

Sanjhi: Stylistic Aspects and Scope for Employment

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Abstract

Sanjhi, a traditional art form primarily found in North India, encompasses a rich tapestry of stylistic, ritualistic, and symbolic dimensions. The art form comprises both the broader creative expression of Sanjhi and the more culturally embedded 'Haryanvi' Sanjhi, deeply rooted in rituals, religious practices, and folklore. This paper delves into the stylistic aspects and the nuanced employment opportunities within the realm of Sanjhi art, highlighting its cultural significance and the potential for economic viability. Additionally, it explores the intricate preparation methods and the symbolism embedded in the craft, shedding light on the deeper meanings and narratives conveyed through this art form. Furthermore, the study investigates the potential scope for employment within the field of Sanjhi and addresses the crucial need for its preservation in the wake of modernization, recognizing the importance of safeguarding this heritage for future generations.

Keywords: Sanjhi, Employment, Symbolism, Stylistic Analysis

1. Introduction

Sanjhi is a religious festival-cum-folk art which dates back to many centuries. It is practised mainly in the regions of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana. Sanjhi has two forms, one of rural custom and the other of tradition taken up and performed by Vaishnava temples, which provides an insight that the image of Sanjhi is integral in not just Hinduism but Vaishnavism as well.

Created by young and unmarried girls as a rural custom, Sanjhi represents the image of a goddess, worshipped with a belief of getting suitable husbands. The simplicity and the raw character of Sanjhi is reflected through the use of cow dung and flowers to create it. While this rural custom is practised and celebrated in the regions of Uttar Pradesh (mainly Vraja), Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab and Haryana, the other form of Sanjhi, i.e., the highly refined temple tradition is observed mainly in the northwestern region of Vraja, in Uttar Pradesh. It is created and performed by highly skilled priests accustomed to the temple tradition using flowers and similar natural elements. Sanjhi here, is representative of the image of Lord Krishna and Radha placed in the centre of an eight-petalled lotus design in accordance to the Vaishnava mythology.



Fig. 1. Sanjhi made on a mud wall. Rohtak, Haryana. 2023

The name 'Sanjhi' has been taken from the word 'Sandhya', which means dusk or evening, which is significant of the auspicious time of evening reserved for worship and veneration of the image and also to the complexion of Lord Krishna – dusky, dark and evening like. Sanjhi, similar to other indigenous arts of India, involves a spiritual approach.

2. 'Haryanvi' Sanjhi: Ritual, Religion and Folklore

Description of Sanjhi portrays it as a representation of the Great Goddess Hoi, where the ceremonies celebrate the cosmic sacraments. The image of the goddess is depicted as a square diagram representing the cosmos, sometimes assimilated into the shape of a human body or a house. In the case of Sanjhi, the Great Goddess takes the form of triangles adorned with various clay discs, forming a complex and diverse visual structure (Kramrisch, 1968) [9].

The religious festival-cum-folk is created and celebrated during Bhadrapada and Ashwin days, significant for Pitra-Paksha, the ritual of honouring the deceased relatives and Navratri, the celebration and worship of the Hindu goddesses. In Haryana, Sanjhi is also known as KalKalwali which is linked to the Devuthni Gya, meaning waking up the sleeping gods by performing certain rituals and activities like Thali-Thapthapana (gently tapping a platter of steel to create a sound or a noise). It signifies the commencement of the auspicious dates and periods for marital ceremonies. The Goddess Sanjhi concerns primarily the

young daughters, to whom Sanjhi is seen as a friend and the ritual of Geet Gana, which is singing different songs to appease the goddess and their significance holds a special place here.

The ceremonial activities involve invoking Sanjhi's presence during the nine nights of Navratri by worshipping and on the eighth night, an image of her brother is added, who brings offerings to the Goddess. The activity of creating the image is accompanied by the tradition of singing songs to appease the goddess, primarily the young girls to whom she is seen as a friend. On the morning of Dussehra or Vijayadashmi, the deity is symbolically 'fed' and then removed from the wall, immersing her body in running water while preserving her face. Girls carry, singing songs, the face to the closest pond where it is submerged after being placed in a perforated earthen pot with lit earthen lamps inside. This whole procession is led by men, who smash and break the pots with sticks. This marks the Vidai of Sanjhi.

The representations of Sanjhi, to an extent, resemble Durga, Uma, and Katyayani since the Sanjhi celebration concludes with the immersion of the goddess's image in the water, on the day of Dussehra, just like Durga Puja.

3. Preparation of Sanjhi and its Symbolism

The images and decorative elements that are made on the walls are mostly made of cow dung which contains uric acid, which then mixed with clay acts as a cleansing agent for the kutchha houses and purifies the atmosphere. There is plenty of water in ponds surrounding the settlements around the villages, and in the fields after the monsoon, the clay from it is used to create Sanjhi.

The technique for creating Sanjhi images involves meticulous preparation and traditional methods. A fresh coating of mud is applied to the outer wall of the house (See Fig. 1). To form the face, hands and feet of the goddess numerous star-shaped discs are made with clay, and are preserved and dried beforehand. These are then stuck to fill the entire body of Sanjhi and the image then formed is triangular in shape. Cow dung here serves as an adhesive. A small figure of the goddess's brother is also made and put up beside the Sanjhi's image (See Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Sanjhi with her brother. Rohtak, Haryana. 2023

All the elements are coated with a base colour, i.e., white, in order to enhance the brightness of the colours applied thereafter. The colour scheme used is mostly earthy and comprises tones of green, red, yellow and brown, with some specs of blue. Back in the days, natural items like geru, turmeric, henna and soot were used to make natural pigments. The base colour, white, was obtained from rice. As the time progressed, the use of readymade colours likely made the process more convenient for decorating the image of the goddess Sanjhi. The shift from natural to synthetic materials often occurs as technology and resources evolve (See Fig. 4).



Fig. 3. Objects made from clay to supplement Sanjhi. Rohtak, Haryana. 2023



Fig. 4. Ongoing process of making Sanjhi in a competition. Rohtak, Haryana. 2023.



Fig. 5. Women making Sanjhi in a competition. Rohtak, Haryana. 2023

Forms of Sun and Moon can be seen around the head of Sanjhi which seem to be indicative of cosmic balance of opposites, like light and dark. Auspicious symbols like the Swastika and Om are also included. Young girls also inscribe their names on the deity's image sometimes. Sanjhi is always seen portraying Abhaya mudra which is identical to the mother goddesses of ancient times. Peacocks are commonly represented in Sanjhi, more so, as a stylized peacock feather on the head, resembling the 'tope' motif of the seven figures on the Mohenjo Daro clay seals (See Fig. 6). The peacock motif is significant in many cultures, representing beauty, grace, and spirituality. This connection could imply a historical or cultural link between these symbols, but further context or research might be necessary to draw specific conclusions.



Fig. 6. Seal depicting seven mother goddesses. Mohenjodaro. 2500 BCE

The intricate and detailed thematic image of Sanjhi often incorporates various elements like jewellery pieces such as bracelets, necklaces, and bangles, along with objects like combs and mirrors, her face is decorated and enhanced with Sringar, adding to the richness and beauty of the overall design. It's fascinating how the Sanjhi Mata is adorned in locally inspired attire, reflecting the traditional approach.

The clothing of the goddess seems to be a kurta or a choli paired with a daman or a lehenga along with a dupatta. It is often observed that the face of Sanjhi is covered with a veil and it is usually of red colour. The use of this veil to cover Sanjhi's face reflects a traditional custom, often associated with the red colour of wedding outfits. Now, the verdict or an observation which arrives here is, that, the entire subject of Sanjhi has various aspects which are correlated, its performance by young unmarried girls seeking suitable husbands, the presence of objects related to adornment or Sringar, the significance of the red veil, and the inclusion of household items like utensils (See Fig. 3), all seem to symbolise an amalgamation of themes associated with marriage and homemaking. The correlation between these elements suggests a connection to the traditions and preparations involved in forming a new household and matrimony, and this further intensifies the significance of another ritual of taking the imprints of the bride's and groom's hands dipped in ghee and henna, on a wall, typically adorned with a border (often seen around the image of Sanjhi), painted with fluent lines and a zigzag pattern, along with a goddess's face on top, in both, the bride's and groom's houses, before and after the vidai of the bride, respectively. The design here is quite similar to that of Ahoi Mata who represents fertility. This again is indicative of the desire to start a healthy family and bear healthy children. These rituals are rich in symbolism, signifying the start of a blessed and prosperous marital life (See Fig. 7, 8, 9 and 10).



Fig. 7. Sanjhi adorned with jewellery and complemented with various objects. Rohtak, Haryana. 2023. Fig. 8. Sanjhi adorned with jewellery and complemented with various objects. Rohtak, Haryana. 2023



Fig. 9. Sanjhi adorned with jewellery and complemented with various objects. Rohtak, Haryana. 2023. Fig. 10. Sanjhi adorned with jewellery and complemented with various objects. Rohtak, Haryana. 2023

The level of detail and symbolism within the Sanjhi painting is truly remarkable, from the materials used to the motifs and symbols incorporated into the artwork. The belief in the Goddess residing within the image adds a deeply spiritual and personal touch.

4. Scope of Employment in Sanjhi and Preservation

Providing employment opportunities for women skilled in crafts and arts from villages can be beneficial in several ways. This initiative can empower these women economically, preserve traditional craftsmanship, and promote local culture. These opportunities could include setting up cooperatives, online marketplaces, or partnering with businesses that support handmade products, enabling these women to showcase their skills and generate income. There are many women, supported by their families who are willing to work and earn, either out of passion or out of need, conducting surveys to identify such sets of women in villages of Haryana in order to keep the art of Sanjhi alive can indeed be a wonderful initiative. There are many arts which have transitioned over the years in terms of their representation, including their portrayal on apparel, decorative pieces, household items and many other objects, this transition opens up employment avenues and a broader market, potentially leading to a global impact, enhancing the sustainability of this artistic tradition (See Fig. 11 and 12). The organisation of Sanjhi making competitions during Navratri by the Department of Art and Cultural Affairs in Haryana and Andhra Pradesh is a wonderful way to uphold and celebrate the tradition of Sanjhi. Such events not only highlight the significance of this art form but also engage people in actively participating and showcasing their skills, also providing satisfactory rewards and prizes, thereby fostering a continued appreciation for this cultural heritage. It's amusing to see both government and private organisations collaborating to preserve and promote such traditional art.



Fig. 11. Motifs of Sanjhi painted on apparel. 2023.



Fig. 12. Motifs of Sanjhi painted on apparel. 2023

5. Notes and References

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