

# Sanjhi as Embodied Knowledge: The Blend of Folk Ritual and Ecological Consciousness

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 1

Month: October

Year: 2025

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Patanjali, Preeti. "Sanjhi as Embodied Knowledge: The Blend of Folk Ritual and Ecological Consciousness." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S1, 2025, pp. 153–58.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS1-Oct.9868>

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## Abstract

*The Sanjhi ritual, a traditional folk practice predominantly observed in specific regions of Uttar Pradesh during the Navratri festival, offers a compelling perspective on the intersection of folk rituals, ecological awareness, and Indian indigenous knowledge systems. This Hindu ritual is associated with young girls and women and revolves around the veneration of Goddess Sanjhi, who is regarded as an incarnation of either Goddess Durga or Goddess Parvati, contingent upon local customs. The celebration entails the daily creation of ephemeral images of Goddess Sanjhi using locally sourced, biodegradable materials such as cow dung, clay, leaves, flowers, and natural dyes. These practices exemplify a profound connection to the land and ecology, underscoring an ecological ethic that preludes contemporary environmental discourse. The research paper posits that Sanjhi transcends mere devotional or folk practice; it embodies a form of knowledge transmitted through generations via oral traditions, songs, and tangible creativity. It functions as a form of indigenous knowledge, wherein women's interactions with nature, fertility, and community are ritualized and rendered visible. This study investigates how the Sanjhi ritual symbolizes the relationship between humans and the environment, emphasizing the relevance of reviving indigenous knowledge and fostering ecological awareness. It also examines how the Sanjhi ritual serves as a conduit for transmitting cultural wisdom and environmental consciousness across generations. The findings thus illustrate how the evolving nature of Sanjhi in contemporary contexts underscores its potential as a tool for environmental education and cultural preservation.*

**Keywords:** Goddess Sanjhi, Folk Ritual, Ecological Consciousness, Indian Knowledge System, Cultural Preservation

The Sanjhi ritual, a traditional folk practice mainly observed in certain areas of Uttar Pradesh during the Navratri festival, provides an intriguing exploration of the convergence of folk rituals, ecological consciousness, and indigenous knowledge systems in the Indian context. This Hindu ritual is linked to young girls and women and centres around the worship of Goddess Sanjhi, who is seen as a manifestation of either Goddess Durga or Goddess Parvati, conditional to local customs. The celebration involves the daily creation of temporary images of Goddess Sanjhi using locally available, biodegradable materials like cow dung, clay, leaves, flowers, and natural dyes. Around the image, elaborate designs are crafted with coloured powders, flour, rice, and flower petals, often depicting religious symbols and elements of nature, highlighting a deep connection to the land and ecology. The Sanjhi ritual goes beyond being just a folk and aesthetic practice; it is deeply embedded in the cultural and ecological fabric of the community that

practices it. Thus, it is fitting to describe Sanjhi as a custom that represents the values, beliefs, and ecological insight of the people.

### **Objectives of the Research**

The research paper suggests that Sanjhi goes beyond being just a devotional or folk activity; it represents a form of knowledge passed down through generations via oral traditions, songs, and palpable artistic expression. It acts as a type of indigenous knowledge, where women's interactions with nature, fertility, and community are performed and made visible. By examining the rituals linked to Sanjhi, the materials used in its creation, the folktales associated with it, and the environmental stories surrounding it, the study aims to show how Sanjhi connects cultural heritage with ecological awareness. The research also explores how the Sanjhi ritual symbolizes the human-environment relationship, highlighting the importance of reviving indigenous knowledge. Through qualitative analysis and ethnographic insights, the paper contends that Sanjhi not only preserves cultural traditions but also encourages sustainable practices and environmental management, making it an essential part of modern ecological discussions. Lastly, the findings illustrate how the evolving nature of Sanjhi in contemporary settings highlights its potential as a tool for ecological education and cultural preservation.

### **Historical Context of Sanjhi Ritual and its Celebration**

Sanjhi originates from ancient Indian customs, where it was predominantly employed in religious settings to seek divine favour and mark seasonal festivities. The word 'Sanjhi' comes from the Sanskrit term 'Sanjh,' which means 'to join' or 'to unite,' highlighting the communal nature of this tradition. In everyday language, 'Saanjh' also signifies 'evening,' indicating the time when it is celebrated. Traditionally, Sanjhi practice was carried out by women in homes, representing their bond with nature and the divine. Consequently, the Sanjhi practice mirrors women's roles in maintaining cultural stories and ecological knowledge. As pointed out by Singh:

The roots of...sanjhi rest in an ancient folk ritual. Sanjhi...a vernacular derivation from 'Sandhya', 'evening' was originally worshipped as a goddess by the unmarried young girls seeking the boon of obtaining a suitable husband. The practice of creating images of the folk deity Sanjhi made of cow dung and flowers on walls and venerating it at evening time is continued in the villages of Vraja, Haryana, Malwa and Rajasthan to the present day. (348)

In the traditional practice of Sanjhi, materials like clay, cow dung, turmeric, flour, flowers, and leaves are used, highlighting the ecological importance in crafting the Sanjhi idol. These elements not only add to the aesthetic beauty of Goddess Sanjhi but also reflect a profound reverence for nature. Additionally, there is a noteworthy communal element; it often involves group participation, which strengthens social connections and reinforces cultural identity.

Rituals linked to Sanjhi frequently align with agricultural cycles, festivals, and community events. For example, during Diwali, Sanjhi is crafted to invite prosperity and abundance, symbolizing the community's dependence on agricultural success. It also serves as a reminder of life's cyclical nature and the mutual reliance between humans and the environment. The importance of Goddess Sanjhi is further highlighted through the connection between the goddess and the Sanjhi art, which is widespread in India. This link between Goddess Sanjhi and Sanjhi art illustrates the profound ties between spirituality, culture, ritual and artistic expression. A deeper understanding in this consideration can be gained by exploring the religious and artistic aspects of this relationship.

### **The Interrelationship between Goddess Sanjhi and Sanjhi Art**

The connection between Goddess Sanjhi and Sanjhi art spans religious, cultural, and artistic aspects. Originating in India, Sanjhi art is a traditional paper-cutting technique closely linked to the veneration of

Goddess Sanjhi, who is often seen as an embodiment of divine feminine power. This art form is typically practiced during festivals, especially in the month of Kartik, when devotees craft intricate patterns to pay homage to the goddess. From a religious standpoint, the goddess is frequently associated with themes of illumination and prosperity, symbolizing the shift from darkness to light. In numerous rituals, creating Sanjhi art acts as a form of prayer, with the detailed designs believed to invite the goddess' presence into the household. The process of making these artworks transcends mere artistic expression, serving as a spiritual practice that strengthens the bond between the devotee and the divine. This connection is evident in how Sanjhi art is employed to tell stories from Hindu mythology, particularly those featuring the goddess, thereby underscoring her importance in the cultural and religious context.

In terms of artistry, Sanjhi art is distinguished by its fine and complex patterns, frequently illustrating themes associated with nature, mythology, and spirituality. Crafting Sanjhi art involves the careful and precise cutting of paper, demanding a high degree of skill and accuracy. The artwork often features depictions of the Goddess Sanjhi herself, along with other divine figures, highlighting the deep connection between the art form and the goddess. The aesthetic elements of Sanjhi art, such as its symmetry and balance, embody the core principles of harmony and beauty that are fundamental to Hindu philosophy.

The art form is widely practiced in Uttar Pradesh, emphasizing its importance and presence in today's world. The continued relevance of Sanjhi art in modern settings highlights its role as a vibrant tradition that pays tribute to the goddess and preserves the cultural heritage of the communities involved.

### **A Cultural and Narrative Survey of Sanjhi through Folktales**

In Uttar Pradesh, in the Braj region, several folktales are linked to Goddess Sanjhi, highlighting her cultural importance and the rituals tied to her. According to one such tale, a village was once hit by a severe famine. In their desperation, the villagers sought the aid of Goddess Sanjhi. To win her favour, they held a grand festival in her name, crafting intricate Sanjhi patterns. As they prayed and danced around these designs, the goddess appeared to them in a vision, assuring them of her blessings. The following day, rain began to pour, revitalizing the dry land. Since then, the villagers have annually created Sanjhi art to honour the goddess' generosity.

In another folktale from a small village in Uttar Pradesh, it is recounted that the Goddess Sanjhi appeared in a dream to a modest artist named Radha. The goddess instructed Radha to craft intricate designs using natural colours to honour the arrival of spring. Motivated by this divine vision, Radha gathered her friends and family to assist her in creating an expansive Sanjhi design in the village square. As they collaborated, the villagers sang hymns in praise of the goddess. Upon the Sanjhi's completion, the goddess bestowed a plentiful harvest upon the village that year. This narrative highlights the communal nature of Sanjhi and the divine inspiration that fuels it. It also underscores the connection between Sanjhi, sustenance, and fertility, illustrating the importance of this folk tradition in crafting and celebrating Sanjhi.

In another folktale, there is a story about the Holi festival. The residents of a small village in Uttar Pradesh crafted elaborate Sanjhi patterns to pay tribute to Goddess Sanjhi. One particular year, the village suffered from a harsh drought, prompting the villagers to pray for rain. The goddess then appeared to them in a vision, advising them to create a Sanjhi that celebrated the splendour of nature and the joy of life. The villagers dedicated themselves to the task, using bright colours derived from flowers, herbs and edible ingredients. On Holi, as they gathered around the Sanjhi in celebration, dark clouds formed, and rain began to pour, providing much-needed relief to the dry land. This tale underscores the link between Sanjhi art, nature, and the goddess' blessings.

According to a story handed down through the ages, it is believed that Goddess Sanjhi had a passion for dancing. One evening, as the villagers crafted a Sanjhi design to pay tribute to her, they began to sing and dance in her honour. Touched by their dedication, the goddess appeared before them and joined in their festivities. As she danced, the colours of her garments transformed into vivid powders that filled the air.

Inspired by her elegance, the villagers started incorporating her movements into their Sanjhi designs, creating patterns that mirrored the rhythm of her dance. This tale highlights the joy of life and the link between art and devotion. These folk stories not only celebrate the importance of Goddess Sanjhi but also showcase the artistic beauty of Sanjhi art in Uttar Pradesh, emphasizing values of community, devotion, artistic expression, and ecological awareness.

### **Understanding the Multifaceted Implications of Goddess Sanjhi's Rituals**

The process of creating Sanjhi becomes a collective experience, where knowledge is transmitted across generations, ensuring the preservation of both the folk ritual and the ecological principles it represents. An important characteristic of this knowledge system is that it is predominantly governed by women, positioning them as the principal custodians of this domain. It is noted by Duhan-Gulia:

The expectation from women to carry on traditions is often rooted in deeply ingrained cultural beliefs that equate cultural preservation with maternal instincts. Women are perceived as the primary nurturers and transmitters of cultural values within the family unit. The weight of ensuring cultural continuity is thus thrust upon women, linking their identity closely with the perpetuation of heritage, a responsibility that extends from domestic rituals to community celebrations. (92)

As a result, the detailed understanding and skills necessary for performing these rituals are frequently transmitted through the maternal line, highlighting the crucial role women play in maintaining cultural traditions.

The entire process of celebrating and venerating Goddess Sanjhi is imbued with metaphorical significance pertaining to a female knowledge system within the Indian context. Additionally, it fosters awareness of ecological issues, which are of contemporary concern. For instance, the songs and hymns performed during the celebration highlight the veneration of feminine energy:

Sanjhi songs very consciously unravel the conscious and unconscious realms of female acculturation constraints and desires in rural-feudal setting and in the process make religion – in the form of female-energy veneration / its folk domestication and articulation – an interlocking sacred-secular space. The desires that are articulated, though emotive / possessive in nature, become socio-psychological markers of female embedding in patriarchal spaces searching for patriarchal patronage largely within patriarchy sanctioned matrimonial configurations. (Rekha 98)

Sanjhi's link to ecological awareness is apparent in its creation, materials, rituals, and customs. As a traditional form of worship, every aspect, from preparation to the act of worship itself, holds special importance. The worship is typically conducted in a specific area of the home or temple, often a clean and sacred space. This area is then purified and sanctified, usually with water and sacred chants, to establish a suitable environment for worship. The main materials used include coloured powders (often derived from natural sources), flowers, and occasionally rice or grains. The image of Goddess Sanjhi is crafted on the wall using cow dung, clay and other natural things. This image is then adorned with natural colours, flowers, bangles, sindoor (vermillion), and garland. The process transcends mere ritual, serving as an expression where the devotee participates in crafting a beautiful symbol of devotion and feminine energy. The use of natural pigments and biodegradable materials highlights a sustainable approach to creation and worship, underscoring the significance of environmental responsibility. During the creation of the image, both married and unmarried women gather around the goddess, singing hymns and songs to call upon her presence and blessings. Moreover, these songs draw inspiration from nature, incorporating themes and narratives that reflect elements from the local or domestic environment. As highlighted by Rekha, "Primarily grounded in rural-domestic world view, the songs articulate rural life, its daily chores, traditional beliefs, family relations, religious manifestations of customs and rituals, almost always from women-centric perspectives (93). With these songs, women seek favour and blessings for peace, prosperity, and spiritual advancement for the family. Women play a unique and essential role in the preparation, worship, and invocation of Goddess Sanjhi. Once

the Sanjhi image is finished, women present food offerings to her, which may include sweets, fruits, and other delicacies, twice a day. This is followed by an aarti ceremony, where an earthen lamp is lit and waved in front of Goddess Sanjhi while hymns and songs are sung. The celebration lasts for nine days, culminating in the respectful dissolution of Sanjhi by dispersing the materials in a natural setting, such as a river or pond, symbolizing the fleeting nature of life and the divine.

In Uttar Pradesh, Sanjhi worship is an integral part of larger celebrations like Navratri and Diwali, where women gather to craft and honour the goddess' image, promoting unity and collective devotion. Additionally, the folktales linked to Goddess Sanjhi highlight ecological themes, placing nature at the forefront and suggesting an awareness of environmental issues. It is pointed out by Devi:

The ceremonial rituals in India...plays a very significant role in the emancipation of nature-worshipping and conservation of nature. The purpose behind these festivals and rituals are attached with human sentiments so that they can be followed wholeheartedly and seriously by the people...This is a sort of acculturation to promote harmony between human and non-human world... (222)

This emphasis on nature underscores the interconnectedness of all life forms and the necessity for ecological harmony. The bond between humans and the environment, as represented by Goddess Sanjhi, inspires a commitment to preserving nature. Sanjhi art also underscores this theme of ecological balance and conservation. Today, Sanjhi is recognized as a form of ecological art, with artists and activists using it to spotlight environmental concerns. Even Sanjhi workshops often stress the significance of sustainable practices, urging participants to connect with their environment and gain a deeper appreciation of ecological concepts.

## Conclusion

In this way, Sanjhi serves as a powerful symbol of the intricate relationship between traditional rituals and environmental awareness. As a living repository of wisdom, it embodies the cultural legacy, women's insights, and ecological mindfulness of the communities that engage in it. Through its collective ceremonies, Sanjhi nurtures a profound bond with the natural world, encouraging sustainable habits and environmental responsibility. It is fair to say that in a time characterized by ecological issues, the teachings within Sanjhi hold greater significance than ever. By acknowledging and appreciating the environmental awareness inherent in this folk tradition, modern society can find motivation for current initiatives aimed at sustainability and community involvement.

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