

Beyond Devotion: A historical analysis of Madhubani folk culture of Mithila region

Dr. Sajjad Ahmad

Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Studies,

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi- 110 025

Abstract: The present paper is based on the textual analysis of Madhubani folk culture through the lens of history and art as one of the parts of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) funded minor project. The folk-culture, art and paintings are an important part of Maithil culture. Though Madhubani folk paintings based on regional and mythological culture got official recognition in 1970, however, it had continued to be practiced in the Maithil households for centuries without being known to outsiders. The beginnings of academic studies in this area can be traced to the year 1934 when W. G. Archer, a British I.C.S officer, first noticed this art form while he was posted as the Sub-Divisional Officer of Madhubani and later on in Darbhanga district of Mithila region of Bihar. In spite of the limitations due to the paucity of primary literature on Maithil paintings, the article has done historical analysis of Madhubani folk-culture and tried to look into the artistic traditions, cultural importance, styles and commercialization pertaining to Maithil painting.

Key words: Mithila, Maithil, Madhubani, Art, Paintings, Folk-culture, Kohabar, Aripam, historical analysis

Introduction:

Mithila, is supposed to be a very ancient region. It is the birth place of Sita- the wife of Rama and of the legendary poet Vidyapati. *Brihad Vishnu Purana* mentions twelve names of Mithila. However, only three names viz.a.viz. Mithila, Videha and Tirabhukti or Tirhut remained popular. Out of these three names, Videha remained the oldest designation of the region. It is popularly believed that the name Videha is probably derived from the Vedic king 'Videgha Mathava' who introduced the Agni (fire) into the lands beyond river 'Sadanira' which is known as river Gandak in present days. However, there is no mention found of Mithila in the Vedic or post-Vedic literature such as the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, *Dasakumaracharita*, *Raghuvamsa*. *Prasannaraghava* used the term in context of the entire country. Further, the term Mithila was used most extensively in different other literature as the capital city of Videha or Tirabhukti province. These literatures refer that Mithila situates itself somewhere in the lower part (Terai) of Nepal identified as Janakpur in the present days. As regards the origin of the name, *Valmiki Ramayana* observes that the city of Mithila was founded by king 'Maithi'. By 4th and 5th centuries A.D. Tirabhukti or Tirhut became extensively popular name of the region. Thus, in determining the history of the region, the geographical location of Mithila remains predominant.

Mithila has remained primarily a land of rivers. It is surrounded by the Himalayas in the North, Ganges in the south, Gandaka in the west and Kosi in the east. Thus, Mithila has remained a secured region as compared to the other contemporary regions. Consequently, it has remained a well-marked natural region with different geographical extent during different ages. In the present times it comprises of Madhubani, Darbhanga, Samastipur, Vaishali, Muzaffarpur, Champaran, Monghyr, Saharsa and Purnea districts in the state of Bihar and about 10, 000 sq. miles in the kingdom of Nepal. Such security also influences the character of the people. Hence, the entire Mithila region is unique in its traditions of making paintings on the floors and walls of their houses especially during festivals and ceremonies. This is why, Madhubani painting represents a restricted area of the painting traditions which is also popularly known as Mithila painting or Maithil painting. However, there is slight difference in utilization of both these terms. Usually, these terms are understood to be synonymic. But the difference lies in the sense that the term Mithila painting or Maithil painting is utilized in more cultural tradition sense where as Madhubani painting is utilized in terms of the commercialised version of these paintings.

The factor that provide distinct identity to Madhubani is that it has remained a seat of learning and intellectual pursuits for preserving and disseminating knowledge especially treasured in Sanskrit and Maithili languages. Several laureates from Madhubani such as Vachaspati Mishra, Shankar Mishra, Vardhaman, Gokulnath, Bachha Jha, Ganganath Jha and so on has contributed with their works on various branches of knowledge, which has remained unmatched till date. The work of Vachaspati Mishra has even influenced the courses of Bengalee, Assamese and Oriya literary history. The other factors that gave global fame to the district Madhubani is its rich and distinct cultural heritage of art, craft & paintings which is revered in the daily life of the people

of Mithila. Therefore, art, craft & paintings are not just the decorative piece rather it derives its themes from the daily socio-cultural and religious lives of people of the area especially the Brahmanic culture based on the Vedic culture. However, there reflects several dilutions to the original vedic culture. Such dilution has led the original vedic culture shift drastically from its originality and incorporating local customs and traditions into the brahmanic fold.

Madhubani: Peeping through the history

Madhubani has remained a centre of vedic culture and learning during the rule of Janak of Videh empire. After the fall of Videh empire, it came under the sway of Lichhavis empire of Vaishali. Subsequently, when Gupta empire became prominent and powerful, Madhubani came under the suzerainty of Gupta empire and later on it came under the suzerainty of king Harshaverdhana of Kannauj. Between 750-1130 AD it was ruled by Pala dynasty that patronized Buddhism. However, Buddhism did not find its upsurge in the region. This was because, the vedic culture and tradition in the region was so deeply rooted that it cannot be eroded by the teaching of Buddhism.

During the reign of Karnat dynasty, the region saw an era of peace in the region particularly during the reign of Harsing Dev (1296-1324 A.D.). It was because, Harsing Dev evolved a code of conduct based on moral values for his subjects and gave upliftment to the literary and artistic pursuits including classical music. Further, the works on Navya Nyaya Shastra, Mimansa and Smriti nibandhas provided space for eternal value in this period. His period also saw the development of genealogical table of each family in order to provide purity to the nuptial relation. However, in 1324, Harsing Dev was defeated by Ghiyasuddin Tughlak of Delhi Sultanat leading to his downfall.

From 1353 to 1527, Oinwar dynasty started ruling this region. Maharaja Shiva Singh (1412-1429) was the most powerful ruler of this dynasty who was successful in establishing an independent Dominion of Mithila. The period of the Oinwar dynasty saw the revival of old ethos of prosperity and harmony. Academic activities reached its zenith during the regime of Maharaja Shiva Singh. He was the patron of Vidyapati, whose works have attracted worldwide attention. It may be said that this period was the golden age for the development of the regional language Maithili. During the period of Mughal emperor Akbar, the principality of Tirhut was transferred to Maharaja Mahesh Thakur in 1557 in appreciation of his scholarship in Sanskrit. Maharaja Mahesh Thakur established the Khandwalakul dynasty, which ruled over area until 1799. However, with the advent of colonial powers, the maharajas were relegated to the position of zamindars. This dynasty was instrumental in establishing schools and colleges in this region

apart from the construction of temples and tanks. The Hindus of the area are traditionally 'Shavites' and has been the devotees of Shakti i.e. Shiva, Vishnu and a number of community guards. Majority of the Hindus celebrate the Durga Puja, Diwali, Chhath, Saraswati Puja, Holi and other festivals with great religious fervour and pomp and show.

Madhubani folk art: Popularization and commercialization

It was W. G. Archer an the then ICS officer and Sub-divisional Magistrate (SDO) of Madhubani, who exposed the paintings of this region to the world. After the earthquake of 1934, in January, Mr. Archer visited Maithili house in order to force the demolition squad into the courtyards of Maithili house. He got fascinated by these exquisite frescos and wrote on these paintings after leaving Madhubani. Bacchi, Balat and Ramnagar were the prominent villages in Madhubani and Keoti, Samaila and Darema were the prominent villages in Darbhanga that were covered by Archer. He published the result of these investigative paintings in the art journal 'Marg' in 1949 entitled '*Maithil Painting*' which became the basis for further academic studies. The basic difference between Maihil painting and Mithila paintings lies in the fact that the term 'Maithil painting' are used when we have talked about the broader cultural tradition, whereas, the term 'Madhubani painting' is used when we have talk about the commercialised version of the paintings. However, the fact is that it took around 20 years for the Maithil paintings to gain worldwide popularity in 1967.

In 1948, that for the first time Madhubani Paintings was exhibited in the art gallery of London. Subsequently, Ajit Mukherjee- a Bengali ethnographer, along with others made secondary use of Archer's finding regarding the folk paintings of Mithila. As a result of his publications, the folk paintings of Mithila got attention of other ethnographers, anthropologists and art-historians. Consequently, the folk paintings of Mithila became exposed further and popular across the world. This development attracted not only the academicians but also inspired entrepreneurs working in the trade of fine/folk-arts.

The first experiment of commercialisation of these paintings were made by J. Walter Thompson private limited company of Calcutta in December 1957. The company was planning to bring out a calendar on the folk paintings of India for one of his clients. In the process, he contacted Mr. S.A. Shere, the then curator of Patna Museum and sought his suggestions in respect of the project. Mr. Shere, recommended Babu Chandradhari Singh of Ranti Deohri, Madhubani who was a famous art collector and the founder of the 'State Chnadradhari Museum' of Darbhanga. The company contacted Babu Chandradhari Singh and requested him to facilitated their project. He agreed to help the project. The company hired a photographer from Maharashtra named Mr

Bhaskar Kulkarni for the photographic compilation of these painting and instructed him to prepare a colour transcript of these paintings. However, he was not able to prepare the colour transparencies due to faded colours of paintings, poor light conditions and high humidity of the area.

While nothing can be said about the project for sure about the calendar project, but one thing became clear that elite families particularly of 'Maithili shrotrias' and other 'Maithili Brahmins' were extremely evasive of permitting Mr Kulkarni any access to their Courtyard or interior rooms where frescos were painted. The only exception is the Babu Chnadradhari Singh who permitted the access. It can be said that despite poverty that the 'Maithili shrotrias' and 'Maithili Brahmins' were not interested in any exploration leading to commercial assessment of their traditional symbols of culture.

On the other hand, the Karna Kayasthas- another caste among Hindus- did not show such reservations. The Kayasthas after the abolition of zamindari system in 1951, were trying to find viable source of earnings for livelihood. Thus, they found an opportunity in compromising with the traditional norms of cultural privacy and bargained a stable economic condition. They started scribbling their folk designs (the motifs and designs assigned to their caste groups) on papers. However, the stock of motifs and style and designs of the Kayasthas were neither complex nor elaborate. Therefore, they started inducting epic themes into the folk-designs of their paintings. They also started on a very small and local scale their efforts of market orientation which was the beginning of the commercialization of the folk-paintings. However, in spite of such inclusion, marketing for these paintings were still a challenge.

It was at this stage that some generous people of this area decided to purchase these paintings to gift them out to their political elites in India. This contributed in propagation and advertisement of such folk-paintings. It was soon noticed that some of the economically weaker Brahmin families too joined the work of reproducing these frescoes on paper and clothes.

As a result, the Mahapatra Brahmins of Jitwarpur- Ranti (a village-north to Madhubani district) developed an independent style (with brush colour) of painting and entered the mainstream of commercial revolution taking place in the market for the folk motifs. By this time, the theme of epic started to dominate the paintings. On the other hand, the folk motifs started losing their status of dominant themes as a result of proliferation of epic themes. The elongated nose, vertically stretched eyes and deliberately induced asymmetry in human and animal figures became the identifying features of these folk paintings. These influenced on a large scale, the other artists of India especially after 1960s in the folk-paintings which popularised the paintings with the dawn of commercialization.

Madhubani painting, tradition and styles:

The Maithil painting or Mithila painting demonstrates a gradual transformation towards its analytical maturity. It further shows a gradual shift from the colonial analysis based on caste categorization of the art to a more complex study of the motifs. Archer's analysis remained centred around the 'brahmanas' and 'kayasthas' styles of paintings. This shows the colonial description of the art. Such discourse based on castes reflect an attempt to present fragmented India. Further, Archer failed to analyse the cultural accomplishments of communities and did not analyse that paintings formed an integral part of women's *vratas* (fastings) as well as *laukik* (reflective) rituals. He writes:

"It is true that Rajputs. Sonars. Ahirs and Dusadhs also do painting and it is almost as if painting is endemic to the region. But in these latter cases the styles are more fragmentary and it is likely that the custom of painting developed later- Maithil brahmins and Maithil kayasths setting the fashion and isolated households of other castes following their example. In its broad essentials Maithil painting is the painting of Maithil brahmins and of Maithil kayasths."

(W.G.Archer, Maithil Painting, Marg, Vol 3, no.3 1949, p.25)

He not only failed to enquire upon the painting traditions of others in detail, but also went on to ignore them completely, thereby, presenting a one-sided analysis of the art form. Further, in his comparison of Maithil paintings with Western counterparts especially in the interpretation of *kohabar* motifs, he writes:

"If we are to find an analogy in European art we might say that the colours of brahmin paintings are parallel to those in paintings by Miro while those of kayastha paintings resemble the black and terracotta colours of Greek vases."

(W.G.Archer, Maithil Painting, Marg, Vol 3, no.3 1949, p.32)

To understand the significance of the *kohabar* motifs painted in the bridal chamber, he drew analogies from the poems of the 17th century poet, Herrick.

Kohabar (wedding room) is an elaborate style of painting done on the walls of the wedding room. This is the room where the newly wed bride spends their first four nights after the wedding

ceremony. The central motif of kohabar comprises mainly of 'purain' (lotus plant) surrounded by different painted images, two parrots making love in the air, fish, tortoise, the sun, the moon, palanquins, grass mats, bamboo grove, and a scene of worship of Gauri. With regard to Kohabar, Vidyapati- the famous poet indicates a very specially decorated room with elaborate paintings on the walls where married couples enter for their first meeting after marriage. This room is specially set apart for the purpose of meeting of the couple, and therefore, the walls of kohabar are decorated with paintings depicting scenes from stories, legends, folklore and mythology. For paintings the kohabar ghar only one colour, 'gairika' or red colour is used. In the *kohabar ghar*, the bans or a bamboo bush and the *purain* or the lotus plants are painted. Most significant is the painting of four women known as 'Naina Jogin' carrying various articles on their head. In the verandah outside the *kohabar ghar*, a virtual painting depicting scenes from mythology or rural life such as carriers of foodstuffs (fish, curd and bananas) are depicted.

Thus, with regard to wall paintings, it is generally executed on the walls under a Maithil theme at three places viz. a viz. the 'Gosauni-ka-ghar' or the room of the family-goddess or deity, the 'kohbar ghar' or the honeymoon room for the couple and the 'kohabar ghar ka konian' or the verandah outside the *kohabar ghar*. The third place is used as a sitting room for the friends of the bridegroom.

Further, *Aripanas* is very popular style in Madhubani painting. It is also referred as 'aipana', 'aipana', 'alpanas', 'samuhalekha' or 'bhumishobha'. In drawing the aripanas, the artists utilize nimble of fingers and do not use brushes. The material used in drawing aripanas is called *pithara* i.e. a paste of rice dissolved in water. Many a times, turmeric and vermilion are also used to project yellow and red colour. In fact, *aripana*, *alepana* or *aipana* is the Maithili words of the Sanskrit term *Aalimpana*, *aulepana* or *ali puna* which means the art of drawing of *ali* or *alepana* (embankment or wall). It is also the 'vratu mandala' drawn on the ground on the occasion of 'vratas' and festivities. It is most commonly known as *Alpana* in Bengal, *Osu* in Orissa, *Chauka* or *Chauka Purana* in Uttar Pradesh and Bhojpuri speaking areas of Bihar, *Mehadimandana* or *Mandala* in Rajasthan, *Sarhia* in Gujarat, *Rangoli* in Maharashtra (Western India), *Kolam* in Tamilnadu (Madras) and *Aipana* in other parts of Northern India.

Apart from these, the 'Swastika' or 'sarvutobhadra aripana' is a very important form of *aripana*. It is composed of 41 small *swastikas* interlinked together with a comprehensive design. Ususally, it is drawn on special occasions such as 'Tulasi puja', in the Hindi lunar month of kartika (October-November) and during 'Mahashtanu' near the image of the goddess inside the temple. The *astadala aripana* connected with the worship of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Durga on ceremonial occasions consisting of the eight petalled lotus are drawn next to *sarvatobhadra aripana*. The *saddala aripana* is drawn on very sacred spots while worshipping Shakti or Bhuvaneshvari. This is another form of *aripana* widely prevalent in Mithila region. It is also

known as *satkona yantra*. This form of *aripana* is drawn on the *Pitha* (the raised earth symbolizing the deity) of the family deity, popularly known as *Gosauni*. Apart from these, '*Dasapatu aripana*' is the most popular in Mithila region. This is a designs of lotus flower known as '*purain*'. Another important *aripana*, the '*sasthi puja aripana*' is made when young maidens attained the age of puberty. This *aripana* symbolized the creation and destruction of the universe. Further, important *aripana* is the '*madhushravani aripana*' which is based on a large and ten small leaves of the '*maina*' tree. It also longish as a footpath outline, drawn near the steps over a stretch of space, often depicting the footprints of the deity. The '*kojagara ka aripana*' is made on the full moon festival.

Conclusion:

Madhubani is the heartland of Mithila's history and culture since ancient times. Its folk-culture, art and paintings are an important part of its culture. Though Madhubani paintings got official recognition in 1970 when the president award was conferred upon Late Padma Shri Mrs. Jagdamba Devi of village Jitwaripur- Ranti and later on some others, but, the painting was already there as a part of everyday culture of the Hindus. This folk-art form continued to be practiced in the Maithil households for centuries without being known to outsiders. Further, the beginnings of academic studies pertaining to Maithil paintings can be traced to the year 1934 when W. G. Archer a British I.C.S officer first noticed this art form while he was posted as the Sub-Divisional Officer of Madhubani and later on in Darbhanga district of Mithila region of Bihar. The successive nationalist movements also helped to flourish this art forms when emphasis was made on the portrayal of India's rich cultural past. This helped to generate a positive expression by scholars and administrators to revive the folk arts of India.

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