



Sustainability in Mithila's Folk Art Tradition

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Abstract

The Mithila folk-art ecosystem, encompassing Madhubani art, Sikki grass art, etc., exemplifies culture and tradition in Bihar. Although it was initially a domestic practice, its transformation into a global commodity offers a one-of-a-kind framework for the operation of a sustainable business. Through the incorporation of the objectives of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) with the objectives of global sustainable development, this tradition establishes a robust paradigm for the creative economy.

The sector's strength lies in environmental harmony, utilising natural pigments and organic substrates that cater to the modern "slow fashion" market. However, this paper emphasises that ecological benefits must be accompanied by economically viable growth. This commercial shift has empowered disadvantaged sections, such as the female workforce, and, most importantly, the underrepresented folk-art tradition on a global platform, thus fostering progress in rural regions. Furthermore, Geographical Indication (GI) tagging serves as a vital tool to bridge folk art -a mark of rituals and tradition-and economic share. Ergo, the research paper proposes a hybrid model-preserving folk art motifs of the past while adopting industrial technologies for present-day global marketing-to bridge the gap between heritage preservation and fiscal innovation.

Keywords: Mithila Art, Madhubani Paintings, Sustainable Development Goals, Eco-Consciousness, Folk art, Indian Knowledge System, GI Tagging, Eco-friendly production.

Introduction

Mithila's folk art-Madhubani (Mithila) paintings, Aripa, and Sikki grass art, for example-is a narration of the culture and tradition of the northern region of Bihar. It has been a long-lived domestic practice, which is still practiced by people specific to the northern Bihar region across the world. Women used to paint mud walls and floors on various occasions like festivals, marriages, and religious rituals (Jain, 1997). They acted as the custodians of this deep cultural knowledge. It was not mere decoration, but a socio-religious duty. As an inseparable component of their ceremonial activities, women transmitted down intricate motifs and visual narratives from one generation to the next through the use of oral and practical instructions (Kramrisch, 1968).

According to Szanton and Bakshi (2007), this time-honoured custom is now a widespread commodity. The development of paper was the catalyst that allowed folk art to transition from the realm of domestic settings to the market on a worldwide scale. Due to its portability, which was another part of the art, domestic and ritualistic art became a global commodity. Transportability was one reason why this painting became so easy to sell. International galleries, fashion fabricators, and even household goods allowed buyers to relocate pieces of Mithila folk art. There has been a tremendous transformation from a household name to a global commodity. There has been a tremendous shift from a highly regarded home-based handicraft to a product that is in demand on a global scale. This brings up some very crucial considerations, such as whether or not it is viable to commercialise indigenous art without compromising the cultural core of the art. This rapid commercialisation also results in a severe economic conundrum. The financial benefits of globalisation rarely reach the grassroots level, despite the fact that it successfully connects local craftspeople to international markets.

This paper argues that Mithila's folk art offers an alternative model for sustainable economic development. Mithila's folk-art tradition is gradually meeting the demands of the global market for eco-friendly and authentic products, directly sourced from the place of origin. Its carbon-neutral production relies entirely on naturally extracted pigments and locally available materials, mostly found in household kitchens. This ecological consciousness is an indication of the deep, time-tested wisdom of Indian Knowledge Systems (Chakrabarti, 2012). Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) recognize that traditional community practices hold immense practical value in meeting modern sustainability challenges, thus bringing nature and man-made traditions together to meet eco-conscious sustainable development goals.

Ergo, Mithila's folk art can actively drive India's sustainable creative economy, rather than being passively preserved only in museums. We must carefully balance heritage conservation with commercial innovation. Thus, the paper underscores the eco-conscious economic potential of Mithila folk art, as part of the Indian Knowledge System, and its vital role in empowering rural women as part of sustainable development goals. This paper also dives into legal frameworks, such as Geographical Indication (GI) tags (Das, 2013), which ensure its protection and authenticity. Therefore, the research paper proposes a hybrid model—preserving folk art motifs of the past while adopting industrial technologies for current global marketing—to bridge the gap between heritage preservation and fiscal innovation.

Cultural and Material Epistemology in Indian Knowledge System

Mithila's folk art is embedded in the culture and age-old traditions of the land. IKS underscores traditional practices embraced with age-old wisdom and practical values. Mithila's folk art is the visual translation of this wisdom. It indicates localised resource management in daily practice and aligns perfectly with modern sustainability paradigms (Chakrabarti, 2012). Mithila's folk art remains a paragon of carbon-neutral production, as it traditionally and ritualistically uses naturally available pigments for colouring, biodegradable sikki grass (Sikki grass art), and mud walls (as a canvas). This reliance on organic and naturally extracted materials creates a massive competitive advantage in the modern eco-conscious global market of ethnic decor. In addition to its ecologically sound presence, this also ensures the authenticity of tradition and its use in various rituals of the land. Therefore, along with its naturally sound body, it holds the traditional and ritual soul of the land, thus appealing to the diaspora to authentically connect with their place of origin (i.e., Mithila). This unlocks premium pricing and directs capital investment into rural communities.

Mithila's folk-art practitioners play a major role, and in order to comprehend this sustainability, we must acknowledge their deep botanical and chemical knowledge, which is passed down through generations as part of tradition rather than a professional training program. Traditional-

ly, women plastered mud walls with a mixture of clay and cow dung. This technique was accepted as purifying and was mandatorily performed on auspicious occasions. Besides, cow dung has anti-fungal properties and works as a perfect insulator during summers and winters to maintain the temperature of the room. Meanwhile, the same technique is followed on paper before attempting Mithila painting. Handmade paper with a light wash of cow dung and water to replicate the traditional texture and earthy hue (Heinz, 2006) is used by artisans today. The extraction of colors exemplifies a zero-waste technique. Artisans take the essential black pigment from carbon soot. They capture the soot on a burning mustard oil lamp then set it with cow dung. They create blue from the indigo plant grown locally. They produce yellow by mixing turmeric root powder. Lastly, they require a binder to make the paint stick permanently to the canvas. They boil the naturally produced, water-soluble gum derived from the Babul tree (Szanton & Bakshi, 2007). Each ingredient can return safely to the earth.

Mithila painting is not just sustainable in material application; it is also a coded and symbolic visual language. Images are not merely "decorative". For instance, the Kohbar Ghar-the marriage wall hanging-is painted to bless the couple with fertility and cosmic equilibrium (Archer, 1949). The dominant phallic structure composed of lotuses (yoni) is adorned by sticks of bamboo on either side to represent family growth and the strength of the male consort. To strip intention from this art is to reduce a mother's prayer to wallpaper. There is another style of painting practiced at doorsteps called Aripāna. Women make a paste out of crushed white rice flour plaster known as pithar and sketch elaborate geometric patterns (Mishra, 2011). Some patterns are referenced from local Tantric practices and serve as yantras-geometrical manifestations of the cosmic grid through triangles, circles, and lotuses. They depict divine power and the relationship between the two, used to purify the household. It is good to commercialise symbols like these, but their meanings need to be preserved; otherwise, they are just made into fashion icons. If we want to keep this art style going, we need to protect the story behind it just as fiercely.

Socio-Economic Dynamics and Commercialization

Global commodification generates revenue from abroad and establishes Bihar's cultural presence on the world stage. Profits from living heritage have substantial effects on village economies. Significant financial shifts alter the social dynamics of remote villages. The most notable social change resulting from the commodification of this art has been for rural women, who were traditionally secluded within the home. Previously, they gained no financial capital from their labour. However, commodification challenged the established social structures of patriarchy (Meyer, 2004). It transformed women's religious expression within the home into income. That income grants women financial independence, allowing the women of Bihar to hold new power within the household. Women from the Madhubani, Darbhanga, and Sitamarhi districts are now the primary source of income for their families. By providing these women with the proper resources at the ground level (through organizations such as the Mithila Art Institute), they can hone their craft and reach clientele who are interested in buying their goods. There has been proven to be a great social impact. Women with their own income have more empowerment and the home life is seen to benefit from children's education and medical expenses (Das, 2013). Skill equals social development.

This economic empowerment must be supported by legislation as well. The global market can be very predatory when content is not copyrighted. When Mithila art began to become commodified for an international market, cases of intellectual property theft rose. Copies began being mass produced because larger companies wanted to capitalize off of the goods without sending benefits back to the source. Authority was given the power to be enforced by law when the Indian government officially passed the GI tag in 2007 (Das, 2013). The GI tag serves many purposes: first, larger businesses cannot legally reproduce the practices; second, it created a

guideline for what products are considered legitimately handmade; lastly, it places the art on the same stage as other high-end international heritage goods. True products can now sell for higher prices because there is legality behind it.

The issue is that there is a large gap between theory and commercial reality. Monitoring the GI system only requires registration through heavy red tape. It also assumes that these villagers have inherent knowledge of legal procedures and document navigation. Networks of artisans in Bihar are highly de-centralised and often unorganised. Most rural women do not have sufficient knowledge of legal procedures to register themselves as official authorised users or to fund lengthy copyright lawsuits in foreign courts. The system often disenfranchises the point of origin (Liebl & Roy, 2003). While structurally sound in theory, it is often inaccessible at the village level.

This central issue leaves Mithila artists vulnerable to systemic abuse. Trade relations surrounding Mithila artwork are often inequitable. Most of the profit is captured by dealers and export elites in urban centres. The percentage taken from the art by middlemen is disproportionately high. They may exploit the rural location and financial needs of the artists. Because of these large commissions, women creating these paintings receive little reward (Scrase, 2003). Another consequence of this international appeal has been the rise of a black market of forgeries. Copies are mass produced in urban factories using inexpensive dyes and screen printing to cut costs. Not only does this help drive down the prices of real pieces, but most villagers have had no prior experience with export business or even reading contracts. Until the system as a whole can fix these issues, fair trade will be difficult for women of Mithila to obtain.

Navigating the Future: Heritage Conservation and Innovation

For Mithila painting to remain alive, some of the medium's paradoxes will have to be dealt with. Change will have to be met with tradition as artists and intermediaries work to find a balance between respecting the significance of this art and commodifying it to sell. There is also a fear that by allowing this art form to be bought and sold on the global market, the culture behind it will be compromised. In order to create enough product for international consumers, artists may feel forced to create faster, destroying legacy. Detailed aspects of the narratives are often lost or translated into generic designs for mass production. Strict archival efforts from relevant organisations are necessary to avoid this (Heinz, 2006). Yet, allowing the art form to stagnate is not a viable option. As a fluid and living style of art, it must continue to evolve. By referencing social issues with ancient symbols, artists today are making traditional artwork relevant again. A number of paintings painted in the last few years have themes like healthcare, women's rights, and pollution (Szanton & Bakshi, 2007). It is clear that this culture stays alive through preservation and entrepreneurship.

A hybrid model is proposed to accomplish this in a legal and comprehensive manner. This model calls for sustaining the past through strategic marketing of the present. To sustain the past, there is a need for institutionalised funding and cultural organisations within the villages to continue the traditional transmission of knowledge. This education must continue in the traditional style of iconography and ritual narrative (Kramrisch, 1968). The spiritual language of the art must remain intact. The model also requires the adoption of modern business practices. Villagers need to leverage new technology to bypass middlemen. By utilising international social media, they can sell directly to consumers, increasing profit margins. Technology such as augmented reality could even allow for virtual experiences of Mithila villages. Connecting villagers to new digital art platforms can provide secure forms of income (Geismar, 2013). By doing this, original artists can gain legal and financial autonomy. Thus, Mithila art can continue as a sacred practice while serving as an economic driver.

Technology offers much more than eCommerce platforms; it allows us to tightly secure IP

rights like never before. Today, there are thousands of factory replicas of Madhubani prints circulating in the world market. These cheap imports drive our rural artists out of business. It is our responsibility as those who care about this art form to use decentralization to our advantage. Use the blockchain to record the provenance of each legitimate piece of traditional art (Geismar, 2013). Let authenticity be verified by buyers at the click of a smartphone app. Authenticate each piece of art, forever linked to the village it was created in. Technology will no longer be a weapon used to mass-produce copies, but will become the tool we use to protect our legacy.

While these technologies are significant, they should be paired with grounded governance. True developmental growth cannot occur if it is not built upon the empowerment of the people. Top-down approaches have proven time and time again to miss the needs of the rural artists they aim to support. Establish self-governing bodies of artists within the villages of Mithila themselves. Allow these councils to voice what terms of trade and export they are willing to conform to (Kurin, 2004). Have the regional government work to include this traditional epistemology into their educational system. Let students learn about traditional materials and religious symbology in school. By bringing this wisdom into the classroom, we are placing folk art on the same level as all other learned subjects. We are allowing younger generations to develop a pride in their culture that is unmatched. In the end, all of our efforts to preserve Mithila art will fail if we do not place control back into the hands of the women.

Conclusion

Traditional art forms like Mithila painting have travelled from the mud walls of villages in Bihar to metropolitan art stores worldwide. With this export of rich legacy comes a thin line that differentiates promotion from appropriation. Global capitalism often draws from marginalised communities; rarely does it provide equitable returns. Mithila art is a movement that seeks to disrupt that system. Unless we take an interest in preserving indigenous value within global consumerism, there is little change. The Mithila painting example will stand proof to this theory. Every dip of the paint brush is a blend of heavy spiritual symbology and eco-philosophy rooted in the Indian Knowledge System. If we are going to celebrate what we've learned from the past and look forward to a brighter, more sustainable future for the industry, we must allow our current production techniques to be led by how our ancestors have been creating masterpieces for centuries. When you buy that canvas, you're investing in a culture, not just a pattern. Supporting your local rural artist is great, but passive liking won't eliminate the barriers they're faced with. Universities, art institutions, and big markets need to play a role in breaking down these systems.

Yes, GI tags are great; however, if we aren't laying the foundation to help these artisans understand their worth as artists and partial owners, how will a piece of paper help them get economically rich? How will we measure the growth if the women making these aren't able to profit and have creative agency over their work? Development will happen when these rural artists can profit off of their intellectual properties enough to sustain a living and bypass middlemen with the help of digital production platforms producing goods directly for consumers. By allowing Mithila art to guide the understanding of the relationship between humanity, nature, and the divine, the legacy is protected for future generations. Mithila art is the story of generations of Indian women who depicted a theory of the universe using natural materials. Pairing technology with tradition allows for a model that finds a balance between conservation and commercial viability, ensuring the spiritual language of India's women prospers for generations to come.

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Footnote

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