

## SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION OF MITHILA PAINTING AND ITS SOCIOLOGICAL OVERTONES

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Gender, caste and ritual seem to have largely shaped the contemporary Mithila painting and its interpretation varies accordingly. This is the only traditional painting in the world solely grown in the lap of women but the caste variation outlines the works of art in their own way. Moreover, the painting creates space for ritual performance, the filled symbols within the outline convey cultural meaning that appear pivotal to the natives for their proper guidelines in their life. Context further marks their complexity in expression and clarification in meaning. Although Mithila society proclaims to be patriarchy, its cultural manifestation lies mainly in the hands of females. Therefore, women who look as if to have lower position in the outer Maithili world, communicates symbolically through their paintings at every ritual occasion.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Gender, Castes, Ritual, Symbols and Spiritual*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Mithila art reflects an ideal of social vision through its performance. It uses several icons, symbols, suggestives, and signs to convey its complex meaning vividly. While doing so, it does not clarify its implication only but also impresses the viewer with some imperative messages. The interaction between observer and the works of art result into an acceptable interpretation. The tapestry of connotation formed so, frames out a picture of the community where art is practiced collectively.

The collective painting of Mithila does not only outline the social structure but also reveals the artists' expressive tone to the social life that it depicts and the cultural ceremonies that it intertwines with. Like any art, Mithila painting is open to multifold meaning. But its situatedness in women-centric realm, caste-ridden society, and openness to Tantric influence give a heavy sociological meaning.

### **DISCUSSION/ANALYSIS**

Mithila art is an inseparable aspect of Maithili culture. It is a part of family ceremonies, village festivals and social celebrations. As more sophisticated art is practiced by the upper castes (Brahman and Kayastha), the scheduled castes or backward people draw very simple arts of animals like horses and elephants and different plants which are not complicated and complex but very innovative and unique in their designs and motifs. Mithila painting is a traditional phenomenon where women folk have been drawing art for ritual purpose. In fact, it is the ritual which creates time and space for drawing art where generally women play vital role to accomplish the task appeasing Gods, Goddesses, and deities for the welfare of their family members.

Basically, art revived during Karnat (Name of Dynasty during 1096 to 1325) period. Therefore, the content of painting largely depends on medieval literature. The religion of the region (mostly Hindu) got large space in the depiction. Both the high and low culture got their representation via works of art. The upper culture of the people who had cultivated their mind also incorporated the culture of the people who had cultivated their field. The interaction between the high and low culture paved the way for tantric influence in the drawing. Before the Karnat period, several invasions had taken place in the Mithila kingdom and the foreign invasions mixed their culture in the natives. That ultimately proved boulder on the progressive path of Maithili culture. The mixed culture fragmented the underlying philosophy of the society which blurs the visionary aspect of Mithila painting. Hence, the clear concept of the portrait loses its tendency of casting the clear vision of the painting.

When the art transformed from wall and floor to the paper and got international recognition then many art lovers and curators came for its film and study. During this period they wrote about Mithila paintings from the western view. Mostly Freudian interpretation seems to be applied while interpreting the painting and culture. Yves Vequaud, a French art curator, mostly illustrates those ritual paintings focusing on the sexuality of Maithili people in their paintings. He comments:

In the matriarchal society of Mithila, young women propose marriage to young men of their choice. These pictures, used as the means of such a proposal, exemplify their artists' knowledge of the symbolism and arcane of tantrism: at the centre is painted a lingam, the phallic symbol, which pierces a yoni, symbol of female sexuality. The six surrounding yonis signify freedom of choice. (68)

Mithila society is solely patriarchal where male dominates almost all the sphere of life. Yves Vequaud's interpretation of Mithila as a matriarchal society seems confusing on his part. Furthermore, he says that young women propose marriage to young men which is again misunderstanding where young women hardly go outside for their marriage. Their male parts mostly their father decides about their marriage. The pictures of Kohbar are drawing on the walls of nuptial chamber to denote fertility of newly married couple. In addition, the mystery of tantra reveals that all the deeds related to the marriage ceremony should be successful. Moreover, at the centre there is lotus leaves and bamboo signifying the importance of proliferation in the conjugal life because both the plants have the quality of propagating. Not only Yves Vequaud but also some other writers who are of Freudian mentality have interpreted the painting in the same vein.

Mithila kingdom was an independent and land-locked geography where outsiders had no access to the place for cultural intermingling. The purity of custom, which is quite genuine to the local, sprouts into a sublime identity of Maithils that marched forward into the limitation of technique. The inclination of Maithils towards spiritual activity further confines them into limited functional needs where purity of manner, thought, and performance are judged on the basis of religious propensity. In this context, Betty LaDuke argues: "the experience expressed in their work evolves from geographical isolation and both spiritual and functional needs as well as to stylistic limitations which have evolved over a long period of time" (17). The artists express themselves through their painting collecting the understanding of their limited surrounding, religious activity, and solitude. This limitation does confine them within a fix periphery but the resulting practice forwards them for unique identity in their creation. LaDuke also asserts on Kohbar:

Mithila is a matriarchal society. When girls reach marriage age, they go to one of the regular gatherings of young men to select a mate, to whom they present a Kohbar, or marriage proposal picture. This centuries' old tradition continues today. Girls

at a young age are trained by their mothers to paint the Kohbar, which looks like a stylized floral motif. The image consists of a lingam or phallus penetrating a fully opened lotus or yoni (vagina) and symbolizes some union rich in children. (18-9)

As argued above, Mithila is a patriarchal society not the matriarchal one. When girls reach marriage age, they do not go to one of the regular gatherings of young men rather their male guardians reach there in search of suitable husband for their wards and bring the boy to the girl's house for marriage on that very day after they reach into a proper compromise. They do not present a Kohbar, or marriage proposal picture to the possible groom but the Kohbar is written or drawn on the wall, corridor, or clan deity room for the auspiciousness of the occasion. Girls since their childhood assist their mother and grandmother in their work which helps them to grow in their company where they learn to draw pictures along with the other works. The floral design of Kohbar is of lotus leaves that are connected to the root underground the water surface with the stem like placenta connected to the child and the womb of mother. The true message is of abundant fertility but not that much obvious penetration of lingam or phallus penetrating the yoni. The portrait is drawn as a symbol of successful conjugal life with the desired number of children.

Essentially, Mithila is a male dominated society where talking freely about sex education is practically not soothing, therefore, during marriage ceremony Kohbar a wall drawing is depicted with sexual symbols to aware the couple about the significance of sexual activity. In this context, Ramvaros Kapadi supports:

Mithila is always a male dominated society where talking about 'sex awareness' is very difficult especially with women. Therefore, symbolic message about sexual power and its significance is given through the Kohbar drawing. Besides, parrot, tortoise, and fish are drawn representing love, longevity, and fertility respectively. In addition, Sun and Moon are drawn reflecting life giving energy. And Naina-Jogin signifies freedom from tantra-mantra (evil magic). Likewise, Lotus flower denotes love and tender and leaf of purain symbolizes female sex. (150)

The Kohbar painting includes different symbolic expression that conveys special meanings according to the icons used there. A peculiar woman at the four corners of Kohbar painting is Naina-Jogin who frees the couple from evil magic. But the sex education was at paramount during medieval period when child marriage was largely at existent. Therefore, Abhi Subedi clarifies:

The tradition of the kohbar harks back to a time when child marriages flourished and was non-existent which were consecrated to celebrate the spiritual and physical union between the newlyweds. Every element in Mithila painting has a deeply rooted symbolism in it focusing around passion, sex, fertility and tantric ritual. (14)

Mithila painting is full of symbols which includes all aspects of Maithili life with its wisdom full of practical meanings. The incorporation of different kinds of signs with their meanings facilitate for better understanding of Mithila painting.

The symbols used in Mithila painting depend on the angle of its analysis. The deeper meaning links it with the transcendental quality the icons convey while the surface meaning connects it with the changing context of the painting. Campoli proclaims; "branch of bamboo alluding to the male or phallic principle, is surrounded by lotus leaves, symbolising the yoni the female element" (34). Whereas Jyotindra Jain states:

the entire kohbar motif, with its roots, stem, and proliferating leaves, is the symbol of the bride or the female but is not, as some scholars have it, her yoni or sexual organ, as the lotus plant motif represents female fertility, the bamboo grove motif epitomizes the male regenerative energy, though not the male sexual organ as some writers suggest. (55-7)

Hence, the symbols used in the painting do not imply the same thing for different writers. On the one hand, some writers convey surface meaning depending on context whereas some other writers suggest deeper meaning according to the underlying philosophy of the society.

The phenomena of whole life are depicted in the painting. The holistic view point of Mithila painting adjoins it with the life cycle of people in the society where each object transmits meaning according to the quality they possess. Kapadi considers:

the symbols used in the Kohbar tell the story of whole life cycle. Bamboo-grove signifies male regenerative power, lotus-leaf indicates female sexual organ, clove means environmental freshness, vermilion symbolizes immortality to husband, betel-leaf and nut characterizes male and female sexual organs, fish is the symbol of fertility, tortoise for lovers' union, Sun-Moon for life generating energy, parrot signifies love affair, wisdom and progress. (105)

The empty place within the outline of the portrait considers bad omen, therefore, they are filled even with the insects, aquatic, and amphibians to denote the creatures that are co-living with human beings to show the importance of ecosystem. Ramniwas Pandey argues:

Three most popular things drawn in Maithil paintings are: a. Kohbar; penis penetrating vagina, b. Aripan; magical circle that shows the concept of Universe according to Tantra and it further accomplishes religious and social activities, and c. Scenes related to Puran (Hindu scripture) and Hindu myths (126).

The content related to marriage, tantric phenomena, and Hindu Gods and Goddesses are popular in Mithila painting. While portraying them, artists insert several symbols to articulate the inherent message of the portrait. Without the knowledge of Sanskrit scripture simply by observing the Hindu temples one cannot opine the true message to the society which is prevalent since the ancient period. In this context, Heinz quotes W. G. Archer, "circles and rods: these were surely sexual symbols; he probably had in mind the lingam and yoni found widely in Hindu temples" (15). But Heinz again writes, "painting life forms that proliferate rapidly represents the hope is that the new couple will similarly reproduce quickly" (15). Hence, the interpretation of the Kohbar painting for the happy and successful conjugal life is one of the remarkable points to be made.

The alien paradigm made to infer the meaning of the native seems faulty for the original meaning where one's voice is blocked in the name of one's methodology. Neel Rekha contends:

It has also shown how western scholars in Mithila interpreted Maithil art from alien paradigms and created a romanticized history. Women's voices got silenced in the process. Maithil painting has been used as a lens to understand local, regional and national cultural politics. Interpretations internalized and articulated by the artists themselves complicate our understanding of Maithil art. (19)

The main artists of Mithila painting are women whose voice counts a lot while interpreting the works of art. In this context, mostly the western writers have used their local technique to infer the meaning of the culture at distant land from them. This really does not justify the cause of construing the meaning by silencing the voice of original people in the field. Thus, the holistic approach of Maithili painting is always praiseworthy where all account of Maithili life is demonstrated through the pictures portrayed on the village walls, courtyard, and nuptial chamber in Maithili society. In this matter, Rewatiraman Lal claims:

Generally the works of art are performed in three types: Wall painting, canvas drawing, and floor writing. Kohbar writing and family shrine decorating custom is very ancient. This type of illustration is mainly related to Pauranic documents as well as contemporary matters, natural life, and social facts are also included in the same portrait. Basically, Kohbar writing wishes for the betterment of newly married couple in their conjugal life. (115)

As the stem which roots the lotus leaf to the bottom of the pond to denote how life is rooted deep down somewhere in mother's womb. So is the case with the newly married couple whose first and foremost responsibility is to celebrate life after giving birth to other life which is the central message of the entire Kohbar painting.

Despite the artists' broad horizon of knowledge after they visited several national and international places, their drawing is deeply rooted to their rural region which always guides them in their style of painting, colour use, and form and content of their drawing. Traditionally, women used naturally available surrounding colours, mud, and style to draw on their floor, wall and corridor. But since 1960s mud drawing transformed onto paper and changed the scenario completely for the artists. That proved to be a bread earning skill which broadens the horizon of thinking, drawing, and the use of content with stylistic limitation. Moreover, Campoli mentions; "with strong religious sentiments, in which earth, colour, and paper continue to be the medium of interaction with the dimension of the sacred that punctuates the rhythm of communal village life" (41). Maithili people are largely religious minded; they have complete believe in religion. With this spiritual sentiment, they perform their regular work.

The artists draw on mud or on paper in meditative state where their works of art are offered to their deities. Although they offer their product to their benevolent Gods, their life passes on the beat of mutual sharing on rural pattern. Neel Rekha quotes Mathur, "the Kulina art of Mithila has refinement, continuity and a literary base which one cannot expect in the tribal art or in the folk art of village people" (9). Hence, the folk art of Mithila has elevated its position to be called a fine art but its root still lies with the rural community. Rekha further writes, "Although the artists are involved in making contemporary paintings for a transnational audience, they still continue to live in villages and are very much rooted in local traditions and culture" (19). Mithila painting is not limited to its confined geography but has blurred the boundary of national and international scope for its vibrant motif.

Maithili life is entirely based on village model. In spite of their luxurious life in city, the culture of the people is based on their root which is in the village. Maithili region is full of villages where only a few towns have grown with some attractive facilities of health, education, and medium scaled industry. Neither the whole region is based on village communal life where people feel each other and bound themselves in cosmopolitanism. Even though their works of art is a collective expression, their sentiment is rural and people and things are deeply connected to one another. In this context, Campoli remarks:

The art of Mithila is essentially a form of expression connected to the ritual life, that graphically accompanies the main celebrations of the various seasons and the events linked to the human life cycle. The paintings have the purpose of attracting the deity's presence during the celebrations in his or her honour and a blessing on the family members of the house where they are painted. (19)

As the artists are from the village, they link their art to the rural life where all kinds of celebrations depend on the occasions and painting becomes an aspect of cultural merriment where art is drawn to appease Gods, Goddesses, and deities for the welfare of the family members.

Mithila is a patriarchal society where male plays crucial role in shaping the entire society. On the other hand, women are very much dominated and have limited space to enjoy their life and the domination has created a strong boundary between male and female where talking about sex is quite restricted and appears vulgar on the part of women. So, Mithila painting is simple yet symbolic that transmits the underlying philosophy of the community. The central ideology is carried out by the symbols drawn in both the art Aripan and Kohbar. Not only the images but also their shapes and sizes of body posture indicate difference in meaning. The painting cultivates the way for inner journey to the artists while drawing them in meditative pose and also to the viewers who concentrate on the pictures while observing them. In this connection, Mulk Raj Anand states; "This urge for connection, for absorption, and salvation, became the curve of the inner journey towards the Self through the outward straying in the mundane world"(6). Despite the physical presence in the worldly affair, artists travel to the inner self through their works of art and bring out the sublime truth to their painting for overall inspiration to the observers.

The humanistic attitude of artists makes their paintings like human beings where all the gestures and postures are counted for various meanings. The multiple of hands, space between the legs, largeness in the size of eye and head give out certain meaning for the observers. In this regard, Anand affirms:

The head is given big eye for vision. The torso is elongated to show strength. The arms are multiplied for power. The legs are stretched for alertness. The flowers and birds enliven the poetry of life. Folk art dares to reach extremes of possibilities. (28)

Mithila painting has unique tradition of drawing very big nose, only one big eye, and big chest to show vigour, hands are drawn more in number to show supremacy, legs are widen for attentiveness. In addition, flora and fauna of the region are the best theme to create art on. Likewise, folk art embraces potential issues of public importance to aware them. In this context, Nibedita Das discusses:

The attributes characterizing almost all Madhubani paintings are: a. use of bold natural and artificial colours. b. a double line border with simple geometric designs or with ornate floral patterns on it. c. symbols, lines and patterns supporting the main theme. d. abstract-like figures, of deities or human. e. the faces of the figures have large bulging eyes and a jolting nose emerging out of the forehead. (2)

The Aryan looking figures always get space in Maithili art which distinguishes the people from other races in the world which is one of the features of confined geography. All these motifs are the product of long rooted tradition of people from the very old age. It got very sharp during medieval age when poets wrote about their sects or from the point of their sectarian motive. In this regard, Upendra Thakur proclaims:

The Vaisnava poets humanised art more and more and brought it into closer association with day to day life. Here was the conception of oneness of life which was brought home to the rural masses by poetry, music and painting in terms of Radha-Krishna motif. Vidyapati equally succeeded in painting the penances of Shiva- Parvati with deep lyrical tenderness and reverence. (27)

Even the Gods and Goddesses are given human form and the artists have blurred the line of heavenly body with the earthly mortal creature like human beings in respect of human quality they possess. The Heavenly bodies are prayed to have human quality and show kindness to earthly creatures as a kind people show to their fellow beings. Therefore,

emblems of Gods are related with the human life format to categorize different aspects of human beings. Vijayakanta Mishra decrees:

that the four arms of Vishnu symbolically represented the four stages of Hindu life:... the discus symbolizes the mind, the bow symbolizes the casual power of illusion from which arises the universe, the conch symbolizes the five elements, representing in turn the creative tendency and the mace symbolizes the notion of individual existence. (31)

Each object with the Gods and Goddesses has some symbolic meaning that propels certain wisdom in the life of people. All those objects cast some deep philosophy of Hindu way of life.

Women possess lots of power despite their limited role in decision making. The little tradition of women where they have full authority to paint their emotion, without the disruption of any male counterparts do so because of strength they have for creation. Therefore, Upendra Thakur verdicts; "there is no other region in the world where only women folk have created their folk art" (39). The strength of Maithili women despite their veiled existence can be inferred from the above mentioned quote. Their special creativity for themselves at first and later on for the entire Maithili society is really praiseworthy. Women have the quality of sacrificing for others that help them to accumulate power in the society. For this matter, Laxminath Jha contends; "women have the power of forfeiting themselves for others considering the contribution of Sita for her husband Ram" (32). The sacrifice always seeks power on the part of sacrificer. According to Ramayan, a great Hindu epic, Sita sacrifices for Ram as her duty to help her husband. This sort of gratitude performed on the part of female has aroused a kind of respect for them in Maithili society.

But the interpretation of power of women has got limitation because women have been considered weak in relation to their male counterpart because of social organization. Therefore, they are not given due respect and people happen to neglect them. In this regard, Neel Rekha counters W.G. Archer's interpretation of Mithila painting seems bias and is not based on local informants:

Instead of consulting women and looking for local meaning of Kohbar motifs, he turned to the 17 century poet Herrick for his interpretations. This led him to conclude that the Kohbar motifs of lotus and bamboo were representative of female and male sex organs. (7)

Here, women artists who have been drawing art since time immemorial have not been consulted for the meaning of those symbols which they depict in their art from the very beginning of human civilization. Instead, male poet of remote past has been taken into consideration for the portrait so original to women.

In spite of women's strength to maintain family prestige, they are considered inferior. But if we take out the social curtain for some time and analyse the power women for male members then the status of male automatically somersaults. Hence, in this regard, Coralynn V. Dais emphasizes, "women carry particular burdens in regard to family honour that centre on sexual propriety and its correlates and that are especially acute in the Maithil cultural context" (290). Maithili society in particular must carry this point into consideration and provide independency to women to realize their contextual role in family, society where they can uplift themselves for equality. For this Brown (1999) rightly observes:

Ponds in Maithil women's ceremonial painting are the symbolic locus of auspicious feminine fertility upon which patriline are utterly dependent, trope of ponds shifts the imaginative register toward women's perspectives and the importance of women's knowledge and influence in shaping Maithil society. (qtd. in Dais 289)

So, male members of the family depend on females for their prestige, children's care, and wisdom for proper maintenance of family affairs. The knowledge of women used in child birth and other family works should really be acknowledged seriously. Maithili society is largely shaped by women's awareness from the remote past.

Maithili women express their knowledge through their age old art of painting on their mud walls, floors and courtyards where they not only express for themselves but also for the observers who could understand the meaning of life and behave accordingly. For this Jagdish J. Chavda adds:

There are no rules or hierarchies of images, and each woman creates according to her own inspiration. Each work is considered a form of personal prayer, perhaps like Mandala. The artists believe that viewers should experience the same prayer that they were engrossed in while executing the art. (27)

The supremacy of women in drawing art provides them with sufficient skill and mastery so that they manipulate their works of art the way they like. Basically, Mithila art is a collective women's art where they design independently for their viewers to receive wisdom. Mishra augments:

Mithila painting is more than an art. Through this creative art, a group of women express their desires, dreams, expectations, hopes and aspirations to the people. If you ask them what they are doing they will respond, "We are writing this Kohbar or gahwar." Hamralokani kohbara yaa gahavara likhait chee. For them, their style of art is a kind of script through which they communicate with the male folk or with the people of the rest of the world. They are the creative writers who write their feelings through the medium of painting. They are creators and are close to god in perfection. Because of money, some men too have jumped into this creativity, but in its essence and nature, even today, it is women's creativity. (102)

Maithili women collectively perform the works of painting which they call their scripture through which they express their collective feeling to the male counterparts and also to the rest of the people in and outside the region.

When the mud art transformed to the paper, cloth, and canvas, it brought good fortune to the women artists who earned money as well as prestige within their social boundary. Kailash Kumar Mishra notes:

The art form has survived the innumerable vicissitudes of history because of the social organization and community life in which the women have clearly understood their roles. It is within this framework that the women continue to reproduce the age-old forms and, indeed, countless recapitulations have resulted in their attitude. As such, they can produce most abstract designs without conscious effort. The village community life is strengthened and sustained by the universal prevalence of social gatherings, traditional storytelling, dancing and singing festivities and ceremonies, processions and rituals. The possibility of any radical assertion of individuality in the modern sense is extremely limited. (95)

Hence, the collective work of women is traditional and it accumulates lots of social phenomena where they express themselves not only through their age old painting but also via other social modes.

The horizon of women's knowledge got broader when the transformation of art occurred on paper. For this Devaki Jain adds:

Art on paper revolutionized women for industrial development; hence, women empowered themselves through their own cultural art. Economic development thus became a part of cultural development, and handicraft production and sale a cultural expression. (Jain 205)



Maithili culture got momentum through the distribution and sale of art on national and international level. Jain further writes; “the ability to earn an income within the given social frame-work has clearly enhanced women’s status” (186). The compound benefit of women through their works of creativity exalted them for further lofty creation.

Furthermore, transfer of wall art to paper does not only create opportunity for the limited few but the whole Maithili region was sanctioned economically, socially, and politically. In this regard, Carolyn Brown Heinz states:

The movement from wall to paper has had enormous consequence for the region. It has brought income into a deeply impoverished part of Bihar; it has provided a source of income to women who previously had none, especially women of high caste; it raised a cultural product of women in a highly patriarchal society to national and international esteem; it empowered women by giving widows a means of independence and wives a source of prestige to which husbands had to make adjustments. (18)

Mostly the women folk of the region empowered through Mithila painting. Their works of art are progressing in such a way that they are lifting up to be called fine art. Hence, poor and neglected ones have got space in the main stream society because of the transnational market the art has taken.

The international sale of their art brought women at the forefront of global market where they express themselves culturally for their artistic development as well as for monetary gain. Mishra enhances:

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

The challenging feat of Maithili women is really praiseworthy in the global age of present time where self employment is not only the coveted work but also the demand of the time.

But a kind of loss is felt when women carve art for consumer. The situation of their expression does not remain like they draw on their mud walls and floors rather it is changed from artist’s perspective to consumer. Mishra further notes:

This connectivity is lost when the art is experimented as a commodity and sold in the market in huge numbers. A woman painting her wall does not expect any monetary returns from anywhere, but when she paints in order to sell her painting as a commercial production, she becomes a sales girl. Her entire attention shifts from culture to consumerism and she puts herself at the mercy of her buyers. She paints not to retain tradition, but to earn a better livelihood. (101)

Although Mithila painting is developing towards a commodity object, its root lies in the rural area where Maithili women gets stand for their creativity. Their religious activity provides them with sufficient strength for collective spiritual expression. In this context, Carolyn Brown Heinz quotes Mookerjee:

Mithila painting is a product of communal spiritual experience... a manifestation of a collective mind, embodying millennia of traditional knowledge. Each painting is a prayer and an accompaniment to meditation. The artist ought not to work unless she is in a yogic state. (29)

Hence, Maithili artists draw their painting in meditative mood that inspire them for simple yet innovative creation where collective sensibility is only reflected. There is no space for individual insertion and age old knowledge of artists keep on working there in a yogic state.

Moreover, Mithila painting is highly symbolic and conveys meaning through those icons which are used in works of art. Avadhesh Aman mentions about the practice of the knowledge of symbol or Tantra: there are four forms of symbols: suggestive, definitive, numerical, and formative which help the practitioner to be free from the sorrow, anxiety and obstacles in their life awakening the Kundalini (inner energy) as well as to liberate from the cycle of birth and death. Mithila art also catches the beautiful glimpse of wonderful native nature and its productivity using symbols like Sun and Moon as the supreme life, fish as the productivity, tortoise as the longevity, parrot as the feeling of love, and bamboo as the sense of lust. (7-9)

The deep knowledge of art provides artists with life awakening knowledge of Kundalini which always makes them attentive for drawing complex symbols of all variety that fulfil their desire of all sorts. Basically, tantra shapes the form of drawing where every point, line, shape, and size carries meaning which is mainly related to the attainment of energy. Dhirendra writes; "the attainment of energy is the main aim of tantra" (5). Through art people think that they can liberate themselves from the cycle of life and death. Dhirendra further mentions; "tantra is the practice that helps people to attain liberation despite their ignorance about classical Hindu texts that suggest either a lot of complex ways to follow for liberation or to be hypocrite" (5). In essence, people who cultivate their field acquire the tantric method of liberation in the absence of the knowledge of classic Hindu texts. Tripathi quotes P.C. Choudhary; "All its elements-the use of magic and charms, the revolting rites, the use of wine, the belief in efficacy of mantras and sex worship-are found in other primitive cultures all the world over and the high antiquity of the cult is pointed out by all" (142). Thus, the practice of tantra is beyond history and common folk of Mithila always wanted to have heavenly position after their death. So, they practiced tantra not only for attaining energy for the worldly affair but also for the heaven after liberation from the cycle of life and death.

Tantric symbols used in art provide both kinds of connotation; one is of obtaining power, strength and vitality and other is of gaining sensual pleasure of all sorts. Lydia Aran in her book 'Art of Nepal' remarks:

Mithila painting manipulates tantric symbols that represents tantric concept about life. Either abstract or symbolic, these paintings use unconscious sexuality and its original and formal application ultimately takes place in marriage, fertility power, and sexual phenomena or related to special tantric concept that grants sexual delight, a play, or a momentary pleasure. (qtd. in Pandey 126)

Therefore, tantra plays multiple roles whether its influence is on creative works of art of Maithili women or its imperative role in daily life of people. It is ancient in origin and miraculously has been affecting the life of common folk. In this context, Kailash Kumar Mishra argues, "Many of these paintings have great tantric significance, for instance, certain non-Vedic rites during the marriage ceremony, practiced exclusively by women, like thakka-bakka, nayana-jogini etc., are directly related to the Mithila tantra" (96). Both the Kohbar and Aripa paintings have tantric influence because of the geometric pattern in them like point, line, various shapes and sizes.

The style of Mithila painting also depends on castes where each caste has its own kind of painting style with variation in content. For example, Brahman has thin lines with colourful portraits of Hindu deities and Aripa, Kayastha has bold line with Kohbar a wall drawing during marriage ceremony, and Harijans smear cow-dung on paper giving

original background of mud wall and draw secular paintings on worldly affairs of common folk of the region. For this Upendra Thakur heightens: aripana paintings of Mithila are mostly the wall-paintings of archer style, nurtured by the Brahmanas and Kayasthas of the region. The Brahman paintings bear thin wavering and nervous lines, whereas the Kayastha paintings show firm, vigorous and precise lines. (190)

Fundamentally, the upper two Hindu castes have been drawing art very seriously in the Mithila region while other castes were also drawing but not as diligently as they did. That may be because they did not use to go out of their courtyard for other household works except cooking but the lower castes women help in other works besides cooking. Jit Bahadur Rayamajhi intensifies, "Mithila painting is the symbol of unity in the community" where occupational castes perform their role for the wellbeing of all (29). The economy of Mithila largely used to depend on occupational castes where both males and females work together for common goal.

Mithila art these days has brought women of all the castes together for common progress of both; the artistic development on the one hand and economic development on the other. Carolyn Brown Heinz strengthens; "No one wishes to acknowledge the cultural significance of the actual caste-based community in which the art played so central a role" (29). The painting tradition has played vital role in cultural development of Mithila where each caste plays equal role in social custom. In this context, Chavda realizes; "their artwork has somewhat broken down the caste system, and all the women receive equal-status memberships"(27). From the organizational point of view of the artists they become equal in rank and position. Although caste system is the civilization of Mithila since the social reform made during Janak time. Vijayakanta Mishra reinforces; "Brahminical culture gathers its strength in the Karnata and Oinivara periods"(26). Before, Karnata and Oinivara period, particular caste did not have hegemony in the society. The interaction between high and low castes was rampant in the remote past that is before the above mentioned period. Neel Rekha underpins, "the entry of jogin culture in upper caste households was an important evidence of the interaction of upper castes with subaltern beliefs and practices"(8). Hence, Mithila painting is the common tradition of all castes in the region where each has certain role to play. Both the higher and lower perspectives have got space on Maithili art canvas to result into a common whole.

Traditionally women artists of Mithila used to make colours out of surrounding nature. Therefore, this age old painting remains attractive on mud walls of Maithili house. People used to collect different plants and things for the purpose of extracting colours to use in their works of art. Nibedita Das:

Till date the artisan of Madhubani paintings have used colours directly from nature. Lamp soot served as a source of black, white from powdered rice, green was made from the leaves of the apple tree and Tilcoat, blue from the seeds of Sikkot and indigo, yellow was drawn from the parts of singar flower or Jasmine flower, bark of Peepal was to be boiled to make a part of saffron colour, red was made from kusum flower and red sandal wood. To make the painting last long as well as to make brightness they mixed gum with colour. (2)

But the knowledge of colour combination is very important for obtaining particular effect in painting. If the artists do not know which colour to combine, they will not be able to produce desired effect in their painting. Kailash Kumar Mishra supports:

The artists rely on nature for colours. It provides them with a wonderful range of natural hues derived from clay, bark, flowers and berries. The colours are usually deep red, green, blue, black, light yellow, pink and lemon. As the deep colours create mood, they have an important role to play. For instance, energy and passion find expression through the use

of red and yellow, as monochromes crash over large surfaces of the painting. Concentration of energy is best reflected in red, while green governs natural leaves and vegetation.

Hence, colours set different mood, energy, and passion and the viewers derive meaning according to the formulation of colours in the painting. The knowledge of exact use of colours makes the artists superior than others and people acknowledge their contribution in the sphere.

Besides various designs and patterns, colours combination beautifies the painting. It is the local environment which could produce several hues and dyes that maintain and sustain the age old beauty of painting. Vinod Kumar Mishra depicts:

Mithila paintings are generally famous for its simple designs, dynamic and bright use of colours with various traditional patterns. The main features of these paintings include double line border, fancily decorated flower patterns, figures of god etc. The beauty of the Madhubani paintings is the exploration of the relationship between nature, culture, and human psyche and the use of natural dyes & pigments provide in these paintings an eye--catching finish.(46)

The importance of any painting depends on how wisely an artist has used the colour. Sometimes, different colours are mixed together for the particular effect in painting and some other time, a fix colour occupies at a certain place for the certain outcome. Singh illustrates how line carries gamut in the form of painting:

Unlike the "colour-drawings" (bharua), in most of her paintings, Ganga Devi utilizes the potentiality of line as a pictorial means to rescue the figure from the flatness of the pictorial surface. As already stated, the term used to refer to the process of shading done with the help of firm but fine line is kanchani. This term, which comes close to incising, says a lot about the nature of the lines utilized in shading as well as the pictorial instruments used by the artists. (qtd. in Singh 14)

The renowned artist Ganga Devi exploits not only the lines but also the colours in her master pieces. The proper use of colours has made her one of the celebrities in the world of folk art. It is the knowledge and experience of the artist in handling the colour use in her painting that lifts her up in comparison to co-artists.

Maithili artists consider nature as their surrogate mother. So, they always pay due respect to it and magnifies its potentiality beyond its normal course. Abhi Subedi refers to Suman:

He does not treat trees as symbols only but also as visible metaphors, the underlying force of life and means of achieving cosmogonic harmony between nature and mankind. He has used various techniques in this painting, including spray. Trees are imbued with the meaning of ecological power and pervasiveness. He believes that every ritual action of the cultures reflects the close living with nature.(2)

The affinity with nature is in the root of Mithila painting. Among natural things, trees play vital role in the life of common folk who garner everything from them in their remote village. They are not only the physical object for them but also the biological life from which they obtain all their basic needs like shelter, cloth, and food.

Despite several changes in Mithila painting due to the changing time and issues, its antiquity is very popular. In this context, Rewatiraman Lal assesses:

Saint Tulsidas has mentioned in his Ramayana that when Sage Vishwamitra came to Mithila with Ram and Laxman, they saw all the houses were decorated with beautiful pictures as if the sketching is executed by Kamdev (God of Painting in Hindu religion) himself. It means Mithila painting was fully developed in the Ramayana age. (117)

In the pauranic (age of famous Hindu scriptures) age, Mithila painting was in full-fledged form. It seems that the entire region was an art gallery. The antiquity of this art is further strengthened by Carolyn Brown Heinz. She claims, “contemporary Mithila art is a direct descendent of paintings mentioned in the Ramayana” (29). Hence, Mithila painting was not only the painting of common folk but also to the royal court. Therefore, it is the identity of Maithils since the time immemorial.

## CONCLUSIONS

Summing up, narrative paintings of Mithila are no longer only abstract in nature rather it has extended itself from the spiritual connotation to the public awareness, cultural to commercialization, female to beyond gender and identity formation. The empowerment of the artists has further changed the face of family life and ones’ culture has become the bread winning tool especially for the needy ones. Mithila painting is like a language with several dialects, yet all the varieties are pronounced as Mithila art of Mithila region. The point to be highlighted is despite the caste wise styles, symbols, pattern of lines and colours, and themes, artists are using them interchangeably. And the alternation which appears to be fetched is its own growth instead of imitation from any foreign land. Moreover, Diaspora will have dual benefit of being rootedness to their culture as well as in the identity formation. The major focus is women’s expression via their age old art and the insertion of their power within the confined area of their freedom. Despite the strong boundary set by patriarchy, Maithili women express their subtle feeling (may be protest) using symbols and that consequently shape their family life.

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