

JOURNEY OF A FOLK ART: THE CASE OF *MITHILA* PAINTING OF BIHAR

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Abstract: India has always been known for its rich cultural heritage since ancient times. Favorably endowed with a wide array of forms and mediums of expression; their beliefs, impression of natural and supernatural elements, their worldviews etc., the people of this sub-continent have contributed towards making India a great civilization. Folklore and folk arts of India speak volumes about their contribution to the rich heritage tag. They are not merely carriers of culture, but rather expressions of the inherent living spirit of the community; an expression of their inherent life experiences and they continue to exist as living traditions portraying the ethnic and traditional vibrancy through their unique arts and crafts. Folk painting is, most often, one such form where narratives and worldview of the community is portrayed in visual tradition; each unique in their style of representation and have made its presence felt to a wider degree in India. Customarily practiced, as part of ritual and sanctified function in the inner domains; houses and villages, *Mithila* painting tradition, with motifs and traditional patterns, has been doing their rounds on walls, floors and other decorative products. However, in recent times, it has been observed that it has come out of the confinements and carve a niche for itself as a popular culture in the metropolitan cities. This paper is an attempt towards understanding the development of the progress and travel of *Mithila* painting tradition from a closed, domestic and local space to the national and global sphere. This paper also intends to explore some of the factors that made the folk art form attain a popular culture status in the contemporary times.

Key words: *Mithila Painting, Bihar, Folk art, Traditional art, Changing scenario.*

Introduction:

Folk art is expression of their inherent life experiences; on both levels of individual self and as collective consciousness of a community and they continue to exist as living traditions portraying the ethnic and traditional vibrancy through their unique arts and crafts. It has been observed in the context of many indigenous communities in India that their rich repertoire of myths, tales, mysteries and their intimate relationship with nature, forest and animals are reflected artistically in their art forms. Among the various forms of folk art, folk painting is, most often, one such form where narratives and worldview of the community is portrayed in visual tradition; each unique in their style of representation and have made its presence felt to a wider degree in India. The process of creation of an art begins with an emotional impulse to express the experience that is either felt or perceived. The word 'folk' has a wide range of connotation that ranges from the rural and to popular. It is embodiment of myths and beliefs that belongs to a particular place and group, hence taking a form of folklore. Each part of India has its own folklore which is transmitted from one generation to another through the oral, written and performance tradition.

Mithila painting of Bihar has its own characteristic styles and patterns of painting. In the process, they transcend their medium; art has transposed onto paper and canvass and artists have also started experimenting new techniques and narratives while keeping the traditional style somehow intact. In the process, the artists are bestowed adequate freedom of expression to keep the tradition alive and going. What is interesting is that certain elements are operating in their endeavor to keep alive these traditions as well as

attain a sustainability of folk aesthetics. It has been observed that there are several folk painting traditions in various parts of India. Basically, these paintings are part of the ritual and belief traditions of the village folk. It is the expression of their world view and their lived experience of the common folk. As such their aesthetics and style is reflective of the code of practice of the concerned community. Therefore, the representation of the forms and styles of paintings is based on their traditions, rituals and collective sentiment attached to the community. Folk paintings are usually done on mud floors, mud walls, ceiling, ceremonial pots etc. These paintings are mostly done during festivals and on ceremonial and ritual occasions. The subject matter and themes of these folk paintings are connected with the myths, legends and the beliefs of the concerned community. Considering the involvement of the whole community in the making, sustenance and perpetuation of the folk painting tradition, it is debatable whether we can designate only a few as folk artists or not. Since the whole community is involved in the practice and knowledge is passed down through generations as collective knowledge of the folk, it is a difficult task to categorize who could be called as folk artist as the artist connotes an individual meaning.

For the sake of convenience, we may equate the artistic capability of the individual and collective community as folk artists. Thus, the folk artists create their composition by using distinctive patterns of lines and colours that is specific to the tradition. The artists also get to paint using motifs and themes that are known and popular to their community people and highly localized. However, with the advent of the time, the folk were exposed to new changes in their way of life and worldly affairs. With the passage of time, it has acquired new patterns and style, which leads to the evolution of this art form. In the age of globalization and commercialization, the marketability of the folk painting is realized by the folk. In this respect one could observe the folk artists attempt to experiment with new forms and new mediums of expression. Realizing the importance of signature of the artist in the new age of commerce oriented mechanism of folk painting production, the emphasis on an individualistic approach and signature began to enter the arena of folk art. The artists try to develop and experiment a new style and thus trying to keep the authenticity of the old forms intact.

Hence, In India, these diverse art forms express their own values through different ways of treatment of the elements. Similarly, Mithila paintings have maintained their distinct identity, cultural background and regional character. Far away from Indian big cities and the modern world, there lies a beautiful region once known as Mithila, which was one of the first kingdoms to be established in eastern India. (Mishra: 2003)

Demography:

Among the few regions of India known for their ancient civilizations, the region of Mithila is often mentioned. Various known as *Videha*, *Tirbhukti* or *Mithila*, this region is believed to be bounded on the north by the Himalaya; on the east by river Kosi (non-existent now); on the south by the river *Ganga*; and on the west by the river *Gandaki*. As per the Bihar district gazetteer, the region of *Mithila* comprised of the districts of *Samastipur*, *Champanan*, *Muzzafarpur*, *Vaisali*, *Dharbhanga*, *Saharsa*, *Madhubani*, *Monghyr*, *Purnea* etc. (P.C. Roy Choudhary; 1964). It also touches upon some parts of the neighbouring country of Nepal, on the lower ranges of Himalayas. According to the Census Report of 1941, the actual area of Mithila is approximately 19,275 sq. miles in India and about 1000 sq. miles in Nepal. (Shailendra Kumar Jha and Bhanu Jha: 1996)

Mithila Painting as folk art:

Over thousands of years, Mithila painting has been a domain and fortified area for the women folk. The women folk in Mithila have inherited their traditions, skills, technical knowledge and expertise from their mothers or grandmothers and carried through one generation to the other. The practice of this art was an integral part of their domestic ritual which was being performed as an everyday activity. These drawings and the paintings are a part of rituals and the customs practice on different festivals. The festival is an epitome of the lifetime action that consists of happiness, joy, hopes, beliefs, dreams and sorrows. Hence, it gives a meaning and substance to the continuity of life. The essence of the festival is to strengthen the bond between the different individuals of the community. The beliefs and the myths

associated with the festivals are the result of the credence and belief on spiritual existence and experience. The festival signifies the manifestation of a collective mind which represents the experience of the people dwelling there which is being carried out since many years.

Mithila women have drawn on the walls with the motif and symbols that have certain belief and myths related to it. It was drawn with a notion or the perception to avert the natural disasters and calamities and pray for the wellbeing of the family members and the community. They used to paint the Hindu Gods and Goddesses to worship on different occasions. These painting and diagrams were made with the natural dyes on the mud wall and floor surface. However, these mud wall paintings are not permanent, as the monsoon arrives, it tends to destroy the painted images. As, soon it fades up, the fresh mixture of mud and cow dung is applied over the wall to hide the old images. It is used to provide a fresh and clear surface for the new paintings, which is related to the festivals and the season. Traditionally, three major castes are associated Mithila painting: *Brahmin*, *Kayastha* and *Dusadha*. Though the painting and its forms vary from caste to caste in this region are associated with religious ceremony and local rituals. Wall painting (*bhitti citra*) and floor painting (*aripana*) are two popular mediums on which Mithila paintings are executed. The *Mithila* tradition has been carried out since the time immemorial in Bihar, particularly the *Mithila* region. This art is being practiced by the women folk who used to decorate the inner and the outer walls of their houses. These paintings were drawn on the festivals and on any auspicious occasions. North Bihar is regarded as Bihar's cultural unit which is impressive and mature in its art forms. These are mostly practiced by the upper caste women; particularly by the *Brahmins* and the *Kayastha* ladies. Though the women from other caste also practice this art form during the festivals. The images of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses are the major subject of this art form: *Ganesh*, *Durga*, *Shiva* and *Saraswati* are also part of the Mithila painting and apart from these religious and sacred visual narratives, the cycle of the seasons, folk and tribal lore, marriage, other ritual processions and ceremonies are associated with the annual festivals based on the cycles of the moon and sun are themes that *Mithila* women immortalized in their paintings. Some of the enduring images of *Mithila* art include agrarian village scenes and village activities. Folk art is deeply rooted with the essence of ceremonies, festivals and rituals. The relation and the association of the art form with the tradition was laid with the motif of ritualistic purpose. It gave a foundation to ensure the continuity of the art form as a tradition. The uniqueness of the folk art form is the artists' simplicity of mind and the creative freedom and innocence that is well presented and reflected in these art forms. We see that there has been an interaction with the outer world which has immensely increased with the changing world, but the 'folk' remains intact with it and is intrinsically associated with the rituals and customs performed within the community. The creative expression and the innocence intact with these art forms have attracted the audience attention toward these art form on national and international platforms.

In recent years, the Mithila painting has evolved enormously and have transformed with the advent of the new generation and the taste of the audience. The changes in the styles, motifs and forms have brought a massive changes and modifications in the lifestyle of rural and indigenous folk art. However, it is interesting to note that the mud walls, courtyards, textiles, household objects, paintings and handicrafts, still rest upon and is kept intact with the age-old repository for the narrations, patterns, designs, motifs, themes and symbols.

Changing Paradigm of Mithila Painting:

William G Archer, an ardent art lover of Indian art, who was the British officer of Madhubani District had discovered this ancient wall painting tradition in the year January, 1934. It was a massive earthquake in Bihar, 8.4 Richter scale that killed thousands of people, had tumbled down the walls of the mud houses. William G. Archer was assigned to take a survey of the region where he was amazed and enthralled to see the images on the walls and that made his interest on the paintings done on the interior walls of the Brahmins and the Kayastha homes, as these paintings were largely being painted by these women folks. Etymologically, Mithila painting was first discovered by William G Archer in 1934 who first drew his attention to the wall paintings drawn by the *Brahmins* and the *Kayasthas* communities of Mithila region. This encounter compelled him to note his observations and analysis in his article, where

he termed the painting as 'Maithil Painting'. Archer marked an identification to the community dwelling there and as the paintings were done on the walls of the houses in *Madhubani, Saharsa, Dharbhanga* and *Purnea* that largely covers the Mithila region. The painting is also popularly identified as *Madhubani* Painting which is more familiar to the outside world. The outside world has come to know about this painting from the village *Jitwaripur* and *Ranti*, which comes under *Madhubani* district.

The year, 1967-68, is considered to be an important landmark in the history of the evolution of *Mithila Painting*. The region was in the terrible state facing a series of disastrous natural hazards. Bihar Famine 1966 and Bihar drought 1968 had wiped out all the hope that the people dwelling there had. The condition got extreme worst and pathetic leaving the entire landscape grey, cracked, harsh with the remorseless heat scorching the earth. As Pupul Jayakar also mentions, 'the bleak dust of poverty had sapped away the will and the energy needed to ornament the home.' The region was left with dust and sun, the disappearance of green landscape, absence of water left a monstrous tonal uniformity. The burnt up tiny plants in the barren fields, ample of fissures and cracks had been eaten by the skin and bone cattle leaving no green patches. Millions of hungry swarmed the free kitchens, as there were no crops left behind. Thousands of death and malnutrition had left no zeal and energy among the villagers. The Bihar drought in 1968 accentuated the problem and this gave rise to the light labour scheme. This disaster was considered to be a boon for the people of *Mithila* marking their upliftment. From this historic moment, the artistic motifs used by *Mithila* women were transferred on to paper. These initiatives were established to promote the inherent skills of these women, help them uplift their lives through the sales of their beautiful artworks and to introduce *Mithila* expression to the rest of the world. *Mithila* painting, today, has taken a new direction of its own and has tried to mould itself according to the time and space. Undoubtedly, it is a source of inspiration for national and international artists.

Looking at the market scenario, earlier, most of the arts works were anonymous. As the artists were not literate and educated, they did not mark their names and signatures. It was their choice of not doing it so, as they did not consider this art as an individual art and unwilling to consider any piece of art as an individual producer of that art form. But with the availability of the market and the consumer in the outer world, they have willing started to accept the notion and the importance of signature and the name. This new market has generated the highly individuated self – conscious artists which have resulted to their own styles and the subjects of their paintings. The tradition has gradually evolved with the time and space where the artists have inhabited their own styles, forms and subjects in the paintings and that has multiplied dramatically. The folk painters have imbibed a new sense of portraying themselves as the artists as well as the social actors, which has directly and directly responded to the audience globally. It has influenced a larger market and the scope to attract the audience. The different form of styles, the intricate details, usage of vibrant colors and the schemes has a certain significance and importance in its own portraying the artist's consciousness. The experimentation of these colors and styles gives the strength to the composition of the art which has undoubtedly given an extraordinary height to the tradition of folk art. The works of the folk artists divulge a clear and apt understanding of the knowledge of the traditional symbols and shapes which has its own meaning and significance. The subject matter and the cognition of themes are the mediums that carry this tradition beyond the facet of pictures. These factors discern the sensibility of originality and intensity in the art. The visual culture of the folk art reflects the subject from the resources available in the tradition of the community. To know the facets of the stories and narratives, it is important to see the historical account of the art practice and the histories, and the mythologies associated with the art form, community and the artisans. The oral and the written histories associated with it helps to form the concept behind the painting in forms of shapes, colors and patterns.

It has been noted that *Mithila* painting was significantly dominated by the womenfolk for ages. The entry of males into this painting tradition is a recent phenomenon and a trend. The development and the transition seem to have transformed the surface and the medium. The opening up of the artistic space and the advent of new modes and color schemes and dyes have been instrumental in the broadening and widening up the scope and the future of *Mithila* painting. It is equally important to look at this aspect and analyse the usage of colours and the change with the time and the space. The shift of colour from natural

extracts to the industrial colours. the natural colours extracted from the flowers, vegetables and leaves practices were present in Mithila.

It is important and vital that the popularity of the different folk art forms rely heavily on extra factors like receptive audience, museums, exhibitions, consumers and connoisseurs. Mithila painting is a representative of the expression of the beliefs and the day to day activities and experiences. The uniqueness of such painting tradition is characterized by its usage of vibrant colors and its variant of styles, patterns and symbols.

Conclusion:

In conclusion it can be said that probing the shift of the *Mithila* painting tradition from the mud walls of house to the canvas and other mediums is a very necessary means to understand the various factors that felicitate or obstruct these transitions. It gives us an idea about the issues associated with ritual aspect and commercial ones. How stories and narratives from the Epics and other regional mythology and narratives have been incorporated into the *Mithila* painting tradition and, the changes in the narrative and artistic pattern that took place made way for the evolution of this art form from rural to urban space. The aesthetics associated with *Mithila* painting needs to be further observed and analysed thoroughly to see if it has change in its movement from folk to popular.

It may be highlighted that the Folk art covers all the forms of visual art in the context of the folk culture. The definitions vary and often overlap or are contested. Folk arts are rooted and are reflective of the cultural life of the community. It encompasses the body of expressive culture associated with the fields of folklore and cultural heritage. Stories from the Indian epics, *Puranas*, stories based on the local mythologies comprise the major repertoire of the visual presentation of *Mithila* painting and sometimes with the accompaniment of the oral songs sung on specific religious and nuptial occasions. However, one can see incorporation of new themes and visual narrative in the contemporary times. These modes and elements that go into the shaping of folk art into a popular culture in the contemporary times is crucial for decoding and identifying those features which indeed made the folk art form attain a popular culture status. Therefore, one of the major concerns of this paper is looking at the journey of an art form i.e. *Mithila* paintings and examine its corresponding characteristics which contribute to its trajectory from rural to urban space in India and beyond.

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