



Celebrating *Sanjhi*: The Rural Goddess and its Oral Inheritance

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Abstract

India is a land of ritualistic and symbolic verities and varieties. Its sacred and secular space abounds in Gods and Goddesses, festivals, rituals and conventions which together become the living metaphor of its truth. The idea of *Sanjhi* manifests itself both as an actuality of a goddess and as a festivity with distinct cultural, symbolic and narrative values and hues. An age-old rural folk festival, *Sanjhi* is celebrated in many states across northern, central and western India. Its celebrations follow a seasonal rhythm. A rich song-story repertoire surrounds the lore of *Sanjhi*. The songs of *Sanjhi* very consciously unravel the conscious and unconscious realms of female acculturation constraints and desires in rural-feudal setting and in the process make religion an interlocking sacred-secular space. The paper is premised on this understanding of folk culture, folk traditions and folk festivities. It focuses on the song repertoire of *Sanjhi*, the rural goddess to understand and analyse their poetics and politics.

Keywords: Acculturation, Iconography, Festival, Ritual, *Sanjhi*

I

Festivities and rituals constitute an important link between nature and the culture, past and the present, the imaginative and the concrete and as such are important constituents of the cultural-civilizational trajectories and socio-historical imaginary of a community. As repositories of cultural and religious world views, they become invaluable reference points to understand the life philosophies, perspectives and cultural psyche of the people who practice them. At the same time, they in their historical evolution, help chart the ontological, epistemological

and pedagogical trajectories of a culture. These festivals and rituals not only help its practitioners negotiate, in fact celebrate the mundane; they also help a community to establish a sense of harmony and hope amidst the apparent chaos of life in transition. But this praxis is also marked by its own ambivalences and ironies. Premised on this understanding of folk festivals/rituals, the present paper focuses on an important socio-religious and cultural tradition, i.e., *Sanjhi* to bring out the poetic and aesthetic salience and significance of *Sanjhi* as identity marking/unmarking ‘gendered’ tradition within India’s multicultural ethos.

Sanjhi is a festivity dedicated to – like *Durga Puja* – female power or *Shakti*. Its celebrations follow a seasonal rhythm, but with spatio-temporal variations. It is celebrated in many states across northern, central and western India, mainly Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and rural Delhi. Though geographically extensive yet the scale and intensity of its celebration do not match that of the *Durga Puja* or *Chhat*, which thanks to the media glare and political exigencies, have attained mass popularity over time.

Sanjhi is mainly celebrated during *Navratras*, but there are many regions of India where it, in its varied forms, is also celebrated during *Pitr-paksha/Shraadh-paksh*. As a female deity with many hues, *Sanjhi* draws its appeal and aura from diverse sources and locations; while as a religious-mythical icon it is seen as a manifestation of Sarswati, Parvati, Uma, Katyayani and even Durga, at a more mundane level, it even embodies in its persona, echoes of caste and communal connotations. In rural songs across regional spread, *Sanjhi* usually emerges as a village-maiden – a goddess, rural belle and friend rolled into one. As a feminine life principal, an aesthetic/fine art icon/symbol and a festival, *Sanjhi* is mainly observed by unmarried girls. They fast, sing and worship *Sanjhi* with an ostensible aim to attain the boon of a good husband and an eventual matrimonial bliss that includes the blessings and

affections of their future in-laws, especially sisters-in-law (*nanad* and *bhabhi*).

Sanjhi is addressed variously as '*Sanjh-phul*', '*Sanjhya-phuli*', '*Sanjha-sanjul*', '*Sanjulde*', '*Chchabari*' and '*Hanja*' etc. The traditional motifs and pictographs through which *Sanjhi* gets manifested as a narrative/ritual during the festivities are the folk ways of invoking and propitiating this feminine spirit. In some traditions, *Sanjhi* is also envisioned as a married girl, who is not very happy at her 'in-laws' place. She is shown visiting her parents and at the end of her stay there, she is taken away by her husband to his family."¹ So *Sanjhi* exists and embeds itself in rural-folk consciousness in various forms and in many semantic echoes. It is believed that as *Sanjhi* is a collective (*sanjhi* or *sanjha*) goddess of all girls, so she is aptly called *Sanjhi* and who is usually worshipped in evenings. Hinting at the diversity of *Sanjhi* association, Ruchira Ghosh in "Rang Sey Roshni" says:

[S]anjhi could also be derived from 'sanjh' or 'sandhya' meaning evening, the twilight time between dusk and darkness, when the temple sanjhis are revealed; (it could be related to 'samaja' or community as it is the cooperative effort of several priests that is required to produce the elaborate temple sanjhi), and then again it could be derived from 'sancha' meaning a mould which creates a precise impression, which too describes a main feature of the sanjhi paper cut. But the important function that distinguishes sanjhi from certain other traditions of decoration, such as 'alpana' or 'rangoli', which are also auspicious designs made during festivities, is that these others are not deified and worshipped as is the sanjhi image. (1006)

Sanjhi, as would be apparent from various songs that have been contextualized/discussed in the latter part of this paper, is much more than a mere utilitarian or boon seeking folk medium; is at once an expression of art and imagination,

familial and social aspirations, mythical inheritance and agrarian worldview, an ostensible maker of cultural cohesiveness and female bonding. Apparently an inclusive 'religious-cultural' package/practice, herein fine art vies with folk songs and narratives for creative expression, and both poetics and aesthetics, that is, songs, stories and iconography combine with each other to weave a tapestry of gendered/human emotions, aspirations and desires – individual and collective.

Sanjhi, as a cultural-religious practice, is deeply rooted in oral culture. The element of orality, an overwhelming presence in its folk repertoire, cuts across the boundaries between the high, folk and the popular cultures. As orality is accretive in its scope and day to day practices, it is amenable to appropriations, interpolations and adaptations. As such the oral element in *Sanjhi* makes this tradition multi-focal and multilayered. This inter-art admixture and its evolution is best exemplified in songs that constitute the majority of *Sanjhi's* narrative-expressive or communicative repertoire. These songs, taken together, evince multiple moods, perspectives and evocative rhythms –incorporating devotional, domestic, seasonal and agrarian textures. In Braj, this repertoire is further replenished by *devalya* devotional tradition, where the *Sanjhi* songs are inspired by Radha-Krishna lore, *rasas* and *bhavas*.

Girls get together to sing these songs in the evenings, just after the dusk. They hold lighted earthen lamps in their hands and gather around the image of *Sanjhi*. The chorus they sing abound in folk imagery, domestic and agrarian rhythms, culinary preferences and habits – food and eating, and female desires, yearnings and aspirations. *Sanjhi's* immersion is coupled with yet another cycle of songs, though mainly in the nature of *vidai* in sync with the mood and context of the festivity. The *Sanjhi* song repertoire is made up of *geets* (social songs), *bhajans* (devotional songs) and *aartis* (religious songs), or the devotional, domestic, seasonal and agrarian rhythms of life.

They are called *Sanjhi* songs – and as is clear from the preceding paragraph – they are meant to be sung in the evenings and as a propitiating incantation or invocation to *Sanjhi*, the goddess. The expression '*Sanjhigaaven*' in fact means: 'let's sing *Sanjhi*.' In many parts of Haryana, songs to initiate any auspicious occasion/celebration – social or religious are termed as *Sanjhi*. So *Sanjhi*'s cultural all inclusivity is indicated by such expressions as: '*Sanjhi gana*'; '*Sanjhi dalna*'; '*Sanjhi mangna*'; '*Sanjhi karna*'; '*Sanjhi poojna*'; '*Sanjhi mandhna*'; '*Sanjhi dhokna*' etc.

Traditionally *Sanjhi* icon is made of natural products such as cow-dung, earthen clay, soot, lime. Though in modern times, various constraints could be held responsible for the substitution of natural and organic materials by market-available plastic and sequins. But the songs in which she asks for cow-dung, wheat, butter etc. still survive. A typical *Sanjhi* wall iconography in Haryanavi tradition looks somewhat like this.



***Sanjhi* Making in Progress (Kivana, Panipat, Haryana)**

II

Broadly speaking, in its contemporary avatar *Sanjhi* crisscrosses the life lived and life desired for with an underlay of conventionality and innovation. It is both a propitiatory practice and marker of cultural identity where feminine principal gets articulated as sacred-secular, domestic-deified energy and idea.

Accordingly, *Sanjhi geets* emerge as oral stores that house within them and display a veritable treat of sounds, sights, sensibilities and rhythms that capture the being and becoming of this icon and its practitioners. Primarily grounded in rural-domestic worldview, the songs articulate rural life, its daily chores, traditional beliefs, family relations, religious manifestations of customs and rituals, almost always from women-centric perspectives. These songs are nature based; various motifs from the immediate/intimate surroundings of local/domestic significance are used as thematic and narrative material in the folk songs.

Since these songs/*geets* renderings roughly proximate nature/rural life rhythms, their lyrics may not be very 'cohesive' or aesthetically-fine-tuned expressions. A typical *Sanjhi* song may begin by invoking the goddess, shift gears to mundane relational dynamics in the form of *bhai-bhabhi* (brother & sister-in-law) praise and simultaneous castigation of the *saas-nanand* (mother-in-law's or daughter-in-law's) misdemeanor or misbehavior. Often these songs are expressions of love for the daughter and reiteration of parental wealth vis-à-vis the in-laws' miserliness. The lyrics are simple, repetitive, dramatic and exaggerated. They are often structured as interpersonal dialogues:

Maan, bhabhi ko mukhro kaiso
Nak chana si, munh batuo so, ghunghat man mein laai
Thodu khani, bhotu kamani
*Je jagu jiti aai*²

(Source: Kela Bai, Sanganer, Rajasthan)

‘Mother, How is the face of *bhabhi*
‘Sculpted nose, blessing showering mouth,
the virtuous heart
Sparse eater, hard working
The epitome of conventional ideals.’³

Sometimes the lyrics are very interesting, yet equally meaningless. They are structured as forced rhymes. The idea is to express, vent out the suppressed and create meaning within patriarchal hegemony that circumscribe them, and through rhymes that may sound meaningless within controlled linguistic structures but which nevertheless ecocatively carry and express their pain and longing:

Maa, bhaiya kahan-kahan byahe, parevariya
Maa, bhabhi ka kalai, pareveriya
Aath bilaiya, naun chakchundari,
Solah puse lai, o parveriya

(Source: Mansi and Mamta, Barsana, U.P.)

‘Mother! to whom you married my brother . . .
oh la, la.
Mother! What things my sister-in-law has brought . . .
oh, la, la.’

However, in most of these songs, the singers address the songs to their companion with a sense of joy and merriment. One group of singers asks the other group for certain information which the girls of the other group part with in the form of songs. One query that persistently underlines these songs is regarding the number of brothers *Sanjhi* has. The query is answered through enumeration – nine, ten brothers. The tenor of the answer, and the additional information about brothers’ sons – five to fifty (umpteens) nephews – suggests how important the masculine line in the maternal family is for the girl even after her marriage. A family that is strong physically, materially and emotionally – and has patriarch to guard and honour these – ostensibly strengthens her position and respect in her in-laws’ house. It amounts to carving a patronizing space

in a socio-cultural-matrimonial structures where patriarchy is pitted against patriarchy. To illustrate, the following song not only underlines this spatial-matrimonial yearning but also reiterates the idea by demonstrating the importance of marriage and female fecundity/ fertility within north Indian folk-consciousness, culture and community:

*Hey baahan, mein tenne bujhoon Sanjhi kei terey bhai
Panch pachas bhateejay nau-dus tere bhai
Hey bahu kyaan ka to biyha rachaya kyaan ki sagaayi
Nau ka to biyaha rachaya dus ki sagayi*

(Source: Kamla, village Jagsi)

‘Oh! Sister *Sanjhi*,
I ask you how many brothers you have
Fifty-five are your nephews and nine-ten are your
brothers Oh! How many of them are married and how
many engaged? Nine are married and ten got engaged.’

Most of the *Sanjhi* songs revolve around the theme of brother-sister love; they underline brothers’ concern for their sisters. Within Indian relational-social hierarchy, brother symbolizes support and strength for his sister; he is her defense in times of crisis. Even *Sanjhi*, the goddess, knew and believed that her brother would stand by her and others through life’s odds and eventualities. Almost every song exhibits this feeling and bond. As a responsible family heir, the brother is ever-ready to concede every demand of her sister:

*Sanjhiya to mangey kaan ki bali
Kahan se lavan kaan ki bali
Kahan se lavan kaan ki bali
Sanjhiya ka dada ji sunhar ghar gaya
Wahan se laya kaan ki bali*

(Source: Suman Chauhan, Mandu, M.P.)

‘Sanjhi asks for ear dangles
From where do I get ear dangles?’

From where do I get ear dangles?
Sanjhya's grandfather went to goldsmith
From where he got her ear dangles.'

Within feudal-agrarian social fabric of India, especially of the states where *Sanjhi* is celebrated, the girl child is considered to be '*prayaadhan*' – a being, a property, who only resides/stocked at her natal home till she moves to her real home after marriage. But all through her married life she remains strongly connected to her roots emotionally and materially. In the event of any crisis in her personal life or in the life of anyone in the family of her in-laws, it is the duty and responsibility of her parental family to support in and resolve her crisis. So, the size of brother's family is a life sustaining metaphor throughout in a girl's life. Moreover, the emphasis on male strength, their 'numbers' is indicative of the importance of preserving and cementing of kinship relationships, fondness for each other, and consequent matrimonial harmony.

Besides songs, Aarties (evening prayers) constitute yet another important facet of Sanjhi- repertoire. These are unfailingly offered in all the places wherever *Sanjhi* is venerated. Though a kind of cultural amnesia increasingly surrounds *Sanjhi*, but the families where *Sanjhi* still survives as a cultural memory and a living practice – especially in the pockets of Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Braj or Malwa – *Aarti* is a vibrant though a modified affair. It is very much an integral and important ritual of *Sanjhi* tradition. The lyrics of *Sanjhi-Aarties* are more or less similar across regions. Though as a goddess, *Sanjhi* is addressed and invoked as a companion, the focus in these lyrics is on propitiating the goddess through offering of food and flowers, and on receiving a reciprocal boon – a boon of marriage and happy married life thereafter – from her:

Sanjhi maiee, Sanjhi maiee
Khol kivad
Kaun aaie, kaun aaie
Dhokanwali

Kay layi, kay layi
Dhokan wali
Chameli ke phool, aarti ki thali
(Source: Sona, Mandu)

‘Oh! Mother *Sanjhi*, Mother *Sanjhi*
Open the door
Who is there, who is there?
Worshipper is here.
What you got, what you got?
Oh! Worshipper
Jasmine flowers and a plate of worship’
(my trans.)

Nin tu jaag Sanjhi jaag
Sain jaag, pain bhaag
Mein aai tere dwar
Mennu taar, mennu taar
(Source: Mina, Samana)

Aarta ey aarta sanjhi mai aarta
Aarta ka phool, chameli ki tehni
Ke khaveygi ke peeveygi
Laddoo khaoongi, pedey khaoongi
(Source: Sumita, Ghevra Delhi)

Oh! *Sanjhi* Maa I pray and sing
Flowers, jasmine twig for worship
What will you eat?
And what will you drink?
I’ll eat laddoo, I’ll eat pede
(condensed milk sweet).’

Even in case of the present form of *Aarti*, the mixing of varied dimensions of life is common. It reiterates the element of naivety, innocence, simplicity and elemental organicity of/in *Sanjhi* orature.

In this typical *Sanjhi* prayer, the goddess is asked what she would like to eat and wear. Many songs/prayers talk about what she wants and what her likes and dislikes are. Freedom and choice of husband /life partner is also kept before her. These songs give a vent to a girl's pent-up emotions. These reflect their deep desire and a long-suppressed sentiment for expressing and exercising their choice in choosing their partners which they are denied by their society even today. As a cultural-religious expression *Sanjhi* seems to promise a space of their own to the girls, and revisit this space through conventional-innovative motifs and iconic expressions of *Sanjhi* creatively and comprehensively through the convergence of art and narrativity – a simultaneous process of designing, decorating, composing and singing. But how liberating or empowering is orature finally?

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. At times – in *Sanjhi* songs – these spaces are banteringly subverted to let out the steam against actual or perceived relational toxicity that matrimonial spaces tend to constrain married women with:

Hey meri sanjhi teri champa phooli aangi, kurban sanjhi!

Ho mera susra, teri dadhi likdi kachra, kurban sanjhi!

Ho meri sasu, teri gin gin to dun pansu, kurban sanjhi!

Ho mera jetha, tera khari kaisa peta ,kurban sanjhi!

Ho mera devar, tu jugnu ka leybulad ka jebda, kurban sanjhi!

Hey meri jithani, tureneychugdiaanni, kurban sanjhi!

Hey meri durani, tu haton bikti aanni, kurban sanjhi!
Ho nandohiya, tere handi maru doiya, kurban sanjhi!
(Source: Mohini Nama, Karauli)

Therefore, women centric folk-rural traditions like *Sanjhi* not only provide exclusive space of their own to the girls but also give them an outlet for creative expression in different forms – designing, decorating, composing, singing etc. But there is a catch! Though it is *Sanjhi* onto which the fulfillment of young girls’ desires converges, yet ironically it is the brother – a male – on whose ‘strength’ this desire is fructified within the folk-feudal socio-existential exigencies. And a kind of fear permeates *Sanjhi* if she transgresses this spatial order, even as a married woman:

Seinja bai ja tu thare ghar ja
Thari maa mareygi peetegi
Hirniyan ke bada bada daant, choriyan darpegi
Seinja bai ja tu thare ghar ja, thari maa maregi
peeteygi Mahun to nahi jaoon dada ji, saasriye
Saasriye ka nakta log
Khawe khajooriya baichey ber
(Source: Kaino Bai, Maheshwar, M.P.)

Though primarily a female affair containing and articulating female desires, yet *Sanjhi* song repertoire contains within it diverse existential strands. There are many songs, for example, in this song-story repertoire that are dedicated to the ancestors; they not only venerate but offer ‘offerings’ to the dead ones:

Jag sanjhi jag, terey mathey lagey bhag
Tu to sada a suhag
Norta meri sanjhi mai ka
Solaa kajal pitro ka
Uth meri sanjhi khol kuvaad
Chhori aai terey dwar
(Source: Jyoti, village Kumasapur, Sonapat)

III

Sanjhi is much more than an art form, a religious festival, a social festivity or a secular tradition; it is all rolled into one. It is an idea and its invocation, a thought and its praxis, an art, artifact and its articulation that still unfolds and evolves in rural settings. It would not be an exaggeration if it is said that *Sanjhi* is a living metaphor – distinct yet diffused; simple yet complex; constant yet changing; superficial yet grounded – of various shades of life still being lived.

Sanjhi's songs represent every young girl/woman and symbolize her desires, dreams and fears in life and relations. While these songs lead one to the inner/hidden core of feminine fantasies, yet these fantasies create are ironically echoed hegemonically. Any empowering space that these songs offer is either in the carnivalesque letting off of the toxicity within or as ironic, even if ambivalent construal of patriarchy endowed patronizing spaces.

Over all, as a rural-agrarian-gender echo-system, these songs make available a cultural and semantic palimpsest, where the old idiom and folk understandings of life and rituals is layered over by the new – a *Sanjhi*-space of ambivalences, cultural customization and crossovers.

Endnotes

1. For source explanation and further clarity see:
<http://ignca.nic.in/sanjhi/introduction.htm>
2. *Sanjhi* songs/extracts cited here have been taken from across the spatiotemporal spread of this practice. These were collected and curated during my interaction with actual *Sanjhi* practitioners.
3. All translations in this paper are mine.

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