Echo of Tradition: Rediscovering the *Sanjhi* Folk Tradition of Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract

The Brij region of Uttar Pradesh, particularly Vrindavan and Mathura, serves as the place of origin of *Sanjhi* art, an ancient religious tradition deeply rooted in India's Vaishnavite heritage. This elaborate folk craft employs organic components such as blossoms, foliage, and pigmented earths. It functions as an artistic and visual portrayal of legendary stories centred on Lord Krishna. This cultural practice exemplifies India's rich artistic heritage through its distinctive fusion of spiritual devotion and aesthetic expression. Nevertheless, given the emergence of contemporary influences and rapidly changing social environments, this holy craft confronts the threat of extinction. This research examines the chronological development, religious and social significance, artistic characteristics, and contemporary challenges facing *Sanjhi* art. It also investigates ongoing conservation initiatives and promotes a renewed communal commitment to protecting this endangered tradition. Through this analysis, the paper emphasises the convergence of heritage and progress while stressing the urgent need to integrate traditional culture into current artistic and scholarly dialogue.

Keywords: Sanjhi Art, Brij Region, Vrindavan, Mathura, Folk Art, Krishna Devotion, Intangible Cultural Heritage, Modernisation, Conservation, Indian Art Traditions

Introduction

India's artistic heritage is deeply intertwined with its spiritual traditions, where devotion finds expression through a variety of visual and performative forms. One such remarkable yet lesser-known art is *Sanjhi*, which originated in the sacred towns of Vrindavan and Mathura, located in the Brij region of Uttar Pradesh. This elaborate folk art employs organic materials, including flowers, leaves, and natural pigments, functioning as both artistic expression and visual portrayal of legendary stories centred on Lord Krishna.

Sanjhi represents India's abundant artistic legacy, distinctively merging spiritual devotion with aesthetic creativity. However, modern influences and rapidly evolving societal contexts threaten this sacred craft with extinction. This paper examines *Sanjhi* art as both a living tradition and an endangered cultural practice, analyzing its historical development, artistic typologies, and contemporary preservation challenges to demonstrate how traditional art forms navigate the tensions between devotional authenticity and modern adaptation.

During its period of prominence, the temples of Vrindavan and Mathura were adorned with elaborate *Sanjhi* designs, intricately arranged on floors and walls as offerings of love and devotion (Mittal & Prabhu Dayal, 1966: 23). It is for this reason that *Sanjhi* is often referred to as the art of Brij, establishing its deep connection to the cultural and religious landscape of the region. While Sanjhi art represents a significant component of India's intangible cultural heritage, scholarly documentation remains limited compared to other folk traditions. Mittal and Prabhu Dayal's seminal work *Festivals and Fairs of Braj* (1966) provides the earliest comprehensive documentation, establishing Sanjhi's religious and cultural foundations. However, their focus remained primarily descriptive rather than analytical.

Vatsyayan's *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and the Arts* (1982) situates Sanjhi within broader performative traditions, noting its ephemeral nature as characteristic of Indian temporal arts. More recently, Ghose's *Sanjhi: 'Rang Sey Roshni'* (2004) attempted to contextualise the art within contemporary cultural studies, though her work lacks ethnographic depth. International scholarship

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on ephemeral art traditions provides comparative frameworks but lacks specific reference to Sanjhi practices. This research paper addresses these gaps by providing comprehensive typological documentation and contemporary preservation analysis. This paper aims to rectify this oversight while contributing to global discussions on intangible heritage preservation.

This research employs a mixed-methods approach combining ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, and visual documentation. Primary data collection occurred during the field visits to the study area, including the selected pockets of Uttar Pradesh, coinciding with major Sanjhi festivals. The information was gathered using the ethnographic methods consisting of semi-structured interviews with practicing artists, participant observation during *Sanjhi* creation sessions, focus group discussions with community groups and life history documentation of master practitioners. Additionally, the documentation was done using archival research methods and the visual documentation method through high-resolution photography of different Sanjhi variants.

Etymology and Mythological Origins

The term *Sanjhi* derives from the Sanskrit word *Sandhya*, meaning "twilight" or "junction," reflecting the art's traditional creation during the liminal hours between day and night when spiritual practices are believed to be most potent. This etymological connection underscores the art's fundamental relationship with temporal rhythms and cosmic cycles that govern Hindu religious observance.

According to foundational mythology preserved in the *Brahma Vaivarta Purana*, Goddess Radha Rani would create intricate floral patterns (*pushpa-mandala*) to welcome Lord Krishna as he returned at dusk after grazing cows with his companions (Paramananda Das, 2013). The *Garga Samhita* further elaborates this narrative, describing how Radha's evening preparations became a model for devotional artistic expression throughout the Brij region. These ephemeral designs, associated with *Sandhya Karma* or twilight rituals, gradually evolved into the elaborate devotional art form known today as *Sanjhi* (Mittal & Prabhu Dayal, 1966: 23).

The mythological framework extends beyond individual practice to encompass collective devotional expression. The *Padma Purana* references similar twilight art practices among the *Gopis*, who created temporary shrines and decorative patterns as expressions of *viraha* (separation) and *prema* (divine love) during Krishna's absence. These scriptural foundations establish *Sanjhi* not merely as folk art but as *sadhana* (spiritual practice) embedded within the Vaishnava theological tradition.

Geographical and Cultural Context of the Brij Region

The Brij region's significance extends far beyond its association with Krishna's earthly *leelas* (divine play). Ancient Vedic literature establishes this area as a sacred landscape with profound cosmic significance. The *Yajurveda* (32.8) describes Brij as "*go-chara bhumi*" (the land where cows graze freely), while the *Rigveda* (1.154.6) refers to it as "*Goshala*" or "*Goshth*" (sacred cowshed) (Griffith, 1896). The *Shukla Yajurveda* poetically portrays it as "*vakra-shringa-gavi-chara-sthanam*" (a place where cows with beautifully curved horns roam without restraint) (Müller, 1884: 245).

These textual references establish a theological geography that connects terrestrial space with divine presence, providing essential context for understanding *Sanjhi* as both artistic practice and sacred geography. The *Vishnu Purana* specifically identifies the Brij region as "*krishna-janma-bhumi*" (Krishna's birthland), where every grain of dust carries spiritual significance (Wilson, 1840: 423). This sanctification of the landscape influences *Sanjhi's* art material choices, particularly the use of Yamuna River soil and local organic materials.

Archaeological Evidence and Historical Continuity

Archaeological investigations have revealed substantial evidence of artistic consciousness in the Brij region spanning millennia. Excavations conducted by the Archaeological Survey of India at Govardhan Hill have uncovered Paleolithic stone tools estimated to be over 60,000 years old, indicating continuous human habitation and cultural development. More significantly for artistic traditions, brown clay vessels dating to 600 B.C.E., decorated with grey-colored leaf motifs, represent some of the earliest examples of decorated pottery in the region (Lal, 1984: 89).

These archaeological findings suggest a long-standing tradition of decorative arts that predates historical Krishna worship by several millennia. The pottery designs, featuring botanical motifs similar to those found in contemporary *Sanjhi* art, indicate cultural continuity in aesthetic preferences and symbolic vocabulary (Chakrabarti, 1995:156). Additional excavations at Mathura have revealed terracotta figurines from the Mauryan period (3rd century B.C.E.) that demonstrate sophisticated artistic techniques and devotional themes that would later influence *Sanjhi* iconography (Rosenfield, 1967: 78).

The Kushana period (1st-3rd centuries C.E.) marked a significant development in Mathura's artistic traditions, with the emergence of distinctive sculptural styles that influenced regional folk art practices. Stone inscriptions

from this period reference community artistic festivals and collective decorative practices that bear resemblance to later *Sanjhi* traditions.

Medieval Development and Institutional Patronage

The historical flowering of *Sanjhi* art occurred during the medieval period, particularly between the 16th and 17th centuries, coinciding with the devotional movements led by Vallabhacharya (1479-1531) and his successors (Barz, 1976: 89). The establishment of the *Pushti Marg* (Path of Grace) tradition provided institutional support for devotional arts, including the formal incorporation of *Sanjhi* into temple worship practices.

Court records from the Mughal period indicate that *Sanjhi* artists received patronage from local *zamindars* and temple administrations, ensuring the art's preservation during periods of political instability. The *Ain-i-Akbari* mentions decorative floor paintings in the Delhi and Agra regions that share technical similarities with *Sanjhi* art, suggesting broader geographical influence during the Mughal period.

The devotional poetry of the period, particularly works by Surdas (1478-1583) and Bihari (1595-1663), contains numerous references to temporary artistic decorations created for Krishna festivals, providing literary evidence for *Sanjhi* practice during this crucial developmental period. The *Chaurasi Vaishnavan ki Varta*, a 17th-century hagiographical text, specifically mentions *Sanjhi* creation as prescribed devotional practice in Vallabhacharya temples.

Scriptural Foundations in Classical Texts

Classical Indian aesthetic theory provides a philosophical foundation for understanding *Sanjhi* as a legitimate artistic expression. The *Vishnu Purana* (6.7.13) establishes painting (*chitra-karma*) as one of the highest forms of devotional offering, particularly when employed in temple contexts. The *Chitrasutra*, forming part of the *Brihat Samhita*, regards devotional painting as a spiritual practice capable of generating both aesthetic pleasure (*rasa*) and religious merit (*punya*).

The *Brahma Vaivarta Purana* offers specific descriptions of decorative arts in divine contexts, including detailed accounts of Shriman Vrishbhanu's palace in Barsana, featuring "twenty gem-encrusted doors and intricate pen paintings rendered with gem-based pigments" (Paramananda Das, 2013). These descriptions establish precedent for elaborate decorative programs that influence *Sanjhi's* artistic aspirations and iconographic content. Furthermore, the *Narada Pancharatra* includes *Sanjhi*-like practices within prescribed devotional routines, specifying that temporary decorative offerings should be created using natural materials during specific lunar phases. This textual authorization elevates *Sanjhi* from folk practice to recognized religious observance within the Vaishnava tradition.

Regional Variations and Cultural Diffusion

The influence of Brij *Sanjhi* traditions extended throughout northern India through various mechanisms of cultural transmission. Following Aurangzeb's iconoclastic policies (1658-1707), many Brij court painters and artisans migrated to Rajasthani princely states, carrying *Sanjhi* techniques and aesthetic principles to new cultural contexts. This diaspora established *Sanjhi*-influenced practices in Nathdwara, Jaipur, and Kishangarh, where they merged with local artistic traditions to create distinctive regional variants.

Documentary evidence from the Jaipur State Archives indicates that *Sanjhi* artists were formally employed in royal workshops during the 18th century, creating both temporary decorations and permanent architectural ornaments inspired by *Sanjhi* motifs. Similar practices spread throughout the Deccan region, where temporary floor decorations called "*rangoli*" adopted *Sanjhi* techniques while maintaining local iconographic preferences.

The contemporary distribution of *Sanjhi*-related practices, *Chowk Poorna* in Brij, *Rangoli* in Gujarat and Maharashtra, *Alpana* in Bengal, and *Kollam* in South India, demonstrates the art form's historical influence on Indian decorative traditions while highlighting its adaptability to regional cultural contexts (Coomaraswamy, 1934: 145). These historical foundations manifest in specific ritual contexts and aesthetic principles that define contemporary Sanjhi practice.

Ritual and Aesthetic Dimensions of *Sanjhi* Art in Braj

The primary centres of *Sanjhi* art have historically been Mathura and Vrindavan, located in the Brij region. These lands have been deeply revered as the abodes of *Yogeshwar Shri Krishna* and the sites of his divine *leelas* (playful divine acts). The art serves not only as a visual medium of devotion but also as a rich narrative archive. It illustrates different episodes from the lives of Radha and Shri Krishna, particularly the legendary event of Govardhan Puja.

With time, *Sanjhi* art underwent several transformations, including the introduction of intricately handcrafted stencils, which helped in enhancing the precision and complexity of its designs. These stencils have also proved helpful in allowing for the repetition

and preservation of symbolic patterns associated with divine narratives. A notable variant, *Sanjhi Gobar* (Sanjhi made from cow dung), continues to be practised in rural regions of Uttar Pradesh, particularly during *Shraddha Paksha*, sixteen days from the full moon of *Bhadrapada* to the new moon of *Ashwin*. During this time, the *Sanjhi* festival is observed with great devotion, culminating in the Navratri celebrations, where unmarried girls worship the *Sanjhi* image through songs, *puja*, and daily rituals held in the twilight hours.

Mythological narratives further deepen the spiritual significance of *Sanjhi* by associating her with *Maa Durga*, thus embedding the art form within the broader matrix of Shakta and Vaishnava traditions. In one account, *Sanjhi* is described as the consort of *Peelam Rishi*, the son of Brahma, thereby connecting her identity to cosmic ancestry and the sacred feminine. Her name varies across regions such as *Sanji, Sanja, Saniya, and Sanjhi*, reflecting the localised expressions of a shared devotional archetype. The ritual worship of *Sanjhi* typically begins after Ganesh Puja and flows into the vibrant celebrations of Govardhan Puja, observed with great fervour across *Aryavarta,* particularly during the Diwali season. This convergence of feminine mythology, rural ritual, and Krishna-centred *bhakti* creates a unique devotional tapestry in which *Sanjhi* functions as both a spiritual offering and a cultural memory. The ritual significance of *Sanjhi* art is expressed through diverse artistic forms, each employing specific materials and techniques that reflect both practical considerations and symbolic meaning.

Typologies and Aesthetic Characteristics of *Sanjhi* Art

Sanjhi art manifests in distinct forms that reflect both material availability and ritual requirements. Understanding these typologies reveals the art's adaptability while maintaining core devotional principles. The primary classification divides *Sanjhi* into Water *Sanjhi* (*Jal Sanjhi*) and Land *Sanjhi* (*Bhoomi Sanjhi*), each with specific techniques and cultural contexts. *Sanjhi* art, rooted in devotional and folk traditions of the Braj region, is primarily manifested in two primary forms: Water *Sanjhi* and Land *Sanjhi*, each distinguished by its unique materials, techniques, and visual expressions.

1. Water Sanjhi (*Jal Sanjhi*)

Water *Sanjhi* is a delicate and ephemeral form of art created on the surface of water, often within temple tanks or sacred vessels. It is further categorised into three distinct techniques:

Floating *Sanjhi*: Intricate, colourful patterns are made to float on the surface of water, creating a vibrant visual spectacle.

Submerged *Sanjhi*: Pigments and designs are arranged underwater, often visible through a transparent layer or reflective surface.

Floral Water *Sanjhi:* Flowers and petals are used to form sacred motifs or scenes on water, enhancing the ritualistic and aesthetic dimension.

2. Land Sanjhi (*Bhoomi Sanjhi*)

Land-based *Sanjhi* is constructed on floors, walls, and other surfaces using a variety of organic and decorative materials. This type includes:

Cow Dung *Sanjhi*: It is a distinctive form of *Sanjhi* art which is created on walls using cow dung as its primary medium, a substance revered in Hindu culture for its purifying and sacred properties. This form of art is particularly prevalent among village girls who draw these on specific festivals, often as part of collective worship and playful reenactments of mythological episodes. One of the most compelling narratives surrounding this tradition is linked to the *Gopis* of Braj and their playful relationship with Lord Krishna. According to a popular folk tale, the Gopis, feeling both overwhelmed and amused by Krishna's persistent teasing and repeated triumphs over them during the Holi festivities, devised a playful form of revenge. It is said that when Krishna next visited Barsana, they resolved to smear him with cow dung, using only the tips of their nails, as both a symbolic act of reprimand and an affectionate gesture of ornamentation, before presenting him to his mother, Yashoda.

Floral *Sanjhi:* This *Sanjhi* is crafted entirely from flowers, symbolising both beauty and devotion. In the region of Brij, the tradition of creating *Sanjhi* designs using flowers dates back to ancient times. This practice coincides with the season of full bloom, when gardens are full of blossoms. During this time, girls visit gardens to gather flowers for making *Sanjhi*, a custom beautifully reflected in the following verse.

वृदावन फूलन सा छायो ,चलो सखी फूलवा बीनन कौ ,
सांझी कौ दनि आयो, प्रेम मगन है साँझी चीतो, पचरंग रंग बनायौ||

(Ruiwala 70)

Flower *Sanjhi* is created on the ground in an intricate style. The temple pond often serves as the primary location for crafting the flowery *Jal Sanjhi*. To begin the process, a square piece of stiff white cloth, soaked in

water, is laid out in front of lord Krishna. This moist base helps preserve the freshness of the flowers for a longer period. An identically sized piece of muslin cloth is then carefully placed over it. Water is also gently sprayed on the flowers to keep them as fresh as possible. A variety of blossoms are used in this art form, including mogra, champa, jasmine, rose, harsingar, yellow jasmine, and marigold, each adding colour, fragrance, and symbolism to the floral Sanjhi.

Wall *Sanjhi*: The *Shradh Paksha* begins on the full moon of the month of *Ashadh* and lasts till *Amavasya*. Throughout the month of *Ashwani*, the Brij region transforms into a fully artistic place. During this celebration, women create figurines out of clay and cow dung and plaster the house's exterior walls. On the day of Amavasya, *Sanjhi* Devi is ceremonially adorned with traditional ornaments such as pearls, mirrors, conch shells, and cowries (*kodi*). Following the conclusion of *Pitru Paksha*, women perform a distinctive ritual in which the image of *Sanjhi Mata* is immersed in a pond or well, signifying the culmination of the devotional observances.

Fig. 1: Drawing by Ved Prakash Paliwal, 21 March 2024

Dry hues *Sanjhi*: *Sanjhi* made with dry hues is another form of *sanjhi*, which is made with hand-cut paper stencils or moulds. Artists carefully cut these moulds into a variety of shapes, which are then used to create beautiful designs by sprinkling dry colours over them. This form of *Sanjhi* painting is done on a clay platform that is slightly damp to let the colours adhere. Before beginning the painting, alum powder is applied to the surface to enhance the look of the design. Using a soft cloth and the tips of their fingers, artists gently sprinkle dry colours onto the stencil, layer by layer. A single *Sanjhi* artwork may require up to ten different templates to complete its full composition. These stencils generally feature divine themes such as *Krishna Leela*, *Maharas*, *Radha-Krishna*, or *Jhula Mahotsav*. The margins are left to be decorated with floral patterns or creeping vines.

Banana Leaf *Sanjhi:* In the scriptures, the banana tree is referred to as the *Rambha* tree, with *Rambha* symbolising Goddess Lakshmi, the divine consort of Shri Hari. Creating *Sanjhi* art from banana leaves is believed to please God, as it embodies purity, devotion, and nature's abundance. The green hue of the banana leaf is associated with devotion, and just as the leaves unfurl and expand, so too does the mind of the devotee in the service of the divine. Typically, five to ten fresh banana leaves are selected, and water is sprayed over them to soften and round them. The thick central vein of each leaf is removed to make them more pliable. These leaves are then cut into the desired shapes. A piece of white cotton cloth is moistened and laid out, onto which the cut shapes are carefully placed. Water is gently sprayed again to help the leaf shapes adhere to the fabric. Nowadays, to enhance the visual appeal, banana leaf *Sanjhi* is often combined with various flowers to celebrate beauty, devotion, and divinity.

Fruit *Sanjhi*

Fruit and Grain *Sanjhi* is a unique and organic expression of devotion. It is created using everyday natural items such as fruits and grains. This form of *Sanjhi* symbolises abundance, fertility, and a deep connection to nature. It celebrates the bounty of the earth while offering homage to the divine. In the Brij tradition, Shri Krishna is lovingly associated with fruits, seen metaphorically as the sweetest and most cherished fruit. A wide variety of seasonal fruits are used in making this *Sanjhi*, such as oranges, guavas, pomegranates, bananas, mangoes, papayas, chikoo, jamun, and more. The designs vary in shape and form, showcasing the natural textures and colors of the fruits. A special variation known as Green Fruit *Sanjhi* is also prepared in front of lord Krishna using only green fruits, emphasizing freshness and life. It is believed that *Sanjhi*

is created using a combination of two or more fruits, delights the deity more as it is not just visually appealing, but also represents the harmony of colour, fragrance, texture, and the devotion embedded in the act of creation.

Grain Sanjhi: Grain *Sanjhi* is a unique and spiritually symbolic form of *Sanjhi* art, which is deeply rooted in the philosophical ideas found in the Upanishads. In these ancient scriptures, food, or *anna,* is viewed not merely as sustenance but as a sacred element that represents life itself. Since life (prana) is connected to the soul (atman), and the soul is seen as a reflection or fragment of the divine (Brahman), food becomes a symbolic conduit between the material and the spiritual realms. In the devotional context of Brij, the *Gopis* expressed their devotion by creating artistic representations of the divine using everyday materials, grains being among the most significant. They reflect simplicity, sanctity and divine presence in everyday life.

Fig. 2: Grain-Based Sanjhi Art by Ved Prakash Paliwal, 21 March 2024. Personal Collection.

Dry Fruit *Sanjhi:* Just as *Sanjhi* is made with fresh green fruits to honour the divine, a similar *Sanjhi* is made by using dry fruits, known as Dry Fruit *Sanjhi.* This variation celebrates nourishment, richness, and sacred abundance. In many traditions, dry fruits are considered auspicious offerings symbolising prosperity, longevity, and purity. In this form of *Sanjhi*, a variety of dry fruits are artistically arranged to form intricate patterns and images. Commonly used dry fruits include figs, cashews, dry coconut, makhana (fox nuts), pistachios, peanuts, almonds, and even potatoes. Each ingredient brings its texture, colour to enhance the visual richness of the *Sanjhi.* This tradition also shows how even the simplest everyday ingredients can be transformed into sacred expressions of faith and creativity.

Spice *Sanjhi:* Another aromatic form of *Sanjhi* is Spice *Sanjhi*, crafted using a rich array of traditional Indian spices. Ingredients such as *tejpatta* (bay leaf), *kali mirch* (black pepper), cloves, nutmeg, mace, cardamom, and other fragrant spices are carefully arranged in a thaal (metal plate) or on a *choki* (decorative platform) within the temple setting. These spices are not chosen at random; rather, each carries symbolic and sensory significance, evoking the essence of sacredness, warmth, and festive devotion. The themes depicted in Spice *Sanjhi* often revolve around divine love and *leela* (divine play). Popular narratives include the eternal love of Radha and Krishna, Krishna's childhood pranks and pastimes, and festive tableaus such as Gokul celebrations or Govardhan Puja. Spice *Sanjhi* reflects the philosophy that every element of the material world, no matter how humble, can be sanctified and transformed into a beautiful offering when presented with love and devotion.

Gemstone *Sanjhi:* Known as *Ruiwala Sanjhi*, this luxurious variant uses semi-precious stones to create ornate devotional imagery. Thus, each type of *Sanjhi* not only reveals the creative ingenuity of the artists but also embodies devotional sentiment, ecological awareness, and the integration of everyday materials into sacred art. The diversity of *Sanjhi* forms also reflects the inclusivity and adaptability of this folk tradition across time, space, and communities. The creation of these diverse Sanjhi forms requires specialized materials and tools, each carrying both practical and symbolic significance in the artistic process.

Materials and Tools of Sanjhi Art: A Ritualistic and Technical Overview

The creation of *Sanjhi* art, particularly within temple spaces of the Braj region, involves a variety of materials and tools that are deeply symbolic and technically refined. Each component plays a crucial role in the aesthetic and devotional outcome of the artwork.

Foundation Materials

Vedi: Sacred soil from Yamuna River banks flattened and smoothed to create the artwork's base

Natural pigments: Historically derived from ochre, burnt chilli, pewdi plant, sindoori, coal, turmeric, kumkum, taamde stone, and powdered marble

Design Tools

Biba (stencils): Hand-cut templates depicting Krishna Leela scenes, requiring a minimum of four hours preparation –

Chas: Motif templates for pattern consistency

Specialized scissors: For precise stencil cutting

Application Tools

Yarn threads: For linear patterns and color guidance

Fanti: Wooden strips (1cm wide, 2 feet long) preventing color spillage

Keda: Dry coconut leaf fragments for measuring and flattening borders

Finishing Materials

Badla (***Zari***): Aromatic powder for visual enhancement

Potna: Wet cloth for excess pigment removal

Pachheli and ***Kinari***: Decorative border elements

Sanjhi Art: A Confluence of Devotion, Cultural Identity, and Aesthetic Expression

Sanjhi art, a traditional form of ritualistic folk art, is not only an act of devotion but also a vibrant representation of Uttar Pradesh's cultural heritage. It represents the region's traditional values, aesthetic sensibilities, social practices, and a repository of its collective memory. As a folk tradition, it plays a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of intangible cultural heritage. The communal aspect of *Sanjhi* art is particularly noteworthy. Its creation often involves collective participation, intergenerational interaction, thus strengthening social bonds and cultural cohesion. This communal dimension situates *Sanjhi* not merely as an artistic practice but as a cultural ritual that contributes to the continuity and resilience of traditional knowledge systems. Equally significant is *Sanjhi's* function as a medium for the expression of traditional knowledge and skill. Each motif and design element inspired by mythological narratives, natural forms, and religious symbolism reflects a deep reservoir of indigenous knowledge. The precision, symmetry, and symbolism embedded in the designs underscore the sophistication of the techniques involved. The art also exemplifies the integration of creativity within cultural practice. While rooted in tradition, it simultaneously encourages artistic innovation, as practitioners interpret and reinvent forms within a prescribed ritual framework. The balance between adherence to traditional motifs and the freedom to experiment makes *Sanjhi* a dynamic art form, capable of evolving while also maintaining its cultural essence. As such, it deserves scholarly attention not just as a visual tradition, but as a multifaceted cultural practice that embodies the spiritual and social fabric of the communities that sustain it.

Sanjhi art occupies a distinctive position within the global taxonomy of ephemeral sacred arts, sharing fundamental characteristics with temporally-bound traditions across diverse cultural contexts while maintaining unique features that distinguish it from comparable practices. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition of *sand mandala* presents the most striking parallel, as both art forms employ impermanent materials to create

Fig. 3: Sanjhi Art Composed of Grains by Ved Prakash Paliwal, 25 March 2024. Personal Collection.

geometrically complex sacred designs intended for spiritual contemplation rather than permanent display. However, while Tibetan monks use colored sand to construct cosmological diagrams representing Buddhist metaphysics, *Sanjhi* artists employ organic materials, flowers, leaves, grains, and natural pigments to narrate devotional stories centred on Krishna's *leelas*, reflecting the Vaishnava theological emphasis on divine play rather than cosmic order.

What distinguishes Sanjhi most significantly from these international parallels is its unique integration of multiple material categories, botanical, mineral, organic waste (cow dung), and food substances, within a single artistic tradition. Furthermore, Sanjhi's seasonal rhythmicity, tied specifically to lunar cycles and Krishna-centred festivals, contrasts with the more regulated temporal patterns of monastic sand mandala construction.

These international success stories on the preservation of traditional art forms suggest that Sanjhi's preservation requires similar multi-pronged approaches that acknowledge its artistic sophistication while emphasizing its spiritual significance and cultural distinctiveness. The art form's current challenges, declining practitioner numbers, urbanization pressures, and generational knowledge gaps mirror difficulties faced by ephemeral traditions globally, yet its unique material diversity and narrative complexity offer distinctive advantages for contemporary adaptation and international promotion. Unlike traditions bound to specific geographical phenomena (cherry blossoms) or singular materials (sand), Sanjhi's flexibility in material usage and narrative content provides opportunities for creative adaptation that could ensure its survival while maintaining core devotional principles, positioning it advantageously within global discussions of intangible cultural heritage preservation and sustainable cultural tourism development.

Challenges and Revitalization Efforts in the Continuity of *Sanjhi* Art

One of the most pressing challenges faced by *Sanjhi* art today is the pervasive influence of urbanisation and modernity. The shift towards fast-paced urban lifestyles has significantly altered the relationship between individuals and traditional cultural practices. In the contemporary moment, there is a marked decline in interest in indigenous art forms as society becomes increasingly oriented towards industrial production and digital culture. This temporal acceleration has led to a diminished capacity for reflection, resulting in the erosion of practices rooted in devotion, patience, and ritualistic rhythm. A key threat to the survival of *Sanjhi* art is the growing disinterest among the younger generation. As it is transmitted through oral and experiential methods, the changing aspirations of the youth, their educational priorities, and the lure of more economically rewarding careers are making younger members of artisan families reluctant to continue this legacy. The result is a gradual rupture in the transmission of technical skills and philosophical understanding necessary for the sustenance of the tradition.

Despite these challenges, several governmental and non-governmental initiatives are underway to revive *Sanjhi* art. The One District One Product (ODOP) scheme identifies *Sanjhi* as a key cultural product of Mathura and aims to support artisans through training, infrastructure, and marketing assistance. Cultural festivals and exhibitions, both domestic and international, have emerged as platforms for increasing the visibility of *Sanjhi* art, re-situating it within the global discourse of heritage conservation. Additionally, several educational institutions and universities have begun to offer courses, workshops, and research opportunities on *Sanjhi,* thereby academically validating it as a subject of scholarly interest.

A landmark moment in the elevation of *Sanjhi* to international attention occurred during the G20 conference in 2022, when Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi presented a Sanjhi artwork, depicting the divine *leelas* of Lord Shri Krishna, to U.S. President Joe Biden. This act not only emphasised the cultural and spiritual significance of *Sanjhi* but also projected it as a valuable emblem of India's heritage on the global stage. Recognising its unique historical and cultural importance, the Indian government has declared *Sanjhi* a national treasure. The art form has recently received the Geographical Indication (GI) tag, formally acknowledging its exclusive connection to the Brij region.

In contemporary times, the continuity of Sanjhi art in Vrindavan rests largely on the efforts of a select group of dedicated practitioners, particularly those affiliated with cultural and religious sites such as the Raskhan Samadhi Sthal, Radha Raman Temple, and Radha Vallabh Temple. Notable among these are Rajesh Vaishnav and Mohan Verma from Udaipur, as well as Gopal Das Rubala from Ahmedabad, Gujarat, who have emerged as key figures in both the preservation and promotion of *Sanjhi* art. These artists have combined traditional methodologies with digital media to extend the reach of this art form to a wider, often global, audience. Gopal Das Rubala Ji, in particular, has played a pivotal role in sustaining the tradition. He initially established a *Sanjhi* Art Centre in Jatipura, Braj, where he trained students in the diverse forms, techniques, and aesthetic principles associated with Sanjhi. However, due to financial challenges and a gradual decline in public engagement, he shifted the centre to Ahmedabad. There, he continues to uphold

the practice in its traditional form. Each year, during the Shukla Paksha of the Ashwin month, Rubala Ji organizes a fifteen-day *Sanjhi* festival, offering participants a deeply immersive experience into the ritualistic and symbolic essence of the art. In addition to his practical contributions, Rubala Ji has authored a book titled *Sanjhi Bhali Ban Aayi*, which meticulously catalogues various *Sanjhi* styles, their symbolic meanings, and aesthetic features. The book stands as a significant source for those seeking to understand not only the intricate art form but also the broader cultural and devotional landscape of the Braj region. Similarly, Rajesh Vaishnav Ji has done tremendous efforts to raise awareness about this art form. He specialises in the rare practice of creating *Sanjhi* on water. Likewise, Mohan Verma Ji, through public discussions, videos, and artistic demonstrations, has tried to raise awareness regarding the rich tradition of *Sanjhi*.

The art has also found a new lease of life through its integration into religious tourism, particularly in Mathura and Vrindavan, where it is presented as a living tradition associated with the worship of Krishna. This effort reinforces the art's devotional origin and also enables its commercial viability. Furthermore, e-commerce platforms have opened new avenues for marketing *Sanjhi*-based products by making them accessible to a global audience. Together, these artists and initiatives represent a movement toward the preservation, reinterpretation, and global promotion of *Sanjhi* art.

This paper demonstrates *Sanjhi* art as an exemplar of ritualistic folk art that transcends mere aesthetic expression to embody profound spiritual and communal significance. The multifaceted nature of *Sanjhi*, manifested through its diverse forms, from Water *Sanjhi* to Cow Dung *Sanjhi*, reveals connections with other documented folk traditions. What distinguishes *Sanjhi* from comparable ephemeral art traditions like Buddhist Tibetan sand mandalas is its unique integration of everyday materials, cow dung, flowers, fruits, and spices, into sacred expression. This diversity mirrors the versatility of traditional Indian painting practices as discussed by Brown in *Indian Painting* (1947), where multiple media and materials have historically been employed in sacred contexts. The technical sophistication evident in Sanjhi's tool nomenclature, *Vedi, Biba, Fanti*, and *Keda*, suggests a systematisation comparable to that found in classical texts as described in *Chitrasutra*, where ancient Indian painting techniques are meticulously documented. The paper reveals critical insights about how Sanjhi art's communal and intergenerational transmission mechanisms compare with other Indian folk traditions. Like the collective practices in tribal communities documented by Bailey in *Tribe, Caste and Nation*, Sanjhi's collaborative nature creates cultural networks that strengthen the social fabric while preserving technical knowledge (1960: 24). The study's identification of "communal aspect" and "intergenerational interaction" resonates with Chaturvedi's observations in *An Introduction to the Art of Braj* (1981), where group participation ensures cultural continuity. However, what sets Sanjhi apart from other folk arts is its unique integration with religious practice. This research paper eventually positions Sanjhi within a broader dialogue about heritage preservation, suggesting that its survival depends not merely on documentation but on creative adaptation that maintains spiritual authenticity while engaging contemporary audiences, a challenge shared by many traditional Indian art forms as they navigate modernity's demands.

Conclusion

This paper reveals *Sanjhi* art as a complex cultural phenomenon embodying the intersection of devotional practice, artistic expression, and community identity. The documented typologies, from ephemeral water designs to elaborate spice arrangements, demonstrate both the adaptability and vulnerability of oral traditions in contemporary India. The research contributes to folk art scholarship by documenting Sanjhi's technical sophistication and identifying mechanisms through which traditional knowledge systems adapt to modern pressures. The detailed classification provides a framework for comparative analysis with other endangered art forms. Sanjhi's survival depends on three critical factors: institutional support, dedicated master practitioners, and creative adaptation, maintaining spiritual authenticity while engaging contemporary audiences. Success stories like Gopal Das Rubala's work demonstrate that preservation requires both traditional practice and innovative outreach. Future research should focus on sustainable economic models for traditional artists, oral history documentation, and digital archives capturing both technique and cultural context. Educational integration and cultural tourism require a careful balance between accessibility and authenticity. Ultimately, traditions like *Sanjhi* represent irreplaceable repositories of human creativity and cultural wisdom that, once lost, cannot be recovered. Their preservation demands not merely documentation but fostering new generations who understand both technical demands and spiritual significance.

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