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EVENING BLOSSOMS: THE TEMPLE TRADITION OF SANJHI IN VRNDAVANA

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INTRODUCTION

I went to pick flowers where there were thick trees growing along the river Jamuna;

A branch of a Punnaga tree caught my upper cloth and tore my blouse.

At that very moment, suddenly, someone came out of that thick growth of malati vines, and without saying a word, freed my cloth and stared at me so...

I was flustered and bend my head shyly, my eyes glancing from side to side:

He freed my cloth but captured my heard -- shame prevents me from saying more!

I don't know his name; his limbs are dark and he wears a yellow cloth.

("The clever girlfriend") Nagari Sakhi (says) now let's go to that grove to gather flowers for Sanjhi!

This verse by Nagariya is one of the numerous devotional (bhakti) songs that describe the tradition of creating Sanjhi designs with flowers. Written in the indigenous Hindi dialect called Brajabhasa during the eighteenth century, it is sung at the Radhavallabha temple at Vrndavana each evening during the fortnight following the full moon of August-September when Sanjhi designs are created. Like the refrain of Dhrupada singing that returns again and again to establish the ground upon which the harmonic edifice is built, this verse sets the scene. It serves as the background against which variations in the tale of making Sanjhi designs unfold.

In Vrndavana, the practice of Sanjhi is twofold as the designs are made differently in homes and in certain temples. The celebration takes place in autumn, after the rainy season, when the woods are full of blossoms...



DEVELOPMENT OF SANJHI

Three are various folk etymologies for the word Sanjhi. One opinion is that Sanjhi means "decoration" and is to be connected with the Hindi word "sajavata", in turn connected with the Sanskrit "sajja" or "Srngara" (decoration). Other scholars prefer to connect Sanjhi with "Samdhya", evening in Sanskrit (sanjha in Brajabhasa and Hindi), the time when the worship of the goddess is carried out. Spanning the two ideas, Acarya K. C. Bhatta, at whose temple in Vrndavana Sanjhi designs are made every year, said Sanjhi is created "for the pleasure of his (i.e. Krsna's) eyes," and that Sanjhi means "sanjha ki sajja", decorating at evening (see Plates 27 through 35).

Another opinion concerning the name was mentioned by Sri Shrivani Lal Goswami while creating the year's last Sanjhi at Radhavallabha temple. He suggested that Sanjhi is to be connected with "Samaja" (society or a group, see note 2) and that it connotes "working together". In support of his contention, he pointed to the cooperative effort being undertaken by his son and nephew, helped by one girl and some of the young boys who live near the Radhavallabha temple. Whether or not his contention is etymologically correct, the idea he wished to convey is clear: cooperative effort is required to accomplish the demanding task of creating a new Sanjhi design daily, using many stencils and various coloured powders, and to have it ready for worship by evening.

There is inadequate authentic material available with which to trace the development of the Sanjhi tradition, either as played by young girls in their homes or in the temples by the priests, with certainty. One hypothesis is that Sanjhi is related to the art of decoration connected with the ancient sacrificial religion of the Vedas. The fire pit constructed within a sacrificial enclosure (yajnasala) was decorated with auspicious symbols and flower designs, using such powdered substances as turmeric, kumkuma (vermilion), saffron, flour and so forth...



POETRY AND THE RASALILA TRADITION

The sanjhi ritual practised by unmarried girls of Vraja furnished the material for the depiction of Sanjhi in Brajabhasa poetry.

The creation of Sanjhi described in poetry in turn preceded the institution of a temple festival consisting of producing Sanjhi designs with coloured powders using stencils. The poetic tradition may even have had a part in moulding the art of Sanjhi as it is practised today in the temples of Radha-Madanamohana, Radharamana, and Radhavallabha at Vrndavana. For, the poetic tradition underscores the importance of picking forest flowers and using them to design Sanjhi. Proficiency in the creation of Sanjhi designs has become synonymous with dexterity in producing intricate intertwinings of the leafy flowering meanders called belas (creepers) that surround the central medallion called hauda (see Plate 39). Their importance to the artisans or priests who produce the designs and to the true aficionados who tour the temples every evening, critically evaluating the Sanjhi designed in each, is beyond the significance of, and proficiency in creating, the hauda with its picture of a site or lila of Vraja (see Plate 48). While this may simply be due to a premium attached to dexterity, it is not impossible that the significance of the intertwining belas originated from the flowers they represent (see note 56)...



THE TEMPLE TRADITION OF SANJHI

We have demonstrated how the temple Sanjhi of Vrndavana has developed from the indigenous folk and poetic traditions. The relevant poetry in Brajabhasa focuses on the creation of Sanjhi with flowers. Flower Sanjhis remain an integral part of the tradition at the temple of Radhavallabha in Vrndavana, where the ten days of the pitr-paksa prior to ekadasi are consecrated to making flower Sanjhis (see Plate 1). In 1988, they were created by two young girls assisted by temple sevakas (persons regularly engaged in the service of the deity). These particular Sanjhi designs are the only ones in the temple tradition made by girls. However, not only Sanjhi designs but all services to Radha and Krsna performed as spiritual practices (upasana) are done by practitioners, male or female, cultivating the feeling of being a girlfriend serving the Divine Couple, head of the Radha-Madanamohana temple at Vrndavana, commenting on this aspect of Sanjhi, said that worship of Sandhyadevi is Gauri puja (that is, worship of Goddess Parvati) and is to be performed just as Radha worshipped kalyanidevi in order to attain Krsna. In his words, it is "to make ourselves firm in His lila." The preparation of a particular lila in the centre (hauda) of the Sanjhi design is an "optical method of communion with lila," in which "we put up our inner beauty for His pleasure - the greatest beauty."..



CREATION OF THE TEMPLE SANJHI

All the temple Sanjhis are created on a vedi, a raised earthen platform; the shape and size varies from temple to temple. Here is a description of the construction of the vedi for Radharamana's Sanjhi (see diagrams on page 35). On 22 september 1989, labourers began carrying yellow earth from a godown within the radharamana Ghera (compound surrounding the temple) to the reading room of the Sarvabhauma damodara Library. This clay, the same used for making the best quality bricks, has been chosen for specific characteristics, such as being free of silica or sand so that it will pack together firmly and not crack. It had been pounded and stored especially for making the Sanjhi vedis.

This vedi is created by superimposing two squares. As shown in diagrams Nos. 2 and 3, it begins as a circle five feet and eight inches in diameter. Two diameters at right angles are marked and the four points at which they touch the circumference of the circle are connected, forming a square. Rotating the diameters to the centre of the sides of the square thus created, the process is performed again, culminating in the eight-pointed star shape...



EPILOGUE

Discovering Sanjhi twenty years ago was an innocent pleasure. A newcomer to India, I was impressed by the Sanjhi folk tradition and was not concerned about its meaning or intent. The beauty of this ephemeral art created by young girls did not require an explanation, only an eye to enjoy it with. In those days, Sanjhi were often seen on walls in villages as well as on walls along the alleys of Vrndavana, especially on the final day when kota was created with special effort. The discovery of the temple tradition was no less intense an experience, and led me to look into the meaning Sanjhi had acquired in the worship of Radha and Krsna and its place in their pastimes. In this sense, my discovery recapitulated the process of change from folk tradition to temple ritual, with the accompanying gain in sophistication.

That initial pleasure, like a seed, has taken root and become this short description of the temple ritual. In the course of writing about it, I have neglected to dwell on its beauty because that is something I could not recreate in words; I hope the beauty of Sanjhi designs may be conveyed by the selection of photographs. I thank those who have given their time as well as their photographs to make this a homage to an ephemeral art form dedicated to the service of the Divine Couple...



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