

The Journey of Braj Sanjhi: From Stencils to Chords

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Abstract: Sanjhi is a distinctive ritual and artistic tradition of the Braj region that integrates visual art, literature, music as devotional practice. Originating from folk customs associated with unmarried girls during Pitra Paksha and later refined within the Vaishnava temple tradition (includes variation as jal sanjhi, pushp sanjhi, rang sanjhi and rhythmic devotional poetry), Sanjhi evolved into a sophisticated form of stencil-based devotional art centered on the divine pastimes of Radha and Krishna. This paper look into the historical development, cultural significance, and artistic diversity of Braj Sanjhi through its folk and temple manifestations. Drawing upon manuscripts, literary sources, field interviews, and temple traditions, the study explores the various forms of Sanjhi, including Gobar Sanjhi, Pushp Sanjhi, Rang Sanjhi, and Jal Sanjhi. It further highlights the close relationship between Sanjhi and Braj Bhasha literature, and Samaj Gayan (the musical representation of sanjhi), demonstrating how the tradition functions as a synthesis of visual and performing arts. The paper also includes the geographical spread of Sanjhi beyond Braj and discusses contemporary challenges posed by modernization and commercialization. This paper underscores its importance as a living expression of Braj's religious, artistic, and cultural identity.

Keywords: Sanjhi, Stencil Art, Braj, Lord Krishna, Indian Folk Art, Ritual Art, Devotional Music.

1. Introduction: *Sanjhi* is an ancient and historic craft of stencilling through paper cutting, which originated in the Braj region of Uttar Pradesh, particularly in the towns of Mathura and Vrindavan. The term '*Sanjhi*' is derived from the Hindi word 'Sandhya', meaning dusk or evening, the time when the art is traditionally prepared and unveiled. It is said that this art form is deeply intertwined with the worship of Lord Radha Krishna, drawing its primary inspiration from their divine '*Leelas*' or pastimes. Historically, *Sanjhi* exists in two main traditions: the folk tradition and the temple tradition. The folk art, primarily practised by young unmarried girls, involves creating images from cow dung decorated with flowers and other natural materials. This practice was believed to help them find a suitable husband. Over time, particularly during the Bhakti movement of the 15th and 16th centuries, this rural custom was adopted and transformed by Vaishnava temples into a highly refined and sophisticated art form. The art's survival now hinges on its adaptation into contemporary contexts, such as home décor

(Rangoli Stencils for Diwali etc.), fashion accessories, and other commercial products, a transformation that shifts the focus from the ephemeral religious image to the paper stencil as the final artwork.

Importance and Uniqueness of Braj Sanjhi: The *Sanjhi* festival of the Braj region serves as a medium to understand this uniqueness. The extraordinary nature of the *Sanjhi* festival, held in the Braj region during *Pitra Paksha* (the fortnight dedicated to ancestors), has always captivated people. The journey of Braj *Sanjhi* encompasses a wide array of forms.

During *Pitra Paksha*, the groves and lanes of Braj resonate with rare *Sanjhi* depictions and melodious musical strains called *Samaj Gayan* in the temples of Vrindavan. The diverse and rare nature of these *Sanjhi* artworks, combined with the soul-stirring emotions of the accompanying music, offers a glimpse into the traditional heritage of festive Braj—a legacy preserved for generations by local *Sadhak-Acharyas* (devotee-preceptors) and *Gopi-Gwalas* (cowherd maidens and lads) or can be called localities in both folk and temple contexts.

The Hindu scriptures show *Sanjhi* in the Braj region dates back to the era of Lord Krishna. Legend has it that during the Gaudhuli hour (twilight), as Krishna returned from grazing cattle with his band of cowherd companions, Radha—the daughter of Vrishabhanu—would welcome him along with her friends by arranging various flowers on the ground; a sight that filled all the cowherds with joy.

An episode described in the *Shiva Purana*, concerning Sandhya the mind-born daughter of Brahma, offers yet another interpretation of the *Sanjhi* tradition. Over time, this practice came to be known as *Sanjhi*. A more refined version of this art form can still be witnessed in the temples of Braj today.

During *Pitra-Paksha*, geometric and ornamental *Sanjhi* designs are created in these temples using dry colors, artists sprinkle the pigments with their fingers onto octagonal clay bases, often employing a fine cotton mesh cloth to aid the process. This tradition is a testament to the selfless devotion of the Vaishnava devotees, not only have their innovative experiments lent the art form a captivating aesthetic, but the vast body of *Braj Bhasha* literature composed by local devotees and practitioners over various eras with *Sanjhi* at the core eloquently conveys the tradition's significance and diversity. The importance of *Sanjhi* in Braj is beautifully encapsulated in this expression of devotion by the *Rasik* devotee Hita Vrindavan Das Ji:

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(One attains the fruits of one's heart's desire by performing this service; listen, O daughter of Vrishabhanu- this *Sanjhi* is truly a divine deity.)

Tradition of Sanjhi: *Sanjhi* tradition has acquired significant diversity over time, both in literary and artistic terms. It is a testament to the selfless devotion of the Vaishnava devotees associated with the *Sanjhi* tradition that, while their innovative experiments lent the art form an alluring aesthetic, local devotees and practitioners also nurtured it across different eras; the vast body of literature associated with it serves to highlight the profound impact of this tradition within the Braj region.

The *Sanjhi* tradition in the temples of Braj possesses a unique distinction: artists create lifelike scenes using only small bundles of cotton cloth to sprinkle dry pigments with precise finger movements. The *Sanjhi* art created in these temples during *Pirta Paksha* period is a sight to behold. While geometric and ornamental *Sanjhi* designs are crafted using dry pigments on octagonal clay bases, often adorned with flowers and leaves. These venues also host *Jal-Sanjhi* (water-based *Sanjhi*) events. In these, experts apply dry pigments underwater in such a way that the colors do not dissolve despite the water covering them, conversely, captivating scenes depicting divine *Leelas* (Radha and Krishna) are also created on the water's surface using dry pigments, leaving onlookers spellbound. The creation of *Sanjhi* in temples typically begins with *Pushp-Sanjhi* (floral *Sanjhi*), where various flowers

and leaves are used to arrange central images depicting the *Leelas* of Radha and Krishna. Following the floral *Sanjhi*, *Rang-Sanjhi* (pigment-based *Sanjhi*) events commence, featuring teams of traditional expert artisans who showcase their skills using specialized techniques and terminology such as *Kainda*, *Dabak*, *Soot*, *Pacheli*, *Dabi-Dabi*, *Haud*, *Galta*, and *Khakau*.

Sanjhi is a ritual observed in the Braj region during *Pitra Paksha* (the fortnight dedicated to ancestors), and its influence runs deep and diverse within the local cultural landscape. A unique characteristic of Braj culture is that the tradition has progressively deepened and flourished through the harmonious blend of both folk and temple-based practices. The '*Sanjhi*' of Braj holds such a unique appeal that not only Indian but also foreign scholars have conducted significant research on this subject, illustrating the widespread reach associated with this festival.

The rich tradition of singing and the extensive body of Braj Bhasha literature created around this art form over the past five centuries, documented in manuscripts, provide a solid foundation for this tradition. Evidence of this can be found in the manuscripts housed in the archives of the Vrindavan Research Institute and in some temples too as their cult's sacred scripture. The significance of this tradition is also evident in the *Gobar-Sanjhi* (cow-dung art) created in the rural areas of Braj, for sixteen days, unmarried girls create these diverse artistic forms on the walls. Just as Braj possesses a distinct traditional religious, literary, and cultural history, a long-standing tradition of fine arts is also evident across the Braj region. It is for this reason that the fame of this Braj tradition. By virtue of these unique characteristics, the *Sanjhi* tradition of Braj is fully capable of showcasing the essence of India's celebratory culture- a culture that influences the entire world today. Blending the aesthetics of literature, music, and art, the sweetness of this tradition continues to delight the human spirit every year during *Pitra Paksha*. This Braj *Sanjhi* can be understood as below-

1. *Sanjhi* in the local folk tradition
2. *Sanjhi* in the temple tradition

'Sanjhi' (Cow-dung Art) in the Folk Tradition of Braj

A unique feature of Braj culture is that the '*Sanjhi*' festival has been celebrated through both folk and temple-based rituals. This art form of Braj has established a unique identity on the international stage. Beyond the temple traditions, the '*Sanjhi*' art created using cow dung is a vital aspect of the local festival, during the fortnight of *Pitra Paksha* (the period of honoring ancestors), unmarried girls create various traditional symbolic patterns, which are finally immersed in the Yamuna river or a sacred kund (water tank). Evidence of unmarried girls playing '*Sanjhi*' in Braj for these days can be found in traditional texts:

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 (संजिहो संजिहो भो भो, संजिहो भो संजिहो भो भो संजिहो भो. भो. 1838, संजिहो 148-151)

"They played thus for sixteen days; day by day, the love and joy grew."

"The games played each day were new; cherished by everyone."

"They celebrated the festival, gathering at the banks of Bhaan Sarovar."

"Auspicious songs are sung, and Shri Radha makes *Sanjhi*."

Since ancient times, the folk community has expressed its emotions and thoughts through varied symbols. Just as an entire tree is contained within a single seed, the oral traditions and traditional beliefs of ancient cultures reside within these symbols, when these symbols evolve into narratives,

folklore is formed. Depictions of trees, plants, the sun, the moon, birds, and deities in the *Sanjhi* art form illustrate this theological foundation elements that have likely become integral to contemporary folk oral traditions.

However, regarding the observance of *Sanjhi* in the Braj region reference is made to a folk belief, documented in remarkably similar ways by various scholars studying the '*Sanjhi*' tradition. Which depicts *Sanjhi* as a woman who returns to her parental home from her in-laws' house during the *Pitra Paksha*. After staying at her parental home for a short while, she begins to pine for her husband. Eventually, her husband arrives to take her back. He stays for a few days and then escorts *Sanjhi* away on the day of Dussehra. Centered around this narrative, unmarried girls in the rural regions of Braj create fresh images of *Sanjhi* on the walls using cow dung daily throughout *Pirta Paksha*, decorating them with flowers, cowrie shells, tikli (bindis), roli (vermilion), and various colors.

According to this tradition, during the *Sanjhi* festival-

- On first dayspecific motifs such as the '*Tiwari*' (a decorative arched gateway) are drawn alongside the image of *Sanjhi*.
- Second to Fifth day day of the festival, the number of *Tiwari* arches created varies ranging from a single *Tiwari* to two, three, and four *Tiwari*, symbolizing the arrangements made for *Sanjhi*'s (daughter) reception and stay. The increasing number of arches reflects the growing reverence and enthusiasm shown towards her.
- On the sixth day, the betel leaf, betel nut and hand fan figure is crafted near *Sanjhi*.
- On the seventh day, offerings of sweets are made.
- On the eighth day the *Swastik* symbol,
- Ninth day an eight-petaled flower or a chaupad (board game) design is created.
- On the tenth, a boat is prepared for a nauka-vihar (boat excursion).
- The eleventh day, 10 *paan* (betel leaves) are created.
- On the twelfth day, 21 *singhara* (water chestnut) shapes are made as an offering to *Sanjhi*.
- On the thirteenth day, an *odhani* (Dupatta/ long scarf/ Shawl) is created.
- On the fourteenth day, a ladder or a date palm tree is depicted, featuring *Sanjhi* climbing upwards, which signifies the state of separation from Sanjha (*Sanjhi*'s husband).
- On the fifteenth day, a lame Brahmin and a crow are drawn, according to folk belief, this heralds the arrival of a guest.
- On the sixteenth day, a *kot* (enclosure or palace scene) is created to depict the reunion of *Sanjhi* and her husband (Sanjha) within this, various figures such as *Sanjhi*, musicians, ornaments, the face of Lord Ganesha, a peacock, a date palm tree, a *Gujariya* (milkmaid), a gardener, and a Brahmin, are crafted using cow dung. This event is far grander and more captivating than the daily *Sanjhi* rituals. It is a tradition deeply cherished by unmarried girls, who participate in it every year with great enthusiasm prior to their marriage.

The concluding ceremony (*Udyapan*) of the *Sanjhi* observance takes place during the first year of marriage, as part of this, the newlywed woman worships the *Sanjhi* image throughout the night and performs the worship of the Kot (fortress) the following day.

A survey conducted across the entire Braj region reveals a different picture, indicating the existence of an aspect of the traditional *Sanjhi* narrative that has remained unexplored, an aspect evidenced by symbols that have not yet been fully integrated into the established folk narrative. Although a narrative based on *Sanjhi* symbols already exists in Braj's folk tradition, the survey uncovered additional symbols such as *Dhal-wali Amma*, *Sota Baba*, *Ganesh-mukh*, *Girirajdharana*, depictions of Vrindavan, Diyas, lotuses, tridents, the om symbol, bows and arrows, that clearly play a

role in the narrative, yet need to be explored. These symbols hold special significance in regional folk traditions.

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Credit: inbrindavan.com

2



Credit: inditales.com

Sanjhi in the temple tradition

The temple-based tradition, in particular, has long captivated people with its unique aesthetic appeal and holds a significant place in the region's cultural heritage. Over time, the creative endeavors of devotees in the Braj region have nurtured various art forms, these have gradually evolved, attaining a refined elegance that endures to this day. Whether it is the creation of *Sanjhi*, the tradition of *Vani-lekhan* (devotional songwriting), festivals, the *Phool Bangla* (floral shrine) displays, or *Samaj-gayan* (congregational devotional singing), the essence of devotion and the distinct spirit of Braj are vividly reflected in all of them. Having evolved from simple, spontaneous expressions of faith, these traditions now represent Indian culture on a global stage. While the narrative roots of the temple-based *Sanjhi* tradition date back to the Lord Krishna era, it truly assumed its distinctive form during the 16th century. Over time, the temples of Braj became prominent centers where devotees and artists nurtured and refined this art form. Due to its unique appeal, this tradition of Braj established a foothold in distant regions, gaining widespread appreciation. Even today, the vibrant *Sanjhi* festivities can be witnessed in temples associated with the Radhaballabh Sampraday in Bundelkhand. Similarly, the expansion of this Braj tradition is evident in various parts of Rajasthan, such as Kota, Jaipur, and Nathdwara. In essence, the diverse sects and traditions of Braj have played a pivotal role in preserving and enriching this art form.

The temple tradition of the Braj region has evolved uniquely across different eras, resulting in the *Sanjhi* festival manifesting in various forms. The distinctive diversity of this *Sanjhi* tradition within Braj's temples can be understood through the following aspects:

1. *Pushp Sanjhi* (Flower *Sanjhi*)
2. *Rang Sanjhi* (Color *Sanjhi*)
3. *Jal Sanjhi* (Water *Sanjhi*)

Pushp Sanjhi (Flower Sanjhi): The origin of the tradition of *Pushp Sanjhi* is mainly related to the pastime of Radha-Krishna, in which the path of Lord Krishna, who was returning from his cowherd friends, was decorated with various types of flowers by the goddess Radha. Watching this Lord Krishna and his friends become so happy. In fact, the practice of *Pushp Sanjhi* is the beginning of temple *Sanjhi*, during times it adapted many changes. This *Pushp Sanjhi* is still in practice in a beautiful and artistic way. To enhance the artistic aspect of the festival, artists associated with the *Sanjhi* tradition create *Sanjhi* using various types of structures (Yogapeeth, octagonal wooden platform, square, circular, or cow dung-based platforms). In the temples of Vrindavan, there is a tradition of preparing a flower *Sanjhi* as the first stage of the *Sanjhi* festival. Artistic *Sanjhi* of various shapes and sizes are created. Even today, various types of flowers *Sanjhi* are created in the early days of *Sanjhi* in Barsana, Vrindavan, Kamban, and other traditional places in Braj.

The layout for the *Pushp Sanjhi* is created using various shapes, sometimes a lotus or a circular or square frame. Since the central theme revolves around *Leelas* (divine plays of Lord Krishna), the *Pushp Sanjhi* unlike the version made with dry colored powders, features pictorial depictions of these *Leelas*. These scenes are crafted in accordance with the sect's established traditions, with prominent themes including *Maharaas*, *Manasarovar*, and *Sevakunj*. Creating a *Pushp Sanjhi* requires preliminary preparations; while some flowers and materials are purchased from the market, such as grass clippings and various blossoms and foliage are gathered from gardens. Subsequently, petals are separated from flowers like Roses and *Genda*, while other flowers are kept intact in separate baskets. Meanwhile, leaves from Mango, *Morchali* or Ashoka trees are folded and strung together using a needle and thread to form garlands, which serve as borders along the edges of the designated frame.



Credit: shrimathuraji.com

Rang Sanjhi (Color Sanjhi): The *Rang Sanjhi* created in Barsana, Dauji (Baldev ji), Kamban, Gokul, and Vrindavan, among other places in the Braj region, have attracted people since the beginning. In true sense, the *Rang Sanjhi* of Braj have crossed many stages of magical attraction in its development journey in different periods. While in many temples of Vrindavan the base for creating *Sanjhi* is prepared by compacting and smoothing wet clay, in Barsana, *Sanjhi* is painted on dry soil. While the artwork in Vrindavan's temples is based on the worship of the Divine Couple as described in traditional devotional literature, the *Sanjhi* art at the Shri Ji Temple in Barsana reflects a tradition of depicting the sacred sites associated with the divine pastimes of Braj. It was the unique attraction of the beautiful *Sanjhi* tradition of Braj that at one time its influence reached Rajasthan and other parts of India.

The celebration of '*Sanjhi*' can be observed in various temples across locations such as Karauli, Jaipur, and Shrinathdwara in Rajasthan, as well as Guna and Datia in Madhya Pradesh. Regarding the '*Rang Sanjhi*' (colored *Sanjhi*) festival organized in the temples of the Braj region during this period, the technique concerning the surface (base) used for the artwork can be understood as follows:

Surfaces (Bases) for Rang *Sanjhi*- Square, Octagonal, Circular, Star-shaped wooden platform. It has many components or terminology like- *Haud* (the place on which *Sanjhi* is to be made), *Kenda* (measurement scale can be made of stick, paper etc), *Pacheli* (the order design), *Khatbunai* (blank colored space), *Daab-Dabi* (stencil technique), *Chas* (dark color filling near vine design), *Galta* (the place showing height of *Sanjhi*).

Daab-Dabi technique is the authentic technique of *Sanjhi* in which many stencils are used to create single symbol, image, icon or design to show the layering or to make *Sanjhi* more realistic. But in present time this technique is nearly extinct state as single stencil is in practice now to create color *Sanjhi*.



Jal Sanjhi (Water Sanjhi): Jal *Sanjhi* is also practiced here. Over time, the artistic beauty of this tradition which rooted in devotion has steadily grown. These artist-devotees, immersed in selfless devotion to the Lord, introduced such diverse innovations that the tradition's popularity has continuously soared. According to folklore, this art originated when Radha observed Krishna's reflection in a pond and outlined the image with flowers. It is made on the surface of water and also under the water both with the help of stencils, which make it stand out from other *Sanjhis*. Dry colours are used in such way which are not soluble in water and float on the surface. While under water *Sanjhi* is made at the bottom of the shallow vessel with dry color and specific technique, then water is poured in such manner not to disturb the colors of the bottom. Artists have honed and perfected it through generations of dedicated practice. According to experts associated with the art form, creating these *Sanjhi* designs involves navigating several meticulous stages. Art specialists note that the techniques for creating *Sanjhi* on the water's surface differ from those used to create it underwater.



The Chord (Musical presentation of *Sanjhi*): The *Sanjhi* ritual is not merely a visual experience, it is a synthesis of art forms. The unveiling of the *Sanjhi* design in the temples is accompanied by musical performances and the singing of *samaja kirtan* (community devotional songs). These songs, often from a seasonal repertoire, are thematically centered on the rural customs of worship, describing Radha and her companions' gathering flowers and creating the designs. The visual depiction in the *Sanjhi* provides scope for singers to perform verses related to the specific '*leela*' being portrayed, enhancing the aesthetic and emotional experience. This combination of the visual stencil work with the aural "chords" of devotional music is what gives the *Sanjhi* tradition its unique spiritual power. Many of the literary works on *Sanjhi* can be seen as manuscripts preserved by individual sect's temple and research institute and some are in print form. This tradition is mainly seen from 16th century along with the development of various vaishnava sects in Vrindavan, when the present day Vrindavan took shape. Thus, the *Sanjhi* art covered a long journey from its folk tradition to temple tradition and in literary tradition. Some of the examples of *Sanjhi* rhythmic literary work are:

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(In Folk Tradition)

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(By Surdas ji)

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(By Goswami Hariraya)

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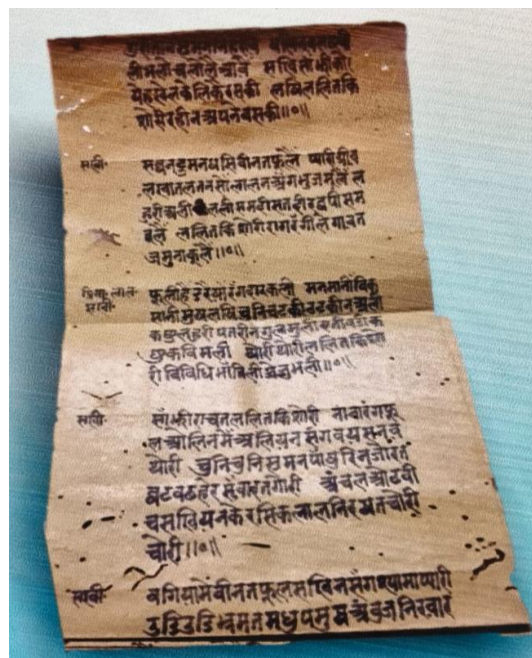
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(By Nagridas ji)

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(By Shri Hita Vrindavan Das ji)



Credit: Vrindavan Research Institute, Vrindavan

Conclusion: One of the Braj region's most notable cultural manifestations is the Sanjhi tradition, which embodies a harmonic blend of literature, music, visual art, and devotion. Sanjhi, which has its roots in folk traditions and has been enhanced by the devotional movements of medieval Vaishnavism, has changed over the ages without losing its spiritual core. The custom is a reflection of the dynamic interplay between rural and temple cultures, where basic ritualistic acts evolved into extremely complex artistic forms over time. The study shows that Sanjhi is a multifaceted cultural phenomenon rather than just decorative art. Its many forms: Gobar Sanjhi, Pushp Sanjhi, Rang Sanjhi, and Jal Sanjhi, showcase the Braj people's inventiveness and spiritual dedication. The complementary legacy of Samaj Gayan and Sanjhi literature, which turns the visual artwork into a comprehensive aesthetic and spiritual experience, is equally significant. The rich historical roots of this tradition are demonstrated by the preservation of documents, devotional melodies, and artistic methods in temples and academic institutions.

Sanjhi's cultural significance and adaptability are further demonstrated by its growth outside of Braj to areas like Rajasthan and Bundelkhand. However, the custom is confronted with serious obstacles in the modern day. Sanjhi's original ceremonial setting has changed due to urbanization, shifting lifestyles, dwindling involvement in traditional rites, and the commercialization of Sanjhi as a decorative craft. Conventional methods, like the Daab-Dabi stencil approach, are becoming less used and run the risk of being forgotten. Because to the commitment of artists, temple communities,

academics, and cultural institutions and Govt., Sanjhi has managed to endure despite these obstacles. There is optimism for its continued significance because of its capacity to adjust to shifting conditions while maintaining its devotional core. To preserve this distinctive custom for future generations, ongoing recording, scholarly investigation, community involvement, and cultural conservation programs are crucial. In the end, Sanjhi is a vivid representation of Braj's ongoing cultural legacy, illustrating the long-lasting connection between art, religion, and communal memory in Indian society.

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