and apparently – I was very surprised – when I was about eight or 10, I was accepted, I was called an *artist*, by the villagers.

AD: Oh! And who invited you to draw in their homes? Women?

PM: Yes.

AD: That's interesting.

PM: The women themselves.

AD: How did you feel this, by the age of 10 – that you were suddenly accepted as an artist? Was there a moment…?

PM: They said so, they told me. They said, 'He's an artist, we'll invite him to decorate our home.' Particularly the outside walls, not inside. You know the walls are decorated?

AD: Yes.

PM: And you have to have decorations also for the wedding ceremonies.

AD: Hmm, for births, weddings… even the…

PM: For births, the men are not allowed to do this, but *weddings…*

AD: And what about sacred thread ceremonies? Do they draw for that?

PM: Not for the sacred thread ceremony. For births, for the weddings. The men… wall decorations are actually for the Lakshmi Puja.

AD: And that's for the wall only, or also on the…?

PM: On the floor, we decorate the floor.

AD: Both?

PM: Yes, we decorate with flowers and footsteps to invite Lakshmi into the house. So that's… there are some beautiful stories and myths…

AD: Around Lakshmi?

PM: Laskhmi, yes. I'll tell you another day. When I went to J. J. School of Arts [Mumbai] to study architecture, I just drew triangles and squares and lines. There, I was meant to feel that everything which came from the village was not art.

AD: My god.

PM: And it was not… and it was not accepted as modern.

AD: And this was at what time? Which year?

PM: '55, 60s. Between '55 and '60. It was called folk, village and rural.

AD: All the prefixes.

PM: Yes, and all done by the so-called illiterate, ignorant villagers. And if I designed a house with a courtyard, it was not considered modern. It has to be [a box]. What was called for was Western architecture. Architects from America or from England.

AD: But what were considered the copies? You were asked to copy the Western…?

PM: Hmm! We were *asked* to copy the Greek sculptures, Greek designs, Greek art – some of them were also educated in Britain… So everything Western was considered modern.

AD: And the advantages of modern being what? Were they ever spelt out or discussed? Why was modern good? I mean…

PM: Because it was Western! It was not Indian. They didn't actually evaluate it. Why it was [considered so].

AD: So modern equalled Western equalled good.

PM: Hmm. *Better.* Than Indian.

AD: Better, yes.

PM: In… everywhere, in art, in architecture… Haven't you come across that?

AD: Yes, I have. It's just that, most people I meet – even from the generation that immediately followed Independence… due to being politically correct, they will never mention something like that. They might insert it in an academic article in heavily couched language, where they are trying very hard to present all points of view… and to admit that there are some areas that need decolonisation, so on and so forth. It's all worded so that nobody can accuse of them of being anti-Western or anti-…' It's a very ridiculous stance to take because there are some things that *are* problematic, there are some things that *have* happened – you can't just brush them under the carpet. And nobody is denying that…

PM: No, but I can understand why they say that, because their *identity* depends on the richness of Western culture and Western education.

AD: *Certainly*, yes. That's where the problem comes from. Even people like me, for example. I have to be careful not to offend the sensibilities of Westerners, particularly when I am talking among Western audiences. I have had to often tone down [my argument]… There's a fine balance that you need to achieve, because there are some things that [are controversial]…

PM: [Laughs]

AD: …that have *happened*, you can't deny those events. On the other hand, I am not saying that everything or person who is Western, is bad. That would be an extremely naïve view *and* completely untrue…

PM: No, no, I am not saying that Western is bad.

AD: No, but because of that [wariness], people are not willing to state that there was a problem in Indian art education at a certain point…

PM: Exactly.

AD: …which is why I am glad you have said that. Art education *has*… there has been this big rupture, this big imposition at a certain point, which has I think changed the course of…

PM: You see, in *my* case, my education was done in the village. The village was my teacher, actually. I loved everything, by seeing, watching, observing, listening…

AD: The environment itself…

PM: The environment taught me, [shaped my] sensibilities. For instance, I developed my sense of design by watching my mother select *sarees* [Indian form of dress], or select bangles, or select pots – you know, the potter would come with about 20 pots and my mother would select three. Sometimes, I would wonder, 'Why did she select those three and not the rest?'

AD: Instinctive.

PM: Yes. So from my childhood, I have been watching and by doing that, I developed a sensibility, which was totally, *totally* a village, a rural sensibility actually. So when I got to Bombay to study architecture, I was already an artist in the village. I'd take a piece of clay and turn it into a beautiful thing, in my *own* way. Although I had seen other villagers doing it, I had my own way of doing it – which was – for *me*, was – original. And the other villagers appreciated it, and *their* appreciation gave me encouragement. And the other thing that helped me create was – because we didn't have brushes or paints which we could go and buy in the marketplace…

AD: So did you draw with rice powder?

PM: Not rice powder but making everything – the colours…

AD: The usual…

PM: The usual – *sindoor* for red…and for all that we…

AD: For green, dried leaves.

PM: For green, dried leaves and petals and… so all the colours which were available in the village and from natural sources.

AD: Coal black and…

PM: No, we used to burn coconut shells and then turn it into powder and then… It was a tremendous pleasure in creating something out of nothing, almost. So when I came to Bombay, I was told that everything I represented – from the village – was inferior. So when I came to England, I saw that people didn't know anything about the village, about village India, and I was surprised that after 250 years of British rule, the British didn't know or understand village India.

AD: But I suppose the administrators were… had the task of finding out about Indian culture solely to control it and to…

PM: Exactly.

AD: And the rest of the Britishers couldn't care less about what the colonies were.

PM: And then when I went to Leeds, to study town planning, I had a room… this size [gestures around the studio], a Victorian room, and it hadn't been decorated for the previous 20 years and it was dark and gloomy. And I felt very depressed in that room, which had no relationship with my India or my village, so I took large pieces of paper and I drew the symbols of the village, like Jagannath, the lotus, various circular motifs, mostly the lotus. I found that *immediately*, the character of the room changed, and it provided me…

AD: Warmth.

PM: And also security, that that was my space. It had village India and everything in it. At that time, you couldn't go and buy any Indian things from the shops. There were none. So I had to paint my village, my India for myself.

AD: In the middle of Leeds.

PM: And that's why the circle, the lotus, the lotus with the round-shaped petals… I could make that lotus abstract. What I meant was a circle and if you make it more abstract, it becomes a point. Absolute abstraction makes it, turns it into *shunya* [zero, nothingness]. And then from the *shunya*, it becomes a point, it becomes a circle, it expands and becomes the whole universe. So that's how my work developed.

AD: It's interesting you say that because the Rajasthan drawings, they say quite a few of them begin with a dot, a *bindi*.

PM: Everything begins with a dot, even a line begins with a dot.

AD: Yes, well, yes.

PM: You know [laughs]. Because you know the line – what is it called – the continuation of a dot?

AD: Yes, that's true.

PM: And then, that circle becomes a square, becomes a triangle, becomes a rectangle…

AD: It's the most elemental form.

PM: *Yes*. No, there are no other *forms*! When you look at a building or a tree, what you see in your environment, you analyse the dot, the line, the triangle, the circle, the square and that combination of all those forms… circles and circle… analyse your face, look at yourself in the mirror, you can see the line, the circle… and the way artists use them in their own way, and make… So nobody is creating anything new. The energy they are inviting is [inaudible, divine, cosmic?] energy, and they are giving it a material form, in the form of a triangle or a square or a circle or an oval. And what they are doing is to invite that energy for a particular purpose. Now in Indian iconography, there are certain forms which represent certain…

AD: Deities.

PM: Deities. And what they do in the rituals [is] inviting it for a moment, for a specific time and… which is very interesting. Like they say, 'this is Shiva' and when the function [ritual event][244] is over, they throw it away. So they bring the energy into it and they take the energy away, for that particular purpose.

AD: So it is invoked only for that moment of time.

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[244] It is telling that Indians tend to use the word 'function' when they speak of an 'event', because events are usually imbued with ritual or ceremonial functions. Similarly, we tend to use the word 'present' for 'gift', which is also not accidental.

PM: For that moment of time, yes.

AD: For that worship. And once that is over…hmm…

PM: Haven't you seen that, in rituals?

AD: I haven't seen too many ritual practices, because I grew up in the Ashram [Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry], where we don't have any [laugh].

PM: Those drawings are to invite the goddess. These drawings I am talking about are the *yantras*…

AD: …which *represent*…

PM: …which represent the particular deities, yes. Everybody can't do it. It's usually the priests who perform the rituals.

AD: So the women don't draw *yantras* at all?

PM: Oh yes, they can!

AD: And they do?

PM: Oh yes. It was a very interesting [experience]. Every Tuesday, they clear it. An image of *Mangala*, the goddess. And what is interesting is that most of the art forms done by the village women or in Indian villages, are abstract forms.

AD: Yes.

PM: It is only people in India who cremate their loved ones. They understand the true meaning of abstraction.

AD: The impermanence of things.

PM: *Yes*, to see in front of you the body you loved, turned into ashes. It becomes a personal experience. Because we take part in the cremation process in India. So you place the body on the fire and then see it being engulfed by fire. That beautiful body is turned into ashes. That is true abstraction, that we in India experience.

AD: [Some recording lost] I want to understand where they have come from.

PM: No, I am only interested in the positive aspects of my culture.

AD: But to distinguish what is positive and what is negative, you have to, in the first place, understand where they are coming from.

[Significant tape interruptions here due to a guest's interruptions].

PM: Yes, exactly. That's the way I see it. And the British think that my ideas are a *threat* to the beliefs, to the propaganda about India. I have become a lone voice in understanding India.

[Significant tape interruptions here due to a guest's interruptions].

PM: If you really understood what culture is, and what our identity is, and what is beauty, because one of the purposes of an artist is to make life beautiful. In my own life, I do it for *me*, to find peace through my own work, through painting. I am most *happy* actually, when I am painting. So I wish I could be in this state of happiness all the time, painting. And I used to enjoy in the village, for instance… when I was decorating people's homes, or *my* own – the walls of our house. I used to occasionally have a little piece of paper, because paper was too expensive. We couldn't afford to buy paper in my childhood. These large, mud walls that I'd paint with rice paste and brushes made with straw – it gave us a marvellous sense of freedom. And then throwing paint on the walls with my fingers. And I wish I could have that feeling of freedom, so that I could go and paint other people's [homes] here, in London, for instance, I feel like painting the walls.

AD: What stops you? I am asking you particularly because you are saying… You know, when you were talking earlier about making things out of almost nothing and now you are painting on canvas – a very, very material…

PM: Yes, yes, yes. Because I am in an environment, in a very materialistic environment. So it is very difficult for me to create a space from nothing, which I could actually do in my village. That's what I do, when I go back to my village. And this time, I worked with the village women.

AD: This most recent visit?

PM: *Yes*. I have been doing that for the past 20 years. So I took the clay from the river, the rice paste, turmeric powder or turmeric paste and I painted. And if you go on painting the village walls… there's no infinite space. There's a limited space which you can paint – the floors and the walls.

AD: Perhaps that's why they are ephemeral as well. [laugh]

PM: *Yes*. So they put another layer of mud plaster and…

AD: And they paint it again… [laugh]

PM: Their creative, artistic expression is not permanent. It's for that moment.

AD: There have been many questions circulating in my head, in this whole PhD process. One is that less permanent and less material forms of expression, are increasingly pressured – either they are forced to become material in some form, semi-permanent at least… [some recording lost]

PM: Ten rupees, you knew how to spend it. Services were exchanged. So the potter came, and my mother bought a pot and gave rice. For everything, actually [it was a system of barter]. It's only when we bought kerosene, from the trader, that you paid in rupees. In India, it still happens. When I go to a doctor, a friend, I can say, 'I'll pay you in paintings or in some other form.' Or a musician can play music. It is still happening in my village actually. I [re]introduced that in a sense. I've got my friends to appreciate what I am trying to do in the village. So we don't need a piece of paper.

AD: The monetary system is…

PM: With an artist, it is a painting or a drawing so I give you [the artwork], then you give [me] the money and I pay that money to somebody else to buy some bread. But if the person who is selling the bread would accept my drawing in exchange, it would be a really beautiful place, for me. So the artist would be supported by society itself.

AD: The system of patronage has become very complicated [some recording lost].

PM: Yes, that's a different system, what you are talking about. But if a person is buying a drawing, a painting or a sculpture, he is buying it because he likes it.

[Interview stopped abruptly because of guest's interruption].

Extracts of hand-written notes from an initial meeting with Prafulla Mohanti, not on tape:
AD: When I read your book, *My Village, My Life*, I realised that *chitas* are – stylistically – sort of a mixture of *alpanas* and *muggus*. In Andhra, we call floor-drawings *muggus*.

PM: Yes. Unlike in Andhra, Orissa drawings are less geometrical, more fluid.

AD: What would you say is the primary purpose of *chitas*?

PM: They have primarily a sacred and a religious function.

AD: Are *chitas* made primarily for Lakshmi *puja*, or are they made for the worship of other deities as well?

PM: They are made for Lakshmi *puja*, but they are made especially for Ganesh and for Saraswati. [While referring to the very bright colours used in drawings made during religious festivals to invite the goddesses Durga and Kali] . . . My nephew's wife suffered from cancer and they performed a *puja* [to get her better]. The priest came in to remove the [evil] powers. He asked for colours and he covered the whole floor with beautiful drawings. You know, had I brought these drawings to London, they would have been [considered] a work of art, but he [the male priest] would not draw them anywhere else or for anyone else.

Edited email correspondence with Mithu Sen for PhD, January 2011
I approached Delhi-based artist Mithu Sen after viewing her 'Black Candy' series of drawings and reading a description of a sound installation called 'Confession'. Avni Doshi wrote:

> Sen's work reflects an awareness of many sources and styles, and the politics of borrowing. Rather than passively assimilate her sources, in her 2009 installation 'Confession' (conceived and produced independently and exhibited with this series), Sen engages critically the notion of copying, using her own voice to raise concerns, including the fraught issue of repeating her own work. (Skoda Prize catalogue, January 2011)

As former *Art India* editor Girish Shahane explained to me, the installation was essentially a 'confession box', in which she spoke about copying, an issue that she's very conscious about. I later heard 'Confessions', and despite not having experienced 'Black Candy' and 'Confessions' in the gallery space, I find I can appreciate the stylistic devices Mithu used, so that viewers experienced a combination of 'beautiful', sensual – even erotic – drawings and a distorted, looped sound-piece which was part confession born of guilt and part evocation of her frustration with artistic repetition. I think the form of the drawings and the sound-piece works well in taking the viewer through the process that Mithu goes through as an artist caught between her own and others' expectations.

MS: Thank you for your interest in my work. The sound piece 'Confession' was done as part of a project called 'Me Two' at Krinzinger Project in Vienna in 2009. Here is a brief text that accompanied the piece during the show (see below).

MITHU SEN: 'ME TWO'
I want to confess as a contemporary artist that I feel that I am compulsively duplicating visual, narrative and formal elements in works. Repetition and reproduction have been recurrent themes in artistic practice as a means of embracing hybridization and as stylistic devices.

My project is to address issues of guilt related to the exhausted receptivity by market forces and the art audience, as well as my own existential crises.

There are two parts to my project:
The first is a research-based authentic encounter with the local Austrian artist Egon Schiele and Herr Schiele's reactions to the social conditions of his time and ways to critique or deal with it. By incorporating elements of his work into my own stylistic space, known for both erotic arts and self-portraiture, together with my own established sensuality, I hope to arrive in a new territory by using my own 'attractive' works as a jumping off point to address non-visual communications.

The second part is to confront my visual art practice in a confessional manner. It is about critiquing one's own 'established' self as well as the practices of other contemporary artists. By critiquing the primacy of my art practice, I hope to indulge everyone's need for the beautiful 'Mithu drawings' that they covet while also presenting another side of myself, in order to address my feelings of guilt associated with the repetition of imagery and motifs that ultimately feel confining and restricting.

It is the idea of having two extremes co-existing under the same roof.

AD: Thank you for further explaining your work 'Confession'. I have been exploring imitation and repetition and have been trying to incorporate contemporary artists' viewpoints. I find the following three statements most interesting. It would be good if you could confirm that I have understood them correctly and clarify some of my doubts:

1) "Repetition and reproduction have been recurrent themes in artistic practice as a means of embracing hybridization and as stylistic devices."

Does repetition here pertain to repeating only your work or the work of others too? Reproduction, I assume, does refer to reproducing the work of others (for example, Schiele). In this sense, I would assume that the challenge is to make your work

stylistically coherent yet include a diversity of reference. Could you say something about this challenge, that is, how you – in terms of formal language – confront the challenge of embracing hybridisation.

2) "My project is to address issues of guilt related to the exhausted receptivity by market forces and the art audience, as well as my own existential crises."

As I understand this, you feel pressured by the market and your audience to repeat a style – beautiful drawings – that you have established, and that they are familiar with, but since you find this constraining, one of the aims in this project was to balance your need to experiment while still catering to that expectation. Have I understood that correctly?

3) "By incorporating elements of his (Egon Schiele's) work into my own stylistic space, known for both erotic arts and self-portraiture, together with my own established sensuality, I hope to arrive in a new territory by using my own 'attractive' works as a jumping off point to address non-visual communications."

I am assuming that by non-visual communication, you refer to the sounds in your installation. What gave you the notion of using recorded voice with the visuals? Would it be possible for you to send me your sound bites?

Apologies for the lengthy questions. Perhaps the following extracts from my thesis will explain my interest.

Extract 1:
"Needless to say, artists' 'signature' plays a significant role in their survival in a competitive market, making them reluctant to risk abandoning an established signature that translates to economic security."

Extract 2:
(Here, I am quoting David Chichester, Petra Kalshoven and Andrew Whitehouse, who critiqued and introduced my Etnofoor paper and the others in the same volume):
". . . the authors demonstrate that imitation is about so much more than imitating; it can include copying but also innovating, sharing but also contesting, emulating but also appropriating a wide variety of cultural gestures, artifacts, and repertoires. Rather than being dismissed as mindless repetition, criticized as derivative reproduction, or policed as plagiarism, imitation is recovered by these authors as a dynamic engine of cultural creativity. . . . imitation . . . [is] an engine of creativity. . . . By attributing creative force to imitation, we break the notional hold of any authenticating original – the primal scene, the paradigmatic beginning, the foundational centre . . . (Chichester)

"Imitation also raises political questions of authenticity and appropriateness. The authenticity of copies and practices of copying is contingent on how they are socially embedded and conceptualised . . . These . . . articles . . . also investigate the pivotal role that imitation is assumed to play in cultural transmission and transformation, both in contemporary societies and historically. Both Das and Kalshoven consider how imitation is implicated in the diffusion of materials, forms and practices and how imitation relates to creativity, originality and individuality. . . . re-experiencing is ultimately a matter of moving the present forward and of arriving at a deeper understanding of the self."
(Kalshoven and Whitehouse)

Extract 3:

"Furthermore, it is viewers' and creators' hegemonic positions that determine whether an artist has appropriated or not. There are several instances of metropolitans appropriating traditional arts, though they are still in the minority. Jamini Roy appropriated Kalighat painters' vernacular – his large almond eyes and the clothing are all Kalighat. The Singh Twins and Manisha Gera Baswani's formal composition and attention to minutiae is inspired by Mughal miniaturists; the twins are additionally also inspired by Mughal portraiture, as evidenced in their recent exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery. Haku Shah borrowed Gujarati tribal artists' flat planes of colour and their simplicity of form, Arpana Caur used the hieroglyphic figures of Warli tribal art as motifs for works like *Rites of Time* and *Harvest* and the neo-symbolists appropriated Tantric geometric symbols, some of them retaining the symbolism of Tantra and others stripping them of Tantric associations to develop a language of abstraction. These examples – like Picasso's appropriation of African art – are less controversial than Indian artists' appropriation of Picasso's style, because they are *individuals* appropriating *collective* traditions. The reverse also applies; just as Bengali *patua* artists appropriated popular imagery from English calendars and postcards, Andhra's women have appropriated Disney figures like Mickey Mouse for New Year's Eve *muggus*. When such reverse appropriation takes place, the results are often branded as kitsch. Appropriation of course can be of different kinds; it can be stylistic appropriation, it can be appropriation of motifs or appropriation of content; it can even be authorial appropriation – in other words, an appropriation of identity. The precise nature of appropriation is not under discussion here; the point is that when you have what Sheikh refers to as the familiar polemic between a collective and ahistorical tradition and an individualistic tradition focussed on originality and consciously situating itself in a historical timeline, it seems permissible to appropriate from a collective tradition precisely because such a tradition makes no claim to originality and thus does not claim a stake in any corpus of intellectual or creative copyrights. The reverse however, is difficult to do without inviting accusations of appropriation used in its pejorative sense. This is why writing and documentation are important; while documentation in writing arguably introduces its own evils, it also generates a history for any tradition and thus contributes to redressing hegemonic positions.

To repeat, imitate or derive from, is not necessarily a sign of weakness. It can be – and very often is – a foundation to build upon. By learning skills, techniques, forms and concepts, traditional artists learn a visual art's vocabulary and grammar, building up a vast reservoir that they then have at their disposal to draw from it, as they may choose. Similarly, metropolitan artists' appropriation of traditional arts is not necessarily exploitative and their appropriation of international artists is not necessarily derivative, though it can be so in both cases. There is a fine line between the instances where appropriation is used by those lacking original thought or creative skill and the instances where an Indian metropolitan artist for example wishes to use the arts of others – be they traditional artists, international artists or their colleagues – as a resource, to be developed further, to be re-assessed, questioned and re-interpreted, or even simply because they are attracted by the novelty of an unfamiliar form or style."

MS: I must say, first of all, that my English is very poor . . . My struggle therefore started when I came to Delhi from Bengal (where I was already an established Bengali poet with lots of dreams and appreciations). My destiny took me to Delhi, where I had to overcome my . . . inability to express myself in this very particular and 'colonial' language, after going through a long, humiliating and frustrating period of communication. . . . I [finally] gave up, as I realized my limitation of becoming 'sophisticated' in this language. So I

started exploring my own cocoon. Eventually, I felt that the language of art (and not just visual art) is my most comfortable zone, where I can at least have my own way of communication. Today, along with my visual art practice, I simultaneously work with sound, writing (using texts in my visuals), poems/scripts, performances, etc, and all [of this] with my broken English.

I have addressed your questions below:

1) I think repetition pertains to repeating my work as well as the work of others.

2) Yes, the challenge is to make my work stylistically coherent yet include a diversity of reference. Also, hybridisation is always fun as well as a bit of a pun.

I always like to push myself to provoke others and myself, to extend my boundary so I am not limiting myself within a frame. So it [the piece 'Confessions'] was [done] more to question myself than others. It was also about protecting my 'love' (drawings) from its over exhausting practices (to fulfill the market's and my viewers' demands).

It's a sort of psychological warning to myself (in the form of a confession), where I additionally tried to make my *viewers* aware of the repetitive factor in my work. It raised a question and [highlighted] the risk of sometimes being 'dishonest'. In the sound-piece, I even used the phrase 'I seduce and cheat my viewer'.

The sound-piece is a combination of my personal and professional confession, where the listener could barely follow a complete sentence, but could just hear some broken, overlapping parts. It's a three-minute piece but because it is on a loop, it assumes a chanting or nagging manner and after a while, it makes the listener dizzy with its strong words. It forces the listener to concentrate more and more to catch the provocative lines but all in vain. The only sentence that is clear here is the confession of repeating images.

3) I have attached the sound-piece 'Confessions'. About my idea of using recorded voice with the visuals, I tried to put two extremely contrasting 'productions' in the same gallery space (but in two separate rooms). The viewer had to cross the 'actual' fancy drawings . . . [the Black Candy series] to go to the next, dark room with a confession box in an invisible corner. I tried to play with two different human senses; the visual sense and the hearing sense provide different stimulations for our brain. [Even when] . . . the visual sense stops receiving visuals, the mind can still be hungry to . . . [receive] some more inputs. If the visuals bring a monotony and frustration for the viewers and they give up – knowingly or unknowingly – they then face a new challenge and activate other human senses to receive new inputs.

Here, the sound part takes over [the experience] and tells the ultimate truth, where the eyes are no longer functioning but the hunger for completing the journey is still there. [In a sense], the confession room was a room for unveiling the truth through meditation and disturbance.

Edited email correspondence with The Singh Twins, November 2010
London-born twin sisters Amrit and Rabindra are contemporary British artists whose paintings have been acknowledged as constituting a unique genre in British Art and for initiating a new movement in the revival of the Indian miniature tradition within modern

art practice. Describing their work as Past-Modern (as opposed to Post-Modern), their work engages challenges existing stereotypes and redefines generally accepted, narrow perceptions of heritage and identity in art and society. Combining elements from Western and Eastern aesthetics they assert the value of traditional and non European art forms to the continuing development of, contemporary art practice. They speak extensively about their work in major art institutions, their work is exhibited internationally, and in 2011, they were awarded an OBE for services to British art. I contacted The Singh Twins – as they prefer to be known – because their work draws inspiration from the miniature tradition and this is, moreover, evident in their paintings.

AD: I have your *Art India* interview where you speak of icons, etc, which I may quote from but would you like to comment on the difficulties or advantages of drawing on traditional arts?

TST: One of the main difficulties we have faced drawing on traditional art – particularly a non European art form – is trying to convince the Contemporary Art Establishment that Tradition has a valid place within contemporary art expression. Very often the Establishment cannot, or refuses to, see beyond the traditional aesthetics of our work and to acknowledge that it is not necessarily the language we have chosen to use, but the universal themes and messages we explore, that make our work contemporary. However, having to fight the prejudice that exists against traditional art forms within the Art Establishment has also been an advantage because it has pushed us to develop the Indian Miniature style a lot further than perhaps we would have done had we not faced that prejudice. And, as a result we have been able to create a unique genre, which sets us apart from other contemporary artists.

To clarify, the negative response to our work made us move away from merely emulating traditional/conventional themes and, rather got us thinking about how we might give the traditional art style a contemporary relevance in order to prove its worth as a valid form of contemporary art expression. In effect the work became the tool with which we challenged the establishment and our themes became much more politically and socially focused, exploring themes of universal concern.

APPENDIX 4: LITERARY REFERENCES TO INDIAN FLOOR-DRAWINGS

By including this appendix, I would like to indicate how embedded floor-drawings are in vernacular cultures. Although I have titled this 'literary references', most of them are transmitted in oral traditions, and have only recently been transcribed by researchers. Any passages quoted here are not verbatim because many of the words – including proper nouns – used in the original texts, are regional pronunciations of Sanskrit terms. As in the main text, in the interest of consistency, I have Sankritised such words here. These variant spellings aside, passages within quotation marks *are* verbatim.

Reference 1: "Duryodhan , already jealous of the Pandavas, visited Indraprastha", a new city built by the Pandavas. "Seeing the beautiful water *kolams* on ponds, he mistook them for carpets and stepped on them, only to be immersed in the water . . ." Draupadi laughs at him and he declares he shall revenge himself on the Pandavas because of this insult, thus leading to the war of the Mahabharata. In the original story, the authors claim, there is no reference to water *kolams*. (Pillai and Saroja 1995: 29-30)
Of course, when the authors refer to the 'original' story, they probably mean the most authoritative edition.

Reference 2: Another account of Draupadi's public humiliation has her drawing a water *kolam* – an inverted triangle – with her tears. In addition to the negativity attributed to water *kolams*, there is the additional negativity of her tears and the inverted triangle – an inauspicious symbol. (Pillai and Saroja 1995: 39)

Reference 3: The two Indian epics offer great scope for variation, the *Mahabharata* more so than the *Ramayana* as it is a layered narrative that recounts the rise and fall of the Bharata dynasty and the Yadava clan and as such consists of multiple narratives. While the *Ramayana* does include notions about kingship, it is a relatively linear story, essentially an epic tale of divine love. It is not surprising therefore, to find several adaptations of popular incidents from the epics, as indicated by another folktale presented by Pilla and Saroja. Here, when Draupadi is humiliated in the Hastinapur court by the Kauravas, she is referred to as taking some water from a jar and drawing a water *kolam* with her toe. (1995: 35) The water *kolam*, for some reason I have yet to discover, symbolises destruction; and here, the inauspiciousness is compounded by the *kolam* being drawn with a toe – ordinarily not acceptable. As is well-known, Draupadi's humiliation in the Hastinapur court brings further destruction, so the water-*kolam*'s inauspiciousness seems relevant in such a context.

Reference 4: In another of the tales, there is a reference to an old woman who turns into a young virgin because of drawing *kolams*. The underlying meaning of the tale, according to the authors, indicates that drawing "*kolams* in temples is a sort of devotional prayer, which keeps ladies young". (Pillai and Saroja 1995: 33)

Reference 5:
Pillai and Saroja (1995: 34) also refer to Jaganatha Das of Orissa who regularly drew *kolams*[245] as a form of prayer and devotion to the lord, and who – when sick in bed – had a *darshan* of the lord through his *kolam*.

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[245] Since the reference is to someone in Orissa, the word *kolam* is probably used as a generic term for floor-drawing and not specifically to the Tamil practice.

Reference 6: Bairi also mentions him: "Sri Jagannathadas by his skill in Rangavalli was famous as Rangavallidas. His followers Sri Pranesha Vittal and other leaders of the 'Dasakoota' were said to have expressed their sublime feelings through Rangavalli thus giving visual forms to their lofty thoughts." (2007: 1-2)

Reference 7: The point I made in Chapter 2, with reference to Deepavali *mandanas'* origin myth, also applies to a tale about how the practice of drawing *kolams* on ovens began. When goddess Lakshmi visited a house where a woman did not draw *kolams* on the oven, she declared that she could not place a crying infant she held in her arms, on the floor of a house where the oven did not have *kolams* drawn on it. From then on, it was traditional to draw *kolams* on ovens. (Pillai and Saroja 1995: 34)

Reference 8: Another folktale (Pillai and Saroja 1995: 37) offers a different origin myth about *kolams* on ovens. Here, a woman who was heavily dependent on her mother-in-law for domestic advice, is advised by the spirit of her late mother-in-law to seek advice from her oven, by smearing it with cow-dung and drawing *kolams* on it. The purpose of the tale, as deduced by the authors, is to attribute sacredness to the oven, by smearing it with cow-dung, etc.

Reference 9: "Cow-dung is the place where Lakshmi resides. Hindus consider the cow as [a] mother and hence . . . [call it] Gomata and Kamadhenu. . . . Kamadhenu came out of . . . [the] milk ocean, even before Goddess Lakshmi came out of it. The thirty crores of gods, finding no place on earth, requested Kamadhenu to give them places to reside. She protected them all, giving them places all over her body, in every part of her. Lastly, Lakshmi came and asked for a place. But there was [a] place only at the backside of her body and Lakshmi agreed to stay there. Hence people believe that cow-dung and cow's urine are auspicious and sacred.[246] . . . and they also began to sprinkle cow-dung water in front of their houses, at their entrances, to invite Lakshmi into their houses. People who build new houses, choose plots where cows have been grazing. 'The lands stepped on and grazed by the cows are worth worshipping. They remove all evil spirits and bring in auspiciousness' says a book on . . . [houses]." (Pillai and Saroja 1995: 34) According to the authors, in the original story about Lakshmi and Kamadhenu, there is no reference to the sprinkling of cow-dung water in front of houses, so they believe that the purpose of the tale is to attribute "divinity to cow-dung, as the place of abode for Lakshmi. (Pillai and Saroja 1995: 35)

Reference 10: Another tale indicates that even "a tiny bit of cow-dung, and a hidden tiny lamp are enough to invite Lakshmi into the house". (Pillai and Saroja 1995: 35) This is a saying I have come across in Andhra as well.

Reference 11: The story of the king and queen of Parvatipuram recounts their efforts to change their falling fortunes. For every boon that the queen wishes for, there is a specific material or manner for drawing a *kolam*. During the first year, "she drew *kolams* to have a baby; . . . second year she drew *kolams* to get wealth; . . . etc." (Pillai and Saroja 1995: 36)

Reference 12: The same story was also recounted by Jaganmohan (1999-2000) during a lecture. She states:

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[246] This story of Kamadhenu is a well-known tale, and many traditional arts, such as Tanjore painting, have beautiful depictions of gods and goddesses on a cow's body.

Sarada Devi is the wife of Ganapalam, the king of Parvatipuram. They didn't have any baby for years and did penance praying to Sivan [Shiva]. Sivan appeared and said, 'You should build five houses and settle in them five families. If you follow the regulations of the *puja* according to the instructions of the lady of the house where Lakshmi enters to reside, you will beget a baby. Akkammal of the last house used to sprinkle cow-dung water in front of the entrance of her house, drew *kolams* and lit a lamp in the house. Lakshmi resided in Akkammal's house. Sarada Devi came to know of this, came to her and got from her the details about the *puja*. She did Shiva Puja according to her instructions. First year she drew *kolams* to have a baby and has *puranakalasham* over the *kolam*; second year she drew *kolams* to get wealth and set up a stone of sandal paste; third year she drew *kolams* for prosperity and set up *palkalasham* over the *kolam*; fourth year she drew *kolams* for long life and set up betel leaves and performed *puja*. She got all the benefits and comforts in life and lived long happily.

The *kalasham* or *kalasam*, as I have explained in Chapters 3 and 4, is a pot used in worship and the ones referred to here contain different materials for specific vows, hence *puranakalasham* and *palkalasham*, the latter probably containing milk. Note that like cow-dung balls placed over *muggus* on Bhogi day, these specific pots placed over particular *kolams* are believed to grant particular wishes.

Reference 13: ". . . Red is the favourite colour for Shakti. Red sand has the colour of the blood of the Asuras [demons in opposition to gods], whose blood fell on the ground and it symbolises valour. In memory of Ambikai's victory over Irattapican, people began to draw *kolams* with red sand." According to the authors, the original story makes no reference to either red sand or to *kolams* and the purpose of the tale is clearly to attribute divinity to the colour red and to red sand. There are a few tales cited by Pillai and Saroja where the blood of some demon or the other falls on the ground, solidifying and purifying the earth and turning into red sand. According to the authors, red sand is associated with blood and purifies stains of any sort. (Pillai and Saroja 1995: 38)

Reference 14: ". . . Antal then beseeches Lord Visnu not to keep destroying the sand castles that she and the other children are making at the edge of the ocean. She says:
…The month of Pakuni is here
we have adorned the street for Kamadeva,
O naughty Sridhara,
do not break
our sandcastles.
With aching backs
we spent the day
building sandcastles.
We had not time
to sit and gaze at them…
You who slumber
upon the surging ocean,
do not break our sandcastles…
With soft white sand
We build castles of our fancy.
Along the street we drew
auspicious diagrams…
have you no eyes to see?

If you erase them
still our hearts will melt
with love for you,
we shall bear you no grudge." (Dehejia 1990: 79-80, quoted by Nagarajan 1998: 138)

Reference 15: Nagarajan goes on to say:
"It is in this song-poem, the *Nacciyar Tirumoli*, that we find the earliest historical reference to patterns ritually created on the thresholds of households, but this time, they are made out of sand. For example, in the very first stanza of the *Nacciyar Tirumoli* Antal sings:
Through the month of Tai
I swept the ground before my house,
made sacred *mandalas* of fine sand.
The month of Maci has begun,
I have adorned the street, . . ." (1998: 139-140)

Reference 16:
"The great poet Shudraka in his famous play *Mrichakatikam*, mentions the paintings done on the ground during *bali puja*.
　　aho salil marjitakrit, haritopalepanasy vividh sugandhi
kusummovahar chitralikhit bhoomi bhagasya vasant sena
　　bhavandvarasya sashrikata
The gateway of the house of Vasantsena is looking all the more beautiful by the pictures drawn by green leaves and scented flowers on the earth duly smeared by the cow dung after sprinkling water." (Kaushal 2007: 19-20)

APPENDIX 5: A TAXONOMY OF MANDANAS

Mandanas, the floor-drawings of Rajasthan, are drawn as part of ritual occasions such as festivals, propitious ceremonies and *vratas* (domestic vows). To illustrate how the ritual framework I have discussed in Chapter 4 may be applied to taxonomies of floor-drawings offered by previous authors (Saksena 1979 and 1885 and Kaushal 2007 for example), this appendix provides a description of *mandanas* made for seasons (which would, under my ritual framework, belong to the class of rituals marking transitions in nature) and *mandanas* made for occasions, which are further sub-divided into those made for rites of passage (under the ritual framework, these are liminal states) and festivals (these belong either to the class of rites marking transitions in nature or to rites of veneration; in some cases they may belong to both categories; a possible example is the Bar Pujani Amavasya). Also note that these taxonomies differ considerably from the one I offer in Chapters 4 and 5; mine focus on threshold *muggus*. With the exception of Sankranti, Christmas and New Year *muggus*, my study also does not look at specific festival *muggus*.

Seasonal *mandanas* are sub-divided into those drawn for summer, winter or the monsoons. These not only have particular motifs but their canvas – the ground – is also smeared with different colours, red during winter, brown for summer and green during the rains. Their characterising features identify them as seasonal *mandanas*. According to Saksena, their forms indicate the season they are drawn for. For example, a fan is drawn only during hot summers. Being a staple winter vegetable, a tender aubergine is drawn during the cold months and – according to Saksena – is the lone winter motif. Although Diwali and Makara Sankranti are both winter festivals, the 160 odd *mandanas* drawn for these festivals cannot really be classified as winter *mandanas*.

Mandanas drawn during the rains[247] are few, and most – if not all of them – are what Saksena calls *lahariya* motifs. *Lahariya* is really a concept; characterising the monsoons, it captures the romance and attire of the people during the rains. One of the most popular *lahariya* motifs is *sravani teej* – a simple but significant motif literally meaning 'ripples of water' but metaphorically perhaps also referring to the romantic ecstasy of the season.[248] Rains provide little opportunity for women to show off their skills, so the only other motif during this season is *rakhi-ka-narel*, which is drawn on Rakshabandhan – the day young girls and women tie a thread around the wrists of their brothers and male cousins.

***Mandanas* for occasions** are related to festivals and rites of passage. Saksena's discovery is significant, i.e. that *mandanas* relating to festivals tend to be polygonal – and especially hexagonal, while in *mandanas* drawn for propitious ceremonies, square shapes are predominant. I propose that this may have something to do with the square enclosure within which a fire is burnt for the propitious ceremonies.

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[247] During the monsoons, most drawings are done indoors for fear of rain, and dung is not mixed with any other substance such as red or yellow earth. Although dung does not dry quickly and smells bad during the rains, its colour complements the verdant nature of the rains, and the tiny *mandanas* drawn at this time look like white flowers on green grass.

[248] The popularity of the *lahariya* motif is suggested by the fact that it also figures in men's headdresses and women's wear. Note that unlike in England, where rains are frequent, in India, they provide relief from the heat, and at least in popular imagination, remain associated with romance.

Saksena states that in Rajasthan, festivals and ceremonies "form the backbone of this women's art" (Saksena 1979: 120), and *mandanas* drawn for the two categories each have their own significance.

Festival *mandanas* can be subdivided into the seven major and several minor festivals they are drawn for. The major festivals are Diwali or Deepawali (in October-November), Makara Sankranti (in January), Holika Dalan or Holi (in March), Gangaur (in April-May), Bar Pujani Amavasya (in June), Teej (in July)[249] and Rakshabandhan (in August). Saksena avers that excepting Diwali, during which walls are also smeared, on all other festivals, only the floors are smeared with a paste made of cow-dung and red earth. Each major festival has exclusive motifs. Just as seasonal *mandanas* indicate the period during which they are drawn, festival *mandanas* often incorporate motifs representing rituals performed during the festival. For example, one of the *chota-mota-mandanas* represents the *papri*, a round sweet-and-salty snack made of wheat and gram flour, Rajasthani Vaishyas and Brahmans customarily distribute among relatives and friends. Several other motifs are immediately identifiable as associated to a particular festival due to what they depict.[250]

Diwali is possibly India's foremost festival, if for nothing else, perhaps because it is celebrated in states across India; the northern states celebrate it with great pomp. The enthusiasm of Rajasthani women during Diwali ensures an increasing variety of motifs. As Lakshmi is Diwali's presiding deity, motifs associated with her are pre-eminent. Lakshmi is propitiated during Diwali because this was the day lord Vishnu accepted her, granting her a boon that she would be the most sought-after goddess, preceding him in worship. This was also the day that lord Rama returned to Ayodhya from his exile in the forest (Saksena 1979: 113).

Diwali's root *mandanas* are usually hexagons, six-pointed stars and lotuses.

> . . . a six-pointed star consisting of two crossed equilateral triangles signifies Lakshmi . . . the lotus is her seat; she is often depicted sitting on a lotus with her feet [resting] on its petals . . . [these motifs] hold special significance for women, who draw them invariably during Diwali as they . . . [seek Lakshmi's blessings] (Saksena 1979: 111)

Diwali *mandanas* include, but are not restricted to, depictions of: Parvati, Tulsi, Hanuman, Shravan Kumar, the moon, the sun, mount Govardhan, the Ganga-Yamuna rivers, the *panchmukhi* (five-faced) elephant, the parrot, *suapankhi* (parrot's wings), *cheeda chowk* (courtyard *mandana* depicting figurative birds that Kaushal believes are symbolic of love, grace and beauty), cow hooves, *titariya* (gamblers from Gwalior), doors with sentries, lamps, *chhabari* (basket), *vataka chowk* (geometric-floral courtyard *mandanas* believed to signify utensils), *chaupad* (chess-board) and pan (betel leaf). Traditionally, two idols of *gwalins* (milkmaids) are placed beside the main *mandana*

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[249] Kaushal does not list a specific number of major festivals. Saksena's 1985 text lists six: Diwali, Makara Sankranti, Holika Dalan, Gangaur, Bar Pujani Amavasya and Rakshabandhan; his 1979 text listed eight major festivals: Diwali, Makara Sankranti, Holi, Gangaur, Bar Pujani Amavasya, Teej, Rakshabandhan and Shraddha Paksha.

[250] For example: "*Bharadi* [also a motif], i.e. the ear of millet, is a pointer to the winter crop that is round the corner. Dipak (lamp) indicates the Dipamalika [Diwali] festival itself, whereas *taraju* (a pair of scales), *patilsota* (lamp stand), *hatri* (an earthern toy), etc., denote the castes to which they pertain to. *Hir* and *santha* (sugar cane) point to the *hir* giving ceremony performed in the evening after the Dipawali [Diwali] puja is over. In the same way *mori* (head decoration for the bullocks) and *khura* (hoof) provide us with an idea of the Godhan Pūjan . . ." (Saksena 1979: 112)

depicting 16 lamps. Motifs signifying Lakshmi include a drawing of the goddess herself, *solah deeva pakhuri* (16-lamp-petal welcoming her), swastikas, Lakshmi *rath* (her chariot, featuring a lotus at the centre and drawn at the worship site, to invite her to sit there), and Lakshmi *ka paglya* (Lakshmi's feet).[251]

Diwali has sometimes been termed a winter harvest festival, and clearly cows and oxen are crucial in the process of harvesting. Occurring a day after Diwali, Godhan Puja is the worship of cows or oxen, during which farmers colour their cattle and decorate the walls of their houses with cart, bull, plough, peacock and parrot motifs. (Kaushal 2007: 24). Instead of listing it as a separate minor festival, I include it here as I see them as inter-related festivals. *Mandanas* drawn for Godhan are "the largest in number and have the most variegated forms" (Saksena 1979: 112). Motifs include the swastika, the fan, the step-well (in different compositions), six- or eight-petalled flowers, *chowks* and *tapaki-ke-manadanas*.

For Godhan,

> ". . . on the court side of the house . . . pictographs of Daridra Devi (goddess of poverty) are drawn, over which the women pour all the garbage and trash of the house, early in the morning. The trash is later taken away to be thrown at a distant place in a broken plate or a sieve. While returning . . . [the women] loudly beat these to drive away Kulalakshmi (Daridra Devi) and welcome Sulalakshmi [into the house]. (Kaushal 2007: 30)

Makara Sankranti[252] or its equivalent, which marks the beginning of the sun's journey into the northern hemisphere, is celebrated across India. It "heralds the advent of spring", comfort and prosperity; bringing warmth and light "from the sun, which helps ripen the crops" (Saksena 1979: 114). It is believed that on this day, the sun grows by a *rashi* (degree) or *kunda* (literally, "a big round earthen bowl with a flat bottom" which can represent "the round disk of the sun perfectly") (Saksena 1979: 114). Unsurprisingly, most *mandanas* drawn on Makara Sankranti relate not only to astrology but are also circular in form. Depending on available space, time and leisure, women draw as many circles as they wish, in the main Makara Sankranti *mandana*, known as 'Sankranta-ka-kunda'. Although occasionally drawn in twos and fours, they are almost always drawn in odd numbers, from three upwards.[253]

Holi celebrates the victory of virtue over vice, of Prahlada over Holika (sister of the demon king Hiranya Kashipu). Observed across India, by several castes and communities, its distinguishing customs include erecting a *Holi-ka-Danda* (log of wood, sometimes just any piece of wood) and making a bonfire of it.

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[251] According to Kaushal, the most decorative and ritualistic Diwali *mandanas* feature motifs such as: *bizali ki Jod* (a pair of lightning), *gadi takiya ki jod* (a pair of cushions), *paglya jod* (a pair of feet, meant to be Lakshmi's, drawn as though advancing from the threshold to the place of worship), *pilsod ki jod* (drawn in the courtyard, this pair of rattles uses a grid of eight by eight dots), *nau satiya ke jod* (comprising nine swastikas on a 16-dot grid).
[252] ". . . *makara* means crocodile or Capricornius which is the tenth house of the Zodiac, and Sankranti signifies transition or transgression of the sun in the month of Pausa (tenth month according to the Hindu calendar, invariably falling on . . . [14] January every year" (Saksena 1979: 113).
[253] Kaushal mentions a geometric courtyard motif called *sankarantya*, which she believes is drawn on Sankranti. Other motifs drawn on the first day of the solar month take the shape of *upla* (dried cow-dung cakes).

> . . . [the erected piece of wood, clustered with] cow-dung-cakes, worn out and
> discarded wooden furniture, doors, windows . . . [and cots, is bedecked with rags].
> Long before the Holi is set on fire, people gather round it, sing songs . . . (Saksena
> 1979: 115)

Holis (a particular *ragini* sung during the festival) sound best when accompanied by either of Rajasthan's favourite musical instruments, the *dapha* and the *changa*, both instruments so important to Holi that they have found expression in *mandana* motifs called simply *Holi-ka-dapha* and *Holi-ka-changa*. (Saksena 1979: 116) Apart from these popular musical instruments, *mandanas* drawn during Holi include the *cheeda chowk*, and wooden weapons such as *khanda* (scimitar), *talwar* (sword) and *danda* (stave).[254] Signifying the war of good over evil, these arms indicate the era during which such weapons were used in real warfare, therefore suggesting the antiquity of the drawings.[255]

Gangaur is a women's festival. While *sumangalis* (auspiciously married women) worship Shiva's spouse Gangaur for wealth, maidens worship Shiva, seeking a suitable partner and in-laws. Saksena claims that Gangaur has a single *mandana* motif called *Gangaur-ka-guna* or *lagalagta-phula*[256]; this basic *mandana*, however, can be repeated ad infinitum to cover a large area, resembling a rich floral carpet. The name *Gangaur-ka-guna* derives from its main motif '*guna*', which represents a preparation of wheat and gram flours that is served during Gangaur. Marriage being important to women, their drawings during Gangaur find unrivalled artistic expression.

The **Bar Pujana Amavasya** is celebrated in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh. This is a festival during which women go out of their homes and worship a *bar* (banyan tree). After worshipping the tree, they eat its budding leaves, which are believed to cool the body in the excessive summer heat. Due to its sacredness, the tree is drawn on Bar Pujani Amavasya – surprisingly, in its figurative form, complete with "roots, trunk, branches, fruits, birds, monkeys and all but not leaves" (Saksena 1979: 118-119).[257]

The ground for the **Teej** and **Rakshabandhan** *mandanas* is the colour of cow-dung – green. *Lahariya* and *chowk* motifs are drawn during both festivals. During Teej, a floral courtyard motif called *singhada chowk* is drawn, which depicts water chestnuts and is believed to "signify auspiciousness" (Kaushal 2007: 33). During Rakshabandhan, the devotional spirit of the story of Sarvan (or Shravan Kumar) – one of filial devotion, relating how Shravan physically carried his blind parents on pilgrimage – is evoked in a *mandana*. The most prolific period for *mandanas* begins with the Dusshera festival and continues till after Diwali, until Devuthani Gyaras.[258]

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[254] In addition to women depicting them, celebrants also buy these weapons on the day the bonfire is lit; the number of purchased weapons corresponds to the number of male family members.

[255] The association of the scimitar and sword designs suggests that fortification of some kind existed in the remote past. The sword and scimitar motifs along with other *mandanas* that are called *chowkri-ka-khera* and *mukuta*, meaning village/township and crown respectively, suggest a monarchy, with these weapons used for its defence and expansion. (Saksena 1979: 116)

[256] Kaushal adds *gor besnaya*, another Gangaur *mandana* drawn in the courtyard, depicting the deity Gangaur *mata*.

[257] Saksena surmises that the ground for Bar Pujani Amavasya *mandanas* is coloured earth-brown rather than red, as the latter would hurt the eye in the summer brightness.

[258] One of Rajasthan's minor festivals, Devuthani Gyaras "falls on the eleventh day of the bright half of the month of Kartik (October-November). This is an auspicious day as it is believed that the gods, especially Vishnu wakes up from his four-month-long sleep on this day" (Kaushal 2007: 24). Other minor festivals or

Although she does not explain its significance, Kaushal mentions a special category of *mandanas* called *dev mandanas*. The word 'dev' is related to divine and suggests that these are considered especially sacred in some manner. Under the ritual framework I have provided in Chapter 4, these would evidently come under rituals associated with sacrality, which are also rites of veneration.

In addition to Shravan and *gor besnaya*, *dev mandanas* include *nav Durga* (drawn during Navratra, representing Durga); *kumbh kalash* (drawn on Gangoj, depicting Ganga inside a pot); Ganesh (drawn during Ganesh Chaturthi); Srinathji (drawn during Govardhan Puja, which commemorates Krishna's worship of mount Govardhan), Dasadevi (drawn during the 10-day ritual worship of Dasamata, which begins the day after Holi and for which women fast); and Sanjhi.[259] Excluding Sanjhi and *gor besnaya* motifs, which are geometric courtyard *mandanas*, the rest are figurative *mandanas* drawn at worship sites.

Throughout her text, Kaushal uses terms such as 'figurative', 'symbolises', 'signifies', 'connotes' and 'denotes' rather freely, sometimes it appears, even interchangeably. This affects the quality of her analysis considerably as one is not certain whether the necessary distinctions are implied.

Rites of passage that are included in this taxonomy of *mandanas* are *janmotsava* (child birth), *yajnapovita* (sacred thread ceremony) and *vivahotsava* (marriage ceremony).

Held after a child's naming ceremony, on the tenth day following childbirth, the most important ***janmotsava*** ceremony is the Suraj ceremony, when the mother comes out of her house for the first time, with her newborn on her lap, and glances at *suraj* (the sun). The entire house is swept and plastered, then decorated with *mandanas*, specifically *suraj-ka-chowk*, a motif specific to this day; circular in form, it symbolises the sun.

Mandana motifs for the ***vivahotsava*** include a pair of drums, a chariot, *paglyas*, a stool and a pitcher. According to Kaushal, the key *vivahotsava* motif is the *bahupasara mandana*, a mat-shaped *mandana* drawn by the bride herself. However, according to Saksena, the most important *vivahotsava mandana* is the *pasarana*. An elaborate design drawn by the groom's female relatives to welcome the bride into her husband's home, it forms part of *bahu agaman* (the coming of the bride).

The *pasarana* is fascinatingly replete with cultural associations. Rajasthani wedding ceremonies begin with the investiture of Ganesh, who is invoked and installed in a room called *bandyaka-ko-ovaro*, to which the newlyweds are first directed after the nuptials, and which is superbly decorated with *pasarana* designs. *Pasaranas* consist of a

religious days include Devhayani Ekadasi, Ram Navami, Janmasthami, Navratra (a nine-day festival honouring Durga), Karva Chowtha (the day married or affianced women fast until the moon appears, in prayer for their partners' long lives), Gangoj (observed after returning from pilgrimages, when a pitcher is set up in worship of the river goddess Ganga), Ganesh Chaturthi (honouring Ganesh) and Shraddha Paksha (held during Ashvin, corresponding to September).
[259] Although these are wall-drawings, Sanjhi or Sanjhya deserve special mention. This is an art practised by maidens for 15 days during Shraddha Paksha, when they draw 15 different designs every day, starting with a lone star the first day and ending with a marriage procession the last Shraddha day. Drawn with cow-dung and decorated with flowers and coloured tin foil, clearly reveal the girls' purpose, i.e. aspiring for a happy marital life, and perhaps also preventing their partners' untimely death by appeasing the god of death. (Saksena 1979: 46-47)

collection of myriad *mandanas* based on squares and incorporate seven *thalis* (plates) in ascending order of size, beginning with the smallest one at the entrance of the room – which is really a small bowl – and ending with the largest plate that leads directly to the Ganesh idol. As the groom enters the room, he touches each *thali* with his dagger or sword, proceeding to the idol. The bride reaches down and also touches each of them, thus giving the impression that she is "collecting them in her arms" (Saksena 1979: 123). In some form or other, not necessarily involving plates or drawings, this tradition of having seven objects (in some cases, Indian bread, for example) in a special room, which the newlyweds touch in some manner, exists in Punjab, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh as well.[260]

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[260] There are further variations in this custom even within these states. For instance, in Patna, Bihar's capital, the newlyweds are not allowed to tread directly on the ground and are made to walk on seven flat baskets leading to the idol. Although not much is known about it, Saksena states that there appears to be a similar tradition in Bengal.

APPENDIX 7: TRACE: ARTIST PROPOSAL FOR TWO INSTALLATIONS, 2011

Muggus are floor-drawings that are made predominantly by Hindu women in Andhra Pradesh, South India. Traditionally hand-drawn with rice-powder or a lime compound, they are made at threshold times and in threshold spaces. They have multiple purposes and interpretations, one of which includes a belief that it is beneficial to step over a *muggu*, due to the prophylactic properties of the lime compound, which – it is assumed – rubs off on the feet and protects them for the rest of the day. As *muggus* are drawn every day, traditionally during the pre-dawn and pre-dusk periods, they are ephemeral. They usually get smeared with the passage of pedestrian and vehicular traffic, and by wind and rain. Andhra women always sweep and wash the floor before drawing a fresh *muggu*; this is regarded not only as part of the domestic routine of cleaning the threshold space but in many instances, is additionally necessary to remove the ghost drawing of the *muggu* from the previous day, or from the morning.

Muggus tend to be drawn with rice powder during festival times, when *muggu*-drawing is regarded additionally as an act of ritual generosity, since rice powder attracts ants and other insects. This is an oft-cited purpose, and while I have often imagined a colony of ants feeding on *muggus*, leaving a partially consumed *muggu* pattern, I have never actually seen this happen!

Some of the oldest associations of the *kolams* – floor-drawings from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu – are with labyrinths, and this association seems probable since many of the dot and line *kolams* and *muggus* are highly complex – so complicated in fact, that viewers often stop and gaze at *muggus* in an effort to figure out how they are drawn. I echo Alfred Gell, who believed that the complexity of *kolams* arrested demons and evil spirits from entering into the home, in effect serving to ward off evil. Whenever I have tried to understand how a complex *muggu* has been drawn, I have imagined the hand that has drawn the *muggu*, as I mentally project mine over the drawing.

One of the most popular pan-Indian motifs for floor-drawing is perhaps a pair of foot-prints, ostensibly of a god or goddess. Footprint drawings symbolize deities' passage or presence, most often meant to be of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth or Vishnu, one of the Hindu trinity – preserver of the world. There are several other floor-drawing motifs that symbolize the presence of deities, who are in effect hosted at the threshold so they can protect the home from any potential hostility originating outside the home. The ritual act of making a *muggu* every day thus can be said to constitute a reinforcement, to be a daily reminder to the deity to protect the home of the *muggu*-maker.

I propose to make two installations, titled *Trace*, which are influenced by the many purposes and meanings of floor-drawings as offered to me by *muggu*-makers. I envisage *Trace 1* as a network of bird foot-prints on sand. Birds often make crisscross patterns that remind me of complex dot and line *muggus*. However, while you know that a bird has been there, and traced a particular trajectory, you do not see the bird, you can only imagine it. You also know that bird-prints are ephemeral, that it is only a matter of time before they are smeared by the passage of feet, or by wind and rain. This proposed installation develops from my observation of bird prints on the beach, which were washed away by the sea or smeared by visitors to the beach. I propose to make *Trace 2* as an interactive installation, where visitors will be invited to participate in creating a traced '*muggu*' in soft clay, or sand. While it will start with a faint tracing of lines in clay

(or sand) that will form a complex *muggu* pattern, visitors will be asked to walk over these lines, thus simultaneously stepping over a *muggu*, 'tracing' a pattern, and walking a labyrinth. In the act of walking over a *muggu*-pattern that has been walked over by previous visitors, I also hope to evoke the repetitiveness of *muggu*-drawing as a ritual, repeated daily by generations of Andhra women. Note that both installations will be on the floor, since *muggu*-makers use the ground as a spatial canvas. I want *Trace I and II* to evoke not a single interpretation of *muggus*' purposes and meanings, but the richly varied perceptions that I encountered during my doctoral research on floor-drawings.

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