# From folk art to fine art: changing paradigms in the historiography of Maithil painting*

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## Introduction

'I have seen years of struggle when we painted on cowdung smeared walls and hours of our work washed out by rain. But we didn't think there was any option. Then came paper, it changed our lives. What more can one ask for?'[1] – Mahasundari Devi

'Painting is in our culture – my mother used to paint and I started painting with her'[2] – Shashikala Devi

'We draw in tradition, in prayer you from the outside see, what we don't in our art'[3] – Vimla Dutta

These are observations from celebrity artists in Madhubani, a district town in North Bihar, now internationally acclaimed for producing exquisite ritualistic floor and wall paintings. Since the 1970s when Madhubani art was promoted by the Indian government as an expression of India's ancient civilization, these women have experienced the problem of explaining their art to the outside world. While elite attention and patronage that Maithil women have received for their art has been unique, the meaning their audiences seek in their art work is nowhere present in the worldview of women who have traditionally made these paintings as their life cycle rituals or as an expression of their position in the society. Being aware of the fact that their art is now reaching a wider national and international audience, artists attempt to explain their art not only as a vivid expression of their regional and national cultural heritage, but also in terms of western aesthetics and symbolism. But the interpretations articulated in earlier writings and internalized to a great extent even by the artists themselves, complicate many issues regarding the understanding and interpretation of Maithil painting. These contradictions have become more apparent in the past few years when scholars, promoters and artists are arguing that Maithil art is no longer a folk art but has been transformed into a fine art.[4] The present article

[1] David Szanton and Malini Bakshi, *Mithila Painting : The Evolution of An Art Form*, Berkeley, California : Ethnic Arts Foundation, 2007, 31.

[2] Szanton and Bakshi, *Mithila Painting : The Evolution of An Art Form*, 41.

[3] Szanton and Bakshi, *Mithila Painting : The Evolution of An Art Form*, 21.

[4] David Szanton, 'Folk Art No Longer: The Transformations of Mithila Painting', *Biblio*, New Delhi, March - April 2004.

attempts to reflect on these issues by reviewing some of the writings which have influenced the understanding and interpretation of Maithil painting.

Mithila, also known as Videha or Tirhut, refers to a broader cultural region than a distinct geographic entity.[5] However, in the present times, it includes the districts of Darbhanga, Madhubani, Bhagalpur, Saharsa and Purnea in North Bihar and some districts in the Terai region of Nepal. From very ancient times, women of the region practised their own rites and rituals and had developed a tradition of making floor and wall paintings known locally as *aipanas* and *bhittichitras* respectively. There were numerous occasions on which these paintings were executed. But it was the Vedic rituals of *yagyopavita* (sacred-thread ceremony) and *vivaha* (marriage) where elaborate floor and wall paintings were made.[6] Among the wall paintings, the most elaborate ones called *kohabar* were made on the occasion of marriage ceremonies.[7] These paintings were made inside the inner rooms of Maithil households and were not known to the outside world till 1934 when they were discovered by W.G. Archer, a British civil servant and later on promoted as an artistic tradition by the Indian Government. For the first few years, upper caste women initiated the transition by transferring the ritualistic wall paintings on paper. Inspired by contacts from the outside world, these artists began making paintings on paper and canvas with themes ranging from *kohabars*, divinities to scenes from day-to-day village life. In the past few years, paintings depicting social issues, feminist themes and contemporary national and international events such as communal riots, global warming and terrorist attacks have gained popularity. Artists now also include men and women from erstwhile untouchable castes. All these changes in traditional imagery have influenced the ways in which this artistic tradition is understood today. This paper reviews these shifts by undertaking a brief survey of the historiographical trends in the past few decades. It examines how the legacy of colonial interpretations, romanticization of past history and debates on innovation and tradition, have changed the trajectories of the historiography of Maithil painting in the past six decades.

This paper has five sections. The first section deals with a brief history of discovery and promotion of Maithil painting from the times of Archer till the present times. The second section looks at how the foundations laid in the colonial period influenced the later writings and how it was used by the promoters of Maithil art to project a regional, caste-based and national identity. The third section looks at the ways in which Maithil art got misinterpreted with the arrival of western scholars in

[5] For more on the history of Mithila, see V. Mishra, *Cultural Heritage of Mithila*, Allahabad : Mithila Prakashan, 1979, 13.

[6] Hinduism, one of the oldest religions of the world, represents an amalgam of different beliefs and practices. However, the religion of the Vedic period (mid 2nd- mid 1st millennium BC) still has the most predominant influence. The practice of life-cycle rites and rituals occupy a significant place in the life of a Hindu – sacred thread ceremony and marriage being the most important.

[7] *Kohabar* is an elaborate painting on the walls of the *kohabar ghar* (wedding chamber) where the bride and the bridegroom spend their first four nights after the wedding ceremony.  The central motif comprising mainly of *baans* (bamboo) and *purain* (lotus plant) is surrounded by different painted images such as fish, tortoise, the sun, the moon, bride in a palanquin, grass mats and a scene of worship of Gauri (another name of popular goddess Parvati).

Mithila who interpreted the art from alien paradigms. The fourth part of the paper discusses the emergence of Harijan Madhubani painting and its recent historiography to explain how the earlier aesthetic discourses and regional and national cultural politics have inspired the lower caste women artists to invent a new tradition of their own. Finally, the paper looks at the recent debates on 'innovation and tradition' and demonstrates how the internalization of these discourses by artists, scholars and curators has created a different space for the writing of a new history of this art.

## Brief history of the evolution of Maithil art

For centuries, women from the region of Mithila have been making ritualistic paintings and expressing their own social world around them through the medium of paintings. Most of the texts of the region were silent about the contributions of women in the socio-cultural life of Mithila. Indirect references to the paintings appeared in many regional texts from 14th century onwards.[8] But most of these artists remained anonymous making these paintings only as part of their day-to-day rituals. Archer with his perceptive curiosity for the first time looked upon these paintings as art pieces. A scholar administrator and art lover with an interest in discovering primitive arts, he started looking for popular paintings after his first posting in the province of Bihar. He could not find any such paintings till his posting as the Sub-Divisional Officer of Madhubani when an earthquake in the year 1934 gave him a chance to discover some brilliant murals made in Maithil households. Interested in photographing and collecting some specimens of this tradition, he made an extensive survey of the floor and wall paintings made in various parts of Mithila in his later postings. After discovering and photographing wall paintings in Purnea district, he visited Darbhanga and Madhubani districts later in 1940 as the Provincial Census Superintendent. The outcome of his researches were published in the form of an article 'Maithil Painting' in the art journal *Marg* in the year 1949.[9]

Pupul Jayakar, another art enthusiast, was one of the readers of Archer's article. But she could not find good specimens of paintings on her visit to Mithila.[10] Later on in her capacity as the chairperson of the Handloom Handicraft Export Corporation (HHEC), a drought relief programme was started in Madhubani which enabled her to explore in detail the traditions that had evolved historically in the region. Bhaskar Kulkarni, an artist in-charge of the project, discovered two villages, Jitwarpur and Ranti, inhabited by Mahapatra Brahmanas and Karna

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[8] Mishra, *Cultural Heritage of Mithila,* 234-240.

[9] W.G. Archer, 'Maithil Painting', *Marg,* 3:3, 1949, 24-33.

[10] Pupul Jayakar, 'Paintings of Mithila', *The Times of India,* 1971, 29. She writes, 'I visited Mithila in the early fifties and was dismayed to find that the glory to which Archer referred had seemingly vanished. The bleak dust of poverty had sapped the will and the surplus energy needed to ornament the house. The walls were blank or oleographs and calendars hung in the *gosainghars*. There were only traces of old painting here and there – fragments that bore testimony to the existence of powerful streams of inherited knowledge of colour, form and iconography.'

Kayasthas,[11] after having unsuccessfully attempted to induce higher ranking Shrotriya Brahmana[12] women to take up painting on paper. The project became successful and women artists from these two villages and some other neighbouring villages such as Rashidpur, Laheriaganj and Harinagar near Madhubani town soon acquired national attention. Madhubani literally meaning 'forest of honey' now became famous for the commercial reproductions of this art.

The newly emerging middle class, art enthusiasts and art gallery owners too responded to this vibrant tradition, thereby giving way to a growing private trade. Commissions for hotels, participation in cultural fairs and private commissions gradually brought about prosperity and international attention to these artists. Exhibitions of Maithil art were organized in western countries such as France, Germany, and the US. The then Railway Minister in the Indian government, Lalit Narayan Mishra, gave a special boost to this art by giving commissions of paintings in some trains. Slowly individualistic artists began to emerge from these villages. Artists such as Sita Devi, Jagdamba Devi, Mahasundari Devi, Ganga Devi and Baua Devi soon evolved their own styles.[13]

In the newly independent India, there was a strong urge to project the image of women through a novel use of its cultural tradition. The image of *nari shakti* (women power), personified by then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, proved helpful for Mithila's women painters. Imagery of powerful goddesses such as Durga, Kali and Radha, became the favourite representations of Maithil artists. Women living under the shadows of patriarchy, had now acquired a voice of their own. Promotion through national and state awards gave these artists celebrity status. Cultural fairs organized by the Indian government also took them to foreign countries. Coming back, they responded to their new experiences by painting on those themes. Sita Devi and Ganga Devi who travelled widely drew upon their experiences to evolve a new vocabulary of Maithil art.

A national projection of  this art not only brought it to the forefront of national cultural landscape but also presented it as an expression of Mithila's and Bihar's cultural heritage. Maithil elite, mainly from the upper castes responded enthusiastically to this new discovery. The region of Mithila always boasted of its cultural superiority and considered itself distinct from the region of Magadha, situated in the south of Bihar. This region thus took this new discovery as a proud expression of its Vedic cultural heritage. Sita, the heroine of the Hindu epic *Ramayana,* hailed from Mithila. Her marriage to Rama and episodes from this famous

[11] Karna Kayasthas have been traditionally scribes or accountants. Mahapatra Brahmanas are one of the lowest ranking Brahmanas of Mithila.

[12] The Shrotriya Brahmanas are ranked highest among the sub-groups of Brahmanas of Mithila. They have also been the wealthiest of all Maithil Brahmanas, many of them having been landlords in the area. The other sub-groups of Brahmanas in Mithila are known as *Yogyas, Panjibaddhas, Vansaj* and *Jayavara.*

[13] For the earliest specimens made by these artists in the late 1960s and 1970s, see Pupul Jayakar, 'Bhittichitras and the paintings of Mithila', *The Earthen Drum : An Introduction to the Ritual Arts of Rural India,* New Delhi : National Museum,1981; Mulk Raj Anand, *Madhubani Painting,* New Delhi : Publications Division,1984; Upendra Thakur, *Madhubani Painting,* New Delhi : Abhinava Publications,1982.

epic, became an important part of this new projection and the antiquity of this art was pushed back to thousands of years. Mithila was shown as a place where Aryan culture was preserved in its purity.[14] The state of Bihar which already boasted of being the birthplace of founders of two religions – Buddhism and Jainism – could now boast of preserving even Hinduism in its purest form.

Two important developments at this stage brought about distinct changes in the art – the arrival of western scholars in Mithila and the international travel of artists. All this set the stage for a second phase in its evolution – the incorporation of outside ideas and market demands to the original repertoire of subjects and styles. Though a number of visitors arrived in Mithila, three scholars stand out - Erika Moser, a German folklorist, Yves Vequaud, a French journalist and Raymond Lee Owens, an American anthropologist.[15] The painting tradition began to change. Influenced by the advice of these scholar activists, the artists began to incorporate changes in traditional ritualistic imagery and introduced themes such as day-to -day village life, popular episodes from epics and local legends. From the late 1980s and 1990s, Japanese art lovers showed keen interest in the art. The arrival of a Japanese, Tokio Hasegawa in Madhubani and the opening up of Mithila Museum in Japan[16] opened a new phase in its evolution. Many artists were taken to Japan who took up the challenge of producing paintings on big boards integrating new themes such as Shiva's Trishul and Rama's bow.

While the upper caste artists were evolving their traditional repertoire, a parallel tradition was emerging in some of the villages near Madhubani especially village Jitwarpur, the initiative now taken by lower caste women from Chamar and

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[14] Aryans refer to a group of Indo-Europeans who are said to have migrated to India around second millennium BC. It was held that a large number of Aryans invaded Northern India, conquered the indigenous peoples and established the Vedic Aryan culture which became the foundation of Indian culture. The region of Mithila, colonized by the Aryan chieftain Videgha was known for preserving the Aryan culture. Secluded from external contacts, this region continued to practice Vedic culture and tradition even till the present times. The highest ranking priestly class, the Shrotriya Brahmanas, were said to have preserved Vedic legacy and identity. For more on the interpretation of Indian history, see Romila Thapar, *Interpreting Early India*, New Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1992.

[15] Yves Vequaud, a French journalist and film maker was the first to arrive in Mithila in1973. Next came Erika Moser, a German anthropologist and folk-lorist whose most significant contribution lay in the evolution of Tattoo painting, besides the production of 14 short films on paintings and related subjects. Raymond Lee Owens, an American anthropologist undertook a fifteen month cultural study of Jitwarpur and founded the Master Craftsmen's Association of Mithila (MCAM) in 1977.

[16] Another important foreigner to visit Madhubani was Tokio Hasegawa, a Japanese who set up the Mithila Museum in Japan. This museum initially concentrated on the acquisition, display and research of Mithila paintings. Later on it also acquired collections of paintings from other parts of India such as Warli paintings. For more on the collections of Mithila Museum in Japan see, Tokio Hasegawa, *Cosmology of Prayer*, Japan : Mithila Museum; Also see Tokio Hasegawa, *Ganga Devi*, With Introductions by Pupul Jayakar and Jyotindra Jain, Japan : Mithila Museum.

Dusadh castes.[17]The presence of Erika Moser and Raymond Lee Owens, made a difference as they encouraged these artists to evolve their own distinctive styles known as *Gobar* and *Godana* styles.[18] Gradually, with the efforts of few artists, Harijan Madhubani art evolved quite distinctive from upper caste paintings. Lower caste deities such as Salhesa, Rahu and Govinda emerged in the pictorial vocabulary of Maithil art along with the oral versions of their story. Scenes from their culture and tradition and places in the Terai region of Nepal related to the exploits of their gods came to the forefront.[19] Finally, their constant innovation and acceptance from art lovers brought attention to the Harijan artists.

In the past few years, artists have further expanded the scope of this art by evolving new ways of telling classical stories and epics. A number of men have entered the field as painters. They have introduced secular themes in the ritualistic vocabulary of Maithil art. Other contemporary themes related to social activism, feminism, environment pollution, national and international events have been portrayed by the painters. These changes in traditional ritualistic imagery are redefining the ways in which Maithil painting is understood today. The efforts of Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF) have drawn attention to these changes in the past few years.[20] It is being argued that Maithil painting is no longer a folk art but has transformed into a fine art. While these changes have created fresh interest in this art, certain questions are being raised by Maithil traditionalists regarding the true nature of Maithil art.

## Archer and his historiography of Maithil painting

The next section shall describe how the historiography initiated by Archer in the colonial context influenced the way this painting tradition is understood today. Some of the most widely circulated beliefs about this art can be traced directly to Archer's 1949 article. Undoubtedly, this article was unique as it gave a glimpse of the tradition as it evolved throughout the region of Mithila, unlike most of the later studies which concentrated on the art practised in and around Madhubani town. Archer had undertaken an extensive survey of villages in Madhubani and Darbhanga district as well as in Purnea. However, rooted in the colonial tradition, he was concerned more in collecting specimens than locating the paintings in its historical and cultural

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[17] Chamar and Dusadh castes refer to the erstwhile untouchable castes in Mithila. While Chamars have been associated with leather work, Dusadhs have been traditionally associated with the work of watchmen.

[18] *Gobar* and *Godana* styles refer to two Harijan Mithila painting styles evolved by Chamar and Dusadh castes in Madhubani. While *Gobar* style or cowdung wash painting style was evolved by Jamuna Devi from the Chamar caste, *Godana* or tattoo painting style was evolved by Chano Devi from the Dusadh caste.

[19] For a detailed description of these places see, Neel Rekha, *Art and Assertion of Identity: Women and Madhubani Paintings*,  Patna University : Unpublished PhD Dissertation, 2004.

[20] The Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF) is a non-profit organization founded in 1980 dedicated to the continuing development of Mithila Painting. The foundation also works for expanding national and international appreciation of the painting tradition by promoting research and publications. In January 2003, the EAF established a free Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani to further the training and opportunities of talented young Maithil painters.

milieu. Moreover, his analysis was based solely on the information provided by upper caste male informants. The colonial context in which he conducted his surveys, thus influenced the ways in which Maithil painting tradition was interpreted.

The contemporary colonial context of essentialising Indian people in terms of castes profoundly influenced his interpretations of Maithil art. Based on the contemporary ethnographic tradition of reliance on the Brahmin scholars, Archer relied more on the Shrotriya Brahmanas of Mithila for understanding this tradition.[21] The reliance on Brahmana scholars and also on some Kayastha informants led Archer to understand Maithil paintings only in terms of their caste affiliations. Thus he wrote, 'It is true that Rajputs, Sonars, Ahirs and Dusadhs also do painting and it is almost as if painting is endemic to the region. But in these latter cases the styles are more fragmentary and it is likely that the custom of painting developed later – Maithil Brahmins and Maithil Kayasths setting the fashion and isolated households of other castes following their example. In its broad essentials Maithil painting is the painting of Maithil Brahmins and of Maithil Kayasths.'[22] Archer's article also obscured the contributions of Kumaharas or potters in the making of this tradition despite the fact that in many of the households where he undertook the surveys, wall paintings had been made by Kumaharas or potters. [23]

The influence of contemporary western scholarship got reflected both in Archer's comparison of Maithil paintings with western counterparts. He wrote, 'If we are to find an analogy in European art we might say that the colours of brahmin paintings are parallel to those in paintings by Miro while those of Kayastha paintings resemble the black and terracotta colours of Greek vases.'[24] Instead of consulting women and looking for local meaning of *kohabar* motifs, he turned to the 17th century poet Herrick for his interpretations.[25] This led him to conclude that the *kohabar* motifs of lotus and bamboo were representative of female and male sex organs. This interpretation formed the foundation on which many of the later writings were to base their analysis.

The description of *Naina Jogin* as a veiled bride was another reflection of colonial academic scholarship.[26] *Naina Jogin* – a goddess of the *Jogin* cult[27] – was an

[21] Mildred Archer, 'Maithil (Madhubani) Paintings', *Indian Popular Paintings in the India Office Library,* London: H.M. Stationary Office, 1977, 89.  Mildred Archer, wife of W. G. Archer has provided a first hand original information and background of Archer's researches in this book.  She writes, 'A number of Maithil men helped him with enquiries and arranged for him to see the bridal chambers and inner rooms of houses'.

[22] W.G. Archer, 'Maithil Painting', 25.

[23] Carolyn Brown Heinz, 'Documenting the Image in Mithila Art', *Visual Anthropology Review*, 22 : 2, 5-33, 2006. The entries accompanying the photographs suggest that Kumaharas had made the paintings. Even Mildred Archer notes that in many households, Kumaharas or potters had started making wall paintings.

[24] Archer, 'Maithil Painting', 32.

[25] Archer, 'Maithil Painting', 29.

[26] Many photographs and paper drawings of *Naina Jogins* were taken by Archer and are now the property of the India Office Library records, now part of the British Library.

[27] *Jogin* cult also known as *Yogini* cult became very popular in parts of India such as Orissa, Bengal and Assam when Tantricism acquired prominence. *Jogins* popular in Mithila had

important goddess invoked by the upper caste Brahmana and Kayastha women during marriage rituals. Her images were painted in four corners of the wedding chamber and elaborate rituals were conducted to ward off the evil eye. A number of paintings of this goddess were collected by Archer from Kayastha households. He had also taken photographs of wall paintings made in Maithil Brahmana households which depict her holding a fan. However, in his *Marg* article Archer described the goddess as veiled brides, despite his extensive surveys and information provided by his upper caste informants. [28]

Most of the *Jogins* in Mithila originated from the lower castes and were elevated as goddesses because of their role in Tantric rituals when Tantricism became important in the region. Numerous folk songs, rituals and painting tradition speak about the *Naina Jogin's* miraculous powers. The entry of *Jogin* culture in upper caste households was an important evidence of the interaction of upper castes with subaltern beliefs and practices. It was also a vivid example of the ways in which Brahmanical religion had appropriated little traditions and how women had asserted their identity. But absence of contextual information in Archer's article not only led to misrepresentation of Maithil cultural history but also contributed to silencing of the voices of women in the interpretation of this art.

A significant part of Maithil history remains unrecorded as women's voices and intentions were marginalized by male writers and remained recorded only in women's folk songs, rituals and little traditions. This tradition of marginalizing women was continued even in the historiography of Maithil art. The description as a veiled bride by an art lover promoting Maithil art provided a readymade reference for future researchers and scholar promoters for creating an exotic imagery of Oriental Indian women. Imageries of veiled women had always excited the imagination of western scholars studying Indian culture.[29] This goddess, in later writings, became symbolic of Orientalist representation. This representation got highlighted with the arrival of western scholars who would elaborate these imageries. Women artists such as Mahasundari Devi too contributed in portraying this imagery as they created paintings of ornamental veiled women.

This article, thus laid the foundations on which Maithil art was to be understood and promoted in the post-colonial times. A group of Maithil and non-Maithil scholars not only used Archer's interpretations of caste based differentiation but also his analysis on the meaning, significance and symbolism of this art. The lead

connections with Kaulamarga belief, an offshoot of Kashmir Shaivism. For more contextual information on the goddess and her rituals see, Rekha, *Art and Assertion of Identity: Women and Madhubani Paintings*.

[28] References of some men who helped Archer in his research can be found in Mildred Archer's accounts. See Archer, 'Maithil (Madhubani) Paintings', *Indian Popular Paintings in the India Office Library,*1977, 89. Names of some more informants are found in Heinz, 'Documenting the Image in Mithila Art', *Visual Anthropology Review.*

[29] For more on Orientalism see Edward Said, Orientalism, Harmondsworth, 1985; Ronald Inden, 'Orientalist Constructions of India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 20: 3, 1986; Also see Ronald Inden, *Imagining India*, Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1990; For feminist readings of western fascination with veiled women of the Orient, see Meyda Yegenoglu Steven Seidman, Jeffrey C Alexander, *Veiled women in  Colonial Fantasies : Towards a Feminist readings of Orientalism*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

was taken at the national level by scholar-promoters followed by regional scholars and later on articulated by western scholars. Most of the articles appearing in the 1970s and 1980s reflect such influence. The next part of this section shall describe how these discourses were used in regional and national historiography. These discourses were to later on project Maithil identity in terms of upper caste, Hindu or Indian identity and the interaction of upper caste Hindus with Muslims as well as with the lower castes got sidelined. The unchanging character of Indian civilization – another premise about India popularized in Orientalist discourses – was now going to acquire a prominent place in the forthcoming discourse on Maithil art. Having merged with Hindu identity or Indian identity, the regional significance of this tradition got lost.

Prominent in promoting the Hindu discourse on Maithil art were a number of scholars.[30] However, the most profoundly expressed regional sentiments got articulated in Lakshminath Jha's, *Mithila Ki Sanskritika Lokachitrakala* published in 1964.[31] The so-called association of this art with Hinduism and romanticization of its past history, later on articulated in the writings of western scholars, owe its origins to his writings. This book successfully demonstrated that the Shrotriya Brahmanas of Mithila had ensured the continuance of this tradition from very ancient times. The book, written in Hindi, could not reach a wider audience but his viewpoints expressed in an article by J.C.Mathur published in *Marg*, in 1966, forms the source of many arguments which associate Maithil women's art with Hindu art. [32]

The beginnings of the arguments for Maithil paintings having a claim for being considered a fine art can be seen in this article. However, the basis for these arguments had a different basis. An attempt was made to stress its distinction from folk art and portray it as a fine art owing to its upper caste origins. Mathur wrote, 'The Kulina art of Mithila has refinement, continuity and a literary base which one cannot expect in the tribal art or in the folk-art of the village people.'[33] Expressing the regional sentiments, he attributed its continuance to the continuous spell of Hindu rule. He wrote, 'The origin of this continuity may be traced to the continuous spell of Hindu rule in Mithila from 1097 A.D. to c. 1550 A.D. under the Karnatas and the Oinavaras which continued uninterruptedly under the Khandavala dynasty (Darbhanga Raj) till the present day.'[34] Thus, by the late 1960s when the drought

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[30] Mishra, *Cultural Heritage of Mithila.*

[31] Lakshminath Jha, *Mithila Ki Sanskritika Loka Chitrakala*, (Hindi), Patna, 1962.

[32] J. C. Mathur, 'The Domestic Arts of Mithila', *Marg*, 20:1, 1966, 43-55.

[33] Mathur, 'The Domestic Arts of Mithila', 33. These arguments like Archer's totally ignored the fact that a lower caste deity was the central goddess in this wedding chamber and had been presented even by Jha as a symbol of Maithil cultural tradition.

[34] Mathur, 'The Domestic Arts of Mithila', 35. This reference to continuity of Hindu rule served to convey the fact that the high castes of Mithila being conservative had preserved their purity of blood and thus upheld the Aryan legacy and identity. Besides, the arguments on the continuity of Hindu rule also tended to ignore historical realities that there had been regular interaction between Brahmin Pandits and Muslim rulers. Mahesh Thakur, a Shrotriya Brahmin Pandit and founder of the Khandavalaka dynasty, was in fact gifted the zamindari by Emperor Akbar for his services. For details see Upendra Thakur, *History of Mithila*, Darbhanga : Mithila Institute, 1956.

relief programme was started, a foundation had been already been laid, upon which promoters could build up a new tradition.

These three articles by Archer, Jha, and Mathur provided the framework from which Pupul Jayakar as a scholar-promoter, evolved a new historiography of Maithil art. Pupul Jayakar based the promotional strategies of the drought relief programme on the above mentioned influences. The influence of Archer's article on Pupul Jayakar is reflected in the way the project was started in Madhubani. Thus, two villages Jitwarpur and Ranti inhabited by two different castes Brahmanas and Kayasthas respectively - were chosen to represent two distinct caste styles and artists were encouraged to make line and colour paintings to bring out their differences.[35] Locally these two styles came to be known as *Bharni* and *Kachni*, Jitwarpur becoming famous for the former and Ranti for the latter.[36]Archer's interpretations got reflected in her description of paintings in terms of Brahmana and Kayastha styles as well the interpretation of motifs. She also turned to the regional sources to explain the historical influences on the art. Quoting from Jha and Mathur, Jayakar's writings reflected a regional identity based on Brahmanical Vedic past and the Hindu tradition.

After Jayakar, a number of Maithil and non-Maithil scholars continued writing on the art. Prominent among them were Mulkraj Anand, Devaki Jain and Jyotindra Jain.[37] Anand explored mythological influences, Devaki Jain wrote on the empowerment of women and Jain on the emergence of Ganga Devi as an artist. But in all these writings, caste-based analysis found its reverberations. However, it was in the writings of regional scholars that colonial interpretations got articulated most prominently. The most important Maithil scholar to have borrowed directly from Archer, Jha and Jayakar to create a case for Maithil art was Upendra Thakur. His book 'Madhubani Painting' projected these sentiments.[38] Maithil Painting, was described as a caste based Brahmana and Kayastha style. The interpretation of motifs as male and female sex organs were also borrowed from Archer. This approach created a tradition when local scholars and even artists would offer similar explanations for motifs.

Archer's interpretations suited current scholars – regional and national – as well as promoters and even the artists themselves. The symbolism and parallels with western counterparts created by Archer was a tool in the hands of promoters to raise its value in the eyes of western audiences. The promoters also found in its symbolism and its connection with religious rituals-a clue to connect it with India's spiritual past. The promoters projected the spirituality of the artists through the presence of

[35] Mahasundari Devi, a celebrity line drawing artist revealed how villages Jitwarpur and Ranti were deliberately selected to project caste styles. Interview with Mahasundari Devi, Ranti, 1999.

[36] *Bharni* style, or the colour painting style was marked by the use of vivid colours and minimal use of lines. Considered to be the finest of all painting styles, *Kachni* or line painting style was marked by the less use of colours. The patterns were very intricate and ornately patterned and the details filled with the intricate use of line strokes.

[37]Anand, *Madhubani Painting*; Devaki Jain, *Women's Quest For Power : Five Indian Case Studies*, Delhi : Vikas , 1980; Jyotindra Jain, *Ganga Devi :Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting* , Ahmedabad : Mapin Publishing , 1997.

[38] Thakur, *Madhubani Painting*.

gods and goddesses, association with rituals and free hand sketching by artists. These strategies to elevate the status of Maithil painting suited regional sentiments as well.

Most of the regional elite hailing from the upper castes welcomed this interpretation as it enhanced their self esteem. An upper caste tradition could be easily equated with regional, Aryan-Hindu tradition and could be linked to the glorious past of Mithila. For the women artists, an elevation of their ritualistic activities to the status of an art provided them with status and social prestige. This was also a good opportunity for them to strike a patriarchal bargain and get name and recognition in the outside world. A new discourse was developed around the high caste connections of Maithil art as it was used to raise its status as a high art or *Kulin* art.

## Arrival of foreign scholars and a new historiography

Till now, the paper has demonstrated how a foundation of historiography of Maithil art was laid in the colonial period. Now it shall demonstrate how a new tradition of understanding this art was created with the arrival of foreign scholars. The arrival of western scholars in Mithila inaugurated a new phase of art writing, the most interesting example being presented by Yves Vequaud. While he borrowed from early writings, his own stay in Mithila and his observations as a foreigner unable to understand the nuances of an alien society, created a romanticized interpretation of Maithil art. The idea of an ancient civilization with spiritual roots can be seen in this quote, 'Mithila painting is a product of communal spiritual experience ….a manifestation of a collective mind, embodying millennia of traditional knowledge.'[39] The role of women in preserving this spiritual past was thus highlighted : 'For about three thousand of years, the women and only the women – of Mithila have been making devotional paintings of the gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. It is, no exaggeration, then, to say that this art is the expression of a most genuine aspect of Indian civilization.'[40] Drawing on a tradition of historiography initiated in the colonial period, it said, 'The artists ought not to work unless she is in a Yogic state. The peace and recollection emanating from women painting have often seemed the best proofs of how seriously they take the period of meditation which precedes work. A woman's painting begins with her reading the spiritual image of a god in deep prayer, and her finished product will therefore correspond to her inner attitude.'[41]

The wrong interpretations of facts about an alien society by a foreigner responding to a western audience, found eloquent expression in the writings of Yves Vequaud.[42] Many of his descriptions about Maithil society stand nowhere close to reality even in the remotest sense, despite the rich cultural experiences derived from

[39] Yves Vequaud, *The Women Painters Of Mithila : Ceremonial Paintings from an Ancient Kingdom,* London : Thames and Hudson, 1977, 8.
[40] Vequaud, *The Women Painters of Mithila ,* 9.
[41] Vequaud, *The Women Painters of Mithila,* 25-26.
[42] For a review of the book see, Carolyn Henning Brown, 'Folk Art and The Art Books: Who Speaks For The Traditional Artists?' *Modern Asian Studies,* 16, 1982, 519-522.

his prolonged stay for two years. Thus a society which had always been patriarchal was observed as matriarchal and the gathering of young men at Saurath Sabha,[43] a place where traditional Maithil marriages were negotiated by men, was taken as a symbolic representation of the freedom of choice where girls came to select boys for marriage. He wrote, 'Mithila's is a matriarchal society, and there are regular gatherings of young men to which girls who want to marry come.'[44] The girls then produce 'marriage proposal drawings', called *kohabars*, and present them to a boy of their choice. Marriages were not only arranged but also negotiated on strict *panji* rules which ensured that six generations from father and mother's side were not related.[45] Drawing a bit further from earlier interpretations, this book used Archer's description of lotus and bamboo as sex organs to make a case for Tantric influence on the paintings. For him, the pictures were 'heavily charged with Tantric symbolism' and exemplified their 'artists knowledge of the symbolism and arcana of Tantrism.'[46] The contemporary interest on Tantra in the West perhaps might have led him to draw these inferences.

The theories popular in European imagination in the 19th century were employed to create a case for the acceptance of Maithil art amongst western audiences. The theory of Aryan race which had dominated the historiography of India,[47] now came to be used in this connection. He wrote, 'One reason for this phenomenon may be Mithila's geographic location. The farthest outpost in the East of white civilization, the kingdom was the first to make contact with Oriental cultures and, in reaction, strengthened its own.' …… 'After three thousand years of inter- marriage and of Tibetan, Mongol and Persian invasions, all these ethnic groups have been mixed together, so it would be idle to maintain that the people of Mithila have preserved their racial identity or that today they look any different from their neighbours.'[48]

The Aryan connections popularized by the book of Vequaud perhaps paved the way for the entry of *Ramayana* themes leading to further romanticization of its

[43] Saurath Sabha was the oldest of the assemblies in Mithila, where Maithil Brahmanas from all over Mithila assembled to negotiate and settle marriages after consulting all the genealogical records with the help of *Ghatakas* (marriage-contractors or go- betweens) and Panjikars (genealogists).

[44] Vequaud, *The Women Painters of Mithila*, 17.

[45] A girl and boy in Mithila can have the *adhikara* (right) for marriage when the paternal side of the bride has no relations within the sixth generation and from the maternal side upto the fifth generation. This is known as '*Solaha Kula'*. For more on this system, see Mishra, *Cultural Heritage of Mithila*, 293-94.

[46] Vequaud, *The Women Painters of Mithila*, 17.

[47] By far the most influential theory to emerge from Indological studies in the nineteenth century was the Theory of Aryan Race. The word *arya* which occurs in both the Iranian Avestan and Vedic Sanskrit texts, were given a racial connotation, as referring to the race of the Aryans. They were described as physically different from the indigenous population and their cultural distinctiveness was apparent from the fact that they spoke an Indo-European language.

[48] Vequaud, *The Women Painters of Mithila,* 29.

historiography. *Ramayana* themes were never popular during Archer's time.[49] However, linkages with Vedic myths and Aryan roots of Mithila in its historiography made the artists and promoters elaborate more on this epic. The late 1970s and 1980s was a period of declining interest in paintings as repetitive paintings depicting *kohabar* and Hindu deities were being made. Inspired by outside contacts, many artists used their age old tradition to invent a new pictorial vocabulary which could help sustain interest. Mithila with its connection with Sita could be easily linked to these new paintings. Many artists began to experiment on *Ramayana* themes. Ram-Sita marriage thus emerged as a favourite theme of the artists hailing from village Jitwarpur.

A tradition of romanticizing Mithila's history began in the 1980s where scholars borrowed facts from historical sources to create a history of this art linked with the epic *Ramayana*. This quote from an article by Jagdish Chavda demonstrates how Jitwarpuri women artists were directly linked to the Aryans. To quote him, 'History records that Videha was colonized by the Aryans under Chief Videgha Mathava some 4000 years ago. With the divine help of the Hindu fire god, Agni, Chief Mathava crossed the River Gandak into an area that now extends to the greater Jitwarpur district.' [50] The story of *Ramayana* was used to create a base for Maithil art. 'The arts were also influenced by the great hero Prince Rama (Ramachandra) of Ayodhya, who affirmed the hand of Mithila's famous Princess Sita in marriage at the *durbar* (court) of her philosopher-father, King Janaka……. Such a vast and rich history of some 5000 years can never be exhausted in the narrative content these Jitwarpuri women cull for their art.'[51]

While this romanticized history popularized by Vequaud and further disseminated by Chavda brought unprecedented recognition to this art, it grossly misinterpreted the position of women in Mithila and silenced their voices. Though a number of scholars especially C.H.Brown, in a series of articles tried to highlight the ways in which women of Mithila were misrepresented,[52] this book still continues to be quoted in popular literature. As a recent work suggests, the book 'Women Painters of Mithila' is still considered to be a bible of Mithila art.[53] It is the source cited by all the promotional literature, in websites, exhibition catalogues, popular writing and media reports. Ironically, many of its interpretations have been internalized by the artists themselves. However, it is worth noting that this book opened a path for dalit women who used this romanticized historiography to invent a new tradition of their own. While this romanticized history was being created in Jitwarpur a parallel historiography was inaugurated by a group of Harijan artists in

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[49] For the recent innovations on *Ramayana* themes see, Szanton and Bakshi, *Mithila Painting,* 52-53.

[50] Jagdish Chavda, 'The Narrative Paintings of Jitwarpuri Women', *Women's Art Journal*, 11 : 1, 25-28.

[51] Chavda, 'The Narrative Paintings of Jitwarpuri Women', 25.

[52] For a discussion on the misinterpretations, See Carolyn Henning Brown, 'Contested Meanings: Tantra and the Poetics of Mithila Art', *American Ethnologist*, 23:.4, 1996, 717-737; Also see Brown, 'Folk Art and The Art Books'; Heinz, 'Documenting the Image in Mithila Art'.

[53] Heinz, 'Documenting the Image in Mithila Art'.

village Jitwarpur, who used the earlier aesthetic discourses to establish a tradition of their own. .

## Harijan Madhubani paintings and its recent interpretations

The historiography of Maithil art took a different direction with the emergence of Harijan paintings, known variously as Harijan Mithila, Harijan Madhubani or Dalit paintings. A parallel religion through iconographic representation and mythographies of their gods came to be projected through the efforts of some artists and scholars. This phase marked a visible shift in the approach of the Maithil artists who now initiated the process of speaking for themselves by articulating the meanings of their paintings in the regional milieu. While the invention of this tradition involved the use of earlier discourses of caste and a romanticized history, they succeeded in highlighting many significant aspects of Maithil past. This section shall highlight how marginalized groups of Mithila came to the centre stage by reviewing the historiography of Harijan art from the colonial period to the present times.

Early historiography made scant reference to the existence of painting tradition of the lower castes. Archer had made reference to the paintings by the lower castes such as Dusadhs and Ahirs. His article had a plate of a horse made by the Ahir community but a detailed analysis of these paintings did not find mention. Gandhian ideas predominating in the immediate years after independence and also influencing the promotional strategies finally brought these traditions to the forefront. The love for folk arts by a Gandhian, Upendra Maharathi encouraged Jamuna Devi, a Harijan artist to experiment on cow dung wash. Pupul Jayakar did not make reference to the existence of *Gobar* and *Godana* styles but Jamuna Devi's paintings form an important part of her writings. This suggests that in the 1970s a caste-based style had not emerged. She writes, 'A few specimens of this school had been discovered earlier, elongated horses and elephants in black, stark paintings on mud walls, with no symbols or figurative drawing surrounding the main form.'[54] Mulkraj Anand calls these paintings 'expressionist and passionate.'[55]

The visit of foreign scholars facilitated the evolution of the art but there was absence of historiography for this period. This gap in the writings is covered by information on paintings in the form of books, catalogues and videos which documented the evolution of Harijan art.[56] The video by Owens describes the evolution of distinctive style of Harijans. In the video, Shanti Devi, a Dusadh artist was given the same status as other celebrity upper caste artists such as Sita Devi, Baua Devi and Ganga Devi. This video also shows various paintings by Shanti Devi such as those depicting stories of Salhesa and Govinda and scenes from an election campaign. The catalogues of Mithila museum in Japan showed paintings by Harijan artists such as Jamuna Devi, Shanti Devi and Uttam Paswan along with those of the upper caste painters.

[54]Pupul Jayakar, *The Earth Mother,* New Delhi : Penguin Books, 1989, 108.

[55]Anand, *Madhubani Painting*, 18.

[56] Details of these can be seen on EAF's website ; Szanton and Bakshi, *Mithila Painting : The Evolution of An Art Form*, 88-89.

The first independent treatment of the emergence of Harijan style emerged in the writings of Jyotindra Jain[57] who talked about the emergence of Dusadh paintings of Mithila. With his contributions, oral histories made their first appearance in scholarly writings. He narrates the story of Salhesa based on the oral account of Uttam Paswan, a Dusadh artist. Oral accounts of artists were also used by Rekha in her study of evolution of Harijan art.[58] The socio-economic background of the Chamars and Dusadhs, the motives behind the evolution of these styles and differences and similarities with Brahmana and Kayastha styles were explained in this paper. The paper also records the oral versions of the story of Salhesa recorded by Grierson[59] and Jain. An attempt to treat the emergence of Harijan Madhubani paintings as a case of Dalit assertion was made in a subsequent work.[60] Locating the emergence of paintings, the work argued that Salhesa was a means to register social protest. The paper argued that Salhesa existed at a point of time and revolted against the elite.

The emergence of dalit movement in India has taken the discourse in a different direction in the past five years. The more popular and political term 'dalit' has replaced the Gandhian term 'Harijan'.[61] Recent innovations in Harijan art have been noticed by scholar-promoters who are trying to link it with the dalit movement. David Szanton calls it dalit intervention. He writes, 'Their stylistically distinctive paintings reflecting their daily life, ritual practices, and cosmology have a distinct character of their own but have also become an aesthetic, economic, and political challenge to ancient upper caste painting traditions in the same and nearby villages.'[62] Treating these paintings as a challenge to the *Ramayana*, Szanton writes, 'Elaborating and celebrating their epic and epic hero as worthy counterparts to the upper castes' Ramayana and Rama may be marking the Dusadh's growing self-confidence and an assertion of a new-found community pride.'[63]

A fresh approach in understanding Harijan art has been initiated by local scholars who are trying to provide contextual studies of Salhesa.[64] Another visible shift in its historiography has been to trace linkages of the discourses in Madhubani with the current politics of dalit assertion. Dalit assertion in India, in recent times has come at the forefront of current sociological discourse. Marked by a growing sense of

[57] Jyotindra Jain, 'The Bridge of Vermilion: Narrative Rhythm in the Dusadh Legends of Mithila', in B.N. Goswamy and Usha Bhatia eds *Indian Painting: Essays in Honour of Karl J. Khandalavala*, New Delhi : Lalit Kala Akademi,  207-22.

[58] Neel Rekha, 'Harijan Paintings of Mithila', *Marg*, 54 : 3, 2003, 64-77.

[59] Grierson, *Maithil Chrestomathy*, Calcutta : Asiatic society, 1882.

[60] Rekha, *Art and Assertion of Identity: Women and Madhubani Paintings*.

[61] 'Harijan', literally meaning 'people of God', was the term coined by Mahatma Gandhi for the erstwhile untouchable castes. In contrast, B.R. Ambedkar, himself an untouchable, preferred to address untouchables as 'dalit.' While both Gandhi and Ambedkar worked for the betterment of the condition of the untouchables, their approaches differed significantly. In Madhubani, the artists have preferred to call themselves Harijan.

[62] David L. Szanton, 'Mithila Painting : A Dalit Intervention', in Gary Tartakov ed  *Dalits and Visual Imagery* , Delhi: Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, Forthcoming.

[63] Szanton and Bakshi, *Mithila Painting : The Evolution of An Art Form*, 65.

[64] Prafull Kumar Singh 'Maun' and Rampratap Neeraj eds *Raja Salhesa: Sahitya Aur Sanskriti*, Muzaffarpur, 2002, 59-60.

self respect and need to become assertive in Indian society, dalits are attempting to carve out a separate space for themselves in the society through various means – political, social as well as cultural. Inspired by Ambedkar to project Buddhism, dalits have looked for alternative symbols or religion.[65] A manifestation of this growing consciousness has been the deliberate projection of dalit heroes into mythical frameworks in the villages of UP and Bihar in North India. Dalit assertion, in present times, has been in active in subverting dominant Brahmanical versions.[66] The Hindu Brahmanic symbols represented by epics such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharta* are rejected by the dalits. Aryan invasion and the subsequent subjugation of dasas or the indigenous inhabitants of India by the invading Aryans in popular Indian history is also being rejected. This is being replaced by alternative histories being written by dalits themselves.

Inspired by these discourses, recent historiography is trying to look at the projection of Salhesa imagery as a manifestation of dalit movement.[67] It argues that while Salhesa imagery is being used for achieving artistic identity by creating a parallel tradition and subaltern religion, it is also a tool for enhancing social prestige and expressing their current political concerns. Salhesa, as a deity was not only worshipped in lower caste temples called *gahabars* but was also accepted and worshipped by the upper castes. Salhesa thus becomes symbolic of a sense of self pride. Citing examples of politicians in Bihar who are using dalit heroes to attract voters, it is being argued that in Madhubani too political motives are inspiring artists to project Salhesa.

The deliberate appropriation of Indra imagery and articulation of oral versions has also attracted attention.[68] In Madhubani, Vedic god Indra[69] has been given the name of Salhesa. This has even found acceptance among the upper castes. Oral histories are narrated through mythographies and places related to their exploits have become prominent. Mithila which is projected as the birthplace of Sita and *Ramayana* is now projected as a place where Dusadhs lived. Inspired by Adi Hindu movement, Dusadhs have been declared to be original inhabitants of Mithila.[70] Not only scholars, promoters but also upper caste artists have accepted these discourses. Indra in popular Indian history had represented victory of Aryans

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[65] Gary Tartakov, 'Art and Identity : Rise of a Buddhist Imagery', *Art Journal*, 49: 4 , Winter 1990 , 409- 416.

[66] Badri Narayan, *Documenting Dissent: Contesting Fables, Contested Memories and Dalit Political Discourse*, Shimla : IIAS, 2001.

[67] For details, see Neel Rekha, '*Salhesa Iconography In Madhubani paintings : A Case of Harijan Assertion'*, BASAS Conference, Birkbeck College, London, 2006.

[68] Neel Rekha, 'Art, Identity and Dalit Discourse in Harijan Mithila Paintings', Working paper.

[69] Indra is the most important Rigvedic God with 250 hyms addressed to him. Indra's chief weapon, which he uses to kill (with the help of other gods), is the thunderbolt , though he also uses a bow, net and a hook. He rides a large, four-tusked white elephant called *Airavata*. When portrayed having four arms, he has lances in two of his hands which resemble elephant goads. When he is shown to have two, he holds the Vajra and a bow.

[70] The 'Adi Hindu' meaning original Hindu movement founded by Swami Achutanand, was based on the notion that dalits were the indigenous inhabitants of India.

over *dasas*.[71] This history was particularly preserved in the region through the tradition of worshipping Indra, unlike other parts where Indra had been ousted by Puranic gods such as Vishnu, Krishna and Rama. The paper argues that the deliberate projection of Salhesa is an attempt to subvert the dominant discourse.

The case of Harijan Madhubani paintings has been used to demonstrate how upper caste discourses were used by lower castes to create a new tradition of their own. The last section of the paper demonstrates how the internalization of these discourses by artists, scholars and curators has created a different space for the writing of a new history of this art. The past few years have seen the emergence of new ideas which argue that Maithil painting is no longer only a folk art, for the work of many of the painters can now be legitimately seen as fine art as well. This paper ends by reviewing these developments.

## Transformation Into a Fine Art: Innovation and Tradition

The trajectory in the historiography of Maithil painting is now taking a different direction when it is being claimed that Mithila Painting is no longer a folk art but a fine art. In this new trajectory, the initiative has been taken by David Szanton, President, Ethnic Arts Foundation, USA. In the past few years, David Szanton through his writings and exhibitions, is trying to create a fresh interest in this art by attempting to argue that Maithil art has transformed into a fine art. His arguments have been woven around the paradigm of 'innovation and tradition' inaugurated by Jyotindra Jain in his analysis of the life and works of Ganga Devi – a fine line drawing artist.[72] Citing examples from the works of Ganga Devi, Jain analysed the excellent use of tradition and individual expression by a folk artist responding to the changed circumstances of her life. Jain's work was a path breaking study as it brought into light the individuality of the artists, departing strongly from the earlier historiographical tradition of projecting their anonymity. This paradigmatic shift in its historiography helped some artists use their innovative talents and declare themselves as fine artists. This also helped Maithil art retain its vitality in the 1980s and 1990s when government supported programmes had reached a phase of declining interest.

[71] In popular history, Indra has been represented as the conqueror of the local inhabitants known as the *Dasas*. To quote a Rigvedic passage, 'The one by whom all things here were made moving; the one who put in hiding the lowly Dasa color; the one who, like a gambler who has won the stake, has taken the enemy's possessions: he, O people, is Indra' "The lowly Dasa color" whom he has "put in hiding" has been considered referring to the indigenous peoples of northern India who were defeated by the Aryan invaders and either moved into the forests or migrated southward.

[72] Jyotindra Jain, 'Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression in Mithila (Madhubani) Painting', in Catherine B. Asher & Thomas R. Metcalf eds *Perceptions of South Asia's Visual Past*, New Delhi, 1994,149-157, *Ganga Devi :Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting*,  Ahmedabad : Mapin, 1997. Apart from discussing Ganga Devi's paintings depicting her individualistic style evolved from traditional Maithil iconography, Jain throws light on her later autobiographical works such as her pilgrimage to Badrinath, the cancer series portraying her battle with cancer in a Delhi hospital and the Japan series.

Quoting Jain who feels that innovation and change are vital to the survival of a culture or tradition, Szanton draws attention to changes in traditional ritualistic imagery. He argues that many artists from Madhubani are innovating on their traditional vocabulary. This has led to the evolution of Mithila painting as a dynamic and evolving tradition. Szanton is arguing for a redefinition of the more popular term Madhubani painting as Mithila painting.[73] Madhubani painting, according to him, is characterized by the repetitive mindless reproductions of traditional ritualistic paintings.

Mithila Painting, Szanton feels, has always been a dynamic and evolving tradition drawing from various castes and voices of Mithila. He draws attention to some recent attempts by Maithil scholars and cultural nationalists who consider the tradition of *kohabar* as authentic Mithila paintings and feel that commercialization of this art form has destroyed the tradition. Arguing against their claims, Szanton demonstrates that Maithil painting tradition was evolving even at that time of Archer. Giving evidences from Archer's photographs, Szanton shows how Maithil painting was not a subset of fixed images but portrayed diversity of Maithil social life. He cites the example of a photograph taken by Archer showing station master with tickets.[74] He draws attention to paintings made with innovative themes such as feminism, environmental movement, social issues and current events which use earlier stylistic techniques to express a fast changing global world.

Arguing further that these new expressions are rooted in regional aesthetics, he says that 'rooted in these broad traditions, Mithila painting has been quite independent of the Western painting techniques and imagery introduced during the colonial period.'[75] While these changes are bringing fresh appreciation for this art, certain hegemonic discourses need to be questioned. Most of these discourses are still rooted in caste based historiography and focus on Hindu-Aryan connections. The emphasis on individuality and notions of fine art applied to Maithil art are all based on western standards of evaluation.[76] These discourses based on western aesthetics fail to explain the local aesthetic tradition and also do not attempt to locate the emergence of these paintings within the region's cultural history.

[73] For Szanton's recent arguments on the transformation of Mithila paintings, see his writings on the EAF website. David Szanton, 'A Preliminary Report on Mithila Painting', 2002, unpublished report available, under Publications on the EAF website; Also David Szanton, 'Some Further Observations on Mithila Painting' 2003, unpublished report, available under Publications on the EAF website.

[74] Szanton and Bakshi, *Mithila Painting : The Evolution of An Art Form*, 18-19.

[75] For more on these recent debates, see David L. Szanton, *Mithila Painting : A Living Language of Perception, Meaning and Expression,* Forthcoming, Draft available under available under Publications on the EAF website; Also see David L. Szanton, 'Mithila Painting : A  Language of Perception, Meanings and Expression', *Arts Annual*, India Habitat  Centre, New Delhi, 2006.

[76] For a detailed analysis, see Lynn M. Hart, 'Three Walls : Regional Aesthetics and the International Art World', in George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers eds, *The Traffic in Culture : Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1995.

## Conclusion

The paper has attempted to review the recent shifts in the historiography of Maithil painting. It has looked at the ways in which a romanticized historiography was created using colonial discourses. Tracing the roots of current perceptions of Maithil art to the 1949 article of W.G. Archer, the paper has demonstrated how his interpretations were articulated by Maithil and non-Maithil scholars and promoters of Maithil art to project a regional, caste-based and national identity. It has also shown how western scholars in Mithila interpreted Maithil art from alien paradigms and created a romanticized history. It has finally examined how early discourses rooted in the colonial tradition and recent arguments on innovation and tradition, have been used by lower caste artists and recent scholar-promoters to attract fresh attention for this art. These developments, the paper has demonstrated, have changed the trajectories of the historiography of Maithil painting in the past few decades.

The paper – through its review of historiography – has also aimed to demonstrate how art histories got constructed in the post-colonial period and how women's voices got silenced in the process. Maithil painting has been used as a lens to understand local, regional and national cultural politics. The projection of Aryan-Vedic connections, upper caste discourses, Hindu religion and the epic *Ramayana* in Maithil art traced its roots to colonial historiography.  Though art lovers, scholars and promoters all aimed at popularizing Maithil art, the construction of a history rooted in the 19th century colonial historiographical tradition, created an exotic imagery of Mithila. Maithil women artists were represented as living examples of an idyllic past. An attempt to change these stereotyped images of Maithil women have been made by scholar-promoters by arguing that these artists are producing fine art. But many of these arguments rooted in a western aesthetic tradition and some interpretations internalised and articulated by the artists themselves complicate our understanding of Maithil art. Although the artists are involved in making contemporary paintings for a transnational audience, they still continue to live in villages and are very much rooted in local traditions and culture.

An attempt to popularise Maithil art requires an explanation of the art in the local context which also highlights the role and voices of women in Maithil society. This calls for the initiation of a dialogue between scholars, promoters and artists. Some scholars have started the process of questioning the previous paradigms and also locating the ritualistic and local roots of the painting tradition. It is hoped that the artists will soon begin the process of questioning the previous interpretations. A beginning has been made by dalit women in this respect but many representations of Maithil art need to be questioned. This article ends with an optimistic quote from a scholar who has extensively researched upper caste women artists: '……the documentation project has now been taken up by Brahmanas and Kayasthas themselves, surely and interesting and important movement. Some of this will come from Mithila University, where a chair has been established for Mithila Art Studies. It will also come from the rapid expansion of the education of women, who are now

learning rhetorical arts as well as visual ones. There is much still to be said about the women's art and finally the women will say it.' [77]

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[77] Heinz, 'Documenting the Image in Mithila Art ', 31.