From tradition to transformation: Deviations in Madhubani folk-art and craft in ancient temples of Mithila region of Bihar

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Abstract

The present paper is based on the textual analysis of Madhubani folk culture through the lens of tradition, transformation and deviation from its original context and form. The commercialization and globalization have made significant impact upon the role of artists who did not remain untouched and resulted in deviation and transformations of Madhubani folk-art from its original form, values and purposes. The paper is one of the parts of the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) funded minor project.

Key words: Madhubani folk-art, paintings, commercialization, globalization, socio-cultural perspectives, Mithila, Bihar

Introduction

Madhubani folk-art stands one of the most iconic examples of folk art globally. It represents not only the aesthetic sensibilities, but also, the socio-cultural and religious ethos of the community- primarily of the Brahmins and the Kayasthas. Traditionally, Madhubani paintings adorned the walls of homes, ritual spaces and temples. However, it, also often narrates mythological tales, cosmological symbolism, and moral values which had remained an integral part of the daily lives of the people in Mithila region. In this regard, Vatsyayan (1981) notes that *"Madhubani paintings were not mere decoration; they were cultural texts, deeply embedded in the rituals and life-cycle events of the community"* (p. 23). The murals and motifs in temple settings often were considered sacred and embodies the interplay between human devotion and divine presence. However, with the passage of time, Madhubani folk-art experienced significant deviations from its original context and form as a result of commercialization and globalization that made significant impact upon each and every sphere of life. Consequently, the role of artists also did not remain untouched and resulted in deviation and transformations of Madhubani folk-art from its original form, values and purposes. No doubt, it increased *'the visibility and accessibility, but, has altered the traditional meanings and ritualistic significance of Madhubani folk-art'* (Rekha, 2012).

This paper is a part of ongoing research funded by Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR). It has tried to examined such deviations with a specific focus on the representation of Madhubani folk art and crafts in the ancient temples of Mithila. By analyzing the historical origins, socio-cultural dimensions, gendered roles, and contemporary transformations, this study situates Madhubani within a broader discourse of cultural preservation, artistic evolution, and socio-religious significance. The central premise of this paper is that while Madhubani folk-art has expanded into new spheres of artistic expression, it remains an essential lens to understand the cultural continuity and identity of Mithila, especially in temple spaces.

Historical Context of Madhubani in Temples

There is no exact date of the origin of Madhubani folk-art. However, it can be traced back to centuries and has remained deeply intertwined with the socio-religious and cultural fabric of Mithila region. Yadav (1998) suggests that ancient temple architecture in the region utilized extensive use of decorative motifs. Such utilization reflects both local cultural traditions as well as pan-Indian mythological narratives. Temples in Janakpur (Nepal), Simraon, and other Mithila region feature intricate wall paintings, depicting epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, local deities and nature-inspired motifs, such as, peacocks, lotus, and geometric patterns. Vatsyayan (1981) emphasizes that these murals served not only an aesthetic purpose, but also functioned as *"visual scriptures"* that communicated religious knowledge to a largely illiterate population (p. 45).

It is evident that women play a central role in the creation and perpetuation of temple-based Madhubani folk-art. Rekha, (2012) says that *"traditionally women remained confined to domestic spaces, but, female artisans gradually extended their practice to temple walls during religious festivals and ceremonial occasions"*. This is also because, the transmission of knowledge occurred usually orally through apprenticeship within familial and community networks. This shows socio-cultural norms, gendered symbolism, and ritualistic knowledge in each artwork. Sinha (2018) notes that *"the interaction between folk traditions and temple art demonstrates a dynamic process in which artistic practices were both preserved and adapted to meet ritualistic, aesthetic, and community needs"*.

The historical trajectory of Madhubani reflects external influences, including patronage systems, socio-political developments, and cross-cultural interactions. Faroqhi (2017) highlights that *"artisan communities across different regions negotiated their artistic agency within the parameters of political and religious authority evident in Mithila, where*

temple patrons influenced the content, scale, and motifs of Madhubani murals". Thus, secondary sources indicate a complex interplay of culture, ritual, gender, and socio-political factors in shaping the evolution of Madhubani folk-art in temples. Thus, the socio-cultural aspects of the folk-art and motifs in the temple clearly indicates its significance in everyday life of the people of the region. Even though many of the historical ancient period temples have been destroyed due to the region being flood prone and swampy area, but, some of the dilapidated remains of temples indicates beauty of the Madhubani- folk art carved on the walls of temple. The same tradition is still visible on many of the temples in the region till date as a tradition and due to socio-cultural significance.

Socio-Cultural Significance

Madhubani folk-art in temples carries profound socio-cultural significance. It also functions as a medium for moral education, religious devotion, and community identity of the region. Pandey, (2013) suggests that *"the motifs, ranging from depictions of deities like Krishna and Shiva to abstract geometric patterns, reflect cosmological principles and local myths"*. Similarly, Rani (2011) argues that *"every line, color, and shape of Madhubani folk-art remain laden with symbolic meaning, providing insight into the ethical, spiritual, and social codes of the community" (p. 78)*. In temple contexts, these artworks serve as conduits for collective memory, linking generations to a shared religious and cultural heritage. Further, gender dynamics also shape the socio-cultural implications of Madhubani folk-art. Women, as a primary custodian of Madhubani folk-art form, have *"historically exercised creative autonomy within patriarchal structures, embedding personal and communal narratives in the murals"* (Rekha, 2012). However, as a result of commercialization, formal art institutions mushroomed and expanded. Male participation in this art has also increased. As a result, traditional apprenticeship systems got altered and raises questions about the authenticity of the folk-art, its ritual significance, and gendered authorship. However, one aspect is quite

clear that these developments illustrate the broader socio-cultural negotiation between preservation, innovation, and cultural transmission.

Methodology

The larger part of the research upon which this paper is based adopted mixed-method approach to explore deviations in Madhubani art within temple contexts. Extensive literature review had helped to synthesize national and international research on folk art, temple aesthetics, and cultural continuity, with comparative insights from Southeast Asian and also Ottoman contexts. Further, archival records helped to analyze photographs, manuscripts, and prior scholarly work to establish baseline traditions and identify deviations. Henceforth, the thematic analysis of qualitative data enabled in identification of recurring patterns, cultural shifts, and the socio-religious implications of deviations in Madhubani folk-art practice. Thus, the triangulated approach ensured the historical depth with contemporary relevance.

Major findings:

Deviations from Traditional Practices

Over the past few decades, Madhubani folk-art has undergone significant transformations. It has deviated from its original expression in Mithila temples in terms of form, function, and context. Vatsyayan, (1981) suggests that traditionally, the art was bound by ritualistic and community-oriented. Every motif used to carry symbolic significance often linked to religious narratives and cosmological beliefs. However, with the rise of commercialization several changes can be seen in the original form of the art such as modifications in style, scale, and medium. Artists started increasingly employing modern materials. Mathur, (2001) suggests that use of acrylic paints and canvas, led the art *"moving away from its traditional use of natural pigments and hand-prepared surfaces that were central to the authenticity of temple-based murals"*. These changes, on the one hand is expanding the reach of Madhubani folk-art,

but on the other it also risks to dilute ritualistic essence that once historically defined its creation.

Thus, it reflects as an impact of commercialization, motifs have evolved to suit market preferences and contemporary aesthetics. Kumar, (2015) says that

> *"while classical temple art relied heavily on depictions of deities, epic narratives, and symbolic flora and fauna, modern interpretations often feature abstract designs, popular cultural icons, and innovations that appeal to urban and international audiences".*

Similarly, Thakur (2007) observes that patronage dynamics have also shifted. He suggests that the temples that were once directly commissioning specific artworks, included ritual requirements. As an impact of commercialization and globalization, the contemporary artists started catering to private collectors, galleries, and tourists. These transitions, hence, redefines the Madhubani folk-art and shows clear-cut deviation from sacred expression to commercial commodity. Thus, it has largely altered the meanings encoded in traditional motifs. Deviations also manifested in scale and placement. Temple murals started being integrated into architectural structures harmonizing with spatial rhythms and ritual spaces. On the other hand, the contemporary representations frequently detached itself from the architectural context and displayed on standalone canvases or in domestic and gallery settings. Such shift actually affects the way viewers perceive the Madhubani folk-art. The spiritual and communitarian resonance of the original temple murals were replaced with aesthetic appreciation devoid of the ritual context it originally depicted. Consequently, these deviations raise critical questions about authenticity, continuity, and the socio-cultural role of Madhubani folk-art.

Socio-Cultural Implications of Deviations:

The deviations in Madhubani folk-art are not merely aesthetic, rather, they also reflect deeper socio-cultural shifts in Mithila region. The

adaptation of traditional art for commercial purposes has created both opportunities and tensions within local communities. Rekha, (2012) suggests that, these transformations *"provide economic avenues for artisans, particularly women, who have historically been marginalized in the labor market"*. Participation in national and international exhibitions, sales through cooperative societies, and through online platforms have enhanced the visibility of Madhubani folk-art. This has also fostered a sense of pride and cultural affirmation among the community inhabitants of Mithila region.

Further, on the other hand, commercialization has also led to erode the ritualistic knowledge and community engagement in the folk-art traditions. Sharma (2017) suggests that *"younger generations of artisans prioritize marketable skills over traditional apprenticeship"*. As a result, it seems to have resulted in the gradual loss of symbolic literacy that used to promote classical temple art. Apart from this, the shift from collective, community-based production to individualistic creation have also altered the social fabric of Mithila. Consequently, it has reduced opportunities for intergenerational knowledge transfer. Thus, the socio-cultural consequences reflect duality. Firstly, in terms of the economic empowerment and global recognition, and secondly in terms of the potential fragmentation of traditional meanings and social cohesion.

Furthermore, deviations also influenced the gender dynamics in the region. Historically, women were central to the creation of temple-based Madhubani folk-art. They used to negotiate personal and communal expression within patriarchal structures (Rekha, 2012; Pandey, 2013). However, commercialization also introduced male artisans into previously female-dominated spaces. This led to shifts in the authorship, recognition, and income distribution. Such changes underscore the complex interplay between culture, economy, and gender in the contemporary trajectory of Madhubani folk-art.

Gender, Agency, and Contemporary Roles:

The gendered dimensions of Madhubani folk-art are critical in understanding its preservation as well as its deviations. In temple art contexts, women were not the only artists rather they were the custodians of cultural and ritual knowledge. Nath, (2009) suggests that they also used to encode the moral narratives, cosmological principles, and community histories in their work. Their labor reflected a nuanced negotiation of agency, as they navigated societal constraints while asserting creative and spiritual authority. In this regard, Anuradha Sinha (2018) shows that *"the female hand in Madhubani folk-art is simultaneously devotional and expressive, linking the domestic, the sacred, and the communal"* (p. 112).

However, modern transformations have shifted this balance. Male artists and commercial enterprises increasingly dominate the markets for Madhubani folk-art often affecting access, visibility, and economic benefit for women artisans. Yet, women continue to innovate and blend traditional techniques with contemporary demands, participating in workshops, cooperative societies, and online platforms. Such developments highlight the persistence of female agency. However, research gaps remain in understanding how these shifts affect ritual knowledge, community identity, and the intergenerational transmission of skills, signaling the need for further ethnographic study (Thakur, 2007; Priyanka Mishra, 2019). Gendered analysis also extends to thematic deviations. Modern representations often emphasize decorative aesthetics over ritual narrative, potentially marginalizing the traditional female-centered modes of storytelling. Consequently, understanding the intersection of gender, art, and commercialization is pivotal for both academic scholarship and cultural preservation.

Preservation Challenges and Strategies:

Preserving Madhubani folk-art in temple contexts faces multifaceted challenges. It ranges from environmental degradation to socio-economic transformations. Kumar, (2020) suggests that *"traditional murals, created with natural pigments on mud and plaster*

surfaces, are highly susceptible to weathering, water damage, and neglect". Further, restoration efforts are often hampered by a lack of documentation, limited funding, and insufficient awareness of the cultural significance of these artworks.

Contemporary preservation strategies advocate a combination of technical, educational, and community-based interventions. Whereas, technical measures include pigment conservation, structural reinforcement of temple walls, and digital archiving to prevent loss of visual information (Pathak, 2005). Community-based strategies emphasize engaging local artisans and cultural custodians in preservation efforts, recognizing their expertise in traditional techniques and symbolic interpretations. Educational initiatives aim to integrate Madhubani folk-art heritage into local schools, festivals, and workshops, ensuring intergenerational knowledge transfer. Apart from these, global comparisons also offer insights. In Southeast Asia, Rawson (1990) observes that the integration of local artisans in temple restoration projects ensures continuity of craft traditions while maintaining ritual relevance. Similarly, Eliade's (1957) framework emphasizes the spiritual dimensions of art, advocating preservation strategies that respect the sacred context of folk artworks. In Mithila, aligning technical interventions with cultural and ritual imperatives is essential for holistic preservation of Madhubani folk-art in temple spaces.

Conclusive remarks and Recommendations:

The trajectory of Madhubani folk-art in the temples of Mithila reflects a dynamic interplay of tradition, transformation, and cultural negotiation. Deviations from original practices, often driven by commercialization, globalization, and changing social dynamics, have altered the form, function, and meaning of these artworks. While such transformations also have expanded visibility and provide economic opportunities, but they also challenge the preservation of ritual knowledge, socio-cultural coherence, and gendered authorship. Its

deviations are not merely losses but also transformations that reflect broader socio-cultural, economic, and gendered dynamics. By recognizing and addressing these changes, scholars, practitioners, and communities can ensure that Madhubani continues to flourish as both a sacred and socio-cultural heritage of Mithila. There is much need to further explore this area keeing in mind ethnographic documentation, gendered analysis, cultural preservation and comparative studies. In conclusion, Madhubani art exemplifies the resilience and adaptability of cultural traditions.

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