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## Transformation of 'Sanjhi' art

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### Abstract

'Sanjhi' - the art of hand cutting designs on paper, is a languishing ritualistic craft used in the worship of Lord Krishna as rangolis. The art depicts Indian mythological stories in numerous forms, which predominant focus on Krishna's Leela. Sanjhi is the art of paper stenciling found in Mathura and Vrindavan. The art involves the composition and drawing of the picture, its expert cutting with small, fine, custom-made scissors and then the use of stencil to create images. These Sanjhis are usually prepared on the final five days of the pitr-paksha, from ekadasi to amavasya. The art grew in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the walls and floors of temples were decorated with Sanjhi motifs. The major transformation of the art is that the stencil has itself become the final artwork, and has lost all ritual or religious significance. The most striking feature of sanjhi, now a day lies in its play with light. The shift from the old to the new sanjhi is transition from color to light.

### Objective:

- To trace the journey of Sanjhi from old to the new.
- To showcase the stencil cutting turning into objects of art.
- To focus on the contemporary use of Sanjhi.
- To make people aware about the craft.
- To keep the art form alive.

**Keywords:** Sanjhi, ritualistic craft, languishing, transformation

### Introduction

The term '*Sanjhi*' is derived from the Hindi word *Sandhya*, the period of dusk with which the art form is typically associated. Sanjhi is an ancient craft of paper stenciling, found in Mathura and Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh of India. The art grew in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the walls and floors of temples were decorated with Sanjhi motifs. As per the folklore the origin of this art started by *Radha*, who made Sanjhi rangolis using natural colors, along with flowers, leaves and colored stones to impress *Krishna*.

These stencils were used to make rangoli on walls and floors to the rituals followed during the pitra-paksha, the period of the ancestors and the departed or the *Shraddha* month. This craft is always linked to '*Vrajbhoomi*' because the art depicts Indian mythological stories in numerous forms, with predominant focus on Krishna's Leela. Known for its inherent spiritual implications that reach beyond immediate aesthetic appeal. Sanjhi art is considered to be one of the finest arts of spiritual expression. Now a day mainly practiced in few temples in Vrindavan and the Ladililala temple in Barsana.

It is an art form that is in very much of the spirit of Mathura and Vrindavan. Walking along the streets of Mathura and Vrindavan one can easily recognize the motifs and designs that appear in the traditional Sanjhi paper cutting, whether it is the peacock or the cows, the monkey or the kadamba tree or the river flowing past the temple. They later broadened to include a number of Mughal motifs -jali patterns and animals and flowers.

### 2. Sanjhi a ritualistic craft

The roots of this temple tradition of *sanjhi* rest in an ancient folk ritual. Sanjhi, (also known as *Sanja*, *Saijha*, *Sanjhuli*, *Sanjhulde*, *Sinjha*, *Sanjhya*) a vernacular derivation from '*Sandhya*', 'evening' was originally worshipped as a goddess by the unmarried young girls seeking the boon of obtaining a suitable husband. The practice of creating images of the folk deity Sanjhi made of cow dung and flowers on walls and venerating it at evening time is continued in the villages of *Vraja*, Haryana, Malwa and Rajasthan to the present day.

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Sanjhi is practiced in two forms simultaneously- one by the young unmarried girls in their homes and in the temples by the priests. In order to understand the evolution of the temple tradition of sanjhi it is necessary to study the folk ritual traditions first.

In the *folk tradition*, young girls smear the outer wall of their homes and make designs on it by sticking various objects such as flowers, colored stones, shells, metal foil, pieces of mirror and various shapes made of cow-dung etc. These symbolic depictions consist of motifs ranging from human figures to utility items like ladder, fan, cot, game of dice, eatables etc. The image thus created is venerated at evening time, when the girls perform aarti, sing songs and offer bhoga to the deity. This ritual is always referred to as playing, i.e. playing sanjhi. The design is effaced the following day in order to create a new one in the same place on a fresh cow-dung background. The material used in making each day's design is saved and on the last day it is ritually immersed in water bodies like well or river.

Originally a folk art, Sanjhi was adapted by the Vaishnava temples and assigned its proper place within the annual liturgical cycle. In the temple environment, the rural Sanjhi made from cowdung and flowers changed its appearance and emerged as a new, unparalleled and highly sophisticated art form. Flowers and cowdung were replaced by colors.

In the *temple tradition*, Sanjhi is created every evening during the *pitra-paksha* or the dark fortnight of waning moon in the month of 'Ashwin' in September or October. During 'Pitra-Paksha' the ancestors are remembered and worshipped. This temple tradition is rare and is only practiced in some of the temples in Vrindavan. The 'Sanjhi' is made by the temple priests and local artisan on a raised earthen platform, known as 'vedi' an octagonal earthen platform created by the mixture of mud and cow dung. The octagonal platform represents an eight-petalled lotus.

Motifs used in this temple tradition are generally the different patterns of flowers and leaves placed very beautifully in the 'rangoli'. After the creation of these floral motifs, the central part of the 'rangoli' is created which is the most important spot called '*hauda*' (also known as *hriday* or 'heart') where the episodes of Lord Krishna and Radha's life are portrayed. The theme depicted in the centre is the main focus of 'Sanjhi' in this temple tradition.

All these intricate motifs are created using a series of 'Sanjhi' stencils. Each of these 'Sanjhis' are created just for a single day. After the Sanjhi is worshipped, it is effaced to make a new 'Sanjhi' for the following day of the 'Pitra-Paksha'. Apart from the sanjhi's made of dry colors sanjhi designs are prepared from dry colors on and beneath water. A form of flower Sanjhi too exists in the temple tradition.



Fig 1: Sanjhi at Radhamadanmohan temple, Vrindavan



Fig 2: Hauda or Hridaya of Sanjhi



Fig 3: Flower Sanjhi

## 2.1 Tools and techniques

The technique involved in the creation of the 'Sanjhi' paper stencils, though seems to be simple but it involves a lot of precision and practice. First the drawing of the design is made on the paper. If more than one copy is required the papers are pinned together on all sides. It is the cutting process which requires an enormous amount of practice, concentration and patience. The only tool used in this craft is a pair of scissors, which is very fine with long arms for easy manipulation. During the cutting process, the paper is rotated around the scissors for a precise and fine cutting. The numbers of paper cut stencils that are used for any design depend on the intricacy of the pattern, number of elements in the design and the number of colors to be used.



Fig 4: Sanjhi stencil cutting through customized scissors

## 2.2 Motifs

The art of Sanjhi is a celebration of the legends of lord Krishna. The subject matter has always been the stories and motifs of Krishna legends. The motifs and designs that appear



in the traditional Sanjhi paper cutting are the scenes of Vrindavan which includes peacock, the cows, the monkey, and the kadamba tree, the river flowing past the temple. Imageries and themes like Krishna rasa, Nand Gopal stealing butter are also cut intricately. The very intricate Sanjhi have

many creepers and flowers running along the borders. The motifs and the themes also include the images of the deity Sanjhi and Sanjha. They later broadened to include a number of Mughal motifs like jali patterns and animals and flowers.



Fig 5: Krishna and Radha under Kadamb tree



Fig 6: Krishna playing flute



Fig 7: Krishna in Yamuna River



Fig 8: Govardhanparwat



Fig 9: Bakasur

### 3. Transformation of Sanjhi ART

From being a work of art which was produced with flowers or colored powders, mainly in temple for worship, the paper cut,

that was used as a stencil to create the image, has itself become the final artwork and has lost all ritual significance. The more striking feature of the new Sanjhi is its play with

light. Besides paper, plastic is also brought into use to make the cut outs for commercial use. Sanjhi templates are now used as stencils made on plastic sheets for decorative bindi, heena patterns and sari borders. Contemporary use of Sanjhi's can be seen now a day in serving trays, coasters, lamp shades, wall frames, greeting cards, cut out partitions, accessories and in garments too.

### 3.1 Stencils as objects of art



Fig 10: Sanjhi on hand bag



Fig 11: Sanjhi earrings



Fig 12: Sanjhi on footwear



Fig 13: Curtain made of sanjhi stencil



Fig 14: Heena stencil made of plastic



Fig 15: Sanjhi paper stencil wall frame





Fig 16: Cutwork portraying sanjhi on saree pallu



Fig 17: Sanjhi influenced top



Fig 18: Cutwork portraying sanjhi on the back of top



Fig 19: Sanjhi tray



Fig 20: Sanjhi coaster



Fig 21: Sanjhi used as partition

#### 4. Conclusion & Suggestions

Sanjhi has now become a *languishing craft* because in Mathura and Vrindavan, there has been a decline in the number of artisans practicing 'Sanjhi paper cutting'. Very few people actually recognize it, as there is no awareness and popularity given to this art. The reason of this decline is the low demand for their work in its traditional form. Traditional patronage is drying up and even the popularity of 'Sanjhi' as the domestic hobby had faded. Only a handful of temples in Vrindavan still perform Sanjhi and in a much reduced form, and Vijay Kumar and his family were the amongst the few left in Mathura who continued to practice the craft as a profession. In search for alternative employment for their skills, they have turned their hand to making Sanjhis for contemporary use. The Delhi Crafts Council has been doing extensive work in reviving and popularizing the languishing craft of Sanjhi in the past of few years and given a much-needed boost to the craft and the artisans. The art should be

protected under geographical indication (GI) and the government of India should take steps to promote the languishing Sanjhi.

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