

# **GENDER ISSUES and DISCOURSE** **IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

**Inter and Trans Disciplinary Perspectives**

*Editor*

**GUPTAJIT PATHAK**



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IN 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
INTER AND TRANS DISCIPLINARY  
PERSPECTIVES**

Edited by

**GUPTAJIT PATHAK**

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# Women as Custodians of Indian Folk Art and Culture: A Brief History of Madhubani Paintings

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## Abstract

Women have been the epicentres and key forces of social and cultural heritage preservation in every civilization. The role of women in the transmission of socio-cultural heritage is of great significance to our world today. Being the nodal points of every familial unit, women have nurtured and sustained the traditions within their families over generations. They are very important aspects of our lives which are essential to the continuity and expression of cultural identity. In many societies, women's spiritual and ritual knowledge and practices specific to themselves are essential aspects of religious life. Women maintain their traditional religious practices, often within exclusive domains.

India had always been known as the land that portrayed cultural and traditional vibrancy through its conventional arts and crafts. Each community has its own distinct cultural and traditional identity which are displayed through various forms of art prevalent there. The folk and tribal arts of India are very ethnic and simple, and yet colourful and vibrant enough to speak volumes about the country's rich heritage.

This paper attempts to shed light on the history of Madhubani painting or Mithila art which is one of the many famous Indian art forms. These paintings are known for representing ritual contents for particular occasions, including festivals, religious rituals, etc.

**Keywords:** Women, Cultural Heritage, Tradition, Madhubani Painting.

## INTRODUCTION

Indian traditional art and craft are the manifestation of cultural heritage of this country. Every region in India has its own style and pattern of art, which is known as folk art. Folk art as a form of art is associated with the common man. This art is related to a particular society, caste and religion and is practiced as a ritual by a group within the periphery of a society. It reflects the country's rich cultural heritage in the form of paintings, sculptures, handicrafts and the performing arts including music, dance, drama, culinary and medicinal knowledge.

Women's involvement in various spheres of cultural heritage is both central and vital. In most cultures, women maintain principle roles in the upbringing of children, through which the intergenerational transmission and renewal of many of these essential forms of folk art occurs. The creativity of women is also essential to the continuity and revitalisation of folk art and cultural expressions. Women are also custodians of these rich cultural heritage to maintain, preserve and transmit them to the next generation. In maintaining and passing on these forms of art, women often integrate new styles and techniques with the traditional, thereby recreating culture. In many societies, women's spiritual and ritual knowledge, rituals and practices specific to themselves are essential aspects of religious life. Women maintain their traditional religious practices, often within exclusive domains. These practices are often closely integrated with knowledge and teachings of ethics, behavioural patterns, symbolism and life - cycles relevant to women and their interaction and relations with other women, men and youth.

Though with the technological advancement and change of social behaviour, cultural heritage of India is becoming secluded from day to day social activities of larger population, sensible technological intervention has the potentiality to rejuvenate our cultural heritage and connect the craft-guilds of rural India with the larger population.

#### OBJECTIVES

Folk paintings embodied in traditional crafts are integral part of any nation which reflect the culture and tradition of a particular region. Although the importance of handicraft has been widely recognized, the literature regarding preservation and growth of traditional style of paintings is scarce. The present paper aimed to explore the origin, history and pattern of traditional Mithila paintings and role of women in the sustainability of this traditional heritage and ensure continuous transmission of skills and knowledge from generation to generation. The objective of this study is also to identify and characterize the challenges faced by the these women artists and suggest some measures in order to promote, develop and preserve this beautiful art form.

#### FINDINGS

Mithila, also known as Videha or Tirhut, refers to a broader cultural region than a distinct geographic entity. 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. Madhubani paintings originated in the Mithila region of Bihar. 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 *airpanas* and *bhittichitras* respectively. Some of the initial references to the Madhubani painting can be found in the Hindu epic Ramayana when King Janaka, Sita's father, asks his painters to create Madhubani paintings for his daughter's wedding. The knowledge was passed down from generation to generation and the paintings began to adorn the houses of the region. The women of the village practiced these paintings on the walls of their respective home. Their paintings often illustrated their thoughts, hopes and dreams.

Literary references suggest that Mithila painting dates back to at least the 14th century as a women's domestic wall and floor painting tradition. Historically, its imagery consisted of Hindu deities and icons that provide a divine presence and auspicious settings for family rituals- most elaborately for weddings. There were numerous other 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. Among the wall paintings, the most elaborate ones called kohbar were made on the occasion of marriage ceremonies. Often characterized by complex geometrical patterns, these paintings are known for representing ritual content for particular occasions, including festivals, religious rituals, etc. The colours used in Madhubani paintings are usually derived from plants and other natural sources. These colours are often bright and pigments like lampblack and ochre are used to create black and brown respectively. Instead of contemporary brushes, objects like twigs, matchsticks and even fingers are used to create the paintings.

In January 1934, W.G. Archer, the local British Collector in Madhubani District, discovered the ancient wall painting tradition when the massive Bihar earthquake (8.4 on the Richter scale, killing at least 10,000 people), tumbled down the exterior walls of local domestic compounds allowing him to see paintings on the interior walls of several high caste Brahmin and Kayastha homes. Archer was enthralled by what he saw, excited by their modernity, beauty, and the parallels he perceived to contemporary Western modern art, and quite specifically to Klee, Miro, Chagall, and Picasso. As he travelled through the region in the 1930s he photographed a number of the wall paintings, and in 1949 he published an article about them in the Indian art journal, Margiv. However, from Archer's commentaries it is clear that rather than discussing the meanings of the wall paintings with the women who painted them, he largely drew on his Cambridge University education and love of modern Western art, to interpret the central marriage painting, the kohbar.

Madhubani paintings were initially practiced by different sects of people and hence the paintings were categorized into five different styles, such as Tantrik, Kohbar, Bharni, Godna, Katchni. But today, these five different styles have been merged by contemporary artists. The themes used in these paintings often revolve around Hindu deities like Krishna, Rama, Lakshmi, Shiva, Durga and Saraswati. Also, heavenly bodies like the Sun and the Moon often form the centre piece of Madhubani paintings. One can also find paintings based on the scenes from the royal courts and social events like weddings. The usage of geometrical patterns is pretty much apparent in these paintings. The fact that these complex mathematical patterns were used in Madhubani paintings makes them more intriguing and special. The painters over the ages have been performing the role of a reformer by promoting the flare of rectitude in the minds of the common populace, not as a preacher but the entertainer with their artistic ability of painting and singing.

These paintings are also known for their simplicity, for the brush and colours used are often derived from natural sources. While the paintings are largely made using powdered rice,



colours derived from turmeric, pollen, pigments, indigo, various flowers, sandalwood, and leaves of various plants and trees, etc. Also, many natural sources are combined and are processed to obtain the desired colours. The colours are often prepared by the artists themselves. If the artists come across empty spaces even after completing the painting, they usually fill up those empty spaces with the motifs of flowers, animals, birds and geometrical patterns. A double line is usually drawn as the border.

For the first few years, upper caste women initiated the transition by transferring the ritualistic wall paintings on paper. It is now slowly transforming local gender relations and gender politics. Ever since it began in the late 1960s, growing numbers of mostly married women have been invited to exhibit and sell their paintings in Delhi, elsewhere in India, and beyond. They have received private, public, and commercial commissions for their paintings. 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. Women are thus receiving local recognition and status, as well as state and national awards. In the process, many have become the major – even the sole – source of family income. Mithila remains a patriarchal society, but elements of its gender politics are discernibly changing. Many women are using their income from paintings to improve family living conditions and to send their daughters to school.

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. Several of the younger painters, however, have recently been taking on the incompetence and corruption of local government officials and agencies. With education and the media both younger and older women in rural Mithila have become increasingly conscious and critical of the limitations on their movement and choices.

#### CONCLUSION

Though the eye-catching Mithila paintings is one of the finest visual folk art forms practiced in the Mithila region of north Bihar, the condition of its artisans – predominantly women, who have excelled in this form for generations are not good. They are faced with multiple challenges: absence of an organised marketing system, insufficient earnings, middlemen running the show and no encouragement from the government. As a result, the upcoming generation is not invested in adopting the art form as a profession. Therefore, the danger of a slow disappearance of this finest art form looms large. However, this amazing art form is still kept alive because of the efforts of many artists who continue to practice Madhubani art. It is the duty of every citizen to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture. Preservation and conservation of India's rich cultural heritage and promotion of all forms of art and culture, both tangible and intangible, including folk and tribal arts and visual arts of paintings-sculpture-graphics is essential and assumes a lot of importance.



Image Credit : <https://www.craftsvilla.com/blog/history-of-madhubani-art-paintings-will-leave-you-in-awe/>



Image Credit : <http://mpcrafts.com/product/madhubani-painting-king-queen-perform-worship-big/>



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## About the Book

It is essential to emphasize and understand gender equality in the 21st Century. Even in the developed countries where females legislatively have equal rights with males, discrimination also appears prominently. The best way of ensuring equality is to start living and asking ourselves what each one of us can do to contribute to an equal society where individuals, regardless of any external attributes, can live and thrive without any distinction.

The present volume titled "Gender Issues and Discourse in 21st Century: Inter and Trans Disciplinary Perspectives" is the outcome of selected research papers from the International Interdisciplinary Webinar, Organized by IQAC, Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Guwahati, Assam and IQAC, Bilasipara College, Bilasipara, Dhubri, Assam on the subject, Gender Issues and Discourse in 21st Century, as a follow up of the UGC Directive.

## About the Editor



**Guptajit Pathak**, IQAC Co-ordinator and Assistant Professor, Department of History, Kanya Mahavidyalaya (Affiliated to Gauhati University), Guwahati, Assam, India is a trilingual contemporary poet, story writer, script writer, lyrics writer, author, translator, reviewer, resource person as well as a prominent editor. His poems, songs, stories, articles, reviews and research papers are published in many regional, national and international journals of repute & ezines and translated into different languages. Mr. Pathak has begged the honour of "Outstanding Researcher in History" Award for his contribution in historical research conferred by Global Outreach Research & Education Association in the 3rd Global Outreach Research and Education Summit on 31st July, 2019 at Bengaluru. He has acted as a resource person in National Seminar titled "Literary Emperor Anna Bhau Sathe" on 1st & 2nd May, 2020 at Arts & Commerce College (Affiliated to University of Mumbai), Phondaghat, Maharashtra, India. At present, he is a Doctoral Research Scholar in the Department of History, Assam University (Central), Silchar, India and the convener of National and International Workshops, Seminars, and conferences and is working as a Section Editor of INSIGHT: An International Multilingual Journal for Arts and Humanities, Peer Reviewed and Referred, ISSN: 2582--8002, University Research Publications, Ernakulum, Kerala, India.

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