

Mithila Paintings: Past, Present and Future

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Introduction

The 5000 years old Indian culture has given successive generations a wonderful mindset tuned in amalgamation of tradition and modernity, and value system, which has been retained with excellent continuity despite the passage of time, repeated foreign invasions, and the enormous growth in population. It gives them a unique personality today, as it has done in the past. In fact, these constitute enduring imprints on Indian consciousness. The 20th century is significant in many fields and art of course is an area to be mentioned. As culture has a curious way of belonging to its times, and yet of being removed from it. Culture has its own agenda and has habitually risen above the conditions prevailing on the ground in every period of human history. "The songs, dance-forms, literary activities and works of art produced in the 20th century have found new expressions and have gone to prove that this century has not only been the greatest in human history but has also been a period of new discoveries and radical renewals. While all the art forms have exhibited significant achievements, several entirely new ones have been invented and popularised such as cinema, pop music, and television documentary (Singh B. P. 2003:35)0." Mithila painting, also known as Madhubani painting, is in its originality an art form practiced by the women of all castes and communities of the region. The women of this country from time immemorial have been involving themselves in the various forms of creativity. The best one can find in their creativity is the relationship between nature, culture and human psyche. Also they use only those raw materials, which are available easily in abundance in the locality they are surrounded with. Through folk paintings and other forms of art they express their desire, dream, expectation and amuse themselves. It is a parallel literacy by which they communicate their aesthetic expression. Their art of creativity itself can be treated as a style of writing by which their emotions, expectations, freedom of thoughts, in the *maryada*¹, etc. Their background, gender, aspirations, hope, aesthetic sensibility, cultural knowledge, etc., find expression in all possible forms of their art. What one needs is to know the level of their enculturation and mode of learning before talking or writing about their art. Putting women in the center, this article is written on the Mithila painting, folk creators and the state of painting, in the same spirit.

No region of this great country is untouched with the creativity of the women. We see the example of *phulkari* in Punjab, *warli* in Gujarat, *chikan* embroidery in Lucknow, weaving in the North-east, *kantha* in Bengal, miniature paintings in the state of Rajasthan, *kethari*, *sujani* and of course *mithila* paintings in the Mithila region of Bihar.

The Mithila painting is one of the living creative activities of the women of this region. It is a famous folk painting on paper, cloth, readymade garments, movable objects etc., mainly by the village women of Mithila. Originally it is a folk art, practiced by the women of all castes and communities, including the Muslims, on walls and floors using the natural and vegetable colours. Later some people took interest in it and motivated the women to translate their art from walls and floors to the canvas² and now the new form has given this a very distinct identity in the art world as well as in the market. This folk art has a history, a cultural background, women's monopoly and distinct regional identification. Where is Mithila? What is the cultural and historical significance of this land? Why is it that this art is that special in Mithila? These are the few questions that deserve an answer before anything can be written about this art form.

Far away from Indian big cities and the modern world lies a beautiful region once known as Mithila. It was one of the first kingdoms to be established in eastern India. The region is a vast plain stretching north towards Nepal, south towards the Ganges and west towards Bengal. The present districts of Champaran, Saharsa, Muzaffarpur, Vaishali, Darbhanga, Madhubani, Supaul, Samastipur etc., and parts of Munger,

Begusarai, Bhagalpur and Purnea of Bihar cover Mithila. It is completely flat and free from rock or stone. Its soil is the alluvial silt deposited by the river Ganges, a rich, smooth clay dotted with thousands of pools replenished by the monsoon, the only reservoirs until the next monsoon. If the monsoon is late or scanty, the harvest is in jeopardy. But if the rain god is kind, the whole plain bursts into green from October to February, dotted with man-made ponds where beasts and peasants bath beneath ancient *vatvrikshas*³. Madhubani is the heartland where the paintings are more profuse than elsewhere. "The region's rich vegetation so impressed ancient visitors that they called it Madhubani, 'Forest of Honey' (Vequaud, Yves 1977:9)"⁴, the name of the most acknowledged district for this painting. In this mythical region, Rama, the handsome prince of Ayodhya and incarnation of the Vishnu, married princess Sita, born of a furrow her father King Janaka had tilled. Mithila is that sacred land where the founders of Buddhism and Jainism; the scholars of all six orthodox branches of Sanskrit learning such as Yajnavalkya, Bridha Vachaspati, Ayachi Mishra, Shankar Mishra, Gautam, Kapil, Sachal Mishra, Kumaril Bhatt and Mandan Mishra were born. Vidyapati, a Vaisnav poet of 14th century was born in Mithila who immortalized a new form of love songs explaining the relationship between Radha and Krishna in the region through his *padavalis* and therefore the people rightly remember him as the reincarnation of Jaideva (*abhinavajaideva*). Karnpure, a classical Sanskrit poet of Bengal, in his famous devotional epic, the *Parijataharanamahakavya* gives an interesting account confirming the scholarship of the people of Mithila. Krishna tells his beloved Satyabhama, while flying over this land on way to Dwarka from Amravati, "O lotus-eyed one behold! Yonder this is Mithila, the birthplace of Sita. Here in every house Saraswati dances with pride on the tip of the tongue of the learned (Mishra, Kailash Kumar 2000)"⁵ Mithila is a wonderful land where art and scholarship, *laukika* and Vedic traditions flourished together in complete harmony between the two. There was no binary opposition.

Background

Like the diversity of India, its folk art also presents a huge canvas and depicts the cultural mosaics of this country in a very colourful style. This art can rightly be termed as an ocean of the folk art⁶, which, since earliest times, has been fed by the rivers of popular artistic creativity – rivers that have flowed into it from all cultural-geographical pockets of the Indian sub-continent. The well-known grammarian, Panini, drew a distinction between artists – the *rajashilpi*, or craftsman employed by the court – and the *gramashilpi*, or village craftsman (Mookerjee R.K. 1962:16).⁷ Originally *shilpin* would seem to have been a term generally applied to the technically trained craftsman; later, however, it came to denote the artisan (Puri, B.N. 1968:217)⁸. Thus the writing concerning the theory of art are referred to collectively as the *shilpashastras* (Kramrisch, S 1946:9).⁹ Being for the most part of a highly schematic character, these manuals of artistic instruction could not, of course, be expected to include a description of folk art or of amateur art practised by women at home. By and large they form part of orthodox ecclesiastical literature with art as the handmaiden of the courts of Brahmanic orthodoxy (Coomaraswamy, A.K.1964: 33-34)¹⁰. But that did not cause any disturbance for the women and the commoners of India to practice various forms of creativity through various mediums on the occasion of rituals, altars, and festivals and also during the leisure period. The fellow villagers and locals always appreciated their creativity and innovation. As a result, in Sanskrit, as well as in the folk tradition, an artist is treated as a person with a magnetic ability to create a world of imagination. Metaphorically, an artist is always compared with the Gods. "In Hinduism, Vishnu has a thousand names, many of which refer to works of art. In Islam, one of the hundred names of Allah is *Musawwer*, the artist. The Sanskrit word *kala* (art) means the divine attributes which direct human acts and thoughts. Man, God and art are inseparable. Art is not removed from everyday life, it reflects a world view (Saraswati Baidyanath 1999:10)¹¹ No distinction is made between fine and decorative, free or servile arts. The eighteen or more professional arts (*silpa*) and the sixty-four vocational arts (*kala*) embrace all kinds of skilled activity. There is no difference between a painter and a sculptor. Both are known as *silpi* or *karigar*. The term *silpa* designates ceremonial act in the *Asvalayana Srautasutra*, and in this sense it is close to *karu*, which in the Vedic context stands for a maker or an artist, a singer of hymns, or a poet. In a reference in the Rgveda, Visvakarma, a god of creation, is mentioned as *dhatu-karmara*, while *karmara* alone refers to artisans and artificers (Rgveda X.72.2; Atharveda III 5-6; Manu IV 215)¹². Visvakarma is supposed to create things out of *dhatu*, "raw

material”, an act known as *sanghamana* (Rgveda X 72.2)¹³. The process of cutting, shaping and painting has been often explained in the text by the *taks*¹⁴.

In Mithila a woman does painting on the wall, surface, movable objects, and canvas; makes images of gods, goddesses, animals and mythological characters from the lump of clay; prepares objects such as baskets, small containers, and play items from *sikki* grass; does embroidery on quilt – popularly known as *kethari* and *sujani*; sings varieties of ritual and work songs (Mishra, Kailash Kumar 2003)¹⁵. These artistic activities are done by a lady as a routine work that makes her a complete creative personality: a singer, a sculptor, a painter, an embroidery design maker and what not! Without knowing these primary details one may not understand the aesthetic wonder of Mithila paintings. From generation to generation the women of Mithila have produced a vigorous distinctive painting. That this traditional art has survived the innumerable vicissitudes of history is due, first of all, to the social organization of Mithila, one based on the village community, in whose corporate life the women have clearly understood roles. Beyond their extended families, the women artists work for a rural society with whose requirements they are perfectly acquainted. It is within this framework that the women continue to reproduce age-old forms; indeed countless recapitulations have resulted in an attitude of mind in which they can produce the most abstract designs without conscious effort. The possibility of any radical assertion of individuality in the modern sense is extremely limited (Mookerjee Ajit 1977: 7)¹⁶. This communal village life is strengthened and sustained by the universal prevalence of social gatherings, traditional storytelling, dancing and singing festivities and ceremonies, processions and rituals.

Discussion

In Mithila, painting is normally done by women folk in three forms: painting on floor, painting on wall and painting on movable objects. *Aripan*, under the first category, is made on the floor with the paste of *arva* (crude) rice. This rice paste is called *pithar* in the local language. Apart from the floor it is also made on banana and *maina*¹⁷ leaves and *pidhi* (wooden seats). A woman or a girl does it using her right hand's fingertips. In *tusari puja*, a festival celebrated by the unmarried girls in order to please Gauri and Shiva to have a suitable husband; an *aripan* is made with dry rice powder in white, yellow and red colours. *Aripan* is of different types suiting different occasions. *Astadala*, *sarvatobhadra*, *dasapata* and *swastika* are its main varieties. Wall paintings are multicolored. Three to four colors are usually used to depict the wall paintings. Pictures include those of *nayana-jogini*, *purain*¹⁸, carrier of fish, curd, jackfruit, trees of fruits such as mango and pomegranate and birds like peacock. Attractive floral motifs adorn the wall on three sides of the entrance. Paintings on movable objects include those on clay models of pots, elephants, birds like *Sama* and *chakeba*; Raja Salhesa, bamboo structure, mat, fan and objects made of *sikki*¹⁹. Decorative multicolored designs made on the faces of brides and the *sumangalis*²⁰ also fall in this category. Many of these paintings have great *tantrik* significance. Certain non-Vedic rites during the marriage ceremony, practiced exclusively by the women, like *thakka-bakka*, *nayana-jogini* etc., are directly related to the Mithila *tantra*.

The tradition of wall paintings as well as surface paintings for beautification of dwellings and ritual purposes in Mithila is believed to have survived from the epic period. Tulsidasa in his magnum opus the *Ramcharitamanasa* gives a vivid account of Mithila painting decorated for the marriage of Sita and Rama. Influenced with the wonderful pair – Rama and Sita –Gauri, the Consort of Siva, desired to participate in the actual marriage ritual and wanted to paint the *kohabar*²¹ where the *sumangalis* had to perform songs and related rituals for this divine ideal couple. These decorations are mythological murals, added with deities of Hindu pantheon, besides regional flora and fauna. The women artists, according to the old age tradition, are the sole custodians who practice this folk painting passing down for generations from mother to her daughter. They have been retaining this great art form in the region since time immemorial. The girl learns to play with the brush and colors at an early age that finally culminates in the *kohabar*, which acquires great sanctity in the social life. All religious ceremonies relating to the marriage are performed in the *kohabar*. The *ahibaatak patil*²² is kept burning in all through for four days.

The present form of Mithila paintings, also called Madhubani paintings, are the translation of the wall paintings, floor paintings and terracotta idols onto paper or canvas²³. This experiment is not very old. In the late sixties, twentieth century, in order to create the job opportunity for the women to face the cruel challenge of the terrible drought, some women were approached to translate their art from walls, floors and other form of creativity to the paper or canvas. They did and it worked miraculously. At first when the ritual was fixed on paper it had a very small audience at the receiver's end but it certainly opened a new world of art appreciators and also potential buyers of their artworks in the world. This was a great success and a ticket to trade. Since then the painting medium has diversified. Wall paintings were transferred to hand made paper (which was of poster size) and gradually it laid the way for other mediums and motifs like greeting cards, dress materials, sun-mica etc. The stylized figures, fierce lions with electrified manes, the human profiles reminiscent of ancient Cretan pottery, the bright native colours and all possible indigenous experiments appealed to the audience of the world. In the beginning only a few Brahman women were given the opportunity to practice this art but after ten years some women of the Kayasthas also came forward with a new style. Till now, the women of the Harijans were not given the opportunity to experiment in this art with their hands. On careful examination I found an interesting story behind this. The women of higher castes were not allowed in the region to cross the boundary of their houses, however they wanted to do some work for generating finance to run their family smoothly mainly during the natural calamities. One folk poet, Faturilal of present Shahpur village of Madhubani had described the pathetic condition of the people during famine in late nineteenth century in his famous poetry known as the *Akalkavitta*²⁴. Influenced with his poetic description the then Maharaja of Darbhanga, Maharaja Laxmeshwar Singh decided to create job opportunities with the help of the British ruler for the people. The women of lower castes however were helping their husbands or male counterparts by working in the agricultural fields of better off people and also as maid servant in the houses of higher castes. This time also some people thought of involving the women of higher castes in some creative business. Mahatma Gandhi's experiment with *charkha*²⁵ came as a wonder for all the women of Maithil Brahmins. They found it very easy as earlier they were preparing cotton thread on *tekuli* for preparing the *janeu* or *jagyopaveeta*²⁶. The *khadi* workers used to give raw cotton to them in every house and collect their prepared yarns. Very delicate and costly *khadi* clothes are woven from these yarns today and they are in great demand everywhere in the country. Some women prepare such very fine thread that at times the length of a sacred thread is contained in the case of a piece of cardamom. Anyway, this created a space for women. *Khadi* centres used to give money as well as clothes for their labour. This was a respectful job mainly for destitute, widows and poor women of higher castes in the locality. And the second experiment was Mithila paintings. As a result some women of the Brahman caste such as Sita Devi contributed to promote the Brahmin style of Mithila paintings. This art, characterised by bright colours and an absence of shade, is mainly concerned with the *khobars*²⁷ and gods and goddesses (Krishna, Rama and Durga mostly). Bawa Devi and her daughter, Sarita Devi later made important personal contributions.

Another social group, the women of the Kayasthas, was also facing the similar problem. They were landless community and their women also got attracted towards this art form to gain some finance. They worked hard on the art and also in the entrepreneurship and finally achieved recognition in the seventies. The Kayastha women earned their name for their elaborate line paintings. Most of the Kayastha women do outline paintings only. They cover their sheets of paper or cloth or any object with the care of cartographers, producing finished pictures where exquisite execution is more impressive in view of the difficult conditions in which they work. They depict village or religious scenes to the finest details such as the late Ganga Devi, Pushpa Kumari, Karpoori Devi, Mahasundari Devi and Godawari Dutta. These two forms of Mithila expression, both due to women from the higher castes, embody traditional Mithila art.

The third group, the Harijan women, came forward in the 1980s. The women of the Dusadh and the Chamar were doing all forms of traditional paintings and art forms for ritual purposes and also for decorating their dwellings. Influenced by the entrepreneurship and experiment of the Brahmins and the Kayasthas they experimented the *godna*²⁸ and other bright colour in their depiction of paintings. Their pictorial alphabet began to include lines, waves, circles, sticks and snails, opening the way to stylization and more abstraction. That also worked. Jamuna Devi and Lalita Devi are famous Harijan female

painters. Lalita Devi sews faces of deities like fruits; profusion of motives seems to rightly counterbalance the precariousness of existence, they transcend their daily lives to harvest new creations. And now women of all castes have been practicing this art as a job earning profession.

Being the folk of the villages, these artists rely on the kindness of nature for colors. It provides them with a wonderful range of natural hues derived from clay, bark, flowers and berries. The colors are usually deep red, green, blue, black, light yellow, pink and lemon. They create mood and hence played an important role. For instance, energy and passion find expression through the use of red and yellow, as monochrome crashed over large surfaces of the painting. Concentration of energy and the binding force is best reflected in red while green governs the natural leaves and vegetation. The Brahmins prefer the very bright hues while the Kayasthas opt for muted ones. For the Harijan style of paintings, hand made papers is washed in cow dung. Once the paints are ready, two kinds of brushes are used - one for the tiny details made out of bamboo twigs and the other for filling in or space is prepared from a small piece of cloth attached to a twig. In the beginning homemade natural colours were obtained from plant extracts like henna leaves, flower, bougainvillea, *neem*, etc. These natural juices were mixed with resin from banana leaves and ordinary gum in order to make the paint stick to the painting medium. Home made paints, though cheap, was time consuming and produced less than the requirement. The solution was at hand to switch to the synthetic colors available aplenty in the market. Now colours come in powdered form, which are then mixed with goat's milk. Black was obtained from the soot deposits by the flame of *dibia*²⁹ dissolved in gum.

The *kohabar* is replete with paintings based on mythological, folk themes, and *tantric* symbolism. The paintings in this chamber are designed to bless the couple. The central theme of all paintings is love and fertility, though the approach may vary. It can commence with the story of Sita's marriage or Krishna - Radha episode with the ecstatic circle in which he leads the *gopis*. The people of Mithila, also known as Maithils, are Sakti worshippers with the influence of *tantric* rituals and so Siva-Sakti, Kali, Durga, Ravana and Hanuman also appear in their murals. Symbols of fertility and prosperity like fish, parrot, elephant, turtle, sun, moon, bamboo tree, lotus, etc., are more prominent. The divine beings are positioned centrally in the frame while their consorts or mounts or simply their symbols and floral motifs form the background. The human figures are mostly abstract and linear in form; the animals are usually naturalistic and are invariably depicted in profile. It begins with the flow of the brush without any preliminary sketching. Though natural colours and twigs have given way to brushes and artificial paints, the subject of Mithila paintings has changed enormously.

The commercialization has caused serious harm to this art. The women and men are learning this art from the markets in towns and metropolitan cities. The trainers themselves do not know the essence and aesthetic beauty of this folk art and they teach their students in utter ignorance. Some of them do not know the colour combination, obtaining the colour from the nature, preparing the background, relationship between rhythm, colour, songs, rituals, dance and the art of painting. The themes and designs of the paintings are, now, in most of the cases decided by the buyers. The buyer-centric approach has caused serious threat to the originality of colour, design, motif, and sensitivity of this great art form. In the name of the *tantric* painting, we see the women have painted something very different from the tradition of Mithila. Commercialization of this art has created the interest of several males in it. They have been now also painting without knowing the significance of women in it. For them it is an industry that can easily provide a job opportunity for them. They are willing to paint anything as per the requirement of the buyers in the name of Mithila painting.

But when we talk about the Mithila painting as folk or traditional painting, which is painted on a ritual occasion or any ritual painting of India we see many activities are combined. This combination, in fact gives special significance to the art. "Viewed at the level of perception and experience, all these local, regional, macro pan – Indian, and beyond Indian expression of art emerge and are held together by an integral vision that makes life an art, part and parcel of a single totality where life functions and creative art are inseparably intertwined. Painting, music, dance, poetry, and other functional objects are inseparable from myths, rituals, festivals and ceremonies. There is no dichotomy between the sacred and profane, life and art. The human and the divine are in a continuum, in a constant movement of

interpretation and transformation (Kapila Vatsyayan 1996:6)³⁰.” When a painter paints a wall or a floor, she is supported by other women by way of singing songs and helping tunes. The lesson drawn from the folk stories and narratives also help her in painting the themes of various requirements.

The *tantric* paintings for instance, are influenced by the famous narratives of the *Madhusravani katha*. This *katha* is narrated before a newly married bride on the occasion of *Madhusravani* for 13-15 continuous days by an elderly and experienced lady who is usually well versed in the art of narrative. She dramatises the stories in a very lively manner and narrates the origin of earth and various *tantric* stories. This festival is celebrated with songs, dance, ritual paintings; spell of *mantras*, etc. One such complete folk-cum-tantric story of Manasa Debi is given below:

Manasa Debi was a mind-born daughter³¹ of Siva. She was born of Siva's semen left on a *chikanipata*³². She is known as Bisahari³³ and said to have extraordinary supernatural power to bless her devotees. She can also ruin and kill those who do not believe in her existence and offer their prayer to her. There was a very rich ship merchant, named Chanrakar. He was also known to the people as Chandu Saudagar³⁴. He was a great devotee of Siva. He had six sons and a happy family. He did not consider Manasa as a Goddess. Manasa Debi did not like this attitude of Chandu Saudagar and killed all his six sons by sending black snakes. However Chandu Saudagar did not relent. One day pleased with the devotion of Chandu Siva appeared in his dream and expressed his willingness to bless him with some great things as per the desire of Chandu. Chandu Saudagar asked him for a son. Siva agreed to bless him with a son but put a condition before him. “ If you want to have a son who will have long life, he would be a fool, lethargic and an idiot. Instead if you want to have an ideal, intelligent and handsome son he will die at the early age of 20”, said Siva, “now you tell me what exactly you want.” After a serious thought Chandu Saudagar opted for an intelligent son who would have a short life. Later, Chandu's wife gave birth to a male child whose name was Bala Lakshendra or Lakhinder. Lakhinder was bright, intelligent and a very cultured child. Everybody was happy with his behaviour. When he reached the marriageable age his father wanted to solemnise his marriage ceremony with an equally qualified and highly cultured girl. After a great search, Chandu Saudagar saw Bihula. She was very beautiful, meritorious, highly cultured and a homely girl. Chandu also came to know that according to her family tradition every woman dies as a *sumangali* and none of them would become a widow at any point of time. In this family tradition of Bihula, Chandu Saudagar saw a ray of hope for his dear and affectionate son Lakhinder and as a result he immediately decided to choose her as his daughter-in-law.

The marriage was solemnised in a happy atmosphere. Lakhinder was bitten by a dangerous cobra at the behest of Manasa Debi on his first night of the bridal-bed in the bridal chamber itself. Lakhinder cried in helplessness and breathed his last. The innocent but firm Bihula decided to remain with his dead body on a raft in the river Ganges. Chandu and neighbouring people made futile attempts to dissuade her. But she was determined. Finding no other alternative, Chandu gave permission to Bihula. She started her voyage on a raft along with her husband's dead body. The current slowly carried the raft. She had to face various difficulties in her journey, but she overcame them all. Ultimately she found a washerwoman washing the clothes by the side of the river Ganges. Her small child was disturbing her. Getting irritated with the behaviour of her girl child, the washerwoman killed her baby and started washing her clothes. Once she had washed all her clothes, she sprinkled some drops of water on the face of her baby and the dead baby became alive. Bihula took no time to understand the supernatural power of this lady and took shelter at her feet and narrated her the sad story.

In accordance with the advice of washerwoman, Bihula reached the *Mahadeoloka*³⁵ with her. On the instruction of the washerwoman, Bihula performed a wonderful dance to please the Lord. The Lord was very impressed by her graceful performance and was moved by the story of her tragic life on earth and heaven. He called Manasa and asked her to give the reasons of her tragedy. Manasa vehemently denied that she was responsible for the tragedy of Bihula. However, Bihula succeeded in producing definite evidence. But Manasa insisted that she was not responsible for the sad plight of Bihula, and it was Chandu Saudagar, her father-in-law, who was solely responsible, because he always abused and disrespected Manasa Debi and did not consider her to be a goddess worthy of worship. Manasa then told Bihula that if Chandu Saudagar were to worship her, she would bring Lakhinder back to life. Bihula felt the hope of restoration of life for the corpse of her husband in the statement of Manasa and agreed to her

proposal. Manasa then brought Lakhinder and other six sons of Chandu Saudagar back to life by chanting spells. At the humble request of Bihula, Manasa recovered all the boats of Chandu Saudagar along with the cargo and crew that had been submerged by the wrath of Mansa Debi. She thus fulfilled the desire of Bihula. With all the seven sons and lost property of Chandu Saudagar, Bihula came down to the city in the earth where the old eyes of Chandu Saudagar and his wife were counting the days to breathe their last. All of a sudden they received all their lost sons along with the cargo and crew.

Now Chandu Saudagar realized the power of Bihula and gave his consent to worship the deity – Manasa Debi. The goddess blessed him. He realized that there was none except Manasa Debi in these three worlds. Finally, he worshipped Manasa with offerings of various fruits and animals.

Thus, Chandu Saudagar, a devout follower of Siva, changed his religious ideas and became one of the staunch followers of the Manasa-cult, which was originally a tantric-cum-folk cult.

The other stories narrated during the *Madhusravani* are *Satik Katha*; *Pativrata Sunaynak Katha*; *Bala-Basantak Katha*; *Gosaunik Katha*; *Chanai Bairsi Katha* and *Raja Srikarak Katha*. The *Madhusravani* is celebrated in the rainy month of the *Savan*. Everywhere snakes and other poisonous insects are found in abundance. People try to please the deities and these serpent deities by way of offering *puja*, singing songs, celebrating festivals, invoking *mantras* etc., the place where the *Madhusravani katha* is narrated, is decorated with the ritual paintings. Some women sing some *tantric* songs³⁶ during the decoration in a falsetto tone. Through the song the snake deity is being worshipped in order to bless the people, mainly the groom of the newly married bride.

The purpose behind giving the summary of one folk narrative, narrated on the occasion of the *Madhusravani* is to explain the interconnectivity amongst various activities in the creation of a ritual art. This interconnectedness get lost when the art is experimented as a commodity and sold in the market in huge quantum. A lady when painting the wall does not expect any financial return from anywhere but when she paints in order to sell her painting as a commercial production, she becomes a sales girl. Her entire attention shifts from culture to consumerism and she puts herself in the mercy of her buyers. She paints not to retain tradition but to earn better livelihood.

In the last twenty years, in order to get job opportunities, a very huge population of Mithila has migrated to the cities and mega-cities of India and abroad. This is a continuous trend. Many of them have settled in those cities. They are emotionally attached with their ritual and tradition. Marriages are solemnized in these cities in the banquets and hotels. And no traditional marriage can take place without *kohbara* painting. These paper and cloth paintings therefore solve their purpose. Now they decorate the banquets, hotels or any other venues with the Mithila paintings and feel very much rooted in their tradition. Such development has given a new and potential group of buyers to the painters.

Some individual painters i.e., Karpoori Devi, Ganga Devi and Jamuna Devi have innovated as per the requirements of their potential buyers. Ganga Devi has wonderfully depicted the Ramayana episode in her paintings.

Ganga Devi also depicted her journey from Madhubani, a small town in north Bihar to All India Medical Sciences, New Delhi she made in order to get treatment of cancer she was suffering from. The train, doctors, hospital, syringe, medical ward everything she drew delicately. Her innovations were excellent, appealing and unique in many respects. Some critics however did not appreciate such step thinking that it might disturb the originality of the folk painting of Mithila but majorities of them were in agreement with Ganga Devi. She did loose the originality of her style, brush, colour, canvas and thought processes in her creativity.

Together with her brother Mitar Ram, but to a greater extent, Jamuna Devi has developed a brightly coloured style that has no equivalent in Mithila art. Jamuna Devi is self-taught and no rules apply to her work that evokes children's play and raw art. She delights in portraying animals - cows, for example. Her

representations of the sacred animals range from a parody of anteaters to a hybrid combination of dancing angels and juggling balls. Many of her paintings can be viewed upside down, showing her total freedom from conventions. But she is very strict to maintain the tradition in terms of obtaining colour, preparing background of the canvas, depicting the pictorials etc.

These painters paint landscapes, rivers, and any other things their customers want them to paint.

In the villages of Jitwarpur and Ratni the Mithila paintings have emerged as a commercial activity where children can be seen engaged in arranging the hand crafted paper or fetching the colours. In my recent visit to Jitwarpur, I saw Jamuna Devi teaching her more than 15 students ranging from the Brahmins to the Harijan girls. On my enquiry she said, "I teach them as their mother. They feel they are at their home. I do not charge any money from the trainees. If I charge, my art will be polluted. The best reward that I get is when a Brahmin girl after successful completion of her training touches my feet to get my blessings. I then bless her from the innermost core of my hearts and also issue a perfection certificate."

Mithila painting is more than an art. Through this creative ability a group of women express their desires, dreams, expectations, hopes and aspirations to the people. If you ask them what they are doing they would respond, "We are writing this *kohabar* or *gahwar*³⁷". For them their style is a kind of script through which they communicate with the male folk or with the people of the rest of the world. They are the creative writers who write their feelings through the medium of paintings. They are the creators and close to the god in the perfection. Because of money culture some men have also jumped into this creativity but in its essence and nature even today it is a women's creativity.

Conclusion

If the *Bharat Natyam*, *Manipuri*, *Kuchipuri*, *Odessa* and the *Satria* dance forms can be retained in their originality (not of course in the water tight compartment) and get popularized day by day, why cannot this great folk painting be also retained in its originality in harmony with the nature, people and the tradition! The recent trends of consumerism, market and selling attitude have made this art a maidservant of the moneyed people. Selling art objects is not a bad practice but surrendering the entire traditional creativity and values before buyers at the cost of originality is something that disturbs a commoner or an insider where such art is done. A serious thought is urgently needed in order to retain the original favour and smells of the Mithila paintings. Researchers, NGO professionals, folk artists, and people concerned all should come together to adopt the appropriate measures to retain this art in its originality.

Footnotes and References

0 Singh, B.P. *Bahudha: Occasional Essays*, New Delhi, Saulabh International Social Service Organization. 2003.

1 Cultural and social boundaries to regulate life as per the structure of the society.

2 Paper, cloth, movable objects, readymade garments etc.

3 Banyan tree.

4 Vequaud, Yves *Women Painters of Mithila*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1977.

- 5 Mishra, Kailash Kumar *Structure and Cognition of the Folksongs of Mithila*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Darbhanga, L.N. Mithila University. 2000.
- 6 *Lokakalasaritasagara*.
- 7 Mookerjee, R.K. *Notes on Early Indian Art*, Allahabad, 1962.
- 8 Puri, B.N. *India in the Time of Patanjali*, Bombay, 1968.
- 9 Shilpanis as works of art in the *Aitareya Brahmana*, cf. Kramrisch, S *The Hindu Temple*, Calcutta, p.9, 1946.
- 10 From the English translation in Coomaraswamy, A.K., *The Arts and Crafts of India and Ceylon*, New York, 1964.
- 11 Saraswati, Baidyanath, *VILLAGE INDIA: Identification and Enhancement of Cultural Heriatge – An Internal Necessity in the Management of Development* (Interim Report), New Delhi, UNESCO Chair in the Field of Cultural Development; Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1999.
- 12 Rgveda, X.72.2; Atharveda, III, 5-6; Manu, IV. 215.
- 13 Rgveda X 72.2
- 14 Rgveda: rathakas who used wood for joining and making chariot, is called taksaka in the Maitrayani Samhita, IV. 3.8.
- 15 Mishra, Kailash Kumar “Mithila Painting: The Women’s Creativity”, in *The Unshackled Spirti from Bihar* (An Exhibition of Artists from Erstwhile Bihar), Patna, RHYTHM Centre for Art and Culture 2003.
- 16 Mookerjee Ajit In the Preface of Ve`quaud, Yves’ , *Women Painters of Mithila*, London, Thames and Hudson, 1977.
- 17 A local plant
- 18 Plant as well as flower of lotus
- 19 A regional variety of indigenous grass
- 20 Newly married auspicious women whose husbands are alive.
- 21 Bridal chamber where the union between the groom and the bride takes place and several rites are solemnized.
- 22 An earthen lamp - a symbol of happy conjugal life.
- 23 Paper, cloth, dress materials, readymade garments, movable objects, etc.,
- 24 Famine poetry
- 25 Spinning wheel

26 Sacred thread

27 Symbolic marriage paintings

28 Tattooing

29 Kerosene lamp

30 Vatsyayan Kapila, in the Preface Fisher Eberhard & Dinanath Pathy's *Muralas of Goddesses and Gods: The Tradition of Osakothi Ritual Painting of Orissa*, India, New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, Zurich; Museum Reitberg, 1996.

31 Manasaputri

32 A leaf of lotus

33 Snake goddess

34 Merchant

35 Realm of gods in the kingdom of Shiva, Mahadeo

36 One such song called *bini* (prayer) is mentioned below:

Deep-deep hara jathu ghara; Motik manik bharathu ghara

Nag badhathu, nagin badhathu; Panch bahin bishara badhathu

Bal basant bhaia badhathu; Dadhi- khondhi mausi badhathu

Ashavari pisi badhathu; Basuki raja nag badhathu

Basukini maie badhathu; Khona-mona mama badhathu

Rahi shabda lai suti; kansa shabda lai uthi

Hoiet prat sona katora men dudh-bhat khai

Sanjh suti prat uthi; pator pahiri, kachor odhi

Bramhak del kodari, vishnuk chanchal bat.

Bhag-bhag re kida-makoda; tahi bate aotah ishvar mahadev, padal gadud ker dhath.

Astik, astik, gadud, gadud.

37 *Hamralokani kohbara yaa gahavara likhait chee.*