

A Case Study :

## Indian craft - sanji (Art of paper cutting)

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A part from being a cornerstone of our culture and heritage, crafts represent a major economic activity in terms of people employed and the value of goods produced. Crafts are as old as human history. Nearly every craft now practiced can be traced back many hundreds or even thousands of years. Originally fulfilling utilitarian purposes, they are now a means of producing objects of intrinsic aesthetic appeal. Crafts, awareness of crafts and craft appreciation has definitely grown tremendously and there has been a great spurt in craft growth and development.

Along the river Jamuna in North India are two, virtually contiguous, towns—Mathura and Vrindavan—which are important centers of Hindu pilgrimage. The region around and containing these two towns, known traditionally as Vraja or Vrajbhoomi, is the legendary place of the god Krishna.

### **Full paper:**

“Thy life so short, the craft so long to learn...”

‘Sanjhi paper cutting’ is an ancient craft of paper stenciling, found in Mathura and Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh of India. These stencils were used to make rangoli patterns on walls and floors, known as ‘Sanjhi’. This craft is always linked to ‘vrajbhoomi’ because its subject matters have traditionally been the stories and motifs of the ‘Krishna Radha legend’. It is an art form that is in very much of the spirit of Mathura and Vrindavan. Walking along the streets of Mathura and Vrindavan one can easily recognize the motifs and designs that appear in the traditional Sanjhi paper cutting, whether it is the peacock or the cows, the monkey or the kadamba tree or the river flowing past the temple.

They later broadened to include a number of Mughal motifs -jali patterns and animals and flowers.

A basic meaning that captures the essence of various practices is ‘sajavat’ which means decoration. Other meanings linked with ‘Sanjhi’ is ‘sanjha’ which means evening and ‘sancha’ which means mould.

### **Legends of ‘SANJHI’ craft:**

The legends related to the ‘Sanjhi’ craft are of two forms:

- Folk tradition
- Temple tradition.

### **Folk tradition:**

Underpinning the tradition is a legend that states ‘Sanjhi’ practices involve creation and decoration of designs on the walls using stones, mirrors, colored stones on a cow dung base. These non-temple ‘sanjhis’ are made by the unmarried girls who offer prayer to the goddess ‘Sanjhi’ for ‘a husband and many children’. The motifs of this ‘Sanjhi’ comprises of very intricate flowers, creepers, and various images of ‘Sanjhi and sanjha’. This prayer also involves offering of food and lighting of lamps by the unmarried girls seeking the wish.

Goddess ‘Sanjhi’ is believed to be the mind-born daughter of ‘Brahma – the creator’, who was granted three wishes which included commitment to a one husband, many child and the third one was that who so ever worshipped her would have their wishes fulfilled.

### **Temple tradition:**

In the temple tradition, ‘Sanjhi’ is created every evening during the ‘Pitra Paksha’ or the dark fortnight of waning moon in the month of ‘Ashwin’, in September or October. During ‘Pitra Paksha’, the ancestors are remembered

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**Key words :**

and worshipped. This temple tradition is rare and is only practiced in some of the temples in Vrindavan. The 'Sanjhi' is made by the temple priests and local artisan on a raised earthen platform, known as 'vedi'. This is created by the mixture of mud and cow dung.

Motifs used in this temple tradition are generally the different patterns of flowers and leaves placed very beautifully in a 'rangoli'. After the creation of these floral motifs, the central part of the 'rangoli' is created. The central design usually represents a 'Lila' of Krishna. The theme depicted in the centre is the main focus of 'Sanjhi' in this temple tradition. All these intricate motifs are created using a series of 'Sanjhi' stencils. Each of these 'sanjhis' are created just for a single day. After the 'sanjhi' is worshipped, it is effaced to make a new 'Sanjhi' for the following day of the 'Pitra Paksha'.

#### **Tools and techniques:**

The technique involved in the creation of the 'Sanjhi'

paper stencils, though seems to be simple but it involves a lot of precision and practice. First the drawing of the design is made on the paper. If more than one copy is required the papers are pinned together on all sides. After this, a parallel line, about 3/16 of an inch away from the first line is drawn. Then the small bridges are made on the parallel lines. These bridges are the areas of the uncut stencil left between the cutout design areas. In addition to creating details and style, bridges are what hold a stencil together in one piece. As one gets more proficient, it is easy to decide which area needs a wider or a narrower bridge. Increase in the number of bridges increases the intricacy of the design.

It is the cutting process which requires an enormous amount of practice, concentration and patience. The only tool used in this craft is a pair of scissors, which is very fine with long arms for easy manipulation. During the cutting process, the paper is rotated around the scissors for a précised and fine cutting. The numbers of paper cut



Fig. 1 : Krishna legends

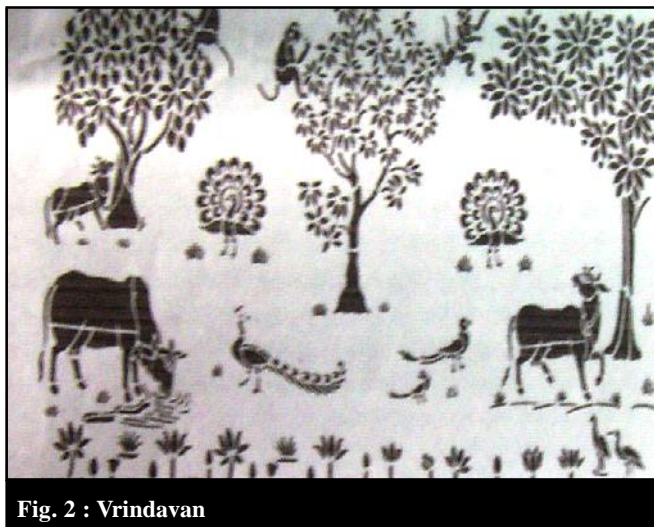


Fig. 2 : Vrindavan

stencils that are used for any design depend on the intricacy of the pattern, number of elements in the design and the number of colors to be used.

#### **Motifs:**

The art of 'Sanjhi' is a celebration of the legends of lord Krishna. The subject matter has always been the stories and motifs of Krishna legends (Fig. 1). The motifs and designs that appear in the traditional Sanjhi paper cutting are the scenes of Vrindavan (Fig. 2) which includes peacock, the cows, the monkey, and the kadamba tree, the river flowing past the temple. Imageries and themes like Krishna rasa (Fig. 3), Nand Gopal stealing butter (Fig. 4) are also cut intricately. The very intricate 'Sanjhi' have many creepers and flowers running along



Krishna Rasa

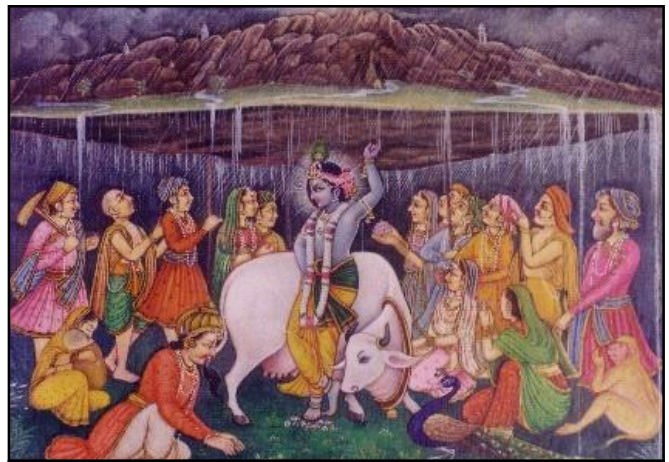


Fig. 3 : Krishna Rasa



Fig. 4 : Nand Gopal

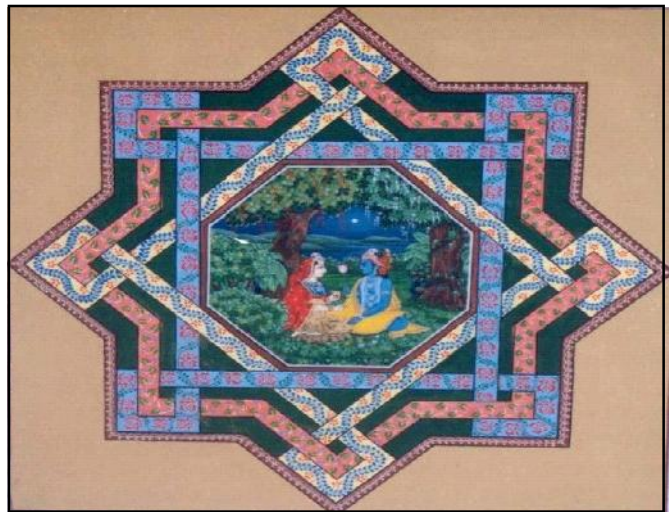


Fig. 6 :

the borders. The motifs and the themes also include the images of the deity Sanjhi and Sanjha.

They later broadened to include a number of Mughal motifs like jali patterns and animals and flowers.

**Size and shape:**

The size of the Sanjhi depends on the occasion, the traditions of the temple where the Sanjhi is to be laid, and the theme to be characterized. The maximum size is 8

feet by 12 feet and the Sanjhi can be octagonal, square, rectangular, or circular. Traditionally the sides have detailed borders with flowers and creepers, while the theme to be depicted is at the centre and is the main focus of the Sanjhi.

In Mathura and Vrindavan, there has been a decline in the number of artisans practicing ‘Sanjhi paper cutting’. The reason of this decline is the low demand for their work in its traditional form. Traditional patronage was drying up and even the popularity of ‘Sanjhi’ as the domestic hobby had started languishing.

**Glossary :**

- ‘vrajbhoomi’ - Birth place of lord Krishna
- kadamba tree- Kadamba tree, botanical name *Anthocephalus cadamba* and *Nauclea cadamba* of the Rubiaceae family, is common in Indian subcontinent

– Brahma- creator of earth according to Indian Hindu mythology

– ‘Pitra Paksha’- This is a 16 day period when most Hindu remember their ancestors, and feed Brahman in their memory. In Indian Lunar month there are 14 regular days (Tithi), one New Moon day and one Full Moon day, so there are 16 days.

- ‘Ashwin’ - September or October month called

Ashwin according to Hindu calendar.

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