



## Goddess Sanjhi : Documenting the Divergence <sup>[1]</sup>



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### Abstract

*The evolution of folk art is often marked by two concurrent realities: a change in materials and stylistic elements on the one hand and a potential decline on the other. These two facets are interconnected, shaping the trajectory of folk art over time. The interaction between these two realities is complex and varies across different traditions of folk art. Some folk-art forms successfully navigate change, embracing new materials and styles while maintaining their cultural roots. Others may experience a more pronounced decline due to various external factors. This complex relationship underscores a delicate balance between embracing modernity and safeguarding cultural heritage, reflecting a nuanced negotiation between continuity and change within the artistic domain. This article documents and examines the divergence or changes in the form and worship of Goddess Sanjhi from Haryana. With the changing role of women in the society, who are the prime creators of this folk art, the tradition of Sanjhi making has faced considerable decline in the state in the contemporary times. The conclusion explores the various possible means to preserve and safe guard this art form.*

**Keywords:** Sanjhi, folk art, Durga, change, decline, Haryana

### Research Paper

#### Introduction

Sanjhi is a traditional folk artform of artistic expression and ritual associated with goddess worship in Haryana. It is created and worshipped during the festival of Navaratri and involves creating designs using cow dung and clay representing the devi. Sanjhi is a seasonal practice and a form of cultural expression intertwined with traditional rituals and agricultural practices in the state. Such maiden earth goddesses are connected to matriarchal societies (Jayakar, 239). Devotees participate in prayer, fasting, and cultural events during this nine-day festival. It provides a means for individuals and communities to connect with the divine, strengthen social bonds, and celebrate their shared beliefs and values (Prabhakar, 73–78).

The creation of the Sanjhi goddess is a ritual act of devotion. It is believed that the goddess Sanjhi is Goddess

Durga herself, who visits them during Navaratri, and the designs serve as a form of invitation for her presence. During the Navratri pooja following the new moon day of Ashwin or Asauj, women begin worshipping Sanjhi made of clay, cow dung, lime, turmeric and terracotta colouring. It involves creating a sacred space, often on a home's south-facing wall, where the female devotees can interact with the deity. The ritual typically offers items like fruits, homemade sweets, and symbolic elements like water, fire, and light.

In the worship of Sanjhi, both tangible materials and intangible traditions (Duhan-Gulia, 221–227) play a significant role in conveying the thought and message behind the worshipping practice associated with the deity. A brass platter (thali) and earthen lamp (diya) are prime materials which enhance the visual and ceremonial aspects of the worship. Other elements placed on the platter are homemade sweets, a glass of water, fruits,

boiled grams, and kheer (puffed rice). On the first day of the worship, barley seeds are soaked in water, and ten balls are made of it. Then, the women place grass blades in each of the balls. “Hum Sanjhi devi ki puja mein jyot lagate hain, keer ya halwa banate hain, phal rakhte hain, pani or keel or bakli rakhte hain. Puja ke pahle din jaun ke gole bana kar uspar ghas lagate hain. Jaise is jaun ke bij phutate hain, usi tarah humareen kheton mein phasal ugati hai” (Rajwanti). As evident by Rajwanti’s statement, this ritual is deeply rooted in the agricultural traditions of Haryana, and it becomes a symbol of celebration of fertility and prosperity for the folks. Barley represents the first crop of the season, as the Sanjhi festival is celebrated at the time of the sowing of a new crop. “Jab Sanjhi puji jati hai, tab hum kheton mein bij dalte hain. Maa Sanjhi hume achi phasal deti hai” (Anita). It holds cultural significance in various Indian folk traditions and rituals. It is considered sacred in Hinduism and is often used as an offering in rituals and ceremonies related to weddings, harvesting, births and deaths. It is a way of seeking blessings for fertility, both in terms of agricultural yields and the family’s prosperity.

### Research Problem

As an expressive manifestation deeply rooted in cultural identities, the art of Sanjhi navigates a trajectory shaped by societal transformations. The celebration style of Sanjhi in Haryana has undergone notable changes over time, reflecting the evolving cultural, social, and artistic dynamics within the region. Changes in cultural practices, including shifts in religious or festive ceremonies, also influence the methods and materials used in making Sanjhi. Traditionally, Sanjhi in Haryana was deeply rooted in religious and folk traditions, primarily associated with the worship of the goddess Sanjhi during the festival of Navratri. The artistic expressions were often created with eco-friendly materials derived from nature. However, several factors have contributed to a transformation in the materials used and style of making Sanjhi in Haryana over time.

### Objectives of the study

What are the materials, which have replaced the traditional material? Which factors led to these changes? Why is the art of Sanjhi making declining? These are some of the questions this article intends to explore. The conclusion provides possible measures to protect the traditions of Sanjhi making and solutions for its revival in the state.

### Hypothesis

More recently, in place of the traditional materials like cow-dung, clay, geru, and lime, the females, especially young girls, have introduced the use of thermocol sheets, different sizes of mirrors, ribbons, chemical based colours to create and adorn their deities, as seen in Fig. 1.[2] The females were and are conscious of evolving tastes and contemporary sensibilities, experiment with innovative materials to infuse a fresh aesthetic appeal into their creations. This creative exploration is not merely a departure from tradition but a deliberate effort to contemporise the art form, ensuring its relevance in dynamic cultural landscapes. “Ab gohar aur mitti se kaun kaam karta hai. Meine apni Sanjhi nayi chijoon se banayi hai; main in sab ko mila kar ek sundar Sanjhi bana sakti hun jo ghar ko bhi gandaa nahin karegi” (Sonia). Simultaneously, introducing modern materials is a pragmatic strategy to attract a wider audience, including those whose preferences may align more closely with contemporary artistic expressions. By maintaining a balance between tradition and innovation, these women artists navigate the intersection of heritage preservation and the evolving taste of a diverse audience, fostering their art’s continued vibrancy and adaptability.



Fig. 1 Goddess Sanjhi made of thermocol sheet cutouts, poster colours and glitters on a wooden board.

In the fast-growing competitive world, artistic innovation and the desire for creative expression have led the Haryana women to experiment with new materials for making Sanjhi as they compete with each other. Fuelled by a desire for unique and distinct creations, women find themselves immersed in an environment where they must continuously try to stand out. This experimentation with materials and style reflects their commitment to artistic expression. Various other factors contribute to alterations in the materials employed and stylistic aspects of celebrating this art form.

The transformation in the availability and accessibility of materials constitutes a pivotal factor in the evolution of this traditional practice. This phenomenon is notably observed in urban settings. The urbanisation process, marked by a shift from agrarian landscapes to urban centres, challenges rural females who traditionally rely on specific materials integral to their art. The transition from villages to the cities often precipitates a scarcity or unavailability of traditional materials such as clay, geru or cow dung. The resulting need for these female artists to adapt to alternative options that are more readily accessible locally engenders a complex convergence of artistic expression and resource availability, wherein the creative process becomes intricately interwoven with the practical considerations of material accessibility. The diminishing availability of traditional resources necessitates re-evaluating material choices, compelling artisans to seek alternatives that align with the urban milieu. This shift underscores the adaptive nature of traditional arts as their creators confront the pragmatic reality of resource scarcity.

### Relevance of the study

One of the primary concerns associated with incorporating modern materials is the potential dilution of authenticity, making Sanjhi an emblematic representation of cultural identity. Sanjhi, revered for its connection to specific regions, communities, and historical contexts, risks losing its distinctive character when modern materials alter the original aesthetic. Practitioners of Sanjhi grapple with the challenge of preserving the authenticity of Sanjhi while acknowledging the inevitability of material adaptation in the face of modernity. The introduction of modern materials represents a response to the challenges, offering both a lifeline for the survival of Sanjhi and a potential source of tension as they grapple with the intrusion of the contemporary.

Although authenticity and other challenges persist, the creative synthesis of tradition and modernity offers a

pathway for the continued vitality of these cherished cultural expressions. In navigating this balance, women in the two districts of Haryana contribute to the ongoing narrative of cultural evolution, ensuring that the art of Sanjhi remains vibrant and relevant in the ever-changing world. In embracing new materials and styles, these women are committed to keeping this tradition alive in the face of contemporary challenges, as it is crucial to ensure that Sanjhi retains its distinct character, reflecting the cultural nuances and historical narratives embedded in this revered art.

### Research Methodology

The results of this article are based on empirical research, which includes fieldwork, interviewing with elderly and young females and collection of primary and secondary visual data. Rohtak and Jhajjar are the two districts in which field work for this article has been conducted.

### Results

The transformation extends beyond the tangible aspects of the art form, encapsulating the broader socio-cultural context in which Sanjhi is embedded. Balancing all these considerations with preserving artistic integrity becomes critical to this ongoing dialogue. As the art form grapples with the challenges posed by the social changing dynamics and fortunate improvements in the roles of women, the essence of Sanjhi risks being overshadowed. Unfortunately, this negotiation has contributed to a discernible decline in celebrating the traditional art of Sanjhi as its evolution, beyond mere alterations in material and stylistic elements, is accompanied by waning interest in its celebration. The palpable decline in the exuberance with which Sanjhi is commemorated underscores a multifaceted shift in the dynamics of its observance. At the core of this transformation lies a confluence of societal and cultural factors collectively contributing to the decline of Sanjhi celebrations. Economic and social changes, coupled with a shift towards a more cosmopolitan lifestyle, have altered the priorities and preferences of the population, contributing to the fading prominence of indigenous cultural practices.

The emergence of alternative forms of entertainment and leisure, fuelled by technological advancements, may divert attention and participation away from traditional celebrations, thereby contributing to the noticeable waning of enthusiasm for Sanjhi (Sonia). The digital age has ushered in an era where information is disseminated in the blink of an eye, rendering traditional folk art forms seemingly archaic. Therefore, the advent

and proliferation of digital media have ushered in a transformative era, reshaping societal behaviours and preferences. One salient repercussion of this digital age is the diminishing engagement with traditional folk art forms like Sanjhi, a decline rooted in the short attention spans cultivated by the omnipresence of digital stimuli.

The homogenisation of culture, driven by various factors such as globalisation, urbanisation, and intercultural interactions, has been identified as a contributing factor to the decline of Sanjhi in Haryana. The increasing influence of modernisation and globalisation has led to a shift in societal values and preferences. In the context of traditional women tribal artists in India, LaDuke says, "As national government seek political and social control of tribal peoples, their traditional life styles become disrupted" (LaDuke, 19). Sanjhi, as a traditional folk art, is intricately linked to the region's unique cultural identity. However, the increasing prevalence of standardised cultural practices, often influenced by broader national or global trends, has led to a diminishing space for the distinctive elements of Sanjhi within the cultural milieu of the region. Moreover, the standardisation of cultural expression often dilutes unique regional elements, making it challenging for traditional art forms like Sanjhi to compete for attention and support (Pieterse, 1389).

Homogenisation tends to prioritise more universally recognisable or commercially viable cultural forms, side-lining traditional and localised expressions. As individuals increasingly adopt mainstream cultural practices, the traditional nuances embedded in Sanjhi may be overlooked or marginalised, leading to a decline in its practice and appreciation.

The decline of Sanjhi in Haryana is not merely a consequence of cultural homogenisation but also a reflection of broader socio-cultural transformations. The societal fabric is transforming at an unprecedented pace, with changing gender norms and values impacting the role of folk art. As societies become more individualistic and cosmopolitan, there is a diminishing appreciation for the communal and traditional aspects embedded in folk art. The collective experiences and shared narratives encapsulated in folk traditions struggle to find resonance in a society increasingly driven by individualised pursuits and instant gratification.

The perpetuation of cultural traditions is often considered a noble endeavour, safeguarding the heritage of a community or society. However, it is observed that the responsibility for carrying on these traditions

disproportionately falls upon women. Historically entrenched gender roles have assigned specific duties and responsibilities to men and women within societal frameworks. In the context of cultural preservation, women are frequently burdened with the task of transmitting traditions, rituals, and culture to successive generations. L Mani claims that "...the maintenance of traditions and identity have historically been placed on South Asian women's shoulders" (qtd. in Dasgupta 957). This gendered division of duties often compels women to navigate the delicate balance between tradition and modernity, leaving them tethered to the past while negotiating contemporary demands.

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. Thus, the intricate knowledge and expertise required to conduct these rituals are often passed down matrilineally, underscoring women's significance in preserving cultural practices. The weight of ensuring the seamless execution of these rituals further reinforces the notion of cultural continuity as an inherent part of the feminine role.

However, in modern times, the urban setting, characterised by the fast-paced nature of professional commitments and many responsibilities, makes it challenging for women to align their schedules with traditional, more prevalent communal activities in rural contexts. Unlike the village women, who are generally homemakers, urban women are engaged in professions that consume most of their day. The emotional labour associated with maintaining traditions can contribute to feelings of pressure, reinforcing traditional gender norms and limiting women's agency in determining their cultural engagement.

Their work timings are also different, which prevents them from engaging in activities that require gatherings at a particular time. This disparity in daily routines reflects broader socio-economic shifts, highlighting the nuanced ways in which gender roles, urbanisation and occupational diversification impact women's leisure and communal engagement patterns, ultimately shaping their societal roles. Addressing the unique challenges urban

women face in reconciling professional commitments with traditional communal activities is suggestive of the evolving dynamics of gender roles and societal expectations in contemporary urban settings.

While women bear a substantial burden in preserving cultural traditions, it is essential to acknowledge their resilience and agency. However, these females see this engagement as a source of empowerment and understand the inherent value of cultural heritage in shaping a community's identity, nurturing interconnection, and transmitting intergenerational knowledge. As Shealy states, "Art production increases women's sense of self-worth and independence, it allows opportunities for creative autonomy and expression, and heightens the roles and status of women within their communities" (Shealy, 318). Through their involvement in cultural preservation efforts, women often become catalysts for social change and advocates for the continuity of traditions. Their participation ranges from the revitalisation of traditional crafts and the documentation of oral histories to the organisation of cultural events that celebrate and transmit ancestral practices. In these endeavours, women find agency and empowerment as their contributions become integral to the sustainability of cultural heritage. Beyond shouldering cultural responsibilities, women emerge as key agents in shaping the narrative of their communities, fostering a sense of pride and resilience that extends beyond the preservation of traditions into realms of personal and collective empowerment. Recognising and supporting women's agency in shaping the narrative of cultural continuity can contribute to more equitable and inclusive approaches to heritage preservation.

The challenges associated with urban living extend beyond the temporal constraints faced by women; they also encompass the accessibility of materials integral to the crafting of deity sculptures and the limitations imposed by urban regulations. Unlike rural areas where cattle-keeping is more common, many cities enforce prohibitions on this practice, restricting the ready availability of materials such as cow dung, which traditionally plays a significant role in sculpting deity images. Also, urban landscapes do not always provide the physical space or conducive environment for practising and preserving this folk art. Sanjhi requires specific settings, such as open spaces for community gatherings, which are limited in urban areas. The confluence of these factors exemplifies the multifaceted challenges that urbanisation poses to traditional religious and communal practices, necessitating a nuanced

understanding of how urban lifestyles intersect with and sometimes impede the cultural and religious traditions deeply rooted in rural contexts.

### **Conclusion/ Discussions: Possible means to preserve and safe guard the tradition**

Sanjhi, like many traditional art forms, is considered outdated and has been replaced by more contemporary forms of worship and creative expression in mostly urban areas of the state. In essence, the changes in the style of the Sanjhi celebration in Haryana over time reflect a dynamic response to contemporary challenges and opportunities. While preserving its traditional roots in other regions, Sanjhi art demonstrates its adaptability, ensuring its continued resonance in the evolving cultural landscape of Haryana.

Rekindling the celebration of Sanjhi necessitates a concerted effort to reconcile modernity with tradition, fostering an environment where the art form can evolve without sacrificing its inherent cultural richness and historical significance. Scholars and artisans may play a crucial role in documenting and interpreting the changes, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the evolving dynamics of Sanjhi art in Haryana. Thus, efforts to revitalise and sustain Sanjhi ought to involve community engagement, educational initiatives, and targeted interventions aimed at promoting the cultural significance of Sanjhi within the changing dynamics of Haryana's cultural landscape are essential to counteract the homogenisation trend and ensure the continued legacy of this folk art form.

Efforts to preserve and revitalise traditional crafts may involve changing methods and materials. Local communities, cultural organisations, and governmental initiatives should collaborate to find a balance between preserving the authenticity of Sanjhi and ensuring its continuity through adaptation. Also, educational institutions that support this art may introduce changes through workshops or collaborations. Such support can bring in new techniques and materials while respecting the cultural roots of the craft. In navigating these changes, it is essential to strike a balance that honours the environmental and cultural significance of traditional Sanjhi in Haryana while embracing the adaptability necessary for its continued existence in a dynamic socio-cultural and natural landscape.

The manner of celebration has also evolved with the integration of technology in the contemporary society in Haryana. The young females who traditionally make Sanjhi should be encouraged to utilise digital tools to

showcase their creations on social media platforms and engage in collaborative projects that transcend geographical boundaries. This technological integration will facilitate wider dissemination and opens new avenues for creative experimentation; hence, Sanjhi celebrations will become more inclusive and participatory.

### Footnotes

1. The research for this article has been undertaken as part of a research project funded under the auspices of Chaudhary Ranbir Singh Institute of Social and Economic Change, Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak, Haryana between the years 2022–2024.
2. Created by 21-year-old Sonia Parmar, from the village of Jassia, Rohtak during a workshop at Government PG College for Women, Rohtak.

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### Interviews

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- Rajwanti Devi (78-year-old, Jahangirpur village, Jhajjar). Interview conducted by Manisha, 03 October 2022.
- Sonia Parmar (21-year-old, Jassia village, Rohtak). Interview conducted by Anjali Duhan-Gulia, 10 October 2023.

