

## RITUAL, WOMEN, AND ART IN MITHILA

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Religious practice paved the way for Mithila painting to grow as a cultural phenomenon. In addition, the literature of the region further shaped its growth in corporation with the agricultural life style of common folk. Mithila painting, in the long run, is the product of interaction between the people who cultivated the mind and the one who cultivated the land. Although the painting was considered a sensual practice especially during Pauranic age, its observance on the Vedic altar to appease Gods and Goddesses helped the painting to depict on the floors and walls of mud houses of Maithils. In due course, women developed it as a ritual activity in their own domain to appease their deities for the well-being of their family members as well as to protect from the malicious nature. Likewise, Mithila painting expanded in each and every occasion, festival, and celebration in the entire Mithila region. This research article incorporates observation, interview and text analysis as the methods of study.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Ritual, Aripan, Kohbar, Tantra & Women*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The juxtaposition of nature and culture sustains complete uniqueness in Mithila art. For one thing, nature provides themes and subjective motives to culture to grow. For the other, culture stipulates colors and decorative items in the backdrop of nature to emulate the inhabitants' distinctive universe. The mutual interaction of culture and nature is the concrete outcome in the form of indigenous art. In fact, the nature-culture bind provides core theme of entire art form where artists consider nature as surrogate mother and culture as guiding father. The age old maintenance of this ethnic art falls in the hands of Maithili women where they not only manipulate their emotions rather represents the whole nuances of the community. Symbolically, culture and nature are the two hands of Maithili women through which they commemorate their artistic creation. Besides, rituals which create space and time for the celebration of life in the society add extra vigor in the performance of ethnic art. In addition, the sacred performance of cultural art demands ritualistic sacrifice fundamentally on the part of women. Thus, the concurrence of environment and society reflect in the art due to the togetherness of women, rituals and venerated presentation.

### **DISCUSSIONS**

Rituals creates sacred space for the cultural performance of Mithila Art. Mithila art even incorporates tantric rituals which are in the form of blending with religious and social rituals. Moreover, it has established its own unique style. Besides, tantric rituals have got geometrical expressions in Mithila art which largely vary at interpretative level. However, its regular portray in daily life conveys collective aspiration of society and culture. For instance, *Aripan* as a geometrical drawing, performed before the beginning of almost all good work in a family. Besides *Aripan*, *Kohbar* painting drawn on

the wall of nuptial chamber also illustrates tantric rituals of society. In addition to these *Aripans* and *Kohbar* paintings, various emotive pictures around the temple clearly figures out the tantric vision of Maithili culture.

The richly patterned Aripan paintings represent the illustrations done on the earth at the front of houses to purify a space for ritual and domestic ceremonies such as puberty, conception, and the sacred thread ceremony. The *Aripan* basically drawn by Maithili women are very innovative and unique in their designs. Indeed, it is drawn to provide protection from the malevolent forces of nature. *Purain* (sacred leaf) or lotus is one of its emblems. The lotus symbolizes purity of character because its petals and leaves remain unsoiled despite growing in dirty water. Its tender beauty has made it a symbol of feminine grace and its prolific growth has become synonymous with abundance. An endless variety of floral – geometric *Aripan Mandalas* evolve from the lotus motif. They are drawn directly with the finger tips using a watery solution of white rice powder, called *Pindar*, or powdered substances of various colors.

Its original form is a mixture of semi-geometrical and floral diagram with each diagram having a well- defined center in which a sacred pot and a plate are kept for ritual purposes. Contextually, it is the content which appears to be more important but form of any folk art equally gets recognition to balance artistic creation. And *Aripan* art is balanced due to equal distribution of space for both content and form. Maithili women draw these *Aripans* when there are special occasions in the family such as marriage, festivals, and ceremonies like *Upnayan*. If there are religious or sacred occasions then they stay on fast making their body pure, they devote themselves to their deities and in these occasions they draw *Aripans* being in a spiritual vow or *Vrata* (fasting) so that no evil spirit can do any harm. To avoid ill spirit tantric symbols are focused in these *Aripans*. So, Maithili women being on fast play meditative role by drawing various artistic designs for all round development of their family members. In this regard, Shrivastava mentions:

The artist ought not to work unless she is in a meditative state. The peace emanating from the paintings have often seemed the best proof of how seriously the artists take the period of meditation, which precedes their work. A woman's painting begins with her realizing the spiritual image of a god in deep prayer and her finished product will therefore correspond to her innate attitude (143).

Such meditative devotion makes prayer to God highly successful and meaningful as the devotees believe. There is a religious devotion and sacred attitude towards creation or art which has made age old tradition of Mithila art living and dynamic despite the influence of several external agencies.

Moreover, *Aripans* drawn on different occasions have their own implications and purposes. There are *Aripans* drawn on the auspicious occasion of *Tusari Pooja* in which young, unmarried Maithili girls draw it to get good husbands. Its duration is between *Makar Sankranti* and *Falgun Sankranti*. In such occasion they draw a temple, the moon, the sun, *Navagrah* (nine planets and so on). Likewise, *Sanjha Aripan* is depicted in honor of *Sandhya Devi* (goddess of the evening). And the whole cosmos are drawn and shown in the form of a temple. *Panch Dev* (five gods) and *Shapta Rishis* (seven sages) are also sketched in the shape of the lotus Aripan. *Sasthi-PujaAripan* is painted when young girls start menstruation. The *Aripan* signifies the creation and destruction of the universe. The *Gatra-Sankrant Aripan* is the symbol of birth and death, whereas the *Kojagara Aripan* is drawn on the leaf of *Makhan* (a plant) on the full moon day of *Aswin* (September). *Diwali Aripan*, which is known in Mithila region as *Sukha-Ratri Aripan*, is depicted to welcome Laxmi, the goddess of wealth for prosperity, health and well-being of the family members and the relatives. And *Swastik Aripan* is painted for blessing the younger generation. Similarly, Rakesh adds:

*Dashpat Aripan* of men is drawn by women on the floor. *Dwadsha Aripan* is drawn on the ground after death of a family member. *Gawaha Sankranti Aripan* is drawn on the door of *Kuldevata* (clan deity) in the month of *Kartik 15 Kalyan Devi Pooja Aripan* is drawn to celebrate the *Kalyan Karika Devi* worship (welfare of goddess). (103)

Furthermore, Aripan art is cosmic in nature and playful in expression. It is a bright and beautiful art. The material applied in such art is a mixture of powdered rice and water known as *Pithar*. The women folk, dipping two fingers into the *pithar*, produce graceful geometrical diagrams with different designs on the mud floor of their houses and courtyards and at the thresholds. This art tells of the magnanimity of the mother goddess. In order to make it more adorning, the women also smear red powder on it. Additionally, three inner triangles symbolize *Gauri*, the favorite goddess of the Maithili maidens.

Another important feature in *Aripans* and their performance is the inclusion of tantric features and female deities as *Shakti* images. *Aripans* are a kind of ritualistic decorative diagrams, which are supposed to be infused with magic circles, the sacred square, powerful curves and intersection of polygons etc. Not only this but also the archetypal symbols and motifs like *Swastik*, lotus, and geometric signs like triangle, square, octagon, hexagon, circle, and curves etc. enhance the decorative perfection and tantric enclosure. It is the enclosed magic field, which symbolizes the dwelling of the worshiped deities while they are made.

However, such types of drawings are widespread in the south Asian region of the world but it differs by names at different adjacent cultural sets up such as *Alpana* in Bengal, *Mehdi* in Rajasthan, *Rangoli* in Maharashtra, and *Chaukapurna* in Bhojpuri area, *Mandala* in Tibetan art and *Aripan* or *Ahipan* in the Mithila region. The love and devotion to the mother Earth is easily portrayed through the artistic attitudes of People in this part of World. Moreover, decoration on the surface of the Earth reveals the fact that Maithili People are entirely depending on agriculture. Hence nature and life juxtapose for the perfection of artistic beauty of land and culture of this ethnic group. Thus Mithila art denounces the affinity of people and land in this particular geographical area of the world.

In addition to floor painting, Mithila art also depicts the wall paintings which can also be classified into two categories: (1) paintings depicting Hindu Gods and Goddesses and (2) Natural objects of the surrounding. As Mithila culture is the fine blending of Hindu religion and its practices. Moreover, the people of Mithila are deeply influenced by the Hindu Gods and Goddesses, especially *Shakti*, *Vishnu* and *Shiva*. These are the most prominent figures in the paintings, and they appear in their varied incarnations. *Shakti* appears as Goddess *Durga* and *Kali*, *Brahma* symbolizes the creator, *Vishnu* (*Rama* and *Krishna*) as the preserver, and *Shiva* as the transformer or destroyer. All paintings of the deities portray auspicious and familiar traditional scenes. Their primary objective is to secure blessings on important occasions. Apart from paintings on festivals, unique pieces are required for important household events, such as renovation of the family shrine, marriage, and *upanayana*, the sacred thread-giving ceremony, etc.

Besides, Gods and Goddesses, the natural objects of the surrounding are also the eye catching beauty of Mithila art. Both the plants and animals are equally important as contents of the art. Mostly flowers, plants and animals, especially elephants, horses and peacocks, are an integral part of it. Among them, the elephant and peacock signify wealth, prosperity and good-fortune (Meyer and Deuel 102 in Rakesh). Moreover, the horse symbolizes male energy and bravery. Similarly, the parrot and turtle are symbols of love, and fish is the definitive emblem of fertility.

In like manner, rituals paintings during marriage ceremony are also drawn on wall especially *Kohbar* paintings (Nuptial Chamber) which are synonymous with female sentiments and fertility symbols. But *Kohbar* paintings largely

differ from *Aripans* in the contents, actions and subject matters. Basically, the contents of *Kohbar* paintings are fertility symbols like lotus, fish, turtle, bamboo sticks, pea-cock, parrots, etc. But all these symbols carry certain meanings and have some actions to perform symbolically. Although contents and actions of *Aripans* and *Kohbar* paintings differ, their message seems similar i.e. blessing, wishing and praying for happy family life.

The sexual symbols used in *Kohbar* paintings are debatable at the interpretation level as different scholars have done differently. For example, The Frenchman Yves Vequaud, a great patron of Mithila paintings, has interpreted the symbols as:

The *Kohbar*'s basic design and composition is heavily charged with tantric symbolism, and in its centre a lingam, the phallus, penetrates the circular beauty of a yoni, the symbol of the female genitals, often drawn as a fully – opened lotus. (32)

Although his interpretation is contextual but emits a kind of vulgarity, the basic design of painting does not indicate so. Because lotus and bamboo are abundantly found and equally useful for the local people in their daily life, such symbols are utility based rather than meanings. Hence, vulgar flavor of interpretation gets no room here. Even Carolyn Brown Heinz, an anthropologist blames Vequaud for his extravagant and unsubstantial interpretations; in her words:

I write neither as a positivist nor a prude when I question the erotic symbolism which Vequaud finds everywhere in Mithila art. Indeed, something may be in it all. But since the excesses of these interpretations have led to a total misinterpretation of the society and culture of Mithila, it is imperative to ask whether there are not some rules of fair play in the interpretation of other peoples' symbols? (7)

Nevertheless, all contemporary writers retrieve the meanings of these symbols as sexual one. Besides, the symbols appear to lose their original meanings as this loss of meaning is somewhat similar to the concept of metaphorical deconstruction discussed by Jacques Derrida in his seminal essay "White Mythology...". He exemplifies this loss with erosion of an exergue. Actually, an exergue is an inscribed or engraved coin in its both sides, Oct and Verso. In course of time, the inscription erodes. As a result, its metaphorical or symbolic value is also lost. What remains in the coin is merely its material value. In other words, the symbolic meaning of a metal coin is lost in course of time and a new material value exists in the eroded coin.

However, the major focus of these paintings are the sexual and creative aspects through the use of motifs like the sun and moon, bamboo, a circle of lotuses, parrots, turtles and fish. For newlyweds, the paintings are presented on the walls of the *Kohbar*, the room where the bride receives her husband. It is here that the couple spends the first four nights of their life together while maintaining sexual abstention. The *Kohbar* artwork is an essential element of blessing for the new couple and of protection against evil forces. Scenes of the marriage process are depicted, along with paintings of the bride and bridegroom in their wedding chamber.

Basically, there are three places where *Kohbar* paintings are done; *Gosaighar* (special room for worshipping cult deities), the *Kohbar ghar* (honeymoon room) and at the corridor of the *Kohbar ghar* i.e. paintings are done at both the places-inside and outside of house. Traditionally, *Kohbar* painting is a kind of social license for newly married couple to spend their nights in both physical and spiritual union. Ritually, the couple is expected to celebrate the honeymoon for four nights in the direct presence of their guardian deities and sacred symbols of fertilities for successful conjugal life.

Thirdly, Terracotta figurines and dolls of other materials are family art for the children to play with them. As the commercialization of art has spread, these sorts of materials have accumulated power of an ancient tradition and also have attracted the capricious influence of the west. Yet, so far, the prevailing sentiments are honor, admiration, and the desire, not to taint a world treasure. These traditional arts seem as old as humanity itself. Besides, they are the products of local available materials which are abundantly found in the market for selling purpose. Although they are professionally made in Janakpurdham, it has got its market in Kathmandu. Finally, daily use articles have got various colorful forms which are regular phenomena of Maithili women. Thus, contemporary Mithila art are developing according to utilitarian mode where all sorts of people satisfy their need.

Nonetheless, these use based articles in colorful forms are designed to quench artistic thirst of artists too. Such types of artistic potentiality lie in the very core of Mithila culture which distinguishes it from other culture of the world. Basically, women's participation is abundantly found while designing such articles of daily use. Commonly, all castes of women merge together for such artistic creation which is one of the features of modernity i.e. homogenizing the heterogeneous people. These articles are use-based; one needs them to utilize in day to day life which makes the work convenient. Thus, such materials of daily use have largely got active market to generate income for Maithili women. As the consumer increases Maithili women feel independent economically, socially, and professionally. In this case they are empowered to express themselves at all levels. Due to these art works they have proved themselves not only the strong side of conjugal life but also the genesis of their folk art.

Similarly, as forms are indigenous to Mithila land, so are its colors. Colors are as native as people. Why Mithila paintings are exotic and so erotic? It is so because of the use of primary or basic hues of colors. Basically, Maithili women who possess the sole authority of Mithila art are the mastermind behind the color use. Moreover, the women artists of Mithila use different local colors in their art. Generally, they use bright and brilliant colors which make their products very pretty and at the same time very attractive. They use bright red, yellow and black colors. These three colors are frequently used which are very natural such as black is from root, red from local clay and yellow from petals of flowers or turmeric. Hence, local plants and flowers are sole indicator of Maithili colors.

The prime importance of indigenous colors in their art is to make them attractive and lasting so that they can easily supply the materials to the destined place. However, it is not only for market purpose but also for originality of its own land and culture. In this way, women artists prepare vegetable colors from different flowers, fruits, barks and root. The gum prepared naturally from the babul tree is mixed in the colors for durability. Black is generally obtained by lamp spot. It is easily dissolved in gum water. A light color is obtained by mixing cow-dung and gum in fresh water. The bark of *Peepal* tree is dried in the sunrise and then boiled in water till it yields a pink color. Blue color is obtained by crushing the berries of the wild herb. It is called *Sikkar* in the local language. The juice of herb is collected in a cup and dissolved in gum and boiled for half an hour, and after that it is filtered by clothes. Dark green is made from the leaves of the *Seem* creepers and parrot green from the sepals of the *Gulmohar*. These colors are used to their imagination and vision. They also sometimes use water color mixed with rice powder.

Furthermore, they mix local colors extracted from the goat milk or the juice of bean plants. Generally they do not use brushes, but they apply the color with a piece of raw cotton or lint attached to the end of the bamboo splint. They prepare their brushes by wrapping cotton around one end of a twig or matchstick. For several years, however, they use different acrylic colors and brushes for arts.

The style used in Mithila art can be broadly classified under three categories based on the people or the community that practices, they are *Bharni* style by the Brahmin community where the word *Bharni* means fulfillment or filling so this type of paintings are filled with lots of contrasting colors in an organized patterns. The *Bharni* artist uses bamboo, straws, soaked cotton, threads or rags as a tool to fill the colors. The second style *Kachri* is carried out by the *Kayastha* community where the paintings are in the form of the line drawings using either black or red colors. The *Kayastha* artist uses fine nibs to draw the lines. The third style is *Godhana* style by the *Dusadh* community or the *Dalit* people who came up with the further innovative styles of painting such as *Gobar* style by which the paper is washed with the cow dung to give the natural appearances and *Godana* style which exhibits tattoo forms of the pictures such as rows and concentric circles, flowers, animals etc. even the other styles like *Geru* by using the light brown colors with contrasting bright colors, this style has now become little outdated among the community.

Besides the above mentioned aspects of Mithila art, raw-materials play the vital role to produce various designs of Mithila paintings. Although they are simple and local, their innovative surface formation for the complete drawing of art is remarkable. The mud walls are plastered with cow-dung. After that, for the smooth surface, white wash is necessary and then powdered rice (*pithar*) with vermilion is used to please family deities for their blessing to the entire family members. Basically, earthen floor, wall, clothes, murals as well as any smooth surface are the materials for the possible drawings of Mithila art because of the easy access of the materials in the surrounding.

## CONCLUSIONS

On the whole, Mithila art exploits Maithili religion to visualize religious beliefs and ideas to the contemporary generation. Moreover, it educates through visual forms from which one learns of one's heritage. Basically, rituals, women and folk art of Mithila have a naiveté and simplicity which perhaps is their attraction that both soothes and pleases the eyes. Likewise, celebration of age-old culture remains equally fresh and enthusiastic at all the time. Similarly, these sorts of visual education remind people of all ages the similar lesson of communal harmony, benefits of social organizations, importance of equality, preaching of ancestors, and ultimately religious, social, psychological, and ecological balance on life and living. Thus, Mithila art serves as flashing light education on people to carry Mithila culture as long as they exist.

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