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**Kohbar Painting as Cultural Performance of Gender Power**

**A Thesis Submitted to the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University,  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Master of Philosophy**

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## **Abstract**

The thesis entitled “Kohbar Painting as Cultural Performance of Gender Power” endeavors to introduce, analyze, and illustrate the cultural significance of Kohbar painting of Mithila region from the perspective of performance, pre-performance, performing gender role, cultural performance and cultural dynamism.

The Kohbar painting is the glorious cultural heritage of Mithila region. It has its time immemorial history and significance for all the Maithils. It epitomizes 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, Maithil women prepare beautiful paintings for the bride and the groom to celebrate first night of their marriage from their early age. They think that marriage is not only a matter of sex and fun but at the same time it has its religious significance because male and female are counterparts 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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## **I. Kohbar Painting and Gender Power**

### **Introduction**

The precise etymology of the word Kohbar is very difficult to state. 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. Many symbolic images like the lotus plant, bamboo grove, fish, birds, and snakes in union are beautifully painted in the wall of their room. 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 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. This color is called '*Gairika*' in local dialects. No other color except this is allowed in this drawing, as that color is taken as auspicious.

Talking about this form of painting is almost impossible without pointing out the significant role women play in performing this and many more other forms of paintings in Mithila culture. It is believed that Mithila women are religious minded. They 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 inspire us to

lead happy conjugal life and consorts love one another more than their lives. They also draw the pictures of Laxmi, Saraswati, Durga (Bhagawati), at the Deepawali, the Shripanchini and the Dashain respectively. More than that, they also draw images of the Lords Ganesh, Kali, Hanuman and among them, there are also other mythical characters and symbols. Maithil women are so expert that they draw Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh through their painting to create and dramatize moments from birth to death better to say the whole activities of the universe.



Figure 1: Religiously Significant Kohbar Painting

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. Over time, aside from the growing diversity of people painting, the subject matters of the paintings have 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 drawn the attention globally.



Figure 2: Kohbar Paining of Lord Ganesh

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 performed by the women of all castes and communities, including the Muslims, on walls and floors, using the natural vegetable colors. In modern times some women talents have taken interests and translated 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.

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 (Coomaraswamy, 21).

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 - *Kohabaror Gahwar*" (37). For them their style is a kind of script through which they communicate with the male folks 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 benefit, some men have also jumped into this creativity but its essence and nature even today it is a women's creativity (Kashyap, 51).

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 has happened to Mithila painting also. Nowadays, modern Mithila painting has come 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 (Mishra, 55).

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 (Bimal, 46).

In Mithila culture a woman is supposed to possess performative power to paint on the wall, surface, movable objects, and canvas. They perform painting of images of gods, goddesses, animals and mythological characters. Needless to say they use materials such as lump of clay to execute such forms of paintings. They also perform their knowledge and skills in preparing objects such as baskets, small containers, and play items from Sikki grass. They perform beautiful embroidery on quilt popularly known as Kethari and Sujani. Most importantly, they sing varieties of ritual and work songs. Women perform these artistic activities along with their routine work. Such performances provide her a cultural height. These paintings and artistic objects are proof that they are creatively competent. They are thus singers, sculptors, painters and embroidery designers. Without talking about women, it becomes almost impossible to talk about the performance culture of the Mithila region.

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 performances 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 such sub-consciousness 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 (Srivastava, 10).

The glorious tradition of Mithila folk art is not very different from the story of folk art tradition. Ancient Mithila (also known as Videha or Tirabhukti) was a fertile land for art and civilization. Though initial inspiration for Mithila folk arts like other arts was religious, later their horizon of subject matter has 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. Their themes are larger than life. 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 naive 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 (Rakesh, 15).

As a cultural life practice of collective life pattern, Mithila art is often ceremonial. It means, originally Mithila arts are executed or performed only for ceremonial significance. And 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*) are inextricable part of successful marriage ceremony. While worshipping the sibling god (*Kid Devia*), the *Aripana* illustration in the prayer room (*Gosain Ghar*) is an essential part of the ceremony. Therefore, these arts have ceremonial and ritualistic importance.

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 *kohbar* paintings from her senior female members of family and society. Her mother or grandmother tends to hand it over to her as a legacy. As she teaches marriageable age she is supposed to use her marriage eligibility. On the other hand, she can use a marriage *kohbar* 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.

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 devotions, a typical Hindu way of acquiring gods, making of *kohbar* 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 Aripanu 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 line and form carries 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 (Jain, 63).

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 Maithil 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 (Thakur, 95).

The production of Mithila art is running through ages. Such a long chain of legacy is a process of mystification of the lives, belief and cultural paraphernalia of Maithil women. In other words, it is 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” (My Personal Interview). This matured remark also supports the process of legacy, mystification 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 artwork 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.

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.

Mithila folk art has been analyzed from various perspectives. Mithila folk art is famous in the world. Lydia Aryan has thrown light on religious aspect of Mithila painting. She remarks:

Four 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 form of worship and instrument for ritual and means of communication with gods and men. (183)

Whether it is ceremonial performance or commercial production of Mithila arts, the Maithil woman cannot remain silent. They communicate themselves with gods, nature, human beings and social realm in which they live.

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

We see many activities are combined in Mithila paintings, which gives special significance to the art. All the local, regional art emerge and held together by integral vision that makes life an art of single totality where life functions and creative art is inseparably mixed.

Dheereshwar Jha 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). Mithila painting is also known as Madhubani painting but they are different from each other in terms of originality. So Mithila painting has its own importance. 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)

An adolescent Maithil girl begins to learn *kohbar* paintings from her senior members of family. She can use a *kohbar* painting to propose and attract her sweater. Generally a *kohbar* painting is used to indicate a girl,s proposal of marriage to a young man, she is interested in.

Similarly, Maithil scholar Sudha Kant Mishra 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).

Mithila region is well known for knowledge and spirituality since ancient times but very few people know that it has enriched Nepal culturally.

J.J. has the following opinion 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)

*Aripana* painting is a serious religious exercise for Maithil women. Each woman expected to spend at least an hour or two at every festivals and religious ceremonies.

Critic Ram Dyal Rakesh has observed the feminist point of view in Mithila painting. He says “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”(10).

Mithila paintings have been produced in a large scale for commercial purpose. 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.

Mithila folk art has been analyzed and discussed from various perspectives. However, there are not enough works on the preparation parts of Mithila folk arts. How do the performers or the members of the Mithila community prepare, collect and use various required materials for the performance. Therefore, this present research wants to highlight the pre-performance exercises and aims to articulate a hypothesis that the real vibrant dynamism of Mithila culture should be seen not only in the performance form but also in the context of pre-performance and preparation phase of cultural and artistic exercises. To articulate this very theme the researcher has taken the pre-performance part of Kohbar painting. This has been done to highlight the real energy of Mithila women and point out a reality that we need to take care of the pre-performance part of the performance. Then only we can understand the dynamism of Mithila art and culture.

The dissertation has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter is introduction which deals with Kohbar painting and gender power. The second chapter is theoretical methodology which studies performance, culture as performance, pre-performance and cultural dynamism. Third chapter is the application of theory, which deals with a per-formative reading of Kohbar painting. Finally the last chapter is conclusion.

## **II. Cultural Dynamism vis-a-vis Maithil Women's Performance**

Illustrating the performance worldwide, Schechner surveys everything from Shakespeare to experimental theatre, urban happenings, cultural mimicry, gender and racial passing the pig-kill dance in Papua New Guinea and terrorism as a performance event. Schechner does not limit himself only on above definition. His innovative research on performance has created new critique of performing arts. He writes:

Performance, the broadest, most ill defined disc, the whole constellation of events must of them passing unnoticed that take place in among both performances and audience from the time. The first spectator enters the field of the performance the precinct where the theatre take place to the time the last spectators leaves. (71)

Quite differently Schechner here locates performance into a theatrical event, either proscenium arch or the street, riverside! Poolside; lake side theatre. The concept of the broadest, most ill defined disc gives the sense of broad performance limitation.

Similarly, Victor Turner writes that social drama is combination of various genres of cultural performance. He says:

I regard the social drama' as the empirical unit of social process from which has been derived and is constantly being derived the various genres of cultural performance [...]. My condition is that the major genres of cultural performance [from ritual to theatre and film] and' narration [from myth to the novel] not only originate in the social drama but also continue to draw meaning and force from the social drama. (92-94)

Here, the supportive term 'drama' emphasizes the multi generic nature of the examples presented as well as the dynamics of the examples presented belong to the

dynamics the materials and content of the performance. The social substratum is the constant formative factor that imbues the performance with meaning. It also structure the restrictive of the performance.

The skillful employment of language, song and movement and their related arts in strategic temporal frames suggest that there are no clear boundaries between aesthetic and social drama. Regarding such concepts of drama Turner further writes:

The aesthetic form of theatre is inherent in social cultural life itself, in what I call social drama” and Kenneth Bruke calls’ dramas of living’ but reflexive and therapeutic character of theatre as essentially a child of the repressive phase of social drama, has to draw on power sources often in habited or at least constrained in the cultural life of society’s indicative mood (12)

There are different voices in relating performance to the human life. It is an occasion when one’s energies are intensely focused on being, set apart, by various signals as distinct from ordinary routines of living. But as Victor Turner, James L. Peacock relates the performance directly to the social life. He points out that:

[...] A performance is not necessarily more meaningful than other events in one’s life. But it is more deliberately so. A performance among other things is deliberately meaningful. So, a performance is among other things is a deliberate effort to represent, to say something about something. (208)

About performance, some architects of Performance Theories say that performance is both process and product. Some theorists try to account for performance as something that happens emerges and grows in and through a process a

set of activities or specific behaviors. This process is most often described as emergent.

Elizabeth Bell quotes in her book *Theories of Performance*, Paggy Phelan's (1993) description about Performance:

[.. .] live performance disappears even as it is happening and it happens differently each time, [...] performance is also a product an accomplishment, an event [...] given as certain statuses as performances through framing an invitation to the audience to perceive them as somehow "especial". To this point here are some definitions that emphasize process and product [Performance a mode of communicative behavior and a type of communication event. While the term may be employed in an aesthetically neutral sense to designate the actual conduct of communication [...] marked and heightened mode of communication, framed in a special way and put on display for an audience. (16)

Performances mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body and tell stories. Performances of art, rituals, or ordinary life are made of twice behaved behaviors, "restored behaviors" performed actions that people train to do that they practice and rehearse (Schechner, 22).

Relating the very argument Diamond says:

Performance is always a doing and a thing done. On the one hand, performance describes certain embodied acts, in specific sites, witnessed by others. On the other hand, it is the thing done, the completed event framed in time and space and remembered

misremembered, embarked, interpreted and passionately revisited  
across a pre- existing discursive field. (1)

Similarly, some theorists suppose that performance is productive and purposeful. Performance causes, creates and produces both itself and things outside of itself. This productivity has many purposes that are often languages as functions, uses or intentions. This purposeful productivity is utilized to do a number of things for individuals, groups and culture. Mary Strine Beverly Long and Mary Frances Hopkins (1990-186-89) list eight purposes for performance aesthetic enjoyment, intellectual, inquiry, affective play, cultural memory, participatory ritual, social commentary, political action and psychological probe. The following definitions add to echo and enlarge this list. These definitions emphasize on productivity and purpose.

A performance may be defined the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other. To perform is to carry something into effect whether it is a story, an identity an artistic artifact, a historical memory or ethnography. The notion of agency is implicit in performance (Kapchan, 479). Performance is dynamic and generative, enabling difficult and controversy and poses that ultimately help us better articulate our objects of inquiry (Johnson, 6-7). In all cases a performance act, instructional in nature and involving symbolic forms and live bodies provides away to constitute meaning and affirm individual and cultural values (Stern and Henderson, 3).

To some extent, some theorists suppose performance that is traditional and transformative. Performance always makes reference to former ways of doing, acting, seeing and believing. Those references can uphold the status quo, critique the status quo, or certain the potential for changing the status quo by performing a new. The definitions below approach tradition and transformation in a variety of ways.

Performance becomes a site of transformation and even a paradigm for cultural resistance (Pollock, 657).

Performance is about doing and it is about seeing: it is about image, embodiment, space, collectivity, and orality: it makes community and it breaks community; it repeats endlessly and it never repeats. It is intentional and unintentional, innovative and derivative, more fake and more real (Jackson, 15)

A performance is a specific action or set of actions dramatic, music, athletic and so on which occurs on a given occasion in a particular place. An artistic performance is further defined by its status as the single occurrence of a repeatable and pre-existent text or score—finally performance can be defined as an activity which generates transformations as the reintegration of art with what is outside it an opening up of the field (Sayre, 103).

These several definitions demonstrate that the concept of performance that covers the whole human action from proscenium arch to social cultural drama and performance which generally supposed to have granted for the theatrical event does not have fix definition. It is in everywhere, in theatre, court, streets, riverside, lakeside, hospital, and farmhouse and in other places. But, it is clear that performance is an act, which represents the way of life. It is natural construct that is transmitted into culture and effects on festivals.

In mid nineteenth century the guiding method for new academic areas was positivism. Three schools of theory emerged in nineteenth century which were studying culture. First was the 'myths and rituals' led by Mircea Eliade who was interested in the phenomenology of religious experience and how myths and rituals are expressions of both sacred and profane in culture that provide for people. Second was the 'sociological school' led by Emile Durkheim maintained religion as a social



creation whose function is to preserve the welfare of a society. Third was Sigmund Freud anchored the psychological approach of incest and patricide necessitating rituals that appeal repressed desires. Across these approaches, performance was studied for its window into larger cultural structures like religion, politics, economics, language and identity (Beman, 127).

When specific performance genres were studied (like rites, rituals, dance, music) performance was often seen as a- fixed, static product evidence of cross-cultural similarities and indicative of universal needs and expressions. Heizinga' s play theory and Milton Singer' s cultural performance laid the groundwork for the performance turn in the study of culture which embraces performance as a paradigm for understanding how culture makes and remakes itself. Performance can be understood as the embodied processes that produce and consume culture [...] in performance makes things and does things (Hamera, 5).

Turner argues that a performance approach to culture (1) reflect dynamic cultural processes (2) enables possibilities between and within cultural structures and (3) provides opportunities for critique and transformation. Performances are constitutive of culture, [...] are epistemic [...] (Elizabeth Bell, 116).

Dictionary definitions of culture have changed through time. From Latin 'cultural', meaning 'cultivation' or 'tending', the growing of plants, crops, or animals is a very early meaning of the word. In 1882, Mathew Arnold proposed culture as the refinement of tastes and sensibilities. Arnold says that culture i the pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know [...]. The best which has been thought and said in the world. He holds western music, art, architecture and literature as his standard for civilization and for high culture (Elizabeth Bell, 116).

Edward Burnett Tylor says culture as that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. Raymond Williams (1985/1983) proposed that culture is ordinary, the common meaning and directions of a society (Bell, 116).

Clifford Geertz argues that culture is semiotic. Culture is a symbolic system unique to humans in which meanings are publicly shared and the collective property of a group (Bell, 117). John Boddey lists three components of culture what people think, what they do and the material products they produce. It is shared, learned symbolically transmitted cross-generational adaptive to the physical world and integrated with it (Bell, 117).

Wen Shu Lee defines culture as the shifting tensions between the shared and unshared acknowledging that culture is contested within and across groups (Bell, 117). A subjective approach to culture focuses on beliefs, attitudes and values held by individuals. Culture is conceived as mental constructions expressed in outlook anxieties, desires and subjective states of the individual.

A structural approach to culture seeks out the patterns and rules that hold a culture together. This approach looks for the symbolic boundaries evident with a culture created in language and how these boundaries among cultural elements are maintained and changed. Wuthnow's third category is a dramaturgical approach to culture which "focuses on the expressive or communicative properties of culture [...]" culture is approached in interaction with social structure (Bell, 117).

Culture is conceptualized as mental states, structures, social relations or an institution that is intimately linked to how culture is studied across academic disciplines and methods. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama advocate a dialectical approach to studying culture as heterogeneous, dynamic and contested

(Bell, 118). The tensions between the individual and the group, high and low, tradition and change, symbol systems and materials products, human biology and human learning, culture and communication will pull especially tight when the study of culture leaves some members out entirely.

In culture, there are different rituals. Culture is made of different rituals that are also performed and are performance.

Ritual performances exhibit all the same formal characteristics as play. All rituals involve participants who question the reality of what is happening.

According to Catherine Bell:

Ritual theorists have agreed on three characteristics of ritual activities.

First, ritual action is communal, in evolving groups of people who gain social solidarity through their participation. Second, the action is traditional and understood as carrying on ways of acting established in the past (94).

There are genres of ritual action Bell lists these genres: rites of passage, cylindrical rites, rules of exchange and communication rites of affliction, feasting, fasting and festivals and political rites.

Further, Bell explains five characteristics of ritual like activities demonstrating that reutilization is a process flexible and strategic:

[1] Formalization is the degree of formality [...] ceremonial costumes, language, gestures and movement occur on a continuum [...] a great deal about hierarchy, authority and symbolic messages. [2]

Traditionalism appeals to cultural precedents [...] [3] Invariance

‘emphasizes precise repetition and physical control (152) actions are performed exactly the same each time [4]Rule governance maintains

that ritual like activities are governed by rules that guide and direct the activities, especially by designating what is not allowed or acceptable [5] sacral symbolism appeals to supernatural beings. People and objects become sacred through the ritual acts or like acts that create them. (Bell, 128-129)

In short we can say that ritual or ritual like events do not exist outside of the performances that create them Victor Turner's phrasing "I like to think of ritual essentially as performance as enactment is not. Primarily as rules or rubrics ritual and ritual like actions abound in our daily lives as a way to give meaning and significance to experience" (Bell, 129).

Ritual events are also marked by joy fun, and anticipation: the Olympic games, Halloween birthday parties, Native Americans powwows (Roberts 2002). This is the room for play that is to do it yourself rituals. Lane Bergeson (2004, 66) writes:

Ritual celebrations knit us into history and ever into prehistory connecting humans to teach other over geography and time. Many still find connection in the rites and ceremonies passed down to them from the lives and faith of their parents and grandparents. [...] choose not to have children and change jobs or genders on continents, the rituals of the past feel increasingly outdated. [...] ritual is so deep though that people have begun creating their own. (Bell, 130)

There are some architects who consider that there are some elements of cultural performance. Milton Singer outlined five components of cultural performances, beginning with their formal characteristics. Each cultural performance can be characterized by (1) a limited time span (a beginning, middle and on and) (2)

an organized program of activity (3) a set of performers (4) an audience and (5) a place and Occasion of performance (Bell, 131).

The cultural stage is the place where the performance occurs—in homes, temples, public halls and community centers. Performances are created by cultural specialists, people who are especially recruited, trained, paid and motivated to engage in performances. Singer lists:

Priests, scholars, recites, story tellers, singers, dancers, dramatic performers and musicians [...]. These cultural specialists often serve as arbitrators of cultural tastes as well as make cultural policy [...].

Cultural media are the modes and forms of communication. The performance utilizes singing, dancing, acting and recitation as well as graphic arts [...]. [Through medial cultural themes and values are communicated as well as on processes of social cultural change. (Bell, 13 1-132)

A performance centered approach enables four features of culture to be highlighted: process, play, poetics, and power. Dwight Conquer good writes that “in stead of static structures and stable systems with variables that can be measured manipulated and managed, culture is transacted through performance. Culture becomes an active verb not a noun” (Bell, 133).

Turner adds interests in carnival, ritual reversals, tricksters, and the way cultural structures are manipulated, critiqued and changed in and through performance genres. Emergence of alternative communities are enabled through play. Poetics emphasizes the constructed-ness of culture. Power is especially important in light of Turner’s analysis of the social drama.

Cultural performances make an explicit or implicit claim about who is important, what is valued, how society ought to function and why this performance demands our participation. Every activity is examined as cultural performances that are accomplished that reflect the social processes.

Cultural performances are not just mirror, according to Turner, but active agents of change. Cultural performances provide moments to enact, comment, critique and evaluate the norms and values of a culture.

In conclusion, we can say the performances are constitutive of culture, not something added to culture after the fact: performances are epistemic, in that we learn to know our world through our performances, and performances are critical lenses for looking at and pushing back on culture.

### **Performing Gender Role**

Since the beginning of human civilization and culture; women remained sidelined as inferior and the “second sex” to borrow a critical term from Symon de Beauvoir while men were perceived as superior and god like. The structure of western as well as eastern society was built on patriarchal foundations. In fact, patriarchy is the rule by a man with privileged authority passing through male line from father to son. Patriarchy is associated mainly with two assumptions. The relations between the sexes are not only biological but also cultural and political that created vast hierarchy between them [men and women]. As the rulers of the state, men occupied superior position and they outlined the male centered framework of the society that assigned the women in peripheral position. Male dominated the society and maintained the splendid position of them that made them (male) as center and sidelined the women in his periphery or-margin. Women were considered to fulfill men’s desire physically and sexually. The identity of the women was in crisis that is their identity depended

on the identity of men. More explicitly the identity of the women was under erasure not only in family but also in literary writing of male, the intellectuals, philosophers and scientists all were men and represented women as subordinate to them.

Historically, women have been blamed for lacking the responsibility and intelligence. It was assumed that women caused all the troubles in the society. Eve excited Adam to taste apple and to open Pandora, the box of trouble. Conventionally women's position was supplementary; their roles were limited as devoted wives.

Women in almost every culture are subordinated to men and are responsible for domestic life. Individuals may in some respects mirror this cultural idealization but the ways in which they deviate will be masked or treated as deviance. While biology determines our sex; culture determines our gender (masculine or feminine). The word 'gender' refers not to our behavior as socially programmed men and women.

To treat gender construction as ideology is to say that it must be understood not as a real attribute of individuals but rather as an ideal animating and regulating the behavior of individuals or representation of masculinity and regulating the behavior of individuals. The representation of masculinity as active, independent, dominant, in control of emotions and of female as passive, submissive, nurturing, controlled by emotions, interact with a number of distinctions of interest and importance to philosophers. In particular, the distinctions previously mentioned between mind and body, reason and feeling and autonomy and attachment.

According to the stereotypes previously outlined, it is men who can be moral agents as they are independent and impervious to the feeling of others and capable of controlling their own. Women as more emotional beings, sensitive to other and

incapable of independent judgment are at best faulty moral agents. These gender roles as stated by Lois Tyson have been used very successfully to:

Justify such inequalities, which still occur today, as excluding women from sexual access to leadership and decision making positions in the family as well as in politics, academia and the corporate world paying men higher wages than women for doing the same job (if women are even able to obtain the job and convincing women that they are not fit for careers in such Areas as mathematics and engineering. (84)

Patriarchy by definition, promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to men. In patriarchal literary and philosophical endeavor the women have not been mentioned largely as men have been. The philosophers from the classical time to modernism have excluded the issues of women. The women were excluded and overshadowed in their literary and philosophical expression. Elizabeth Spelman in her work 'Women as Body', ancient and contemporary views studies, argues:

What philosophers have to say about women typically has been nasty, brutish and short. A page or two of quotations from those considered among great philosophers contributes a veritable litany of contempt. Because philosophers have not said much about the women and when they have said it, have usually been in short essays or chatty agenda which hasn't been considered to be part of central body of their work. [...]. (367)

In patriarchal framework of the society women have been victimized psychologically and physically. The society since the remote past, established certain restrictions and dictated certain rules over their performance because of which men dared to show leadership and imposed his authority over females. Though, there is not



such natural rule to justify the dichotomy between male and female, socially and culturally men are provided superior position to rule, oppress and manipulate the women. Men with their socially constructed superiority through that they have rights to shape women physically, sexually and mentally. Unanimously the men have become the director of social mechanism. Naturally, they are destined to be inferior and complement to men. More clearly, they remained usurped dominated invisible insignificant and worthless beings to male chauvinism and supremacy.

Men have manipulated intellectual field and shaped socio- cultural values and systems of institutions. They enjoy the power of naming, defining and exploring. He is authorized to analyze, describe and direct female. A woman is destined to be judged from masculine value system. Even the woman herself perceives the world from the viewpoint because she is forced to accept the male dominated social values in which male has privileged position.

A woman in patriarchal society is always treated as passive, helpless and powerless victim in the hands of man. To be male is synonymous with strength aggression and the will to dominate and do violence to others. To be female is synonymous with weakness passivity and will to nourish the lives of others. Such categorization of men as superior being and women as inferior being is the cause to all forms of domination in the human society.

Some feminist writers and critics argue that females are restricted within certain restraints in male- dominated social reality. Mary Wollstonecraft says, “women are taught to be sentimental and loyal to men” (131). Virginia Woolf says that socio- economic factor is totally in favor of men. Hence, women are oppressed socially and economically. To Behavior, either the women are tamed by decorating angelic qualities or they’re ostracized by imposing demonic tags: Kate Millet, in her

book, *Sexual Politics* says that the gender is psychological concept. She also used the term patriarchy to describe the course of women's oppression. In this way, patriarchal patterning of the society is at work to oppress the women in manifold situations. On the other hand, gender studies or performing gender role exposes how gender is an assembled and assumed costume rather than an essential expression of one's sex. This ideas drawn from gender criticism will be applied to show how it proves gender is socially constructed rather than biologically and naturally and how the women are being victim of it or how the women in our society, community, country especially in Madhesi community of Nepal have been suppressed, how they are oppressed, how they are made toy like things, how they are played in the hand of the very community's males and how they've been entrapped in the culture, social cultural norms and values making them as the devotees, and how they are thrown in the culture, rituals, values, norms to follow, obey that have been made by males, for the benefit of them, for the advantage of males and whole community. Thus in the next chapter, an attempt is made to study and analyze Kohbar Printing of Mithila from the light of theoretical perspective developed above.

The word 'pre-performance' is the combination of the words 'pre' and 'performance'. 'Pre' is a prefix used for verbs, nouns used to form words that indicate that something takes place before a particular date, period or event and is opposite to the prefixes 'anti' as well as 'post'. Therefore 'pre-performance' is related to preparations or preparatory actions. Preparations are the arrangements are done before doing some thing else as a form of preparation.

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, "Dynamism" refers to the energy and enthusiasm to make new things happen. According to *Collins Cobuild*

*Advanced Learner's English Dictionary*, dynamism is related to a situation, system and fact that it is changing in an exciting as well as dramatic manner.

As time changes, society and environment are also subject to change. All these things have huge impact on the cultural and the art around that area. Civilizational and cultural terms such as political subjugation, oppression or patronage, human psyche, individual and collection human endeavor, positive as well as negative political environment have influenced cultural dynamism.

Kapila Vatsayayan, in the very first paragraph his essay *From Interior Landscapes into Cyberspaces' Fluidity and Dynamics of Tradition* reveals:

Implicit in the theme of this volume is the question of the flow of tradition and, in a large and deeper sense, of a civilization and culture, not only as linear, historical progression, but also in its dynamics of being multi-layered and multidimensional at any given moment of time. The conceptual framework of the volume anchors culture within historical and political process. (1)

When the time changes, we have to change our life style, tradition, culture, mentality, civilization etc. In other words time is dynamic and so are our culture and tradition.

To show how performance, culture and women came as intricately embedded issues, the researcher wants to explore the kohbar paintings in the next chapter. Therefore, several theoretical issues explained in this chapter will be more meaningful issues in the involvement of women in the making of kohbar painting. Though this ends with the marginalized roles, women are given in the patriarchal society, the coming chapter will argue that there are certain rituals and cultural theories which

without women's involvement cannot be performed. Thus, women make one of the most dominant forces of the performance culture of Mithila.

### **III. Women and Pre-performance Part of Kohbar Painting**

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.

The precise etymology of the word Kohbar is not known. The word is popularly used in Mithila region (Janakpur and Madhubani) Eastern Uttar Pradesh and almost throughout Bihar. It denotes 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 pictures or images are painted inside 'Kohabar' the bridal chamber where the newly married couple resides for at least four days. Why and how is done this? While performing such paintings how do the members of the women prepare themselves? How do they prepare materials? How do they come together, share knowledge and pass them across generations? Why are such occasions of preparation important to understand the dynamic role of women playing in the Mithila cultures? Why should not one only look at performance part of the culture but also should concentrate on the pre-performance and women's role on occasions? This research wants to answers these questions. It argues that such a painted room should not only be seen as a place where the couples celebrate their honeymoon. Not should they seen as site of very powerful symbolic images like the lotus plant, bamboo grove, fish, birds, and snakes in union. No doubt at symbolically, these images present fertility, sexual ability and proliferation of life. But important thing is that the ladies of the bride's family and those of the locality draw such images collectively. The members of the community participate, and perform knowledge and wisdom and give continuity to the Mithili culture.

The Kohbar 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 and so on. Mainly, the village women of Mithila are the main performers of such paintings. Originally, it is a folk art and is practiced by the women of all castes and communities, including the Muslims, on walls and floors, using the natural vegetable colors. During the modern times, some women have transformed this ages-old art as they have been found executing such wall paintings in canvas. Art critics believe that 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.

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 solemnization of marriage.



Figure 3 : Performance of *Gauri-Puja*

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 powered 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.



Figure 4 : The Performance of *Matkor Ritual*

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 *pratisarabaudha* or amulet-tying.





Figure 5 : Performance of *Pratisarabaudha* or *Amulet-tying* Ritual

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.



Figure 6 : Performance of *Kumraun* Ritual

While returning home, the bride is made to sit at the entrance of *gosain-ghar* (the domestic shrine of the family deity) and make offerings. It 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 Dharnashastras is comparable to the *pasahin* ritual of Mithila.



Figure 7 : The Performance of *Pasahin Ritual*

The walls of *kohbar-ghar* are painted with images, motifs, and symbols indicating the union of the male and the female, denoting fertility, proliferation, and regeneration by singing the following song:

Hold the vermilion in fertile kohbar

Bride's face is more beautiful than vermilion

Her nose ring too is beautiful than Kohbar

Her ear-ring seems to be more beautiful than nose-ring

Her sari seems to be beautiful in fertile kohbar

Her ghunghat seems to be more beautiful than her sari.

What is the color of bed-sheet?

What is the color of mat?

What is the color of door?

New bride, new groom.

Red bed-sheet, red mat, red gate

New bride, New groom

Various colors of saris have been brought,  
 Whereas step-wife has been brought for me.  
 New bride, New groom.  
 Various colors of saris will be useless,  
 Step-wife will live longer and,  
 New bride New groom.

Father Dasrath plants a mango-mahua sapling  
 Mother Kaushalya waters the sapling  
 Oh hail the auspicious occasion  
 Our son is going to get married,  
 Before he marries his betrothed  
 He will marry a mango-mahua sapling  
 After which he will marry his betrothed  
 Oh hail the auspicious occasion  
 This sapling will give him blessings  
 the dhol and mridhanga reverberate in all four directions  
 Oh hail the auspicious occasion  
 The Tree of Life concept is sacred to most  
 cultures. Jasleen Dhamija, an Indian writer  
 and expert on the arts and crafts of India  
 elaborates that the significance of the tree of  
 life “transcends conscious reality, touching the  
 subconscious and beyond. Even if the original  
 meaning is obscured, the symbol retains an

unconscious link with our primeval memory



Figure 8 : Celebrations around the Tree of Life

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, notes:

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 (10).

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 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.

Archer did not leave a photograph of a Kayastha wall painting of either apurain 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.



Figure 9 : *Kohbar* Paintings of *Kalash* Motive

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.



Figure 10 : Traditional Kohbar Painting



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.

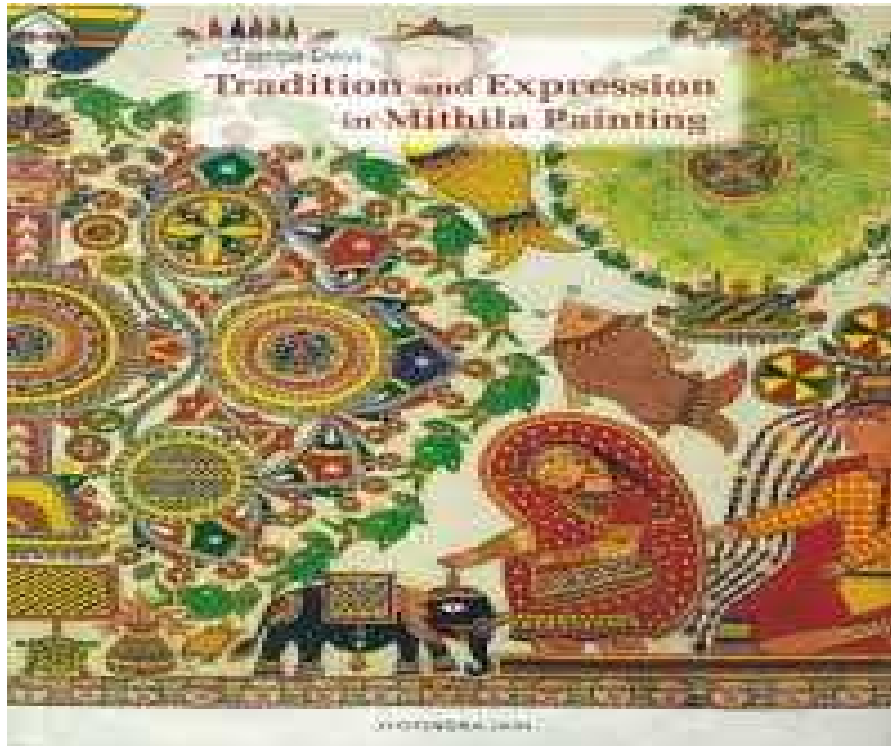


Figure 11 : Kohbar Painting of New Generation

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.

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 impressions 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 puruin had only, rather than fifteen leaves. She also pointed out that Brahrnin betrothals and marriages are often taken 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 Brahinins, 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 14<sup>th</sup> 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 bond. 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.



Figure 12 : Kohbar Painting of Religious Significance

Ram and Sita are very different. He is the great. Sita is the beautiful, faithful, and self-sacrificing queen. However, she was abducted and in captivity for years before she was rescued and neither were Ram nor his subjects 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 nan. 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.

For some years, growing numbers of women have been using their painting to critique their society. Feminist paintings are ubiquitous. Most of them deal with the constraints, heavy workloads, and responsibilities that 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 Rooparn 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, devotionalism 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'. K.S. Shivastav reveals:

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*. Some symbols used in *Kohbar* paintings are:

### **Lotus Motif**

The 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. 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.

The entire kohbar 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 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 *Rain 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 for women.

### **Lotus pond or Kamaldaha Motif**

Similarly, lotus pond or kamaldaha motif of Mithila symbolises female sexual organs for women in kohbar painting. 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 or the bamboo grove motif, metaphorically represents the bridegroom, the symbolic male counterpart of the female motif of kohbar painting for Maithil women. 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 oils it to the painted symbol of a bamboo grove and the groom to the lotus plant.

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 symbolise 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.

### ***Lalpatia Suga* (A Couple of Parrots)**

Literally, 'parrots in union', or the motif of two parrots flying in circles, chasing one another in erotic play is painted in virtually every elaborate kayasth *kohbar-ghar*. Such type of motif represents the union of the bride and the groom for women in kohbar painting.

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 Lalpatia 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. The latpatia suga also symbolizes the religious permission to intercourse the bride and groom.

### **Bidh-Bidhata Motif**

The motif comprising two bids symmetrically facing each other in a beak to beak union, is usually painted above the central lotus plant, almost like a pinnacle by Maithil women in kohbar painting. 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.

*Bidhata* is a manifestation of Brabma, 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 by Maithil women in kohbar painting.

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:**

It 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:

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)

So, Maithil women give special importance to betel, choona and katha in kohbar painting.

### ***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 by Maithil women in kohbar painting.

### **Patia (Mat) Motif**

Patia is a thick reed mat woven from Moihi, a fast multiplying reed that grows wild in the ponds and ditches of Mithila. It 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 is 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 by Maithil women.

### **Nag-Nagin (Snakes Male-Female) Motif**

The symbol of entwined male and female cobras is representative of the union of the bride and the groom for women in Mithila painting. 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 Parshvanalha is surrounded by a 'thousand hooded snake'.

(Sahasraphana parshvanalh) 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 mollified 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 Maithil women can paint 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 as auspicious when any Maithil people go out of their houses. The great poet Tulsi Das compares fish with pure mind and innocence.

### **Tortoise (Kachhuwa) Motif**

The tortoise is the symbol of long life in kohbar painting for Maithil women. Every Maithil woman wishes 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 one of the forms 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 the Lord of love and beauty. So, parrot is the symbol of love for Maithil women in kohbar painting. 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 for Maithil women in kohbar painting. 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. It is believed 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, loyalty and richness for Maithil women in kohbar painting. 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 and is used widely by Maithil women in kohbar painting. It is used as mantra and images for auspiciousness and peace. It is believed 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 combination 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 better fortune.



### **Snake (Sarpa) Motif**

In Mithila Snakes are widespread and important figures in Mithila ritual cosmology and narrative paintings. Maithil women always accompany images of Shiva. They are said to be the basic supports of the universe. 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 kohbar painting of Mithila.

### **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 symbols of long life. For Maithil women, sun and moon both are equal to god and goddess respectively.

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 special importance. 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. 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 in kohbar painting for Maithil women.

### **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 Mthila 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 non-living 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 for Maithil women in kohbar painting.

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 and reveals:

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. 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 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> 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 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 suppressions emotion by drawing *Kohbar* painting in which they draw lotus flower and bamboo grove as symbol of female and male genital organs respectively.

*Kohbar* paintings also present the concept of nine planets revolving around the sun which was actually the concept of Copernicus and later Galileo 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. Mithila women draw not only religious painting but also scientifically proved view about the planets and the sun.

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

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.

In the traditional Kayastha *Kohbar* painting every element of *Kohbar* is placed systematically and harmoniously but at the same time 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 that “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. So they are also incomplete.

We are now in a position to analyze that the *Kohbar* paintings treat matter and spirit in a very poetic manner. Through symbols like parrot, fish, elephant, tortoise, the sun and the moon, *Kohbar* paintings provide us mood and meaning of our conjugal life. Marriages are not made only for sleeping together. It is much more than this. By going through the marriage ceremony, the bride and bride groom are also going through a journey that is highly spiritual, social and cultural. These symbols there are mantras for the newly wed couples to control their mind and relationship. On the one hand, the symbols represent the material of the world. On 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.



#### **IV. Conclusion**

For centuries, women in Mithila region have been preserving the secrets and charms of their most ancient and beautiful crafts. However, there are some problems those of the 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 village life, marriage ceremony, and nature as well as critical commentaries on contemporary social and political events- local, national and international.

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.

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. May be 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.

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.

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.

Kohhar 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 Kohbar paintings and the activities associated with this are very crucial to understand the role of women in the domain of Mithila performance cultures. Women become the most dominant force in giving continuity to the ages old performance cultures of this region. They pass on the knowledge, wisdom and life force. They teach each other. Girls and grandmothers come together and address the corpus of knowledge and arts, philosophy and fun, which are integral parts of the Mithila culture. Therefore, the occasion of performing Kohbar paintings, the marriage ceremony is much more than a family and individual affair. It is an important moment when the flow of Mithila performance culture passes through one body to another, one mind to another mind and so on. Thus Kohbar painting, Mithila cultures, Mithila women, Mithila families and Mithila performance cultures become

inseparable. One cannot be discussed without addressing the other. Thus, the Kohbar painting itself is a metaphor of the living and dynamic performance culture of Mithila.

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## Appendix 1

### 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, coexistence, brotherhood and so 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.   |
| Karnadeva:   | 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.  |
| Kobbar:         | 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 parrotsofkama   |
| 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 Hernant (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.   |
| Saihesh:   | 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   |

## Appendix II



Photo No. 1 : Kohbar Painting



Photo No. 2 : Tree of Life up Peacocks



Photo No. 3 : Mokha Bhitichitra



Photo No. 4 : Salhesh Lok Katha



Photo No. 5 : Mokha Bhitichitra



Photo No. 6 : Salhesh Lok Katha



Photo No. 7 : Map of Mithila

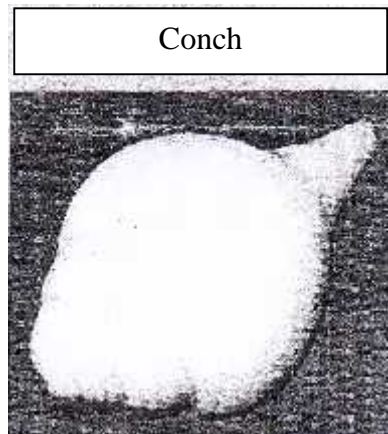
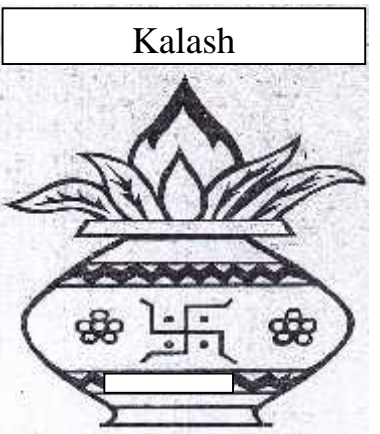
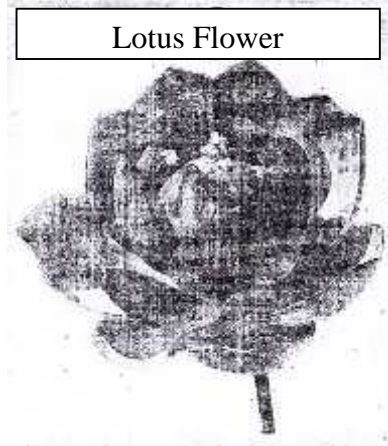
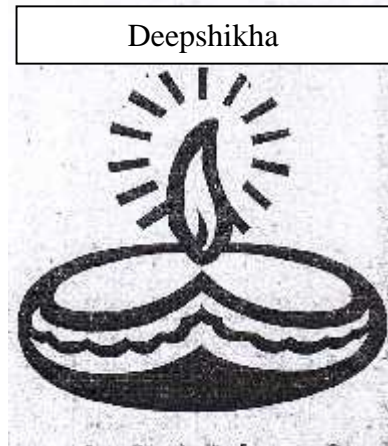


Photo No. 8





Photo No. 9 : Kohbar Painting of Bamboo Grove and the Lotus Leaves



Photo No. 10 : Kohbar Painting of Kamaldaha - Cosmic Pond



Photo No. 11 : Kohbar Painting of Parrot (Suga) Motive



Photo No. 12 : Kohbar Painting of Naina-Jogin Motive



Photo No. 13 : Kohbar Painting of Fish - Cosmic Pond



Photo No. 14 : Kohbar Painting Showing Elephant Motif