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Search for Cultural Significance of Mithila Folk Arts

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By

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Letter of Recommendation

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This is to certify that Mr. Kamal Kumar Shah has completed his thesis on the topic Search for Cultural significance in Mthila Folk Arts under my guidance and supervision. I recommended this thesis for evaluation.

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Abstract

The thesis entitled “Search for Cultural Significance in Mithila Folk Arts” endeavours to introduce, analyze, and illustrate the cultural significance of Kohbar painting in Mithila painting.

The Mithila folk arts are the glorious cultural heritage of Mithila region. It has its time immemorial history and significance for all the Maithils. Specially, Mithila folk arts talk about the cultural, social, religious and way of life which Maithils live, think and create. Mithila painting (Kohbar) has different symbols used in particular ceremony and they have their own cultural and religious significance. Symbols and images used in Kohbar paintings are very contextual which are depicted for the happy and successful marriage life.

Similarly, there are variations in the Kohbar paintings according to time, place and castes. We can find differences within the same villages. Marriage is the vital part of life in every culture but we don't find such a very good arrangement for honeymoon room in other culture like in Mithila. Maithils believe that marriage is not only the private affair of life but it is also the social affair so they prepare a beautiful painting for the bride and the groom to celebrate first night of their marriage. They think that marriage is not only matter of sex and fun but at the same time it has its religious significance because male and female are counter part of each other and without help of each other further creation is not possible. Marriage of Mithila is full of love, submission and sacrifice of each other so their marriage life is long lasting in comparison to western culture.

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Chapter I

Introduction: Mithila Folk Arts and its Cultural Significance

Mithila an ancient artistic land is not only on the map of Nepal but also stretches towards northeast India. Mithila stretches north south from the Himalayas to the Ganga, and from the Koshi River on the east to the Gandaki River on the west. Most of Mithila is in the state of Bihar where it includes the districts of Darbhanga, Madhubani, Sitamarhi, Muzaffarpur, Saran, Saharsa, and Champaran, as well as some portions of Bhagalpur, Munger, and Purnea. Historically and culturally, Mithila also crosses the border into the Terai region of southern Nepal. It includes the districts, Morang, Sunsari, Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi, and Rauthat as well as some portions of Jhapa, Bara, and Parsa. Thus, the area of ancient Mithila was more than thirty thousand square mile and population was almost six crore. But unfortunately, this great Mithila region was divided into two parts after the Sugauli Treaty in 1816 A.D. The very large portions went into India and a small portion in Nepal.

Though small part of ancient Mithila is in Nepal Maithili is the second largest language and population in Nepal. According to 2001 census of Nepal, population of Maithils is nearly three millions and twelve percent people of Nepal speak Maithili as their first language (mother tongue).

After the partition of ancient Mithila, the Mithila Folk Arts (painting) also divided into two parts. The Mithila painting which is in Nepal known as Janakpur Painting and Mithila painting which is in India known as Madhubani Painting. Although both separated from same culture and tradition their styles and techniques are different from each other.

Mithila artistic history is very glorious, glamorous and the same time golden. Her ancient capital Janakpur is the living museum of magnificent arts and crafts and Madhubani is the heartland of Mithila folk arts and crafts too. Maithili art focuses on favorite subjects like folk or tradition, ritual, cultural, social, myth, and religious aspects of life. People come to Janakpur from all over the world to see the Janaki Mandir, a Moghul style temple dedicated to Sita (*Baidehi*). Janakpur was once the capital of a kingdom called Mithila whose territory extended into present center of Maithil culture in Nepal.

Maithili culture has its own language and rich literary tradition and women's tradition of painting and handicrafts which have been passed down from generation to generation. Examples of the Maithil women's arts can be seen in the mud homes in villages near by Janakpur i.e. Kuwa, Devdiha, Lohana, Ghodghans etc. and villages near by Madhubani i.e. Ranti, Jitwarpur, Rashidpur etc. The uniquely designed women's training and cultural center is the first of its kind to celebrate the arts of Janakpur and Madhubani and use the traditional arts of women for their empowerment.

The famous painters from Janakpur who have been giving life to Mithila painting are Sita Karn, Abha Suman, Chunchun jha, Saraswati Shah, Rebti Mandal, Urmila Yadav, Rajkumari Shah, Indrakala Nidhi, Phulwa Mandal, Sudhira Karn, Mombati Yadav, Gangawati Das, Indu Mishra, Manjula Thakur, Suhagwati Shah, Prem Mishra, and Shyam Sundar Yadav. Similarly, from Madhubani painters like Ganga Devi, Sita Devi, Mahasundari Devi, Chano Devi, Bibha Das, Shashikala Devi, Godawari Dutta, Urmila Devi, Lalita Devi, Ram Kumari, Dulari Devi, Baua Devi, Karpuri Devi, Vinita Jha, are famous but especially Ganga Devi, Sita Devi, Godawari Dutta, Mahasundari Devi, Chano Devi, Bibha Das, and Karpuri Devi have got not

only national but also international recognition. There are also young emerging painters like Shalinee Kumari, Pinki Kumari, Sangita Kumari, and Nisha Jha as well as many others who are contributing their cultural skill to show traditional and contemporary art by painting different types of pictures.

There are also some organizations, museums and art galleries which have helped to uplift the Mithila painting and make it known to the whole world. In Janakour, after her discovery of traditional wall paintings in the surrounding villages of Janakpur the American young lady Claire Burkert with the help of Dr. Rajendra Bimal founded, with the help of a little private foundation, the Janakpur Women's Art Project (JWAP) in 1989.

Three years later the JWAP was registered under its present name Janakpur Women's Development Center (JWDC) as the first official non-governmental organization in Nepal to use Mithila art with the dual aim of promoting traditional Mathili painting skills and generating income for the empowerment of the local women.

The present center was built in the traditional Maithil style with support of various donors in Kuwa village on the outskirts of Janakpur in 1994. Women of diverse castes and backgrounds learnt to translate the traditional designs of their wall and floor paintings to new materials such as Nepali handmade Dhanphe paper or 'lokta', cloth, ceramics, paper match and silk- screen prints while still maintaining their distinctive Mythil style. The artists of JWDC have earned recognition as some of the finest contemporary artists in Nepal in various exhibitions in the USA, UK, Germany and Belgium.

JWDC focus was given to training women who were poor, uneducated and had a little chance to experience the outside world. JWDC believes that that women

should have jurisdiction over the marketing of their art and that profit should be cooperately managed by the producers. In order to empower women, they are given training in literacy, record-keeping, costing and quality control, marketing, management, leadership, team building, gender awareness, planning and evaluations. It is hoped that JWDC provides a model women's program, wishing to harness tradition to achieve social change. Mithila folk painters in particular have brought a revolution in interior decoration and, maybe, also in painting itself.

The goals of the JWDC include the preservation of an indigenous artistic heritage, the creation of wealth within an impoverished local community and the empowerment of women within a culture where women's rights and abilities are often under-valued. Artists associated with the JWDC have earned their niches as some of the finest contemporary artists in Nepal. They associate regularly with development projects to promote awareness about nutrition, right to vote, safe sex and saying "no" to drugs through their art work. They often mix images of tales from the Ramayan with other folklores; similarly gods will appear in scenes of family planning. The mixing of traditional and contemporary themes is a reflection of the real world of the Janakpur artists today. The artists share ideas and images with women working in other sections of the center who produce ceramix, textile, and paper made objects. Proud of their traditional culture, they continue to illustrate Maithil rituals as well as define a new horizon for Maithil women. For them, painting is synonymous to a new social life with women friends from different villages and different castes.

In Madhubani, with help of Ethnic Arts Foundation, there established Mithila Arts Institute (MAI) in 2003A.D. This institute provides a very good environment for emerging young Mithila artists to learn their traditional and cultural art skill. Since its establishment, MAI has provided various programs to sharpen the skill of painting

through formal education and it has also helped the local people to understand the significance of Mithila painting. After visiting this institute, I found that such types of institute can only save the glory of Mithila art and at the same time, it makes people feel the vitality of the folk art and ritual performance of Mithila culture.

Mithila painting has also moved beyond Nepal and India. On the outskirts of the small mountain town of Tokamachi in Niigata, Japan, stands the Mithila museum, the only museum in the world primarily dedicated to these paintings. Established in the late 1980s by Tokio Hasegawa, the museum contains some 850 Mithila paintings.

In the United States, the Berkeley Art Museum has 65 Mithila paintings, and the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco has a matching collection of 52 paintings. The Philadelphia Museum of Art also a major collection. Oberlin College has some 20 paintings of episodes of the Ramayan by a variety of Mithila artists. Syracuse University, the University of Florida, and the Denver Art Museum also have collections. In addition, ever since 1980, the Ethnic arts Foundation has been sponsoring exhibitions of Mithila paintings in museums, universities, professional meetings, and galleries all across the United States, and recently in Iceland and South Africa as well.

In Europe there have been exhibitions in museums and galleries in Denmark, France, Germany, Iceland, and Spain. In addition, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations has for many years sponsored exhibitions of Mithila paintings that has traveled to some twenty countries around the world. The list must begin with William G. Archer and Mildred Archer. His 1949 Marg article and his photographs followed by Mildred's 1966 and 1977 articles on the wall paintings, brought them to the attention of Pupul Jayakar, then director of All India Handicrafts Board. She in turn

sent the Mumbai artist Bhaskar Kulkarni to Madhubani during the drought in 1966 to encourage the painters to transfer the wall paintings to paper for sale.

In the early 1970s, Patna-based culture historian, Upendra Maharati, established and for several years maintained a system for grading the paintings for quality, from A+ to C-. During the same period, Railroad minister Lalit Narayan Mishra commissioned Mithila paintings for trains and stations; the French filmmaker, Yves Vequaud, produced a romanticized film on Mithila and a book with splendid images and a text full of errors; and the German anthropologist and filmmaker Erica Moser made several extended visits to Jitwarpur, produced a series of short films about the Dusadh, and encouraged them to use their tattoo designs for their own paintings.

During the 1980s, Jyotindra Jain, the director of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi, gave Mithila artists a major presence at the museum, directly supported Ganga Devi during her ultimately terminal illness, and later published his stunning 1997 volume, *Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression in Mithila painting*. Then from the late 1980s through 2002, Tokio Hasegawa provided eight painters with periods of three to nine months to paint at his Mithila Museum Studio and travel to their exhibitions around central Japan. Additionally, in 2000, Minister of Communication Ram Vilas Paswan arranged for Mithila paintings to grace four Indian Stamps.

Finally, between 1977 and 2000, the American Anthropologist Raymond Owens lived in the painters' village for many months at a time. In the early 1980s, he made two films on the lives of the artists and helped organize a Master Craftsman Association of Madhubani (MCAM) - a short-lived cooperative among the artists. In the US, Owens helped found the not-for-profit Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAP) in

1980. To run this institute, Professor Joseph Elder, Dr. Parmeshwar Jha, and Dr. David Szanton have taken up the work that Owens' initiated.

Janakpur has been the seat for learning from time immemorial. It has been the most ancient traditional town in Nepal. Janak, the great philosopher king ruled over it for several years. The various kings of Janak dynasty ruled for more than fifty two generations. We find reference of Janakpur in the *Satapath Brahman*, *the Vrihad Vishnu Puran*, *the Vishnu Puran*, *the Vayu Puran*, *the Ramayan*, *the Mahabharat*, and *Mithila Mahatamya*. Ancient Mithila was ruled by the Videh dynasty, the kings of which held the title of Janak and hence the capital of Mithila was called Janakpur. Mithila is identified with modern Janakpur in the Nepalese Terai. It is regarded as a sacred spot by the Hindus and is visited by many pilgrims every year. Janakpur is very rich in religious, cultural and traditional heritages which made Janakpur the world famous place. There are folk lores, folk songs, folk dramas and folk arts, folk festivals and many more.

Mithila folk arts (painting) can be categorized in the following way.

1. Wall painting i.e. *Kohabar* Painting
2. Floor painting i.e. *Aripan* Painting
3. Body painting i.e. *Godana* (Tattooing) and *Mehdin* (heena)
4. Pot painting i.e. pottery picture
5. Cloth painting

Dr. Ram Dyal Rakesh has divided Mithila folk arts into following categories:

1. Cloth making
2. Utensils making
3. Paintings
4. Clay modeling, potteries and terracott

5. Handicrafts
6. Wood work
7. Making garlands
8. Making lac bangles
9. Matting
10. Making ornaments
11. Making bamboo articles
12. Doll making
13. Color making
14. Tattooing

For better understanding of Mithila folk arts (painting) here are given details of some Mithila paintings.

Kohbar Painting: The precise etymology of the word *Kohabar* is not known. The word is popularly used in Mithila region (Janakpur and Madhubani) Eastern Uttar Pradesh and almost throughout Bihar, to denote the pictorial renderings of auspicious symbols done on the walls of the nuptial chamber (wedding room), where a few of the most important rituals are conducted. Exotic, intricate and exuberant paints are painted inside '*Kohabar*' the bridal chamber at the bride's room where the newly married couple resides for at least four days. The couples celebrate their honeymoon in that beautifully painted room. There are many symbolic images like the lotus plant, bamboo grove, fish, birds, and snakes in union. They present fertility, sexual ability and proliferation of life. They are drawn collectively by the ladies of the bride's family and those of the locality in the nuptial chamber only on the special occasion of marriage ceremony.

In the whole Mithila region there exists an age-old tradition of doing wall paintings in the nuptial chamber of the bride. Special red color is used in it which is called '*Gairika*'. No other color except this is allowed in this drawing, as that color is taken as auspicious.

Aripana: The second kind of Mithila art is called *Aripana*. The *Aripana* is like a Rangoli in Maharashtra culture, Kolam in Kerala culture, Chouk Purna in Bhojpuri culture, Alpana in Bengali culture and Sathia in Gujarati culture. It is a magical and mysterious circle which is drawn on the floor to purify and sanctify the particular land for worshipping purpose. It is ritualistic art which is depicted on various occasions. Mithila art is mainly ceremonial art. So, it is done on the auspicious occasions like *Batsavitri* (worshipping of Bat tree which is the symbol of long life), *Nagpanchmi*, *Satyanarayan Bhagwan Puja*. It is also painted on the occasion of sacred thread ceremony. So, it is rightly called ceremonial art. It has been compared to the Tibetan Mandala art and it is deeply influenced by Tantric Cult. It is the outcome of meditation and yogic experience of the Mithila women artists.

Tattooing (*Godana*) : This folk art is done for decorating the human body especially the skin. The people of Mithila have fascination for this skin fashion. Women folk are fond of this. This is called *Godana* in the local language. They engrave in their arms, legs, chests, hands, necks and on the back in black designs. This is engraved with the help of needles and it is very painful. In olden days it was considered symbol of womanhood (*Suhag*). Really it was a very painstaking process. But now with advent of machine the tattooing process has become easier than before. According to customary belief among Maithil people, it is only their tattoos that people can keep at the time of death. Everything else they will have to leave behind. Originally, '*Godana*' paintings only depicted legends of *Raja Salhesh*, in important

divinity in the local Dusadh community; but later stories and incidents from Hindu epics and mythology were also integrated. It is done by a particular caste called *Natin*.

Mehdin (Heena): Like tattooing, it is also body painting but it is generally painted on the hand and feet. It has also ritualistic value because it is applied during marriage ceremony or any religious festival. It is applied generally to the female folk. Although *Mehdin* is generally used in many Hindu festivals and celebrations, there is no doubt that the Hindu wedding has become synonymous with this beautiful reddish dye made from the leaves of the heena plant. The Hindus often use the term '*mehdin*' interchangeably with marriage. The reddish brown color of '*Mehdin*', which stands for the prosperity that a bride is expected to bring to her new family is considered most auspicious for all wedding-related ceremonies.

A day before her wedding, the girl and her female relatives gather for the '*Mehdin*' ritual during which the future bride embellishes her hands, wrists, palms and feet with a lovely red hue. The groom's hands are also decorated with '*Mehdin*' patterns. It is said that the darker the design of a bride's *Mehdin* the more her mother-in-law love her. A good deeply colored design is a sign of good luck for the marital couple. A bride is not expected to perform any house work until her wedding *Mehdin* has faded. And it is jokingly reputed that some lazy brides may secretly redo their heena designs to prolong their leisure.

Nowadays people also use heena to their hair for changing color and for shining the hair. While much of the symbolism of heena designs has been lost over time, some examples still remain: the peacock, lotus flower and an elephant with a raised trunk, which all stand for good luck.

Pot Painting: People of Mithila make many types of utensils which are used in day to day life. They are generally made of soil and iron. They make beautiful designs

on them. They also engrave images of birds, gods and goddesses out of religious feelings. This art of pottery making goes back in the age of the epic *Ramayana*. People used to make potteries and paint them in various colors. The village potteries of Mithila make the clay toys for children and pots of daily use. These are very useful for the entertainment of the children and domestic purpose. They are also good for household goods and religious purpose. 'Purhara' and 'Patila' are the most pious pots made for puja purposes. They are painted tastefully in different colors by women folk of Mithila.

Religious painting: This is the main painting of Mithila folk arts and Mithila women are very expert in drawing such types of painting. Actually Mithila women are religious minded. They always draw religious painting in different religious and ritual ceremonies with different motifs. They have faith that the god will fulfill their expectations and desires what they wish for. Generally in marriage ceremony they draw Sita and Ram, Radha and Krishna, Parvati and Shiva, and Laxmi and Vishnu. These paintings for happy conjugal life and consorts love one another more than their lives. They also draw the pictures of Laxmi, Saraswati, Durga (Bhagawati), at *Deepawali*, *Shripanchmi* and *Dashain* respectively. More than that, they also draw Ganesh, Kali, Hanuman. Maithil women are so expert that they draw Brahma (Generator), Vishnu (Operator) and Mahesh (destructor) through their painting to show birth to death activities better to say the whole activities of universe. Regarding Mithila painting the scholar Lydia Aryan says:

“For three thousand years, Maithil women have painted the mud walls of their homes with the scenes of legends of Hindu gods and goddesses. The art was temporary, however, because the images were erased when the walls washed” (36).

For centuries the women of Mithila region of Northern Bihar and Southern Nepal have done wall and floor paintings on the occasion of marriage and other domestic rituals. These paintings, inside their homes, on the internal and external walls of their compounds, and the ground inside and around their homes, create sacred, protective and auspicious spaces for their families and their rituals. Although the images were similar, women of different castes developed different styles of paintings.

In the aftermath of a major earthquake in 1934, William Archer, the local collector, inspecting the damage in Mithila villages, saw the wall and floor paintings for the first time and subsequently photographed a number of them. Recognizing their great beauty, he and his wife, Mildred, brought them to wider attention in several publications. In the 1950s and early 1960s several Indian scholars and artists visited the region and also became enamored of the paintings. But it was not until 1966, in the midst of the major drought, that All India Handicraft Board sent an artist, Bhaskar Kulkarni, to Mithila to encourage the Maithil women to make paintings on paper that they could sell as a new source of family income.

Although traditionally, women of several castes painted, Kulkarni was only able to convince a small group of Mahapatra Brahmin and Kayastha women to paint on paper. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, these two women Sita Devi and Ganga Devi were recognized as great artists both in India where they received numerous commissions, and in Europe, Japan, Russia, and the United States where they represented Mithila in cultural fairs and expositions. Their success and active encouragement led scores of other women to paint. Many of these women have also been recognized as artists of national and international stature. Furthermore, women

of several other castes are now painting most specially the Dusadh, a Dalit community and a small numbers of men.

Over time, aside from the growing diversity of people painting, the subject matters of the paintings has expanded to include ancient epics, local legends and tales, domestic, rural community life, ritual, local, national and international politics, as well as the painters own life histories. Artists of different castes and genders are now borrowing themes and styles from one another. Mithila painting has demonstrated extraordinary vitality and become a vibrant and aesthetically powerful attention.

The Mithila painting is one of the living creative activities of the women of this region. It is a famous folk painting on paper, cloth, readymade garments, movable objects etc. mainly by the village women of Mithila. Originally it is a folk art, practices by the women of all castes and communities, including the Muslims, on walls and floors, using the natural vegetable colors. Later some people took interest in it and motivated the women to translate their art from walls and floors to canvas and now the new form has given this a very distinct identity in the art world as well as in the market. This folk art has a history, a cultural background, women's monopoly and distinct regional identification. Where is Mithila? What is the cultural and historical significance of this land? Why is it that this art is that special in Mithila? These are the questions that deserve answers before anything can be written about this art form.

But when we talk about the Mithla painting as folk or traditional painting, which is painted on the ritual occasion or any ritual painting in India we see many activities are combined. This combination, in fact gives special significance to the art. "Viewed at the level of perception and experience, all these local, regional, macro-pan Indian, and beyond Indian expression of art emerge and are held together by integral vision that makes life an art, part and parcel of single totality where life functions and

creative art are inseparably intertwined. Painting, music, dance, poetry and other functional objects are inseparable from myths, rituals, festivals and ceremonies.

There is no dichotomy between the sacred and profane, life and art. The human and the divine are in continuum, in a constant movement of interpretation and transformation.

Mithila painting is more than an art. Through this ability a group of women express their desires, dreams, expectations, hopes, and aspirations to the people. If you ask them what they are doing they would respond, "we are writing this *Kohabar or Gahwar*" (37). For them their style is a kind of script through which they communicate with the male folk or with the people of the rest of the world. They are the creative writers who write their feelings through the medium of paintings. They are the creators and close to the god in the perfections. Because of the money culture some men have also jumped into this creativity but its essence and nature even today it is a women's creativity.

As time changes, society and environment are also subject to change. All these things impact the culture and the art around that area. The same thing happened to Mithila painting also. Nowadays, modern Mithila painting came into existence, depicting the modern changes to this art. Basically, these are the translation of wall paintings, floor paintings and terracotta idols onto paper or canvas using special type of pen and colors.

Like the diversity of Mithila, its folk art also presents a huge canvas and depicts the cultural mosaics of this region in a very colorful style. This art can rightly be termed as an ocean of folk art, which since earliest times has been fed by the rivers of popular artistic creativity- rivers that have flowed into it from all central geographical pockets of the Indian sub-continent. The well known grammarian,

Panini, drew a distinction between artists –the *rajshilpi*, or craftsman employed by the court and the *gramashilpi*, or village craftsman. Originally shilpin would seem to have been a term generally applied to the technically trained craftsman; later, however, it came to denote the artisan. Thus the writing concerning the theory of art is referred to collectively as the *shilpshastra*. Being for the most part of highly schematic character, these manuals of artistic instruction could not, of course, be expected to include a description of folk art or of an amateur art practiced by women at home. By and large they form part of orthodox ecclesiastical literature with art as the handmade of the courts of Brahmanic orthodoxy. But that did not cause any disturbance for the women and the commoners of Mithila to practice various forms of creativity through various mediums on the occasion of rituals, altars, and festivals and also during the leisure period.

The fellow villagers and local always appreciated their creativity and innovation. As a result, in Sanskrit, as well as in the folk tradition, an artist is treated as a person with a magnetic ability to create a world of imagination. Metaphorically, an artist is always compared with the God. In Hinduism, Vishnu has a thousand names, many of which refer to work of art. In Islam, one of the hundred names of Allah is Musawer, the artist. The Sanskrit word Kala(art) means the divine attributes which directs human acts and thoughts. Man, God and art are inseparable. Art is not removed from everyday life. It reflects a world view distinction in between fine and decorative, free and servile arts. The eighteen or more professional arts (shilpa) and the sixty four vocational arts (Kala) embrace all kinds of skilled activity. There is no difference between a painter and a sculptor. Both are known as *shilpi* or *Karigar*. The term designates ceremonial act in the *Aswalayana Srautasutra*, and in this sense, it is close to Karu, which in the vedic context stands for maker or artist, a singer of hymns,

or a poet. In a reference, in the *Rigveda*, Viswakarma, a god of creation, is mentioned as dhatu-karma, while karmara alone refers to artisans and artificers. Viswakarma is supposed to create things out of dhatu, “raw materials”, an act known as *Sanghamana*. The process of cutting, shaping and painting has been often explained in the text by task 14.

In Mithila a woman does painting on the wall, surface, movable objects, and canvas; makes images of gods, goddesses, animals and mythological characters from the lump of clay, prepare objects such as baskets, small containers, and play items from Sikki grass, does embroidery on quilt popularly known as *kethari* and *Sujani*; sings varieties of ritual and work songs (Mishra, Kailash Kumar 2003) 15. These artistic activities are done by a lady as a routine work that makes her a complete creative personality; a singer, sculptor, a painter, an embroidery design maker and what not, without knowing these primarily details one may not understand the aesthetic wonder of Mithila paintings.

From generation to generation the women of Mithila have produced a vigorous distinctive painting. That this art traditional art has survived the innumerable vicissitudes of history is due, first of all, to the social organization of Mithila, one based on the village community, in whose corporate life the women have clearly understood roles. Beyond their extended families, the women artists work for the rural society with whose requirements they are perfectly acquainted. It is within this frame work that the women continue to reproduce age-old forms; indeed countless recapitulations have resulted in an attitude of mind in which they can produce the most abstract designs without conscious effort. The possibility of any radical assertion of individuality in the modern sense is extremely limited. This communal village life is strengthened and sustained by the universal prevalence of social gatherings,

traditional story –telling, dancing and singing, festivities and ceremonies, processions and rituals.

The visual text of traditional folk arts of Mithila mostly encompasses the themes of folk or traditional and ritual of this region. Folk art and ritual performance are depicted in particular because the women of Mithila live closer to nature. Therefore, it is not unnatural that typical Maithil artist is affected and guided by nature and her mute glory. To what extent the women of Mithila have built an indispensable affinity with nature and their folk art and ritual can be realized through their choice of subject matters in the paintings. Folk tradition and ritual performance are kind of surrogate for Maithil women. Their inter-relationship with folk tradition and ritual provide them a sub-conscious drive for their arts. As a result, their arts and crafts are enriched with folk flavors like their daily lives, living ethos, ritual and rites, nature and her flora and fauna, co-living beings and definitely their own feminine sentiments.

The two central themes of folk tradition and ritual performance will be the focus of the dissertation: Mithila folk art is more than an aesthetic manifestation of a traditional life pattern, rather the myths, folklores and ritual work as a popular medium for the performance and the execution of arts as reverential tribute to folk tradition and ritual, two facets of women artisans' lives.

Folk art by nature is a visual commentary of common people on the world as they have lived, seen and understood. The history of folk arts goes back almost to the history of human civilization. Perhaps, the cave painting, primitive frescos in iconic forms and stone carvings were the first and rudimentary forms of folk arts. The primitive urge for visual expressions preceded other urges in mankind. In course of evolution, the acquired languages are to express themselves. But the verbal

communication is always insufficient to express the immense creative potentialities and disseminations of human ideas. Therefore, human minds want something more concrete, credible and most of all more expressive and simplified. Such quest for simple communication icons was the beginning of folk arts in real sense. In course of civilization, people began cultivating archetypal and worldly images in simple forms and basic colors. Their creative impulses inspired them to play with woods, stones, clays and other objects and to produce something artistic that could give them aesthetic satisfaction. These urges were guided by two factors: To shape and execute their inner desire in visual forms and uplift oneself spiritually and achieve the magnanimity and protection from divine power.

The glorious tradition of Mithila folk art is not very different from this story of folk art tradition. Ancient Mithila (also known as *Videha or Tirabhukti*) was a fertile land for art and civilization. Tough initial inspiration for Mithila folk arts like other arts, was religion, later their horizon of subject matter was broadened. In contemporary Mithila painting we can find familiar subject matters like daily village life, works, toils, beliefs, animals and so on. To say in a few words, Mithila arts have become the witness of ancient and contemporary ways of Maithil life, culture and their living ethos and their themes are larger than life.

In the words of K. Prakash “the art of Madhubani is common man’s ways of attaining God, guided by his sense of aesthetics of beauty” (15). However, the unlimited scope of Mithila folk arts regarding academic research deserves much more attention beyond this definition. For instance, Mithila art is not only visual emblem of religious tribute but is an age-old tradition that reflects a surrogate picture of folk tradition and ritual sentiments. It is mostly a ceremonial need, inspired from culture

and religion. The age-old tradition of Mithila folk art is integral part of the life pattern of the Maithil women.

Mithila arts are the integral part of the lives of Maithil women and a sociological or ceremonial need. It is much more than what it appears to be the simplest naïve expression on a different kind of canvas. More than a form of expression, it is significant for the whole gender ontology of Maithil women, a vast subject matter for cultural texts. In Mithila, when a daughter becomes marriageable, she is to be qualified or tested for her marriage eligibility. For this, her knowledge and skill of traditional arts are treated as first qualification. At least, familiarity with their traditional art is the first requirement. The more she is expert in arts and crafts; the better she will be an ideal housewife. Sociologically speaking this part of female life pattern is process of social legitimization of the would be brides which has been running through thousand years as a legacy.

As a cultural life practice of collective life pattern, Mithila art is often ceremonial. That means, originally mithila arts are executed or performed only for ceremonial significance. Any kind of religious ceremony or ritual becomes inauspicious, incomplete and defunct without Mithila arts. As the tradition prescribes, Mithila arts are constitutive and the integral part of the rituals. For instance, *Kohbar* paintings on the walls of honeymoon room (*Kohbar Ghar*) is an inextricable part of successful marriage ceremony. While worshipping the sibling god (*Kul Devta*), the *Aripana* illustration in the prayer room (*Gosain Ghar*) is an essential part of the ceremony. Therefore, these arts have ceremonial and ritualistic importance.

The precious arts of Mithila are the cultural artifices of Mithila region because they are inspired by indigenous Maithili culture. Any art form, whether that is *Kohabar*, *Aripana*, *Sikki*, *Munj* or any other form is culturally inspired. The

aesthetical and gratificational purpose in any art form is always there, but more than that, these art forms are vital part of the existence and life pattern of Maithil women. Art is integral and unavoidable in Mithila so much so that these arts are self created and have not been guided by extraneously accepted art standards and formulas. The artists shape their forms and develop it according to their intuitive organization of ideas. How these arts are a vital part of the Maithili culture, can be understood in the words of Enakshi Bhavnani... and neither folk nor tribal craftsmanship have been done as a hobby or primarily as an art expansion or as a profession or for designs sake but because of a deep need to create these things of beauty and utility since they are a vital part of their very existence and life pattern.

But nowadays, for commercial purpose, Mithila Arts have been produced in a large scale. Women are proliferating this occasional business as industries. From the mud walls and clean swept floors, these artistic motifs have been transfixed into Nepali papers and brought into market place, to make it known before the world. However, its ceremonial and cult values lies only on its ritualistic performance not on professional reproduction of arts.

How traditional art is an integral part of the lives of Maithili women can be exemplified through the ritualistic importance of *kohabar* paintings. An adolescent Maithili girl begins to learn *kohabar* paintings from her senior female members of family and society. Her mother, grand mother tend to hand it over to her as a legacy. As she reaches marriageable age she is supposed to use her marriage eligibility. On the other hand, she can use a marriage *kohabar* to propose and attract her suitor. Generally, a marriage *koabar* is used to indicate a girl's proposal of marriage to a young man she is interested in. Similarly, like *kohabar*, another form of Mithila folk art *sikki* equally important to prove a girl's knowledge of traditional art and sanction her

as better wife. *Sikki* is a craft of making different household objects from a grass called *sikki*, which is mainly found in Mithila religion. The minutely weaved *sikki* works as like baskets, trays, cover boxes etc are extremely decorative and colorful. In later times, Maithili women have been producing other beautiful objects from hard papers, like ring box, cosmetic box, mirror frames trays and many more. Thanks to their craftsmanship that shows their cultural prosperity.

Another undeniable aspect of Mithila folk art is the religious value. It is so important because it is related with their belief system of spiritual devotionism, a typical Hindu way of acquiring gods. Making of *kohabar or aripana* is a serious religious exercise for Maithil women. In Mithila, each woman is expected to spend at least an hour or two at every festivals and religious ceremonies in these kinds of religious exercises. Often religious motifs and contents are integrated with tantric and mystical elements. There is reason behind it. In the past also, the whole Mithila region was a fertile land for the development of mystic cult called tantrism. Mithila played a vital role in the development of Mithila school of Hindu law and orthodox tantric cult in Buddhism. In fusion of tantrism can be found in excess mostly in *Aripana* paintings. For its tantric features, Lydia Aryan relates it with Tibetan Mandala: “ a magic circle representing a magically purified space for rituals and domestic religious ceremonies, the equivalent of Tibetan Mandala” (185). So making of *Aripana* is a sacred task of devotion and meditation and austere religious practice of Maithil women. Each lines and forms carry meanings; each performance is a moment of spiritual vow. An artist has to work as if she is coaxing the cosmic energy and interacting with divine power.

Nature and Animals are other favorite subject matters in Mithila arts. Nature or Earth is associated with feminine power in many ancient and modern traditions.

For Mathil women, nature is perennial source of inspiration. They depict nature and animals in their arts because nature for them is a surrogate of *Shakti* and animals as other forms of divine power. They treat nature in pantheistic way. Talking about nature and animal symbols in Mithila art is talking about divinity, feminine power, procreative aspect, magnanimity and abundance of nature and animals show their desires for existential harmony.

The production of Mithila art is running through ages. Such a long chain of legacy is a process of mythification of the lives, belief and cultural paraphernalias of Maithil women. In other words, it is a process of making a purposive mythology through cultural legacy and myth of inheritance. Purposive mythology means to render the artisans as an indispensable part in the chain of legacy. For instance, the mothers instruct their daughters and many times, spontaneously the inquisitive daughters learn it themselves watching and observing the ceremonial production of the arts. The mind of the girls is preoccupied with an obligation towards the tradition that they should teach the performances of art whatever their mothers, grandmothers, aunts have been doing since years.

About inheritance, an old Maithil woman artist says: “Singers, gardeners, gem specialists, females with virtues like kindness and compassion and judges, they do not have teachers and such abilities are inherited.” This matured remark also supports the process of legacy, mythification and inheritance. Indeed, the women of Mithila cannot remain detached from their age old artistic tradition because as social beings. They are an extricable part in the chain of mythology running through thousands of years. The contemporary tradition of Mithila art is in itself a living legend and the Maithil people are characters inside it. Each and every piece of art work is a legend to which the folk people turn to pray in daily rituals.

In the Mithila art, the role of women artists and artisans is very prominent. Mithila art reflects the human values, tradition, culture and religion. The art symbolically represents the relation between human life and the world. Some of the art reflect the stories of mythology, folk dances, folk songs and folklores. Along with the development of civilization, Mithila art is ageless. The main purpose of Mithila art is to balance between materiality and spirituality which can be abundantly found in *kohbar* paintings of Mithila.

In brief, whether that is ceremonial performance and commercial production, Mithila arts both should not be viewed merely as an aesthetic manifestation of a traditional and indigenous life pattern. There are many things to be analyzed. The major objective of this dissertation will be to discuss the themes in subject matters, forms and structures and contemporary trends which have surpassed the traditional motives and exposed the canvas of Mithila before the world to utilitarian purpose. A preoccupied motive behind Mithila art is the core of all themes. That is, whatever the motive may be, the Maithil women cannot remain without expressing the mute glory of folk tradition and ritual in their arts. The art for them is a means to express and communicate themselves with gods, nature, human beings and social realm in which they live.

Though the Mithila folk arts speak out its folk tradition and ritual performance of not only Maithil people but it also appeals the universal (cosmic) harmony between creeds, religion, culture and materiality and spirituality, the Government of Nepal has not paid proper attention to enhance the folk arts of Mithila. This art has been enduring the prejudice of Nepal Government since time immemorial. But nowadays because of Madhesh Movement against the Government of Nepal biased attitude and

inclusion theory of every culture of Nepali people, the Mithila Culture is also coming a long way.

Mithila folk art has been analyzed from various perspectives i.e. Feminist, New Historicist, Marxist and religious among others. There are also some critics who relate the Mithila painting with Madhubani painting.

Dr. Dheereshwar Jha as cited by Kulraj Ghimire in his book *simhavalokan* remarks that “the structure of Mithila painting is almost similar to Madhubani painting but the originality of Mithila painting is different from Madhubani painting”(84).

Another critic K.S. Srivastava has observed culture of marriage and remarks”Mithila paintings are a part of family ceremonies and village festivals, they decorate the walls of marriage chambers, the wrappings of ritual gifts and the letter known as *Kohbar* with which unmarried Mithila girls traditionally propose marriage to the men of their choices”(14).

Similarly, Maithil scholar Sudha Kant Mishra as cited by Ram Dyal Rakesh in his book *Janakpur the Sacred Jewel of Nepal* throws light on the importance of Mithila tradition in the following lines” Mithila, the birth place of Sita, is well known from the vedic times for her learning, scholarship and spirituality. But it is not so known that she is also rich in the tradition of rural culture”(100).

J.J. has the following pinion about *Aripana* Art of Mithila. “*Aripana* is the mostly in the nature of semi geometrical floral diagram. Each diagram has a well-defined center on which an installation of a sacred pot plate, a basket or a seat is made for ritual purposes. The intricately patterned diagrams are dotted with vermillion at specific points. Most of these are in the form of a lotus flower or plant” (55).

Scholar Arun Kumar Bajpai as cited by Ram Dyal Rakesh in his bookn *Janakpur the Sacred Jewel of Nepal* remarks that “ Mithila paintings have their characteristics themes which collectively express the Maithili attitude towards life, the feelings, the experiences, and thoughts that govern the Maithili way of living”(104).

Critic Ram Dyal Rakesh has observed the feminist point of view in Mithila painting. He says that “Today this art has been exposed to the whole world. The women painters are not applying their indigenous knowledge only in four walls of their houses but they are exposed to the outside world. Most of the women artists of Mithila are more or less self independent. They have overcome the men in art skill”(110).

Similarly, Lydia Aryan has thrown light on religious aspect of Mithila painting. She remarks “For several years now the women of Mithila have cultivated the ceremonial art of drawing and painting on the mud walls of their house, the floors of their courtyards and later, on paper as a form of worship and instrument for ritual and means of communication with gods and men” (183).

In this regard, it becomes clear that though the Mithila painting has been analyzed through various perspectives, the theory on folk art and ritual performance has been applied yet. There exists a strong need to carry out research on Mithila art from a new perspective.

Chapter II

Symbols Used in Mithila Folk Arts and their Motives

As we all know, painting is the visual text and we can read it by the help of colors, pictures and the lines drawn to show some motives. If we try to analyze the painting without knowing about its context (time and place), especially the culture from which it originates then we never reach at the core of the paintings.

Every folk art has their own context, symbols and images. Folk arts are very close to its own cultural aspects of life of the people from which it emerges so before leafing through any folk arts we should know the right ritual performances and ceremonies; cultural, social, economical, and religious elements of that culture. Folk art by nature is very near to the life pattern of the people whether that is, folk arts, folk songs, folk dances and folklores.

Mithila folk arts have their own symbolical significance and cultural motives to analyze it. Mithila has a very rich tradition of folk art and ritual performance. Every ceremony of Mithila folk art has a strong inter-relationship with its religion, culture and society. Almost all the Maithil people know well that why they use a particular symbol and image in a particular context. For instance, the elephant, horse, palanquin are the symbols of royalty and richness. The Sun and the Moon represent for a long life. The goose and peacock are symbols of welfare and calmness. Betel leaves (paan) and lotuses symbolize good luck. Bamboo is the symbol of future progeny.

The *Kohabar* painting is very famous in Mithila which is meant for increasing the sexual fertility of brides and bridegrooms. The outer walls of the *Kohabar* are full of paintings of rural life such as *Palki* with *Kahar* (palanquin and its carrier) shady fruit trees, mango, banana and dancing peacock. They also depict love scene of lord Krishna with Gopies and his constant companion Radha.

This *kohabar* painting is valuable property of this precious art which must be protected by all means because all art forms are practical and symbolic expressions of cultural intelligence. They carry a passive burden of assumed or inherited knowledge and an active burden of conscious knowledge which intentionally communicated. This *kohabar* is a very typical Maithili word which means *Suhagraat* (Honeymoon). Newly married couples enjoy it in a magnificently decorated room during the first night of their conjugal life. This occasion is very important in their life. So, they want to spend it very artistically in a decorated room. Various sexual symbols are painted on the walls of this room to increase the sexual stamina of the couple but it is not only symbol of physical love but having strong spiritual bond between them which we analyze afterward. It also inspires them to play sexual game for whole night. This kind of art can be very erotic in nature and only available in Mithila. The women artists of Mithila paint this art to increase sexual passion and fertility in the couple to the maximum. The every symbol and image of *kohabar* attracts the bride and the groom to come closer and playfully intercourse with each other. Here are given some symbols and images of *kohabar* painting and their cultural and ritualistic value in Mithila people.

Lotus Motif: This lotus is the symbol of female beauty and fertility, the main purpose of this motif is to create a suitable atmosphere for celebrating the honeymoon night successfully. There seems to be great confusion among scholars about the interpretation of this motif. Most scholars have described it as the lotus motif or 'lotus ring' motif, pierced by a bamboo shaft representing sexual union of the male and female or the bride and the bridegroom. In reality, this symbol neither represents the lotus flower nor 'lotus ring', nor sexual union of any kind. It primarily represents the lotus plant, with its *jar-muri* or roots and stem from which leaves (normally 15 among

the Maithil Kayastha) grow in various directions. The floral medallions, that surround the central stem, like a ring, are not lotus flower but leaves or *pata*. On account of their floral form many scholars have mistaken the lotus leaves for flowers. Similarly, the central vertical stem cutting across the ring of lotus leaves is not meant to be a bamboo shaft but the 'stem and roots' of the lotus plant. The word *Purain*, which denotes lotus leaves, is often used as a synonymous for the *kohabar* motif and it is the leaves rather than the flowers that signify rapid proliferation. The word *Kamal* rather than *Purain* is commonly used for the lotus flower in Mithila. For example, in the case of the lotus pond motif, the word used is *Kamal Daha*. The word *Bari* is used for the fruit. These three elements of lotus plants are clearly distinguished by the Maithils in their belief and iconography.

The entire *kohabar* motif, with its roots, stem and proliferating leaves, is the symbol of the bride or female but is not, as some scholars have it, her yoni or sexual organ. Many women painters paint a female face at the upper end of the central stem, clearly indicating that the lotus plant motif is the personification of the bride. Further proof of this belief is the ritual of offering *sindur* (vermillion) to the painted motif of the *kohabar* by the bridegroom, which is obviously the symbolic repetition of the act of offering vermillion in the central parting of the hair of the bride as part of the ceremony of solemnization of marriage.

As mentioned above in the depiction of the *kohabar* or the lotus plant motif, the women of Mithila often endeavored to personify the motif as the bride. It has also been observed earlier that the importance of the lotus plant and lotus pond in Mithila stems from its abundance growth. In this context, it may be pointed out here that the Hindu goddess of good fortune, prosperity and fertility is known as Kamala, 'the one who dwells in the lotus'. Interestingly, one of her appellations is Laxmi literally

meaning 'She -of-the Hundred- Thousands', which has a direct bearing on the abundant proliferation of fertility. In the *Rigveda*, the goddess is described as *Karisini* or 'one possessing dung', for 'she is the patroness of the rice growing agriculture of native India, where rice is planted in the mud and cultivated with inundated fields. She is the goddess of the fertility of the soil.

In the pictorial depiction of the *kohbar* motif, the most essential iconographic features include the central vertical stem with a broad base and a pointed pinnacle, the latter being either in the form of a female face (the bride) or a lotus bud. The stem itself is shown studded with lotus flower ornamentation or other decorative patterning. Cutting across the center of the stem is the central lotus leaf medallion, which is usually surrounded by six similar medallions forming a ring. Eight other medallions are painted in the interstices between the central and the surrounding ones. The remaining spaces within and around the ring are filled with a networks of stalks issuing out of the base and symmetrically spreading in all directions, interconnecting medallions, the innumerable lotus flowers, buds, calyxes, and weeds, like umbilical cords. The rim of the entire plant, which itself resembles one large medallion, is usually shown dotted with a row of parrots or bees. Occasionally a pair or two of fish or snakes are drawn in the space within or around the plant.

It should be note here that there is an astonishing similarity of concept and form between the so-called lotus medallions and the *Purna-Kalash* panels of the celebrated Buddhist stupas of Sanchi and the *kohbar* motif of Mithila. Both represent lotus plant motifs signifying fertility and auspiciousness; occasionally in Sanchi the lotus plant is shown personified as Shri-Laxmi, the goddess of beauty and plenty, surrounded by lotus leaves, flowers, buds and fruit but in Mithila the same plant (*kohbar*) is personified as the bride desirous of the quality personified by the goddess

Shri. In this particular case the central stem of the lotus plant has been converted into the anthropomorphic figure of the goddess Shri in her standing posture. This depiction comes closest to the *kohbar* motif in which the central stem has been converted into the figure of the bride by painting a female face at the top. Extremely ornate and stylized lotus flowers, calyxes, buds, leaves and fruit rising out of the spot (Sanchi) or roots, (jar in Mithila) forming a ring around the central stem or stalks found both in Sanchi and Mithila, probably speak of the survival of an ancient tradition in the comparatively isolated society of today's Mithila.

In general, the lotus is the symbol of culture and civilization. Talking about the importance of lotus, Tulsi Das has used lotus three hundred and fifty two times in *Ram Charit Manas*. He also compares every organ of Ram and Sita with lotus.

In *Geet Govinda*, Jay Deva compares the beauty of Krishna with blue lotus. In one context, great poet of Mithila, Vidhyapati, compares his heroine's face with lotus and the moon. The use of lotus is not only in paintings but there are so many literatures, sculptors, and other art works that includes lotus as spiritual aspects of life. Lotus is also the symbol of happiness, peace and prosperity.

Lotus (leaves and pond): Lotus leaves are called *purain* in Mithila. It is the original symbol of female folks. It is so important that without it *Kohbar* paintings become incomplete. *Purain* is must necessary in almost every *Aripana* painting. Similarly, lotus pond or *kamaldaha* motif of Mithila symbols are female sexual organs. This motif is meant to enhance the sexual stamina of the newly married couple. Maithil women artists are very innovative and imaginative and this motif according to their own original ideas and imaginations.

Bamboo grove motif (bans): Bans is the bamboo grove motif, metaphorically representing the bridegroom, the symbolic male counterpart of the female motif of *kohbar*. As the lotus plant motif represents female fertility, the bamboo grove motif epitomizes the male regenerative energy, though not the male sexual organ as some writers suggest. The bamboo plant, which has a masculine gender in Maithili, multiplies and spreads rapidly and has therefore become associated with male fertility. At the time the ritual offering of vermilion is made in the *kohbar-ghar*, the bride offers it to the painted symbol of a bamboo grove and the groom to the lotus plant.

A hazy and dreamy impression of an ocean of small, pointed green leaves quivering in the smooth flow of summer breezes whistling through a dense bamboo grove perhaps provides the basis for the pictorialisation of this motif. Innumerable, fibrous lines- intertwined, staggered or parallel-capture the spirit of a dense, rapidly spreading bamboo grove. These fibrous masses are organized into diagrammatic motif which then adopts the forms of a lotus medallion, a tree medallion, or a fish medallion often incorporating in its conception, systematically, arranged images of elephants, parrots, peacocks or fish in amorous pairs.

The bamboo has very important role in Maithili life pattern, due to its usefulness it is said that bamboo is friend of life and death. It is also the symbol of worldly development and lineage growth. In *kohbar* painting, the middle portion of bamboo is intersected with main *purain* and encircled with six other *purains* which symbols the daily intercourse of bride and grooms. The flower of bamboo is the symbol of unity of *purush* (male) and *prakriti* (nature). At the same time, it is the symbol of patience because when there is complete draught in that condition also the bamboo flowers bloom.

Latpatia Suga (a couple of parrots): Literally, ‘parrots in union’, this motif of two parrots flying in circles, chasing one another in erotic play is painted in virtually every elaborate kayasth *kohbar-ghar*. The motif represents the union of the bride and the broom.

In the Dharmasastras, as also in Sanskrit love poetry, one finds repeated references to *chakravaka* birds (*Anas cassarca*) that are supposed to be separated and to mourn in the night. It is interesting to note here that the name *chakravaka* owes its origin to the ‘a-oung’ call of the bird, resembling the sound of a rusted wheel mounted on a wooden axle.

In the context of the ceremony of marital consummation, one of the *Griha Sutras* cites the following mantra. ‘The concord that belongs to the *chakravaka* birds, that is brought out of the rivers of which divine Gandharras is possessed, thereby is concordant’.

This reference in Sanskrit literature makes it evident that the union of man and woman is symbolized by that of two birds, and the occurrence of the painted motif of *latpatia suga*, two parrots flying in circles engaged in erotic play, on the wall of nuptial chamber where marriage is consummated, further testifies to the continuity of symbols and motif from the past, cutting across cultural strata.

This pictorial rendering differs to a degree from artist to artist. Usually, to attain the circular movement of the birds, the body of each one is elongated and curved to form a semicircle. Disproportionately small wings are shown issuing from the bodies in order not to dissipate the sense of concentric movement. This *latpatia suga* also symbolizes the religious permission to intercourse the bride and groom.

Bidh-Bidhata Motif : This motif comprising two birds symmetrically facing each other in a beak to beak union, is usually painted above the central lotus plant, almost like a pinnacle. This placement is most appropriate for this divine pair because it presides over the well-being and future destiny of the newly married couple.

In popular Mithila belief, *bidh* and *bidhata* are female and male birds, respectively. They govern the course of events of every individual's life. When there is death in family, a neighbor is often heard saying: 'No wonder, this unfortunate event has taken place last night I saw *bidh –bidhata* hovering over the house of the deceased.

Bidhata is believed to record in written form an account of an individual's entire future life on the occasion of an infant's sixth day rite *Chhatthi* or initiation of an infant described in the cycle of life. On this later day an anthropomorphic cow dung image of *bidhata*, with a red pen along side is placed in this form of a cloth bundle, next to the infant being initiated, with a request that *bidhata* writes a happy course of its future destiny. *Bidhata* is a manifestation of Brahma, creator of the universe, and the maker of the fortune of each individual. He is believed to record an account of a person's entire future, writing every event the prosperities and adversities and even birth, marriage, accidents and death. It is a common saying in Mithila that 'Bidhana likhal metal nahi jay' means the writing of *bidhata* cannot be erased.

Naina –Jogin Motif: *Naina- Jogin* is a goddess possessed with magical powers that guard against the evil eye. Her figures are customarily painted in the four corners of the *kohbar-ghar*, where an elaborate ritual is conducted to ward off the evil eye.

Despite minor variations in this iconography, *naina-jogin* is customarily shown frontally as a woman standing, with long loose hair and carrying a basket on her head.

The basket containing paddy and pieces of dried turmeric roots is usually held in position by one or both raised hands. The most striking feature of the depiction is the traditional style of covering the entire head and the face, leaving exposed only one eye or part of the left half of the face. Often the partial opening of the veil assumes the form of a triangle, at the center of which one prominent, wide open eye is seen staring at the onlooker. In some cases, a scorpion motif is painted on the veil and the blouse of the goddess.

The pictorial conceptualization of the figures of *naina-jogin* placed in the four corners of the nuptial chamber, staring intensely through the triangular opening of her veil at the bridal pair, as if casting a spell on the evil spirits, and at the same time carrying auspicious rice and turmeric root in the basket over her head, adds to the atmosphere of magic and mystery in a chamber where the consummation of marriage occurs.

Paan ke Ghar (house of betel leaf) Motif: This depicts a beautiful structure covered with betel-leaf creepers. Betel is planted near a pond or inside a thatched roof hut. The plant is considered to be very pious and auspicious. It is thought to increase fertility and energy in the body. The betel is very common in Mithila region so chewing betel is the life pattern of Maithil people. It is chewed by bridegroom in the marriage ceremony and taken to be auspicious.

Dr. Rebati Raman Lal says that” in *Kohbar* also bridegroom is provided with prepared betel having *Choona and Kattha* whereas white color of *Choona* represents semen of bridegroom and red color of *Kattha* represents ovum of bride which connotatively is the preparation for intercourse” (138).

Dasavatara (ten incarnations of god) Motif: During the ceremony, when the bride's face is unveiled to the gatherings, a packet of vermilion is once more supplied to the bride by the groom's family. The vermilion wrapped in paper with painted motifs of dasavatara, is placed in an open basket near the couple. The groom's relatives see the bride's face and offer her ornaments or money which is placed in the basket. Later, the basket and the bridal couple are taken to the *gosain-ghar*, the shrine of the family deities, where the basket is kept for a couple of days. After paying to the family deities, the couple goes to *kohbar ghar* and offers vermilion (left over in the previous wrapper) to the painted *kohbar* and bans on the central wall of this chamber.

The dasavatara painted on the wrapper usually has two horizontal rows of five rectangular compartments, each with depiction of one incarnation of Vishnu that is primarily identifiable by an iconographic emblem.

Once the wedding is over, the groom's entourage and family return to their village but leave the groom behind for further rituals, including *Chaturthi*, 'the ritual of fourth day', which is held in the *kohbar ghar*. As the groom's party leaves, the bride's parents hand over to them all the ornaments collected in the basket in which the dasavatara packet of vermilion was also placed during the face showing ceremony. The cash collected is counted and, after adding some more, it is given over to the groom's parents. The latter return the basket with yet another packet of vermilion, this time with bans motif painted on the wrapper. This vermilion is used for the daily *Gauri-Puja* ritual to be performed by the bride. But returning of groom's party without taking bride and groom only prevails in Brahmin caste.

It is said that Sita, the constant companion of Rama, performed this ritual after her marriage, so it has become customary in the whole Mithila region. A clay

elephant and a decorated pot which holds an oil lamp are also made and used for this puja.

Patia (mat) Motif: *Patia* is a thick reed mat woven from *Mothi*, a fast multiplying reed that grows wild in the ponds and ditches of Mithila. This is brought by the bride as part of the marriage ritual. It is healthy and hygienic, cozy and comfortable to sleep on.

On the occasion of *Chaturthi*, consummation, the bride and the bridegroom spend the whole night on a *patia*, which is subsequently taken by the bride to her husband's home as a part of her dowry, and there used again by her for sleeping on during the initial period of three to four days. In *kohbar* painting the *patia* is usually shown as a rectangular mat with a chequer-board pattern.

Nag-Nagin (snakes male-female) Motif: This symbol of entwined male and female cobras is representative of the union of the bride and the groom. There are various modes of representation of this motif which often adopt the form of geometric diagrams. *Sarpabandh*, or the diagrammatic composition of entwined snakes, features almost throughout India in the painting and religious sculpture tradition. Depiction of the *Jaina Trithankara Parshvanatha* is surrounded by a 'thousand hooded snake'. (*Sahasraphana parshvanath*) and that of Krishna quelling the snake *Kaliya* as it appears in carved and painted relief panels, or prevalence of the motif of entwined snakes in the south Indian floor paintings, kolam, or in the Mithila wall paintings apparently pre-supposes an ancient labyrinthine diagram that has been modified adopted to suit the iconography of snake related cultic images in various parts of India.

Fish Motif: In most of the Mithila painting we find fish very common. The fish is the symbolic representation of love, auspiciousness, fertility and good luck. Talking about *kohbar* painting, the fish has occupied great importance because fish symbolizes love, fertility and *Suhag* (bridegroom) so only the women eat fish whose husbands are alive.

The fish is also symbol of the first incarnation of god Vishnu i.e. Matsya Avatar. The fish is regarded auspicious when any Maithil people go out of their houses. The great poet Tulsī Das compares fish with pure mind and innocence.

Tortoise (*kachhuwa*) Motif: This tortoise is the symbol of long life. The every Maithil people wish that the bride and groom should have long life and they should enjoy their marriage life till long time. On the other hand, the tortoise also represents the one of the form of Vishnu i.e. Kasyap Avatar so it has also religious significance.

Parrot (*Suga*) Motif: Parrot means *suga or tota*, a beautiful bird. It is said that parrot dwells on the crown of Kamdeva who is a lord of love and beauty so parrot is the symbol of love. Some scholars have opinion that parrot is the representation of friend and teacher but actually it is the symbol of soul. Therefore, it is also known as *Aatmaram*. In the *kohbar* painting we find parrot at the top level. It also suggests that in Mithila soul is superior to the body. So bride and groom along with their physical relationship keep soul to soul harmony with each other.

Conch-Shell (*Shankha*) Motif: The conch symbolizes the determination, wealth, power and initiation. The women of Mithila regards daughter of sea, Laxmi, as their sister and her brother, *Shankha* as brother in law of Vishnu. It is said that where there is conch there exists the goddess of wealth, Laxmi. There is belief in Mithila region that the sound of conch evades the evil spirits and scientifically also it has been

proved that the sound of *Sankha* kills bacteria and viruses which are very harmful for human beings.

Elephant Motif: The elephant is the symbolic representation of female body and royalty and richness. Sometimes, it also represents the pregnant woman. On the other hand, the elephant is the symbol of Ganesh, the lord of wisdom so elephant is also regarded as wise animal. At the same time, it is the vehicle of king of lords, Indra. *Airavat* is the name of that elephant.

Swastika Motif: The symbol of swastika has been used since Hadappa Age but it is used widely in Mithila. It is used as mantra and images for auspiciousness and peace. There is belief that the mantra of swastika harmonises the heart and mind. The swastika mantra is useful when we build house, time of marriage ceremony, sowing seeds in the field, beginning of journey, in business, and at the time of child birth.

In Mithila painting, the symbol of swastika is the combine form of Ganesh and his two wives (Riddhi and Siddhi). Conch-shell swastika is the symbol of Ganesh and prosperity. Almost every religious ceremony includes swastika to make or bring good fortune.

Snake (*Sarpa*) Motif: In Mithila snakes are widespread and important figure in Mithila ritual cosmology and narrative paintings. They always accompany image of Shiva. They are said to be the basic supports of the universe though Baua Devi and Godawari Dutta have very different images of these primordial beings. Unlike the biblical vision of the snake as inherently evil, the Mithila tradition recognizes that Naga can be frightening and deadly but if well treated, they can also be benevolent and protective.

As a consequence, naga is central to protective marriage rituals, as well as to numerous folktales and legends. The image of Vishnu recumbent on Shesh Naga, the

massive snake representing endless time, is another popular subject in Mithila painting.

Sun and Moon (*Suraj and Chanda or Ijoriya*) Motif: The painting of the sun and the moon can abundantly be found in Mithila. They are symbol of long life. In Mithila region, sun and moon both are equal to god. In *Chhatha* festival, all the Maithil worship the sun and there are many floor paintings (*Aripana*) representing the sun. Without sun our life in the earth cannot exist so it is very significant for all of us. More than that in Mithila culture sun is the mother goddess and all Maithil women fast during Chhatha festival and wish for children and healthy future. Similarly, moon has also a great importance in Mithila, in Chauthchand (Chaurchan), which is held in month of Bhadau at fourth day of moonlight night, Maithils worship moon for their wish fulfillment.

In *kohbar* painting, the sun and the moon represent warmth and coolness. Bride and groom at the honeymoon night before and during sexual intercourse are very hot like fire which is represented by the sun but after play they become cool like the moon. Therefore, in marriage life, the sun and the moon have important. Some scholars also opine that the sun and the moon are the goddesses in front of which the bride and the groom play their sexual act with religious mind.

Eye Motif: The eye motif in Mithila painting is very significant because it represents the naina-jogin which saves us from evil spirit. Without eye we cannot enjoy the beauty of the world and nature. There are many poets who appreciate the beauty of eye and compose beautiful poem.

In *kohbar* painting, we find that both bride and groom looking at each other take the enjoyment of their every organ. The eye is the first organ that brings them very close to each other and the eye contact of each other arise the passionate feeling

towards each other for further sexual intercourse. It is the eye through which they perceive all the beauty of the *kohbar* painting. Most of the ladies are regarded beautiful with their beautiful wide and big eye i.e. *Mriganayani* and *Minakshi* so eye motif is very significant of *kohbar* painting.

Yoni (vagina) Motif: The painting of yoni has come from Hadappa Civilization to Mithila painting. The yoni in Mithila culture is symbol of Shiva and *Shakti*, prosperity and fertility so it is most necessary painting in *kohbar*. In ancient tradition yoni was painted in front of the wall from where both bride and groom's eye-sight reached easily. In Mithila painting, yoni is like earth-mother.

As we generally know that yoni is for only sex and fun. But in Mithila culture, this is equal to mother goddess (earth) from where every creature of the world has originated. It is not only matter of sex and enjoyment but at the same time it is for the creation of the organisms. Maithils worship yoni as mother. It is a wonder to say that god Shiva even comes out of yoni i.e. Shivling. As earth is the origin of everything i.e. plants and animals and nonliving things so is the yoni but it is the origin of every animal. Therefore, we can say that "the greater yoni is the earth and smaller earth is the yoni".

As we sow seeds in the earth and only those seeds grow which the earth accepts harmoniously, similarly yoni takes sperm (*briya*) but only those turn into creation of baby which is accepted by the ovum. So yoni is the symbol or source of creation.

Generally above mentioned symbols are used in Mithila painting but there are many more symbols which are used in Mithila painting. To limit my dissertation, I have only used above mentioned symbols especially of *kohbar* paintings.

Chapter III

Wedding Rites, Kohbar Paintings Variation and Interpretations

Mithila is very rich culturally. She has glorious rites and rituals of marriage. As we know Mithila is multi-caste region where every caste celebrates marriage according to their own rites but generally they celebrate the common rites and rituals.

Though features of the Hindu marriage ceremony, as described in the Dharmasastras, are generally followed in the more tradition bound pockets throughout most of northern India and southern Nepal, the rituals of *triratrivrata* (vow of three nights of celibacy) and *chaturthikarma* (the rites of fourth signifying consummation of marriage), mentioned in some early dharmasastras, which have apparently lost importance elsewhere, have survived and flourished in Mithila. These two rituals have a direct connection with the present practice of the installation of a *kohbar ghar*, as also the rituals conducted within it, and are therefore worth describing in detail here.

These rituals in Mithila not only reveal the ancient roots of the living traditions of the *kohbar-ghar* and *gauri-puja*, but also demonstrate how text and context complement each other to provide a comprehensive and meaningful picture of the complex Maithili cultural situation.

Practically the entire wedding ritual at the home of the bride takes place in two separate spaces in and around the house, which are duly consecrated. Broadly, the rituals pertaining to the solemnization of a marriage occur in the *madaba* or wedding booth and nearby *vedi* or fire-altar, while those relating to the consummation and *gauri-puja* take place in the *kohbar-ghar*. The *angan*, or the central courtyard of house, is significant for its ritual liminality. Apart from serving as the locale for such mundane activities as receiving visitors of unknown castes and ritual status, the pounding and husking of grain, stocking agricultural tools or as the place where the

barber comes to routinely shave their cheeks and cut the hair of male members of the family, the *angan* is the site for some of the most sacred activities, including the daily worship of the tulsi, basil plant (for which small shrine is installed in the courtyard and consecrated), the tonsure ceremony of a child, and for the celebration of virtually all the annual festivals and vows, together with the rites associated with solemnisation of marriage.

On each ritual occasion, the space of the *angan* is consecrated fresh unlike the temples or divine images. The required space is therefore newly smeared with cow dung and over this *aripana*, sacred diagrams, is drawn with a paste of powdered rice. The space thus recaptured becomes worthy of the conduct of rituals and sacred installations.

The ceremony of installation the *madaba* in Mithila is comparable to the *mandap karana* mentioned in the dharmasatras. The *madaba*, comprising a thatched roof and bamboo structure, is installed in the *angan* about five days prior to the wedding for Brahman and kayastha and a day before marriage for other castes. Sections of the thatched bamboo frame roof are first prepared on the ground and then placed over the structure of the booth. Then the bride-to-be places five thapas or impression of her palm dipped in pithar, rice paste, on the structure, and worships it by anointing it with vermilion and tying a yellow cotton thread to it on this occasion, known as *madab thatthi*. Married women from the bride's own caste and neighborhood are invited and vermilion applied to the central parting of their hair by female relatives of the bride.

The space for the *madaba* is further sanctified on the arrival of the bridegroom at the bride's house. The bridegroom is given new clothes by the bride's family on arrival, as well as subsequently on the eve of the wedding, on *chaturthi* or the "fourth

day” after the marriage and once again on his departure from the bride’s village. The reception ritual closely resembles *madhuparka*, mentioned in dharmasastras.

It is interesting that on the arrival, the groom is offered a betel leaf with areca nut which had a while earlier been kept in the bride’s mouth. This is followed by triple circumambulation of the *madaba* by the groom. As the groom completes three circumambulation of the sacred space in this manner, he further sanctifies the *madaba* which had earlier, at the time of its installation, been anointed by the bride.

This is followed by another fertility ritual. The groom along with seven male members from the bride’s entourage forms a ring around a wooden mortar placed over an *aripana* diagram on one side of the *angan*. All eight men are tied together by a cotton thread wound around them by the village barber. They collectively hold a large pestle in their hands and pound some paddy in the mortar. A married female informant said me that this represented sexual union between man and woman and that every adult of the community is aware of this. The belief that the curry-stone and mortar represented the female, and the roller and pestle the male, is reflected in a common custom in Mithila when every night before the family retires, the roller is placed over the curry-stone and pestle inside the mortar, or the mortar and pestle made to recline against one another. The two should not suffer separation. My informant also told me that when young women are asked to pound rice with the mortar and pestle, they often joke about enacting a symbolic sexual act between man and woman. This perhaps illumines the significance of the common Maithili wedding rite of the bride treading on a curt-stone while circumambulating the sacred fire (*asmurohana* in the Dharmasastras).

The person from the bride's family required to perform the *kanyadan*, the giving away of the bride (usually the bride's maternal uncle) also joins in the ceremony. The *purohita*, the officiating priest, intones invocatory stanzas and asks the performer of *kanyadan* to repeat them. This ritual is known as *matrika puja* or the worship of the mother goddesses. The individual performing *kanyadan* fasts on this day. The *purohit* invokes the deities of the *kohbar-ghar*, who are offered barley, rice, sesame, flowers, sandal paste, and water from the Ganga.

After this ritual, the groom is handed a branch of mango tree and asked by the wife of the bride's brother to identify the bride from among the two veiled girls (the bride and her sister) seated on the floor. The bridegroom is expected to identify the bride with a light stroke of mango branch. In the event of his identifying the wrong girl, there is a hearty laugh.

It is clear that these ritual performed in the *kohbar-ghar* have tremendous magical significance. The mysterious concept of *naina-jogin* itself, as well as pictorial rendering and ritual enactment of it, are peculiar to Mithila.

The connection with *kamakhya of kamarup* is interesting. Significantly, *naina-jogin* literally means 'eye goddess' and *kamakhya* the 'goddess with charming eyes'. In Mithila the word *jog* is used to connote a spell or charm. *Jog* songs sung throughout the course of a wedding ceremony to evade the influence of the evil eye and harmful spell on the bride or groom, as such the *naina-jogins* would appear to personify the goddess *kamakhya* herself, whose presence in the four corners of the *kohbar-ghar* is meant to guard the bride and groom from any possible evil or harm.

Similarly, the bridegroom striking the bride with a mango branch has an intrinsic connection with fertility. The use of the mango branch or leaves repeatedly recurs during the wedding rites of Mithila. On the morning of the wedding day, the

bride and groom, separately, in their respective homes worship a mango and a mahua tree by winding a *dora* or cotton thread around them in the course of five circumambulations. The thread tied by the bride and groom are later removed and intertwined with a mango leaf, to be tied to the wrist of the groom and bride before the groom offers the bride *sindur*. The Dharmasastras refer also to *pratisarabandha* or amulet-tying. These wristlets are removed in the *kohbar-ghar* on the day of *chaturthi* before the consummation of marriage.

Another typical wedding ritual of Mithila is *kumraun*. The meaning of the word is not clean but it relates to the ritual bathing of the bride on the day of *kumraun*, a day prior to the actual wedding. The bride fasts throughout that day. In the morning she worships the family deity in the *gosain-ghar*. In the afternoon, her body is anointed with abtan paste. At night she is taken to nearby pond; here a small portion of the ground is first smeared with clay and cow dung on which an *aripana* diagram is painted with rice paste. Then, after spreading a few freshly plucked bamboos leaves over the diagram, the bride is seated on it. The women of the family spray the bride thrice with water from the pond with a winning fan. Then a woman veils the bride's face with her sari and takes her into the pond and bathes her.

On the returning home, the bride is made to sit at the entrance of *gosain-ghar* (the domestic shrine of the family deity) and make offerings. This is followed by the roasting of *dhan* (paddy) to prepare lava, which is used the following day for the culmination of the wedding sacrament. The rituals of *snapana*, *paridhapana*, and *samhana*-making the bride bathe, wear new clothes, and grinding her with a string or rope of *darbha* grass respectively, mentioned in the Dharmasastras, come close to those of the *kumraun* day bathing of the bride.

Pasahin, or the ritual of smearing the body of the bride and the groom with *ubtan*, a paste made of fenugreek seeds, barley, turmeric, and mustard, also has obvious connotations with fertility. The *pasahin* begins at least five days before the actual day of the wedding, separately but identically, at the home of the bride and the groom. Before grinding the ingredients, hymns are offered to the *Kuldevta*. A ritual known as *samajana* (anointing) mentioned in the Dharmashastras is comparable to the *pasahin* ritual of Mithila.

Other important rituals that are performed on the actual day of wedding include *Kanyadan* (giving away of the bride), *Sindurdan* (ritually applying vermilion in the central parting of the bride's hair), and *Lavachhidiyav* (sprinkling roasted paddy around the fire-altar).

Kanyadan takes place under the *madaba*. The floor of the booth is consecrated by an *aripana* drawn with rice flour, and on this offerings are made. Special *aripanas* are often drawn for the *kanyadan* ritual. Around midnight the bridegroom comes to the *madaba*, accompanied by his *purohita* and some male relatives. The ritual is principally conducted by the bride's *purohita*. Before the actual *kanyadan*, the formal ceremony of *gotradhyaya*, or recitation of the names of five or seven generations of the paternal and maternal lines of the bride and the groom, is performed by the *purohitas* of both sides and during this, *gotras* or clan names are also called out and checked.

Immediately afterwards the *kanyadan* is performed. The hand of the bride is placed in the open palm of the right hand of the bridegroom. The relevant mantras are uttered by the 'giver of the bride' under the *purohita*'s guidance. Finally, the groom and the bride take oaths of mutual loyalty and protection.

The solemnization of the marriage takes place at the *vedi*, fire-altar. The altar comprises a square ditch bound by four low walls of mud especially collected on the very day of the wedding from the *madaba* environs by women of the family. After the *kanyadan*, the bride wears the clothes presented by the groom's family and approaches the fire-altar. The groom and bride, the *purohita*, and the 'giver of the bride' then sit around it. The mango wood already stocked in the altar as firewood is now lit by the barber on instructions from the *purohita*. Ghee is poured into the fire by the *purohita* intoning the relevant mantras.

On instructions from the *purohita*, groom gets up and stands behind the bride who remains seated, her head covered by a folded sari other than the one she is wearing. The groom removes this additional sari to uncover the bride's head and fills the central parting of her hair with vermillion. During this short period, the bride covers her face with one sari she is wearing and once the vermillion ceremony is over, she for the first time in her life quickly covers her head with the same sari.

The bride and groom are virtually considered married with the completion of *sindurdan*, now get up to jointly participate in the final ritual of solemnization of the marriage, known as *lavachhidiyav* or scattering roasted paddy around the fire-altar. This culminating ceremony, which is obviously a fertility ritual, is cited in the Dharmashastras as *Rajahoma* and, is widely practiced in varying forms.

With the marriage so solemnized, the bridal couple returns to the wedding booth. Here the elder brother of the groom offers *ghoghat*, the veil. He places pator, a folded brocaded sari, over the head of the bride, and this is twice mischievously displaced by the groom and then allowed to remain on her head the third time. Finally, the bride's brother lifts her veil to show her face to the groom his party. On this occasion the groom's family gifts cash and ornaments to the bride's family. The

only parallel to this in the Dharmashastras is the rite of *parparasamikssana*, or 'looking at each other'.

Then the men and the women of the bride's family bless the bride. The men perform *durvakshat*, showering the bride with *durva* grass and rice grains, while the women perform *Chumaun* (touching the feet, knees, and shoulders of the bride with grains of rice and showering over her head). In all probability *durvakshat* is a parochialised Maithili pronunciation of the Sanskrita *durvakshat*. A comparable ritual, *ardraksataropana*, is mentioned in the Dharmashastras.

Once the wedding ceremony is complete, four or five women of bride's family go to a nearby pond to fetch a pitcher of water, which they place over the heap of paddy alongside the installation of the goddess Gauri on the floor of the *Kohbar-ghar*. The water is used for four days later to ceremonially bathe the newlyweds as a part of *Chaturthi*, the ritual of the fourth day, held in the *kohbar-ghar*.

With the completion of these rituals, the scene shifts to the *kohbar-ghar*. The bride and the bridegroom move to this nuptial chamber. As they enter, the bride is made to take a pinch of vermilion from a plate held by a woman of her family and to put a red mark on the painted motif of the bamboo grove on the wall, the bridegroom making the similar offering to the painted motif of the lotus plant. The ritual of the bride offering vermilion to the male symbol and the groom offering the same to the female one clearly relates to fertility not only in that it represents symbolic union of the male and female but also because the lotus plant and the bamboo trees proliferating in rich abundance, are themselves considered to be charged with growth and fertility. That is also why bamboo leaves are used in several rituals connected with sacraments of life, and why great significance is attached to the bride being bathed in the lotus pond one night prior to the wedding.

By the time this ritual is completed, it is almost early morning. The bride and the groom retire for a while to the *kohbar-ghar*, and after a few hours perform *Gauri-puja*. A figure of an elephant made from unbaked clay is placed on the floor in front of the central painted wall. On the head of the elephant a silver ring, a piece of wood, and an areca nut are placed, one over the other, and in that order from bottom to top. The bride, wearing an ivory ring around the little finger of her left hand, squats in front of the elephant, and while pressing gerli, a ring made of jute fibre, under her right foot, she takes vermilion powder, pinch by pinch, from a plate and sprinkles it thrice over the installation on the elephant's head. Finally she puts some vermilion in the central parting of her own hair. As she performs this ritual, the bridegroom, standing behind her, holds the hand with which she makes the offering. This ritual of *gauri-puja* is expected to be performed by the bride and the groom in the *kohbar-ghar* in precisely this way every morning as long as the bridegroom stays at the bride's home.

It is interesting to note that customarily the scene of the bride and the groom worshipping gauri is an integral part of the wall paintings executed on the central wall of the *kohbar-ghar*. Apparently the ritual of gauri-puja, as part of the vedic ritual in Mithila, echoes an ancient practice of *gauri-hara-puja* described in the Dharmashastras.

The most remarkable feature of the Maithil marriage ceremony is the ritual of the consummation of the marriage which takes place inside the *kohbar-ghar*. This is the feature that makes the Maithil marriage unique among the whole world and, provides the direct link with the ancient practice of marriage described in the Dharmashastras. Among Hindu today, the culmination of marriage is attained with the

completion of offering vermillion and the seven steps taken together by the bride and the bridegroom round the fire-altar; so much so that if the bridegroom died at the anytime after this rite has been performed, the bride is considered to have been widowed. Among the Maithil Kayastha this is not the case. Here, after the ritual of the bridegroom anointing the central parting of the bride's hair with vermillion and circumambulating the *vedi*, the fire-altar, the marriage is solemnized. It is not however, considered the culmination, which would occur only after the completion of the additional rituals of consummation comprising *Chaturthi*.

Significantly, the ritual takes place entirely in the *kohbar-ghar* whose walls are painted with images, motifs, and symbols indicating the union of the male and the female, denoting fertility, proliferation, and regeneration.

On the completion of ritual of 'three nights' begins the ceremony of consummation *Chaturthi*, or 'the fourth'. In the early morning, before sunrise, the bridal couple is awakened by relatives of the bride. The morning begins with ceremonial bath. The water used for this bath is that which was brought in a pitcher from a pond at the night of the wedding and placed on the heap of paddy on the floor of the *kohbar-ghar*.

Explaining the significance of yoghurt on this occasion a male Maithil Kayastha told me that yoghurt was a form of milk and according to a popular proverb of Mithila; 'Dudho nahao puto phalo' means 'bathe in milk and flourish with sons'.

Similarly, fish is considered auspicious in almost all the sacraments of Mithila, including that of marriage. It features prominently in the wall painting of *kohbar-ghar* and other pictorial contexts. The ceremonial evening meal of *Chaturthi* comprises received from the house of the bridegroom. The importance of fish on ritual occasion is attributed to its prolific growth and therefore as a symbol of fertility.

The bride and the bridegroom now spend the night of *Chaturthi* together in the *kohbar-ghar*. Traditionally, it is considered obligatory for the couple to consummate their marriage through sexual intercourse this night in the *kohbar-ghar* in the presence of all the deities and sacred symbols fertility of plenty and enshrined in the surrounding wall paintings.

With regard to *Chaturthikarma*, the *Sankhayana Griha-Sutra* says: Three nights after marriage having elapsed, on the fourth the husband makes into fire eight offerings of cooked rice to Agani, Vayu, Surya--- then he pounds the root of Adhyanda plant and sprinkles it into the wife's nostril... he should then touch her, when about to cohabit... then he should murmur... may a male embryo enter thine womb as an arrow into the quiver; may a man be born here, a son, after ten months.

The comparable living ritual of *Chaturthi*, as practiced in Mithila, leading to consummation of the marriage by sexual union clearly echoes the practice set out in the Dharmashastras, providing sufficient ground for us to believe that the living practices of Mathils are of ancient origin.

From the centrality and elaborateness of the rituals of consummation among the Kayastha of Mithila, one may quite safely assume that when these rituals were originally practiced, the marriage took place only after the couple had attained puberty, and the observance of *Chaturthi*, involving ritually obligatory sexual union, precludes child-marriage. On the other hand, the repetition of the ritual of 'three nights' followed by that of 'the fourth' at the bridegroom's home requires some explanation. Several elderly women informants of mine are of the view that in ancient time the marriageable age of girls was reasonably high (post-puberty), but sometime in the medieval period the custom of child-marriage was introduced. The child bride, after marriage, remained at her parents' home till she attained puberty. The actual

ritual of spending three nights together in celibacy and consummation on the fourth night customarily required to be performed only once, whether at the bride's or groom's home. But in the event of the bride and the groom being below the age of puberty, it became necessary to symbolically sanctify the marriage by observing the ritual of *Chaturthi* at the bride's home so that the bride or the groom could not get married elsewhere during the long period between the marriage and attainment of puberty. For these reasons a symbolic *Chaturthi* was observed by the child bridal pair to conclude the wedlock, and eventually when the bride attained puberty and came to live with the groom in his home the actual rituals of 'three nights' and 'the fourth' were again performed there.

The present day dual observance of the rituals, first in the *kohbar-ghar* at the bride's home, and then at the groom's can only be explained in terms of repetition of an archetype in a culture even when it has lost its functional relevance. Moreover, though the practice of adult marriage is becoming increasingly common among the Kayastha of Mithila today, the memory of earlier custom of child-marriage (prevalent till recently and still occasionally taking place) and dual observance of *Chaturthi* may be seen as confusion in the process of tradition adapting to change.

Although we got information about *kohbar-ghar* ritual but we find differences in 'three nights' and 'the fourth' ritual of Mathils according to their castes. Among Brahmins, Kayasths, Rajputs, Bhumihars, Khattris, and Sonars of the region a rite known as *Chaturthi* is also prevalent in which the bridal couple, after reaching the groom's home, spend three nights together in celibacy to consummate the marriage on the fourth night. But other castes except above mentioned do not observe 'three nights' and 'the fourth' ritual in their marriage ceremony in Mithila, but no doubt,

they observe the honeymoon (nuptial chamber) ritual i.e. sexual union between the bride and the groom in *kohbar-ghar*.

One typical tradition of Maithil Janjati, Danubar observes the ritual of poking sword into the nut (supari) during the marriage day ceremony and wherever the bridegroom goes he takes that sword with him. One of my informants told me that they believe that they are the offspring of Kshetri (warrior) and so they carry the sword as the symbol of bravery which makes them proud.

Although the purpose of *Kohbar* paintings is the same but the style of representation, form and structure, castes, place and time has changed the *Kohbar* paintings.

According to the differences in caste, the *Kohbar* also differs from each other within the same village, Archer's notes indicate that the figures in Brahmin homes were painted with broad areas red, blue, green, yellow and orange in the *bharani* or "filled" style. In contrast, he notes that most of the Kayastha wall paintings used only black and red, in *kachani* or "linear" style. Thus, in a 1966 article about the wall paintings, Archer's wife, Mildred, noted:

The work of the two castes has remained clearly distinguishable even though the houses may be in close proximity in the same village.... Brahmin paintings have a delicate meandering line that encloses areas of brilliant color- pink, green, lemon yellow, aquamarine blue, red and black. The figures, reduced to fantastic geometric or vegetable form, float in space amongst birds, animals and flowers...Kayastha paintings, on the other hand, employ only one or two colors- black and sometimes dull blood red. They rely on strong lines enlivened with hatching and spotting, and the figures, often set in panels, are firmly ranged in long processions round the wall.... Although similar in purpose and subject matter, the two styles are markedly distinct.

Their variety and inventiveness make them perhaps the most sophisticated and elegant of all popular painting.

Brahmin *bharani* vs. Kayastha *kachani* distinction in the wall paintings largely carried over to the early paintings on paper. It is still somewhat evident today, though many painters now combine the two styles.

The Archers' photographs also recorded the varied imagery of Mithila wall painting in the 1930s. Common subjects among both Brahmin and Kayastha wall paintings are the gods and goddesses: Shiva, Parvati and their son, Ganesh; Durga, Vishnu, Lakshmi and Brahma. Krishna is often seen with his flute in *kadam* tree, or with his adoring *gopis* (milk maids) by his side, or in the circular dance raas. We also see several of the ten avatars (dasavatar) of Vishnu. In addition to the five *purain*, Archer's photos included two wall paintings of *Kohbar* from Brahmin homes, painted for a "second marriage". The *Kohbar* is again an elaborated lotus, similar to the *purain*, accompanied by fish and the stylized bans. The *Kohbar* differs, however, in two respects. A vertical figure, with a stylized head at the top, thrusts through the large central flower. Beneath the entire figure is a check board image, said to represent the mat where, when the four-day marriage ceremony is completed, the marriage will be consummated.

Oddly, Archer did not leave a photograph of a Kayastha wall painting of either a *purain* or a *Kohbar*. Still, we know that Kayastha painted *Kohbar* because the British Library Collection included an out-of-focus photo of a Kayastha *Kohbar* drawn on a small sheet of paper. Archer describes it as an "aide memoire" for making future painting that a new bride would bring to her husband's home. Although the photograph is blurred, it is evident that the Kayastha *kohbar* is much more elaborate. Aside from all the elements of the Brahmin *Kohbar*, it is thickly surrounded by

images of the sun and the moon; many pairs of fish, birds, and snakes; a turtle, wedding pots (*Kalash*), and luxuriant foliage. The Kayastha aide memoire *Kohbar* also includes the figure of Brahma, Ganesh, Shiva and Nandi, *naina-jogin*, several other gods difficult to discern, and two characteristic scenes: the bride and the groom being transported in a palanquin, and bride doing *Gauri-puja*(offering vermillion to the goddess Gauri- a form of Parvati), in a bowl on the head of a clay elephant while the groom sits behind her.

Perhaps most striking in this regard is his photo of a Brahmin wall painting depicting a passenger train, with a steaming engine and a stationmaster, directly above an image of Vishnu and three of his avatars. Clearly, by Archer's time- and perhaps earlier- the traditional wall paintings were not limited to sacred or ritual subjects.

More generally, the Archer photographs demonstrated that different castes, different families, and different painters visualized and painted both sacred and secular images in recognizable, but distinctive ways. His photographs are evidence that already in the 1930s there was no single way of doing Mithila painting. In producing their paintings, artist drew on a traditional but varied iconography, their own lives, and their personal perceptions of the cosmos and the world around them. People who today argue that paintings of new subjects are no longer "traditional" need to recognize how diverse and dynamic the tradition was in the past.

In the late 1960s and 1970s when Brahmin women began painting on paper, they continued using both the natural and commercial pigments. At the same time some Kayastha women turned to fine-nib pens for their red and black ink line paintings. Others used a sharpened silver of bamboo with a wad of cotton wrapped around it just above the point to serve as a small reservoir for the ink.

When Dalit women began painting on paper in the early 1970s, they immediately developed two distinctly different styles and techniques. One style, employed by Jamuna Devi from the Chamar community and by Shanti Devi, a Dusadh, drew upon the Brahmin *bharani* paintings. Using a frayed bamboo “brush” they produce bright, colorful images of deities and of legendary and human figures in natural or commercial colors. Their paintings- stood out, however, by the use of a doubled line of cowdung (gobar) with lampblack dots between the lines, in the frames, and around the depicted figures.

The second Dalit style, initiated by Chano Devi and Urmila Devi and now by most of the Dusadh painters drew upon the small protective tattoos, *godana*, often seen on their arms and legs.

Although painting was women’s activity for centuries, with the advent of painting on page, a small but growing number of Maithili men have taken up painting. Since about 1980, one of them, Krishnanand Jha, has continued producing these images, as well as episodes from the Ramayan, paintings chronicling the murder of a boy from his village. Another man Gopal Saha, who also started painting around 1980, is known for his local scenes done in a distinctively bemused, even sardonic style. In the mid 1980s, Sarup Lal Paswan, along with several Dusadh men , began painting images from the adventures of their cultural hero, Raja Salhesh. The men’s paintings are more often of secular subjects or local or literary narratives.

As in the Archer photograph of the “aide memoire” for a *Kohbar* mentioned previously, paintings of Kayastha *Kohbar* on paper also include gods and goddesses, and protective figures of the sun and the moon. In the lower right corner one always sees the bride doing *Gauri-puja* placing *sindur* on a betel nut in a bowl on the head or

back of small clay elephant. By this offering, she is giving thanks to Gauri, a form of Parvati, for responding to her prayers since childhood for a husband like Shiva.

Traditionally these elaborate marriage paintings could cover a large wall, while varying in style and technique by caste and household as well as by the wall surface available and the skill of the painters, the core imagery seem to have remained quite constant, though as indicated, some new images have been added. Indeed, because a bride moves to her husband's village- often some distance from her own- images, styles and techniques learned from her mother or older relatives can quickly move from one community to another. As a result, while some eminent painters and cultural spokespersons- male and female have attempted to standardize what the *Kohbar* "should" look like, there can be considerable variation in *Kohbar* within a single village.

Aside from variation in the wall paintings of the *Kohbar*, many families are now commissioning painters to create a red *Kohbar* on paper- and then simply attaching it to the wall. This eliminates the singing and community participation in the construction of the painting and limits the opportunities for young girls to try out and develop their painter skills. Nevertheless, both artists and families claim that it is image that matters, and that the ritual value and auspicious power of the paper *Kohbar* is no different than one painted directly on the wall.

While the *Kohbar* has retained its importance and centrality, a number of painters are now abstracting parts of the complete whole. Some painters have simply elaborated on the central images of the *purain* or lotus itself, often surrounded by varieties of pond life, fish, crabs, snails, snakes, turtles, and the like. Others have gone one step further, producing what might be called "nature paintings" by depicting a pond's fauna, larger animals, a single fish, or simply trees. Still others, mostly

younger, artists are deconstructing the *Kohbar*, rearranging its key components or focusing on the figure of the bride doing *Gauri-puja*, though always with the groom seated behind her.

In effect, while many artists continue to paint more or less traditional *Kohbar*, other are now producing paintings that derive from or elaborate on elements of this core symbol, exploring how it can be seen and used as a reservoir of striking images. Thus, while cultural conservatives argue for a standardized *Kohbar*; in the hands of the painters, the figure appears to have long been- and certainly has been in recent years a subject of considerable variation and a source of artistic innovation.

In recent years, the initially differentiated caste styles, techniques and subjects have begun to merge. Several Brahmin painters, with their richly colored paintings, have followed the lead of the Dusadh and are now preparing their painting with a gobar wash. Many Dusadh painters are now using both commercial and natural colors and at times inserting images of Krishna, Shiva and even the *Kohbar* in their paintings. Likewise, many of the Kayastha painters who previously used line alone are now adding color to their work, and a few are taking up the gobar wash as well. A common vocabulary is spreading across the initially disparate components of Mithila paintings.

For the textual analysis, I have selected seven *Kohbar* paintings from different castes. For instance, three *Kohbar* paintings from Brahmin caste, three from Kayastha and one from other castes.

From surviving living traditions, and after several conversations with Kayastha and Brahmins of Mithila, it becomes apparent that the convention of elaborately painting the walls of the *Kohbar ghar* was primarily a Kayastha custom, and that the Maithil Brahmins adopted it from them in recent times. According to

Ganga Devi, a Kayastha, the Brahmins earlier merely placed five impression of the palm doped in rice paste on one of the walls of the nuptial chambers which they called *Kohbar*. Only vermilion was applied over the impression of the palm. In support of this, she pointed out that the lack of an older tradition of *Kohbar* painting, led Brahmin women to haphazardly paint only a few of the required sets of motifs and symbols, and that their *purain* had only ten, rather than fifteen leaves. She also pointed out that Brahmin betrothals and marriages are often took place in quick succession, leaving little time for the painting of an elaborate *Kohbar*: constraining them to merely put five imprints of the palm on the wall. Though the account appears to be somewhat biased against the art of the Brahmins, it might be pointed out that the Brahmin tradition of *Kohbar* painting was undoubtedly less elaborate and more casual than that of the Kayasthas. This, however, does not mean that the Brahmins are lesser painters.

Though their *Kohbar* tradition was less elaborate, they created intricate and attractive wall paintings to mark some samskaras, such as the sacred thread ceremony, the celebration of Durgashtami, or when family shrines were being set up or restored.

Mithila *Kohbar* painting has maintained an extraordinary vitality. At least since the 14th century, Maithil women have painted colorful and dramatic protective images of gods, goddesses, and icons of fertility and well-being on the interior and courtyard walls floors of their homes. Intended to provide auspicious setting for a family rituals, the images are found in the family deity room (*gosauni ghar*), and are especially elaborated in the bridal chamber (*Kohbar ghar*).

The *Kohbar* is the most complex and richly symbolic form in the painting tradition. The region's numerous ponds are thick with lotus plants. Rooted in the mud

below and rising through the water to a beautiful flower on the surface, the lotus readily serves as nature's counterpart to the human female's fertility and beauty.

Kohbar painting can be divided into three types e.g. the *gosain ghar* (special room for worshipping family god), the *Kohbar ghar* (honeymoon room) and at the corridor of the *Kohbar ghar*. In *gosain ghar*, there are paintings of the *kul devata* which Maithil believes that they are the protector of them. The real *Kohbar* is the *Kohbar ghar* where paintings provide a good and cordial environment for the bride and the bridegroom to spend happy marriage life. The outer wall of the *Kohbar ghar* has religious significance and almost all the paintings are more or less concerned with gods and goddesses who bring spiritual feeling between the bride and the bridegroom.

Talking about the outer wall painting of *Kohbar ghar*, there are various gods and goddesses in conjugal. In that connection, it is worthwhile comparing the three couples-Shiva and Parvati, Krishna and Radha, and Ram and Sita- as they represent divine constructions of very different relationships between men and women. In Mithila, Shiva and Parvati are taken as an ideal couple, unified through the complementary of their male and female energies and principles. As such, they are nearly always present in the marriage paintings, and often further idealized in the unitary figure of Ardhanarishwara. The picture of Ardhanarishwara also tells us that to be a complete human we have to be both male and female quality and attitude within us. Mathils also believe that if we understand the form of Ardhanarishwara there will never be conflict and violation between male and female and every type of discrimination can be eliminated.

Ram and Sita are very different. He is the great and good king, she the beautiful, faithful, and self-sacrificing queen. However, she was abducted and in captivity for years before she was rescued and neither Ram and his subjects were sure

that she had been faithful during that period. Like many human couples, their relationship was marked by love and commitment, but also by uncertainty and suspicion. Although she twice passed through innocence-proving trials by fire, in the end she was still banished to the forest. As we all know Sita was Mithila nari (lady) and she had great courage to endure the sorrow and she also symbolizes the great enduring capacity of Mithila nari. But nowadays people arise question about the same matter e.g. Sita had to endure injustice due the patriarchy society of Mithila.

Krishna and Radha represent yet another type of couple. They are the great romantic, passionate, even erotic lovers. They are also, however, both married to someone else. In comparison to the other two couples, in effect they represent illicit love. Taken together, the three contrasting couples- all frequent figures in Mithila painting- capture both the imagination and much of real world human experience.

In the last six years, growing numbers of women have been using their painting to critique their society. Feminist paintings are ubiquitous. Most deal with the constraints, heavy workloads, and responsibilities women face. Others point to the disparities in male and female education and medical services, with boys and men always receiving better treatment. Several of Rani Jha's painting deal with the constraints of marriage, but also gender specific abortions, problems of the elderly, and women whose husband have abandoned them. Dulari Devi has been doing paintings on the medical services offered to the rich but denied to the poor, and village headmen scoffing at women's concerns. At the same time, the young painters Roopam Kumari, Pinki Kumari, and Shalinee Kumari are producing powerful painting on bride burning, pollution, patriarchy, global warming, global terrorism, and the benefits and costs of capitalist development as well as paintings with positive feminist images, proclaiming new possibilities for women.

Mithila arts are the products of the artists' vision of the magnanimity and supernatural power of the divine and their perennial adherence with it. Art for them is a recreation of the divine image they have cultivated in their devotional minds. They show devotion on two kinds of power: supernatural power and patriarchal power. The epithets like obedience towards parents, chastity towards husband (*pativrata*), are common notions among Maithil people. Politically speaking, devotionism is also related with the creation of myth and exercise of power in Maithil society.

The Maithil women believe that their '*bhakti*' on divine power will protect themselves from earthly evils. With this belief, they try to express and recreate the higher reality of their aspired and loved gods in their own profiles, motifs, and arbitrary designs given by traditions. Their arts are the aesthetic manifestation of their implicit beliefs. Maithil women depict gods and goddesses to quench their yearning for security, longevity, and prosperity by appeasing and uniting with the virtuous spirits. This spiritual belief guides them throughout their lives.

A question can be raised: why the Maithil women have been painting the mud walls, floors, yards of their homes with different decorative designs of *Kohbar and Aripan*? A convincing objective co-relative behind this question could be their spiritual devotionism and belief. The performance of hereditary rituals or traditional ceremonies like making of *Kohbar or Aripan* can protect home from evil spirits and safety within its wall can be ensured. They believe that with this act malice, famine and disease is conquered and health, welfare of the inhabitants is secured.

The performance of painting in Mithila is an occasion of communal spiritual experience. The mood during the performance must be highly concentrated up to the point that the artist is supposed to be in a position of meditative trance. It is a kind of

spiritual vow or 'vrata' as usually the Hindus call it. Only in such condition, it is believed that a direct interaction occurs between the devotees and the concerned deity. The significance of performance mood is all that matters in this kind of 'vrata'.

In the words of K.S. Shivastav:

The artist ought not to work unless she is in meditative state. The peace emanating from the painting has often seemed the best proof of how seriously the artists take the period of meditation, which precedes their work. A woman's painting begins with her realizing the spiritual image of god in deep prayer and her finished product will therefore correspond to her inner attitude. (143)

Kohbar paintings are synonymous with female sentiments and fertility symbols.

Kohbar is the painting of ritualistic significance, especially during marriage ceremony. In fact, the *Kohbar* is a kind of marriage *Aripana*. What distinguishes the *Kohbar* from the *Aripana* is the field of action and contents or subject matters.

The *Kohbar* painting is a kind of social license for newly married couple to spend their nights together in union both physically and spiritually. Traditionally, the couple is expected to spend the honeymoon nights up to the fourth day of marriage celebration. The four days are a kind of mandate for successful intercourse in the presence of their guardian deities and sacred symbols of fertilities depicted on the walls of the *Kohbar ghar*.

Since the basic motive behind the *Kohbar* painting is to increase sexual desire and potency in both the bride and the bridegroom, the wall of *Kohabr ghar* is supposed to be more perfect if there are more and meaningful fertility symbols and erotic scenes. The scenes of love making are depicted in esoteric ways in the exotically decorated wall of the honeymoon room. These depictions and motifs have

no trace of vulgarity at all. It is so austere, sacred and licensed that it exhibits a true picture of matured social attitude towards sexual matters, ceremonial and celebrative mood in the background of a ritual. The implicit motive behind a *Kohbar* design in honeymoon room is to fulfill a sacred task of prompting the couple for happy and successful union resulting in meaningful procreation. Lydia Aryan also supports this idea with her apt definition:

The so called *Kohbar*, i.e. a composition centered on the Lingam (phallus) penetrating the Yoni (vagina), often depicted in the form of a lotus flower, surrounded by mythological scenes and various sexual and fertility symbols. (184)

Kohbar paintings are not limited within walls. These are also painted in paper as souvenirs. These artistic pieces are related with dreams and emotions of young girls. For instance *Kohbar* painted on papers is sent by a young girl to a young boy to indicate her marriage proposal. Similarly *Kohbar* made for wrapping different gift items suggests a girl accomplishment in the traditional art.

A typical *Kohbar* is a highly symbolic presentation of sexual intercourse between male and female. Often the images and symbols are related with fertility and genital organs of both male and female. The basic *Kohbar* designs and composition are heavily charged with tantric symbolism. The most popular and familiar composition of *Kohbar* is the one which depicts 'Shiva' in an anecdotal form of his eternally erect member called 'Shiva lingam' and his counterpart 'Shakti' is also depicted in the anecdote of 'Yoni' symbolized in lotus motif.

All these depictions are guided by a single motive i.e. to accomplish the real aim of marriage. A successful union between husband and wife is that one which is based on both physical and spiritual companion. Naturally the ornate tantric designs and the romantic scene in these marriage ceremony paintings are the celebration of

the marriage mood. These are social license for enjoying sexual life in a socially recognized manner. In traditional Hindu society of Mithila where sex is often treated as taboo, such culturally recognized treatment of sex is indeed an interesting matter of study. It is more peculiar when we take in account the fact that most women are involved in the performance of *Kohbars*. Truly, sex is an obvious matter and biological need. It is noteworthy that Mithila folk arts have given such priorities for a fundamental aspect of human life.

The basic design of *kohbar* seems vulgar. In fact, it is not so. This is a highly sacred and symbolic motif. An open lotus symbolizes female genital and fertility power. Similarly, six surrounding lotuses hint the endless possibilities of procreation offered by the eternal female fertility power. The seven circular lotus ponds (the central one and other six) motif is called '*Kamaldaha*' or 'lotus pond' motif. Actually the central motif, which bigger than other lotuses, is the yoni and it is shown penetrated by the lingam.

The artists prefer to draw either seven or fourteen leaves. In Hindu rituals, number 'seven' is often associated with divine power and first seven paces of the Buddha. The ceremonial performance of *Kohbar* is equally interesting. Only the matured women paint the honeymoon chamber (*kohbar ghar*). Their tradition and legacy gives them a kind of mystical creativity to design these motifs. The fourth day of honeymoon nights is the most awaited one. It is believed that on this very day the couple is supposed to have a successful intercourse. Then, so laboriously painted *Kohbars* are rubbed out because the Maithils think that particular ritual is significant only for a particular context or ceremony.

Mithila *kohbar* paintings only express their folk arts and ritual performance but they have also wide range to interpret them. For instance, we can take Marxism,

feminism, Freudian psychology and evolutionary theory with religious significance in *Kohbar* paintings.

When we carefully look at *Kohbar* paintings we find that lotus pond motif with small creatures like scorpion, crab, black wasp, snake, turtle, fish and big creatures like elephant and human being along with flora and fauna clearly shows that what Darwin had said in 19th century about evolution of human being from unicellular organism to multicellular organism, that is found in *Kohbar* painting which has been supposed to begin in 13th and 14th century during the king Janak dynasty. So *Kohbar* painting supports the view of Darwin theory of evolution.

When we analyze *Kohbar* painting on the basis of Marxism then we find that Maithil women believe that there are not only bourgeoisie and proletariat as such Marx had said in the world in which former always exploits the latter but they think that there are only two group in the world i.e. male and female in which male always exploits the female. So they hope that the day will come when female become as equal as male through their creative art and there will be no hierarchy between male and female. They will be treated equally.

Kohbar painting at the same time also supports the feministic point of view where we get that men always regard women as weak, emotional, secondary and uncreative in comparison to men but Mathil women has proved this view completely wrong by occupying the higher space in creative art like painting than the men and dominating men in this sector. Mithila painting is the proof of the women that they are not less than the men in any field if they would get equal opportunity like men. They are able to compete with men but society should treat women as men. New painters like Pinki Kumari and Shalinee Kumari have deconstructed the concept of male

chauvinism by showing picture of bridegroom always following the bride in the *Kohbar* painting.

Kohbar painting can also be interpreted from the Freudian Psychological point of view, according to this view, every male and female have suppress desire which is not acceptable to the society so they try to evoke those emotions by socially acceptable form i.e. dream and writing. Maithil women also express their suppress emotion by drawing *Kohbar* painting in which they draw lotus flower and bamboo grove as symbol of female and male genital organs respectively (figure1).

Kohbar paintings also present the concept of nine planets revolving around the sun that was actually the concept of Copernicus and later Gallileo in 15th and 16th century. How apt Mithila women are to draw not only religious painting but also scientifically proved view about the planets and the sun. (figure 2).

Another significant concept of *Kohbar* painting is the seven point (Chakra) in the human body. If we able to activate all those points then we get salvation like Buddha. For which every body is aspiring for. (figure 3).

The most significant and vital concept of *Kohbar* paintings are the nainajogin in the four corners of the wall paintings of *Kohbar*. Actually Maithil women have faith on the gods and goddesses and they think that their vital part of life i.e. marriage should be long lasting and happy so they perform different marriage ceremonies in the presence of their *Kul Devta* (family gods) regarding as spectators. (figure 4 and 5)

Figure 6 and 7 show the detail and elaborate *Kohbar* paintings in which figure 6 is the traditional Kayastha *Kohbar* painting where every element of *Kohbar* is placed systematically and harmoniously but at the same time figure 7 shows the

Kohbar paintings of the other castes where the new painters have placed the images and symbols randomly and it also deconstructs the idea of traditional paintings.

Regarding the cultural significance of *Kohbar paintings*, Dr. Rajendra Bimal says, “*Kohbar* paintings are the coordination between materialism and spiritualism” (270).

If we take this point on discussion we find that *Kohbar* paintings are the bridge to fill the gap between west and east. Truly speaking, both are incomplete without the help of each other. We cannot survive in the absence of materials (wealth) because our life runs with the help of money or matter but we should not be obsessed with this money minded concept but west is running after money (wealth) only so they have lack of religiosity. Similarly, the east is so engrossed in devotion on god or spiritualism that they think matter as nothing and facing the problem of fulfilling their basic need and so they are also incomplete.

If we analyze the *Kohbar* paintings minutely then we find that this gap between matter and spirit is maintained by showing symbols like parrot, fish, elephant, tortoise, the sun and the moon. In the one hand, they have all represent the material of the world. In the other hand, the very symbols have spiritual significance also i.e. parrot is the symbol of soul (*Aatma*), fish and tortoise are the symbols of incarnation of god Vishnu and elephant symbolizes the god Ganesh and undoubtedly the sun and the moon are regarded as equal to god in Mithila region. So it is clear from the above mentioned symbols that the *Kohbar* paintings have represented both materialism and spiritualism without which we cannot get peace and happiness in the world. If we are ready to say goodbye to the war from the world then we must understand the significance of *Kohbar* paintings which give message to the whole world, that is, humanity is the only weapons through which we can get peace in the world.

Therefore, the folk arts and ritual performance of Mithila have very important not only in Mithila but to the whole world. So we all should respect such a great art of humanity which teaches human beings about the fundamental question: why are we not able to support the human right to the world? Sometimes we fight for the name of terrorism and other time we fight for the name of religion to control each other by applying our material power, then where does humanity lie?

Have we ever brooded over this question? And we are pushing the world in the pit of the war day by day. So it is time to adopt the meaning of *kohbar* paintings and spread it to the rest of the world to save humanity and our beautiful earth from the further devastation.

But unfortunately, such a great art of *Kohbar* painting which is the gift of Mithila to the world is not taken proper care from the government of Nepal and India. Being Maithil myself, I visited the different places of Mithila to observe the condition of Mithila folk arts (Mithila painting) but I became very sad by hearing from most of Maithils that their art is disappearing day by day due to ignorance o government to their arts. Though condition of Mithila folk arts in India is somehow satisfactory but when we talk about Mithila folk arts of Nepal, it is on the verge of end.

The government of Nepal is completely careless about how to enhance or develop the Mithila culture. It seems that the government of Nepal is biased to marginal culture of Nepal. So Maithils life is degrading day by day and they are very poor in comparison to Indian Maithil. No other any INGOs andNGOs are paying proper attention to uplift the Mithila folk arts. As we all know that language and culture are the vehicle through which life of people get developed but Maithils are in hopeless condition. Nowadays, criminal activities are at the climax in Mithila region but the government of Nepal is deaf ear to it so Mithila folk arts are attacked by various sides.

I hope that though there are thorns around the Mithila folk arts one day will surely bring the blooming of the roses from the heart of all those thorns and Mithila folk arts will flourish well.

Chapter IV

Conclusion

The Maithils arts are a saga of continuous traditions and rituals, which never die. The charm of basic colors and forms, peculiarity in imagination depiction of a pleasant world within harmony of folk art, nature, ritual performance and co-existence of all the living beings have made Mithila arts 'timeless images'. Besides, folk arts are the most loved cultural heritage not only in Nepal and India but all over the world. The cultivation of Mithilka folk arts since ages is an artistic manifestation of the innate love for beauty, forms and colors in Maithil women. Besides, handicrafts are the integral part of the life of the Maithil women. For centuries, they have been preserving the secrets and charms of their most ancient and beautiful crafts. However, there are some problems, is that of generation gap and the problem of continuing the legacy.

Over the past forty years Mithila painting has demonstrated an extraordinary vitality and has evolved dramatically. An ancient wall painting tradition by women of two so-called high sub-castes, primarily depicting gods and goddesses and ritual icons, has moved from walls to paper. Paintings done by groups of women for family rituals have been complemented by paintings by individual to generate family income. Women of Dalit Community as well as small number of men, has become major painters. The god and goddess rooted in local ritual and cosmology are still present, but overtime, the subjects of paintings have rapidly expanded. They now include life histories, epics, legend and folklore of village life, marriage ceremony, and nature as well as critical commentaries on contemporary social and political events- local, national and international.

Techniques and styles of painting, initially associated with individual castes, are now broadly shared. Women and men from the wide array of backgrounds are now painting and for much wider range of motives: personal, spiritual, social, political, and commercial. Yet this rapid evolution and expansion and the incorporation of new ideas and meanings, Mithila painting remains immediately recognizable. It retains its coherence and its adherence to an unspoken set of rules, expectations, and aesthetics.

The new generation of daughters is attracted towards modernization rather than carrying the weights of rituals. Easy life and moderate thinking have become a motto of present generation. As a result, the old tradition of mud wall and floor painting is gradually dying out. On the other hand the new generation is attracted towards the machine products, realistic images of gods and goddesses they frequently see in photographs and movie. The charm of photographic and movie images have become more powerful than the traditional designs .A senior women artists comments on the changes in the thought of new generations: “My only granddaughter is more interested in movies, one of the woman said. She looks at my painting and asks ‘How can a triangle be a nose?’”

This question puts the age long profile of nose at the stake. A nose as triangular elongated shape is and unsophisticated, simplified geometric design of Mithila folk arts, which was shaped by the sub conscious of Maithili women, perhaps thousand years before. In fact, such a question about the shape of nose is an anecdotal hint for the disinterest of new generation. This is possible that one-day daughter may ask: How can such a ridiculous figure be a man, woman or an animal?

This is a severe assault of new exhibition value of co-modified art works upon the extinction of folk art. There is a strong need for guiding the new generation

before the things go worse .The new generation must be taught about the cult value of their ritualistic arts and the conventional profiles and motifs of the forms. What they must know is: a triangular, elongated shape is indeed a nose according to folk art tradition and their lies its identity and typicality in beings so. Similarly, the wide-open eye in front view e.g. in *naina-jogin*, feet inside turned view etc depicted in two-dimensional forms are part of the tradition despite the fact that they are the arbitrarily designed.

Moreover, the rapid expansion in mass media, urbanization, generalized education these factors also has tremendously affected the traditional values. Mainly the exposure of other belief systems (can be called cultural globalization) and intermingling have severely jeopardized the indigenous belief system and put the cult value of folks arts in the furnace of cultural mosaic. There is need to assert the significance of Mithila folk art against such cultural intervention.

There is a common problem with the symbols of all types (not only the symbols of folk arts)-i.e. symbols lose meaning in course of time. Regarding the visual symbols of folk arts, certain symbols defunct their connotation in course of time and they are turned into mere images. If not loss, an inevitable change in their meaning is sure to incur. Such defunctions of symbols naturally creates complexity and paradox in the formation of meaning.

This loss of meaning somewhat similar to the concept of metaphorical deconstruction discussed by Jacques Derrida in his seminal essay” White Mythology...” He exemplifies this loss with erosion of an exergue. Actually, an exergue is and inscribed or engraved coin in its both sides oct and verso. In course of time, the inscription erodes. As a result, its metaphorical or symbolic value is also lost. What remains in the coin now is merely its material value. This new value is only

the sediment or interest of the principal value. In simple words, the symbolic meaning of a metal coin is lost in course of time and a new material value exists in the eroded coin.

Similarly, in Mithila arts (since its thousand years old tradition) some primarily symbols must have lost their meanings and later they were established as secondary symbols or as images with new meaning or no meanings.

In the research, some individual examples were found regarding the loss of symbols .A female painter was asked whether she really knows the exact meaning of the swastika, her answer was not very clear. She said that they have been painting it for years because their predecessors painted it; it decorated the painting and makes it look beautiful. That means she uses the symbol ‘Swastika ‘ as a decorative motif without knowing what exactly does it mean. Maybe, she is ignorant but the real symbolic connotation of the sign is different. Originally, it is an archetypal symbol of Aryanism and its purity. There are other several examples of this model if we decipher the motifs and signs for their original connotation. As symbols go dim and defunct day by day, naturally the meanings carry paradoxes, which is the serious problem for the analysis of folk arts.

In the beginning chapters, we discussed that the real inspiration behind the performance of Mithila folk art is religious motives. Originally the paintings were performed as religious tribute to their deities. . But now, besides religious motives, the motives of Mithila arts are to depict their own lives, culture, ritual and surroundings. The subject matters become larger than lives. The Maithil women depict the scenes from their everyday life experiences. Some similar scenes are like marriage ceremonies (*kohbar* paintings), life cycle rituals (covering the rituals of the twelve months of the years), scenes from agrarian life like ploughing, working in the fields,

different festivities etc. The entirely subjective aspects of women life like pregnancy have also become favorite scenes. This is often depicted in the symbolic motif of pregnant elephant. Whatever the motives, paradoxes and problems may be, the folk arts of Mithila are the precious heritage of our folk culture. These arts have been nourished by the subjective imagination of Maithil women and the cultural input provided by the rituals, myths, beliefs and value system.

What we must take into account is the expressive aspects in these arts. These arts are so full of innocent expression, yet so full of life; utterly simple yet so full meaning; astonishingly human, yet so very divine. Indeed they are common peoples way of attaining gods, guided by the sense of aesthetics of beauty. Mithila arts are indeed the living legends of our time and the women artists are the legend makers in themselves, not only a part of the legend. Mithila arts will not die until unless there are the creative hands of Maithil women and their innate artistic impulse. Though, it is an obvious fact that they will be influenced by the expansion of globalization, and modernization.

As culture is never static, the cultural products like Mithila art will go with the flux of time. The dynamism and transformation of their artistic motives and subject matters can't be denied. The bottom line will be always the same, that is, Mithila folk art is more than an aesthetic manifestation of a traditional life pattern. Rather the myths, folklore and rituals are popular mediums for performing the arts as reverential tribute to folk art and ritual performance, the entirely subjective feelings of female artisans' lives.

In the beginning chapter we also discussed the history of Mithila folk arts and how it came to its present condition from wall and floor to paper. The contribution of

W.G. Archer and Bhaskar Kulkarni is unforgettable. The categorization of Mithila painting is also presented.

In the second chapter we talked about the different types of symbols and images used in Mithila painting (Kohbar painting) and how folk art and ritual performance are significant for Maithils. As we all know, painting is the visual text and we can read it by the help of colors pictures and the lines drawn to show some motives. Mithila folk arts have their own symbolical significance and cultural motifs, which is very close to the life pattern of the Maithilis that they spend. Every ceremony of Mithila folk arts has a strong inter-relationship with its religion culture and society. Almost all the Maithil people know well that why they use a particular symbol and image in a particular context. Mithila women use different things as symbols. For instance they use lotus, sindur, *fish*, shake, bans, as such many more to signify the folk art and ritual performance of Mithila.

In the third chapter we discussed the variation and interpretation of *Kohbar* painting in which we found that *Kohbar* painting differs in its form and structure though the purpose and theme are the same. Basically, Barhmin and Kayastha is the beginner of *Kohbar* painting but due to change of time other castes also started to paint *Kohbar* painting. *Kohbar* painting differs according to castes, time and places. Within the same village we can find the differences in *Kohbar* painting if it is drawn by the different castes.

Kohbar painting has not only ritualistic and cultural importance for Maithili but it also proves the scientific view about our world and so significant for beyond Mithila region. At the same time *Kohbar* painting also depict the universal appeal for co-ordination between material values as well as religious significance for every human and therefore, it supports the concept of humanity. It also informs the whole

world that there are three events in human life i.e. birth marriage and death. Marriage is the vital part for everybody's life and if we failed in spending marriage life successfully then our life becomes boring and despair. So Maithils are very careful about their marriage and they arrange opportunity for the bride and the bridegroom of different images and symbols to spend their marriage life successfully, specially honeymoon that is the most important time for the couple to know each other outwardly and internally.

To sum up, we can say that Mithila painting (*Kohbar* painting) is the heart of Mithila culture through which they speak the inherent significance of human life in every part of the world. But to celebrate or entertain honeymoon night successfully, a kind of arrangement through *Kohbar* painting we only find in Mithila in the whole world. Therefore also *Kohbar* painting is unique because such type of custom is typically Mathili consecration. It also spreads message that we should spend our marriage life harmoniously and so Maithilis life pattern of husband and wife lie in understanding, sacrifice and loving each other more than their life and it is quite different from the western marriage cultures so it is long lasting and happy in Mithila (Eastern culture).

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Glossary

Ahivat:	unwidowed blessedness or long life of husband
Archana:	A form of worship
Aripana:	Alepana or aipana is the Maithil version of the Sanskrit word Alimpone(a kind of ritualistic diagram like a Mandala, mainly painted on the floors for purification purpose)
Avadh Suhag:	Its symbolic meaning is husband like Ramchandra.
Bhakti:	devotional attitude and extreme faith on gods and goddesses
Bhumi puja:	worshipping the land or soil
Bat Vriksha:	Banyan tree Kalpataru: the tree of eternity is a mythical tree which grows in the royal garden (Nandan van of lord Indra)
Bodhisattva:	a being who has achieved nirvana, enlightenment.
Brahma:	creator of the universe
Chaturthi:	the fourth day or final day of marriage
Chhaith:	the name for the sacred performance,dedicated to the sun and observed on the sixth day of the bright half of the month of Kartik
Deepawali:	second greatest festival of Hindus, celebrated during the month of Kartik, festival of lights, prosperity, co-existence, brotherhood andso on.
Devi:	the great goddess of the Hindus.

Durga:	violent form of Shakti; destroyer of demons, worshipped during Dashain festival.
Durbadal:	Basil plant's leaf
Ganesh:	the elephant headed god, a son of Shiva, who removes obstacle to new ventures and bring good luck, the god of prosperity and learning.
Ganga:	the sacred river Ganga of Northern India
Gobar:	cowdung
Gosain ghar:	prayer room for worshipping the family or sibling god
Hajam:	Barber, a caste whose hereditary occupation is to cut hair
Hanuman:	the name for the 'ape' who was a great devotee and servant of the epic God Ram. He is worshipped as a giver of physical strength, son of Vayu.
Indra:	king god of heaven or gods' land, god of rain
Kama:	sexual power or urge
Kahar:	A caste of domestic servants; members of this caste are specialized in carrying Palanquin
Kalash:	It is an earthen or metal water jar frequently used to invoke deity during ritual.
Kamadeva:	the Hindu god of love, is a son of Vishnu and Lakshmi, husband of Rati.
Kamaldaha:	a motif found in Kohbar paintings, which means lotus pond

Kohbar ghar:	where the Kohbar is painted; mostly a honeymoon chamber, nuptial Chamber.
Kohbar:	a kind of Aripana, which is mainly drawn on the wall during marriage ceremony.
Krida:	sexual intercourse or playful acts
Krishna:	the divine hero of the 'Mahabharat' epic and incarnation of god Vishnu.
Lakshmi:	female counterpart (Shakti) of god Vishnu, goddess of prosperity and rich.
Lingum:	male genital organ, phallus
Latpatiya Suga:	a pair of parrots, also known as parrots of kama
Maithil:	people who live in Mithila region, a caste of Brahmin who falls in Panch Gaur division of Brahman.
Mandala:	mandalas originally refer to Buddhist tantric mandalas which consist of the cosmic entities.
Munj:	craft similar to Siki, weaved with the grass called 'Munj'
Mantra:	sacred vedic words
Marwa:	A place where a little thatched and well decorated cottage is built for the sacred performances like upanayan, vivah etc. at Janakpur, a marwa is sacred center where marriage ceremony of god Ram and goddess Sita was performed.
Mudekhai:	gift for viewing the face of the bride
Naga:	A tribe of deities who is half human, half snake.

Pan:	Betel leaves chewed with arecanut, lime and spices
Pandit:	learned, title of address for Brahman, recites sacred books.
Parvati:	daughter of Hemant (Himalaya), wife of lord Shiva
Pithar:	rice flour paste
Pooja:	worshipping
Purain:	It denotes lotus leaves
Purohit:	A priest, especially a domestic priest
Saraswati:	female counterpart (Shakti) of god Brahma, goddess of wisdom, knowledge and arts
Shakti:	female counterparts of Hindu gods; many times they dominate the gods in power.
Shiva:	one of the three major gods in Hinduism, destroyer
Shuva:	auspiciousness, good omen
Siki:	craft of making household objects like baskets, trays, boxes etc. by weaving a grass called 'Siki'.
Sindur:	red powder (vermillion) put on forehead by Maithil women.
Salhesh:	village of Dusadh caste
Tantrism:	religious sects in Hinduism and Buddhism, which believe in a mystical invisible power like Shamanism.
Tika:	a dab of paste that is applied to the forehead for religious or cosmetic purposes.
Tulsi:	A small Basil plant; considered as sacred and worshipped by the Hindu.

Upanayan:	the sacred thread ceremony, one of the sacraments of Brahman, Kshetriya known as Dwiz.
Veda:	Name of the religious text
Vishnu:	one of the three major gods in Hinduism, Operator, Preserver
Vrata:	a kind of spiritual vow for women and commitment for devotion and sacrifices for their male members of family.
Vivah:	the marriage ceremony
Yoni:	female genital organ, vagina



Figure-1

Kohbar Painting Showing Bamboo Grove Penetrating the Lotus Leaves.



Figure-2

Kohbar Painting Showing Nava Graha Motive.



Figure-3

Kohbar Painting Showing Seven Points (Chakra) of Human Body.



Figure-4

Kohbar Painting Showing Naina- Jogin Motive.

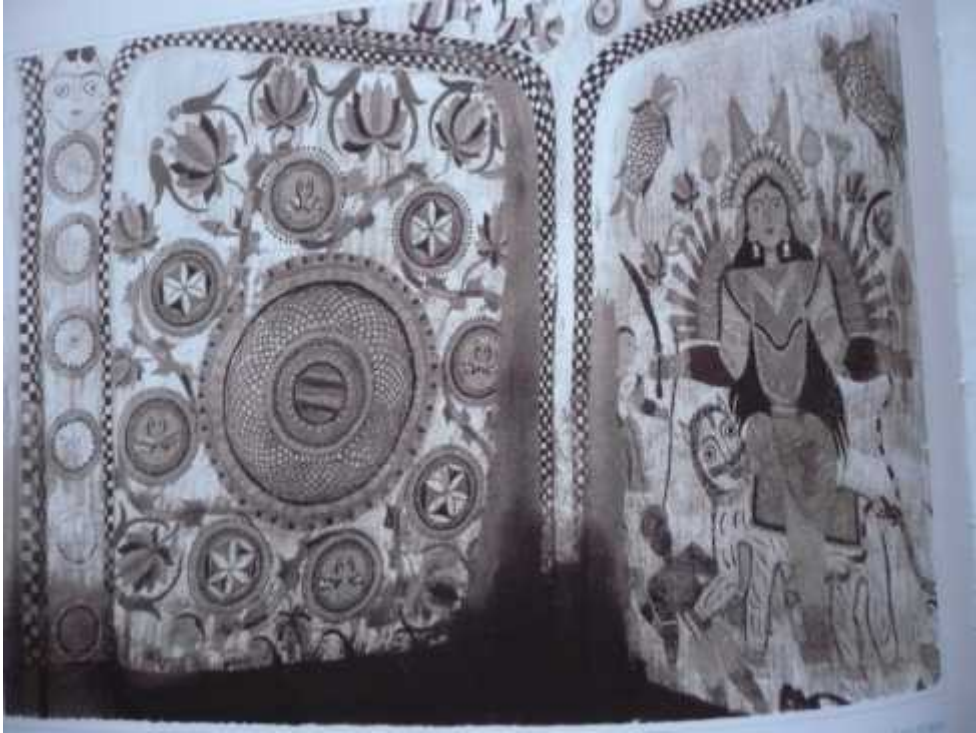


Figure-5

kohbar Painting Showing Religious Significance.

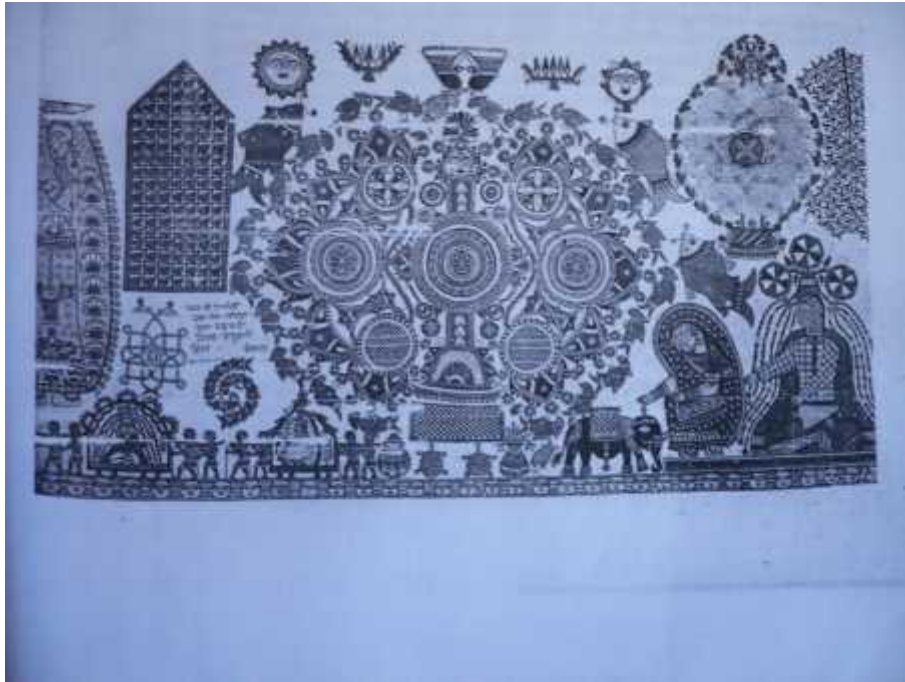


Figure -6

A Kayastha Elaborate Traditional Kohbar Painting



Figure-7

Kohbar Painting of New Generation