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SANJHI: DECODING THE VISUAL LANGUAGE OF AN ANCIENT INDIAN ART AND CRAFT TRADITION WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

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Abstract

Sanjhi, a paper-cut and stencil-based art tradition native to the sacred Braj region of Uttar Pradesh, India, is one of the most advanced but least studied knowledge systems of visual-craft in the wider context of Indian cultural tradition. Sanjhi is practised by (priestly) communities only during the Pitru Paksha fortnight in the temple precincts of Vrindavan and Mathura, and is a concurrent devotional practice, visual text and oral-performative event. This paper suggests that Sanjhi is a parallel textual tradition, a kind of iconographic literacy, translating the narrative and lyrical content of classical Sanskrit and Braj Bhasa literature, such as the Bhagavata Purana, the Gita Govinda and the poetry of the Ashtachhap poets, into a visual grammar that can be read across language and literacy boundaries. The paper will analyze Sanjhi as a living epistemological system using three interconnected analytical lenses iconographic-textual analysis, craft knowledge and material intelligence, and the oral-performative tradition. Based on primary fieldwork in Vrindavan, manuscriptal records of the temples, archival records of craft, and local literary texts, the work shows that the craft represents a stratified textual-artistic epistemology which, over centuries, has been used as a democratising mechanism of the devotional culture of the Braj region. The paper also contextualizes Sanjhi in the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), with an urgent need to document it interdisciplinarily, to give it scholarly and policy-level protection as intangible cultural heritage.

Keywords: Sanjhi art; Braj cultural tradition; Indian Knowledge Systems; Bhakti literature; iconographic-textual analysis; intangible heritage; Pushkara community; visual epistemology

1. Introduction

Visual and material cultures of the Indian subcontinent have long been encoding systems of knowledge that speak to and through the scriptural world. One of the most fascinating but least understood of these is Sanjhi, a paper-cut and stencil art tradition practised in the temple towns of Vrindavan and Mathura in the Braj culture zone of Uttar Pradesh. Sanjhi is rooted in the Bhakti devotional tradition, and infused with the cosmology of Vaishnavism, and it is made every year during the Pitru Paksha fortnight, the lunar fortnight dedicated to remembrance of ancestors, by Pushkara priestly communities who serve in the region's great temples.

Despite its complexity, the refinement of its visual idiom, its rich literary allusions, the agility of its craft, Sanjhi has so far proved almost completely invisible to the gaze of art history, cultural policy and scholarship. When it is studied, it's typically placed in the decorative folk art category, an appellation that is kind of like a punch in the face. It reduces the complex to the merely decorative. There are decades of scholarship by people like Kapila Vatsyayan (1983) on how Indian craft traditions are a repository of knowledge and ideas, but this has never been explored in Sanjhi, not as a serious enquiry anyway.

This paper seeks to redress this. It claims that Sanjhi is not decoration. It is an illustrated knowledge system scripture. Every composition is a visual pada: a devotional lyrical unit that narrates an episode, a lila, from the life of Krishna, the emotions and stories of which are drawn from the rich body of classical Sanskrit and Braj Bhasa literature (Hawley 1983; Bryant 2003). Sanjhi, over centuries, has quietly evolved as a parallel to the Sanskrit literary canon- not in written texts, but through visual, material, and sonic expressions, making it accessible to both literate and non-literate communities alike.

This paper approaches this narrative in three ways. The first is a tracing of the relationship between the iconography of Sanjhi and the literary sources, an iconographic and textual conversation that has gone largely uncharted. The second



concerns itself with the knowledge that is embodied in the craft: the classification of paper-cutting styles (katran kala), the ecology of natural pigment extraction, and the transmission of design templates (thappa). The third explores the vibrant oral and performative culture in which Sanjhi is embedded. When put together, these three approaches paint this picture: Sanjhi finds a place in the Indian Knowledge Systems, and time is running out to document it seriously, rigorously, urgently.

2. Situating Sanjhi: Origins, Ritual Context, and the Braj Knowledge Landscape

Sanjhi is part of the sacred topography of Braj, the area around Mathura, Vrindavan, Govardhan, and the surrounding areas that have served since centuries as a main seat of Krishna worship and Vaishnava education. Entwistle (1987), offers the most detailed academic description of this pilgrimage landscape, recording how each grove, each riverbank and each hillside is marked out with the story of the lilas of Krishna. Generations of bhakti poets, musicians, visual artists and craftspeople have made the whole landscape a living scripture (Haberman 1994). Sanjhi is an inscription of his yearly ritual within this landscape. Each year, over sixteen days of Pitru Paksha, Pushkara followers cut elaborate stencils out of paper, and apply natural pigments of flower petals, turmeric (haldi) and abir (dry coloured powder) and create elaborate floor and wall decorations in the temple precincts. They are not mere adornments of the temple area but are engaged in the day-to-day liturgical programme which is supported by fieldwork interviews with administrators of Vrindavan temple that were part of this study. The literary ancestry of the practice can be traced back to the devotional literature. The Purana Bhagavata (Canto 10) is the main account of the lilas of Krishna in Vrindavan (Bryant 2003). The lyrical architectonics of the twelfth-century poet Jayadeva provide its devotional poetry with a tradition of loving the relationship of Radha and Krishna in which the movement between the human soul and the divine is paradigmatic (Miller 1977). The poetry of the Ashtachhap poets (mainly Surdas and Nandadas) of the Braj Bhasi provides a literary tradition in the vernacular, of unrivalled fertility (Hawley 1983; McGregor 1984), which introduced Sanskrit cosmological subject matter into the lived devotional world of the Braj community. The visual continuation of all three traditions is called Sanjhi.

3. Sanjhi as Visual Literature: Iconographic-Textual Analysis

The Concept of the Visual Pada

The theoretical assertion of this paper is that every Sanjhi composition is a visual pada. The pada is the lyrical unit of devotional poetry in the Braj school of devotional poetry a verse which is independent and tells a story or evokes an episode in the divine life of Krishna, to be sung at a particular raga at a particular hour of worship. Thousands of these padas were written by the Ashtachhap poets, all of which are windows of love creating a scene in the lila of Krishna (Hawley 1983; Barz 1992). The pada is translated into spatial and visual by Sanjhi. Both compositions retell a particular episode of lila in a visual grammar which is based on the iconographic conventions of the literary sources. The outcome is a scripture that is visualized; a prayerful book that can be seen and felt and not read and heard in isolation. This role echoes the work of Eck (1998) of darshan as a central form of divine knowledge in Hindu devotionalism, a theology of visual experience whereby the knowledge is conveyed through the sacred gaze.

Motif Mapping and Literary Correspondence

A systematic analysis of Sanjhi's principal motifs reveals an intricate network of correspondences with the literary canon. The following table maps key motifs to their symbolic meanings and primary literary sources:

Motif	Symbolic Meaning	Primary Literary Source(s)
<i>Kadamba Tree</i>	Sacred site of Radha-Krishna's divine rendezvous in the Vrindavan forest	Bhagavata Purana (Canto 10); Gita Govinda (Jayadeva)



Motif	Symbolic Meaning	Primary Literary Source(s)
<i>Yamuna Bank (Yamuna Tat)</i>	Riverine space of divine lilas; site of the Maharasa dance	Braj Bhasha poetry of Surdas; Bhagavata Purana 10.29-33
<i>Vanmala Garland</i>	Krishna's distinguishing divine insignia; symbol of cosmic sovereignty	Bhagavata Purana; Harivamsa
<i>Bansuri (Flute)</i>	The sonic call to devotional surrender; voice of divine love	Gita Govinda (Jayadeva); Surdas's padas
<i>Peacock Feathers</i>	Krishna's crown adornment; emblem of Vrindavan's forest character	Ashtachhap poetic tradition; temple iconographic canon
<i>Lotus (Kamala)</i>	Symbol of divine beauty, purity, and Lakshmi's auspicious presence	Bhagavata Purana; Vaishnava iconographic tradition

Table 1: Key Sanjhi Motifs and Their Literary Correspondences

What this mapping reveals is not merely thematic similarity but structural homology. The visual grammar of Sanjhi is organised according to the same principles of narrative, symbolic layering, and devotional affect that structure the texts from which it draws. Coomaraswamy's (1934) foundational argument that Indian visual art functions as a form of philosophical and theological commentary rather than aesthetic expression in the European sense provides a useful theoretical frame here, though Sanjhi extends this principle into the domain of popular devotional practice.

Sanjhi as Democratising Scripture

A crucial dimension of Sanjhi's function as visual literature is its democratising operation within the devotional community. The Sanskrit literary tradition was historically accessible primarily to those with Sanskrit literacy. The Braj Bhasha poetry of the Ashtachhap poets represented the first major democratisation of this tradition (McGregor 1984; Pauwels 1996). Sanjhi represents a second and more radical democratisation: the translation of both the Sanskrit and Braj Bhasha canons into a purely visual form, one that required no literacy at all to apprehend.

This resonates with Pinney's (2004) analysis of the democratising capacity of Indian popular visual culture, and with Lutgendorf's (1991) account of how the Ramayana tradition has been made accessible across registers of literacy and orality in North Indian devotional culture. Sanjhi performs an analogous function for the Krishna devotional tradition of Braj, embedding theological and literary knowledge within a visual practice open to all members of the community.

4. Craft Knowledge and Material Intelligence: Katran Kala, Pigments, and Thappa Transmission

Katran Kala: The Epistemology of the Cut

The physical production of a Sanjhi composition begins with katran kala, the taxonomy of paper-cutting techniques that constitutes the foundational craft knowledge of the tradition. This is a form of bodily knowledge accumulated over years of apprenticeship, transmitted through the hands of masters to students within the Pushkara community. Sennett's (2008)



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influential account of craft as a form of embodied knowledge where the hand thinks is directly applicable here, though Sanjhi's transmission operates within a devotional rather than a secular artisanal framework.

The cutting of a Sanjhi stencil requires the practitioner to think simultaneously in positive and negative space, to anticipate how the removal of material will produce a form, and to maintain the structural integrity of the paper sheet across compositions of extraordinary complexity. This embodied knowledge is not supplemented by written instruction manuals or standardised curricula; it exists entirely in the hands, the eye, and the accumulated practice of the craftsman, which Polanyi (1966) termed tacit knowledge.

Natural Pigments and Material Ecology

After the stencil is cut, Sanjhi compositions are filled in using natural pigment media, a practice that entrenches the craft in ecological knowledge systems of the Braj region. The main media of colour are flower petals harvested on a seasonal basis in the rich flora of the temple gardens of Vrindavan, turmeric (haldi) extracted out of locally grown rhizomes, and abir, a dry coloured powder that is traditionally made using natural fragrances. This repertoire of materials relates Sanjhi to what Gadgil and Guha (1992) refer to as ecosystem-based knowledge systems, ecological intelligence manifested in the material activities of a community with strong territorial ties. The transition of natural to synthetic pigments, which has been reported in recent fieldwork, is not just a change in materials, but also an epistemological discontinuity: the break of the craft with the ecological knowledge base upon which it has historically been based and which has defined it.

Thappa: The Genealogy of the Template

At the heart of the passing of the visual vocabulary of Sanjhi between generations lies the thappa- the design template. The pattern stencils, which represent patterns of compositional structure that characterize the tradition, the arrangement of its major motifs, the conventions of their spatial relation, the hierarchy of their symbolic weight, etc. are called thappas. They are inherited in artisan families, and form an undocumented yet highly structured body of visual knowledge. The thappa system is a sort of visual grammar that is more or less analogous, as Kramrisch (1946) proposed, to a system of generative rules out of which an infinity of particular compositions can be generated and still retain the integrity of the iconographic language of the tradition. There is no record of thappa knowledge, and the loss of this knowledge due to the decline of practitioners or failure of intergenerational transmission cannot be reversed without a systematic external recording of the knowledge.

5. The Oral-Performative Tradition: Text, Image, and Sound in Convergence

Sanjhi as Performance Event

Sanjhi cannot be understood without paying attention to the completed piece of composition but also to the way it was created. When the Pushkara practitioner cuts and draws the composition, devotees crowd the temple premises. The visual work is accompanied by a rich soundscape: chanting of Sanskrit stotras, singing of Braj Bhasa pada in keeping with the lila scene being represented and the sound of communal devotional involvement. It is the production of the Sanjhi that is therefore incorporated into a performance event that fuses image, text and sound into one devotional event, which Schechner (1988) would identify as a total performance environment.

The Sampradaya Framework

The practice and transmission of Sanjhi firmly positions it within a sampradaya, a tradition that is built and maintained by teachers, artists and devotees who transmit knowledge across generations. Historians such as Flood (1996) and Lorenzen (1995) have demonstrated how the kinds of lineage-based networks have always been important in the transmission of devotional knowledge in North Indian Vaishnavism. The same can be said for Sanjhi: when the Pushkara community takes up the mantle of being artists of this art form, they are not only artists, they are also religiously institutional guarantors. Sanjhi's devotees do not simply watch the creation of a work. They are involved in something; they are part of a moment of knowledge, emotion and memory. As they chant stotras, sing padas and remember together the stories embedded in the tradition, they are in their way interpreting the image before them. It is interpretation, but not the sort of interpretation that



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takes place in classrooms or in books. They are doing it through what they see and what they sing, through their presence with each other in a very human way of knowing together.

Living Knowledge and Ephemeral Practice

What is different about Sanjhi is that it is ephemeral: made to disappear. Each composition is made each day anew during the fortnight of Pitru Paksha; when it has been shown, it is dispersed, not collected. Rather than seeming a waste, this disappearance is deliberate. It is a Vaishnava conception of lila, divine play, not as something that was once done and documented, but that is always new, always being created (Haberman 1994). The art is not a representation of a moment; it is a moment. This means that every Sanjhi that is enacted is an act of scripture. It is not a reference to a sacred text; it actually is one, here and now, in the hands of the artist and the eyes of the viewer. This is similar to what Zumthor (1990) wrote about oral poetics: that the text is not the written and fixed text, but the performance itself. Sanjhi, then, is never an image. It is an event, and like all events, it can never be repeated only re-lived.

6. Methodology and Fieldwork

Interdisciplinary Analytical Framework

The analytical methodology employed in this study is necessarily interdisciplinary, reflecting the multi-register character of Sanjhi as a knowledge system. Four established scholarly disciplines have been combined and adapted:

- **Art History:** Iconographic and stylistic analysis of Sanjhi's visual compositions, situating them within the broader history of Vaishnava visual culture and craft production, drawing on the methodological frameworks of Coomaraswamy (1934) and Kramrisch (1946).
- **Literary Studies:** Close reading of the Sanskrit and Braj Bhasha literary sources the Bhagavata Purana, the Gita Govinda, the Ashtachhap poets, using the frameworks of Hawley (1983), Miller (1977), and Bryant (2003).
- **Craft Studies:** Ethnographic and technical analysis of katan kala, pigment preparation, and thappa transmission, drawing upon the methodological frameworks of Sennett (2008) and the material culture scholarship of Tilley et al. (2006).
- **Performance Studies:** Analysis of the oral-ritual context of Sanjhi's creation, drawing upon Schechner (1988) and Zumthor (1990).

These four lenses have been integrated within the overarching framework of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), as articulated by Vatsyayan (1983), Subbarayappa (1997), and the National Education Policy 2020's foundational framing of IKS as a site of interdisciplinary scholarly inquiry (Government of India 2020).

Primary Data Sources

Primary data for this study was gathered through field research in Vrindavan, where practising Sanjhi artists from the Pushkara community were interviewed and their practice observed across multiple sessions during the Pitru Paksha season. Fieldwork was supplemented by consultation of historical temple manuscripts held in Vrindavan and Mathura collections, archival craft documentation, and direct textual engagement with the primary literary corpus. Fieldwork methodology prioritised collaborative and non-extractive engagement with practising artists, with informed consent obtained from all participants.



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7. Key Findings

The three analytical lenses above have aided in the ultimate analysis that has provided four major findings of theoretical and practical importance. To begin with, Sanjhi codifies a multifarious textual-artistic epistemology that has been acting in correspondence with the formal Sanskrit literariness traditions since centuries. Its iconographic vocabulary is strictly tuned to the story, symbolic, and emotion-filled frameworks of the Bhagavata Purana, the Gita Govinda, and Braj Bhasa devotional poetry. Sanjhi is not represented scripture but scripture in a different form, which is validated by the structural homologies presented in Table 1. Second, Sanjhi has traditionally been a democratising process in the Braj community of devotionalism, which encoded the content of the Sanskrit and Braj Bhasa literary traditions in a visual language that did not need any textual literacy. This role puts Sanjhi into the context of the democratising project of the larger Bhakti movement that is recorded by Lorenzen (1995) and Pauwels (1996) of which it is a visual extension. Third, the craft culture of Sanjhi, katran kala, preparation of natural pigments, thappa design is a richly organized yet virtually unwritten system of knowledge. This tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966) is a kind of knowledge that only appears in embodied, familial, and communal forms, its loss would mean the death of a type of knowledge, and not the loss of an object of art. Fourth, the oral-performative context of the creation of Sanjhi turns the art object into a living knowledge event, into the place of the convergence of text, image, and sound in the shared devotional activity of the Braj community. This convergence is not contingent on the epistemological role of Sanjhi but part of it.

8. Contemporary Marginalisation and the Urgency of Documentation

Sanjhi is exposed to severe contemporary marginalisation conditions which endanger the tradition with a risk of irreversible loss in the next generation. Deinstitutionalization of temple institutions, loss of practising artists, lack of systematic academic record keeping, the substitution of natural with synthetic pigments, and the collapse of the intergenerational reproduction of Pushkara artisan families are all elements leading to a crisis, which is both cultural as well as epistemological in nature. The international policy framework that best applies to the case of Sanjhi is the Convention on the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage of 2003 of the UNESCO, which acknowledges oral traditions, performing arts, social practices and traditional craftsmanship as forms of intangible heritage that need active protection (UNESCO 2003). When India ratified this Convention in 2005 it established a legal and institutional structure of action, which is still yet to be systematically applied to Sanjhi. The focus of the National Education Policy 2020 on Indian Knowledge Systems as a starting point to interdisciplinary academic inquiry (Government of India 2020) provides another institutional point of entry. Sanjhi is exactly the type of living body of knowledge that IKS framework is meant to acknowledge and facilitate- an oral, material and performative set of knowledge transfer whose complexity has been lost in its classification as folk craft and not scholarship.

9. Conclusion: Towards a Framework for Sanjhi Scholarship within IKS

The paper has presented the argument that Sanjhi is an advanced system of visual knowledge that deserves to be given the due credit in the discourse of Indian Knowledge Systems in the context of art history, literature and craft traditions. The fact is that Sanjhi is a parallel textual tradition: a type of visual scripture, the epistemological value of which has been systematically underestimated by the available scholarly and policy paradigms. Finally, the paper suggests four models of the development of Sanjhi scholarship:

- **Academic Acceptance:** Sanjhi as a case study in academic IKS curricula and research programmes, as a visual epistemology, craft knowledge, and the democratisation of devotional culture.
- **Interdisciplinary Documentation:** An art-historical, literary, and craft-studies approach to systematic archiving of the visual vocabulary, craft techniques, thappa corpus and oral-performative traditions of the Pushkara practitioner communities, in partnership with the practitioner communities of Sanjhi.
- **Academic Study Framework:** University-level research projects on Sanjhi and other similar visual-craft knowledge traditions, based on the analytical frameworks suggested in this paper.



- Digital Heritage Archive: The systematic digitalisation of thappa designs, audio-visual documentation of the oral-performative tradition, and generally the temple manuscripts and archival material of interest, based on the principles of the Endangered Archives Programme (British Library) and the Sahapedia digital encyclopaedia of Indian culture.

Sanjhi marginalisation is a cultural as well as an epistemological crisis. It will take the long-term and joint effort of scholars, craftspeople, institutions, and policymakers operating within an IKS framework broad enough to acknowledge the entire spectrum of forms within which Indian communities have created, passed, and revitalized knowledge throughout centuries. One of these is Sanjhi: scripture in visible form, knowledge in material form, and community in durable form in the precarious material of cut paper and colour.

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