

# Mithila, its People and its Art

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## Introduction

We critically examined the debates around art, particularly „folk“ art, to delineate a discursive history of categories that unravel the politics of nomenclature. We also examined those discourses in the context of Mithila art, by surveying the literature from the earliest writings to the most recent ones. In this topic, we shall present an understanding of the *region* of Mithila in the historical context. We shall also delineate the history of Mithila art, from the earliest times when it was done on walls and floors to its commoditized form. The objective of this paper is to provide a background of the region- how structures and relations of society, economy, polity and culture have worked together to construct this region, which provides a context in which the painting tradition emerged.

## Political History of Mithila

Though Mithila shares some features with the „Hindi belt“, owing to being part of the state of Bihar which comprises the other two regions of Bhojpur and Magadh on the one hand, and those of „eastern India“, owing to the similarities with Bengal on the other, it developed its own unique features over time, leading to the development of a distinct social formation and cultural identity.

The history of Mithila is mired in myth; infact, it is difficult to separate the two. Claude Levi-Strauss, among others, has argued for the understanding of history as another type of myth, for studying history not as separate from but as a continuation of mythology<sup>1</sup>. However, even though this approach broadens the domain of sources for writing accounts of the past, particularly of non-literate people, it can be manipulated, especially by dominant groups to weave „origin“ stories for the purpose of constructing identities and thereby staking claims.

In the context of Mithila, the conflation of myth and history has happened primarily because of the lack of „scientific“ sources. According to the most important historian of Mithila Upendra Thakur, the chief sources for writing the history of this region are the Atharvaveda, Brahmanas, particularly the Satpatha Brahmana, the Upanishads, Buddhist (Jatakas) and Jain texts, the Puranas (Mahabharata and Ramayana), accounts of a few foreign travellers, medieval Sanskrit literature, the Panjis or genealogical records of the people of Mithila, very few archeological

evidences such as artefacts, inscriptions and coins. However, it is claimed that many of these sources, particularly the Puranas, are not „scientific“ in nature, leading to the conflation of myth and history, as discussed earlier.

Mithila is one of the regions of the Indian sub-continent which has been considered to be an ancient civilization<sup>2</sup>. Most of the historians of the region regard it as a reservoir of the most glorious elements of the history of the Indian sub-continent. This claim is made on the basis of the fact that it was in Mithila that “the great and unparalleled philosophical discussions” that were “ever attempted in the history of human thought and culture were held”<sup>3</sup>. It is significant to note that the history of this region is not the history of battles and wars but of courts and kings, who were mostly devoted to pursuits of learning.

According to the Imperial Gazette<sup>4</sup>, Mithila (variously known as Videha, Tirabhukti, Tirhut) is located between 25 degree 28“ and 26 degree 52“ N latitude and between 84 degree 56“ and 86 degree 46“ E longitude. It is spread in about 25,000 square miles. Right from the Puranas to modern histories, the boundaries of the region have been described in a similar way- that it is surrounded by the Himalayan range in the north, by the rivers Kosi in the east, Ganga in the south and Gandaki in the west. The Terai- foothills of the Himalayas- forms part of Mithila in the nation-state of Nepal. It is evident from the geographical location of Mithila that it is a tract of land locked by the topographical barriers of mountains and rivers, because of which it has developed as an independent entity.

Mithila has been home to four out of the six systems of Indian orthodox philosophical traditions- Navya Nyaya, Vaisesika, Mimamsa and Samkhya. It has been labeled as the land of the most orthodox Brahminical tradition. But this is also the same place, where non-Aryan philosophies like Buddhism and Jainism flourished. Both Mahavir and Buddha have lived and discoursed in Mithila. But the non-Aryan/ non-Brahmin streams always had strained relationship with the Brahminical religion, prior to the complete takeover of the latter in this region.

We find mythical accounts of the various names that have been associated with this region in the *Satapatha Brahmana* and *Puranas*. Mithila or Videha are names, which according to historians, are entirely mythical. In some narratives, it is a land first inhabited by King Videgha Mathava, who arrived there from the banks of the river Sarasvati. In others, it was King Nimi of Ayodhya, who came to this land which was known for sacrifices, whose son Mithi eventually established the kingdom of Mithila. Again, there are various versions of the legend around King Mithi, in texts such as *Vishnu Purana* and *Srimadbhagvata*.

The Sanskrit grammarian *Panini* refers to Mithila as a kingdom of brave kings, particularly invoking the King Janaka, the father of Sita. In popular imagination, too, it is in the context of the epic *Ramayana*, that Mithila is most remembered. As the home of Sita, the protagonist of *Ramayana*, Mithila has been represented as a land of learned men-the Janakas, who belonged to the long line of the Videhan kings. The early Videhan kings were devoted to the pursuit of learning and some of them have been regarded as „philosopher-kings“.

The Videhan monarchy was replaced by the Licchavis of the Vajjian Republic in Vaishali, before the rise of Buddhism in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. The reason for the former's downfall is attributed to the moral corruption that had set in the later Janaka kings. The Licchavis, though being indigenous Ksatriyas, got converted to non-brahminical faiths like Jainism and Buddhism. So, they were termed as Vratyas for their „relegation“ in observance of the sastric, i.e, brahminical codes. In other words, they became flexible in terms of regulating caste distinctions. It can also be argued that since these Ksatriyas consisted of the merchant class (*shreshtis* in the local parlance); they did not give supremacy to the Brahmins. Eventually, Ajatshatru of the Magadh Empire conquered the Vajjian Confederacy as part of his expansionist policy. Many dynasties ruled over Mithila after the Republic of Vajji was uprooted by Ajatshatru. Till the 11<sup>th</sup> century, Mithila was ruled by kings from Bengal- particularly those of the Pal and Sen dynasties. It was fourteen hundred years later that Mithila kingdom found its „lost glory“ once again in the Karnata kings.

### **The Chief Ruling Dynasties of Mithila (Karnata, Oinvara, Khandavala)**

The Karnata dynasty followed the Sen Kings of Bengal and ruled Mithila from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century. This was the period when feudalism in the sub-continent was seeping into the core of Mithila's economic, social and political fabric. Historians, while doing a comparative analysis between the Western form of feudalism and that of this part, enumerate the similarities in both the regions, such as the granting of land from the kings on the implicit condition of military assistance during war, emergence of self-sufficient local economy, paucity of coins, the decline in trade and decentralization of administration. The unavailability of coins marked the low level of trade transactions. No coins of this period have yet been discovered. This feature also confirms the omnipresent dominance of feudal holdings, with no or little importance attached to independent capital. It definitely caused to restrict the economic lives of the common people, thus forcing them to be tied to the land at their feudal lords' whims.

Nanya Deva, the first ruler of the Karnata dynasty, was also the first sovereign ruler of Mithila. The epithet „Mithilesvara“ that he took on was meant to demonstrate his power to his subjects.

The Karnatas were supposed to have come from the Karnata region and their first capital was Simraun Garh (Birganj). Nanya Dev has been credited for his role in raising Mithila out of the dust of oblivion. He is said to have infused „Maithiliness“ or „Maithiligeist“ to the scholars practicing Maithili language through his patronage. Apart from his warfare skills, he earned name for his mastery in music. On the literary front, some significant work happened during this era. Alongside Sanskrit, the earliest extant work in the Maithili language *Varnaratnakara*, composed by Jyotirishwara is the product of this period. King Harisimhadev was the most prominent ruler of the Karnata dynasty. It was on his order that the system of documenting and maintaining genealogical records or *Panji Prabandh* was introduced for the Brahmins and Karn Kayasthas of Mithila- the two caste-groups that have historically occupied the highest positions in the caste hierarchy.

It is said that a branch of this dynasty was still ruling in some parts, during the rule of the subsequent Oinvara dynasty in the 17th and 18th centuries. The legacy of the Karnatas petered out to landlords or zamindars with the coming in of the Khandavala dynasty in the region.

The Karnata dynasty was followed by the Oinvaras, who belonged to a line of Brahmin kings. By the time the Oinvaras ascended the throne of Mithila, the Muslim conquest of north India was complete. After Firoz Shah Tughlak attacked Mithila and conquered it, the last king of the Karnata dynasty Harisimhadev eloped to Nepal. For about the next thirty years, there was no king, and Mithila was ruled by the governors of the Muslim conquerors. Eventually, Tughlak handed over the reign of the region to Kamesvara Thakur, with whom started the tradition of Brahmin rulers, which continued till the end of monarchy when India became an independent nation-state. While Mithila was dependent on the Empire of Delhi for the protection of external enemies from Bengal; in internal affairs, the kings exerted unbridled freedom. The historians however believe that “the status of the Oinvaras was no better than the feudal vassals and they were obliged to supply troops to the emperor”<sup>5</sup>.

The acclaimed poet Vidyapati was the court poet of this dynasty. His patron was King Sivasimha, under whose behest Vidyapati wrote the prose „Purusa-Pariksa“, which was perhaps the first text in the Indian sub-continent to talk about notions of masculinity. The text constructed the Muslim rulers as hyper-masculine and exhorted indigenous men to „rise up to the occasion“ and confront the former by becoming more „masculine“. Later, during the colonial period, we can find a similar discourse in Bengal, which constructed the British men as masculine and Indian men as feminine, beseeching the latter to fashion a kind of masculinity that incorporated ideas of physical strength alongwith control over the soul<sup>6</sup>.

Sivasimha and his accomplished queen Lakhima were both patrons of learning. Apart from Vidyapati, another significant scholar Vachaspati Mishra is supposed to have been patronized by them. They became the connoisseurs of Maithili, alongwith Sanskrit. After Sivasimha lost the battle to the Sultan of Delhi, it is said that Queen Lakhima ruled over Mithila for about twelve years. Another queen Visvasa Devi is supposed to have ruled for about twelve years. She, too, was a patron of Sanskrit learning. After ruling nearly for 250 years, the Oinvaras were forced to migrate to Maldah (Bengal), Santal Parganas (South Bihar) and Bhagalpur.

There are a number of versions regarding what happened after the Oinvaras lost power. According to the writer of *Ain-i-Tirhut*<sup>7</sup>, Mithila came under the rule of the Rajput chiefs. But others<sup>8</sup> argue that Pathan rule descended after the exit of the Oinvaras. Both these views have been substantiated by proving the existence of Rajput rule in Bhara and Gandavaria on the one hand, and that of Keshava Majumdar, a Maithil Kayastha and Majlish Khan on behalf of the Afghan Governor of Bengal, on the other. After the Afghans were defeated in 1567 ACE, the Mughal Empire, under the control of Akbar, took over Mithila. Akbar appointed Mahesh Thakur, a Maithil Brahmin, as the king, who laid the foundation of the last line of kings- the Khandavala dynasty.

There is a debate whether this dynasty got the title of „Raja“ from the Mughal or from the British. Historian R.N. Choudhary<sup>9</sup> considers all the versions regarding the authenticity of the kingship of this dynasty as myth, since for him these do not have any basis for historical reasoning. The ancestors of this dynasty belonged to the Khandavalayana family of Brahmins referred to in Puranic literature, including the Mahabharata. But the claim that Mahesh Thakur received the grant of Darbhanga Raj or the Raj of entire Mithila for his outstanding scholarship by Akbar cannot be ascertained since contemporary texts like *Ain-i-Akbari* and *Jahnagirnama* do not mention the name of Darbhanga Raj. Choudhary opines that Mahesh Thakur got the declaration from Akbar as „Chaudhary“ or „Qanungo“ to collect land revenue, not as the „Raja“ of Mithila in 1557 ACE. So, he concludes that the Khandavalas got the title of Raja through the Governor of Bihar later.

Akbar came over to Bihar twice and directed the reorganization of the region, which was divided into seven Sarkars and Mithila became one of them. The introduction of Permanent Settlement by the British put a cap on the privileges that the members of the family used to enjoy. Gradually, their position was reduced to a Head Zamindar, responsible only for the payment of revenue to the Government.

The above discussion has provided a broad sweep of the political landscape of Mithila from the earliest recorded time till the Indian independence. In the next section, we shall evaluate the social history of the region, in order to provide the context for the emergence of painting tradition in the region.

## Social History of Mithila

*Varnashramdharma* has prevailed in Mithila since ancient times. During the post-Vedic period, many of the social norms and customs had started being codified, only to be made more rigid in later times. The four-fold division of the society, documented in the *Rgveda* gave way to the full-fledged concretization of the caste system, with the question of purity of blood becoming significant. It was in the *Satapatha Brahmanas* that we find the first mention of the earliest rules of endogamy and exogamy laid out. The *Aithreya Brahmana* talks about the privileged position of the Brahmin and documents the denial of right to property in the case of the Vaisya. The Sudra was the worst affected in this system, injunctions to whom came to be codified in the laws of Manu. The Puranas narrate the story of Sambuka, who was killed by Rama for performing *tapasya*, in violation of the code that prohibited Sudras to engage in such activities. The Sudra became slaves and were given as gifts to the Brahmins by the kings. The caste-system came to be controlled by the Brahmin-Kshatriya duo in the matters of religion as well as economy. The burden of paying tax, too, fell disproportionately on the Vaisya and Sudra.

The Upanishadic age has been considered to be more liberal than its preceding counterpart, in that a few exemplary women such as Gargi and Maithreyi were able to access the small coterie of learned men. However, these women were exceptions to the norm. By and large, women even in this age too, remained outside the pale of education, even though formally, restrictions on them for pursuing higher learning seem to have been less stringent.

The subsequent period, marked by Buddhism, saw certain fluidities in the caste system, particularly in the domain of occupation. Candalas- the Dalits of today, however, remained outside the pale of the caste system and literally lived at the periphery of settlements. They were the most despised and violated of all the social groups. Slavery was well-established as a system in the region and the Sudras could be “expelled at will and... slain at will”<sup>10</sup>. Buddha in one of his Suttas has described the situation of the slave thus: “a server rising up earlier, sleeping later, always waiting for the bidding, working to please, speaking to flatter and looking to another person for favour”<sup>11</sup>. The system was so deep-seated in Mithila, that there were elaborate legal battles for ownership of slaves and related matters.

With regard to „upper“ caste women, early and medieval Mithila was largely a patriarchal society, marked by the evils of *sati*, polygamy, *purdah* and related practices. However, history (of all hues- colonial, nationalist and so on) has been silent on the question of woman from the „lower“ caste groups<sup>12</sup>. The very little history of women that we have, talks primarily of the few „upper“ caste women.

This is the social condition that remained more or less unchanged over the course of Mithila history. We shall now discuss how in Mithila, rules of endogamy and exogamy were made stringent through Panji Prabandha and its consequences on „upper“ caste women“s lives. What is striking about this system is how it led to hierarchical divisions within the „upper“ caste groups, where those of „lower“ sub-castes had to follow stringent rules in order to claim higher status in the caste ladder.

### **‘Re-organization’ of Maithil Society through Panji Prabandh and Kulinism**

In around the fourteenth century, during the reign of Harisimhadev, the societal structure of Mithila was „re-organized“ through the introduction of the system of Panji-Prabandh and Kulinism. These were unique social systems, perhaps borrowed later by the adjoining areas of Bengal and Assam, and continue to have an effect on contemporary Mithila society. Panji Prabandh refers to the systematic enlisting of genealogical records known as Panjis (Sanskrit for „log book“). The two caste-groups which have followed Panji Prabandha most stringently over centuries are the Brahmins and Karna Kayasthas of Mithila. The practice came into existence in around 1326 ACE by the orders of the last ruler of the Karnata dynasty- Harisimhadev. It was introduced with the aim of maintaining the purity of blood by recording the exact ancestry of the people of Mithila, and by avoiding forbidden degrees of relationship in marriages.

It is important to note that even earlier, marriages of „upper“ caste Maithils used to be solemnized according to the scripts of Manu, Yajnavalkya, Gautama, and so on. And therefore, unlike popular perceptions, Harisimhadev did not quite invent this system; it was already in practice in less organized ways since the ancient time. For instance, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, scholar Kumarila Bhatt in his book *Tantravartika* (his famous work on Mimamsa) had talked about a similar custom known as *Samuha-Lekhyani*- the ancient tradition of keeping genealogical records by the „upper“ echelons of the society in order to maintain caste and blood purity- which was later re-organized as Panji-Prabandh. The distinction between the two is that *Samuha-*

*Lekhyani* used to be prepared individually; while Panji was commissioned by the royal order and a set of trained persons known as Panjikars (genealogists) were assigned to maintain the genealogical records. Harisimhadev was instrumental in making the custom more systematic and, thereby, more stringent. But what made him bring back this age-old custom in such a vigorous manner to Mithila?

One of the recurrent fears was to maintain purity of lineage, more specifically to avoid mixing of castes in marriage alliance. There was an understanding that human society is not equal, that there are distinctions and these distinctions have to be made and maintained in order to protect the sanctity of social institutions of this region. Kumarila and other scholars such as Yajñvalakya, had emphasized on the protection of dharma for preserving the purity of caste-distinctions.

The origin of the Panji system is traced to a mythical event, which is believed to have taken place in the village Satghara of Mithila. The story goes that one Pandit Harinath Sharma was a respectable person in the court of Harisimhadev. His wife was considered to be a pious woman, who used to visit the temple of Muktinath on a daily basis. Once when her husband was away, a Dusadh (a Dalit caste) man attempted to molest her inside the temple, though he could not harm her. Rather he lost his life before touching the woman, as she was a *pativrataa* (devoted to husband). The news spread that an „outcaste“ had molested her. Consequently, she was barred from taking part in social and religious functions, as her „chastity“ was considered to be „defiled“. The community members asked her to go through an ordeal to prove her innocence in this matter, the fact that she was not complicit to the act. In the first round, she uttered “Naham chandaal gamini” (I have not co-habited with a chandaal (a lower caste))” and touched the iron rod. Her hand got burnt and her supposed guilt was confirmed. The woman requested for one more chance and after repeated pleadings, the religious minister of Harisimhadev granted her appeal. This time she recited “Naham swapatibyatikta chandaal gamini” (I have not cohabited with any chandaal other than my husband). This time, she passed the test. However, this brought misery to her husband, as his caste identity was held into question. The investigation unearthed the fact that the pandit had entered into a marriage that was within the prohibited lines, as it was found out that the his wife was the grand-daughter of his first cousin, and an alliance of this nature was supposed to amount to incest. As a result of not complying with the marriage codes, he became akin to a „chandaal“. This incident made Harisimhadev ponder over the question of caste purity among the „upper“ castes. He appointed specific pandits to keep a complete genealogy of each individual of the community. The practice of assigning people to do this task gave birth to two professions: *panjikars* (record-keeper) and *ghataks* (the match-maker). The

*swasti patra* (permit of the marriage) had to be obtained before any marriage could take place.

The injunctions were as follows:

A man cannot marry a girl:

- a) who is of the same *gotra* as himself
- b) who is of the same *pravara* as himself
- c) who is the *sapinda* of his mother
- d) who falls within six generations from an ancestor on his father's side
- e) who falls within five generations from an ancestor on his mother's side
- f) who is the descendent of his paternal or maternal grandfather
- g) who is an off-spring of his step-mother's brother

To give Panji an institutional form, a commission was formed to verify *mulas* and *gotras*. At the end of the exercise, 168 *mulas* and 19 *gotras* of the Brahmins of Mithila were recorded in the Panji. Each stock or *mula* were recorded to have several branches. Its encyclopedic nature has been a source of information about the two „upper“ castes of this region- Brahmins and Kayasthas. Further, Harisimhadev divided the Brahmins into three sub-castes based on their degree of adherence to the Sastras. They were called the Shrotriyas, Yogyas and Jaybaras. Like the Brahmins, the Kayasthas were also divided into four main groups.

### Effects of this System on Mithila Society

The practice of „Kulinism“ sprang from the Panji system. As Maithil historian Upendra Thakur has commented, “a close scrutiny of the relevant records bearing on Kulinism would leave no doubt that the birth of Kulinism in Mithila was a natural corollary of the introduction of the Panji.”<sup>13</sup> This *Kulina* class boasted of purity of their blood/ line/ descent and the distinction between *kulina* and *akulina* started playing a huge role in the social life of Mithila. Venerated poets such as Vidyapati expressed their staunch support for this system and advocated that marriage should be done in accordance with Sastric injunctions. *Akulina*, for him, deserved no sympathy and „even beauty was the preserve of the rich and the privileged class.“ The social evils accrued from this institution were manifold. It created factions within the same caste, thus giving birth to several „warring groups“. The rigid nature of the norm to accomplish marriage within the same caste put a huge pressure on „upper“ caste communities, since failing to do so

invited excommunication, disinheritance etc. Taking advantage of this situation, some sections of the „upper“ caste community took to marriage as profession. They came to be called *Bikauas*. Families belonging to a „low-grade“ section of the same caste would get their daughter married to these *kulina (bikaua)* men, in order to raise their own social status. The practice became so rampant that the family of the girls would not be concerned about the qualifications of the *kulina* suitors. Girl children were subjected to marriage at a very tender age, involving a heavy amount of dowry. As there was imbalance between the ages of the bride and groom, widowhood became rampant.

According to historians of the region, Panji came into being at a time when Mithila society was threatened by Muslim invasion. Therefore, the society had to be reconstructed and social relations and institutions had to be made rigid in a way to „save“ Mithila’s culture, particularly women, from the „foreigners“. It was also a way to create an identity of „Maithil“, a sense of “unity and Maithilhood”<sup>14</sup> amongst the „upper“ castes.

A significant aspect of the Panji system is that it does not record the names of women. However, in some Brahmin Panjis, names of women have been recorded, albeit not in their natal family’s records but in marital family’s. So, in a sense, single or un-married women were denied their existence in the family, as they were not eligible for getting recorded in the Panji. The stress on the maintenance of „pure“ race and culture, therefore, glaringly brought forth the political insipidity of that period. But it is of no doubt that this system came out naturally from the feudal society, the foundation of which rests on the strangled mobility of the members of the community to retain the supremacy of the patron classes.

The evolution and perpetuation of the painting tradition by the women of Mithila has to be seen in the context of the feudal, brahminical and patriarchal social fabric that came to characterize Mithila. The excessive pre-occupation with the ideology of caste exclusiveness, and control over women’s sexuality in order to maintain caste „purity“ severely restricted „upper“ caste women’s mobility. Restricted within the domestic sphere, these women took to ritual and ritual-related art in a huge way.

### **Women in Mithila History**

A glimpse into the status of women in any society can measure the progress of that society, i.e. openness towards change and the intent to accept new ideas. The social position of women in Mithila society has been similar to that of most societies, where women have been treated differently on the basis of their gender. Their invisibilization started in an institutionalized manner, when the Panji, one of the most important documents of Mithila society, did not care to

record women's names. A few women got their names entered into this compendium only through their marital kinships. Women's education was not given due importance vis-à-vis their male counterparts. Though this land is famous for several women scholars found in the Puranas, women („upper“ caste) were kept in *purdah* or inside the four walls. One prominent woman scholar and poet was Lakhima, the chief queen of Shivasimha (1416 ACE). One of her famous writings „Padarthachandra“ is a treatise on Nyaya Vaisheshika. Her wit and humour is legendary, the evidence of which can be seen when she describes the *Bikauas*- the mercenary Brahmins who had resorted to polygamy as a profession. All of her verses are in Sanskrit. Chandrakala, the grand-daughter of Vidyapati, was another poet of fame. Queen Visvasa Devi, who is said to have ruled over Mithila for twelve years and Queen Dhiramati, who patronized Vidyapati are a few of the other prominent women. But these are exceptions, as women in general were placed in an insubordinate position to men. The classical poet Vidyapati, whose verses sang the praise of the pinnacle of men-women love, though in the garb of propitiation towards God, did not consider women as equal to men. Some quotes from his book *Purush Pariksha* are:

- i) chaste women followeth her lord
- ii) women live a life of dependence
- iii) the only refuge of women is husband
- iv) it is through the virtue of her son that a woman is light

There is a myth around the illustrious Queen Lakhima, that she performed *sati* after twelve years of the death of her husband. Vidyapati mentioned this incident in his book. Another woman, the Queen of Raja Purusottama Thakur of the Khandavala dynasty, also went for the *sati* ritual. Raghava-Priya, the wife of Raja Raghava Simha, similarly burnt herself with her dead husband. All these women were Brahmins and Ksatriyas, so it also instantiates the fact that this kind of a conservative attitude towards women was much more prevalent among the „upper“ castes. But women had the right to property in terms of *streedhan*. They could inherit the property after the death of their husbands.

This is mainly the picture of medieval Mithila which was undergoing a threat from Muslim rule. This threat was manifold- from conversion to „defiling“ the culture by the Muslim rulers. This constant anxiety gave in to the stiffening of all social institutions in a bid to „protecting own women“.

These women, invariably, belonged to the „upper“ caste-groups, since it is in those groups that anxieties regarding „purity“ of caste and blood prevailed the most. As we have discussed earlier,

histories of all orientations have remained silent on the question of the woman from the „lower“ rungs of society. On the question of art practice of women in these communities, too, therefore, textual sources do not provide us with any insight. This is not only a problem with history-writing in Mithila but is a larger issue concerning history-writing in general, and India, in particular. In India, modern histories emerged and developed during the contentious times of the colonial period, which framed the question of culture- from both the orientalist as well nationalist sides- around the figure of the „upper“ caste woman. Contemporary history is struggling with the legacy of this kind of partial knowledge production and the concomitant construction of its subject which is exclusionary.

The next section presents a historical account of Mithila during the colonial period, when in the face of the might of colonial powers, „upper“ caste groups of Mithila mobilized in different ways to consolidate their identity. It primarily took the form of a language movement but also reflected the societal structure of the time. On the one hand, nationalist fervour compelled the rulers to privilege Hindi over Maithili; on the other, Maithili language and culture became a pivot around which the movement for the demand of a separate state of Mithilanchal was articulated. As we shall see, these movements failed to mobilize the people of Mithila, as they remained exclusionary in their approach. It was the Brahmins and Karn Kayasthas of Mithila, who spearheaded and sustained the movement, which could not forge a larger Maithil identity, due to their policy of caste-exclusiveness.

### **Mithila in the Colonial period**

In colonial India, several revivalist movements happened in order to claim and showcase India’s „own modernity“. In line with the Arya Samaj (1875), the Theosophical Society (1882) and the Ram Krishna Mission (1896), the Maithili-Tatva Vimarshani Sabha“, i.e. the body for research on Mithila, was established in 1905 under the auspices of Maharaja Rameshwar Singh, the then Maharaja of Darbhanga. This Sabha was established for the promotion of Maithili culture in its supposed „purest“ form. To meet this end, the Sabha advocated Sanskrit learning. Resolutions were also made to write an „authentic“ history of Mithila, focusing on its literature and prominent personalities of this region. It has been found out that the number of English literates started dwindling, as the focus shifted to Sanskrit education. The Maharaja created 20 scholarships for the revival of Vedic education. He established Sanskrit colleges to popularize Sanskrit. He was instrumental in pursuing the government of Bihar and Orissa to start Sanskrit education in Patna. He also re-introduced „Dhout Pariksha“, a traditional system of education and examination. He started the „Mithilesh Mahesh-Ramesh Lecture series“ in Sanskrit and established the Kameshwar Singh Sanskrit University at Darbhanga in the 1950s. His

patronization of Sanskrit was not aimed at drawing people from all communities and therefore, the common people, belonging to various other socio-cultural identities could not identify fully with this programme. It means that the revival of classical language cannot make for a lively, active social bond among people.

The subsequent king Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh took a different route. He went for vernacular education, thus taking up the issue of patronizing Hindi. Printing press with Devnagari script replaced those with Maithili script. The Maharaja declared Hindi as the official language of the region. Infact, his nationalist fervor gave way too much prominence to Hindi, which proved to be debilitating for Maithili. The lack of sustained interest in Maithili resulted in the failure to create the base for linguistic nationalism, as Pankaj Kumar Jha writes, “these developments, detrimental to the emergence of a homogenous elite group, constricted their sense of consciousness about a „community“”.<sup>15</sup>

On a different note, efforts to resuscitate Maithili by others included publishing journals in Maithili rather than Sanskrit. Poet Vidyapati became the icon for this movement. The first journal of the Maithilis, *The Maithil-Hit-Sadhana* (1905) was published by Madhusudan Jha and Chandra Dutta Jha from Jaipur. Maithili literature has a very old tradition dating 900 ACE. Medieval Maithili literature touched its peak with the literary works of Vidyapati. He is the protagonist for Maithils in taking pride in the glory of their literature. His *Padavalis* (verses) are a must-performed item in the festivals of this region. The other important Maithili literature of this period is *Varnaratnakara* by Jyotirisvara, which is regarded as the first prose in the entire north India. It is said that Maithili took the lead in the literary scene in the eastern India, replacing Apabhramsa in medieval times. Govindadasa was another luminary, whose verses got popularity beyond the Mithila region. Maithili dramas went to Bengal, Assam, Nepal, and Orissa. Brajabuli, a mixed language, which is mainly inspired by Maithili, became the foremost medium of writing Vaishnava Padavalis in eastern India.

Most of the elements that make for a „nation“ to emerge have been present in the case of Mithila. It has its own distinctive historical ancestry, geographical demarcation, and a rich linguistic and cultural heritage. But the contradiction is that due to inherent social, economic and cultural inequities, a strong nation-building movement could never come to fruition. Historians, who have investigated into its failure have all agreed upon some facts. Western scholar Paul R. Brass<sup>16</sup>, in his study on the independence movement for Mithila, pointed to the refusal of particular „upper“ castes to include all communities, irrespective of their caste identities in imagining a unified geo-political region. He succinctly observed that rather than highlighting its distinctiveness, the „upper“ castes, who led the movement, put undue importance on its purity

and strict observance of orthodox Hinduism/ Brahminism, alongwith reverence for Sanskrit education. Caste exclusiveness, which is based on the idea of a hierarchical social order, was at the core of the „upper“ caste consciousness of this region. Sociologist Hetukar Jha<sup>17</sup> defines it as „elite-mass contradiction“, which hindered the forging of alliance among all social communities. While describing it, he enumerates several issues regarding inequitable distribution of wealth and different cultural practices, such as the practice of giving rent-free grants of land to the landlords and also to their favourites by the kings; agreement between the Brahmin and Kayastha zamindars to forestall any move to initiate any changes in the Zamindari system; prevalence of whimsical decisions to increase the rent and harsh methods of collection from the subjects, the custom of slavery, the lack of a unified education system, the Panji system and the reactionary activities of *Maithil Mahasabha*. In one instance, the Darbhanga Maharaja, in a meeting of the Bihar Landlord's Association in 1882, opposed vehemently the Bengal Tenancy Bill, which was aimed at the welfare of the *ryots*. The Bill had provisions to prevent surplus production from going entirely to the Zamindars. Maharaja Lakshmeshwar Singh claimed that neither the landlords nor the tenants had asked for a new legislation. They were also at war with the proposal because under it, the *ryots* would get permanent occupancy rights after the completion of twelve years on the condition of regular payment of rent.

Pankaj Kumar Jha<sup>18</sup> holds the failure of industrialization and subsequent lack of urbanization as factors responsible for this kind of social fabric. The absence of any renaissance movement that happened in other parts of the sub-continent turned Mithila into a stagnant pool. The *Maithil Mahasabha* only extended its efforts to maintain caste prejudices regarding food and marriage. They rejected outrightly The Hindu Code Bill and supported the Cow Protection Movement. Another Darbhanga Maharaja- Rameshwar Singh organized a national conference of conservative groups in Delhi in 1900. In the procession, he walked barefoot carrying a copy of the Vedas. It was decided in this Mahasabha that only Maithil Brahmins and Karn Kayasthas would be termed as Maithils, thus denying the existence of other caste-groups within „Hinduism“, let alone other communities such as Muslims.

### **History of the Oppressed Communities**

The orthodoxy of Mithila society is conspicuous, as it was also the seat for non-brahminical religions like Jainism and Buddhism. This specialty has been featured in the travelogues of the Chinese travellers and one ancient scholar Dharmasvami. During the ancient times, Buddhism and Jainism drew huge numbers in their fold and created a tradition of heterodox religions in the region, though Brahminism continued to retain its dominance. Though Buddhist challenge to Brahminism began to weaken during the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it left a legacy of dissenting voices that

later paved the way for heterodox traditions such as *nathpanthis*, *tantrics* and *kabirpanthis*. People belonging to the intermediate castes, „lower“ castes and some Muslims became members of these cults and traditions, which rejected the hierarchical caste system of Brahminism.

We have very scant record of the history of „lower“ castes in the colonial records. In the Survey Settlement Report of Muzaffarpur district (1892-1899)<sup>19</sup>, Stevenson-Moor expressed their dismay at the abysmally low literacy rate among „lower“ castes in a region, whose „upper“ castes were renowned scholars since ancient times. Jatashankar Jha, in his book *Beginnings of Modern Education in Mithila* talks about the opening of schools in vernacular medium in 26 villages by Darbhanga Raj in the area under their jurisdiction in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century. These schools were attended to mostly by children of „lower“ castes but eventually all of them closed down by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the Census reports of 1921 and 1931, literacy rate of the Mithila area was found to be approximately 5 percent. Caste-wise break up of literacy rate suggests that most of the „lower“ castes were totally illiterate.

The colonial village notes of Darbhanga district show the practice of blatant exploitation of the „lower“ castes, worst even among the other districts of north Bihar. One of the reports said,

“There is no doubt that in this part of Bihar, while the upper and middle classes are prosperous, the ordinary labourers and small cultivators amounting to some forty percent of the population are much worse off than the corresponding classes in Bengal. Daily wages...are nowhere estimated at more than 2 annas and in many cases do not exceed five or six pice a day. Even the lowest rate of wages...will suffice in ordinary times to supply food and necessary clothing for the individual worker... But it would appear that wages less than two annas a day... cannot supply the wants of the number of persons ordinarily dependant on the bread winner. There is no employment for all the local labourers available... The small cultivators have not sufficient land to support them....

The rents are also comparatively high...”<sup>20</sup>

In the district of Darbhanga (of which the district of Madhubani was a part at that time), „upper“ castes, particularly Brahmins were zamindars or upper *ryots*, while the middle castes and „lower“ castes were either lower *ryots* or agricultural labourers. No middle caste person, without exception, was a zamindar. It is also remarkable that there is no recorded instance of any attempt towards sanskritization on the part of middle and „lower“ castes in order to improve caste status, while such attempts were common in the adjoining districts of Purnea and Saharsa.

Apart from these references, primarily in colonial documents, there is hardly any scholarly work on the history of „lower“ caste communities in general and of the Dusadhs and Chamars of Mithila, in particular. The history of Mithila is largely the history of „upper“ caste men. For the history of women and the „lower“ castes, one has to depend on oral traditions- folklore, folk songs, folk-histories (myths, legends) and so on, which are, by nature, highly malleable and therefore, contested, even though their contribution in constructing histories of non-literate people have been of immense value.

The movements around identity-assertion which began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has rendered history-writing a highly complex act. Caste-groups, particularly those belonging to lower rungs of the caste hierarchy, have claimed higher status by constructing myths of origin for their respective caste-groups, apart from appropriating „respectable“ modes of sociality from the „upper“ castes. Creation myths are aimed towards building self-esteem of groups that have been at the receiving end of caste-based discrimination. However, as we discussed in the introduction of this chapter, the problem with this is that the line between myth and history, between past and a sense of the past, between verifiable sources and belief-systems gets blurred, with huge implications. Badri Narayan<sup>21</sup> shows how Hindutva forces have attempted to resurrect myths and legends of the „lower“ castes in order to politically mobilise these communities, with the aim of constructing a unified Hindu nation. On the other hand, Dalit and middle caste communities across the country have fought for higher status by constructing origin myths, many of which come within the ambit of a loosely-defined Hinduism, while others have rejected Hinduism altogether and imagined their identity within a modern, democratic framework. So, if there are examples of Raja Salhesa and Chuharmal as Dusadh and Dalit icons, falling under the larger rubric of „Hinduism“; we have an alternative set of non-religious icons that have been resurrected from history to boost the morale of downtrodden Dalits by projecting them as role models. Both kinds of endeavors on the part of the oppressed communities not only aim at building self-confidence of its members but also to construct role models, who have resisted the dominant social order.

It would not be out of place to discuss the implications of one such attempt at myth-making on the part of the Dusadhs of Mithila, in their attempt towards identity-formation, viz. that of Raja Salhesa. Raja Salhesa is arguably the most prominent non-„upper“ caste hero of Mithila. Whether he actually existed or not is a concern that pales into insignificance when we consider the myriad ways in which stories of his life have become a vital part of the cultural universe of not only the Dusadhs but of other caste-groups as well.

George Grierson's account of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century version of the Salhesa story<sup>22</sup>, when pitted against the contemporary ones that we came across during field-work, point towards a deliberate resurrection of Raja Salhesa as a Dusadh hero and demi-god, around which a political identity of the Dusadhs has been consolidated over the last century. It is on the site of gender relations that „history“ of this community has evolved. In the Salhesa story that Grierson has documented, it is the women characters- the “flower-girls” Daula, Kusuma and Hiriya, who are supposed to have been the owners of the *Phulwari* (garden) which, in the present-day versions, is known as *Raja ji ki Phulwari*, referring to Raja Salhesa. In the entire story, it is the “flower-girls” who occupy a substantial part of the narrative. Besides, the story seems to contain sexual overtones that suggest the carefree expression of the women protagonists. Gradually however, as the movement of the Dusadhs towards identity-construction got consolidated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women protagonists were marginalized and centrality was accorded to Raja Salhesa, so much so that he got elevated to the position of a deity. The *Rajaji ki Phulwari* in the present context is a huge pilgrimage place, located in the Nepal part of Mithila (Maisohta), where thousands of people, mostly from the Dusadh community from both sides of the border assemble in an annual fair, held around 14<sup>th</sup> of April, the New Year's Day in Mithila. Though women deities are also worshipped, Raja Salhesa has emerged as the central symbol<sup>23</sup>. Centrality to Raja Salhesa, as a symbol of resistance to brahminical domination, has also found reflection in the pictorial repertoire of the Dusadh artists.

If we look at other kinds of sources such as the documentation done by the Anthropological Survey of India<sup>24</sup>, we are informed that the present-day Dusadhs belong to a caste-group, which was recruited for guarding the lands of the kings and zamindars. In the legend of Raja Salhesa as well, we have the figure of Chuharmal, a Dusadh, who is a watchman in the kingdom of Salhesa.

There are many origin myths related to the Dusadhs, which contest each other. H. H. Risley, in 1891-92 wrote that Dusadhs claim to have descended from the soldiers of the Pandava prince Bhim or Bhimsen. The historian R. S. Sharma linked them with the Kaurava prince Dushsaasan, which is refuted by many Dusadh leaders in contemporary times. Some other myths link them to the Gehlot Kshatriyas of Rajasthan. In the British times, Dusadhs, alongwith many other caste-groups and tribes, were criminalized under the notorious Criminal Tribes Act in 1911 and 1924.

The Chamars, on the other hand, were considered to be lower than the Dusadhs in the caste-hierarchy. Their socially-sanctioned traditional occupation was to dispose-off dead animals, work with leather and make shoes and other articles. Women of this community have traditionally been midwives and performed percussion instrument during weddings, alongwith their men counterparts. They have been survivors of caste-based discrimination from most other

castes, since they are considered to occupy one of the lowest rungs of the caste ladder. Of late, political mobilization in the state of U.P. has impacted the lives of the Chamars, since political leaders have hailed from this caste-group. However, their situation in the state of Bihar and the region of Mithila remains dismal.

The Constitution of India included these two caste-groups in a special Schedule, alongwith many other „lower“ caste groups, who were earlier considered to be untouchables by the Brahminical social order. They are beneficiaries of the Reservation policy in educational institutions and employment in the government sector, which many consider as one of the most important reasons for the empowerment of these communities, even in the face of lack of proper implementation of the policy.

Both Chamars and Dusadhs struggle with social stigma in rural as well as urban spaces, even today. In an attempt to fight caste-based oppression, they have mobilized people of their own and other caste-groups to form two of the most important Dalit political parties-the Bahujan Samaj Party in UP and Lok Janshakti Party in Bihar respectively.

The scant historical record of these two and many other communities, who were barred from access to the means of knowledge production, poses a huge challenge for the reconstruction of their lives and expressive traditions such as art. It is the artistic practice of the women from „upper“ caste groups that find some mention in the textual sources of the region.

### **History of Mithila Art**

The culture of a region is inextricably intertwined with its economy, polity and social relations. It constructs as well as gets constructed by these forces. In this section, we shall look at the „origins“ or rather the trajectory of Mithila art from the earliest known reference till its commoditized form, in the context of the Mithila society. Many of the styles within the contemporary art practice were invented during the moment of its commercialization and therefore, a history of their „origin“ has been easier to trace, since the artists (or their family-members) who invented their respective styles are still practicing the art.

### **‘Origins’ of the art form**

The historian Neel Rekha<sup>25</sup> has attempted to trace the „origins“ of Mithila painting to forces of feudalism and the Panji Prabandh in Mithila. Feudalism led to a closed village economy, while the Panji system tightened the grip of conservatism in Mithila. Rekha has also emphasized on Tantricism as one of the significant influences on Mithila painting.

The post-Gupta period saw the breaking-up of the whole of India from a centralised rule into many regions, governed under feudal lords of the respective regions. There was lack of strong links among the regions, leading to the flourishing of regional/ local cultures. Feudalism in Mithila became strengthened under the rule of the Karnatas, and with the Oinvaras and Khandavalas, it was able to consolidate itself. Land became the source of power and privilege and ministership became hereditary. Brahmins and eventually Kayasthas became powerful communities. As a result of decline in trade and commerce, the economy of the region became entirely dependent on agriculture. This strengthened the position of these two caste-groups, since they were the chief recipients of cultivable land and, as a result, became powerful feudatories.

In an agricultural society, fertility cult becomes prominent. Worship of Mother Goddess and related rituals and festivals according to agricultural seasons become the norm. The floor drawings known as *ahipanas*- that include depictions of pond, aquatic life as well as those plants and animals which proliferate profusely- made elaborately during these festivals, underline the importance of agriculture. *Kohbar* or the floor drawings made during weddings, too, depict fertility symbols. The emphasis on *vansha-vridhhi* (perpetuation of family line through sons) grew in the agricultural and feudal society of Mithila, where land was supposed to be inherited by men.

Besides, lack of urbanization in Mithila and a near-total village economy meant that the society followed the *jajmani* system- according to which „lower“ caste-groups performed particular occupations for the feudal lords (*jajmans*). The economic dependence of these laboring caste-groups on the feudal lords made the caste system more rigid and escape from it difficult, due to lack of alternative avenues of livelihood.

Another institution that was responsible for the development of paintings was the Panji Prabandh. As discussed earlier, it led to the strengthening of patriarchal forces that got manifested in multiple ways through which women’s freedom and autonomy was curtailed- high premium on women’s chastity, control over their mobility, proliferation of polygamy and increase in the number of widows because of the *bikaua* tradition. The introduction of the Panji system and the consequent conservatism amongst the „upper“ castes of the Mithila society led to the preservation of painting tradition across centuries. Higher a caste in the hierarchy (including sub-castes within Brahmins), stricter the forms of control imposed on women’s mobility, resulting in higher propensity of preservation of the painting tradition.

The other explanation provided for the perpetuation of the art form over centuries is by foregrounding women’s agency in a context that severely limited their life-choices. The

elaborate *kohbar* painting during marriage has been considered as an expression of women, who had little decision-making capacities in the choice of partners. The wedding chamber motif included, apart from symbols of fertility, divine and celestial beings to bless the couple for a long and blissful married life. The employment of benevolent figures by women acquires significance particularly in the light of the prevailing *bikaua* system, due to which women had to confront with the ills of child marriage, polygamy, dowry, and so on.

Tantricism and other „tribal“ systems of thought prevalent in eastern India (Bengal, Assam, Orissa) came into contact with the Vedic culture of the „upper“ castes of Mithila during the period. It led to the incorporation of *yantra* motifs from the tantric tradition into the painting repertoire of Mithila. For instance, *ahipanas* extensively use *yantra* symbols, while the figure of *Naina Jogin* (one-eyed, veiled woman) in the *kohbar* is an example of a tantric motif from the Kamakhya tradition of Assam. Mithila itself eventually emerged as a prominent centre of tantric ideology. There are accounts of tantric practice in the region by Brahmin priests, some of whom eventually took to painting post-commoditization.

The survival of intricate painting tradition within the Brahmins and Kayasthas has been attributed to conservatism within the Mithila society, which was a consequence of strict social norms. Restricted within the home, since mobility meant the possibility of transgressing stringent caste boundaries, women from these communities involved themselves in rituals and observance of everyday religion in a huge way.

Also, since these women did not have access to the *shastras*, they imagined and constructed a parallel semiotic system through their art<sup>26</sup>. Infact, the complex symbolism depicted in the *ahipanas* which the women „write“ (Maithili word „*likhiya*“ is used to denote both the acts of writing as well as drawing), attest to the prevalence of an evolved system of meaning-making. The significance of this kind of a parallel system is profound, even though limited, as no life-cycle ritual or celebration is accomplished without them, even in present-day Mithila.

We have argued elsewhere that “women“s art, therefore, has to be seen as a knowledge system in its own right, rooted in the philosophical traditions of the Lokayata- a loose amalgamation of ancient Indian materialist philosophical practices grounded in the beliefs and practices of communities- women, Shudras and Ati-Shudras- excluded by the dominant shastric/ high Hindu/ brahminical traditions. The Lokayata tradition has existed as distinct from, and also opposed to, the tradition based on the core brahminical texts of *shrutis* and *smritis*. As women“s traditional role was limited to the continuity of patrilineages, many of the motifs represent fertility symbols and images depicting care and nurture, while others seem to have strong links with non-shastric

traditions, such as Tantricism- which has its roots in subaltern knowledge systems, close to the materialist philosophy of the Lokayata”<sup>27</sup>.

To conclude, as we have discussed earlier, orientalist and nationalist impulses during the colonial period framed the discourse on Mithila art form in different ways, privileging some styles over others. On the other hand, the styles that did get recorded were analysed from frameworks that romanticized them. Some of these constructions caught the fancy of policy-makers and cultural workers of post-independent India, which resulted in the conceptualization and operationalization of a massive program linking art to livelihood. In the following section, we shall take a look at the years leading upto commercialization of the art form and its initial history.

### **The ‘Pre-history’ and History of Commercialization**

Though commercialization of Mithila paintings began as a government intervention in 1966-67, as part of a drought-relief measure, one can trace a „pre-history“ of the events that led to it<sup>28</sup>. It was around 1957, when an advertisement company J. Walter and Thompson Company Pvt. Ltd. of Calcutta wanted to print a calendar on the „folk paintings“ of India for one of their clients. The Company wrote to the Curator of the Patna Museum, after seeing some of the photographs of Mithila paintings by W. G. Archer that were published by Ajit Mookerji in his book „Modern Art in India“ (1956). With the help of a contact provided by the Patna Curator, Bhaskar Kulkarni (photographer and artist, then working as a freelancer) was sent by the Company to the village Ranti, in Madhubani district, where he met Mithila artist Mahasundari Devi. Mahasundari Devi and her son Bipin Das recall the time<sup>29</sup> when Kulkarni had first come to Ranti and date it to 1961. They claim that Mahasundari Devi was the first artist who painted on paper at Kulkarni“s behest. Although the calendar project got shelved for some reason, Kulkarni became familiar with the art form and some of the artists in Mithila. Later, in 1967, when Pupul Jayakar planned to begin her relief project in that region, Kulkarni, who was then working as a designer with the Handloom and Handicraft Export Corporation (HHEC), was chosen to go to the field because of his familiarity with the region and its art form.

The immediate reason for the implementation of the famine-relief program was dire poverty, which people of Madhubani and surrounding villages were struggling with, on account of years of drought and infact, even before that. Households in the villages of Ranti and Jitwarpur, particularly the latter, possessed meagre land-holdings that yielded crops merely adequate for subsistence. Besides, faulty flood-control mechanisms led to water-logging in these villages on account of flooding by the river Kamla Balan nearby. In this kind of a scenario, crop production

was a challenge. However, when it did not rain for several years, whatever little agriculture that had been practiced till then completely stopped. This led to a situation of utter despair, which ultimately forced the people to embrace the livelihood program introduced by the State.

It was perhaps decided to introduce the program in two villages around Madhubani, one being Ranti since Bhaskar Kulkarni had already visited it. Devaki Jain<sup>30</sup> recounts Kulkarni's visit thus, "...On reaching Madhubani, Kulkarni cycled 60 kms out of Madhubani town, to villages in the famine belt. He explained his mission to men belonging to some high-status Brahmin villages, where the skill of painting was highly developed. Their reaction was hostile. The prospect of allowing their women to communicate with strangers was as abhorrent as the implication that they would live off their wives' earnings. They considered it more honourable to starve to death. Kulkarni was chased out of these villages".

Neel Rekha cites the reason for the choice of the other village Jitwarpur as "sheer co-incidence", in which Kulkarni accidentally came across murals painted on the walls of one Ganesh Chandra Jha, where a sacred-thread ceremony had just taken place. However, the Kayastha artists of Ranti narrate a different version. According to Bipin Das, Mahasundari Devi's son, when Kulkarni asked them where he can find a poor village, they answered that there are many poor villages in the region but there is one village which is in the state of abject poverty. The village was Jitwarpur, populated mostly by the Mahapatra Brahmins- the lowest in the hierarchy of Brahmins, who worked as priests for death rituals. Das recounts, "That time, Kayasthas practiced untouchability with Mahapatra Brahmins. I went along with him and showed him where Jitwarpur was, from a distance". This is only one example of the multiple narratives that one comes across in the villages on a number of topics. Each voice is contesting the others in a fiercely competitive world.

In any case, Jitwarpur did become the other village, where the program was introduced. Infact, Kulkarni is supposed to have stayed in Jitwarpur for about nine months, during which he toured the area, convinced a number of artists to join the livelihood program and put together a system of purchase and sale. Initially, Kulkarni had difficulty because of patriarchal restrictions on women, but dire need to overcome poverty finally made it possible for women to interact with him. There was also a lot of anxiety in men around the question of women becoming the breadwinners in the new context. There were some men who broke these barriers earlier than others but eventually, a large number of women did join the program.

Devaki Jain<sup>31</sup> also writes about the uniqueness of the livelihood program by underlining the fact that it was the first time that a famine and drought-relief welfare measure shifted from cultivators to craftspeople, especially those who had not even been seen as craftspeople so far- the women artists of Mithila.

In 1966-67, a joint team of people from various government agencies such as All India Handicrafts Board (AIHB), Handloom and Handicraft Export Corporation (HHEC) and Bihar State Small Industries Department (BSSID) did an extensive tour of the region, spearheaded by noted Gandhian artist, designer and scholar Upendra Maharathi (who originally hailed from Orissa but was posted in Patna). It is significant to note that apart from Mithila paintings, a few other crafts forms were also chosen for the welfare program- *sikki*-grass ware and bamboo-ware. However, it is the former that went on to become the most popular items of the program. This has been attested to by the older staff of what is now known as the Upendra Maharathi Institute of Industrial Design (UMIID), Patna.

The HHEC and other agencies have played a crucial role in projecting Mithila art onto the global scene by employing strategic marketing techniques. A steady supply line was established, strict quality control was enforced and Mithila art was publicized profusely. Only the „finest“ paintings were displayed in exhibitions and the rejected ones were burnt, albeit without telling the artists. Mithila paintings were soon catapulted to the national and eventually international sphere through fairs and exhibitions. Some of the most notable were the Kunika Chemould Art Gallery exhibition, New Delhi in 1967, Montreal Fair in 1967, Asia-72 Fair in New Delhi, Festival of India fairs and exhibitions in the UK, US, France, Brazil, Japan and so on. The HHEC displayed paintings in its retail shops in the capital cities of many countries. Art journals, magazines and other media with wide reach covered features on Mithila art and art connoisseurs and buyers got to know about it. Greeting cards, calendars and other publicity material were made using Mithila art by the HHEC and distributed to its customers abroad. Interior walls of public buildings, hotels, airports and railway stations came to be decorated in Mithila art.

In order to enforce quality-control, a pricing system was introduced by Upendra Maharathi. Each painting was judged according to „originality of design, decorative value, colour rhythm and the artist“s reputation“. National awards for „exemplary“ artists were introduced by the Government of India.

Marketing in the domestic front was not as strategic as the export. It was mainly done through Central Cottage Industries Emporium and its retail outlets in several cities. Apart from this, the

Bihar State Handloom, Powerloom and Handicraft Development Corporation (BSHPHDC) and the Bihar State Small Industries Corporation (BSSIC) worked at the state-level to streamline sale through its emporia and retail outlets in different towns and cities in Bihar and outside.

A number of products with utility value were introduced by the designers of HHEC in order to diversify the market for Mithila art, which came to be painted on stationery items, scarves, household items, greeting cards, calendars and so on. All this led to a saturation of Mithila art in the market. Supply went up since more and more artists joined the program, while demand started going down.

Private trade came up because of the withdrawal of HHEC from being a primary provider of market. It comprised of „exporters of handicrafts, dealers in handicrafts for domestic sales, representatives of foreign whole-sale/ retail organizations, foreign buyers for art museums, private foreign traders and tourists“. Private buyers were encouraged by local officials of the Marketing and Service Extension Centre, located in Madhubani town as well. Since official orders were not regular, private trade- with its steady demand- was seen by artists as an option that had promise. The figure of the middle-man is the product of private trade, which though provided a steady demand, was also extremely exploitative in its transactions with the artists.

The above discussion has touched upon the various measures taken by government institutions to popularize Mithila art and place it firmly onto the global stage, in the initial years of the livelihood program. Assessing the myriad roles which govt. agencies played in strategically catapulting Mithila art onto the global platform goes on to confirm the belief that political will can go a long way in implementing welfare and development policies. In the next section, we shall look at the various styles within the art form that emerged as a result of commercialization.

### **Styles within Mithila Art**

As we discussed earlier, Mithila painting finds a place in the category of „folk art“ in most of the literature on the subject. Within the state discourse, it finds a place among „handicrafts“, which has been associated with the Ministries of Industry, Commerce and Textiles. Scholars have challenged the binary between categories such as „handicraft“, „folk“ art on the one hand and „classical“, „modern“ art on the other and have argued for locating Mithila painting within the Ministry of Culture (Jyotindra Jain), which as of now includes only „classical“ and „modern“ art and excludes the „folk“ art forms. Some scholars have also advocated for its inclusion within the modern art world that comprises art galleries and other institutions which promote „fine“ art (David Szanton). Interestingly, Mithila painting has grown in both the directions- handicraft/ „folk“ art as well as „fine“ art.

The state popularized the art form as „Madhubani painting“, referring, as it were, to its geographical „epicentre“- the district of Madhubani, where the livelihood program began. The scholar community, however, has preferred the more inclusive term „Mithila painting“, since the painting practice prevails in the entire region of Mithila.

In terms of the various styles within the art form, though Archer had documented only two styles of Mithila Painting- the *bharni* and the *kachhni*- in his 1949 *Marg* article, the commercialization process facilitated the „discovery“ and in some cases, the „invention“ of some more styles. The „colour“ style<sup>32</sup>, popularly known as *bharni*, which employs vivid bazaar colours to fill the motifs, is largely the style associated with the Brahmins. The themes depicted in this style are chiefly high Hindu gods and mythological figures, such as Krishna, *Dasavatara* (the ten avatars of Vishnu), episodes from the Ramayana, and ritual motifs like the *kohbar*.

The „line“ style<sup>33</sup>, popularly known as *kachhni*, which employs fine lines to draw the outlines as also to fill the motifs is largely the style associated with the Kayasthas. It is important to note here that the *kachhni* style resembles Bengal“s *kantha* embroidery, where the *kanthas* made by the Kayasthas have been found to be more intricately carved than those made by the *Brahmins*. The themes that the *kachhni* artists portray include ritual motifs like *kohbar* and *ahipana*.

The Tantric style of painting was practised by some Brahmin men of the area, who claim to be Tantric priests<sup>34</sup>. Distinguished from the other styles by the predominant presence of male artists, this style was developed on Kulkarni“s encouragement. The pictures of different goddesses along with their *yantras* on paper were categorised as „Tantric Paintings“ by Upendra Maharathi. This style could not achieve the popularity that the others did, primarily because it could be practised only by the Tantric priests, who were very few in number.

The *gobar* (cow-dung) style of painting was evolved by the Chamar community of Jitwarpur, particularly by Jamuna Devi. She experimented by coating the paper with cow-dung to give it the appearance of a mud wall. In contrast to the mythological themes of the Brahmins and Kayasthas, Jamuna Devi“s pictorial expression derived its inspiration from scenes and events of her everyday life, viz. serpent speeding through the paddy fields or a dead cow being carried by the Chamars<sup>35</sup>.

The *godana* or *tattoo* style, done primarily by the women of the Dusadh community of Jitwarpur, was evolved by Chano Devi, with the encouragement of Erika Moser, a German folklorist who visited Madhubani in the 70s. The themes employed by them include the life and adventures of Raja Salhesa, the legendary Dusadh hero, Rahu, Ketu and those inspired by nature<sup>36</sup>.

## Endnotes:

- 1 Levi-Strauss, Claude (1995) p. 43
- 2 Jha, Makhan (1997)
- 3 Thakur, Upendra (1988) p. 3
- 4 *Ibid.* p. 4
- 5 *Ibid.* p. 357
- 6 Chowdhury, Indira (1998)
- 7 Written by Bihari Lal „Fitrat“ in Urdu, a treatise on the socio-cultural landscape of Mithila during the time of Maharaj Lakshmishwar Singh, 1883
- 8 Choudhary, R.N. (1987) p. 141
- 9 *Ibid.* p. 141
- 10 *Aitreya Brahmana*, quoted in Upendra Thakur (1988) p. 349
- 11 *Samannaphala Sutta*, quoted in Upendra Thakur (1988) p. 351
- 12 Chakravarti, Uma (1989)
- 13 *Ibid.* p. 380
- 14 *Ibid.* p. 394
- 15 Jha, Pankaj Kumar (2002)
- 16 Brass, Paul R. (2005)
- 17 Jha, Hetukar (1980)
- 18 Jha, Pankaj Kumar (2002)
- 19 Quoted in Hetukar Jha, (1988)
- 20 *Ibid.* p. 31
- 21 Narayan Badri (2009)
- 22 Grierson, George (1882)
- 23 Image 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
- 24 <http://www.peoplegroupsindia.com/profiles/dosadh/> accessed on 28 March 2015
- 25 Rekha, Neel (2004)
- 26 <http://himalmag.com/imagining-traditions/> accessed on 22 October 2014
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 Rekha Neel (2005) p. 102
- 29 Interview with Mahasundari Devi and Bipin Das, Ranti, 2005

30	Jain Devaki (1980)
31	<i>Ibid.</i>
32	Image 9, 10, 11, 12
33	Image 13, 14
34	Image 15, 16
35	Image 17
36	Image 18, 19, 20

