

Mirroring Aspirations: Āpanas in the Brata Rituals of Bengal



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Abstract

It has been rightly observed that the aspirations of human hearts have no limits and what we see as the popular semi-religious usages and the existence of different cults, are only an expression of these endless aspirations. Alpana is the living symbol of these usages and ceremonies. Though we cannot negate the aesthetic dimension of the alpanas, its essential nature was originally something else, it was drawn to perform imitative or mimetic magic

Alpanas can be described as ritual drawings connected with the desires and aspirations of human hearts. Mostly they form an integral part of the bratas or vowed observance undertaken for the fulfillment of various desires. It was thought that by representing the objects of human desires through these motifs of alpanas, one can expedite the actual fulfillment of these varied desires. If we carefully study the bratas which I shall do in my discussion, it shall be seen that a marked aspect of these bratas is the imitation of nature in their ritual practice. The alpanas too are nothing but symbolic patterns drawn on house floors that are considered to be imbued with magical qualities, and the presiding deities of these functions are usually personified nature.

The practice of using alpanas in the various rites is not just a specific characteristic of Bengal. There is the prevalence of alpanas in other parts of India too, though there they are known by different names, like Aripan in Bihar, Jhuti in Orissa, Sathiya in Gujarat, Mandan in Rajasthan and Central India, Rangoli in Maharashtra and several other places of Uttar Pradesh and so on. However my focus shall be primarily on the brata alpanas of Bengal and it shall be my humble attempt to trace the origin and antiquity of the Alpanas used in the brata rituals, the role these alpanas play in the myriad bratas of Bengal and the use of various motifs in the Alpanas. Basically the endeavour of my present study would be to bring the dimension of magic in these decorative patterns called alpanas. It is time that we devote ourselves to the study of the true purpose of the alpanas which were not mere ornamental appendages but a reflection of the pagan religion and society of Bengal.

Keywords: Alpanas, Bratas, Mimetic Magic, Ritual Drawings, Rituals.

Introduction

Alpanas are ritual drawings connected with the desires and aspirations of human hearts. Mostly they form an integral part of the bratas or vowed observance undertaken for the fulfillment of various desires. It was thought that by representing the objects of human desires through these motifs of alpanas, one can expedite the actual fulfillment of these varied desires. Of course we cannot undermine the aesthetic dimension of these alpanas but their primary objective was mimetic or imitative magic.

If we carefully study the bratas which I shall do in this discussion, it shall be seen that a marked aspect of these bratas is the imitation of nature in their ritual practice. For instance, if the purpose of the brata is to bring rain, the vratinis or the participants simply pour water from a jug. Likewise the alpanas too are nothing but symbolic patterns drawn on house floors that are considered to be imbued with magical qualities, and the presiding deities of these functions are usually personified nature.¹

The word *Alpana* is said to be derived from the Sanskrit word *Alimpana* which points to the basic technique of this kind of artistic activities. The root 'lin' here means to plaster with fingers and not to paint with a brush. Alpana is essentially adapted to a plane surface. It is generally executed on the courtyard or on the floor of a house. It is also found on low wooden seats or on the upper surface of winnowing fans. It may also be depicted on the outer surface of earthen pots used in socio-religious rites. Generally alpana is executed with rice paste mixed with water, The artist holds a little piece of cloth with the tips of the first four

fingers of her right hand and dips it in the mixture of rice paste already prepared. She then draws the different designs of the alpana with the middle finger of her right hand which slightly protrudes beyond the other fingers holding the piece of cloth and which is fed with the mixture from the cloth. The design is never traced on the ground before the mixture is applied. The artist always starts her work from the centre of the alpana and goes on building it up, step by step with different decorative designs. Each piece of alpana, as a general rule, consists of two classes of designs, ceremonial and decorative. The artist is required to put the ceremonial designs in their proper shape and place and has no option regarding these factors, but she is free to give a wild run to her imagination in respect to the decorative designs.² This shows that the decorative aspect of the alpanas was secondary and that the actual origin of the alpanas cannot be attributed to the creative pursuits of mankind but for the performance of magico-religious rites though gradually the aesthetic dimension became more and more important.

Alpanas are invariably executed by the womenfolk though there is no taboo on men but in practice it is rarely done by the men-folk. The girls start learning it at a very young age, between six and seven. By thirteen or fourteen they become experts.

In rural Bengal most of the alpanas as stated before are executed on the courtyard or floor of a house, which is mostly made of earth. The rice-paste mixture is easily soaked by the ground and dries within a short time leaving a bright white colour against the grey background of the earth. Though white is the prevailing colour of the alpanas, in some cases, like that of the Tara Brata other colours are also introduced, which are obtained from nature. Though alpanas are usually drawn with liquid colours, but on certain occasions, for example during the performance of Magh-mandal-brata, they are made with powders of different colours. Here also the colours are obtained from nature and objects like charcoal, brick, dried leaves are used. These are easily available and show that the development of alpana was a simple process, designed to give vent to human aspirations and emotions.³

The practice of using alpanas in the various rites is not just a specific characteristic of Bengal. There is the prevalence of alpanas in other parts of India too, though there they are known by different names, like Aripan in Bihar, Jhuti in Orissa, Sathiya in Gujarat, Mandan in Rajasthan and Central India, Rangoli in Maharashtra and several other places of Uttar Pradesh. Sonha rakhna in the eastern part of Uttar Pradesh while in some other parts of this state it is known as Sajhi, Lithnua in Himachal Pradesh and Haryana, Mungali in Andhra Pradesh and Kolam in Tamil Nadu and Kerala.⁴

In the subsequent sections I shall deal with the origin and antiquity of the alpanas used in the brata rituals, the role these alpanas play in the myriad bratas of Bengal and the use of various motifs in the alpanas. Basically the endeavour of my present study would be to bring the dimension of magic in these decorative patterns called alpanas. It is time that we devote ourselves to the study of the true purpose of the alpanas which were not mere ornamental

appendages in the beginning though nowadays they are mostly considered as decorative.

II

It has been rightly observed that the aspirations of human hearts have no limits and what we see as the popular semi-religious usages and the existence of different cults, are only an expression of these endless aspirations. Alpana is the living symbol of these usages and ceremonies.⁵ Though we cannot negate the aesthetic dimension of the alpanas, its essential nature as discussed before, was originally something else, it was drawn to perform imitative or mimetic magic.

Alpana is a living tradition of Bengal and elsewhere, it is not taught in any school, it simply passes from one generation to the next, from the mother to her daughter, granddaughter and so forth. In this way the tradition of alpana has survived. However this actually piques our curiosity as to its origin, that is at what precise moment of history did this art originate and why is it almost always executed by women with men playing little role in it.

In Bengal and elsewhere alpana is inextricably associated with the brata rituals. In all probability brata was originally a non-brahmanical ritual practiced exclusively by women, that was later adopted by Puranic Hinduism to suit a specific purpose.⁶ As a result of its adoption into the brahmanical fold bratas gradually came to be categorized into two different types, the *Sastriya* bratas, that are the ones having brahmanical sanction and the *asastriya* or the non-brahmanical ones. The latter follows a very simple procedure for its performance. It consists of collection of commonly available and inexpensive articles of daily use for the observance of the rite, alpana or drawing of the standard motifs on the floor, *chada* or recitation of doggerel verses from memory which express the desire behind the performance of the brata, and *katha* or listening to the story which establishes the justification of observing this brata. Though nowadays brahmanas have started to encroach upon these brata rituals as well, originally there was no place for the brahmana in such bratas. Unmarried and married women get together to observe such bratas for the fulfillment of the rather mundane desires of their everyday lives, like getting a desirable husband, a worthy son, a happy and modestly prosperous life.⁷

Though alpanas feature in both these types of bratas, it is in the *asastriya* ones that we notice their predominance. This is because in the *asastriya* bratas, it is the women who play the most prominent role, and since the alpanas are basically the handiwork of women it is not surprising that the Alpanas would play a prominent role here.

Tapan Mohan Chatterjee pointed out that alpanas hold an important position in the socio-religious life of the Hindus of India and that it is not to be found among the adherents of other faiths, like that of Islam, Christianity and Zoroastrianism. He further negated its occurrence among the different groups of tribal population, except at places where they had been influenced by Hindu culture.⁸ We cannot disagree with him more because micro-studies in predominantly tribal societies have shown that just like Hinduism or to be more precise Brahmanism had

an effect on these societies, similarly the reverse process of tribalization also holds ground. An example of such has been given by S.L Kalia who has shown how at Jaunsar-Bawar in Uttar Pradesh, high-caste Hindus residing among tribal people have taken the latter's ritual which are in sharp contrast to their own. Similar trends have also been highlighted by Martin Orans, M.K Gautam and Sarita Bhowmick.⁹ Transmission of culture, rituals and beliefs is never a one way process but involves a synthesis of both, hence it is not right to say that the tribal population did not know anything about the alpanas but learnt it from their Hindu neighbours. On the contrary it seems that alpanas originated first among them in far away times. The cave paintings of the primitive men were probably the predecessors of the modern-day alpanas. Actually for the primitive men Nature was an enigma and he was in awe of the varied forces of Nature. The lifecycle of a human being spanning from birth to death was incomprehensible to him. Hence as if seeking an answer to these, he resorted to magic to manoeuvre the varied and myriad forces. By imitating scenes of cohabitation, reproduction, hunting he was probably trying to bring them into reality.

According to Abanindranath Thakur it is wrong to confine these bratas within the parameters of any particular religion or community.¹⁰ Same can be said in the case of alpanas. Abanindranath Thakur has drawn in the reference of the Huical tribe of America in this context. At times of drought one of the rites performed by this tribe share a great deal of similarity with our bratas and alpanas. In this they draw the image of the Sun on an earthen plate with mountain peaks, paddy fields and rain denoted by small vertical lines.¹¹ All this goes on to prove that these bratas and alpanas cannot be restricted within the boundaries of any geographical unit.

The question that arises is why women, and not men, play a prominent role in making alpanas. This is because alpanas are considered to be imbued with magical qualities, it is thought that whatever is drawn in the alpanas, the magic inherent in it, turns them into reality. Similarly in primitive times the power of women to bring forth new life was considered no less magical. A woman who could perform the magic of bringing forth a new life hence became an apt choice for the drawing of alpanas and extending her magic in other spheres of life as well.

Though most of the alpanas we see in Bengal are painted in white, as it is made with rice paste and water, alpanas painted in different colours are to be found among the tribals particularly the Oraons, Mundas, Kharia and Birhors.¹² This they do by mixing different colours that are obtained from nature like charcoal, mud with rice paste.

One may ask why alpanas are generally made with rice paste. This is because rice powder is considered to be magical and that it scares away evil spirits.¹³ We do not know the rationale behind this belief and it calls for further research on this subject. Thus alpanas drawn with rice paste on the floor are considered covered with magic potency. These alpanas or the designs are always drawn within the confines of a circle or a square. This magic circle or the sacred square encloses the magic field of the alpanas where a superior power is invoked. It is

enclosed so that the power cannot escape. The magic diagram makes it possible for power to be present and it brings this presence into the power of the person who made this diagram. It is believed that even a simple wish is not to be fulfilled if no effort is made at the right time to communicate with the power and it is these alpanas that make communication with the Superior Power.¹⁴

So great the faith is in the magic of the alpanas that such magical diagrams or yantras are also a part of the Tantric Hindu practice, In Tantrism such magical diagrams are also known as mandalas. Though Tantrism unlike Brahmanism stands for equality between men and women, however those who draw these diagrams avoid food prepared by women. Stella Kramrisch quite pertinently puts forth a question that whether this is because these Tantrics want to guard this art from those who have the power to evolve it.¹⁵

Though alpanas are not sanctioned by the Vedas, ancient Sanskrit texts contain references to this art. In the Silparatna alpana or a floor painting is referred to as *Dhuli citra*. The Visnudharmottara Purana that has a separate section dedicated to Art prescribes the worship of the Sun God through an eight petalled lotus drawn on the ground. Several other Puranas like the Brihadharma Purana, the Bhavishya Purana and the Shamba Purana speak of the art of drawing the Sun on the ground and that the Sun was worshipped in a circle in early days.¹⁶

These Sanskrit texts, by taking note of the practice of drawing alpanas, were actually giving sanction to the indigenous practice of mimetic magic. As the objectives of both the bratas and the alpanas are the same, that is fulfillment of desires alpanas came to form a very important part of the brata rituals of Bengal.

III

The bratas as discussed before are nothing but manifestations of human desires through *chhadas* (doggerel verses), the various ritual practices and alpanas. Through bratas human beings tried to fulfil their unrealized dreams and ensure well being of all. However some of them had a negative dimension and those were specifically performed by women to bring an end to enemies and thwart malevolent spirits. In short whatever fell outside the purview of human agency, it was sought to be fulfilled through these bratas which were mostly magico-religious rites. In almost all the bratas, particularly the *asatriya* or non-brahmanical ones, alpanas played a very important role. Here I shall discuss about the varied alpanas that form an integral of the brata rituals.

One of the most important bratas performed by the womenfolk of both the urban and rural areas, is the Laksmi brata. In the opinion of S.R Das, Laksmi was originally a non-Aryan primitive corn goddess who was later absorbed into Hinduism. In his opinion the Laksmi-puja was originally a primitive agricultural rite and was later absorbed into Hinduism. This is also proved by the fact that even nowadays before the actual Laksmi is worshipped in the house, another puja is held just outside the house which is known as "A-Laksmi Puja".¹⁷ A-Laksmi means the inauspicious Goddess. This A-Laksmi is driven outside the house to usher in Laksmi or the auspicious Goddess.

However Abanindranath Thakur has pointed out that this A-Laksmi is no other than the non-Aryan Laksmi who was originally the corn goddess.¹⁸ S.R Das in his work has tried to show how the Goddess Laksmi was moulded by Brahmanism and in a bid to show that the Goddess worshipped by them was the real Laksmi, while the one receiving the devotion of the masses an inauspicious Goddess created this myth of Alaksmi.¹⁹ Three important brata rituals in honour of this goddess are observed by the women of Bengal every year in the Bengali month of phalguna before the sowing of the seeds, then again in Asvina or Karttika when the paddy is growing in the field and in the month of Agrahayana during the reaping of the paddy.²⁰

In many families the goddess Laksmi is worshipped on every Thursday, which is believed to be associated with Laksmi. It is generally women who officiate in this Puja, though in some places this has also been encroached upon by the brahmanas.

The alpana in connection with this brata fosters the connection of the Goddess with agriculture. In the centre circular coiled lines represent the furrows, while the outer edge of the alpana is decorated by a row of paddy plants.²¹ Being the deity of agriculture, she is also associated with wealth and she is worshipped for granting wealth and good fortune. As a part of the Alpana, foot marks of Laksmi are also drawn to signify her presence in the household. By representing such motifs in the alpana, it is thought that the Goddess will actually grace the house by her presence and usher in good fortune and general well-being of the family members.

The basic nature of the bratas and the alpanas are the same. While some of them are associated with agriculture and the fertility of the soil, there are others which are undertaken to bring in rain in the times of drought. Besides these, a number of bratas and Alpanas are associated with human fertility. There are a few bratas and alpanas of vindictive nature as well, carefully connived to bring the end of one's enemies. Actually women secluded in a world of their own had little connection with the world outside. Concerned with the mundane affairs of everyday life they devised these brata techniques and alpanas for each and every problem that they faced in their lives. In such fashion bratas and alpanas were created. As discussed before, these rites were essentially the creation of the womenfolk but gradually the brahmanas usurped the rites. As a result at a later stage some of the bratas were considered incomplete if they were not presided over by a brahmana priest.

Another important brata is the Prithvi brata, observed in the month of Baisakh. This brata can be seen as a rain-compelling brata as well as a human fertility ritual observed from the last day of Caitra to the last day of Vaisakha by the maidens. The alpanas drawn on this occasion include the earth goddess (prithvi), the lotus and the lotus leaves. Then a bratini sits by the side of the alpana drawings and holds a conch which contains honey, milk and ghee. Each bratini turns the conch so that all the things are poured on the alpanas. While pouring them out they utter a chara:

*Eso Prithvi basa Padme, Samkhacakra dhor
haste Khaoabo kheer Makhano Nani, Ami Jeni Hoi
Rajar Rani.*

Through this doggerel verse the Earth Goddess is invoked to take her place in the lotus drawn in the Alpana, a desire to achieve a good husband is also expressed here.²²

The pouring of the ghee, milk and honey on the alpana which represents the Earth itself suggests some sort of mimetic magic of inviting rain to increase the fertility of the soil. It can also be seen as a mechanism of enhancing human fertility. The invitation to the Earth Goddess to take her place in the alpana shows the belief of the people in the Greater power who if properly propitiated will reside in the magical diagram of the alpanas and prove potent enough to serve the very purpose for which the power has been invoked. Other rain compelling brata alpanas include among others that of the Purnipukur brata and Basundhara brata. The alpanas here also serve the purpose of mimetic or imitative magic.²³

Another very interesting alpana is that of the sejuti brata. Through the performance of this brata a woman seeks to fulfill a number of desires. For making each of her wish come true she makes a number of images for each of her wishes. It is observed from the last day of Kartika to the last day of Agrahayana. A bratini has to observe this brata for four years in succession. The alpanas of this brata mirror all the desires of a Bengali girl. It was thought that the representation of their objects of desires in this alpana will expedite the process of their achieving such things. For instance, her desire of having many brothers is depicted through the drawing of many stars and the girls after drawing this utter the following verse:

*Jatagula naksatra tatagulo bhai
Naksatra puja kore
Ghare Chole Jai.*

The stars drawn here signify the number of bratas a bratini wishes to have. It shows how society craved for male children. Various other desires like getting married to a good husband, having loving in-laws, wealthy household etc are also depicted through the alpana of the Sejuti brata. A girl can include as many things as she feels like. A girl's love for jewellery is made evident when she wishes for a pair of gold bracelets. As most of the houses in the villages were made of mud and many desired to live in brick built houses, a bratini by making representation of such houses hopes to make this true. Her concluding prayer is however to be as virtuous as Savitri.

Besides all these prayers, a bratini observing sejuti brata seeks the help of the deity to make her the sole claimant of her husband's love and may she not be plagued by the existence of co-wives. For these she draws various alpanas designed to root out the very existence of co-wives.

For instance an image of the bird mynah is drawn and the bratini utters a verse that says:

*Mayna Mayna Mayna
Satin Jeni Hoy na*

If this is a prayer for not having any co-wife there are alpanas and prayers for cases in which there are already co-wives. In such situations, a bratini draws an alpana designed for bringing death to the co-wives and utters the verse:

*Bati Bati Bati
Satiner Sraddher Kutna Kuti*

In some the bratini wishes her co-wife to be a slave to her.²⁴

Such examples can be compared to the primitive form of witchcraft performed to uproot the enemy altogether.

Magh-mandal Brata is another significant brata of Bengal where the Sun is worshipped. It is usually worshipped by the maidens of Bengal, who begin to observe this from the age of four or five. This is to be continued throughout the month of Magh. The alpana of this brata includes a small circle drawn to represent the rising sun in the east and a semi-circle is drawn that represents the moon in the west. After the completion of the drawings, they chant charas, sitting on the edge of the circle. In each year a new circle has to be drawn and in this way five circles are to be drawn altogether in five successive years at the end of the brata ritual.²⁵ Since the rising Sun is associated with regeneration, this brata can be termed as a human fertility ritual.

Another brata associated with human fertility is the Tara brata. This brata is observed by the unmarried girls in the evening. The girls draw alpana that include pictures of the Sun, Moon, Stars, Mirror, Comb, Palanquin, etc., on the floor with the help of rice-paste. It is believed that if a girl observes this brata she will marry a husband like Siva, have sons like Ganesh and Kartikeya, daughters like Lakshmi and Sarasvati, servants like Nandi and Bhiringi, maid-servants like Jaya and Vijaya, brothers like Bhima and Arjuna, and be blessed with much wealth.²⁶ This alpana also includes a figure of a mother with many children in the mother's arms, at her waist and even nearer legs. This bears a special significance, that is the future of the girls to become mothers with many children.²⁷ It is also believed that the mother goddess, Hate-po-kankhe-po, drawn in a linear alpana of the Tara brata, bears magico-religious significance of producing children for barren women.²⁸

Sasthi brata and Manasa bratas are other examples of human fertility rituals. While Sasthi is predominantly associated with human fertility, Manasa is primarily a serpent goddess and apparently her worship seems to avert snake-bites, but side by side she is also associated with fertility. Since snakes are connected with fertility, Manasa being a serpent goddess has also inherited this trait.²⁹ A particular alpana also features in this brata.

During the height of sea faring activities of Bengal there were bratas that were undertaken by the women to ensure safe return of their near and dear ones. One such brata was the Bhaduli brata, observed in honour of Bhaduli, the presiding goddess of the seas, throughout the month of Bhadra.³⁰ The alpana drawings relating to this brata include symbolical things- seven seas, thirteen rivers, the sandy beach, rafts, sea fowls, palm trees etc, denoting sea voyage. The little girls and women worship these images praying the safe return of their relatives.³¹

Thus there are bratas and alpanas for every occasion of life. Though it is impossible to deal with each and every one of these, as the list is endless, one thing can be said with certainty and that is the alpanas were considered as devices through which one can have control over the supernatural forces and

manoeuvre it accordingly. In societies where beliefs in witchcraft and sorcery were predominant, alpanas and bratas continued to occupy a major place in the lives of the people and particularly the womenfolk. These bratas and alpanas might seem to modern day understanding as regressive but in the days of yore the drawing of alpanas and performance of bratas made the women create a world of their own where they exercised complete autonomy and power; power because it made them believe that they had the capability to regulate various events connected to their lives and of those around them through these magico-religious symbols and rites.

End Notes

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