

Embodying Culture and Nature: A Study of Mithila Painting

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Abstract: India is known for its cultural diversity and a rich storage of its art forms. The diversified art forms are produced all over the country with its distinct form and styles. Folklore and folk arts of India speak volumes about their contribution to the rich heritage tag. Since ancient times, art has been elementary part associated with the human life. The women folk of Mithila practice this art form and decorates the walls and the floors of their houses. My paper is an attempt to understand the relationship between the culture and the nature as seen in the context of Mithila Painting and how nature is the major inspiration behind folk art. Nature as an integral part in human life is to have set the pattern for almost every creative urge and artistic endeavors, not only among the people in India but throughout the world.

Key Words: folk art; Mithila Painting; Bihar; women folk; nature; creative expression.

1. INTRODUCTION:

“Art is born of the observation and the investigation of nature” - Marcus Tullius Cicero

Folk arts of India speak volumes about their contribution to the rich heritage tag. The 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. 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. It is crucial to gauge on how mankind and artistic expression plays a very crucial role in magnifying the expressions of life. The art form, Mithila Painting, is dominantly practiced by the women folk and are drawn on the occasions and festivals as a part of ritual and procession of ceremonies. The religious sentiments and emotions are attached to this particular art form. This art form has been profoundly inspired and is very much dependent on the nature and the immediate surroundings, which consists of the epics, myths and beliefs related to it. The knowledge of this art form has its own cognitive space that is passed from the one generation to the other. The stories, narratives are being heard from the older generation and is being passed to the mothers and the daughters in form of styles, themes, motifs and patterns. The process of learning through observation is a natural phenomenon among the mankind. And, with the constant connection with the nature and the environment, the mankind captures a certain impression in their mind which is simultaneously projected and reflected through these artistic expressions.

Since the beginning of humanity, the human beings have always been dependent on the botanical knowledge for the survival [Flagler1994, page 4]. As, Kalidasa, renowned Indian classical author has explained the relationship between the art and the nature is since eternity. As he explains the composition plays a significant part in the painting and Indian artists have always tried to reflect the nature as the main subject of representation. The artists have tried to demonstrate the relationship between humans, art and nature. This relationship reveals the interaction between these three which are dependent on each other correlating with birth and death, joy and sorrow, good and evil.

The art is not just a mere representation of static existence but a representation of the streams of life that flows through the man and nature. The content and subject matter is connected to the form, mediums, texture, structure, colors, balance, proportion and space. The artists use these components that are extracted from their surrounding that makes these arts carry its own aesthetic and geographical identity.

Mithila Painting is such an art form that indicates the richness of biodiversity which can be seen since the ancient times thus giving a powerful message of conservation of the biodiversity. It is a rich repository of biodiversity that represents the richness of flora and fauna. From preparing of colors to the representation of the flora and fauna, this painting tradition signifies the thread of connection that this art has with the nature. The practice of Mithila Painting which is usually performed on the festivals and religious ceremonies reveals the sense of the association that the man has with the nature.

2. OBJECTIVE:

This paper would further examine the evolution of Mithila painting and how it reflects the ecological consciousness of the society. The painting known for its women preserve which is performed by them as a daily activity depicts how this painting is intertwined with the *Maithili* life and its local flora and fauna. The folk painting of Mithila communicates its local and the international audience about the preservation of nature by blending it with the ritual phenomena and hereby inculcating geographical values to the new generation through the visual depiction, which is being passed from one generation to other.

3. BACKGROUND:

Mithila Painting is an umbrella term for the paintings associated with the rituals and ceremonies that is mainly practiced by the womenfolk of Mithila region of Bihar. The origin can be traced back to the age of Ramayana (a Hindu mythology, where King Janaka had commissioned the artists to draw the paintings in his daughter's marriage to Lord Rama).

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*, *Champaran*, *Muzzafarpur*, *Vaisali*, *Dharbhanga*, *Saharsa*, *Madhubani*, *Monghyr*, *Purnea* etc. (P.C. Roy Choudhary; 1964). It also touches upon some parts of the neighboring country of Nepal, on the lower ranges of Himalayas.

Earlier, *Mithila* paintings were mostly drawn and painted on the walls and the floors of the houses with the motive of decorating it and for the religious purposes. This art was not much known to the people outside the region. It was in 1934, when Bihar was struck by the massive earthquake with a Richter scale of 8.4. It had massively destroyed the land and several people lost their lives. This calamity had massively destroyed everything leaving behind the cracked and thatched walls of houses. The art historian and an avid art lover, William G. Archer, who was appointed as the sub divisional officer was given the responsibility to construct the survey of the effected region and evaluate the destructions and damages caused. During his evaluation of the area, he was awestruck and enthralled seeing these magnificent wall paintings which were initially painted on the inner walls of the houses and got exposed due to the earthquake. It was William G. Archer who had recognized the importance and essence of these paintings. Few years later, a broader survey of the Mithila art form was conducted which encouraged him to draft an article, entitled as '*Maithil* Painting' published in 1949 in the Indian art journal '*Marg*'. This article is considered to be the first academic contribution to the *Mithila* Painting of Bihar.

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 hopes that the people dwelling over there had.

The condition got extreme worst and pathetic leaving the entire landscape grey, cracked, harsh with the remorseless heat scorching the earth. 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 the papers. These initiatives and schemes were introduced to promote and encourage the women. It also helped them uplift their lives through the recognition and sales of their artworks. This phase is considered to be an eminent one, where the Mithila expression was introduced to the world. *Mithila* painting, today, has taken a new direction of its own and has tried to mold itself according to the time and space. These trajectories in its evolution have undoubtedly marked it is a source of inspiration for national and international artists.

4. DISCUSSION:

Mithila painting is usually drawn on the walls and the floors of the houses. These patterns are being drawn on different sacred ceremonies and rituals. The forms, patterns and motifs drawn on the walls are known as *bhitti chitra* and the geometric patterns drawn on the floors are termed as *aripana* or *alpana*. Over a span of time, the distinct styles have evolved which are broadly categorized as *bharni*, *kachni*, *gobar* and *godna*, *geru*. With the changing scenario of this art form the practitioners have tried to bring their own world view and the understanding of aesthetics into their paintings.

The amalgamation of the usage of colours, subject matter, styles, forms and surface are the different modes and form of expression. The concept of form and content plays a significant role in depicting the expression of creativity and the artists' consciousness. Each regional art has a particular evolution trajectory of its own and hence a particular way of self-expression.

The *Mithila* mind expresses its sense of beauty in a way which suits its temperament as well as the surrounding. The love for nature and the sense of spirituality is linked with the *Mithila* Painting. The women folk of the region have been the decorating the walls and the floors of the house by the decorative figures and the geometric patterns on the cow

dungs and the whitewashed walls. The cow dung has been an essential element of religious and spiritual aspect of the Indian culture. The colours of *Mithila* painting are an expression of day-to-day experiences and ideas. As such, symbolism holds a vital role in this traditional art.

The artists of *Mithila* paintings use colours directly from nature. The natural dyes are prepared by extracting colours from the environment. The use of rice pastes to make the *aripanas*, use of turmeric and vermilion powder signifies the connection of *Mithila* art with the nature. The images on the wall paintings are drawn with the natural colours such as the lamp for the black colour to draw the outline, white colour from powdered rice, different shades of green were made from the leaves, blue is extracted from the seeds of *sikkot* and indigo and the other colours similarly.

The different colours are used to paint the images of the Gods and the Goddesses, where the colours are not just the mere colours to be filled as a part of aesthetic and enhancing beauty, but every colour used depict the emotions behind the artists. The brushes and the tools used were prepared with the cotton tipped bamboo sticks and stiff twigs. Moreover, every product of this art form has participatory role which generates meaning through visual vocabulary.

Mithila Paintings are mainly based on the themes of religion and mythology. In the paintings, the stories and the events are narrated from the episodes of the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*. Hindu Gods like *Krishna-Radha*, *Shiva-Parvati*, *Ganesha* were painted and with the advent of the new styles other Gods like *Raja Salesh*, *Jutki Malini* and *Reshma* are also being portrayed. The natural scenes of villages, everyday life, flora and fauna which are so much a part of life of this painting. The background of *Mithila* Painting is painted with flora and fauna available in the region which define how this painting has evolved from the womb of nature. The images of birds, animals and plants are largely the subject matter of *Mithila* art. The illustrations of animals and plants in *Mithila* painting is not a component of art rather it conveys a larger meaning associated with it. It tries associate their potential qualities with their portrayal of any depiction of flora and fauna. As, fish is swift as well as productive aquatic creature that gets place in nuptial chamber painting to help visualize the wealth and fertility, procreation and good luck, peacocks are related with romantic love and religion, parrots as the epitome of love and serpents are regarded as the heavenly protectors. These images are drawn on different occasion of marriages, festivals as a part of customs and rituals. In the process of representation of the spiritual and religious of Gods, the outflow of the nature is spiritually conceived that shows the harmony and association of the spiritual ideas with the object of nature in the forms of flowers, birds, animals, trees and creepers. This portrays the *Mithila* mind which is always associated with the human creation or the creation of deities which indicates the essence of life through the nature.

The symbolic motifs in *Mithila* paintings indicate the close association within man, his immediate surroundings, his mind, environment, plants and animals. This shows the power and importance of nature in the life of mankind. Hence, the environment should be conserved and protected. The important message behind it is taken by *SEWA Mithila*, an NGO is working with the artists of *Mithila*. They have taken the message of conservation of nature and biodiversity to be the *Mithila* Painting's ultimate selling point. The artists have taken initiatives to save the environment and have been trying their best to aware people about the association that the art has with the nature and subsequently the nature has with the mankind.

5. CONCLUSION:

The folk art is not just limited to its literal and hermeneutic meaning; rather, it goes beyond and represents the entire custom, ritual, daily living activities and processions in various occasion. The mutual blending of local colours, flora, fauna, and human sentiment make every folk art immortal throughout the history. Hence, the blend of nature and mankind is subjected to produce a certain value system that provides a systematic outlook of the society and *Mithila Painting* tradition is a perfect attestation to this phenomenon.

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