

Cultural Preservation through the Lens of Madhubani Art: A Reflection of Subaltern Narratives

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Abstract

Even before the beginning of civilization art has been the integral part of life of people in India. The paintings of Bhimbetka caves are the living examples of this ancient culture. Madhubani art is one among those old paintings that is believed to be dated back to the age of Ramayana when it was first painted on the walls of Janakpur on the eve of marriage of Lord Rama and Seeta. Thus, having its root in ancient past madhubani art has travelled a long way. However, this is not just an art but a repository of the unheard voices of the society. The article aims providing an account on the social conservation led by the madhubani art. The soul purpose of this article is to focus on the role of women in promoting this art form and also the contribution of Madhubani art in uplifting the condition of women in Bihar. Another section of this article focuses on the contribution of Dalits in this artform as to how they developed two new styles of madhubani art that is the Gobar and Godna style. Hence, madhubani art is not just a preserve of our cultural heritage but also the repository of feminine and Dalit perspective.

Key Words: Madhubani Art, Godna, Gobar, Feminine, Dalits

India being a cradle of numerous cultures and artform has a long history of its various art-form evolving with time. The tradition of painting in India began even before civilization entered this noble land. The cave paintings of Bhimbetka are the oldest evidence of paintings existing in India. There are a large variety of paintings showcasing the beauty of our culture. Madhubani painting is one of the most eminent artform among them. This style of painting was born in area of Mithilanchal which earns it another name which is Mithila folk-art. Mithila also known as Mithilanchal is a region in Indian sub-continent located in Bihar and also constitutes some parts of adjoining districts of the eastern Terai region of Nepal. Its ancient name was Tirhut also known as Tirhutbhukti. The place is adorned by Himalaya in its north and rivers Ganges, Gandaki and Mahananda in the south, west and east respectively¹. The region is not just naturally blessed but is also the abode of rich cultural heritage. The name Mithila is believed to be derived from the name of king 'Mithi', who is believed to have established Mithilapuri². A mythical story goes on his name that since, he took birth out of his father's body thus, was called as 'Janaka'. After king Mithi his name Janaka became a title to be adopted by the later kings of Mithila and among all, the most famous Janaka documented in history was Seeradhwaaja Janaka, considered to be the father of Sita³. Thus, Mithila has its special mention in Yajurveda Samhita for the first time and later in Buddhist Jatakas, the Barhmanas, Puranas and various epic such as Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Madhubani, which means forest of honey ('Madhu'- honey, 'Ban'-forest) is a region in the Mithila region of Nepal and the northern part (Madhubani district) of Bihar.⁴ Deep in the rural interiors as well as in the urban decors this art form not only captures the legends and mythology of ancient culture, but also reflects the amalgam of art, life and environment. Madhubani painting got official recognition in 1970 when the President of India gave an award to Mrs. Jagdamba Devi of village Jitbarpur near Madhubani.⁵ While, on the one hand, these paintings have brought about a revolution in the world of art, on the other they are fast capturing the world of fashion. It is difficult

to say whether these paintings are folk art or home art. By whatever name one may call it, there is no doubt that it formed, and still forms, an integral part of not only of Mithila's social life but of entire nation.

Madhubani paintings were initially practiced by different sects of people, hence, the paintings were categorized into five different styles, such as Tantrik- it solely depicts religious texts and characters related to the paintings, Kohbar- it is the painting which is painted on the wall of a kohbar ghar. This is mainly painted by the women of lower class of the society, Bharni- it is mainly done by filling the enclosed areas with vibrant colours. It is mainly practiced by upper caste people, Godna- it is commonly known as tattoo in today's life done on arms and legs, also practiced by the lower castes, Katchni- this style makes the use of only two colours, still practiced by Kayastha community of the society.⁶ But today, these five different styles have been merged by contemporary artists. The themes used in these paintings often revolve around Hindu deities like Krishna, Rama, Lakshmi, Shiva, Durga and Saraswati. Also, heavenly bodies like sun and the moon often form the centerpiece of madhubani paintings.

Madhubani Art: Empowering women of Bihar:

Madhubani art not only portrays pictures but the emotions of the people of Mithila. It has multidimensional impact on the life of people of Bihar. It has touched the untouched section that is the women of Bihar and it has turned out to be a great source of income for these downtrodden ones. Besides this, madhubani art form also projects the division of society through the paintings as we even get to see the caste shadow on the paintings. One of the greatest relevance of this painting is that it has huge impact on the environment as it has turned out to be a powerful weapon for maintaining the ecological balance of Mithila as well as entire Bihar.

Since, Mithila is credited to be the birth place of Sita thus, it later got related to Lord Rama. According to Ramayana the king of Mithila Raja Janaka married his daughter Sita to Lord Rama the son of Kaushalya and Dasharatha in Ayodhya the capital of kingdom of Kosala. However, this marriage was one of the most celebrated marriages of its time in our history. Thus, this marriage is believed to be documented in a very peculiar form which gave birth to the new form of art called as Mithila paintings as a result of which the region of Mithilanchal is crowned as one of the most culturally rich area of India and has also enabled it to receive international recognition. This ancient folk-art has kept women in the forefront when it comes to the ratio of contribution of both male and female artist. Public and private dichotomy has been a stark divide evident since the later vedic period. Although the role of women in the public ambit was relegated to becoming negligible but still the work of female madhubani artists like Jagdamba Devi, Channo Devi, Dulari Devi, Mahasundari Devi, etc earned them not only local but international recognition. This artform was begun by the women of Janakpur in the form of Kohbar painting during the marriage of lord Rama and Seeta and thereafter has been carried by the women force largely. Where on one hand there is a condition of identity crisis for the women in every sphere of life, madhubani art on the other hand has given them a platform to prove their competency and creativity to the world. This artform has not only provided them recognition in India but made them famous on the global platform.

Where at once housework was the only appreciated art of women in Bihar, the emergence of madhubani art transformed the whole scenario and these unrecognized labourers emerged out as a significant artist and a huge workforce. It is serving as a panacea for the unemployed rural women. This has not only helped employ women but has also given recognition to their work which is a huge step in a state like Bihar which is struggling for women empowerment. Thus, this art form is supporting thousands of women's existences not only in Madhubani or Bihar but also all over the

country. The women of Mithila have successfully transferred their techniques of ‘Bhittichitra’ or ‘Wall Painting to the medium of paper and lastly on clothes, and have registered the temptation to freely adopt their tradition of unpredictable public tastes

Madhubani painting is more than an art for the women of Bihar, through this creative ability, a group of women express their desires, dreams, expectations, hopes and aspirations to the people. It is an emblematic expression of day-to-day experiences and beliefs. Madhubani is exclusively feminine school of folk painting. Traditionally, this style of painting was passed down from generation to generation in the far reaches of the Mithila region mainly by women.⁷ 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. These artistic activities are done by a lady as a routine work that makes her complete creative personality; a singer, a sculptor, a painter, an embroidery design maker; these were the aesthetic wonder of Madhubani painting.⁸

This widespread art form exhibits a very small scale beginning as it was begun by Sita Devi, one of the pioneering Madhubani artists, who exhibited the nature and influence of the arts in the socio-political development of an underdeveloped region of rural India. She brought the ‘bharni’ form out of homes and showcased it in public, both in India and abroad. Her work was officially recognized by the Government of India in 1981 and she was awarded the Padma Shri. She undertook a project of teaching 1000 villagers Madhubani art for social and financial empowerment.

Mahasundari Devi of Ranti village was another prominent lady in this field. She shed her purdah and picked up the brush to make a name for herself as one of the foremost practitioners of a fine art that typically draws its inspiration from Hindu mythology or scenes from everyday rural life thus, her name turned out to be synonymous of this folk style.⁹ She was recognized and awarded by the president of India in 1982 for her commitment to art. She was awarded the Padma Shri in 2011 for her paramount contribution to the field of art. She had expertise in ‘Sikki’ work, Sujni craft and clay work in Madhubani paintings. Her legacy and artwork live on through her sister-in-law Karpuri Devi and granddaughter Pushpa Kumari

The work of Mahasundari Devi and Karpuri Devi was carried forward by one of their dedicated followers, Dulari Devi. She transformed Madhubani art and expanded the palate from primary colours. Although she herself cannot read or write, with her collaborative efforts with Gita Wolf, she has published her own biography called ‘Following My Paintbrush’.¹⁰ She belonging to a fishermen’s community wishes to extensively work on the education of children belonging to Mallah community.

Another lady who availed the mainstream canvas was Pushpa Kumari, the granddaughter of Mahasunderi Devi. She illustrated social issues through a spiritual perspective. She approached towards social issues like HIV, female feticide, child marriage, dowry system, etc. Besides these senior artists this art form is also attracting the young female artists too one such prolific name is that of Mahalaxmi.¹¹ She uses this art form to set a discourse around problems such as street harassment and education. Thus, with time, upcoming women artists are bridging the gaps between the personal, political, and professional life. Their artworks are now a reflection of their realities, which are no more in alignment with the patriarchal structure that they inherited with their informed skills; they illustrate and actively create their history

In this era of digitalization Madhubani painting is no more only a part of wall paintings, clothes, walls, floors, etc, but has also turned out to be a unit of economy which reminds us of a digital

platform named 'iMithila'.¹² This was an online application developed by Ruchi Jha and her mother-in-law Renuka Kumari in 2016 and is a part of the startup India. These social entrepreneurs have been adapting the ancient art of Madhubani painting on apparel and home décor products and selling them through this ecommerce platform.¹³

Besides the national recognition a few ladies worked towards the international fame of Madhubani art, one eminent name that emerges out is that of Usha Mehta, the owner of 'Petals Crafts' which she established it in 1991. Petal Crafts has travelled a long mile since its inception and have its international presence now. It is registered under Micro, small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) program of the Government of India. Usha Mehta presented the Petal Crafts in two international stages such as "India Show" St. Petersburg, Russia in 2009 and "World Indian Festival" in Singapore in 2014.¹⁴ Thus, Usha Mehta has somehow become the face of this industry in Bihar. When erstwhile President Pratibha Patil visited Bihar, she was gifted a 14-foot painting that still hangs in the Rashtrapati Bhavan.

Hence, even in this patriarchal society this art form emerges out to be pioneered by a female, got its national recognition due to a female and is receiving international acknowledgement due to a female. The females have emerged out to be the backbone of this very art form of Bihar. Madhubani art has led to the empowerment of women not only economically but also psychologically, culturally as well as socially, as, a woman who was confined only to the four walls of the house now has a hope and a way to move out of it and be an identified part of the economy and the society of the country.

Social Conservation through Madhubani Art: The Dalit Perspective.

Madhubani art has not only empowered the female section of the society but has also turned out to be a pictorial voice of the sabotaged class of the society, the Dalits. As in the region of Mithila, there are particularly women from two sub-castes among the Dalit community have mastered the art of Mithila which was different from the paintings by upper castes women. Though this art was traditionally begun by Brahman and Kayastha women, who by reasons of their caste constituted a socially respected class in the villages of Bihar. Yet it cannot be forgotten that women were not counted on an equal footing with their men folk. But the further investigations have revealed that the Dalit women especially those belonging to 'Dusadh' and 'Chamar' community had developed their own style of paintings and various new themes were included.

The credit to Dalit inclusion goes to a German anthropologist, Erika Moser, having inspired and guided Dusadh women back in 1978 to embrace the art and start writing a new chapter of their social recognition and economic independence.¹⁵ The result was the Dusadh captured their oral history (such as the adventures of Raja Salhesh and depictions of their primary deity, Rahu). This added another distinctive new style to the region's flourishing art scene. This art also demolished the supremacy of the much-established Brahmin women artist. Dusadh women were very receptive to their ideas of starting a profession in Mithila Paintings but at the same time were apprehensive of their awareness and strength against the already established Brahmin women leading the art. These apprehensions were born around the lack of their knowledge for elaborated painting styles like Kohbar and Aripana, Hindu customs, deities, Gods and goddesses over which the Brahmins has created a complete dominance. Thus, the Dusadh women started to embark on their own journey of Mithila paintings and its rewarding experience. As a result, Dusadh community today is an active force in Mithila and Bihar. These Dalit women force mainly painted trees, creepers/ flowers and moulded low relief clay figures of deities and animals on external walls of their homes. Evolution of

Dalit art came as a resistance as it is evident that it marks the creation of social space for themselves in the cultural hierarchy of the society.

Among the few recognized Dalit artists Malvika Raj is a prominent figure, a Dalit woman artist from Samastipur, Bihar has been subverting the genre by illustrating folklore surrounding Buddha's epoch. However, her idea of representing her narrative through Madhubani art has not been met with complete support from the mainstream community, as she was harassed for shifting from the traditional depiction of Hindu mythology in art. Dulari Devi, Rajesh Paswan, Shivan Paswan, Chunnu Devi, Roudi Paswan are some of the individuals who despite belonging to the low caste did work for their cultural upliftment and are successful to a greater extent.¹⁶ The Dalit men and women gave a local rural tinge to this art form as we get to see a few new styles of the Madhubani painting. One such example is the Gobar style of painting, it was started by Jamuna Devi. It basically involves giving the paper a light gobar wash, which imparts a beautiful sullied look and feel to it, on which bright colours come out very beautifully. This new style of painting, in due times attained huge recognition and demand in commercial markets, besides being emulated by painters from upper castes. Jamuna Devi's mud frescos and paintings reserved a place in big exhibitions in Japan, New Delhi, Patna and Varanasi. Another important subaltern art form propagated mainly by the Dalit artist is that of Godna, or tattoo paintings. The evolution of this art can be traced back by studying the rituals and habits of the Nat community.¹⁷ Godna, for Dalit women has become not just the inversion of markers of identification, but for forms of subaltern expression. However, the history of Godna also lies in the discrimination suffered by Dalit women, who were forced to wear ornaments of iron and other inferior material only, as prescribed by the Manu code. A few Dalit Godna artists includes the names of Chano Devi, Roudi Paswan, etc. Though these Dalit women force have to face three-fold inequality and suppression- first, they are Dalits; second, they are women and lastly majority are uneducated and poor. Maximum of the Dalit women are generally illiterate, and are in any case reluctant to consider themselves individual procedures of, 'works of art' and only a few of them mark the paintings with their own name.

Thus, Madhubani art turned out to be a weapon for the Dalits to rebel against the monopoly of the upper castes even in the field of art and architecture. The active participation of Dalits gave a new perspective to this art form as it is more like a platform for them to express their unsaid sabotaged views fearlessly. Hence, evolution of Dalit art came as a mode of resistance as it is evident, it marks the creation of social space for themselves in the cultural hierarchy of the society.

Hence, Madhubani art can indeed be considered to be the feminine as well as Dalit preserve. It is a unique platform which has enable both the subaltern group that is the women and the Dalits to express their views through various pictorial motifs. It can also be considered to be a non-violent revolution carried out by these suppressed group to raise their voices. Madhubani art has also turned out to be a huge source of revenue for these downtrodden sections as unlike other folk-arts this art is still has survived through ages and flourished in every facet be it culture, social life, women empowerment, ecological conservation, tradition etc. The social richness of this art lies in the fact that women are the soul bearer of this art form. The paintings must be seen as the product of individual artist, where work combines selected aspects of traditional art with inspiration from historic sources as well as personal innovation. The central theme of all paintings is love and fertility. Hence, the wall hangings, paintings mural and tapestries of this art form are widely available and can be effectively employed to add colour and vitality to the interior space.

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