



Research Paper

## Approaching Mithila Painting from the Perspective of Tradition, Transformation, and Cultural Continuity

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**Abstract:**

India has consistently been recognised for its profound cultural history since antiquity. The people of this subcontinent, richly endowed with diverse forms and means of expression, have significantly contributed to the development of India as a great civilisation through their beliefs, perceptions of natural and supernatural aspects, and worldviews. The folklore and folk arts of India significantly contribute to its rich legacy. They are not only vessels of culture, but rather manifestations of the community's intrinsic spirit; an articulation of their lived experiences, persisting as dynamic traditions that reflect ethnic and cultural vitality through distinctive arts and crafts. Folk painting is a medium that frequently depicts the narratives and worldview of the society through visual tradition; each style of depiction is distinct and has significantly influenced India. The Mithila painting tradition is customarily undertaken as part of ritual and sacred functions within homes and villages, adorning walls, floors, and various decorative items. Recently, it has emerged from its confines and established itself as a prominent aspect of popular culture in metropolitan areas. This paper endeavours to elucidate the evolution and dissemination of the Mithila painting tradition from a confined, domestic context to a national and global arena.

**Keywords:** Bihar, Changing Scenario, Folk Art, Mithila Painting, Traditional Art.

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### I. Introduction:

Folk art embodies the intrinsic life experiences of individuals and reflects the collective consciousness of a community, persisting as a living tradition that showcases ethnic and cultural vibrancy through distinctive arts and crafts. Many indigenous cultures in India have a wide repertoire of stories, tales, and mysteries, which are artistically mirrored in their art forms, with their profound connection with nature, forests, and animals. Folk painting, a prominent genre of folk art, frequently depicts the narratives and worldview of the society through visual heritage; each style of representation is distinct and has significantly impacted India. The creation of art commences with an emotional impetus to convey an experienced or perceived sensation. The term 'folk' encompasses a broad spectrum of connotations, extending from rural to popular contexts. It embodies the myths and beliefs specific to a given locale and community, therefore manifesting as folklore. Every region of India possesses distinct folklore that is conveyed throughout generations via oral, written, and performance traditions (Anand, 1984).

Mithila paintings from Bihar possess distinct styles and motifs. In this process, they surpass their medium; art has been transferred onto paper and canvas, and artists have begun to explore with new techniques and tales while maintaining the classic style to some extent. The artists are granted sufficient freedom of expression to sustain the tradition. It is noteworthy that specific entities are actively working to preserve these traditions while also achieving sustainability in folk aesthetics. Numerous folk painting traditions have been noted across different regions of India. These murals are integral to the ritualistic and belief systems of the villagers. It reflects their worldview and the lived experiences of the general populace.

Their aesthetics and style reflect the community's code of practice. The depiction of painting forms and styles is grounded in their traditions, rituals, and the collective sentiments of the community. Folk paintings are

typically executed on earthen floors, mud walls, ceilings, and ceremonial vessels. These paintings are predominantly created at festivals and ceremonial or ritual events. The subject matter and subjects of these folk paintings are intertwined with the stories, tales, and beliefs of the relevant society. Given the community's collective engagement in the creation, maintenance, and continuation of the folk painting tradition, it is contentious to label only a select few as folk artists. The involvement of the entire community in the activity and the transmission of information through generations as collective wisdom complicates the categorisation of individuals as folk artists, since the term 'artist' implies individual significance (Szanton, 2017).

For simplicity, we may equate the artistic abilities of individuals and the collective community as folk artists. Consequently, folk painters formulate their compositions utilising unique patterns of lines and colours characteristic of each culture. The artists are permitted to utilise motifs and subjects that are familiar and popular within their local community. However, with the passage of time, the populace encountered new transformations in their lifestyle and worldly matters. Over time, it has developed new patterns and styles, resulting in the evolution of this art form. In the era of globalisation and commercialisation, the folk recognise the marketability of folk painting. In this regard, one could note the folk artists' endeavour to explore novel forms and means of expression.

Recognising the significance of the artist's signature in the contemporary commerce-driven paradigm of folk painting production, the focus on an individualistic approach and signature began to permeate the realm of folk art. The artists endeavour to cultivate and experiment with a new style while striving to preserve the authenticity of traditional forms. Consequently, in India, many art forms convey their distinct values through varying treatments of the elements. Mithila paintings have preserved their own identity, cultural heritage, and geographical characteristics. Remote from India's major urban centres and contemporary society, there exists a picturesque area formerly referred to as Mithila, recognised as one of the earliest kingdoms created in eastern India (Mishra, 1979).

#### **Demography:**

Mithila is frequently cited as one of the few locations in India renowned for its ancient civilisations. This territory, referred to as Videha, Tirbhukti, or Mithila, is said to be delineated to the north by the Himalayas, to the east by the now non-existent river Kosi, to the south by the river Ganga, and to the west by the river Gandaki. According to the Bihar District Gazetteers: Monghyr, the Mithila area includes the districts of Samastipur, Champaran, Muzaffarpur, Vaishali, Darbhanga, Saharsa, Madhubani, Munger, Purnea, among others. It also encompasses several regions of the adjoining country of Nepal, situated in the lower Himalayan hills. The 1941 Census Report indicates that the real area of Mithila is roughly 19,275 square miles in India and about 1,000 square miles in Nepal (Choudhary, 1960).

#### **Objective:**

This paper will further analyse the growth of Mithila painting and its reflection of the society's cultural consciousness. The picture, renowned for its portrayal of women engaged in daily activities, illustrates the connection between Maithili life and its indigenous flora and animals. The folk painting of Mithila conveys messages about nature preservation to both local and international audiences by integrating it with ritual phenomena, thereby instilling geographical values in the new generation through visual representation, which is transmitted from one generation to the next.

#### **Research Problem:**

Mithila art has consistently evolved, with its progression further accelerated by its transition to paper, canvas, and fabric from traditional mud floors and walls. The commercialisation of this work has not compromised its originality; rather, it has enhanced it with a diversity of subject matter, style, and colour usage. While art ought to be created for its intrinsic value, contemporary practices often prioritise commercial interests. It does not imply a loss of artistic sensibility; furthermore, it preserves tradition with innovation. Mithila painting is no longer just the domain of women; men have now embraced the art form significantly. This assertion is now inapplicable. Historically, artistic styles were delineated by caste; however, these styles have now converged, allowing any artist to employ any medium or technique in their creations. Consequently, transgender, transcaste, and transsociety are aspects that have undergone significant transformation from the traditionally women-centric, caste-based, and socially restricted art of Mithila. This study aims to examine Mithila painting in the context of these transformations and to analyse its socio-semiotic significations.

Mithila art is presumed to have evolved from traditional themes of women's repressed passions, sexuality, and childbearing to encompass cross-cultural topics in contemporary globalised situations. This research will examine the evolutionary process of Mithila painting, namely its styles, subjects, shapes, and colour combinations. It will further explore women's perspectives on society and life through the symbolic usage of art. This research will examine the impact of commercialisation on the livelihood of artists and how

disruptions in art have preserved the history of Mithila painting. There will be a discussion regarding the impact of commercialisation.

This research will provide a thorough examination of Mithila painting and its evolving dynamics across time. The contemporary perspective on this ancient artwork is the guiding principle of our inquiry.

### **Significance of the Study:**

Humans have consistently expressed their secular and religious sentiments through their artistic creations. Folk art is a genre of art associated with the general populace. This artwork pertains to a certain community, society, caste, and religion. This painting technique is executed as a tradition or ceremonial practice. Folk art is consistently produced by a group on the periphery of a community or culture. However, the geographical and cultural characteristics of Mithila did not facilitate artistic endeavours. Consequently, the inhabitants of Mithila cultivated a unique artistic expression that reflected their aspirations and perceptions, depicting primitive, impulsive, and traditional existences in a distinctive fashion. The study of folk art demonstrates a profound connection between art and culture beyond mere aesthetic considerations. Owing to their unique style and method, they attained significant renown and recognition globally. Notwithstanding several budgetary restraints, these painters created wall murals for every religious and social occasion. An examination of the socio-economic and socio-cultural context reveals that this work emerged under the exclusive authority and influence of female artists from the Mithila region. The diversity and creativity render them arguably the most sophisticated and refined of all popular paintings in India. The village artists of Jitwarpur demonstrate their expertise using organic pigments and freehand brushwork (Das 1-7). The traditional folk paintings of Mithila, also known as Madhubani paintings after the sub-region of Bihar, have been meticulously conserved by the women of the area to this day. These folk paintings, originating from ancient times, are produced in the Mithila region and represent two significant traditions: aripanas or floor paintings and wall paintings, with the most notable being created for nuptial rites (Rekha 1-20).

## **II. Methodology:**

The analytical framework derives from socio-semiotics, which redirects conventional semiotic analyses of sign systems towards discourse inclusion and social transformation, referred to as the method of social semiotics. Social semiotics regards meaning-making as a social practice (van Leeuwen, 2005), examining signifying behaviours within particular socio-cultural contexts. Lemke (1990) characterises socio-semiotics as

“a synthesis of several modern approaches to the study of social meaning and social action. One of them, obviously, is semiotics itself: the study of our social resources for communicating the meanings... Formal semiotics is mainly interested in the systematic study of the systems of signs themselves. Social semiotics includes formal semiotics and goes on to ask how people use signs to construct the life of a community” (p. 183).

Each community possesses distinct characteristics, resulting in divergent signage. For example, in much of Asia, particularly South Asia, red is traditionally associated with wedding attire, symbolising joy and fertility, while in the Ivory Coast, it signifies mourning, reflecting local and national sensibilities. This study aims to emphasise artists as agents who not only transform the mindset of traditional culture via their indigenous artworks but also refine their artistic production talents.

Signs possess varied significances across different social and cultural situations. Consequently, socio-semiotics is centred on society, progressing from context to text rather than from text to context.

Social semiotics examines the social aspects of meaning influenced by power dynamics. Cultural products, encompassing literary works and artworks, serve not just as vessels of social meaning but also as instruments of power relations. The contestation of power relationships from which ideology arises. Hodge and Kress (1988) note the growth of ideology as follows:

“To elucidate the contradiction inherent in the characteristics of ideological forms, we will refer to ideological complexes...An ideological complex develops to maintain ties of power and solidarity, representing the social order as serving the interests of both the dominant and subservient” (p. 3).

Social semiotics advocates for a dialectically mediated approach that necessitates a multifaceted and intricate comprehension of the interaction between agency and structure, as well as between lived human experience and the social power dynamics associated with literary or artistic works. It seeks to develop a novel analytical framework that prioritises the significance of socio-cultural circumstances and the dynamics of power struggle and resistance, which not only shape community identity but also indicate a potential societal revolution.

## **III. Findings and Discussion:**

### **Mithila Painting as folk art:**

For millennia, Mithila painting has served as a realm and stronghold for women. The women of Mithila have received their traditions, talents, technical knowledge, and competence from their mothers or

grandmothers, passing them down through generations. The execution of this craft was a fundamental component of their domestic ritual, conducted as a daily activity. These sketches and paintings are integral to the rites and customs observed at various festivals. The event epitomises a lifetime of experiences encompassing happiness, joy, hope, belief, dreams, and sorrow. Thus, it imparts significance and essence to the continuance of existence. The festival's purpose is to reinforce the connections among various members of the community. The ideas and stories linked to the festivals stem from faith in spiritual existence and experience. The event represents the embodiment of a communal consciousness that reflects the experiences of the local populace, a tradition sustained for many years.

Mithila women have adorned the walls with motifs and symbols that embody specific beliefs and tales associated with them. It was created with the intention of preventing natural disasters and tragedies while invoking blessings for the welfare of family members and the community. They traditionally depicted Hindu deities for veneration on various occasions. The paintings and schematics were created using natural dyes on the surfaces of the mud wall and floor. Nonetheless, these mud wall murals lack permanence, as the onset of the monsoon typically obliterates the painted images. As it immediately dries, a fresh mixture of mud and cow dung is placed on the wall to conceal the old images. It serves to furnish a pristine and lucid surface for the new artworks, which pertains to the festivals and the season (Chavda 26-28).

Traditionally, Mithila art is connected with three primary castes: Brahmin, Kayastha, and Dusadha. The art and its forms differ among castes in this region, being linked to religious ceremonies and local rites. Mithila paintings are performed on two prominent media: wall painting (*bhitti chitra*) and floor painting (*aripana*). The Mithila tradition has been practised since time immemorial in Bihar, specifically in the Mithila region. This craft is practised by women who adorn the interior and exterior walls of their homes (Thakur, 1982). These paintings were created during festivals and other momentous events. North Bihar is considered a significant cultural entity of Bihar, distinguished by its sophisticated and developed artistic expressions. These practices are predominantly observed by women of the upper castes, specifically Brahmins and Kayasthas. Women from other castes also engage in this art form during festivals.

The depictions of Hindu deities constitute the primary focus of this artistic genre. Ganesha, Durga, Shiva, and Saraswati feature prominently in Mithila painting, alongside religious and sacred visual narratives. Additionally, themes such as the seasonal cycle, folk and tribal lore, marriage, and various ritual processions and ceremonies related to annual festivals governed by lunar and solar cycles are immortalised by Mithila women in their artwork. Prominent representations of Mithila art encompass pastoral village scenes and communal activities. Folk art is intrinsically connected to the essence of ceremonies, festivals, and rituals. The connection between the art form and tradition was established through a motif of ritualistic intent. It established a basis to guarantee the preservation of the art form as a tradition.

The distinctiveness of the 'folk' art form lies in the artists' unpretentiousness and the creative liberty and purity that are effectively reflected in these artworks. There has been significant engagement with the external world, which has markedly intensified in the evolving landscape; nonetheless, the 'people' remain steadfastly connected to and inextricably linked with the rituals and customs practised within the community. The artistic expressiveness and preserved innocence of these art forms have captivated audiences on both national and international stages.

In recent years, Mithila art has undergone significant evolution, influenced by the new generation and audience preferences. The alterations in styles, motifs, and forms have resulted in significant transformations and adaptations in the lifestyle of rural and indigenous folk art. It is noteworthy that the mud walls, courtyards, textiles, household artefacts, paintings, and handicrafts remain preserved, relying on the ancient reservoir of narratives, patterns, designs, motifs, themes, and symbols.

### **Changing Paradigm of Mithila Painting:**

William G Archer, a passionate admirer of Indian art and a British official in Madhubani District, uncovered this historic wall painting tradition in January 1934. A catastrophic earthquake measuring 8.4 on the Richter scale struck Bihar, resulting in the deaths of hundreds and the collapse of mud house walls. William G. Archer was tasked with surveying the region, where he was captivated by the wall images, which heightened his interest in the paintings adorning the interiors of Brahmin and Kayastha homes, predominantly created by women. Mithila painting was etymologically identified by William G. Archer in 1934, who initially focused on the wall paintings created by the Brahmin and Kayastha populations of the Mithila region. This experience prompted him to document his observations and analysis in his piece, in which he designated the artwork as 'Maithil artwork.' Archer designated an identifier for the people residing there, and the murals were executed on the walls of the houses in Madhubani, Saharsa, Darbhanga, and Purnea, which predominantly encompass the Mithila region. The artwork is commonly recognised as Madhubani Painting, a term more familiar to the global audience. The external world has become acquainted with this painting originating from the villages of Jitwarpur and Ranti, located in the Madhubani area (Archer 24-33).

The years 1967-68 are regarded as a significant milestone in the history of Mithila Painting's progress. The region was in a dire condition, confronting a succession of catastrophic natural disasters. The Bihar Famine of 1966 and the Bihar drought of 1968 obliterated all hope for the inhabitants of the region. The condition deteriorated severely, rendering the environment grey, cracked, and harsh, with relentless heat searing the dirt. Pupul Jayakar states, "the grim dust of poverty had drained the will and energy required to embellish the home" (Jayakar, 1980). The area was characterised by dust and sunlight, the loss of verdant terrain, and the lack of water, which resulted in a grotesque tonal homogeneity. The charred diminutive plants in the desolate fields, replete with fractures and cracks, had been consumed by the emaciated cattle, leaving no verdant patches. Millions of famished individuals converged upon the free kitchens, as all harvests had been depleted. Numerous fatalities and starvation had extinguished the people's zest and vitality.

The 1968 Bihar drought exacerbated the issue, leading to the establishment of the light labour plan. This calamity was regarded as a benefit for the inhabitants of Mithila, signifying their advancement. From this pivotal period, the artistic motifs employed by Mithila women were transposed onto paper. These projects were created to enhance the intrinsic talents of these women, assist them in improving their lives through the sale of their exquisite artworks, and present Mithila expression to a global audience. Mithila painting has evolved, adapting to contemporary contexts and circumstances. It is unequivocally a source of inspiration for both national and international artists.

In the current market landscape, formerly, the majority of artworks were attributed to anonymity. The artists, lacking literacy and education, did not inscribe their names or signatures. Their decision to abstain stemmed from their perception that this art did not qualify as a distinct art form, and their reluctance to regard any artwork as the product of a singular creator within that genre. However, with the accessibility of the market and consumers in the external environment, they have willingly begun to embrace the concept and significance of signatures and names. This new market has produced very individualistic, self-aware artists, leading to the development of their unique techniques and subjects in painting. The tradition has progressively evolved with the temporal and spatial contexts in which artists have developed their distinct techniques, forms, and subjects in painting, resulting in a significant proliferation. The folk painters have adopted a new approach to representing themselves as both artists and social agents, which has directly and indirectly engaged a global audience. In this context, Narendra Jha asserts:

"In the present age of globalisation, where each and every economy of the world is giving emphasis on women's empowerment, which is not possible by creating employment opportunities for them, but to motivate them to go for creating their own enterprise. Women have undergone a radical transformation from merely a homemaker to a dynamic, multifaceted personality contributing to the socio-economic growth worldwide. Therefore, a move from family management to enterprise management may be easier than a move from paid employment to self-employment" (48).

It has impacted a broader market and has the potential to engage the audience. The many styles, detailed details, brilliant colours, and schemes possess distinct significance, reflecting the artist's consciousness. The exploration of these colours and styles enhances the composition of the artwork, significantly elevating the tradition of folk art. The creations of folk artists reveal a profound and accurate comprehension of traditional symbols and shapes, each with its own meaning and value. The subject matter and the understanding of themes are the conduits that extend this tradition beyond the realm of images. These characteristics distinguish the significance of originality and intensity in art. The visual culture of folk art embodies themes derived from the community's traditional resources. Understanding the dimensions of stories and narratives necessitates examining the historical context of the art practice, along with the connected histories and mythologies of the art form, community, and craftspeople. The oral and written history related to it contributes to the conceptualisation of the painting through shapes, colours, and patterns.

Mithila painting has always been predominantly practised by women. The inclusion of boys in this painting style is a new development and trend. The evolution and transition appear to have altered the surface and the medium. The expansion of the artistic realm and the introduction of novel techniques, colour palettes, and dyes have significantly enhanced the scope and future of Mithila painting. It is essential to examine this aspect and study the utilisation of colours and their evolution throughout time and space. The transition from natural extracts to synthetic hues. The natural pigments derived from flowers, vegetables, and leaves were utilised in Mithila.

The popularity of various 'folk' art forms significantly depends on external variables such as a receptive audience, museums, exhibitions, consumers, and connoisseurs. Mithila painting exemplifies the expression of beliefs, daily activities, and experiences. The distinctiveness of this painting tradition is defined by its application of vivid colours and its diverse styles, patterns, and symbols.

#### IV. Conclusion:

In conclusion, examining the evolution of the Mithila painting tradition from mud walls to canvas and other materials is essential for understanding the numerous reasons that facilitate or hinder these changes. It provides insight into the challenges related to both the ritualistic and commercial dimensions. The integration of stories and narratives from the Epics and various regional mythologies into the Mithila painting tradition has facilitated changes in both narrative and creative patterns, leading to the expansion of this art form from rural to urban contexts. The aesthetics of Mithila painting require comprehensive observation and analysis to determine any shifts in its transition from folk to mainstream art.

It is important to note that folk art encompasses all types of visual art within the framework of folk culture. The definitions differ and frequently intersect or are disputed. Folk arts are entrenched and indicative of the community's cultural existence. It includes the corpus of expressive culture related to folklore and cultural heritage. The visual repertoire of Mithila painting mostly consists of narratives from Indian epics, Puranas, and local mythology, sometimes accompanied by oral melodies performed during special religious and matrimonial ceremonies. Nevertheless, one may observe the integration of novel concepts and visual narratives in contemporary times. The techniques and aspects involved in transforming folk art into current popular culture are essential for deciphering and recognising the characteristics that have enabled the 'folk' art form to achieve popular culture status. This dissertation primarily addresses the evolution of Mithila paintings, analysing the traits that facilitate their transition from rural to urban contexts in India and beyond.

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