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FOLK ART OF MATHURA AND VRINDAVAN





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Sanjhi or *Devasthanakala* is a ritualistic folk art form of *Vrajadham*, linked to the worship of Lord *Krishna*, undoubtedly one of Hinduism's most popular gods.

Stenciling is an art which is believed to have begun with the Chinese and the Egyptians sometime between 2000 and 3000 BC. As trade between China and the Middle East grew, the craft travelled to Western Europe and America and between the twelfth and nineteenth centuries became very popular in Western Europe. People began decorating their homes and places of worship with stenciling. The primary reason for its popularity was in it being inexpensive and comparatively simple to execute. Stenciling became a professional art and artists would be commissioned to do decorative work.

There is no historical evidence about when this craft first came to India. It is widely assumed that travellers from China first brought this expertise to India before the advent of Muslim rule, but it was made popular by the Muslim rulers. Artists from Iran and other Middle Eastern countries were brought in to decorate the walls and doors of palaces, forts, mosques and tombs. Using stencils the artists created colourful geometric designs, some bold and others intricate.

Over time, the art became intimately linked to *Vrajabhoomi*, and the two contiguous towns of Mathura and Vrindavan along the river Yamuna, the homeland of Lord *Krishna*, became the home of *Sanjhi* art. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it was regarded as a highly refined art form practiced by *Brahmin* priests. It continues as a living tradition in the temples of Vrindavan but is nowadays practiced only by a select few. The ritual can be seen in the temples of *Radha-Madanamohana*, *Radharamana* and *Radhavallabha* in Vrindavan and the *Nathdwara* temple in Rajasthan.





In Vrindavan, the practice of *Sanjhi* has evolved through three stages: folk, poetic and temple. In the earliest stage, the folk tradition, young unmarried girls created a new *Sanjhi* design every day during the *Pitr Paksh*, or the dark fortnight of the waning moon, in the month of *Ashwin*, when ancestors are remembered and worshipped, not exactly regarded as a time for festivities. They were created using coloured stones, metal foil, flowers or pieces of mirror on a background of cow dung applied to a wall of their homes. Each day's picture brought alive an event from the life of the folk goddess *Sanjhi* and her husband *Sanjha*. By the nature of their placement, the designs on the walls of the homes were created so that it could be seen by all. Every evening, the day's design, considered to be Goddess *Sanjhi*, was worshipped. A girl who offered prayers with devotion would be blessed with a good husband and many children. On the final day of the fortnight, a particularly grand design called the *Kota* was created. The next stage, the poetic tradition, evolved from the folk tradition. The ritual practised by the unmarried girls of *Vraja* provided the material for the depiction of *Sanjhi* in *Vrajabhasha* poetry. Descriptions of *Radha*, *Krishna* and the *Sakhis* going to the forests, gathering flowers and playing provided the themes for the songs. The descriptions of the pastimes of the divine lovers were based on the folk tradition of worship. In the third stage, the *Sanjhis* moved off the walls, out of the homes, into the temples and down to the floor. The temple tradition in its present form is not very old and it is unlikely that the tradition existed before the seventeenth century.



Intricate stencil patterns depicting scenes from Lord *Krishna*'s life are cut on banana leaf or paper and these stencils are used to create the



Sanjhi. The word *Sanjhi* could be either the corrupted form of the word *Sancha*, which means “a mould that creates exact identical impressions” or it could have originated from the word *Sanjh*, “the twilight time between dusk and darkness” when the *Sanjhi* is traditionally unveiled in the temples. It could also be derived from words like *Sajja*, *Shringar* and *Sajavat*, which all mean “decoration”. It could also be related to *Samaja* or “community” as the creation of an elaborate temple *Sanjhi* required the cooperative effort of several priests. *Sanjhi* art is very much a part of the spirit of *Vrajabhoomi* and Lord *Krishna* an integral part of the world of the *Vrajabasi*.



According to Hindu mythology, *Radha*, Lord *Krishna*’s chosen *gopini*, would decorate the walls of her home with *Sanjhi* art to attract her beloved. She used coloured stones, metal foil and flowers to adorn her freshly plastered cow dung walls. Seeing her, the other *gopinis* of Vrindavan also started beautifying their walls with what is believed to be the rudimentary form of *Sanjhi* art, in a hope of being able to attract *Krishna*’s attention. Though the art of *Sanjhi* is still alive, its origins are lost in antiquity. The celebration involving the creation of *Sanjhis* takes place in autumn, right after the rainy season when the woods are filled with flowers, which is why flowers are used to decorate them. *Sanjhi* designs are made during the final five days of *Pitr Paksha* in the temples of Vrindavan, from the eleventh day of the lunar fortnight (*Ekadasi*) to the no-moon day (*Amavasya*), but at the *Ladililala* temple at Barsana, they are prepared every evening during the fortnight. Barsana is believed to be the home of *Radha*, who with the other *gopinis*, would also observe the folk tradition of depicting *Sanjhi* and her husband on all the fourteen days of *Pitr Paksha*. The *Sanjhis* here depict the different places associated with the different *leelas* of *Krishna*. The *Vedi* or platform on which the *Sanjhi* is made gets



progressively larger over the days of the fortnight. The largest design which depicts Vrindavan, the ultimate place of union of the divine lovers, is made on the no-moon day.

The art of *Sanjhi* involves composing and drawing a motif from the *Krishna* legend, cutting a stencil using small, fine, custom-made scissors on paper or a banana leaf and then using the stencil to create the images. First a line drawing is made on the paper. A second line, parallel to the first, is drawn at a short distance away from the first line. If more than one copy is required the papers or banana leaves are pinned together on all sides and then cut. The bridge areas are left uncut when the stencil is cut. The bridge not only creates the details of the design but also holds the stencil together



in one piece. With practice, an artist becomes proficient in deciding which areas need a wider or narrower bridge. Each craftsperson individualizes the curve on the scissors he uses, to suit his personal requirements. After use, the scissors are wrapped carefully in cloth to protect the tip and as a mark of respect to the tool that creates the *Sanjhi*. It is easy to increase or decrease the size of the drawing as per the requirement by redoing the drawing on a larger or smaller sized paper. The final image is created by using most often coloured powders, and also fresh flower petals, stones of different hues and shades, thin sheets of bright metal foil and pieces of mirror. The more intricate the pattern and the more the number of colours used, the more will be the number of paper cuts required for the design as each colour requires a separate paper cut of its own. Each stencil is folded at the corner tip and the craftsman uses this fold to gently lift up the paper once the colour has been applied through the cutout. The



moment of lifting the *Sanjhi* is crucial and has to be done in a single movement to ensure that the colours are not disturbed.

When a *Sanjhi* is made within the temple precincts, the size of the *Sanjhi* will depend on the occasion, the traditions of the temple and the theme being depicted. A common practice is to build a *vedi* of maximum size nine feet by twelve feet, plastered with mud and cow dung, on which the *Sanjhi* is created. The *Sanjhi* can be octagonal, square, rectangular or circular in shape. Traditionally, the border has flowers and creepers and the main theme is depicted in the centre of the *Sanjhi*.

A submerged *Sanjhi* is made by taking a shallow dish and coating the inside of the vessel with oil. Powders insoluble in water are used to create the *Sanjhi* on this oil base by using the cutout patterns. After the stencil is carefully lifted out, the dish is gently upturned to remove the extra colour. Water is then poured into the dish, from the side, without disturbing the colours. This underwater *Sanjhi* is rather unusual in its appearance. A floating *Sanjhi* can also be made in a somewhat similar manner. To the oil-lined shallow vessel, water is added. The oil being lighter, floats to the surface and forms an oil film on the water. The stencil is placed on it very carefully and the colours are filled in. Though difficult to create, these *Sanjhis* are spectacular.

In the main temple in Vrindavan, on the banks of the river Yamuna, after the evening *Aarti*, devotees float hundreds of lit *diyas* or earthen lamps placed on banana leaves in the river. Along with the *diyas*, *Sanjhi* scenes are also floated. The *thali*, or shallow dish, on which the *Sanjhi* scene is created is very carefully



immersed in the water. As soon as the level of water in the *thali* is slightly lower than the level of the river water, the scene starts



floating on the river. For people standing along the banks, the sight of a floating *Sanjhi* along with the lit *diyas*, is spectacular to say the least.

The offering of *Sanjhi* is particularly emphasized in the *Pushtimarga* or “Path of Abundance” of the *Vaishnava* traditions. This branch of *Vaishnavite* thought rejects asceticism as the way to God, and instead celebrates aesthetic delight. The material world is a creation of *Krishna* and the decorations sustain the sense of joy and fulfilment that leads to complete surrender to the Almighty’s grace.

The artwork of *Sanjhi* is used to decorate temples, *Nat-Mandirs* and *Kirtan Sabhas*. *Sanjhis* are seen in their full splendour during the *Vaishnava* festivals of *Raas*, *Holi*, *Janmashtami* and *Jhulan*. In



Vrajabhoomi, just before *Dussehra*, pilgrims undertake a *parikrama* or “pilgrimage” around the holy land, for a period of forty-five days. This is an important event of the *Vraj* calendar, when the devotees walk two hundred and fifty kilometres through *Vrajabhoomi* around Mathura and visit all the places associated with Lord *Krishna*’s life. *Sanjhis* are created depicting *jhankis* or episodes from the *Krishna* legend. Location-specific *Sanjhis* adorn the places along the *parikrama*. For instance, at Govardhan, the *Sanjhis* bring alive the story of *Krishna* lifting the mountain on his finger to save the people from torrential rain. In Barsana, the *Sanjhi* depicts *Krishna* playing *Holi* with *Radha* and the *gopinis*. Every evening a new *Sanjhi* is created at the spot where the pilgrims rest. *Sanjhis* of flowers are made for *manoratha*, or “the desire of a devotee to please *Krishna*”. The



doorway of the *Srinathji* temple in Nathdwara in Rajasthan is decorated with the leaves of the auspicious plantain tree and *Sanjhis* depicting each of the places being visited by the pilgrims in the course of their annual pilgrimage through *Vrajabhoomi*, are made daily. So the devotee at Nathdwara who is unable to make the actual pilgrimage, can have the feeling of doing so by walking around the *Sanjhi* and thereby attaining the



merit of the pilgrimage. Thus, the *Sanjhis* of Nathdwara are inextricably linked to those of Mathura and Vrindavan and *Vrajabhoomi*.

The difference between a *Sanjhi* and other decorative art from the other parts of the country, such as *alpana*, *rangoli*, *jothi* and *chita*, which are also auspicious designs made during festivities, is that a *Sanjhi* image is deified and worshipped while the others are not. The simpler *Sanjhi* cutouts are made in a very short time, but it requires several years of sustained practice to perfect the skill of cutting the balanced compositions without the help of drawings. Larger *Sanjhis* can sometimes take over a hundred man-hours to create. The artisans must have a well-developed visual imagery to become skilled craftspersons. The *Ustads* or “masters” have, through their strong neuromuscular coordination and sense of balance, uplifted this work to the highest level of artistry. Younger artists adhere principally to the basic traditional technique but have brought in innovations proving that this art is also flexible like water colour, oil or tempera.

Each *Sanjhi* is created for just one day and the aesthetic experience of



its revelation in the evening is further heightened by the singing of *samaja kirtan* or “community devotional songs” in front of the *Sanjhi*. After the worship of the *Sanjhi*, it is effaced, so that a new image can be created for the following day’s worship. The material used for making the *Sanjhi* is disposed of in the river Yamuna. Nowadays, *Sanjhis* are made only on special occasions, unlike in the past when a new *Sanjhi* would be created every day. Traditionally, the artists were men as the priests of the temple created the *Sanjhis* for the evening worship every day. In the main temple in Vrindavan at least eight priests were involved in the making of the evening *Sanjhi*.

Lord *Krishna* is regarded as an avatar or incarnation of Lord *Vishnu*. The making of a *Sanjhi* is an expression of love for *Krishna* and this devotion gives the image its life and meaning. A *Sanjhi* artist begins work after offering prayers to his guru or “teacher”, his tools and the gods. Creating a *Sanjhi* is considered by the devotee to be a dedicated service to Lord *Krishna* – the offering lying more in the process of creation than in its final form. Another distinctive feature of a *Sanjhi* offering is in its anonymity, where no one actually claims authorship of the work. As the effort is collective, the satisfaction of the individual members lies in pleasing the god through the creation, rather than looking for individual merit and recognition. Though the





traditional artists used only paper or banana leaf to make the stencils, younger craftsmen have started using plastic, which is light, pliable, washable, re-usable and easy to cut. Several new designs could be created with plastic which was not possible with paper or banana leaf.

Initially, *Sanjhis* were in demand only locally and by visitors to Mathura, particularly members of the *Pushtimarga* sect from Gujarat. *Sanjhi* art has now expanded its base and is used for making home décor items and other products such as wall hangings, cards, notebooks, diaries, etc.

Sanjhis made on rice paper or cloth can be used to make lampshades, lanterns, curtains and many other household products. Board games like Ludo and Checkers made with a *Sanjhi* under a framed glass board is popular as a collector's item. Stencils designed to be used by children for craftwork have also become very popular. The images have become more secular – mistletoe and bells on Christmas cards, balloons



and ribbons on birthday cards and an intricate *jaali* or lattice work design on wall hangings. Moving away from the traditional motifs of the infant *Nandgopal*'s stealing butter or *Krishna* performing *Raas* with the *gopinis* has distanced the images from the lives and ethos of the craftsmen. *Bhava*, *Seva* and *Upasana*, which were an integral part of the *Sanjhi* craftsman, who would in most instances be a *Vrajabasi*, has to a certain extent been lost with the expansion of the base of the craft, and along with it there has been a certain loss in the artistic sensibility and understanding of the content of the art. In order to survive, all art forms have to move with the times and the changing demands and *Sanjhi* is no exception. While creating *Sanjhis* with alien



subjects the craftsmen are familiarizing themselves with new aesthetics. The craftsman is no longer the main creator as professional designers have moved in with new ideas and concepts which embrace all religions and cultures. The distancing of the craftsman from his beliefs and culture may result in a reduction in inspiration and the craftsman may lay more emphasis on technique rather than on content. This shift to newer and wider influences and markets will ensure that the art survives and does not go into oblivion like many other folk art forms of the country.

The most major transformation that *Sanjhi* Art has undergone is from being a piece of art produced with flowers and coloured powders, used mainly for temple worship, the stencil used to create the image has become the final product. With the focus shifting from the image maker to the stencil cutter, the ritualistic and religious significance of *Sanjhi* is lost. The suspense of revealing the image in the evenings in the temples is gradually dying.







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