

## Beyond the Canvas: Madhubani Art as a Luminous Tapestry Interwoven with Mythology, Culture, and Narrative

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### Abstract

India, with its rich tapestry of artistic expression and linguistic diversity, spans from traditional to contemporary realms. Various art forms have carved out a significant niche, attracting both art enthusiasts and language scholars. The nexus between Madhubani art and Indian mythology is both profound and intriguing. The artistic and cultural outputs of India's tribal and rural communities have established a distinguished presence among art connoisseurs nationwide.

The interplay between Madhubani art and India's Ithihasa is particularly noteworthy, revealing how this art form resonates with contemporary times while profoundly influencing the cultural and linguistic fabric of the region. Central themes in Madhubani painting, such as love and fertility, are intricately linked to religious motifs. This paper endeavours to explore the rich cultural and historical contexts, artistic evolution, symbolic meanings, religious representations, and preservation efforts associated with Madhubani art, aiming to elucidate the interconnected artistic heritage that shapes the cultural legacy of Mithila in Bihar.

**Keywords:** Madhubani art, Mithilā painting, Godhna painting and Khobar

### Introduction

Painting is a mode of reflection of human thoughts. In India, art linked back to the time when Homo sapiens expressed their world through painting on mud surface with hands, fingers, sprigs, bones and sharp rocks. Some of them have managed to evolve their way without fading out in the ravages of time. Art is associated with the culture of an area. As Morphy opines about culture – culture as a way of life or body of ideas and knowledge, and culture as the metaphysical essence of society, incorporating standards by which the finest products of society are judged” (Morphy and Perkins 2006). Franz Boas considered art as a cultural universal; he mentioned that the presence of aesthetic pleasure in art was obvious in all societies (Boas 1955). A.L. Kroeber attempted to relate the historical development of artistic style to the development of civilization (Kroeber 1923).

The wall painting tradition of India continued to generations of which Madhubani art acquires a special place. Ancient city of Mithila in Bihar has a long living tradition, where

Madhubani art flourishes. It tells the world about the social structure as well as the cultural history of Bihar. The origins of Madhubani paintings are rather unmapped. Madhubani art, also known as Mithila painting is associated with Ramayana being revered as the birthplace of Goddess Sita, daughter of king Janak. It is accounted that the Mithila paintings were authorised by the king to immortalize the marriage of Goddess Sita to Lord Rama of Ayodhya. The paintings not only reflect the morals, values, and customs of the region but also serve as a key tool for understanding the psychology of the society it represents.

### **Historical Significance**

The historical roots of Mithila painting dates back to 3000 years and this art came to be noted in 1934. This art was recognised as pure art (*kulin* art) as it was the art of the people of pure castes. The rudiments of Indian civilization, predominantly the stories from the Purānas, are vividly depicted in Madhubani folk paintings. In the olden days these paintings were done on the walls which often represent Hindu deities like Shiva, Krishna, Parvathy, Radha, Sita and Durga. Details of the events that happened in Ramayana and Mahabharata are represented and narrated colourfully with intricate details that catch the attention of all. Originally, Maithili paintings were created on walls and the ground for special occasions and then removed once the season was over. This made it complicated to document the earlier drawings of Mithila paintings. Most of the ideas came out instantly and it passed easily from one generation to another without the help of any specialized tools. This pattern of transmutation of knowledge from one generation to another led to the development of Madhubani painting based on experiment and creativity.

The major earthquake which shook the Mithila region in 1934 caused massive destruction. The British officer William Archer was sent to note the situation. He saw some of the pictures lying in the rubble and documented them. He categorized those paintings into two based on the surface on which the paintings were done - 'the floor painting and the wall painting' (Archer 1949). A severe draught that occurred in the 1960's shattered the village life of Mithila. An IAS officer, Mr. Bhashkar Kulkarni took the initiative to prompt All India Handicrafts Board to encourage women in villages around Madhubani to paint in paper as it would help to generate an income. Thus they got introduced to a new format of painting on paper. With the commencement of portable format of painting, Madhubani folk art genre became popularized at a rapid pace (Archer 1977). With the advent of Madhubani paintings as a commodity, it turned out as a viable source of income both in local and global markets.

Madhubani paintings merge local myths with the broader Hindu Itihasas, blending verbal and ritualistic expressions to create a rich artistic tradition. In 1984, Mulk Raj Anand published a book titled Madhubani Painting, which explores the thematic elements and stories behind these paintings. Madhubani folk painting consists of the tales of the origin of the earth, existence of supernatural beings like gandharvas and apsaras (Anand 1984). The art depicts the social formation and cultural identity of the region, featuring themes of religion, love, and fertility.

### **Folk Tradition**

Folk elements of Madhubani folk art genre continue its tradition in its relation between local myths, traditions, and the Hindu 'Itihasas'. The exquisite synthesis of oral tradition with visual expression yields a comprehensive art tradition imbued with specific

cultural significance, rooted in customs and conventions as well as its holistic folkloric essence. Folk heritage, therefore, constitutes an intricate and nuanced mosaic encompassing the past, present, and future. The diverse expressions found in Madhubani art reflect the broader societal spectrum, presenting novel and multifaceted forms and colours that encapsulate the culture and civilization of India in its entirety. Madhubani paintings, in their wide array, vividly depict themes ranging from the local populace's faith and beliefs to the customs and practices of their daily lives.

Over time, as people migrated to various regions, the linguistic landscape of Mithila also changed. The influx of people from different backgrounds led to the emergence and development of hybrid linguistic forms. Infusion of diverse cultural elements motifs, patterns, themes and artistic techniques paved way to newer styles which impart a modern look to Madhubani paintings. Madhubani artists found new avenues to showcase their work. Art exhibitions, workshops, collaborations and tourism have provided a wider platform and recognition for artists. However the identity of Madhubani painting remains timeless to the external world. There are village women who work with natural things and they enhance their style of work with contemporary ideas too.

### **Women and Art**

Women within the community draw upon their imaginative faculties to incorporate various events from their life cycle, interweaving historical, religious, and spiritual motifs into their art. Indeed, they harboured the conviction that adorning their walls with depictions of deities would not only appease the gods and goddesses but also foster the prosperity and welfare of their community. Moreover, it was widely believed that such paintings could avert natural disasters, safeguard their crops, and invoke blessings for the well-being of their kin. Constant efforts are made for the preservation and revitalisation of Madhubani art. Madhubani folk paintings were no longer limited to folk art but rather emerged into a new form of individual stylised contemporary art (Szanton 2005). Contemporary Madhubani artists sign their works to establish some unique elements that distinguish them from other art forms. They know the need to promote their individuality. Artists fuse in various global issues as themes of their paintings which are calved as a result of economic and social change.

Madhubani paintings are mainly practised in Jitwarpur, Khajauli, Madhubani, Ranti, Simri, Nirmali and Supaul district. The villages consist of major castes, such as, Brahmins-Priestly occupation, agriculture (land holder), Kāyasthas-agriculture, Rājputs-business and trading, Dhānuks- service giving to the brahmins, Kumhārs-earthen pot making and painting, Goalās- milk the cow and the buffalo and selling the milk, Mālis- making of flower-garland, painting and craft, Dusādhs- cleaning, Chamārs- skinning off the dead animal, Dhopās-washing the garments and Kahārs- swine herder and palanquin bearer. Though each caste carried out a different occupation, the inter- dependent relations that exists between the people strongly unifies them. This allowed people of all castes to practise painting as their alternative means of sustenance.

### **Uniqueness of Madhubani painting**

Madhubani folk paintings are characterized by five distinct styles: Bharni, Kachni, Tantrik, Godna, and Kohbar. Each style possesses its own historical background and distinct

identity. A notable feature of Madhubani painting is that specific caste groups within the locality are designated to create works in particular styles. Each style adheres to its own conventions regarding colours, themes, and motifs. Artists explore a broad spectrum of themes, incorporating both exceptional and traditional elements. Despite their differences, these styles share a commonality, as they are deeply intertwined with Indian culture, tradition, and civilization.

Madhubani painting transcends mere decoration, embodying the community's beliefs, norms, values, and customs. This tradition has been meticulously transmitted through generations, from mothers to daughters. From a young age, girls are trained in the art, learning to manipulate brushes and colours.

Historically, Aripana involved floor paintings created at doorsteps, while Godhna began as a form of tattoo art. Gobar painting was initially sculptural in nature, and the Tantra style held religious significance. The outer coating of the walls was prepared using a mixture of cow dung and clay, upon which the primary drawings were rendered. Margosa twigs served as brushes, though artists also employed fingers, traditional brushes, nib-pens, and matchsticks in their work.

For paint they used anything colourful that was available in nature and was prepared and applied manually. Generally bright colours like red, orange, blue, green and yellow are used. The black colour is prepared by mixing blight with cow dung; yellow is prepared based on turmeric and Banyan leaf milk; blue is extracted from indigo; the red from Kusum flower; green from the leaf of the applewood tree; white from rice powder; and orange from the juice of Palash flower. The outlines of the figures are drawn in sharp lines, often painted in black. At present all the modern equipments and even synthetic colours are used. The culminating moment is the decoration of the kohbar - the room of the house where the new couple lives after their wedding. Essentially, the paintings are of religious motives. The central theme of all paintings is love and fertility.

### **Symbolic and Religious Connections**

Initially, Madhubani paintings were intimately linked to various rituals and festivals. Artists depicted thematic scenes associated with significant events such as Beha (the marriage festival), Upanayana (the sacred-thread ceremony), and Annadan (the rice-giving ceremony), as well as other religious observances including Akshaya Tritia, Ganesha Chaturthi, Sita Navami, Nag Panchami, Nandotsav, Janmashtami, and the marriage of Lord Rama and Sita Devi.

The pictorial elements of Madhubani folk art serve as a medium that reflects the symbolic, religious, and anecdotal dimensions of societal behavior and structural expressions. Symbols within the art include Tulsi, which signifies purity and devotion; fish, which represent fertility; lotus flowers, which denote spiritual growth; and the Sun and Moon, which embody cosmic balance. Themes of birth, marriage, and death are represented through deities and the cyclical nature of life. These symbolic elements enrich the interpretation of the mythology depicted in Madhubani art. Indian civilization and its multifaceted lifestyle of the people fascinate interest among all. In terms of cultural diversity, this civilization is incomparable. Singer defines civilization from the cultural historical approach. He believed that every human culture is a composite historical growth from elements, most of which have

been borrowed from other cultures (M. Singer 1964). Robert Redfield ideate civilization from a different perspective; to him, it is a great whole in space and time. Civilization is a very complex organization of culture which by virtue of the complexity of organization conserves and cultivates its heritage and traditions and communicates them with existing great traditions to the other small local societies within it (Redfield 1955).

Traditional knowledge and its successive continuity intricately shape the dynamics of folk lifestyles. Folk paintings encapsulate the diverse rhythms and narratives of everyday life among ordinary people. The true grandeur of these artworks can be appreciated through an understanding of their profound connection to civilization, as they form a fundamental component of the cultural matrix. Thus, the significance of Madhubani folk paintings within the context of Indian civilization warrants analysis within a broader framework. Art, as a quintessential medium, serves to articulate the emotions and ideas of individuals across all societies. It is an essential conduit for expressing one's innermost feelings. The family plays a crucial role in nurturing its members to internalize and perpetuate cultural values, facilitating their socialization and development into accomplished artists across generations.

The home environment serves as a fertile ground for the flourishing of traditional folk expression, offering ample space and opportunities for emerging artists to develop their craft. The walls of their residences thus function as a gallery, showcasing the profound philosophical underpinnings of their lives. This mode of expression emerges within the cultural domain through its ritualistic patterns and associations. By the early 1970s, Madhubani painting began to adopt a commercial dimension, expanding into the global market. Today, it stands as a vital economic sustenance for the local community. The patterns from this art form are now featured on a diverse array of products, including bags, cushion covers, apparel, coasters, mugs, crockery, bottles, and mouse pads.

### **Conclusion**

In 1970, the Government of India recognized the significant contributions of Madhubani painters by honoring the pioneering artist Jagdamba Devi. Subsequently, in 2008, Mahasundari Devi was awarded the Padmashri for her contributions. Both public and private art-promoting institutions now regard Madhubani painting as a definitive cultural legacy of India, promoting it with reverence and enthusiasm on national and international stages, as exemplified by the Lalit Kala Akademi. This institution plays a crucial role in preserving the tradition of Madhubani painting for future generations.

The interconnection between Madhubani art and mythology transcends mere artistic expression, encompassing profound cultural and spiritual dimensions. This art form serves as a bridge between generations, perpetuating and inspiring the rich tapestry of myths and traditional narratives. Through its paintings, Madhubani art provides deep insights into the beliefs and values of the Mithila community, enriching our comprehension of this remarkable art form and underscoring its enduring importance within our cultural heritage.

Globally, numerous Arts and Crafts Museums hold extensive collections of Madhubani paintings. Institutions such as the Chandradhari Mithila Museum in New Delhi, the Darbhanga Museum, the Museum of Sacred Art in Belgium, the Mithila Museum in Japan, and the Museum of Norway feature a diverse array of Madhubani artworks. Both local artisans and academically trained individuals continue to practice the contemporary



Madhubani style. The natural vibrancy and dynamic quality of these paintings resonate across various societal segments. Modern artists experiment with new themes and materials in their interpretations while preserving the essence of the traditional art form, thereby ensuring its ongoing evolution and relevance.

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