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SYMBOLS OF GOOD FORTUNE:  
AN ANALYSIS OF *ALPANAS* AS SACRED IMAGES  
THAT REPRESENT AUSPICIOUSNESS

BY

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## INTRODUCTION

*Alpanas* are a type of Hindu ritual art, which are constructed as part of a ritual known as a *vrata*. In a *vrata*, practitioners vow to fast for a day, at the end of which their desires are granted by its focal deity. This ritual, which has developed over centuries into its modern use, is primarily performed by married women to promote auspiciousness, or good fortune, in the home. *Alpanas* are made from rice paste and applied to the walls and floor around the practitioner's home altar. Previous scholars have analyzed *alpanas* as being either: decorative, representative, or illustrative. The decorative analysis interprets *alpanas* as expressing the practitioner's artistic whims. The representative analysis understands them as showing what the practitioner hopes to gain from performing the *vrata*. Finally, the illustrative approach analyses them as depicting scenes from the narrative connected to a particular *vrata*. This paper disagrees with these analyses because they do not take into account what symbolic meaning *alpanas* might have. It proposes that *alpanas* are sacred images which, when analyzed, represent auspiciousness through use of popular Hindu iconography.

This paper will be laid out in six sections. The first section will give a brief overview of some of the terms and concepts that will be covered in this paper. The second section will trace the development of the term *vrata* from a concept in its earliest uses to a ritual in today's modern world. This is done so that one might have a proper understanding of *vrata*, which is essential for understanding *alpanas*. The third section will explain what *alpanas* are, and how they are constructed, but will be chiefly concerned with how the previous scholarship has analyzed *alpanas*. This will allow the reader to understand the other analyses of *alpanas* as well as their short-comings. Once these short-comings are highlighted, the value of this paper will be better understood. The fourth section will layout this paper's method which is based on Diana Eck's analysis of Hindu sacred imagery, and the concept of auspiciousness. Through an explanation of

this method, the reader will understand why this approach was chosen and how it applies to *alpanas*. The fifth section will present two case studies of *alpanas* in which this new method will be applied. Both of the *alpanas* used here have been analyzed using the other methods, this will allow for a better contrast between the previous methods and the method of this paper. Finally, the sixth section will conclude with how this analysis has improved upon the study of *alpanas*.

Symbols provide human beings with a means of conveying complex ideas through representation. Symbols are context sensitive and their meanings can vary greatly depending on the culture and time period within which they appear.<sup>1</sup> This means that if one wants to analyze a symbol, it must be done through a particular lens. For example, a Greek cross (+) has different meanings depending on which lens it is viewed through. A Christian might understand this as a symbol of salvation. A renaissance alchemist might understand it as a symbol of the successful combining of the four Aristotelian elements. It could represent the four directions of a compass to a sailor, or it might represent addition to a mathematician. It could also be understood in multiple ways. A Christian sailor might understand it to represent salvation, but the idea of it representing the four directions would not be lost on him.

This paper will be using two lenses through which to analyze *alpanas*. The first is that of Hindu sacred images, and the second is that of auspiciousness. The first lens is based on Diana Eck's book *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. In it, Eck analyses how Hindu sacred images are understood by Hindus and how non-Hindus might also come to understand them. She suggests that one should understand them as "visual texts" which can be "read" if one possesses sufficient knowledge about Hinduism.<sup>2</sup> The difference between a regular image and a sacred one is how it is treated in a particular context. An image used in a worship ceremony for a deity, *pūja*,

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Stevens, *Ariadne's Clue: A Guide to the Symbols of Humankind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Diana L. Eck, *Darshan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 2.

is considered sacred only during that ceremony. During the *puja* the deity is asked to inhabit the image so that the deity maybe worshiped. When the worshiping is completed, the deity is asked to leave and the image goes back to being a regular image. *Alpanas* are constructed in a similar context. They are made during a *vrata* and with certain materials. They are also not permanent designs and fade away rather quickly. Just as a sacred image is not sacred outside the context of being inhabited by a deity, so *alpanas* are not *alpanas* outside of a *vrata*. Based on this, *alpanas* can be understood as a type of sacred art. By analyzing *alpanas* as sacred images, the auspicious meaning of the various objects in *alpanas* can be brought to light.

The second lens through which *alpanas* will be analyzed is auspiciousness, which refers to good fortune that is based on the intertwining of place, time, and people. Auspiciousness is a native category used by Hindus to understand their world, not some term placed on them by outside scholars. It is also not only used by ancient philosophers but is used in people's everyday speech. Hindus will consult with an astrologer, priest or almanac in order to find the proper time to perform an action. This action can range from the everyday, like a good time to milk the cow, to the unique, like a good time to get married.<sup>3</sup> Due to its popular use, auspiciousness is an excellent lens for analyzing aspects of Hinduism. It is particularly useful for this study because, as will be explained later, *vrats* are performed to promote auspiciousness. As a component of *vrats*, *alpanas* would then be connected to auspiciousness, but this connection has yet to be fully explored by scholars. Another important concept in Hinduism that is connected to both *vrats* and auspiciousness is that of *dharma*.

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<sup>3</sup> T. N. Madan, "Concerning the Categories of Subha and Suddha in Hindu Culture: An Exploratory Essay," in *Purity and Auspiciousness in Indian Society*, eds. John B. Carman and Frédérique Apffel Marglin (Leiden, Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1985), 12-3.

*Dharma* is a complex ideology that encompasses, but is not limited to, duty, law, justice, and moral and religious behavior.<sup>4</sup> If it must be translated, it perhaps can best be translated as: “to uphold and support.”<sup>5</sup> As a category for understanding the world, *dharma* has two dimensions: ontological and normative.<sup>6</sup> The ontological dimension refers to the laws that structure the cosmos, often referred to as the “cosmic ordering principle.”<sup>7</sup> The normative dimension refers to the various actions that support and maintain the cosmic structure. On the human level of existence, the ontological dimension is expressed as the various social classes (*varna*) and life stages (*ashrama*). The normative dimension is expressed through actions, both religious and socio-cultural, that are specific to one’s class, caste (*jati*), and life stage. *Dharma* can then be described as both the laws of the cosmos and the actions which support those laws.

Not only does doing one’s *dharma* support the cosmic order, it also promotes auspiciousness. When one does their respective *dharma*, one works toward achieving the four goals of human life: *kama*, sensual pleasure; *artha*, wealth and power; *dharma*, religious rituals; and *moksha*, liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth.<sup>8</sup> Working toward these goals is inherently auspicious, and since only through doing one’s *dharma* can they be achieved, doing one’s *dharma* is auspicious. The promotion of auspiciousness also helps one achieve these goals through increasing the chances of a favorable outcome in one’s actions.<sup>9</sup> Thus, auspiciousness and *dharma* are two sides of the same coin.

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<sup>4</sup> Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 52.

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Holdrege, “*Dharma*,” in *The Hindu World*, eds. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (New York: Routledge, 2004), 213.

<sup>6</sup> Holdrege, 213.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>9</sup> Vasudha Narayanan, “The Hindu Tradition,” in *World Religions: Eastern Tradition*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996), 107.

### VRATA: From concept to ritual

The ritual during which *alpanas* are constructed is called a *vrata*. Today, *vrats* are performed almost entirely by married women in order to maintain marital felicity. The word *vrata* is often translated as “vow” due to fasting being the most prominent aspect of the modern *vrata*. Vow, in this context, refers to both the words spoken and the action connected with them. If one says one will fast, but does not, one's words mean nothing. Conversely, without declaring what one will do, either formally or informally, the actions are meaningless and there is no *vrata*.<sup>10</sup>

The word *vrata* is the Hindi translation of the Sanskrit *vrata*, and can be traced back to the Rig Veda (c. 1200 BCE),<sup>11</sup> wherein it was connected with several concepts. P. V. Kane associates *vrata* with such concepts as command, duty, religious or moral practices, sacred vow, and finally any vow or pattern of conduct.<sup>12</sup> All of these concepts are found at one point or another within the Rig Veda. However, Kane and Brereton both argue that the understanding of *vrata* as “commandment” occurs most often in the Rig Veda.<sup>13</sup> While the usage of *vrata* as “commandment” stands out the most in the Rig Veda, in the Brahmanas and the Upanishads the word *vrata* is used mainly in connection with either a “religious vow,” which would affect the practitioner’s behavior, or the specific food one is to eat while observing a religious ritual.<sup>14</sup> Along with these concepts, *vrata* in the Brahmanas also becomes associated with “proper action” and

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<sup>10</sup> Anne Mackenzie Pearson, *“Because It Gives Me Peace of Mind”: Ritual Fasts in the Religious Lives of Hindu Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 138.

<sup>11</sup> The Rig Veda is the oldest of the four Vedas. The other three are the Sama, Yajur, and Atharva. Each of these are made up of three sections: the Samhitas, the hymns; Brahmanas, ritual commentaries; Aranyakas, for use by forest dwelling ascetics; and Upanishads, philosophical commentaries.

<sup>12</sup> Pandurang V. Kane, *Vratas, Utsavas, and Kala, Etc.*, vol. 5, part 1 of *History of Dharmashastra* (Poona, India: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1994), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Joel Brereton, *The Rgvedic Adityas*, vol. 63 of *American Oriental Series* ed. Ernest Bender (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1981), 70-1; Kane, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Kane, 23.

“*upavasa*,” the fast the sacrificer follows on the night of the sacrifice.<sup>15</sup> This relation with *vrata* and food and fasting will become one of the central parts in present day *vrats*.

The *Mahabharata* (c. 500 BCE – c. 500 CE) continues to expand upon the usage of *vrata* in relation to vows and fasting by including vows that are not religiously required. It also begins to place a special emphasis on the resolve of the practitioner by showing it is not the nature of the act, but rather the inner strength to carry it out which is important.<sup>16</sup> This concept is exemplified through the story of Savitri. In this story, Savitri learns her husband is going to die and for the three days prior to his death, she vows to not sleep or eat until sundown on the third day. Her *vrata* is not undertaken to honor a deity, but rather it is done for the protection of her husband and out of the compulsion to fulfill one’s *dharma*. She does this because she knows that if she can complete her *vrata*, then the *vrata* will produce the desired result of saving her husband. The power of her *vrata* comes from her resolve to see it through to completion. It is the strength of her resolve that gives her the strength to carry on and eventually confront Yama, the god of death, and save her husband. This story is significant because it is the first in which a woman is the performer of a *vrata* and it places a greater importance upon the practitioner’s resolve. It was Savitri herself, which declared what she was doing to be a *vrata* and this declaration, rather than the act alone, is what brought about her desired result.<sup>17</sup>

The concept of *vrata* is greatly expanded upon and institutionalized by a set of texts, the Puranas (c. 300 – 1000 CE) and Nibandhas (c. 1100 – 1600 CE),<sup>18</sup> in two ways: 1) they produce the same results as the Vedic sacrifices, and 2) they could be performed by women and Shudras. The

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>16</sup> Pearson, 50-1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 54-5.

<sup>18</sup> Written in c. 300 – 1000 CE and c. 1100 – 1600 CE respectively, the Puranas and Nibandhas are part of the vast literature on *dharma*. The Puranas are exemplary narratives which use stories to discuss important topics. The Nibandhas are the latest addition to a collection of texts known as the Dharmashastras. The Nibandhas are a digest version of the previous books in this collection.



amount of space afforded to *vratas* in these texts is evidence that they considered *vratas* significant. *Vratas* are explained as rewarding the practitioner with the same material wealth (*bhukti*) and spiritual liberation (*moksha*) as the older Vedic sacrifices. This concept is shown in the Puranas propensity to refer to the performer of the *vrata* as a *yajamana*, the sponsor of the Vedic sacrifices, and the *vrata* itself as *yajna*, the sacrifice. This association implies that *vratas* came to be understood as identical to the Vedic sacrifices.<sup>19</sup> The authors of the Nibandhas focus on the rewards for performing *vrata* in making their comparison to the Vedic sacrifices. They state that a devotee who performs *vrata* out of a sense of duty can gain spiritual and material rewards, which are the same rewards gained from doing the Vedic sacrifices. For example, for the *vrata* performed on Krishna's birthday, the practitioner would pray: "Grant me children, grant me wealth, long life, good health and progeny, and grant me righteousness, pleasure, and marital felicity, *heaven and liberation*." (emphasis added)<sup>20</sup> This understanding of the fruits of *vrata* did present a practical problem due to their availability to women and woman's inability to achieve *moksha*.

The Puranas and Nibandhas got around this issue of woman and *moksha* by adjusting the reward if a *vrata* is performed by a woman. They described the *moksha* gained by women as "*kramamukti*", or "gradual liberation". *Kramamukiti* means that instead of gaining liberation at the end of their current life, a female practitioner would gain liberation from womanhood and be reincarnated as a man in her next life, during which she might work toward full liberation.<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that the discussion of allowing women to perform *vratas* and the concept of *kramamukti* are the only times women are discussed with regards to actually performing *vratas*.

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<sup>19</sup> Pearson, 62-3.

<sup>20</sup> Mary McGee, "Desired Fruits: Motive and Intention in the Votive Rites of Hindu Women," in *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, ed. Julia Leslie (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Press, 1991), 75. Quoted from the *Agnipurana* 183.17cd – 18ab.

<sup>21</sup> McGee, 76.

While featuring them prominently in *vrata* stories and having a few *vratas* prescribed especially to them, women are still secondary and nearly silent participants in these texts.<sup>22</sup>

It is in the Puranas and Nibandhas that one first sees descriptions of *vratas* with a similar structure to modern *vrats*.<sup>23</sup> The modern *vrata* follows a general structure which usually includes: a statement of identification and intent (*sankalp*), a ritual bath (*snan*), worship of the deity (*puja*), telling of the *vrata* story (*katha*), giving of gifts to a Brahmin (*dan*)<sup>24</sup>, and a closing ceremony (*udyapan*). The closing ceremony is usually when *dan* is given and a priest declares the *vrata* completed. It is considered unfavorable to end a *vrata* without performing the *udyapan*, and usually results in a curse from the *vrata*'s deity.<sup>25</sup> *Alpanas* are usually constructed around the *puja* and storytelling portions of the *vrata*, though it changes from *vrata* to *vrata*.

While the texts expand greatly on *vratas* and it is here where many of the details regarding the performance of *vratas* are laid out, the importance of *vratas* as understood by women today is different. Pearson's book, correctly titled "Because It Gives Me Piece of Mind," found that many women perform *vratas* as an expression of their own religiosity and as acts that contribute to a sense of empowerment and self-worth. This is due, she claims, to the cultural and religious environment of Hinduism, which dictates that women must pursue their religious goals in an indirect manner. *Vrats* are one of the ways women pursue their religious goals, which in Hinduism is the fulfillment of *dharma*.<sup>26</sup>

Another modern scholar who has dealt with *vrats* how they are understood by women is McGee, whose study of 108 women found that the vast majority of them perform *vrats* to fulfill

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<sup>22</sup> Pearson, 62-3.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>24</sup> The kind of gifts and to whom they are given is dependent on the *vrata*. Since most *vrats* involve a Brahmin to some degree, he will receive *dan* as payment for his services. However, some *vrats* also require the devotee give *dan* to certain other people, like the poor or homeless. Ibid., 143-5.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 133-4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 220.

their *dharma*. As noted above, the Puranas and Nibandhas list *moksha* as a goal for performing *vrats*. They also mention the attainment of power and wealth as possible goals as well. However, only 32% of women mentioned wealth as a motivating factor in performing *vrats*. 30% mentioned *moksha* as a factor and only 21% mentioned power. Conversely, 94% of the women interviewed stated that marital felicity was a motivating factor. When McGee asked the women to expand, they claimed that ensuring marital felicity is part of their *dharma* and that *vrats* were ways of helping them fulfill their *dharma*.<sup>27</sup> Given the importance women place on *vrats* as ways for them to fulfill their *dharma*, an examination of what women's *dharma* is will be done.

The sphere of *dharma* that applies to women is known as *stridharma*, literally women's *dharma*, and it states that to be a wife is the ideal state for a woman.<sup>28</sup> The *Stridharmapaddhati* (c. 1719 CE), a text devoted entirely to the topic of *stridharma*, opens and closes with the assertion that a woman's primary religious duty, *dharma*, is the worshipful service of her husband.<sup>29</sup> This worshipful service is known as *pativrata*: a vow (*vrata*) to one's husband (*pati*). *The Code of Manu* (1<sup>st</sup> c. BCE – 2<sup>nd</sup> c. CE), a *dharma* text, extols the importance of *pativrata*. It states that: "a woman will be exalted in heaven by the mere fact that she has obediently served her husband" (5.155). *Pativrata*, then, can be understood as the "*vrata par excellence* [emphasis in original]" and through its fulfillment grants rewards in this life and the next.<sup>30</sup> As mentioned above, the goal of most *vrats* is marital felicity, which is also the ultimate goal of *pativrata*. Since *pativrata* is an expression of a woman's *stridharma*, then *vrats* are also an expression of *stridharma*.

The purpose of this section is to examine three important features of *vrats*: the relationship between words and actions, the expansion of who can perform *vrats* to include women, and the association with *stridharma* and *vrats*. The first point is expressed in the Rig

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<sup>27</sup> McGee, 79-80.

<sup>28</sup> Lynn Denton, *Female Ascetics in Hinduism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 20.

<sup>29</sup> Denton, 28.

<sup>30</sup> McGee, 78.

Vedic understanding that words are inseparable from action. It is this relationship that led Kane and Brereton to translate *vrata* as “commandment” because commands are things that must be followed. The next point is expressed in the story of Savitri. She is the first woman to have performed a *vrata* and can be understood as responsible for initiating the link between *vrata* and *stridharma*. This link is then expanded in the Puranas and Nibandhas through their equation to Vedic sacrifices. The Vedic sacrifices were the initial *dharmic* action and to equate an action with them would make that action *dharma*. This relation to *dharma* is illustrated in Pearson’s and McGee’s surveys of contemporary Hindu women.

### **ALPANAS: Problems in Previous Analyses**

One of the components of a *vrata* is the creation of art. This art is visually and linguistically different all across India. Practitioners in Uttar Pradesh refer to this art as *chauk-purna*, while it is known as *rangoli* in Maharashtra. Other than the name, these two styles are not that different and can be recognized by their geometric and abstract designs with liberal use of color. In Rajasthan this art is known as *mandna* and in Bengal it is known as *alpana*. These two styles are both similar in that they do not employ much color. However, *mandnas* use more geometric and abstract designs.<sup>31</sup> The ritual art examined in this paper is from Bengal, thus *alpana* will be used from now on to refer to the art.

The word *alpana* is derived from the Sanskrit “*alimpana*” which means “to paint or plaster with the fingers.” *Alpanas* are made by applying rice powder or paste with the finger to the walls and floor of the practitioner’s home. The placement of the *alpana*, however, varies depending on which *vrata* is being performed. Some *alpanas* are placed underneath or around an image of the deity, some are placed on the wall next to the home altar, and others are placed in a border like

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<sup>31</sup> Pearson, 155.

fashion around the altar.<sup>32</sup> While there are no textual guidelines for how *alpanas* should look, there are elements which traditionally appear in them. Due to this lack of written text, how certain *alpanas* are supposed to look is passed down from generation to generation by word-of-mouth.<sup>33</sup>

Previous scholars have analyzed *alpanas* in three ways: decorative, representative, and illustrative. The decorative analysis is put forward by Tapan Chatterji in his book *Alpana*. For *alpanas* as a whole, he argues that they depict objects desired from performing the *vrata*.<sup>34</sup> However, certain elements depicted in *alpanas*, he argues, “have no religious or magical import,” meaning they are created for aesthetic purposes only.<sup>35</sup> These elements are mainly vines and geometric patterns that are used as borders around the main part of the *alpana*.

This paper disagrees with this decorative analysis on the grounds of the *alpanas*' ritual context and popular Hindu iconography. *Alpanas* are constructed as part of a ritual that is used for the promotion of auspiciousness and the fulfillment of *stridharma*. These two concepts are very important in the lives of Hindu women and to claim that a ritual, which focuses on these specific concepts, would have elements in it that are superfluous is inaccurate. Also, *alpanas* are not the only images to depict the elements that this analysis claims are decorative. Plant designs are used in Hindu iconography to represent the Goddess, and growth and fertility in general. Vines are especially associated with growth because their curvaceous nature is thought to allow the free, uninhibited flow of life energy.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Tapan Chatterji, *Alpana: Ritual Decoration in Bengal* (Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1965), 31-2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>36</sup> S. N. Dasgupta, *Fundamentals of Indian Art* (Bombay, India: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1960), 29.

The representative analysis argues that *alpanas* are a visual reflection of what the practitioner desires to gain from the *vrata*.<sup>37</sup> As mentioned above, Chatterji analyzes *alpanas* in this manner but does not go into much detail on why they depict the desired result. On the other hand, S. K. Ray, in *The Ritual Art of the Bratas of Bengal*, associates *alpanas* with the concept of sympathetic magic, which changes their function from a simple visual representation to a required ritual tool. He states that “the *alpana* related to a *brata* [*vrata*] must clearly depict the object the *bratee* (devotee) desires to have, otherwise its performance will be meaningless and impossible.”<sup>38</sup> For Ray, this means that if the *alpana* depicts an object unrelated to the *vrata*, the entire ritual becomes pointless.

The representative analysis has some shortcomings, which are mainly due to what modern women understand the goals of *vrats* to be. When one applies this analysis to *alpanas*, it shows that many *vrats* are performed to gain material possessions for the practitioner. This seems oddly selfish and contradicts the findings of Pearson and McGee examined earlier, which states that the goal of *vrats* is the wellbeing of the husband and family. However, if one applies Hindu iconography to the material possessions depicted in *alpanas*, one can understand them as symbolizing prosperity, not just for the practitioner but for the whole family.

The illustrative analysis of *alpanas* claims they depict scenes from the *vrata* story. The *vrata* story is told during the performance of a *vrata* and may serve one or more of these functions: use narrative to describe the performance of the *vrata*; tell the origin of the *vrata*; or give an example of the *vrats* efficacy.<sup>39</sup> Both Chatterji and Ray analyze some *alpanas* in this way, but Laxmi Tewari

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<sup>37</sup> Chatterji, 4; Sudhansu K. Ray, *The Ritual Art of the Bratas of Bengal* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhobadhyay, 1961), 42.

<sup>38</sup> Ray, 42.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-1.

analyses many more *alpanas* in this manner.<sup>40</sup> An *alpana* with a flock of ducks in it does not represent a desire for ducks, but rather it refers to the story of the Subachani Vrat, which tells of a mother who saves her son from execution by worshipping the duck goddess Subachani.<sup>41</sup> The ducks serve as a visual aid to the story, which is told during the *vrata*.

This analysis, however, does not apply to all the elements in *alpanas*. In fact, there are enough non-story elements within *alpanas* to justify other scholars developing different ways of analyzing *alpanas*. This analysis also does not explain why certain images from the *vrata* story are depicted and others are not. This paper argues that while some *alpanas* do include elements of the *vrata* story, these elements are there to remind the practitioner of the *vrata*'s association with *stridharma* and auspiciousness.

This section examines the three other analyses of *alpanas* so that one might understand the current theories of *alpanas* and what their short-comings are, as well as showing the value of this approach. The decorative analysis does not take into account the ritual context or Hindu iconography. The representative analysis also does not take into account Hindu iconography, as well as what the actual goals of *vrats* are understood as being. The illustrative analysis cannot be applied to all the elements in *alpanas* and does not consider why only certain elements of the *vrata* story are shown. Recognizing these short-comings lends merit to the analysis presented in this paper as being applicable to all the elements in an *alpana*, rather than some.

#### **METHOD: *Alpanas* as Sacred Auspiciousness**

The method for examining *alpanas* proposed by this paper is based on a dual lens analysis. The first lens that will be used is present in Eck's *Darshan*. She examines how Hindu sacred images are

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<sup>40</sup> Laxmi Tewari, *A Splendor of Worship: Women's Fasts, Rituals, Stories, and Art* (New Delhi: Manowar Publications, 1991), 14-5.

<sup>41</sup> Ray, 15-7.

understood and used by Hindus, and how non-Hindus can understand them as well. For a majority of Hindus, sacred images are not merely visual aids used during rituals. They are also visual theologies that convey the various qualities and stories of the gods through symbols. Symbols, however, must be understood in context. If one does not know the context in which the symbol is used, one cannot know its meaning. A trident in a Roman statue refers to the god Neptune, in a Christian painting it refers to the devil, and in a Hindu shrine it refers to the god Shiva. Eck notes that with proper knowledge of the image's context and the stories of the deity, one can "read" the symbols of the image as if it were a text.<sup>42</sup> Thus, background knowledge is essential for understanding images.

Simply depicting a deity does not make an image sacred. Rather it is sacred because it is used as part of a ritual. If one has two identical images of Vishnu but one is placed in a temple and the other in a museum, the image in the temple is the sacred image, despite sharing all the same visual elements. Since *alpanas* are constructed as part of a ritual, they can also be analyzed as sacred images. Because background knowledge is required to understand sacred images, and there is no in-depth study of *alpana* iconography, other Hindu images will be used. These other images share visual elements with *alpanas* and the analyses applied to these elements will help in understanding the value of those same elements in *alpanas*.

The second lens is that of auspiciousness, which refers to the increase of good fortune. This good fortune is based on the intertwining of time, space, and people. What is auspicious at one time and place for one person may not be auspicious for another person in that same time and space.<sup>43</sup> If a wedding procession encounters a Mahabrahman, someone who cremates the dead, it is considered extremely inauspicious and an ill omen for the new couple. However, if a funeral procession were to encounter that same Mahabrahman at the same place, it minimizes

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<sup>42</sup> Eck, 41-3.

<sup>43</sup> Madan, 12.



the inauspiciousness of the event.<sup>44</sup> Auspiciousness is not an inherent quality in places, objects, or persons and is only applied to them when they are associated with certain times or events. The kitchen and the room reserved for home worship are considered auspicious if the house is occupied.<sup>45</sup> A woman is considered auspicious as long as she remains married.<sup>46</sup> In these examples, it is the state of being occupied or married that makes the rooms and woman auspicious, not their inherent nature.

The auspiciousness of actions is also contingent on the time at which it is done. Childbirth, for example, is generally auspicious but may be highly inauspicious if the child is born at an inauspicious time. For a Kashmir Brahman couple, a son born under a certain astrological sign foretells of a possible patricide, not as a conscious action but as a result of the subtle influences on the child's life due to his birth sign.<sup>47</sup> Death is usually an inauspicious event, but this quality is lessened depending on the circumstances. For women, particularly upper-class women, widow-hood is an even more inauspicious state than being dead because she is now unable to fulfill her *stridharma*. Thus, it is their connection with certain temporal events that makes people, places, objects or actions auspicious.

Auspiciousness is a useful category for analyzing *alpanas* because of the relationship between auspiciousness, *dharma*, and *vrats*. As examined earlier, *dharma* and auspiciousness are two sides of the same coin. The understanding that *vrats* are performed as part of a woman's *stridharma* was also analyzed. Since *vrats* are performed for *dharma*, and *dharma* is intimately connected with auspiciousness, it can be understood that *vrats* are also performed for the maintenance of auspiciousness. The next section will analyze how this auspiciousness is expressed.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>46</sup> Narayanan, 108

<sup>47</sup> Madan, 15.

## CASE STUDIES

This section will apply the method described above to two *alpanas*. The *alpanas* are part of two different *vrats*, the Lakshmi Vrat and the Manasa Vrat respectively. These *alpanas* were chosen because they are part of two popular *vrats* and have a variety of elements in them, which have been used in analyses by other scholars. Through applying the method outlined above to these *alpanas*, this paper will show how this analysis provides a better understanding of the *alpana*.

### *Lakshmi Vrat*

This *vrat* is performed just before a wedding in the hopes that the marriage will be a prosperous one (Fig. 1).<sup>48</sup> This *alpana* consists of a large square with a vine moving to a protrusion in the center of the bottom side. Within the square, there are many different types of jewelry such as bangles, necklaces, and earrings, which surround a large disk shaped object. At the bottom center inside the border is a pair of footprints and in the top center are two figures in a structure flanked by two birds.

To help explain this *vrat*, and some of the symbols in the *alpana*, better a retelling of the *vrat* story will be performed. The story tells of a poor widow and her son overcoming poverty through devotion to *Lakshmi*. The son was sitting under a tree one day when a milkman passed by and, seeing that the boy was hungry, gave him some cream. As the boy was drinking the cream, he heard above him some baby owls chirping. Guessing that they were hungry, he gave some of his cream to the baby owls. When the mother owl returned, her chicks told her of the generosity of the boy. The owl then took the boy on her back to the abode of the goddess *Lakshmi*, to whom the owl belonged. After hearing of the kindness the boy showed the baby owls, *Lakshmi* gave him a basket of sesame seeds and told him to worship it daily and all his poverty

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<sup>48</sup> Eva Maria Gupta, *Brata und Alpana in Bengalen* (Wiesbaden, Germany: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1983), 146.

would go away. The boy did just that and after a few years he and his mother were rich enough that the boy married the king's daughter.<sup>49</sup>

Only the vines, the figures at the top, and the jewelry depicted in this *alpana* will be examined because these are the same elements analyzed by other scholars. The vines have been argued by some that they serve only to decorate the *alpana*.<sup>50</sup> However, if one were to examine other Hindu images, one will soon find that vines and other symbols of vegetation are often found in images associated with the goddess Lakshmi, the same goddess to whom this *vrata* is dedicated and who is also the goddess of auspiciousness. She is often shown surrounded by plants because of her association with plant growth and fertility in general.<sup>51</sup> Fig. 3 is just one of the many examples of these kinds of images. Vines are also typically associated with Lakshmi due to their curvaceous nature making it easy for the life energy to flow through them, thus making them ideal symbols for growth.<sup>52</sup> Based on the symbolic use of similar vegetation in other images, this paper concludes that the vines depicted here are not done so for mere decoration, but as a symbol of growth and fertility. These relate to the *vrata* because they also relate to marriage, which is when the *vrata* is performed. Once a woman is married she is then expected to take up the role of the fertile and nurturing mother.<sup>53</sup> Bearing sons allows her husband to fulfill his *dharma*, and through helping her husband, she fulfills her *pativrata*.<sup>54</sup>

Jewelry in *alpanas* has typically been analyzed as representing the practitioner's desires.<sup>55</sup> However, this approach ignores the other meanings and uses of jewelry in Hindu iconography, namely marriage and material prosperity. Married women are the only women allowed to wear

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<sup>49</sup> Ray, 44-5.

<sup>50</sup> Chatterji, 44.

<sup>51</sup> David R. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 19-21.

<sup>52</sup> Dasgupta, 29.

<sup>53</sup> Denton, 35.

<sup>54</sup> Holdrege, 234-5.

<sup>55</sup> Ray, 42.

jewelry. This is due to her *pativrata*, which states that a married woman should always look beautiful for her husband.<sup>56</sup> Since *pativrata* begins at the marriage ceremony, the bride is given jewelry to wear. The marriage becomes irreversible when the groom ties a silk cord with a golden pendent around the brides neck. This necklace, known as the *mangalustra* or *tali*, also becomes a symbol of the marriage.<sup>57</sup> This understanding of jewelry fits with the *vrat's* performance before a wedding. Marriage is one of the most auspicious events in the lives of both men and women, thus making symbols of marriage also auspicious.

Jewelry has another symbolic value important to the understanding of this *alpana*, that of wealth and prosperity. The *Code of Manu* (c. 200-400 CE) states that “Where women are revered, there the gods rejoice; but where they are not, no rite bears fruit. [...] If men want to become prosperous, therefore, they should always honour the women on joyful occasions and festive days with gifts of adornments, clothes, and food” (3.56-9). This means if the household is prosperous and wishes to stay that way, the husband should give gifts of jewelry to his wife. If he does not honor his wife then a curse falls on the home and no ritual will be successful. *Manu* goes on to say: “For, if the wife does not sparkle, she does not arouse her husband. And if the husband is not aroused, there will be no offspring. When the wife sparkles, so does the entire household; but when she ceases to sparkle, so does the entire household” (3.62). This means that if the wife is adorned in jewelry, she will arouse her husband and they will beget children, which is *dharma* for both husband and wife. Thus if she is bejeweled, good fortune will be promoted in the form of children and wealth.

There is also other visual evidence for jewelry representing prosperity. Fig. 3 also depicts Lakshmi heavily bejeweled with a crown, necklaces, rings and bangles. This is a common theme in

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<sup>56</sup> Pearson, 71.

<sup>57</sup> George P. Monger, *Marriage Customs of the World: From Henna to Honeymoons*, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc, 2004) s.v. “Hindu Weddings.”

goddess images and is due to the understanding that Lakshmi is the embodiment of wealth, prosperity, and auspiciousness. Wherever she is present, so is prosperity, and vice versa.<sup>58</sup> The reference to Lakshmi can also be found if the jewelry is understood as representing the riches gained by the poor boy in the story. It is due to her blessing that the boy received the basket, and it was by following her instructions that he and his mother overcame poverty and grew wealthy.

Thus not only is there conceptual evidence expressing jewelry as symbols of auspiciousness, but also visual evidence. This understanding can explain the small disconnect in what is depicted as the goal of the *vrat*, and what women understand it to be. It is not the jewelry that is desired from the *vrat*, rather the circumstances under which the jewelry might be given to her that is desired.

The two figures at the top have been argued by some scholars as representing Lakshmi and Vishnu.<sup>59</sup> However, based on the lack of detail in the image this is hard to establish. What these figures might symbolize may be represented by the pavilion they are under. This structure is quite similar to the canopy used in wedding ceremonies called *mandap*.<sup>60</sup> It is under this canopy that the majority of the wedding rituals take place. As this *vrat* is performed just before a wedding, it is possible that this represents the bride and groom under the wedding canopy. As an image of the couple, it could also be a reference the marriage of the poor boy to the king's daughter told in the *vrat* story. This marriage would certainly be an auspicious event for both parties involved. The boy came up from having nothing to being wealthy enough to gain the hand of the princess. The daughter is marrying a man who gained his wealth through the blessing of Lakshmi, which is always an auspicious quality.

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<sup>58</sup> Kinsley, 19.

<sup>59</sup> Chatterji, 44.

<sup>60</sup> Monger, s.v. "India."

### *Manasa Vrat*

This *vrat* is performed for fertility, health and wealth, and is dedicated to Menasa, the Bengali folk goddess of snakes (Fig. 2).<sup>61</sup> The *vrat* story, which is extremely helpful with understanding the symbolic meaning behind these symbols, tells of the troubles and eventual divine intervention of the youngest wife of a rich man. The young wife came from a poor family and was not able to give her husband a proper dowry, like the other wives, who berated her accordingly. The young wife became depressed and one day while gathering water she caught what she thought was a few tiny fish and put them in a jar. A few days later she opened the jar and found they were, in fact, snakes. She took care of the snakes and secretly fed them, until they grew up and went to their heavenly abode, for they were the son's of the goddess Manasa. When the goddess learned of the young wife's plight, she brought the wife to her abode, and bestowed upon her great, elaborate gifts. When the young wife returned with these gifts the other wives ceased tormenting her and they all lived happily ever after.<sup>62</sup>

The elements of this *alpana* that will be examined were chosen for the same reason as the last *alpana*: they have been analyzed by previous scholars. The snakes, depicted at the top, represent the children of Manasa that are caught by the wife and are responsible for transporting her to and from the abode of the goddess. They represent an auspicious event in the life of the young wife. Her life before this event could be seen as inauspicious because she was unable to give her husband gifts like his other wives and was continually tormented for it. However, capturing the baby snakes set into motion the events that would lead to her visiting the goddess and returning with riches. Now that she was able to treat her husband the way the other wives did, she was no longer tormented by them. Thus, the capturing of the baby snakes was an auspicious event captured visually in this *alpana*. This change of state is also related to the

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<sup>61</sup> Gupta, 151.

<sup>62</sup> Ray, 37-8.

understanding of snakes as going through a rebirth and gaining a new life, so to speak.<sup>63</sup> The young wife is given a new life after her visit with the goddess, which was just shown to be auspicious.

Snakes are also symbols of healing and health, which is one of the goals of the *vrata*. This understanding of snakes is due to their annual shedding. The shedding of a snake's skin is seen as a rebirth and revitalizing of the snake, healing it from any ailment.<sup>64</sup> Parts of snakes are often used to make remedies, for snake venom is still an essential part of making anti-venoms today. While the healing aspect of snakes is not found in the *vrata* story, the *vrata* is done to improve a person's health, either the practitioner's or someone in her family. Therefore, this characteristic should be used in the analysis. Performing this *vrata* with the goal of healing makes this part of a wife's *pativrata*. It is the wife's responsibility to maintain the family structure, which includes the health of her family members. As symbols of healing, the snakes, thus, can represent an aspect of *pativrata*.

The jewelry that is depicted here is similar in meaning to the jewelry in the previous *alpana*. The jewelry here is that which is told of in the story, and serves as dowry for the poor wife and as ornamentation as part of her *pativrata*. The practitioner, again, is not showing that she desires these specific objects, but that she desires the condition under which she might acquire such jewelry. Such circumstances would indicate the family is wealthy and prosperous and would therefore be auspicious.

The lotus is an extremely popular symbol for the goddess throughout all of Indian art. The lotus is a symbol of fertility and growth, and is considered the seat of the goddess (Fig. 3). While typically the lotus is mainly associated with Lakshmi, its association with the concept of "The

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<sup>63</sup> Jyoti Sahi, *The Child and the Serpent: Reflections on Popular Indian Symbols* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 167.

<sup>64</sup> Sahi, 166-7.

Goddess” makes it an applicable symbol of all the goddesses.<sup>65</sup> This would make the lotus depicted here a symbol of Manasa who is responsible for showering wealth on the young wife. The lotus is also associated with fertility. It is often referred to as the “womb of the universe,” and typically is the seat for the god Brahma from which he creates the world.<sup>66</sup> The lotus plant itself is known for being able to grow and thrive even in harsh conditions, proving its fertile power.<sup>67</sup> The fact that it grows from mud also allude back to the *vrat* story, where in the end the young wife emerges beautifully out of the ugly situation she was in prior to meeting Manasa.

These two case studies serve to illustrate how this method can be applied and how it serves to successfully explain the elements in an *alpana*. Through using knowledge about the *vrat* story and its goals, as well as similar visual elements found in Hindu images, this paper was able to show how *alpanas* represent auspiciousness. The *alpanas* used in these case studies have been analyzed with the other methods described earlier. The short-comings of those analyses on these specific *alpanas* have been addressed and this method has been used to fill in the gaps.

### CONCLUSION

Part of what this paper has been attempting to show, is that the previous methods of analyzing *alpanas* do not answer all the questions that arise when one examines them. If one examines them solely on the *vrat* in which they belong one misses the other meanings these symbols have in Hindu iconography. Examining them in this way also leads one to disregard the sacred images of Hinduism that are created under similar circumstances. However, if one treats *alpanas* as sacred images and uses other Hindu symbols for comparison then vines are no longer decorative

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<sup>65</sup> Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Pantheon Books, 1946), 90-1.

<sup>66</sup> Zimmer, 90.

<sup>67</sup> Kinsley, 21.



elements but symbols of growth and fertility. The jewelry are no long things to be gained from the *vrat* but symbols of prosperity within the entire family. When other Hindu symbols are used for comparison a similar theme is found among the elements of an *alpana*: auspiciousness.

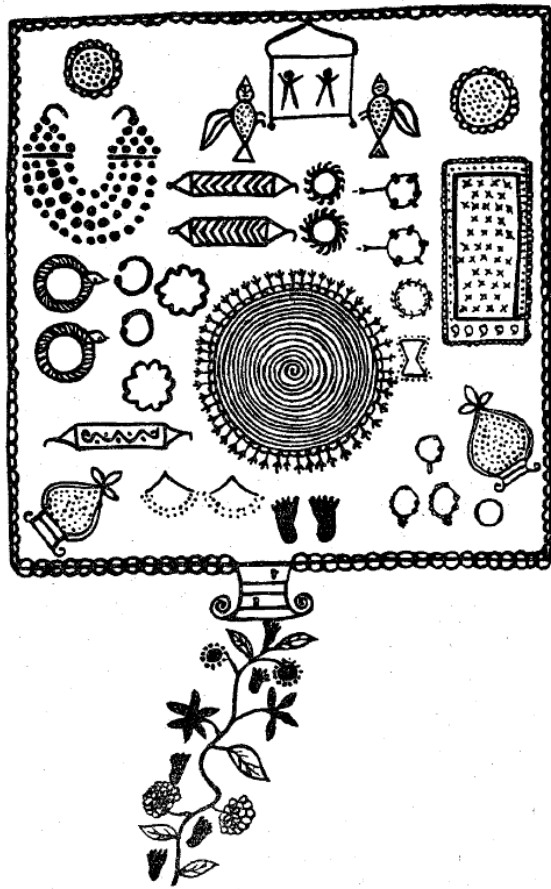


Fig. 1

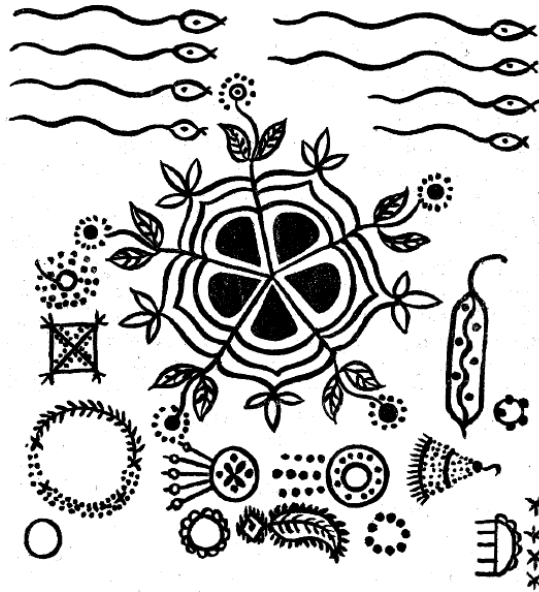


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

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