

Chapter 23

Women Painters of Mithila: A Quest for Identity

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ABSTRACT

The region of Mithila has become synonymous with the beautiful and vibrant Madhubani paintings which are very much coveted by the connoisseurs of art the world over. The women from Mithila have been making these paintings and it is admirable that they have been able to carve out a space and name for themselves amidst the patriarchal set-up of society. Indeed, there is no other parallel anywhere else in the world of a folk-painting being mastered exclusively by women. The progressive commercialization of this art has resulted in the corrosion of this pristine variety of art - in form as well as content. Except a miniscule number of artists, economically the plight of the vast majority of these women painters has remained quite miserable who are forced to sell their artistic pieces for a pittance while a huge profit is earned by the middlemen. The commodification and commercialization of this traditional art form has caused much alarm to the anthropologists, art historians and connoisseurs of art who are sensitive to the cultural origins and solemnity of these art forms, and also made them empathetic to the economic deprivation of the women artists who produce them. These women artists are undermined by the patriarchal social structures of the community and family and also by the market that expropriates traditional knowledge and cultural expressions.

'Painting is in our culture - my mother used to paint and I started painting with her. - Shashikala Devi

Since the ancient period of human history, even going as far back as the primeval times, art has been an integral and inalienable aspect of human life, as revealed in the cave paintings belonging to the pre-historic period found in various parts of the world. Painting is an important medium for the expression of creative thoughts, human feelings, emotions and sentiments as well as the secular themes, religious

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beliefs and variegated mundane subject matters. As such, the study of painting concerning the genre of the folk-art helps us in understanding the deep co-relation between art and the various facets of the respective culture and civilization.

The region of Mithila has become synonymous with the beautiful and vibrant Madhubani paintings which are very much coveted by the connoisseurs of art the world over. Madhubani painting is a predominantly feminine oriented folk-art form of the Mithila region in the northern part of the state of Bihar in India and some adjacent areas of Nepal Terai. Thus, Mithila broadly refers to the geographical areas encompassing the old and undivided districts of Darbhanga (out of which the district of Madhubani was formed upon its bifurcation), Bhagalpur, Purnea and Saharsa in North Bihar and some areas of the Nepal Terai adjoining the border of Bihar. The uniqueness of this art along with a clearly specified geographical area of its practice has led to the Government of India giving it its own Geographical Identification or GI tag. These paintings have been aesthetically appreciated and also received international acclaim.

HISTORY OF MADHUBANI PAINTINGS

Mithila has had a glorious tradition in the political and cultural life of ancient India. The region also saw the rise and collapse of many kingdoms like Magadha and republics like the Licchavis, Vaisali etc. Mithila earned the distinction of being the land which witnessed the emergence of personalities like Yajnavalkya, Kapila, the founder of *Samkhya* philosophy, Kanada (the exponent of the *Vaisesika* philosophy), and Jaimini (the exponent of the *Mimamsa* school). It was also the land of the *Upanishads* which embody the highest philosophical speculations about life, soul and God. Vaisali, an ancient Indian republic was a stronghold of Buddhist and Jaina religion and philosophies. The second Buddhist Council was held in the city of Vaisali. Hence Mithila has remained the cradle of Indian region and culture.

It cannot be stated with certainty as to when these *bhittচিত্র*s (wall paintings) really began. From the fact that this art is mentioned in the ancient literature of Mithila inferences can be drawn to the fact that it is a very ancient art. The name Mithila was also usually used for the kingdom of Videha. This art form is said to date as far back as the *Ramayana* when King Janaka, who ruled over Mithila, commissioned artists to make paintings to celebrate his daughter Sita's marriage to Rama. Legends state that the ladies of King Janaka's household used to paint on the walls.

This glorious tradition continued during the medieval period in Mithila, which included the period from 1097 AD to 1550 AD under the *Karnatas* and *Oinavaras* as also under the Khandavala dynasty (Darbhanga Raj), down to the present times. The age of the *Karnatas* and *Oinavaras*, though not very significant politically, was a landmark with respect to developments in culture, art and literature in north-eastern India. There is an abundance of literary works in *Maithili* (dramas, poetry and prose), the language spoken in Mithila from about the eleventh century.

FEATURES OF MADHUBANI PAINTINGS

These paintings are characterized by loose-limbed, exaggerated vertical figures with great reserve in their forms. Foilage and flowers are stylistically arranged in the paintings to form decorative patterns. The unique feature of the Madhubani painting is that the women are the sole custodians of this art form,

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