

Vijaya Nagarajan, *Feeding A Thousand Souls: Women, Ritual, and Ecology in India; An Exploration of the Kōlam*

New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 301 pages. Hardcover, \$99.00; paperback, \$24.99. ISBN: 9780195170825 (hardcover); 9780190858070 (paperback).

The book under review examines the South Indian cultural practice of *kōlam* making, as transmitted through oral tradition and practice. Vijaya Nagarajan revisits a decade of ethnographic field work in Tamil Nadu, punctuated by memoir-esque vignettes from a lifetime of engagement with the *kōlam*, a ritual rice-flour drawing created by Tamil women. In place of a rigid thesis, Nagarajan presents this very personal work as a discovery of “non-dualism,” whereby the *kōlam* “became a bridge to reconcile my Indian and American selves both literally and metaphorically” (17). This journey of self-discovery began from the author’s formative experience witnessing her mother’s performative exhibitions of *kōlams* during the Smithsonian Festival of India in 1985, showcasing the wealth of cultural knowledge and authority that is unique to oral traditions.

Kōlam is distinguished as a term that explicitly refers to a daily practice of women’s ritualized threshold drawing in Tamil Nadu. In spite of *kōlam*’s affinity to similar forms within India—*raṅgolī*, *maṅḍala*, and *ālpanās*—this book does not engage with the larger context of Indian visual traditions. Rather, it is designed to fill a problematic gap in academic literature on Indian cultural practices and traditions with what is known of the oral and lived experience; in this sense, it serves as a very fine model. Nagarajan creates space for new voices to speak on the *kōlam* tradition, while finding her own. Nagarajan’s charting of the general decline of the traditional, rice-flour-based *kōlam*-making (substituted with non-organic synthetic materials) invites reflection on a complex set of familiar social and environmental issues. The book’s title is a reference to *kōlam*’s ritual purpose, “to feed a thousand souls.” Thus, religiously motivated by *dharma* (duty), the rice flour conventionally used to create this ephemeral installation at the threshold of a home is intended for consumption by a thousand souls—those of small non-human creatures who encounter it through the day, “fed” by the actual *kōlam*.

The first half of the book presents the *kōlam* from many angles—and its position and function—in social and religious dimensions. Aligned with her intention to turn up the volume for a constellation of voices, there is no singular explanation fixed to any one ritual. With this multiplicity, this book stands out for its accessibility. Many complex ideas unique to lived Hinduism today are distilled into accounts from ordinary people and are beautifully stated. This strategy further reflects the fluidity in lived Hinduism that is often a challenge to convey for a non-specialized audience.

Chapter 3, “Rituals,” for example, offers various accounts for *kōlam*’s meanings as understood by practitioners, and it delves into the practice of many rituals to attract, host, and maintain close relationships with the goddess of well-being, abundance, and wealth: Lakshmi. This discussion is contextualized by introductions to Hindu ideas of space and time, auspiciousness, and ritual purity unique to women. Functions of prayer, protection, and fertility are highlighted here as well, and Nagarajan ultimately summarizes the *kōlam* tradition holistically as an expression of life force and a process that serves as a reminder of one’s own life.

The next chapter, “Thresholds,” muses on the relationship between *bindu/pottu* (different terms for forehead markings) as a marking of purity or pollution on the body and *kōlam* as a similar marking of the threshold of a home. Some ethnographic

vignettes feel fragmented, though they contain thought-provoking ideas. Nagarajan's clear presentation of understandings of ritual purity around menstruation and sexuality from a folk perspective makes this book an ideal text for undergraduate courses on South Asia and Hinduism. It is highly instructive.

Chapter 5 compiles fragments of oral histories that conceive of the ninth-century Hindu saint Antaḷ as the creator of the first *kōlam*. Antaḷ is one of Tamil Nadu's most popular saints daring to indulge in imbibing fragrance from flowers intended for Vishnu. In addition to being a rich resource in Antaḷ-related legend, song, and poetry, this chapter illustrates how complex hagiography is often wed to practices in need of an origin story.

Subsequent chapters touch on designs (chapter 6) as technical processes and also delve into geometry and mathematics (chapter 7), without which any book on this practice would be incomplete. Nagarajan introduces fascinating concepts like fractals in relation to *kōlam*, but appropriately never moves out of her depth.

Secularization is explored in chapter 8, "Competitions: From Village to City," through critiques of contemporary practices. Spiritual value is often displaced by materials, corporate sponsorship, and new iconography, which has less to do with community and more to do with aesthetics and individual makers. This discussion is of interest to scholars concerned with the detachment of ritual from aesthetic tradition and offers a case study in how commercialization transforms community. In spite of these shifts, Nagarajan maintains that *kōlam* drawing remains communal. She presents it as a practice that resists individualization, part of a shared intellectual and artistic knowledge (no institutional or guru traditions). The idea of *kōlam* performance as shared creation foreshadows Nagarajan's greater ecological thesis.

In the compelling new ideas in Nagarajan's final chapters, her deep commitment as an environmentalist shines. Chapter 9 introduces and develops the concept of "embedded ecology." Building on the idea of embeddedness from economic anthropologist Karl Polanyi, she creates space for reflection on the cultural construction of nature in India. This is complemented with her articulation of "intermittent sacrality," an account for "the tendency to hold the earth as sacred during specific rituals, and then to drop that deferential attitude and practice in the midst of the practical demands of daily life" (216). In short, Nagarajan develops these new ideas to explain how a culture's "perception of the natural world as sacred does not *necessarily* lead to more 'environmental' or ecological attitudes or behavior toward nature" (220). She weds these revelations to the *kōlam*, which may be a daily practice of the temporary "painted prayer" that hosts the divine and then de-hosts and disperses its sacredness onto the feet of passersby.

This book is an invaluable contribution to literature on living traditions in India and their relationship to the contemporary world both in terms of material, environmental, and secular shifts. This book could become a staple for undergraduate courses that aim to delve slightly deeper than an introduction to Hinduism and offer insight into a regional study that reflects the diversity of Hinduism as a lived religion today.

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