

# 1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

He freed my cloth but captured my heart-- 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") Nāgari Sakhī (says) now let's go to *that*  
grove to gather flowers for Sāñjhī!

This verse by Nāgariyā is one of the numerous devotional (bhakti) songs that describe the tradition of creating Sāñjhī designs with flowers.<sup>1</sup> Written in the indigenous Hindi dialect called Brajbhāṣā during the eighteenth century, it is sung at the Rādhāvallabha temple at Vṛndāvana each evening during the fortnight following the full moon of August-September when Sāñjhī designs are created.<sup>2</sup> 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 Sāñjhī designs unfold.

In Vṛndāvana, the practice of Sāñjhī 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. The fortnight during which it is observed is known as the piṭṛ-pakṣa, dedicated to performing rites known as śrāddha for deceased ancestors. Young unmarried girls create a new Sāñjhī design daily by sticking various found objects, such as coloured stones, metal foil, flowers, and pieces of mirror, into a background of cowdung applied to a wall in their homes during each of the fifteen days. Each day's design tells a chapter in the story of Sāñjhī and her husband, Sāñjhā.<sup>3</sup> A few

pieces, especially faces and breasts, are created in terracotta. They are used for the finale, on the no-moon day (amāvasyā), when a particularly grand design called koṭa is created (see Plates 13, 14 and 15).

Each evening, that day's design, considered to be Goddess Sāñjhī, is worshipped; the girls make an offering of food (bhoga) followed by the ritual known as āratī that consists of an offering of fire (a burning oil-soaked wick) and then water. A girl successfully worshipping this goddess should obtain a husband and many children.<sup>4</sup> This is emphasized in a verse sung during the āratī that specifies nine, ten, or twenty children for the girl, as well as twenty-five children for her brothers.<sup>5</sup>

The Sāñjhī design is effaced the following day in order to create a new one in the same place on a fresh cowdung background. The material used in making each day's Sāñjhī is saved, and after the celebration of Navarātri, which follows the pitṛ-pakṣa, the fortnight of creating Sāñjhīs, this material is generally disposed of in water, such as a tank or the river Jamuna.<sup>6</sup>

The second aspect of Sāñjhī is practised at a few of the many temples in Vṛndāvana and at the main temple in Barsana (see Plates 19, 20 and 37), a village said to be the home of Rādhā, Kṛṣṇa's favourite milkmaid (gopī).<sup>7</sup> Although the schedule of events varies from temple to temple and from year to year, these Sāñjhī designs are mainly prepared during the final five days of the pitṛ-pakṣa in Vṛndāvana, from the eleventh day (ekādaśī, a fast day observed by worshippers of Viṣṇu) to the no-moon day (amāvasyā) and during the entire fortnight at Barsana. Temple priests and local artisans make these Sāñjhīs with coloured powders applied through stencils. In this way, intricate patterns are formed atop a low earthen platform (vedi) that is generally, but not always, raised within the temple itself. Those who treat Sāñjhī as a spiritual practice create these designs with the feeling that they are playing Sāñjhī along with Rādhā, Kṛṣṇa, and their girlfriends (sakhīs).

For an interpretation of the meaning of Sāñjhī we may turn to the *Śrīnātha-sevā-rasodadhi*.<sup>8</sup> This work, depicting the services (sevā) performed for Śrīnāthajī, a well-known image of Kṛṣṇa now enshrined in the town of Nāthadvāra (Rajasthan), describes several kinds of Sāñjhī, including the types found in Vraja. The *Rasodadhi* is unique in that it attempts to give a coherent narrative explaining both why Sāñjhī designs are created and the feeling (bhāva) with which they are to be made according to the teachings of Puṣṭimārga, the school founded by the sixteenth-century teacher, Śrī Vallabhācārya. The feeling behind the preparation of Sāñjhī is that Kṛṣṇa comes to Rādhā's village and goes to pick flowers in a forest called Khadira. With the permission of Rādhā, he is allowed to take the form of Śyāmā Sakhī, the dark or dusky girlfriend, so called after his own dark (kṛṣṇa or śyāma) colouration, in order to join the game.

The following tale is related to explain the etymology and meaning of Sāñjhī;<sup>9</sup> no source is given for its provenance. Brahmā, the creator, produced a mind-born daughter from his austerities. When she was born, she requested her progenitor to tell her what she should do. He said "penance" (tapa) three times.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, she went to the tank or pond called Bṛhallohita Sarovara near the Candrabhāga mountain. Wandering around in the uninhabited forest there, she met sage Vasiṣṭha who initiated Sandhyādevī with the mantra "namo bhagavate vāsudevāya" (obeisance to the auspicious Vāsudeva or Kṛṣṇa). This being the first reference to her name, we are probably to understand that the initiation included giving her a name suggestive of her spiritual nature. She commenced a long penance that was eventually fruitful when Viṣṇu himself appeared and conferred three

boons on her. She requested that, once born, an individual embodied soul (jīva) would not experience sensual desire, that her own vow of chastity, in the sense of commitment to a single husband (pativrata), would be unbroken, and that everyone who worshipped her would have their wishes fulfilled. Viṣṇu granted the latter two wishes but altered the first request so that an embodied soul (jīva) would experience no sensual desire in childhood and in old age.

Viṣṇu then advised the goddess: “Previously, you desired to leave your body. To complete that desire, you should now offer yourself into the fire of the sacrifice being conducted by certain sages on the bank of the Candrabhāga River. But you must go in a form that the sages will not recognize. By my grace, you will become the daughter of Agni, the fire.” Accordingly, touching her, he transformed her into the final oblation poured into the fire (pūrṇāhuti or puroḍāśa), the culmination of the sacrifice.

She was subsequently taken up by the sun, in whose orb she took the form of the threefold sandhyā. “Sandhyā” means both the three junctures of the day (dawn, noon, and dusk) and the rituals to be performed at those times by men of the three upper castes who have been “reborn” through initiation (dīkṣā) and are thereby called the twiceborn. She became Arundhatī, a model wife.<sup>11</sup> Thus, she is worshipped by unmarried girls and by the twiceborn.

According to this story, it is she whom the ladies of Vraja worshipped for fourteen days in order to attain Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who subsequently allowed them to join him in his mahārāsa dance, the culmination of devotional spiritual practices.<sup>12</sup> Sandhyā is called Sāñjhī in Hindi; that is to say, in this sense she represents the evening, when Sāñjhī (Devī) is worshipped, although all the three junctures of the day are included within the former epithet. Therefore, according to the tenets of the Puṣṭimārga school, in order to reach Śrī Kṛṣṇa, Sāñjhī is played for fourteen days, with koṭa made on the final (no-moon) day. The fourteen days are said to represent the fourteen worlds that Kṛṣṇa is lord of. This tale will be referred to again, as it offers an explanation for some puzzling statements about Sāñjhī.