

Chapter II

Mithila Art: A Discursive Analysis

2.1 Introduction

We have argued in the previous chapter that Cultural Studies, particularly in India, has largely remained pre-occupied with the study of mass-mediated cultural expressions and have not paid enough attention to ‘folk’ forms. The discussion on ‘folk’ art has largely been carried out within the disciplines of Folkloristics and Anthropology.

Recent studies in the West have pointed out the blurring of distinction between various cultural forms- ‘folk’, ‘popular’, ‘fine’/ ‘elite’, and ‘mass’. In the context of art, Ray B. Browne has said that “Perhaps the best metaphorical figure for all art is that of the flattened ellipsis, or lens. In the center, largest in bulk and easiest seen through is popular art. On either end of the lens are high and folk art... All four (including mass art) derive in many ways and to many degrees from one another, and the lines of demarcation between any two are indistinct and fluid”¹.

Russel Nye opines, “Popular art is folk art aimed at a wider audience, in a somewhat more self-conscious attempt to fill that audience’s expectations, an art more aware of the need for selling the product, more consciously adjusted to the median taste. It is an art trying to perfect itself, not yet mature”².

Cultural Studies and Sociology of Culture/ Art, therefore, need to respond to these blurrings of categories to make sense of forms that have been thought of as fixed and fossilized, such as ‘folk’ art. We shall return to this question later.

Since Mithila art has been categorized within ‘folk’ art in the literature, in this chapter, we shall look at the writings on ‘folk art’ in India since the nineteenth century, as a discourse that was framed primarily by Orientalism, Romanticism and Nationalism. It

critically investigates the category of 'folk art' and its relationship with other categories such as 'fine', 'commercial', 'industrial', 'tourist', 'indigenous', 'primitive', 'vernacular', 'everyday', 'ritual', 'popular', 'decorative' art, 'craft' and so on. The Nationalist project in India framed 'folk art' by constituting 'Indian tradition' through it. It was later recast as 'handicrafts' by the independent State and was categorized within 'Commerce'- with a view to foster economic development through production on a large scale. Finally, recent discourses argue for the blurring of distinctions- from different positions and in different ways.

The second section of this chapter examines the literature on the Mithila art form, since the first article on the subject was published by W.G. Archer in the 1959 edition of the art journal *Marg*, in order to understand how various discourses- the State, scholars, curators, patrons and finally the artists themselves- have framed this particular art form and what have been its ramifications.

2.2 'Folk' Art in the Nationalist Project: Colonialist, Orientalist and Romanticist Perspectives

The aim of the nation-making project of a colonized country is to construct the image of a glorious nation and to instil self-confidence in the colonised, to break free from the image that the colonizer creates and imposes upon the colonized. In order to do so, heterogeneous elements of the imagined nation's political and social fabric is 'yoked together by violence', many a time, literally. In historiographical traditions, this (epistemic) violence is performed by the privileging of cultural expressions of dominant groups over those of marginalized ones. The idea of the unified nation rests upon distilling 'a' culture from among many diverse ones.

Indian nationalism, as Partha Chatterjee³ has famously argued, was not a derivative discourse, a project based on unimaginative imitation of the Western model of nationalism but a negotiation with it. He has also pointed out that during the process of nation-making, an old binary was reconfigured which created a divide between the

spiritual and the material domains. While the former symbolised women, the domestic/private sphere and India (colony), the latter denoted men, the public/ outside realm and the British (colonizer). Needless to say, this was not just a process of creating an innocuous binary but a tool in the hands of Indian nationalists to fight the war of independence at an ideological level, since they knew that in the material realm it was difficult to fight the might of the colonizers. This battle was thus fought by discursively glorifying India, identifying women with the ‘wounded’ but spiritually superior (nascent) Indian nation, and valorizing the ‘folk’ and the ‘tribal’ as people and cultures who have preserved India’s glorious past in its ‘purest’ form, unsullied by Western modernity.

As Roma Chatterjee has formulated in the context of the ‘folk’, “folk carries the connotation of a primordial essence and is seen as the expression of an unselfconscious and timeless community life... [T]his is influenced... by the nationalist imperative of constituting a new community (the nation) that must transcend all other community allegiances- whether of family, caste or religion”.⁴

The nationalist discourse, with its primitivist leanings, compressed India’s entire past and its rural and tribal communities, valorised peasant communities as upholding the ideals professed by Hindu myths and as the living repositories of ancient customs and ethics and constructed tribal communities as embodiments of a hoary, distant past. It systematically revived and repositioned select cultural productions through monographs, newspapers, museum displays, Republic Day parades, government initiatives, such as departments and ministries related to Indian ‘folk’ and ‘tribal’ art and handicrafts. These revived idioms and discursive practices have played a very important role in imagining and representing a particular idea of the Indian nation⁵.

In the second half of 19th century Calcutta, as a response to the West’s categorization of Indian art as ‘merely decorative’, nationalists of various hues began articulating on the issue of Indian art. The responses varied enormously- some advocated experimenting with fusing styles of various cultures, including Western with Indian ones to come up

with and claim an Indian Modernist art, while others resurrected indigenous ‘folk’ traditions as art that was more abstract and symbolic than Western Modernist art.

One of the first cultural commentators was Anand Kentish Coomaraswamy, who interpreted aesthetic principles enshrined in ancient scriptures such as *Satpata Brahmana*, the Rig Veda, and many others in a way that could counter the hierarchical divisions of ‘classical’ and ‘folk’ art in the Western art historical traditions, which were being used to denigrate Indian artistic traditions. For instance, in 1956, Coomaraswamy⁶ wrote about the difference between *marga* and *desi*- categories respectively used to denote sacred art or art made for the divine (higway), and that used to denote art created for the purpose of entertainment of the masses (byway). For him, *marga* and *desi* did not refer to ‘classical’ and ‘folk’, ‘high’ and ‘low’ but to ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’. Roma Chatterji argues that “unlike the Western case, he finds that ‘folk’ art falls within the category of *marga* or high art”⁷ and avers that for Coomaraswamy, “universal and eternal values are always embodied through the sacred. Therefore, since Indian folklore speaks exclusively in the voice of the sacred, it must necessarily embody universal values. Rather, it is the courtly arts like Mogul miniature painting that deal with worldly and secular themes and must, therefore, be characterized as *desi* or parochial.”⁸ According to Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Coomaraswamy was trying to signal towards the distinctiveness of the Indian aesthetic tradition- its spiritualism, in the face of colonial criticism that Indian art is only sensuous and decorative.⁹

Further, the ‘folk’ or village, as we have discussed earlier, got associated with the inner domain of the nation, unsullied by Western modernity. In this discourse, the village people were considered to be inheritors of a tradition that goes back to a timeless, hoary past. In this context, Coomaraswamy says that, “folk memory” serves “the purpose of a sort of ark, in which the wisdom of a former age is carried over (*tiryate*) the period of dissolution...”¹⁰

William Morris’s Arts and Crafts Movement in England, which had started as a reaction to the hyper-industrialization and mechanization of the West post-industrial revolution,

when machine-made had relegated hand-made to the margins, made a deep impact on Indian nationalists such as Gurusaday Dutt, so much so that after Dutt returned to India, he devoted himself towards the resurrection of 'folk' traditions of his native Bengal. His revivalist programme for the 'folk' dances of Bengal, for instance, was directly inspired by his exposure to the All-England Folk Dance Festival at the Royal Albert Hall in London in 1929. After he came back from London, in his words, "I resolved to devote myself on my return to the conservation of the village dances of my province"¹¹.

Gurusaday Dutt's perception of the 'folk' was however, very different from that of Coomaraswamy's. 'Folk' for Dutt did not refer to a singular, unified aesthetic tradition. He believed that different regions in India had different styles and should not be subsumed under a singular national style. Folk was representative of the culture of Bengal, rather than that of India and the culture of Bengal for him was an amalgamation of pre-Aryan as well as Aryan culture. Dutt made a distinction between the "aristocratic art tradition that he called the '*patroned marga*' (courtly or aristocratic way) and the '*sahaja marga*' (the popular and spontaneous way) represented by the work of village artists who created artistic forms within ritual and in the activities of daily life"¹².

In spite of the differences in their perspectives, Dutta and Coomaraswamy have something in common- "the folk, whether defined as a *jana* or "a unanimous community" in Coomaraswamy's terms or as a 'race culture' in Dutt's terms- are unaffected by institutional forms of inequality based on class, caste or ethnicity"¹³. Both emphasized that the "folk" represented the living traditions of a *Hindu* India.

2.3 'Folk' Art in Independent India: Secular, Democratic, Emblematic of Unity in Diversity

Nachiket Chanchani has carefully studied the discourses spawned by the cultural commentators Gurusaday Dutt and Ajit Mookerjee and have detected in their writings a "valorisation of the ritual arts of rural India by blending orientalist, romantic and meta-physical perceptions of earlier generations of cultural commentators (such as Anand

Coomaraswamy), with the developing nationalist vision of an independent India”¹⁴. For Gurusaday Dutt, the visual idioms of rural India were grounded in the religious beliefs of the Hindus. Ajit Mookerjee, on the other hand, carefully repositioned the hitherto valorized ‘folk’ arts from their position as the living core of the Hindu nation to the regalia of a secular state.

Ajit Mookerjee was one of the next generation cultural commentators, writing during and after the independence years. He dropped Coomaraswamy’s and Dutt’s vision of ‘Indian folk arts’ as being ‘Hindu folk arts’ in favour of the view that ‘Indian folk arts’ were the voice of the diverse faiths and beliefs that make up independent India.

On the other hand, Mookerjee looked at visual traditions of rural India as ‘primitive’ and lamented the loss of a once-existing glorious tradition. In a manner reminiscent of the West’s appropriation of African ‘tribal’ art, the ‘folk’ arts of rural India were viewed as sole representatives of a critically endangered primordial culture. The religious objects of this culture thus needed to be salvaged and to be quickly repositioned as ‘cultural artefacts’. The folk arts of India were thus re-positioned as the regalia of the secular, democratic state.

After India became independent, the state started its programme of salvage and preservation of the ‘folk’ arts by establishing the All India Handicrafts Board in 1952 and the Crafts Museum in 1956. Mookerjee went on to become the first Director of the Crafts Museum and argued that ‘Indian folk arts’ composed of diverse voices and faiths that make up the independent Indian nation, marking a departure from Coomaraswamy’s and Dutt’s vision of the ‘Indian folk arts’ as ‘Hindu folk arts’.

It is important to note that in all these discourses, the category of ‘folk’ was constructed as a tool for forging the idea of a nation, erroneously assuming that the ‘folk’ is a homogenous entity and stands outside the relations of power, domination and hierarchy. Most of the later nationalists such as Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay valorized ‘folk’ arts and crafts on the lines of Gandhi. Mulk Raj Anand, in an essay talks about Gandhi’s

theory of art, where Gandhi seems to be re-iterating views on art which are coterminous with his views on Swaraj and village self-sufficiency. For Gandhi, women and village craftsmen in India have worked with their hands and hearts and drawn and painted since generations, as against European artists who are not connected with people and live surrounded by machines. True art is one that is practised by ‘people’ and is connected to the ‘ground’- the basic unit of society- the village. Gandhi, Anand tells us, “had sensed the instinctive vitality of the hands and hearts of the people... [A]nd that he wanted an integral art from below rather than an art imposed from the top by a few individualist artists cut off from the people”¹⁵.

2.4 Folk Art as ‘Art’: Articulation of Individual Consciousness

A major shift in the discursive domain of Indian ‘folk’ art came about once it entered into the market as commodities. The articulation of individual voices from within so-called anonymous ‘folk’ communities came to be represented by patrons and writers who were invested in infusing fresh blood in the dying craftsmanship of the yore. Pupul Jayakar’s role in the commoditization of folk arts of various regions, including Mithila, and the prominence she gave to individual women artists in her writings changed the way ‘folk’ art had been perceived by then.

Around the late 1980s, Jyotindra Jain began articulating his position on the ‘folk’ arts and artists in a sustained way. He has relentlessly argued to consider ‘folk’ artists at par with ‘modern’/ ‘fine’ artist. He wrote in the biographical account of the renowned Mithila artist Ganga Devi, “It is customary for art-historians to trace the evolution of the work of individual artists who belong to mainstream modern art. On the other hand, the creative expression of rural and tribal artists has always been seen by most of them as a product of ethnic collectivity whose authenticity lies in the remoteness of time and space. Given this context, it needs to be emphasized that this study is the first of its kind, tracing the growth of a rural artist’s work from the early paintings done as learning exercises until the time she ventured out into narrative and autobiographical work, and inventing, whenever required, a new pictorial vocabulary”¹⁶.

This quote from the introduction of the book sets Jyotindra Jain's agenda in no uncertain terms- the appeal to perceive 'folk' and 'tribal' painters not as part of an undifferentiated culture but as 'artists' in their own right. This book was followed by an exhibition entitled 'Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India' that Jyotindra Jain curated in the capacity of the Director of the Crafts Museum, New Delhi. The exhibition was accompanied by a book by the same name, where he discusses similar issues, this time incorporating, apart from Ganga Devi, biographies of four other 'folk' and 'tribal' artists.

The book also signals a departure in terms of challenging the old binary between the 'folk' and 'classical'/'fine'/'modern', which had been maintained by the art-historical and state discourses. His subsequent writings questioned the location of 'folk' art within the subject of 'handicrafts', which is associated with commercial development. He also questioned the agenda of the entire edifice of the 'arts' which he saw as being designed to promote the modern academy-trained artists who work in studios, sell through organised galleries and are regularly covered by the media. He recounted in a personal interview, how while selecting artists for participation in the Fourth Triennale of International Art that was held in New Delhi in 1978, the Lalit Kala Akademi rejected the works of Ganga Devi and Jivya Soma Mashe (renowned Warli artist from Maharashtra), on the grounds that "such art does not have anything in common with contemporary art". It is in the background of this kind of not just an innocuous division but a structural hierarchy that Jain wrote this book and curated the exhibition 'Other Masters' later.

In the 'Other Masters', Jain further argues the case for considering the 'folk' and the 'tribal' artists as 'modern' artists or 'masters'. He disparages those who see any deviation in the iconography of these artists as 'degeneration' and 'loss of authenticity'. He derides the idea that "if the artist isn't anonymous, then the art isn't primitive".

However, the story of a 'tribal' artist Jangarh Singh Shyam, who finds a place in this book, raises significant questions vis-à-vis the kind of argument that Jain seems to be putting forth. Jangarh was hand-picked by the cultural activist Swaminathan in the 1980s,

during one of latter's visits in the forests of Madhya Pradesh. Swaminathan took Jangarh to Bharat Bhawan- a museum and cultural centre that Swaminathan had set up. Jangarh invented the now famous Gond style of art living for years in the precincts of the Bharat Bhawan.

“...[C]oming from a tribal background”, writes Jain, “at a young age [Jangarh] enters a city and works at a modern multi-arts complex, making an argument... that ‘not only it is possible for an *unselfconscious* mind to survive in an alien, if conducive, environment, but to grow as well; differently, but creatively nonetheless.” This statement acquires an intense sense of irony if we juxtapose it with the circumstances in which only a few years after Jain published this book, Jangarh ended his life in mysterious circumstances, while working in a museum for Indian ‘folk’ and ‘tribal’ art located in Japan.

Like many ‘folk’ and ‘tribal’ artists before him, Jangarh was invited by the museum in Japan to paint for them. After working for several weeks, under strict time schedules and supervision, he reportedly felt suffocated and expressed his desire to return. The museum officials responded to his request by allegedly taking away his visa and other important documents. Finding no escape from the situation, Jangarh wrote a couple of letters to his wife back home in desperation, urging her to contact none other than Jyotindra Jain, who, he believed, in the capacity of the Director of the Crafts Museum, could extricate him from that veritable prison. This incident raises significant questions about the implications of Jain’s arguments. What does the making of a ‘modern’ artist that Jain has passionately advocated with regard to the ‘folk’ and ‘tribal’ artists entail? Can artists rooted in closed communities survive in a completely different ethos? What does the sense of alienation that Jangarh felt in Japan represent, if not, what James Clifford had referred to as, the ‘epistemic violence’?¹⁷

2.5 The 'Folk' Art of Mithila

In the previous section, we have looked at the ways in which the nationalist impulse framed 'folk' art as a symbol of a pristine, democratic, timeless Indian tradition and culture; orientalist and Romantic discourses (both western and indigenous) have framed it as 'primitive' and primordial; and new art historical discourses, which are arguing for an equal space for indigenous art traditions at par with modern art, are framing 'folk' art as the 'contemporary'. In this section, we shall look at the literature on Mithila art and delineate the various frames.

2.5.1 Colonial Interpretation

W. G. Archer's article¹⁸ in 'Marg' was the first scholarly text on the subject, where he briefly dealt with many significant aspects of the painting tradition, viz. themes, styles, its performance during rituals such as wedding, its temporary nature owing to the impermanent mud wall surface and so on. He argued how the painting tradition is an expression of a *caste* form, rather than that of an individual- "the paintings spring from individuals but they transmit that much larger concept, a caste style... the effort of an individual to project not a private but mainly a caste sensibility". The reasons that he cites for this are three- conservatism in Mithila society and concomitant reluctance on the part of women to innovate; painting's association with rituals; and 'circulation' of women within the region of Mithila. He then went on to elaborate on the themes and motifs of the paintings. His interpretation of the use of symbolism in the *kohbar* motif- that of bamboo piercing lotus leaves as signifying copulation between the bride and groom¹⁹- caught the fancy of later scholars, who retained this interpretation in their work and even went as far as claiming Mithila society as matriarchal because of the freedom with which women depicted sexual organs! Anthropologist C.H. Brown later challenged this by pointing towards the fact that this interpretation was based on interviews with the *men* of the region and that women interpret the symbolism differently.

Even though Archer's article itself contained an image painted by an *Ahir*, he seems pre-occupied by those of the Brahmans and Kayasthas- "Of the castes residing in this area, Maithil Brahmins and Maithil Kayasthas are those in whom painting is most highly developed. It is true that Rajputs, Sonars, Ahirs and Dusadhs also do painting and it is almost as if painting is endemic to the region. But in these latter cases, the styles are more fragmentary and it is likely that the custom of painting developed later- Maithil Brahmins and Maithil Kayasths setting the fashion and isolated households of other castes following their example. *In its broad essentials Maithil painting is the painting of Maithil Brahmins and of Maithil Kayasths.*"²⁰

Archer imagined the entire repertoire of Mithila paintings as primarily the cultural articulations of the Brahmanas and the Kayasthas, even though his own article contained the photograph of a painting done by an artiste of the *Ahir* caste. The historian Neel Rekha later interpreted Archer's pre-occupation with categorizing Mithila paintings on the basis of castes as being "influenced by the colonial academic scholarship which emphasized chiefly on castes in an attempt at presenting a fragmented India".²¹ She further argued, "[T]his colonial attitude of providing caste a disproportionately important place even in the evaluation of a folk art form, in turn, blinded him towards the cultural accomplishments of other communities"²². Though Rekha's criticism of Archer's attempt to establish the supremacy of the Brahmana and Kayastha styles over those of the other caste-groups is fair, her argument against employing caste as a category of analysis betrays the sentiments of a reactionary nationalist. Archer departed from the framing of "folk" arts as 'democratic' by nationalist cultural commentators and talked of Mithila art as a product of mutually exclusive caste- groups, viz. Brahmanas and Kayasthas.

'Mildred Archer's book,²³ published 26 years after W. G. Archer's article, too, only talked of the Brahmana and the Kayastha styles and entirely ignored the painting practices of other communities. Most of what Mildred wrote in her book is a reproduction of Archer's observations and commentaries. However, she provided some additional information that are significant. For instance, in the 1940s, wealthy families of Mithila, started to look down upon the practice of doing wall painting and instead took to sewing,

embroidery and knitting. This perhaps was a way to emulate Victorian femininity that was becoming the ideal in a scenario where Western educated men needed 'companionate wives'. The task of performing the paintings during marriage and other ceremonies was accomplished by employing 'lower' caste *kumhaars* (potters). Mildred then goes on to provide the names of local men who had accompanied Archer in his search for paintings after the earthquake relief work was over. These men worked as cultural articulators and interpreted for him various motifs that women painted, among others, the controversial motif of the *kohbar*. She also talks about how Pupul Jayakar had written to Archer enquiring about the paintings after reading his article and had visited Mithila once in April, 1956 only to find that the painting tradition had dwindled and later during the drought in the late 1960s to introduce the program of livelihood in the region.

2.5.2 Privileging 'Upper' Caste Styles

J.C. Mathur's 1966 article entitled 'The Domestic Arts of Mithila' argued for considering the origins of the painting tradition in the homes of the 'Kulin' - i.e. the 'upper' castes. He wrote, 'The *Kulin* art of Mithila has refinement, continuity and a literary base which one cannot expect in the tribal art or in the folk-art of the village people'.²⁴

Echoing Mathur's argument, Upendra Thakur, a historian of Mithila, wrote in his 1982 book titled 'Madhubani Paintings', "... the more sophisticated art is practised by the upper caste women, particularly the *kulina* Brahmana and Kayastha ladies. The scheduled caste and backward people express their artistic instincts in certain utility articles, some of which they prepare for use during festivals in upper-class homes. The former is more prolific and important".²⁵ Further he asserts, '[i]n Mithila the women of all communities paint, but the paintings of the women of the Brahmana and Kayastha communities are unique'.²⁶ Further, commenting on the representation of the 'masses' by Brahmin and Kayastha artists, he opines that "the pictures of the people belonging to the lower strata of society carrying plantain, curd and fishes... do not represent the exploited, suffering, downtrodden fraction of humanity; on the other hand, they form an integral part of that cultured society which ardently believes in the welfare and happiness of all (*sarva*

bhavantu sukhinah) and seeks to promote it by all means. Disparities were no doubt there, but at the same time it cannot be doubted that the entire structure of this society stood on mutual trust, welfare and compassion for one another, definitely indicating the progressive outlook of its mentors”.²⁷ Thakur’s narrative does not only privilege ‘upper’ caste painting traditions over others but more dangerously, represents the art forms as well as labour of the ‘people belonging to the lower strata’, as *consenting* entities of a system, based on the principle of caste-based servility. In other words, the appropriation of their art and their labour by the ‘upper’ castes is justified by constructing the narrative of a self-sufficient, interdependent and co-operative socio-economic system, which enjoys the consent of one and all. It is significant that these scholars chose to exclusively deal with the painting traditions of the ‘*kulin*’, even when they acknowledged the prevalence of art forms in other communities.

2.5.3 Western (Mis)representation: India as a Matriarchal Society

Yves Vequaud, a French journalist and film maker, wrote a book in 1977²⁸, which popularized the Mithila art form world over. Interestingly, its preface was written by Ajit Mookerjee, who, as we have seen, framed Mithila and other folk art as *primitive* on the one hand,

“... the simple, *childlike* directness: this painting has useful lessons for creative artists in search of *basic forms*”²⁹

and as *diverse* but *democratic* on the other,

“Mithila painting is a product of *communal* spiritual experience”.

Vequaud, on the one hand, talked of Mithila as a land that gave birth to multiple religious traditions- from orthodox Brahminism to heterodox Tantricism, Jainism and Buddhism, and on the other, constructed Mithila as a ‘matriarchal’ society on the basis of his interpretation of what he perceived to be the practice of producing ‘marriage proposal drawings’ or *kohbars* by girls to the boys of their *choice*. Further, he misinterpreted the symbolism depicted in the *kohbar*. These drawings, he wrote, which are “heavily charged with tantric symbolism,” are composed of a central lingam (phallus) which “penetrates

the circular beauty of a yoni, the symbol of the female genitals, often drawn as a fully-opened lotus...The six surrounding yonis signify freedom of choice...”³⁰ He concluded, “...There is no question of male or female dominance, but life itself is venerated; so that the simplest and most intimate ceremony in which a man and a woman may participate is both cause and effect of the *kohbar* which is unique in the history of the world’s art—a glorious crucifixion seen on the walls of every bedroom in Mithila”.³¹

Refuting Vequaud’s description of Maithil society as matriarchal, C. H. Brown, an anthropologist working in the region for several years writes, “The Maithil brahmins and kayasthas are patrilineal, their ancient lineages being documented for the past nineteen generations in extensive palm-leaf genealogical records. Nor is there any sense in which power can be said to be in the hands of women at the district, village or caste level”.³² Expressing her anguish at such gross misinterpretations as Vequaud’s, she wonders, “Where did these ‘facts’ about Mithila society come from if not from a spoof nearly as deliberate?...It is not just the viewer who is at the mercy of the commentary writer; the artists who produced the works, who may never see the text and may not be able to read it if they saw it (or read even their own language, for that matter); and the culture of which it is a partial embodiment, a concrete object produced out of the collective consciousness, are also defenceless in the interpretation which the western writer presents of them to the rest of the world”.³³

Regarding the painting practices of the ‘lower’ castes, Vequaud does talk about the existence of “bas-reliefs like those of some African tribes”, but his book contains a total of 88 paintings, none of which represent the painting traditions of the ‘lower’ castes.

In 1984, Mulk Raj Anand wrote a book titled ‘Madhubani Painting’ on the behest of the Indian government (Ministry of Culture), where he argued that “...curiously, the same family of gods and goddesses appear in Harijan paintings as in the free-hand work of the ‘twice born’... The Harijans are also offering prayer and sacrifice as part of the fourfold Hindu order, even though they are considered beyond the pale, because of the menial work which is their function”.³⁴ Anand’s thesis that ‘Harijan paintings’ depict the ‘same

gods and goddesses' as the 'twice born', completely ignores the introduction of Salhesa- the Dusadh god- within the thematic repertoire of the Dusadh artists, working within the Mithila painting tradition. Besides, like Thakur's, this narrative also constructs the 'lower' castes as consenting subjects.

It is significant to note that the Dalit artist Jamuna Devi had received the National Award from the Government of India and her paintings had been displayed in an exhibition in Japan prior to the publication of many of these writings. The other Dalit artists Seewan Paswan and Shanti Devi had painted a series of Salhesa stories between 1978 and 1982³⁵. Further, the German folklorist and film-maker Erika Moser-Schmitt had organized an exhibition of *godana* paintings in New Delhi in 1978-79, which was a great success.³⁶ Many of the writings reviewed so far completely obliterate these moments from the history of the Mithila painting tradition.

2.5.4 Centrality of Women/ Gender in Mithila Art

Later, Pupul Jayakar wrote extensively on Mithila painting and was instrumental as Chairperson of the Handicraft Handloom Corporation of India in making the paintings move out of Mithila. She gave official patronage to Mithila art as a relief measure during the Bihar famine of 1966. She finally gave the women painters the acknowledgement that was due to them. However, she went on to assess the styles on the basis of individual painters rather than castes. Her pre-occupation with the celebration of the art-form as a women's art form also led her to glorify what she saw as the increasing status of women in Mithila.

Her book 'The Earthen Drum', in which she talks about various kinds of craft and art traditions of India, constructs Mithila as an amalgamation of Sanskritic and vernacular cultural expressions. She writes of her first visit to Madhubani in the 1950s, after chancing upon Archer's article, "I had visited Mithila in the mid-fifties but the village walls were blank and lithographs and calendars hung in *gosainghars* (altars). The bleak dust of poverty had sapped away the will and the energy needed to ornament the home.

Traces of old painting were sometimes to be found, fragments that bore testimony to an inherited knowledge of colour, form and iconography”.

In May, 1968, Jayakar again visited Mithila when the drought-relief measure was under operation for several months and found that the introduction of the scheme had palpably altered the lives of people, particularly of women in the region, “A sense of pride and joy had already permeated and transformed the women of Mithila. There was visible a simple dignity, a poise and a supreme self-assurance”. She marks the movement of the art from being the cultural production of anonymous communities to that of individual artists- the greatest evidence of which was the practice of signing the paintings. Her description of the image of the Goddess Durga reflects her orientalist inclinations- she describes the “phallic energy” surrounding the Goddess, who is energy-charged, at whose waist is the “mysterious triangle”, referring to Tantricism. She talks of the central themes of the paintings- love and fertility- in most of the paintings. Though she talks in considerable detail about the *geru* and *bharni* styles, she regards the *kachhani* style as the best amongst all.

Similarly, Devaki Jain, a feminist economist, on the basis of impact-assessment surveys concluded that the ability to earn had raised the status of women of Mithila, “...They have been transformed from the ‘dependent partner’ into a vital contributor to family income. This fact alone has endowed the women with a certain distinction and esteem”.³⁷

Archana Verma in her article³⁸ countered the myth that economic empowerment necessarily ensures power and dignity for women- a myth that has almost become common-sense. “Perhaps”, she argued, “it would be a relevant proposition here to say that a dominant cultural ideology works through ritual situations to construct people in subject position. Along with these come the illusion of freedom and misrecognition of the true, objective nature of the self and society. Hence, a visual and performative demarcation of the feminine territory does not necessarily contest the dominant power discourse in the cultural arena... [it] gives them a perceived sense of power over a predominantly patriarchal arena which pervades the domestic space traditionally defined

as feminine. This sense of power however, doesn't often translate into a control over the decision-making space and a sense of freedom from the patriarchal structure".³⁹

The rupture in this perceived sense of power is demonstrated, for instance, by the life of an eminent Mithila painter, whose husband married for a second time and forced her to leave home. After she became financially sufficient, she wanted to write her will in the name of her co-wife's son, as she regarded him as her husband's 'offering'. Her story is one of a successful artist but fails to explain why economic empowerment is not sufficient to ensure autonomy and dignity to women.

Therefore, even when women's lives find centrality in the writings of these later scholars, the theoretical position from which they come, viz. that economic empowerment enhances women's status in the family and society at large, leads to a cognitive blackout in their research framework, with the result that other equally significant indicators of women's well-being and empowerment remain un-investigated. What makes such accomplished women's predicament poignant is the fact that it is *their* cultural expressions on which national and regional battles of identities and subjectivities have been fought.

2.5.5 Biographical Writings

Published years later, in 1998, Jyotindra Jain's book on Ganga Devi⁴⁰- the only biography of a Mithila painter so far- projected the Kayastha 'line' style as a metonym for the entire Mithila painting tradition and Ganga Devi as its representative artist. In the 'Festival of India' exhibition organized by the government of India in the United States in 1985, Ganga Devi was accorded a central space within the festival site as also on its catalogue. She was made the 'dramatis personae of the exhibition' and her position as the central figure in the Mithila Painting tradition consolidated with the publication of Jain's book. It immortalized her, not only as a 'folk' artist or a 'mastercraftsperson' but also as an emblem of the Mithila art form. The larger than life statue of Ganga Devi, which was

showcased as part of the Bihar tableau in the Republic Day parade, 2009, elucidates this point.

2.5.6 Recent Writings

Some of the recent works on the Mithila art form have attempted to trace the trajectory of the painting practices of communities other than the Brahmanas and Kayasthas, most notable amongst which is Neel Rekha's construction of the pictorial traditions of the Dusadh and Chamar communities⁴¹. However, Rekha's narrative concludes with the assertion that "... Brahman painters have begun imitating the Harijan style of coating the paper with cow dung and using natural colours. This acceptance has not only increased the prestige of the Harijan painters but also created an environment where 'caste barriers are fast breaking away'". My attempt in this thesis is to show how caste barriers are 'fast breaking away' neither in the domain of iconography nor in the realm of social relations. The dominance of Brahmanas and Kayasthas in the domain of painting has only been resisted, that too in a limited way.

The above discussion mapping folk art in the Indian context in general, and Mithila art in particular shows that the resurrection of traditional cultural practices has been an ideologically loaded project. In this chapter, we have unravelled the various ways in which 'folk' art of the Indian sub-continent has been understood and imagined and how Mithila art has been framed within the larger rubric of 'folk' art. The findings of this thesis show how popular culture and oral cultural traditions in the Mithila region have emerged as a site for multiple articulations, of marginalization, as well as resistance and subversion.

In order to understand the interplay of art and social structure, we attempt to resurrect in the next chapter, the social history of Mithila region, including the history of Mithila art. One of the biggest lacunae in re-constructing a history of the region is the dearth of good, critical accounts of the past. One issue that much of the history of the Indian sub-continent suffers from, which is more pronounced in the case of Mithila, is the conflation

of myth and history, of fact and fiction, so that the Puranas and other texts become the main sources of history writing and, beyond a point, it is a challenge to separate the grain from the chaff. The other issue is that unlike regional histories of Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra, Bengal and others, there is huge dearth of histories of this region, particularly social histories. Therefore, the overview that we present largely deals with the political history of the region. However, we have tried to look at major social phenomena, practices and events that have, over the centuries, impacted upon the lives of the people of Mithila and their culture, some of which continue to be practiced till today.

Endnotes:

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- ¹ Browne, Ray B. quoted in Fred E. H. Schroeder (1981) p. 114
- ² Nye, Russel B. quoted in Fred E. H. Schroeder (1981) p. 115
- ³ Chatterjee, Partha (1993)
- ⁴ Chatterji, Roma (2003) p. 568
- ⁵ Chanchani, Nachiket (2005)
- ⁶ Coomaraswamy, Ananda Kentish (2004)
- ⁷ Chatterji, Roma (2005) p. 8
- ⁸ *Ibid.* p. 8
- ⁹ Guha-Thakurta, Tapati (1992)
- ¹⁰ Coomaraswamy, Anand Kentish (2004)
- ¹¹ Dutt, Gurusaday, quoted in Samik Bandhyopadhyay (1990)
- ¹² Chatterji, Roma (2005) p. 9
- ¹³ *Ibid.* p. 10
- ¹⁴ Chanchani, Nachiket (2005)
- ¹⁵ Anand, Mulk Raj (1969) p. 3
- ¹⁶ Jain, Jyotindra (1998)
- ¹⁷ Clifford, James (1988)
- ¹⁸ Archer, W.G. (1949)
- ¹⁹ Image 3
- ²⁰ Archer, W.G. (1949) italics mine
- ²¹ Rekha, Neel (2005)
- ²² *Ibid.* p. 7
- ²³ Archer, Mildred (1975)
- ²⁴ Mathur, J.C. (1966) pp. 43-55
- ²⁵ Thakur, Upendra (1982) pp. 32-33
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 55-56
- ²⁷ *Ibid.* p. 122
- ²⁸ Vequad, Yves (1977)
- ²⁹ Preface by Ajit Mookerjee in Yves Vequad (1977) p. 8, emphasis mine

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- ³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 68
- ³¹ *Ibid.* p. 17
- ³² Brown, C.H. (1982) pp. 519-522
- ³³ *Ibid.* p. 520
- ³⁴ Anand, Mulk Raj (1984) p. 15
- ³⁵ Interview with Shanti Devi and Seewan Paswan, Laheriyaganj, May-June, 2008
- ³⁶ Rekha, Neel (2005)
- ³⁷ Jain, Devaki (1980)
- ³⁸ Verma, Archana (2006)
- ³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 38
- ⁴⁰ Jain, Jyotindra (1997)
- ⁴¹ Rekha, Neel (2003) pp. 64-77