

ROLE OF MADHUBANI PAINTING TO EMPOWER

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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment or female empowerment as the name suggests is the process of empowering women. There are many ways in which it can be defined, including accepting women's viewpoints or making an effort to seek them, raising the status of women through education, awareness, literacy, and training. Women's empowerment not only promotes their sense of self-worth but also equips and allows them to make life-determining decisions through the different problems in society. They may have the opportunity to redefine gender roles, determine their own choices and influence social change for themselves and others, which in turn may allow them more freedom to pursue desired goals.

Keywords: Empowerment, Awareness, Self-Worth, Gender Roles.

Introduction

Mithila, a region in the state of Bihar, northern India and also stretching into Nepal, has an important tradition of knowledge in the form of paintings. From small streets in North Bihar to other urban parts of India, the colourful strokes magnetically attract art lovers, soothing their eyes and minds.

Madhubani paintings also known as Mithila paintings or *Bhitti Chitra* have been practiced by the women of the land through the centuries with a variety of tools, including fingers, twigs, brushes, and organic colours, and today it is considered as a living tradition of Mithila. The art not only depicts the social structure, love for nature, social goods and evils but also the cultural identity of the land with its depictions on themes of religion, love and fertility. The word Madhubani means "honey from the forest". It got into limelight and received the deserved recognition when the state award was awarded to Sita Devi in 1969 and Jagdamba Devi was given a Padma shri in 1975.

Madhubani paintings are among the most famous paintings in the world depicting the creativity and sensitivity of its people. Like any folk art, it also shows the psychology of the society to which it belongs, reflecting their morals, values and customs of the region in a very interesting yet a simple manner. This age-old art is characterized by eye-catching geometrical patterns. These paintings are predominantly made by the women of the Mithila region and thus it signifies a great deal in a male-dominated society.

The art of Madhubani paintings is believed to be developed in the villages of Jitwarpur and Ranti, near the city of Madhubani.

Although the origin of Madhubani paintings are quite unclear but it can be traced back to mythological time of Ramayana. It is believed that King Janak, ruler of Mithila Kingdom in the 8th or 7th century BCE, had asked to develop these paintings in order to capture the moments of his daughter Sita's wedding to Prince Rama.

The paintings are the exclusive monopoly of artists and their knowledge has been passed from generation to generation, from mothers to daughters. Girls learn to play with a brush and with colours from childhood. The decoration of the kohbar is considered to be the most important moment, which is the room of the house where the newly married couple lives. Although the paintings are traditionally made by women, men are becoming more and more involved in order to meet market demand. Along with increased men participation, modifications have been observed even in the traditional process of making this art. Traditionally the custom was to make the paintings by hand, on a plastered wall or on a mud wall, but now the commercial demand is bringing the paintings to paper and clothes.

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Before starting the painting, women usually do a prayer to the deities so that their favour accompanies them in their objectives. For its elaboration, the cotton wrapped on a bamboo stick is used as a brush. The colours that are applied are prepared manually by the artists in many ways. There are no observable gaps between different objects in the painting; they are separated using geometric borders. The black colour is prepared by mixing blight with cow dung, yellow is prepared based on turmeric and Banyan leaf milk, blue color is extracted from indigo, the red color is made of the Kusum flower, the green leaf of the applewood tree, the white of rice powder, and orange of the Palash flower.

The commercialization of Madhubani paintings began back in 1962 CE when a foreign artist travelling through this town was attracted by the murals. He persuaded the women to paint those same drawings on paper, so that he could take those back to his country. The idea was quite successful and thus began the commercialization of Madhubani painting. Since then, the way of painting has diversified in different ways.

The women of the Mithila region, who are extraordinarily talented in this art form, have made their art a subject of artistic attraction irrespective of geographical, social and cultural boundaries. Finding out the artistic excellence of these paintings in the 1960s CE, some government officials as well took the initiative to popularise the art in order to uplift their earnings. They did this by persuading women artists to draw similar paintings on paper, which eventually led to the concept of commercialization of their work for a worldwide market.

The recent initiatives taken by the local government, NGOs and cultural organisations, have brought the Madhubani art to an even greater level of popularity and recognition. Bihar government came with the idea of beautification of the railway stations and coaches by decorating it with Madhubani art. Even though the artist mainly the women were not given any remuneration but the railways provide them with the essential materials like colors and brushes, the security and arranged for their conveyance with the additional advantage that they can write their name with contact numbers which meant free advertisement of their work. In the field of fashion, many designers have launched Madhubani designs collection such as traditional outfits which are beautifully designed in Madhubani art. Many other daily use products like pen-cases, bags, diaries, etc. are painted in Mithila art and are very popular.

Madhubani painting is still practiced by many women in Ranti village of Bihar. Karpuri Devi, sister-in-law of known artist Mahasundari Devi, Dulari, and Mahalaxmi are women from three generations of the village who have made extensive efforts to keep the art form alive by educating other women in the village and teaching them how to make Mithila painting a way of life and carry on the legacy. Works of the three women have been commissioned by the government of India and also found a place in the Mithila museum of Japan.

A pioneering Madhubani artist, Sita Devi showcased the nature and influence of the arts in the socio-political development of rural India. With her untiring efforts and firm determination, she brought the bharni form of Madhubani paintings out of homes and exhibited it in public both across India and the world. Born in pre-independent India, another famous Madhubani artist is Godavari Dutta who inherited the art from her mother. In her 35 odd years of career she has worked significantly in improvising the art form and taught more than 50,000 students and artists from across the country. She made headlines when she was awarded Padam Shri at the age of 93 by the Government of India owing to her contributions towards this art form making it a part of Indian heritage and culture.

Barely literate, Mahasundari Devi learnt Madhubani art from her aunt. Shedding her purdah, the Hindu tradition prevalent at that time and taking a step towards her freedom, it was in 1961 that she picked up the brush to practice the art form. Gradually creating her own style and manner, she inspired the future generations to empower themselves. She founded the cooperative society of Mithila Hastashilp Kalakar Audyogki Sahyog Samiti to support other such oppressed artists. Depicting the struggles of a Maithil girl in her painting, she highlighted the challenges that women were facing in the society. This inspiring artwork made her win her first award from the Bhartiya Nritya Kala in 1976. She was even awarded by the President of India in 1982 and was also honored with the civilian award of Padma Shri in 2011 for her paramount contribution. She was renowned for her expertise in sikki work, sujani craft, and clay work.

Under the mentorship of Mahasundari and karpuri Devi, Dulari Devi also emerged as a prominent Madhubani artist and transformed the traditional art and expanded the limited palate from primary colors as well. She has created art in her own distinctive style. With collaborative efforts of Gita Wolf, she even published her biography titled 'Following My Paintbrush'. She attempts to work extensively to educate the children of her community for a brighter future and making them independent.

Born in 1969 and raised under the guidance of her grandmother, Pushpa Kumari is also a famed artist in this art. Along with representing the world she inhabits, she also renders her own understanding of these issues in a unique manner without destroying the traditional style of painting. The personal and political interpretation of the theme through subtle and intricate details, adds life and meaning to her art.

The legacy of these prolific Madhubani artists is being carried forward by the efforts of the new artists with a touch of their own experiences along with retaining the traditionality. Mahalaxmi is one of such artist who attempts to use her art to highlight the everyday problems faced by women, the social evils present in society like eve-teasing or molestation and making the people aware. She was the recipient of the art scholarship given by the Ministry of Culture. A firm believer of feminism and equality, she works to represent the traditional Madhubani art to emphasise the traumas and challenges of women.

While Madhubani paintings sketch still retains its traditional technique of illustrating scenes from Hindu mythology and folklore, the young Dalit artist from Samastipur region of Bihar, Malvika Raj is making waves with her representation of the genre with an innovative twist centred around Buddha's epoch and Hindu narratives. A graduate from NIIFT, Mohali, she specialises in the Kobra form of Madhubani and creates paintings depicting the life and stories of Lord Buddha, Dalit leader Babasaheb Ambedkar and several other revolutionaries. Her inventive painting of Ambedkar's life narratives including the caste humiliations he faced, have been displayed at the prestigious University of Edinburgh.

Another eminent Madhubani painter is Bharati Dayal. Her work finds a place of pride among many collections, like the Ministry of External Affairs, Minister of Commerce, US Embassy, First Secretary, US Embassy and Museum of Eminence, Norway to name a few. Dayal was awarded the National Award in 2006 and the Indira Gandhi Priyadarshini Award in 2013.

Her works have also been displayed at Craft Exchange Program of SAARC Countries Meet at Delhi Hatt, Pritampura in 2008, Indiart Gallery, Belgium in 2013 and at the Nehru Centre, London in February 2011 among many others.

Mithila painting is unique on its own because it is a reflection of the modern day issues as well where the other art forms are still about their traditional concepts. Along with empowering women it has even managed to save an entire forest. Undoubtedly, with passing time, women artists are perfectly bridging the gaps between personal, political, and professional lives. Transforming with time, their artworks are not mere pieces of beauty but a reflection of their struggles and challenges as well as realities that defy the patriarchal structure that they inherited. Using their art, they have redefined the art form in their own distinctive manner at the same time carving a niche of their own and creating their own history.



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