

Madhubani Painting: The Marker of Indian Civilization

Kaushik Bhattacharya* and Dr. Abhijit Das**

Assistant Professor Department of Anthropology Bidhannagar College
Associate Professor Department of Anthropology West Bengal State University

ABSTRACT

This article tries to throw light upon how the elements of Indian civilization, mainly the mythical anecdotes of the Purānas, are portrayed in the Madhubani folk paintings. The endeavour is to contextualise how the folk elements of Madhubani folk art genre construct an ethos of Indian civilization and tries to continue its tradition in the frame of Indian civilization. The folk elements in Madhubani painting and its relation between local myths, the little tradition, and the Hindu mythology, the great tradition, are evident. Hence it can be opined that in this case, the oral tradition has been combined with ritualistic visual expressions to produce a complete art tradition. It bears specific cultural meaning and usually bound by the customs and conventions in form and content, style and pattern, as well as by their holistic folkloric character. The folk artists of the Madhubani tradition have bound themselves within the limits of social and cultural milieu of their own community. Madhubani folk paintings have four distinct styles, each with its different identity along with different art historical background. These four styles are Mithilā painting, Godhna painting, Gobar painting and Tantrā painting. All these styles are intimately interwoven with Indian tradition and civilization. With this background, this article ventures into salient issues – the networks of relationship among the castes, themes and styles of paintings, the emergence of specialised artists from a folk painting tradition, the transformation folk artists' village into the specialists' centre, and the way a traditional community art shifts from its traditional authenticity to more individualistic exercise of contemporary art production. This article also tries to document different internal and external social and cultural factors that act upon this folk art form.

KEY WORDS: Indian civilization, folkloric character, Mithilā painting, Godhna painting, Gobar painting, Tantrā painting

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I. TO BEGIN WITH

It would suffice to say that traditional knowledge and its sequential persistence are built upon the cornerstones of folk lifestyle. In my view, this process is not only an intricate one, but may be understood as an analogue of a massive tree; which in its entanglement of numerous branches, shoots and twigs exhibits an apparent lack of pattern, but a closer inspection reveals an underlying organisation that is meticulously governed. Folk painting assimilates the ethos of the frequency and rhythm of the life stories of the common people. How improbable and venturesome it is to shed light on this epic vastness in a nutshell. In 1871, E.B. Tylor provided the definition of culture, where he put forward the characteristic feature of cultural continuity; but it was only an indication. Its real importance and apprehensibility can only be perceived by delving into the innermost core of the subject. The purpose of this article is to establish the close association of civilization and folk life in the foundation of cultural matrix as a whole. The significance of *Madhubani* folk paintings in the frame of Indian civilization will also be elucidated in the latter part of this article.

The lexical meaning of the term '*Paramparā*' (heritage) usually signifies offspring or succession or tradition. In this regard, '*Loukik Paramparā*' (folk heritage) can also be considered to be an intricate and delicate mosaic of past, present and future. And hence, the variety of expressions of folk culture is actually the offspring of culture and civilization as a whole. Thus, the characteristic features of tradition-ridden culture have attained, by virtue of the constituent elements of the society at large, newer and multifaceted forms, colours and essence in their expressions in due course. Similarly the manifestations of *Madhubani* folk paintings have collected its various elements from local people's faith, beliefs, norms and forms, customs and practices of their daily lives. The ever-changing elements of *Madhubani* paintings are cogent evidence of the change in the array of style and expression of folk elements, in the use of folk components along with the shift in their life pattern. Though the backdrops remain unchanged, with the passage of time, newer styles emerge and impart a modern look to the expression. Folk motifs take up a new look and the themes change. But the name of the style, the identity, remains unchanged to the external world. Thus *Madhubani* painting keeps up its existence as an ever-

flowing river. Ingredients (both in form and content) change, but the primary stream maintains its course. Simultaneously its roots and branches get spread deep into the social fabric. Thus the plant grows into an 'Adima Mahādrum' (an ancient massive tree).

In course of analysing the elements of Indian civilization, we generally get into the pitfalls and labyrinths of antiquities. The reason is not quite unknown. Varieties and diversities within this particular civilization, along with its streams and sub-streams, their arrays and subarrays – all come into creating this intricacy. The foundation of this folk life is the natal home of this particular Indian civilization and the multifaceted lifestyle of the people lies at its centre.

It fascinates me to think that the vastness of Indian civilization is, in fact, of such epic proportions that even an isolated section of this civilization epitomises the whole. In this context, we may begin by understanding what civilization is; what the key features of the versatilities of this Indian civilization are, and, why we should consider this particular manifestation as an interesting one. Such questions are verbosely under polemics. But does it mean that these polemics would not be reviewed or reconsidered? Rather we should evaluate the definitions given by the erudite scholars in consideration that this has veritable multiple angles. Considering the term *civilization*, as its general connotation, I should start with classical evolutionists' view on serial development of human civilization and the contextual dimension of progress and heritage. Human being has to traverse all the rungs of the ladder of progress. Savagery, barbarism and civilization are the serial stages of progress (Morgan, 1877). This unilineal passage is the acknowledged series of the progress of civilization. This final stage is the most complex position of cultural evolution of the human society. This civilization, that is, one that exists presently is actually a stage of progress which has its foundation in the appreciation of metallurgy, industrial development, rise of arts and aesthetics, phonetic alphabet, and use of mathematics are all the basic instruments that has helped to achieve this stage. With the emergence of writing and the application of mathematics, history took its flight. But these attempts of theorising processes of civilisation, as a unilineal movement, has been vehemently criticised by those who consider historicity as an indispensable dimension of viewing civilisation.

CIVILIZATION AND INDIAN CIVILIZATION

Now, what the civilization is. It is an assembled condition of styles and expressions of cultural practices among the inhabitants of a certain place in a certain time. These styles are expressed in the functioning of government or in the form of governance, that is, in implementation of law, established social relations, the manner of production and economy, religious belief, religiosity as well as a religious organization (Kroeber, 1963). The moment time and place are taken as inevitable dimension of civilization, we consciously include history in the domain of civilization. Kroeber has conceived civilization from the cultural historical approach which 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, however, envisaged 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). Redfield has viewed civilization from the perspective of little tradition and great tradition. Milton Singer has been highly influenced by Redfield's views and has formulated a hypothesis on Indian Civilization, particularly concerning upon the immensely entwined interrelationship between the little and great tradition based on Redfield's ideas. According to Singer, the elements of great tradition of India were *culturally continuous* with the little traditions. Great tradition comprises of epic anecdotes and elements of the Hindu pantheon which are universal in presence; whereas, little traditions found in local places, primarily in rural areas and significantly among the lower castes and tribes, are the parochial elements of Indian civilisation (Singer 1955). He opined that this *cultural continuity* is the by-product of pre-existing cultural consciousness of their heritage among Indians (Singer 1955). Singer also compared the great tradition of Indian civilization with the *Sānskritic Hinduism*, which is proposed by M.N. Srinivas and Monier-William's proposition of *Brāhmanism* (Singer 1955).

India is one of the oldest civilizations of the world. In terms of cultural diversity, this civilization is unparalleled. The underlying causes of this magnanimous variety of Indian civilization are blended with each other in a complex relationship. Several major causes and historical events have shaped what we know as Indian civilization today. For five thousand years, this civilization has surmounted all other civilizations in terms of cultural plurality. The foremost reasons why India has attained such a unique dimension are the factors such as social stratification, cultural heterogeneity, religious plurality, and caste hierarchy (Oommen 2001). Since civilization is a dynamic process, Indian civilization has also undergone a continuous process of transformation. It is Oommen, who pointed out the major trends of social transformation of Indian civilization – transitional trend from cumulative to dispersed dominance which is often resulting in status incongruence; gradual movement from hierarchy to equality which again is giving rise to the consequent birth of

individualism; simultaneous demands for equality and the assertion of collective identity and the movement from plural society to pluralism (Oommen 2001).

In this context, the Indian civilization can wholly be conceived through its unique features – Caste System, a traditional social stratification that divides Indian population into distinct occupational groups which are again tightly bound by the concept of purity and pollution; strongly kin-based social organisation and family-centric society which puts emphasis on the importance of family as the building blocks of society as well as the prime source of socialization and enculturation; well established religion which is characterized by clear religious practices and the belief in *Dharmā* or duty that is intertwined with certain related spiritual aspects that operate it; supremacy of traditions or *Paramparā*, where the socially inherited ancient beliefs, customs and practices are followed with devotion and take precedence on every socio-religious situation; and distinguished division of labour which is based on individual age, gender, caste, clan and other demographic and social classifications. Indian Society is thus unique in its own way which is well reflected by its members at large. Later on, I will discuss how the folk art form of *Madhubani painting* encompasses each of these features and consequentially justify as being the marker of the Indian Civilization.

In this article I have tried to access how the folk elements of *Madhubani* folk art genre construct the ethos of Indian civilization and how it keeps and continues its traditional identity in the frame of Indian civilization. It also tries to point out the folk elements of *Madhubani painting* and its relation between local myths, from the little tradition, and the *Hindu* mythology, from the great tradition.

ART AND FOLK ART

The search for beauty is the innate quality of humankind. Whenever, human being has tried to make a single utilitarian good, they have sought to impart some element of beauty in it. Since Upper Palaeolithic period mankind painted the cave walls, made ivory figurines – which were unquestionably masterpieces of aesthetic success, to communicate their daily experiences and actions through beautiful artistic expression. So, it is needless to say, whenever an artist has tried to interpret and communicate their experience through their creation, their endeavour becomes the quintessence of their artistic expression. In this context, it will hardly be an overstatement to say that if anybody wishes to understand our species and its cultural experience completely, the person should deal with the artistic expression and symbolic behaviour of our species, and it indeed is anthropological.

What is art? This particular question has been answered in different ways and at different times by various scholars, throughout the endless journey of the academia in the pan-world context. The etymology of the word ‘art’ in the English vocabulary has its origin in the Latin word ‘*ars*’, meaning skill, way, or method. Usually, art, in our general perception, is designated as plastic or visual countenance, but precisely it should also include the art of literature and music (Read, 1931).

Whenever the scholars engage themselves in the study of the anthropology of art, they are obviously confronted with the problem of defining it. A few decades ago, prior to the First World War, the study of the anthropology of art was considered to be the study of primitive art and this primitive attribution was almost an integral identity associated with the non-Western art (Gerbrands, 1957; Anderson, 1979; Layton, 1991). In the first quarter of the twentieth century, anthropologists included Indian, Japanese, Chinese, Mesoamerican, Sumerian and Egyptian art into the category of ‘primitive’ (Rubin, 1984, 1987). This branded category, i.e. ‘primitive art’, was, for a period of time, an extremely broad one and ambiguous as well. Such a totalising narrative adds nothing but confusion to the anthropological literature on the art of non-Western societies (Layton, 1991). In the mid- twentieth century, by narrowing down this definition, anthropologists tried to specify mainly the works of small-scale indigenous societies which were often referred to as ‘tribal art’. However, the reason behind such branding of non-European art as ‘primitive’ was the construction that adhered to the European conception regarding art and its assumed superiority in ‘observing other cultures’. We may note, that the act of observation and subsequent documentation and categorisation is, in itself, a way to establish dominion over the ‘other culture’; one that asserts itself by defining what art is. This process of ‘knowledge-making’ is intrinsically related to the power dynamics that exists between the coloniser and the colonised – one that imposes the colonisers view upon the *native*. Here the statement of Morphy may be worth mentioning; according to him, for studying anthropology of art, it is essential to develop independent thought which is free from the shadow of the concept of the European classification of objects (Morphy, 1994). In spite of this intricate complexity and debate, anthropologists are bound to review the definition of ‘anthropology of art’ at the beginning of such treatise. So we should stand on a consensus that the study of anthropology of art must begin with mental and emic components of day to day community life.

In the past, the anthropologists neglected the study of art as a human endeavour. At that time they treated the study of art in anthropology as a minority interest and put a tag on it as a mere branch of material culture in general. But today, the anthropology of art has earned its distinctive identity and has entered an exciting stage of history (Morphy and Perkins, 2006). Art is a human endeavour; it is thought to be aesthetic

and bears a meaning beyond a simple description. Anthropologist, Alexander Alland defined art as “play with form producing some aesthetically successful transformation-representation” (Alland, 1977). According to his opinion *play* arises from a genetically inherited stimulus or proclivity; in fact, he opined that art, as a response to form, is one of the basic emotions of the human species. Alland explained art from biological perspective; on the contrary, Morphy and Perkins viewed art from ideological locus. In their words “Art is associated almost equally with the two senses of the word “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). He introduced an early concern with psychic and symbolic aspects of art styles. A.L. Kroeber attempted to relate the historical development of artistic style to the development of civilization (Kroeber, 1923). In 1998, ‘Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory’ by Alfred Gell was published. Here he put forward a new anthropological theory of visual art. He argued that existing anthropological and aesthetic theories took an overwhelmingly passive stance and attributed art status only to a certain class of objects. According to him the anthropology of art should be reformulated as the anthropology of a category of action. Gell showed how art objects embody complex intentionality and mediate social agency (Gell, 1998).

In this context, the anthropology of art studies those human endeavours which are sprung out from individual or community experience and which are indeed somehow aesthetically successful. It includes literature, painting, music and dance, weaving, poetry, crafts (stone carving, woodworking, etc.) and so on. Though aesthetic success is the inevitable precondition for being an object of art, there are other aspects, such as, individual or community beliefs, ritualistic traditions, and people's lives, that play a wider role in the process by which an object of utilitarian good becomes an artistic expression (Coote and Shelton, 1992). Art, in general, is a medium of expression where the individual psyche and the collective cultural knowledge and meaning come together as interwoven threads of fabric. So, one who has to understand art of a specific community, has to know the cultural ethos of that community in particular. This can be understood in the context of various folk art forms.

While conceiving any form of art, the artist hovers around their deep experience. In this sense the artwork itself becomes a direct reflection of artists’ psychic canvas. Since time immemorial, art has been an inseparable part of human life. The earlier artworks were utilitarian in nature but all of them were aesthetically successful. With the advent of agriculture, man became settled and villages emerged. At this period, their depiction of art became folk-religious in nature. Folk art is such a form of art which is associated to common man. Folk art is related to a particular society, caste and religion (Agarwal, 2015).

At the onset of the discussion on folk art, we should organise our thought considering the definition of the terms *folk*, *folklore* and *folk-life*. Folk, or folkways, are the customary ways in which people act in their daily lives. According to scholarly order, folklore is active and significant enough for communicating social identity, collective memory, cultural anxieties, and world view. According to Jonas Balys, folklore comprises traditional creations of people. Moreover, folklore is not a science about the folk, but the traditional folk-science and folk-poetry (Balys, 1940). Folklore as an academic term, is used in a wide sense to refer to all forms of traditional knowledge. Folk life is often linked with the societies in rural settings. Folk societies are small and isolated; the intra-community members are intimately united by sharing of cultural meaning and customary modes of behaviour; the social structures are tightly knit in kinship relations; and above all the motive of commercial gain through economic transaction is less. Though these propositions of the term *folk life* are almost out-dated now, the basic and common meaning of the term is the rural orientation. So, virtually, folk art stands for the art practiced by the rural people. This tradition is universally marked by a type of its own. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *folk art* as ‘the traditional typically anonymous art of usually untrained people’. It is an expression of the indigenous knowledge of a particular community; it is rooted in the traditions that are continued from generation to generation through enculturation. This age old successive process constructs a cultural identity of a specific community by conveying shared community values and aesthetics. It encompasses a range of utilitarian and decorative media, including cloth, wood, paper, clay, metal and more. It is made by individuals or by community as a whole whose creative skills convey their community’s authentic cultural identity. Though, individual or idiosyncratic artistic identity is not at all essential.

The elements of folk life can be defined as the behavioural expressions of the people which are manifested through various cultural phenomena of the society. These elements may be categorized in three broad sections such as verbal expression, performing expression and ritualistic expression. Though, these three types of expressions are different from one another, often a combination of categories of expression may surface as a whole. For example, in case of Maithili Painting, the juxtaposition of local myths with the greater Hindu mythology is evident from the local folk connotations which seamlessly blend with the Brahminical ritualistic traditions. Hence it can be said that in this case, verbal expressions have been combined with ritualistic expressions to produce a complete art tradition.

MADHUBANI FOLK PAINTING

The ongoing discussion can be aptly exemplified by *Madhubani painting*, an ancient folk art tradition. Analysing the constituent elements of this form of expression, one may attempt to understand the nature of Indian civilization. This tradition, originating around the Mithila region of North Bihar and adjacent Nepal, dates back to the time of *Purānas*, especially the *Rāmāyana*. Local myths suggest that King *Janaka* asked women artists to depict his daughter, *Sitā's* wedding scenes in paintings. The artists decorated the walls and floors with paintings accordingly. Even today this tradition is practiced by the women folk. Traditionally these paintings were usually drawn on walls and floors of houses during festivals, ceremonies or special occasions. The places where the *Madhubani* paintings are practised are Jitwarpur and Khajauli of Khajauli block, Madhubani district, Ranti and Simri of Rajnagar block, Madhubani district, and Nirmali of Nirmali block, Supaul district.

Madhubani painting, as a domestic ritual activity, was unknown to the outside world until the massive Bihar earthquake of 1934. In that year William Archer, the British colonial officer in Madhubani district, went there to inspect rescue operations. In doing so, he discovered fascinating wall paintings. He published an ethnographic account on *Madhubani* folk painting in 1949 where this form is documented for the first time. He classified these paintings into two broad categories based on the surface on which the paintings were done; these are *Āripanā*, the floor painting and *Bhitti Chitra*, the wall painting (Archer, 1949). In the late 1960s a severe draught again shattered the village life of *Madhubani* district. At that time an IAS officer, Mr. Bhashkar Kulkarni prompted All India Handicrafts Board to encourage a few upper caste women in villages around *Madhubani* town to transfer their ritualistic wall paintings to paper as an income generating project. Thus a new format of painting on paper, *Pata Chitra*, came into reality (Archer, 1966). From that day, owing to the portable format of painting, *Madhubani* folk art genre became popularised at a rapid pace (Archer, 1977).

Like almost all other folk art tradition around the world, *Madhubani* folk art tradition also takes refuge in different elements of myths and legends. In 1984 Mulk Raj Anand published a book named '*Madhubani painting*' where he attempted to throw light on the thematic issues and stories behind different paintings. *Madhubani* folk painting consists of the tales of the origin of the earth, existence of supernatural beings like *gandharvas* and *apsarās* (Anand, 1984). After 1980s, publications on *Madhubani* folk painting have changed their course. Scholars published different critical interpretations of *Madhubani* folk art tradition instead of general ethnographic documentation. In 1996 Carolyn Henning Brown published poetical influence on *Tantrā* painting as well as motif analysis on the basis of *Tantrā* elements (Brown, 1996). In 1990 Jagdish Chavda made a detailed narrative analysis on particular plates and published his paper, *The Narrative Paintings of India's Jitwarपुरi Women* (Chavda, 1990). Jyotindra Jain, in 1995, published detailed narrative analysis on *Dusadh* legends of Mithila, specifically on the legends of *Salhesh Jeevan* and its depiction in *Godhna* painting (Jain, 1995). In 1997 Jyotindra Jain's epoch-making work named *Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting* was published. Here Jain shed light on how an individual artist rises out from a conventional folk art tradition to an individual creative world of art and to form a distinctive new style which is aptly titled as *Ganga Devi style* later on (Jain, 1997). In 2002 David Szanton started his prolonged series of works on *Madhubani painting*. Here he first claimed that *Madhubani* folk paintings were no longer limited to folk art but rather emerged into a new form of individual stylised contemporary art (Szanton, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005). With the advent of *Madhubani* paintings as a commodity, both in local and global markets, and viable source of income, one may observe how these paintings, which were previously drawn on walls and floors of the house, come onto paper, making it portable and thus marketable. As a result, a once anonymous tradition born out of collective identity, takes the name of an individual artist. It may be observed that in recent times, the *Lokchitris* (the main artists) not only take to signing their works with names, caste identity, names of villages and even accolades received, but also seek to incorporate some unique elements that distinguish them from others – the artists' intention is to promote their individuality, not unlike an act of self-advertisement. Certain recent plates of *Madhubani* painting tend to incorporate global issues as themes which are born as a result of globalisation. This movement from anonymity of folk expression towards individualism is a tangible feature of civilisation itself. However, in the backdrop of *Madhubani* folk painting, it is possible to get a glimpse into the folk traditions and folk-life at large.

Madhubani painting has four styles and each style has different identity along with different art historical background. These four styles are *Mithilā* painting, *Godhnā* painting, *Gobar* painting and *Tantrā* painting. Another interesting observation is how each specific style has different basis of caste orientation, i.e. traditionally each different caste group of the locality is assigned to draw paintings of a specific style. This caste-based restriction is a unique feature of *Madhubani* folk painting. Similarly, such undeniable restrictions are equally applicable in use of colours, themes and motifs. Different styles have particular thematic variety and are associated with different great and little traditional elements. Apart from this, *Madhubani* painting, in its entirety, has a ritualistic flavour; traditionally women folk used to paint *Bhitti Chitra*, the wall painting, in accordance with several events of their life cycle. According to their folk belief, this painting tradition has a role

to propitiate gods and goddesses for their community's prosperity and welfare; to avert natural disasters, protect their crops, and pray for the well-being of their kinsmen. Irrespective of its different styles and caste orientations, it is comprehensively created and nurtured by the women folk.

This traditional folk art form, despite its tradition and heritage, has undergone a great change due to the influence of its popularity and fame as well as the effect of global art market. Yet the main thematic representation of the mythical anecdotes of the *Purānas*, the values and beliefs behind its theme, the caste based division of labour, and familial tradition of painting have remained the same all along, which in turn reflects some of the core elements of Indian civilization.

I have tried to look into the salient queries considering the art form of *Madhubani* folk painting as a marker of Indian civilization. These queries – what the networks of relationship among the castes, themes and styles of *Madhubani* painting are; how and why the caste system, how the feminine experience and external forms of agency, (social, cultural, political, religious, economic and market factors) influence *Madhubani* folk painting; in which way and why the specialised artists emerge; how the artists' village transformed into the specialists' centre; how and why a community art shifts from its authenticity to more individualistic exercise of art production; and finally how and why the *Madhubani* folk painting sustains its traditional identity to the outer world.

II. CONCLUSION

The succeeding delineation encapsulates the observation and interpretation of the present study which concentrates on the presence of certain unique characters of Indian civilization within the domain of *Madhubani* folk painting, which consolidates it as distinctive marker of Indian civilization. The present observation unveiled the multi-caste characteristic features of the villages under study, through their settings. The interpersonal and intergroup relations of the inhabitants of these villages, leads the social network to a collective social matrix. I observed that the symbiotic relations of different castes have made the people strongly unified within the villages. The villages consist of major castes, such as, *Brahmans*, *Kāyasthas*, *Baniās* (*Rājputs*), *Dhānuks*, *Kumhārs*, *Goalās*, *Mālis*, *Dusādhs*, *Chamārs*, *Dhopās* and *Kahārs*.

The *Harijans* (composed of three caste groups *Chamār*, *Dusādh* and *Dhopā*) constitute the largest community in the village. In spite of their preponderance, the social status of the *Harijans* is very low in the caste stratification. Formerly the *Harijans* were primarily engaged in the skinning of animal carcass, cleaning the carrion depot and washing clothes. But now they have given up their traditional occupation. Now they are engaged with primarily painting and agriculture. The *Harijans* now are enlisted as schedule caste. Though the caste discrimination now has been legally abolished but the orthodox system of caste hierarchy has placed them in socially secluded communities. Previously they were deprived of the privilege of *Brāhman* priests attending them and performing their religious rites. *Mondal* community has two major castes, the *Kumhārs* and the *Goalās*.

Besides these, the presence of untouchable community, namely the *Kahārs* is also observed in the village. Originally the *Kahārs* belonged to the community of palanquin bearer. But the caste name *Kahār* communicates a sense of confusion and ambiguity. It seems that the word *Kahār* comes from the word *Kowrā* means the hog. The word, *Kowrā*, in course of time was transformed into the word *Kaharā* and then again into *Kahār*. But yet the truth of this fact is a little bit doubtful. Even today the *Kahārs* practice swine herding as their supplementary occupation.

Apart from the original caste occupation, almost all of them practise painting as their other means of livelihood.

Caste	Occupation	
	Traditional	New pursuits
Brāhmans	Priestly occupation, agriculture (land holder)	Painting
Kāyasthas	Agriculture	painting
Baniās	Business and trading	Selling of painting
Dhānuks	Service giving to the Brahmin	Painting
Kumhārs	Earthen pot making	Painting
Goalās	Milk the cow and the buffalo	Selling the milk
Mālis	Making of flower-garland	Painting and craft
Dusādhs	Cleaning carrion depot	Painting
Chamārs	Skinning off the dead animal	Painting
Dhopās	Washing the garments	
Kahārs	Swine herder and palanquin bearer	

Thanks to the traditional *Madhubani* folk art, the villages in the proximity have attained boundless fame not only in India, but in abroad also.

The sustenance pattern of the inhabitants of locality is an important aspect of the observation. The traditional caste based occupational specializations, and a newly born economic inlay, i.e. the practice of *Madhubani painting* are the chief factors to compose a nexus that has given rise to a compact life pattern in the village.

Even six or seven decades ago, land was greatly valued in the area, for the village economy being predominantly agricultural at that time. The dominant castes of the villages, i.e. the *Brāhmins* and the *Kāyasthas* grasped the lion's share of the land holding. These two upper castes never deployed themselves in the manual parts of agricultural work; rather they employed the labours from other lower castes for these purposes. Mainly the *Dhānuks* and the *Mālin* were engaged in the profession of agricultural labour. Although the *Maithil Brāhmins* did not cultivate the land themselves previously, but recently they do not hesitate to do the manual parts of cultivation themselves. Previously, the agro-labourers were mostly remunerated in kind by instalment or annually. But in recent times, daily wages in cash is the prevalent mode of labour transaction in the village. Thus, the *Jajmāni* system of production which is a typical feature of traditional Indian civilization is replaced by the modern, neo-liberal market economy. The subsistence of the family is ensured by all its members; although the work-load on the males is relatively higher than that on the females. Almost entirety of outdoor labour is undertaken by the males, whereas females are solely responsible for household jobs. Agriculture is almost entirely practiced by the males. Besides production, selling of agricultural produce also rests on the male members. In agricultural affairs, the females take a rather passive role. After harvesting, they husk the grains. The distribution of produce was once entirely controlled by the *Baniā* caste. Traditionally, this *Baniā* caste was the mediator of production in one hand, and the market on the other. At that time, the *Baniās* were one of the richest castes in the village. Business and trading and money lending were the major occupations of the *Baniās*. The rich members of this caste were locally called *Mahājan*. Nowadays they invest money in the new economic sector i.e. paintings. They fix out the buyer in the market and supply the paintings to the buyer and procure these paintings from the local artists. The *Kumhārs*, (the potters) makers of earthenware are broadly related to the cultivator. The *Goalās* (milk men) are another important section of the society. A few families of the *goalā* caste have sources of outside income. Till today the *Goalā* families are mostly dependent on milk trading, they supply their product to the neighbouring villages. The main customers of milk are the local *Mithaiwallā* (sweet maker). They purchase milk from the *Goalās* on monthly payment basis. Traditionally the *Mali* caste occupied in horticulture. They are specialized as flower gardeners and are often engaged with the temple authority to supply flowers for the purpose of worship in the temple. They also supply flowers to the *Brahman* families for worship. The male members of the *Mali* caste are engaged in nurturing flowering plants. The female members make flower garlands and flower ornaments for worship, marriage and other sacred ceremonies. The female members of this caste are called *Mālin* or *Phulwāli*. Nowadays most of them are engaged in painting. The *Mālis* are also remunerated in cash or kind, though remuneration in kind is often preferred.

Family-centric aspect of Indian civilization is also perceived within *Madhubani* folk painting as it is caste-based, traditional, and often familial affair. Initially, the art and the artists are protected and nurtured by the families like the floral bud is shielded by the calyx. Family especially acts as the nursery for the future artists. Since the childhood, the family members go through a proper enculturation and gradually become full-fledged painters. The home and the family provide all sorts of help and privilege to the artists. This role of the family is one of the vital aspects in providing ample opportunities for the budding artists but physical aspect of a family is nonetheless very important. The research has observed that the house is not only a dwelling space but also the gallery that preserves the works of an artist and often become the surface for their works. The house walls are the initial display format of the *Madhubani* fresco painting. Not only that, the house provides a special workshop for paintings. This workshop is an open and airy space in the most lighted part in the house.

Virtually, in all societies, people experience the need to express their feelings and ideas in what we might call an artistic medium. For example, we can cite that many American Indian communities used to perform rain dance or sun dance as a medium of expressing their emotion. The Indian sub-continent may also be a great example of the breeding ground of such rich traditional folk expression.

Here, the term folk expression signifies a broad spectrum of any cultural projection which traces its course through behavioural mechanism. Folk painting is one of the most vital forms of ritualistic expression. Art is a part of life and in no way separate from it. If we follow closely the lifestyle of a particular community, we can discover a profound impression of their philosophy of life that is projected in their rituals. And when painting, as the form of expression, surfaces in the cultural sphere through ritualistic pattern, it becomes much more expressive and acceptable; and this is what actually happened in the case of *Madhubani* painting.

Primarily, *Madhubani paintings* were related directly to rituals. The *Maithil Brāhman Lokchitri* (folk artist) used to paint various thematic drawings in their *Behā* (marriage festival), *Upanayana* (sacred-thread ceremony)

Annadān (rice-giving ceremony) and other religious festivals. In various religious rites, paintings are essential ritualistic expressions.

Name of the festival and rituals	Painting theme
<i>Akshaya Tṛitiā</i> and <i>Ganesha Chaturthi</i>	Image of the Lord <i>Ganesha</i> (the Elephant God)
<i>Sitā Naumi</i>	Birth of <i>Sitā Devi</i> (the beloved of the Lord <i>Rāmā</i>)
<i>Nāg Panchami</i>	Image of <i>Nāg Kanyā</i> (the Snake Deity)
<i>Nandotsav</i> and <i>Janmāshṭami</i>	Birth of the Lord <i>Krishnā</i>
<i>Rāsa</i>	The divine flirt of the Lord <i>Krishnā</i> with the <i>Gopinis</i> (<i>Rāsa Lila</i>)
<i>Sālshesh Puja</i>	Image of <i>Sālshesh Jeevan</i> and <i>Mālin</i>
<i>Beha</i> (marriage)	<i>Kowbār Ghar</i> (nuptial chamber) and the marriage scene of the Lord <i>Rāmā</i> and <i>Sitā Devi</i> and the love scene of <i>Sālshesh Jeevan</i> and <i>Mālin</i>

In marriage the *Kowbār* is decorated. Though both the upper and the lower caste communities decorate the marriage place with *Kowbār* painting, the theme of this painting is different in different communities. The *Kowbār* for the upper caste communities contain mythical elements from the greater Hindu tradition, while, on the other hand, in the lower caste communities, it renders the elements of little tradition. This ‘*Kowbār*’ form is basically related to the fertility cult. Apart from all these themes, the story of banishment of *Rāmā* to the forest, the marriage of *Rāmā*, the story of love of *Sālshesh Ji* and *Mālin* are very popular among the local artists. Traditionally various caste groups were specified for specific painting. But at present there is no hard and fast specification for such division. From the above description, it is obvious that this painting form is not only a product of individualistic aesthetic drive or a mere decorative art object but the community orientation and its religious thematic relation with rituals are also a vital collective psychological force behind the painting motive.

On keen scrutiny of the themes and the contents of the paintings, I found a very close relation between myths and paintings in the one hand and castes and myths on the other. In fact these relations are the basic components of the existing network among the three major vertices i.e. myth, caste and painting. Truly speaking, *Madhubani* folk art is a symbolic and communicative medium which reflects certain kind of social behaviour or structural expression of the village society.

The pictorial elements of *Madhubani painting* are closely related to the myth of great tradition and little tradition. The upper caste Brahmins and other upper castes adopt different myths of Hindu *Purānas*, specifically from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Here it should also be noted that the selected stories from the mythical base are mostly related to the symbols of fertility cult. The archetypal myth core here has been foregrounded by relatively later local fertility oriented folk motifs. For example, the theme of *Hori* (the colour festival) is directly related to various fertility motifs. In *Kowbār* decoration the elements of fertility cult are relatively common and easy to observe. But in the paintings of lower castes and the untouchables the mythical orientations are somewhat different. The elements are mostly adopted from the myths of the little tradition. The themes are the images of *Sālshesh*, love story of *Sālshesh* and *Mālin* and the *Kowbār*. The elements of these themes are taken from natural environment. The use of soil, cow dung and black pigment are the remarkable features of the paintings by the lower castes. The processes of parochialisation and universalisation have altered the traditional thematic orientation of *Madhubani* folk art. The little traditional elements have been universalized and inducted into the great traditional mythical matrix and on the contrary, the great traditional element parochialised to the little tradition. The interrelation among caste, painting element (the symbolic expression) and thematic orientation of the element is expressed through ritualistic behaviour or structural base of the society. So it can be said in this respect that caste orientation and symbolic expression are the impulsive mode while rituals are the functional mode of the entire painting tradition.

Madhubani painting is not a mere decorative object; it bears the community’s beliefs, norms, values and customs. It is not haphazard or chaotic; rather it is the symbolic expression of the desire for sustenance of life, needs and human emotions. *Madhubani* folk art genre is a vast domain which comprises four distinct forms - *Mithilā*, *Godhnā*, *Gobar*, and *Tantra*. Besides these forms the craft, named *sikki* craft, is also a major component of *Madhubani* traditions.

In *Mithilā* painting the subject often is drawn from the *Hindu* epics and mythologies. For example, the *Rāmāyana* and the *Mahābhārata* and the *Krishnalilā* are depicted in the two dimensional painting format. Gods

and Goddesses like Kali, Lakshmi and a male deity with five faces and four hands, holding lotus in two hands and chakra and conch-shell in the other two (the mixed incarnation of *Shiva* and *Vishnu*?) draw special attention. The figures in most cases, are drawn in profiles, though, there are frontal version too. Generally the figures are linear in nature. Interestingly, no figure in *Tribhanga* (trifold) have been found by the researcher. Colours are generally bright; use of red, orange, ultramarine blue, viridian green and chrome yellow is remarkable. Uses of raw pigments instead of mixed colours are more popular. Often the canvas depicts a group of figures clad in bright colourful *ghagrā* (rap around) like apparels, singing and dancing in jubilation. The figures are often stylized with big eyes, emphasized nose, bold and sometimes disproportionately big lower arms and shortened lower limbs. Women folk are generally seen in buoyant *dupāttās* (scarfs) and *ānchals* (veils) and with long locks around their ears. They wear ornaments like bangles necklaces, earrings and waist bands. The outlines of the figures are drawn in sharp lines, often painted in black. In *Kowbār* paintings, one can identify the symbolic depiction of marriage and fertility rituals. There are images of pond filled with *prin-kā-pāt* (the lotus leaves), birds, fishes and animals, the images of bride-groom, the sun, the moon and the *Madandatt* (the God of Love). All the paintings are highly stylized and decorated with emphasized boundaries or borders which are painted with intricate designs of creepers or a series of triangles and spirals. The empty space of the canvas is filled with decorative and functional motifs of floras, the leaf-fringed trees and branches bowed with flowers. One can often find tiny figures of cows, elephants, fishes and crows in the canvas. So far as the drawing is concerned, the figures are less realistic, more stylized; sometimes they hover around the edge of being stylized incarnation of abstract qualities of human psyche.

In Godhna art tradition, pagan motif are frequently observed in most of the canvases. Animals like boars, tigers, horses, elephants; birds like peacocks, parrots and even an unknown bird called *ājab chirei* (a strange bird as a respondent unfolds its identity to the recorder) can be seen. The *Sālshesh Jeevan* myth of the little tradition recurs in some painting and the protagonist is seen in the bower of bliss while the *Mālins* (fairies) fly around the garden on their wings. Their intricate hair-style, dresses with small *buti* (dot) work and distribution of space either with concentric quadrangles or concentric circles bring clearly its difference from *Mithilā* form. The *Godhnā* paintings are often monochromatic, though use of colour pigments in flat and opaque tones is also found. Lacking in rich colour combination and pictorial details in comparison with the *Mithilā* paintings the *Godhnā* art is more simplified, more symbolic, and in a sense repetitive. Here one can find more intricate line drawing often in black, brown and amber. Often the canvas is primarily coated with a thin layer of water mixed with cow dung that reminds us of the *Gobar* tradition. It may be a case of mutual give-and-take and intermixing of two different art traditions. In its structural simplicity and symbolic overtone, it seems much closer to its primitive origin and lack of stylization seems to impart a characteristic style that keeps the *Godhnā* tradition apart from other local art forms.

The *Gobar* tradition is originally a bas-relief, which seems to be more close to sculptural style. But in recent days, it has adopted elements from the *Godhnā* tradition to evolve into a new art form. In this painting, the canvas is treated with cow dung or the pigments that are mixed with cow dung to create a thick and opaque colour base; the motifs and features are often like *Godhnā* tradition. In a canvas the motif of the Sun God centrally located and surrounded by motifs of birds and flowers demands special attention. The pigments used in the canvas are not at all loud and a student of art could even venture a guess that it was originally a primitive way of tempera. Simplified, but aesthetically rich in form, the *Gobar* tradition is an example of Indian primitive painting at its height.

In *Tantra* art form, things are more obscure and as these paintings aim at certain abstruse religious rituals, these paintings are aesthetically less convincing and more a thing of coterie appreciation. The treatment, though often has the flavour of *Madhubani* style, the centrally located *yantra* (ritualistic drawing in tantric practice) often resembling a star, or a pentagonal form or a circle and at times a multi-petal lotus that symbolizes the blooming consciousness. Though recently the *Tantra* paintings are gaining grounds in the market, yet its appeal as a painting is less in comparison with the other local art forms.

Among the four art traditions *Mithilā* style seems to be the richest and the most popular. The use of bright colours and its close association to a storyline has made this painting close to life. Human stories have been depicted with typical flexibility and rhythm and thus the warmth and rigour of life have imparted something which makes the paintings pulsating with vitality.

In the beginning Maithili painting was drawn on the walls as a form of fresco and as the form of *Āripanā* (floor painting) at the doorsteps. *Godhnā* was originally a tattoo painting. Traditionally *Gobar* painting was a sculptural bas-relief treatment, and the *Tantra* form was the obscure religious painting of the *Shāktas*.

Traditionally the artists used indigenous materials for their work. Cow-dung and clay were used for making the outer coating of the walls on which they drew the primary drawing. *Nim-kathi* (*Margosa* twigs) served the purpose of brush. For paint they indiscriminately used anything colourful that was available in nature and in the surrounding areas. For example, coloured clay, extracts of leaves, seeds and flowers and colour

pigments are usually used in festivals. But at present modern equipment such as sable-hair brush, crow-quill pens, chemical and even synthetic colours are frequently used.

In case of Maithili painting, first the walls were prepared by smearing with mud and cow-dung paste. Then the walls were allowed to dry perfectly. Then the painter used to draw the painting with the help of *Nim-kathi*. They collected suitable *Margosa* branch and then they cut it into pieces. After that they prepared its working end. To prepare it as a brush, they dip its one end in water for a couple of days and then they battered its wet end with a wooden hammer and made it into bristles. And finally it was used as the painting brush.

Godhnā was originally a tattoo painting. In the period of the emperor Akbar, to demarcate the *Hindu* from *Muslim* maidens, a law was enacted that the Hindu women must have to be tattooed. And consequently the *Natnis* (a nomadic group of Central India) were employed to tattoo the Hindu female folks in their hands, forehead and throat. And thus *Godhnā* painting was popularized among Hindu women.

After 1960s, gradually *Madhubani* painting began to take a commercial look; and today it has become one of the most vital financial streams of the village economy. Until painting became a commercially viable medium there was no such specialization in *Madhubani* painting. In those old days painting was not at all a source of income; and the female folks in spite of being the *Chitri* (the primary artists) were not economically independent. As a result, they became a prey to grave social exploitation by the male section of the society.

But since then, the scenario has become changed. They are now treated as the *Chitri*, the principal painters and the male folks, on the other hand, have become their helper. Now, the women draw the basic design and the form of the painting, whereas the male population help them in colour preparation and preparation of the other painting medium. Sometimes the *Chitris* allow the helpers to fill up the drawing with colour. A vitally important thing is that the training institutes are directly controlled by the women folk. In these institutions the women are the sole authority and the male folks help them in rendering services in less important matters such as keeping accounts, maintaining attendance registers etc. Nowadays this painting has attained a worldwide market as has enhanced the scope of its, becoming a major sphere of trade. In Jitwarpur alone there are seven awarded '*Chitri*', among them three are Presidential award winners, and four of them exhibited their paintings outside India (America, France, Japan, England and Germany). It is true that the women folk have regained their social position and status but the loaves and fishes of the business are enjoyed by the men. The reason is quite obvious.

The entire marketing process is under the clutches of the male folks. To find new markets, especially to carry paintings to foreign buyers at different tourist spots are some of the jobs that needs physical help of the male folks. Thus it has, in some way or other, brought the entire trade under the control of male members. Hence, though the female part is the author of the whole story, the nectar of the profession is enjoyed by the males at large.

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