



## AN ANALYSIS ON SANJHI ART: AN EPITOME OF INDIAN FOLK ART IN MATHURA

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### ABSTRACT

Sanjhi Art- is the popular and historical art of stencilling by way of paper cutting. It relates to the Braj Area which is situated nearby areas of Mathura. The said paper art (stencils) was and are still being utilized for creating coloured powder art which is known as “sanjhi”. The Art Form is made in the Braj temples in accordance with the rituals of the People in Mathura. It is inspired from great epics of Hindu deity i.e., Radha Krishna. In the present research paper, the author will elaborate on the historical background of the Sanjhi Art. It will further discuss the ritualistic and mythological Importance of this Art. The researcher will analyse the Sanjhi Art in a manner which has made the India, a heaven for folk art across the globe. In this paper, the researcher will further examine the shift of traditional Sanjhi to modern Snajhi which are being used for commercial purpose. The author will analyse the distinctive feature of the Sanjhi Art and efforts taken for preserving this Art in Indian Context.

**Keywords:** Sanjhi, Mathura, Lord Krishna, Stencil.

### INTRODUCTION

*Sanjhi* Art of Mathura, also known as *Devasthanakala* is a form of ritualistic folk art existing in Mathura or *Vrajadham*. This folk-art has connection with the worship of one of the most famous gods of Hindu religion i.e., Lord Krishna. Stencilling or *Sanjhi* Art form is spread all across the world. According to Cambridge dictionary, this art has been defined as “*Stencil is a piece of metal, plastic, card, etc. in which the shapes are being cut, utilized to paint or draw patterns on the wall or surface.*”<sup>1</sup> This Art lies at the very spirit or Vrindavan and Mathura. Between fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it was considered as highly refined and traditional art followed by the Brahmin priest. It continued in the form of living tradition in the Vrindavan temples. However, in contemporary era, very few people practice this Art<sup>2</sup>. Sanjhi Art was conventionally created by hands which is laborious, time consuming

<sup>1</sup> Sanjhi Art- The Miracle of Paper and Scissors. Retrieved 3 August, 2024, from <https://isha.sadhguru.org/en/blog/article/sanjhi-art>

<sup>2</sup> Singh, M. (2021). Adaptation of "Sanjhi" art using laser cut work technique for designing of handicraft articles. *ResearchGate*. 1(3), 18-20.

and tedious process. The Sanjhi Art is very impressive because of artisan's perfect portrayal through intricacy of ornamental designs, combination of well-matched colours and beauty of the shape. Further, the actual replication of motif in pattern are not practically possible by hand cutting method. This method holds a great religious and mythological importance, and there was a shift from traditional to modern form of Sanjhi Art, which will be described in this Research paper.

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To study the historical overview on Sanjhi Art of Mathura.
2. To examine the religious and mythological significance of Sanjhi Art.
3. To analyse the transformation of Sanjhi Art in Indian Context.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Stencilling or Sanjhi is an art which is assumed to have brought by the Egyptians and Chinese between the phase of 2000 and 3000 BC. With the passage of time, the trade between Middle East countries and China rose, the said art was further expanded to USA and Western Europe and it became famous in Western Europe between 12<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Public started decorating their house and worshiping areas with Sanjhi. Although there is no historical source regarding when this art came to India for the first time. However, it is widely believed that the Chinese travellers introduced this craft to India prior to the beginning of Mughal Era, and was later on made famous by the Muslim leaders<sup>3</sup>. This art has begun as making pictures of goddess sanjhi on floor and walls. The Sanskrit meaning of the expression "Sanjhi" refers to twilight or evening which signifies to the goddess of dark and light. Thus, these 2 mediums were used for making the pictures. The Sanjhi art of Mathura is also called by different names across the country, it is Mandna in the State of Rajasthan, Alpna in West Bengal, Muggu in the State of Andhra Pradesh, Rangoli in Karnataka, and Kolam in Kerala<sup>4</sup>. On one hand, the cut stencils are used in Sanjhi paper and on the other hand others are created in the form of freehand floor drawing<sup>5</sup>.

### SIGNIFICANCE OF SANJHI ART

The major factor for the popularity of Sanjhi Art was due to its ritualistic importance and that it is quite inexpensive. This craft is quite simple and easy to execute. This is a professional art which is being used for decorative purpose. The traditional aspect of the Sanjhi is derived from ancient folk ritual. Sanjhi is also called as "Sanjhya, Sinjha, Sanjhulde, Sanjhuli, Saijha or Sanja", which is derived from the expression "Sandhya" which signifies the evening.

The art form of Sanjhi is being used for beautifying the Kirtan Sabhas and temples (Nat-Mandirs). This art is witnessed in full-fledged manner during the Vaishnava festivals of *Jhulan*, *Janmashtami*, *Holi* and *Raas*. Just before the festival of Dussehra, the pilgrims undergo for 45 days of pilgrimage around the holy place of Mathura, the *Vrajabhoomi*. This is considered as a significant event of Vraj calendar, wherein the worshippers walk 250 kilometres across the Mathura and thereafter visit every area connected with the life of Lord Krishna<sup>6</sup>.

Sanjhi Art is made for showing the episodes or *jhankis* from the Lord Krishna. The Sanjhis which are specific to the place or event (festival) adorn the region along with the parikrama. For example, In Barnasa, the Art form of Sanjhi demonstrates the episode of Krishna celebrating the festival of Holi with Radha along with gopinis. During the evening time, a new design of Sanjhi is made at the place where the devotees rest. The flower is made in art for manoratha i.e., "the desire of the devotees to please Lord Krishna".

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Seth, J. & Singh, S (2017). Sanjhi The Braj Craft. Retrieved August 4, 2024, from [https://www.academia.edu/35697675/SANJHI\\_THE\\_BRAJ\\_CRAFT](https://www.academia.edu/35697675/SANJHI_THE_BRAJ_CRAFT)

<sup>6</sup> Magik India. Sanjhi, the art of stencil in India. Retrieved August 5, 2024, from <https://magikindia.com/en/sanjhi-stencil-art/>

Further, in Govardhan, this art brings alive the event of Krishna uplifting the rocky mountain on the fingertips with a view to protect the public from torrential rain. The floor of the Nathwara's Srinath temple in the State of Rajasthan is decorated with leaves of plantation tree and the art shows every place being visited by the pilgrims across the Mathura (Vrajabhoomi). Hence, the Nathdwara pilgrims who is not able to make the pilgrimage, could have felt of doing the same, by taking a walk across the Sanjhi Art. Therefore, the Nathdwara's Sanjhi is closely associated with those of Vrindavan and Mathura.

### **RITUALISTIC ASPECT CONCERNING THE ART**

In Mathura, the practice of Sanjhi developed through 3 phases namely, *folk, poetic and temple*.

#### **(i) Folk tradition**

In the earliest phase as per the folk tradition, the young and unmarried females made Sanjhi design during the month of Ashwin. The bachelor girls used to create this art to pray for decent spouse and prosperity, because it has been revealed that it is synonymous to goddess Laxmi and Parvati<sup>7</sup>. This art was made with the assistance of mirror pieces, metal foil, or coloured stones on the background of cow dung which is being used in a wall of their house.

Every evening, different designs were being used for depicting the life of *Sanjhi* (folk goddess) and Sanjha (Sanjhi's husband). This art is made and showed to the public every evening for the purpose of worshipping and another new pattern is created in the upcoming days. The temple wherein these patterns are drawn is known as the Sanjhi Temple. This art was usually utilized to decorate the courtyard of the Krishna and Radha's temple every evening for 14 days in the memory of their ancestors. The design/pattern is believed to be Goddess *Sanjhi* and are worshipped by the people<sup>8</sup>.

#### **(ii) Poetic Tradition**

The next phase i.e., the poetic tradition is derived from the traditions of folk. The rituals and traditions followed by the girls of Mathura gave the material for converting the Sanjhi in the form of poetry in Vrajabhasha. The theme of the songs was inspired from the descriptions of the event wherein Krishna, Radha and other friends went to the forest for playing and gathering flowers. The descriptions of the early events of the divine couples were premised on the folk tradition of worship.

#### **(iii) Temple tradition**

In the last phase i.e., the temple tradition, existed prior to the 17<sup>th</sup> century wherein the Sanjhis moved off the wall, out of the houses, into the temples.

### **MYTHOLOGICAL ASPECT**

As per the Hindu Mythology, the gonini of Lord Krishna i.e., Radha used Sanjhi art for decorating her house for attracting Krishna, her beloved. She used flowers, metal foil and coloured stones. Watching this, the other *gopinis* of Mathura also began decorating their walls and thus it is assumed to be rudimentary kind of Sanjhi Art. Although the Sanjhi Art is alive, its origins are being blurred<sup>9</sup>. God Krishna is considered as the incarnation or avatar of Lord Vishnu. Thus, the creation of a Sanjhi Art of Mathura is "an expression or symbol of love for the Lord Krishna" and this kind of devotion depicts the picture of life. According to a mythological belief, the artisans of this Art starts work after offering prayers to his or her teacher or "guru", his god and tools used for making the art. The art is deemed by the devotee as dedicated service to the God i.e., Lord Krishna.

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<sup>7</sup> Shikha Singh. Sanjhi the Braj Art. Academia. IICD (2017).

<sup>8</sup> Retrieved August 5, 2024, from <chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.ezcc-india.org/pdf/book/sanjhi.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Ghose, R. (2004). Sanjhi: 'Rang Sey Roshni' From Colour to Light. *Modern Asian Studies*. 38(4), 1003-1005. Retrieved August 4, 2024, from [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231847742\\_Sanjhi\\_'Rang\\_Sey\\_Roshni'\\_From\\_Colour\\_to\\_Light](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231847742_Sanjhi_'Rang_Sey_Roshni'_From_Colour_to_Light)

## RELIGIOUS OFFERING OF SANJHI

In major temple of Vrindavan, the devotees float many earthen lamps or lit diyas on the banks of Yamuna River post evening Aarti. These lamps and diyas are placed on banana leaves. Additionally, Sanjhi scenes are also floated alongside diyas and lamps. The shallow dish or thali, over which the Sanjhi Art is made is immersed into the river very carefully. When the water level in the shallow dish is gradually lower than the river water level, the art began floating over the water. The view of floating Sanjhi along with lamps or diyas seems to be glorious and spectacular.

The offering of this Art is specifically stressed in the “Path of Abundance” or Pushtimarga of the traditions of Vaishnava. This school of Vaishnava denies asceticism a way to God, and rather undertakes the celebration of aesthetic delight. It is of the belief that the material world is created by Lord Krishna and the decoration ensures the sense of fulfilment and joy which ultimately results into surrendering to the grace of Almighty<sup>10</sup>.

## TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS USED IN SANJHI ART

The technique used in making of “Sanjhi paper stencil” seems to be quite simple and easily executable. However, it requires a lot of practice and precision. The initial drawing of the Sanjhi design/pattern is created on the paper. Where more than 1 copy is needed, the papers are clubbed together on every side<sup>11</sup>. The cutting process requires a great level of patience, concentration and practice. The sole tool utilized in this art is a set of scissors, which has long and very fine arms for easy alteration and manipulations. During the process of cutting, the paper is being rotated by the tool for fine and précised cutting. The number of stencils is for any pattern is dependent on some factors such as number of colours to be applied, the number of components in the said pattern (design) and intricacy of the design.

The ultimate picture is made by using stones of various kinds of shades and hues, fresh flower petals, coloured powders, pieces of mirror, thin sheets of bright metal foil. Every stencil is wrapped at the corner and this is being used by the artisans to gently lift up the paper after applying colour. According to a common practice, the Sanjhi is made up of size comprising of nine feet by twelve feet, plastered with cow dung and mud. The shape of this Art can be circular, rectangular, square and octagonal. As per the traditions, creepers and flowers are made at the borders and the core theme is shown at the centre of the Art<sup>12</sup>.

A submerged kind of Sanjhi Art is created by using a shallow dish and coating the inner side of the container with oil. Insoluble powders are used in water for making a Sanjhi on the oil base by way of cutout designs. After lifting the stencil in careful manner, the dish is slowly upturned for removing the excess colour.<sup>13</sup> Thereafter water is poured in the container from sideways without causing hindrance to the colours. The said underwater Sanjhi has distinct appearance. Likewise, floating Sanjhi can also be made in similar manner. The water is poured onto a shallow vessel. As oil has less weight, it floats on the surface and a layer of oil is formed on the water. In a careful manner, the stencils are kept and the colours are filled. By this technique the Sanjhi Art can be made, which is an epitome of spectacular Indian folk Art<sup>14</sup>.

## MOTIFS

The Sanjhi Art encompasses drawing and composing a motif from the Legends of Krishna, cutting a stencil with the help of customized, fine sand small scissors on banana leaf or paper and thereafter using stencil for making the images. The Sanjhi Art of Mathura signifies the celebration of the epics

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<sup>10</sup> Sharma, D. (2005). Sanjhi Ladliji ke mandir ki in Kripalsinh Shekhawat. Jaipur: Sanjhi, Jawahar Kala Kendra.

<sup>11</sup> Sanjhi: The Art of Paper Cutting. Retrieved August 4, 2024 from <http://hubpages.com/art/sanjhi-the-art-of-papercutting>

<sup>12</sup> Singh, A. (2022). Transformation of ‘Sanjhi Art’. International Journal of Home Science. 8(2). 349-350.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Singh, N. Rishi, M. (2009). Indian crafts (Art of paper cutting) a case study. Asian Journal of Home Science. 4(1), 197-200.

of God Krishna. The subject matter relates to the motifs and stories of the legends of the God. The designs and motif which is provided in the traditional Sanjhi are the Vrindavan's scene, which includes Kadamba tree, the river flowing through the temple, the monkey, the cow and the peacock. The themes and imageries such as butter stealing by Nand Gopal, and the Krishna Raas are also being cut in intricate manner. The most intricate form of Sanjhi design have various flowers and creepers showing alongside the borders. The themes and motif further involve the pictures of the deity Sanjha and Sanjhi. Afterwards, the artisans widened the motif to include numerous kinds of Mughal Motifs such as flowers, animals and jali pattern<sup>15</sup>.

As provided in the aforesaid paragraph, the motifs utilized in the Mathura Art are taken from the stories of deities. Few instances of the same are described below-

**(i) Raas Leela**

This motif relates to the Maha Raas or Raas Leela is a form of spiritual dance which is performed by God Krishna along with Radha and gopinis near the bank of Yamuna River during the right of Full Moon (Sharad Poornima)<sup>16</sup>.

**(ii) Kaliya Daman**

The motif of Kaliyan daman is inspired from the Kaliya i.e., a venomous snake which was habituated in Yamuna River. Because of this snake, the water and marine animals were adversely affected and the water became venomous and contaminated.

**(iii) Govardhan Parvat**

In the Govardhan Parvat Sanjhi, the event of Lord Krishna lifting the mountain was depicted to save the Braj people from the Lord Indra's anger. The Brajwasi (people of Braj) followed the request of Lord Krishna who asked them to stop worshipping Lord Indra and for worshipping the Govardhan mountain (Parvat).

## **DISTINCT FEATURES OF SANJHI ART**

The distinction between a Sanjhi Art and other kinds of decorative art from different areas of the nation, such as chita, jothi, rangoli, and alpana, which are also auspicious art created during the time of festivals, is that the picture of Sanjhi is worshipped and deified and whereas the others are not<sup>17</sup>. The simple form of Sanjhi cutouts can be created in less time. However, several years of continuous practice and expertise is essential for cutting the balanced composition of art even without taking assistance of drawing. The larger form of Sanjhi Art could take more than 100 people to create. The artists shall have visual imaginary skills which is well-developed. The master or "Ustads" have a balanced sense and strong neuro-muscular coordination, which is being used to undertake this work to the greatest level of artistry. The younger artisans follow the fundamental traditional principle and technique. However, they have used their innovative minds in this art which reveals that Mathura Art i.e., Sanjhi is flexible in nature.

Every Sanjhi is made for one day and is later on dumped into the Yamuna River. The aesthetic aspect of this art is enhanced by singing of "community devotional song" i.e., Samaja Kirtan in front of the Mathura Art. In present times, the Sanjhis are created only on special events, contrary to the earlier times wherein new Sanjhi is made every day. During ancient era, the artisans were men because the Sanjhis were usually made by the temple's priest on everyday during the evening worship.

Another extraordinary feature of Sanjhi Art lies in its anonymity. This means that no individual can claim authorship over the said Art. This is due to the fact that making this art collective effort is used, and the motive of the artisans is to please the god by creation, instead of acquiring recognition or merit.

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<sup>15</sup> Handmade Paper and Art of Sanjhi. (2023). Retrieved August 6, 2024, from <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/handmade-paper-and-the-art-of-sanjhi-dastkari-haat-samiti/AQXhM-u5KHJpJw?hl=en>

<sup>16</sup> Supra Note at 12.

<sup>17</sup> Dasa, A. (2016). Evening Blossoms, The temple tradition of Sanjhi in Vrindavan. New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Sterling, 28.

## TRANSFORMATION OF SANJHI ART

The Sanjhi Art of Mathura has transformed to a great extent. In the beginning, the Sanjhi Art was in demand merely by local people and visitors who came to the Mathura, specifically they were the member of Pushtimarga sect belonging to the State of Gujarat. Now, the use of this art has expanded<sup>18</sup>. For instance, currently the Sanjhi Art is utilized for creating home décor products and other items like diaries, notebooks, cards, wall hangings and so on. The Mathura Art created on cloth or rice paper could be used to create curtains, lanterns, lampshades and various other household items. Board games such as Checkers and Ludo created with the help of Sanjhi within a glass framed board is famous in the form of collector's product.

Stencils which are currently being used by the children has become quite famous. The pictures of Sanjhi Art have now become more secular- ribbons and balloons on the occasion of birthdays, bells and mistletoe on Christmas Cards and exquisite lattice or *jaali* work pattern on wall hangings. A shift from a conventional motif of the Kishna indulging into Raas with gopinis and infant Nandagopal's stealing is not been inculcated by the modern craftsmen. The essential element of Sanjhi craftsmen i.e., Upasana, Seva and Bhava are no more practiced in the contemporary period. This is because of the reason that for the survival of the any form of art, it should change with the needs and demands of the people and Sanjhi Art is one such kind of art which has transformed<sup>19</sup>.

While making Sanjhi Art with different subjects, the artisans are familiarizing themselves with latest form of aesthetics. The craftsmen are no longer the actual maker because professional and skilled artisans have come with new concepts and ideas which represent every culture and religion. The distancing of the artisans from his culture and belief could lead to decrease in inspiration and artisans may put more stress on the techniques instead of the content. This transformation to a broader and newer will have impact on the market. It has assisted the art to survive unlike other art forms which is no more prevalent in modern India<sup>20</sup>.

The most substantial shift which Sanjhi Art has gone through is from being a single piece of Art made from coloured powders and flowers, used majorly for offering prayers, the stencil used to make the picture/image has currently been transformed into the final product. As the focus is shifting to the stencil cutter from the image creator, the religious and ritualistic importance of Sanjhi Art is lost. The form of suspense revealed through picture in the evenings at the place of worship is slowly diminishing<sup>21</sup>.

## SANJHI: WHETHER THE SANJHI OF MATHURA IS BECOMING ENDANGERED?

Sanjhi Art is considered as endangered Art because in past it was followed in almost all the temples of Mathura but currently merely around three to four temples are practicing the tradition. Although the craft travelled along with the Kirshna temples in the nation and acquired its identification in the adjoining States and cities. However, currently this art is facing challenge because it is taking time to commercialize<sup>22</sup>.

According to a study, it has been found that the Sanjhi is made by the people during Pitra Paksha, which is considered as the inauspicious period under Hindu Mythology. In this season, Hindu people doesn't initiate any new work. The economic condition of braj depended on tourism and agriculture as due to pitra paksha and for keeping themselves involved and busy people created Sanjhi in the temples<sup>23</sup>. The tradition of not beginning any new work during the said occasion is still existing, but

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<sup>18</sup> Sanjhi: Folk Art of Mathura and Vrindavan. Eastern Zonal Culture Centre, Kolkata. Retrieved August 5, 2024, from <https://www.ezcc-india.org/pdf/book/sanjhi.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> Supra note at 12.

<sup>20</sup> Mathura Sanjhi Art. Retrieved August 6, 2024 from <http://mathurasanjhiart.com/>

<sup>21</sup> Sanji (the folk art of Braj). Retrieved August 7, 2024, from <https://sanjhiart.weebly.com/paper-cutting.html>

<sup>22</sup> Jauhari, P. (2020). Sanjhi Art, the Painting with Scissors: An Endangered Artform of India. Retrieved August 7, 2024, from <https://www.rachnakar.com/sanjhi-art-painting-with-scissors/>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

people have found other ways to indulge themselves and they are no more dependent on tourism and agriculture. Rather the People have managed to use the art in commercial manner as mentioned above. Thus, this has adversely impacted this Art and the essential aspect of Sanjhi is becoming blurred<sup>24</sup>.

### RESTORATION MEASURES: WAY AHEAD

For the purpose of restoring the actual Sanjhi Art, several agencies like Braj Foundation, Delhi Craft Council and the Indian Habitat Center have put their efforts. The Braj foundation conducts Sanjhi Art fest annually at Bhram Kund, Vrindavan wherein artists were called upon to exhibit their work in the exhibition. Apart from this, competitions were also being organized. Very recently, Delhi Craft Council while celebrating its golden jubilee year wherein sanjhis were put on exhibition for five days with the title “Sanjhi Revisited”. Likewise, in 2015, the Delhi Council again conducted an exhibition with the name “exploring the possibilities of using Sanjhi in modern interiors”.<sup>25</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Sanjhi Art from Mathura is a traditional form of stencilling Art. It was introduced in 16<sup>th</sup> Century and is known for its ritualistic and mythological implication. This Art is utilized for beautifying the places of worship and depicts the stories and epics of Lord Krishna. It has emerged as a languishing form of craft as there has been a sharp decrease in number of craftsmen in Vrindavan and Mathura. Very less people really identify it because there is lack of popularity and awareness regarding the said Art. The main factor behind such a decline is the low demand for this Art in traditional form. Thus, it can be concluded that Sanjhi Art is an epitome of Indian Folk Art which has transformed to a newer form as per the need of the hour.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Fashioning Paper Into Art: Reviving The Ancient Craft Of Sanjhi. Retrieved August 7, 2024, from <https://businessworld.in/article/fashioning-paper-into-art-reviving-the-ancient-craft-of-sanjhi-123936>

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