

# Pragmatic Connotations of Mithila Arts

Yam Prasad Sharma<sup>1\*</sup>

Lecturer in English

Lalitkala Campus, Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, Nepal

Email: yamprasadsharma@gmail.com

Date of Received : 01<sup>st</sup> December ,2021

Date of acceptance: 2<sup>nd</sup> January,2022

## Abstract

Mithila arts are spontaneously created in the Mithila region of southern parts of Nepal and northern India. These folk arts are connected to Mithila cultural performances. The cultural ceremonies are related to the practical life of the people. The people and society are closely connected to the arts, culture and rituals. The arts contribute to the quality of life as we as we realize their connotations. Various rituals, cultural performances and ceremonies carry the human civilization ahead. Folk arts are an integral part of culture and life. Homage and worship to nature create ecocritical value among the viewers. Mithila folk arts suggest the living culture of that region. The practice of creativity passes ahead from one generation to the next in a spontaneous manner. The cultural images and symbols are in the collective unconscious of the community. The cultural heritage of the community lives in the real life of the people. The sun is worshipped by the devotees as the source of all energies. Cows are worshipped for their milk and manure. Worshipping of divine figures signifies respect for invisible spiritual power beyond the visible world. Plants and animals are given special space in the visual arts since they support human life in many ways. Strange characters and concepts make the composition mystical. Nevertheless, their pragmatic values enhance the quality of life The artworks can be related to their broader context and community. Paintings and performances are integral entities of the cultural rituals in Mithila region. The artworks are not created for their own sake but they have spiritual, pragmatic and moral purposes. Arts, culture and life are closely connected to each other. This research is qualitative since the interpretation of artworks can be done in multiple ways their significance may differ in relation to time, place and person.

**Keywords:** Mithila arts, mystical, cultural rituals, pragmatic, *Kohbar*, *Aripan*

## Introduction

Mithila arts are connected to cultural rituals and performances. These folk art forms are ceremonial, symbolic and mystical. Maithili women create the figures of Hindu divinities in the shape of *mandalas* on the floors and the walls of their residence on the festivals and auspicious

*Bratabandha* and marriage ceremony. (Srivastava 1999, p.143). The figures on the floor and walls are wiped every year when they are cleaned to observe the ritual annually (Jha, 2010). The young girls learn folk art skills and from their mother and elder sisters. Festivals in Mithila along with integrated artworks have pragmatic values to improve the living experience.

Mithila folk paintings represent the narratives of the Hindu epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and scenes from *Bhagavata Purana*. Characters of the myths are represented in the form of visual narration (Sharma, 2013, pp.183-185). Mithila is an important location in the epic *Ramayana*. Sita (the daughter of King Janaka) is from Janakpur of Mithila region. She is the Shakti or *Prakriti* (female power) of Lord Ram (*Purusa*), one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu for the destruction of demons and preservation of righteous people. The interesting and adventurous narratives in the epic inspire the women to create the visual narration (Mandal, 2018). The pictures are about Lord Ram, Laxman (younger brother of Ram) and Sita's exile in the forest, kidnapping of Sita by Ravana, the demon king from Lanka, Ram's companionship with monkeys like Hanumana, Hanuman's unremitting devotion toward Ram and his assistance in the war between Ram and Ravana. The divine figure's friendship with the monkey symbolizes the love of nature and the oneness of



Fig.1 Radha Krishna

occasions as *Satyannarayan Puja* (worshipping Lord Vishnu), *Kojagratabrata* (the ceremony on the full moon day after the Dashain festival), *Gauripujana* (worshipping cow), *Laxmi Puja* (worshipping the goddess of prosperity), *Chhata* ( the festival of worshipping sun) *SaraswatiPuja* (worshipping the goddess of learning),

all living beings. Despite the magical dimensions, the artworks have pragmatic value.

*Raslila* (flirting) of Krishna and milkmaids near the Yamuna River has been presented in the folk painting. The visual narratives from the *Mahabharata* are painted on the walls of mud walls of the houses and temples (Rekha, 2014). Naked milkmaids (*gopinis*) are swimming in the river. Lord Krishna collects their clothes and keeps them with himself. He sits on the branches of a tree and plays his flute in a melodious rhythm (Sharma, 2009). The ecstatic music charms the milkmaids. He is hiding the attires of the *gopinis* while looking after and protecting his cows in the jungle. The principal deity like Krishna is generally presented at the center of the composition. The folk paintings are narrations in visual forms (Aran, 1978, p.185). The visual account symbolizes manifold aspects like compassion as the source of every creation in the universe (Singh, 2018). The sublimity in art supports life. The aesthetic object provides relief from loneliness and existential angst. The devotion of the disciple of Krishna presents the Bhakti rasa (the rapture of dedication and devotion). The deity is the invisible guardian of the primitive folks. Lord Krishna and Radha are the central figures in the given composition (Fig.1). The principal figures are surrounded by other images and figures.

Mithila folk paintings are mystical because the monkey is the friend of Lord Ram and assists him in the battle. Hanuman, the devoted monkey friend, is one of the major characters from the *Ramayana*. The figure of the cow is given human attributes. The love of cow and monkey connotes the compassion of man in all the creatures of the world. This assists in saving nature and biodiversity. Such presentations have pragmatic values in life and society. Hanumana is presented in his garments. The monkey worships Lord Ram and helps him in his difficulty. The figure of the cow is hybrid since it appears in the combined form of both woman and animal. The figure is decorated in different colorful clothes and garlands of flowers (Sharma, 2013, pp.182-86). Cow's hair is combed. Two locks of hair are hanging from her head as on the head of a woman. Ornaments are on the nose and the ears of the cow. The face of the animal appears as that of a female figure. The cow has got human characters, and at the same time, it is given divine status. Animal, human and divine characters are connected at a point in the visual composition. People worship the figure of a cow giving divine status to the animal (Heinz, 2006). They feed it well and look after well. Thus, they get enough milk that nourishes the family. The cow supports the farmer's income and economy in the agrarian society. Mithila art and folk cultures support life

and community (Ghosh, 2020). This is the significant pragmatic value of cultural performance.

Mithila arts are integral components of Mithila culture and life. The pragmatic rituals create a habit and collective unconscious among the community. Groups of women are involved in creating arts and celebrating festivals. The artworks are anonymous. This suggests that the work or creation is more important than the worker, creator or agent. The attitude is in sharp contrast to contemporary time.

### Materials and Method

The research area of this study is Mithila art which has been studied giving emphasis on pragmatic values and their link to the community life in the Mithila region. The perspective assumes that arts contribute to the society and external world. Books on the history of art and research articles are the secondary sources of the study that have been studied to create a background of the research. Mithila folk arts are primary sources for analysis and interpretation. The study uses a qualitative research method for exploration since the interpretations of visual art can be multiple.

### Results and Discussion

Folk paintings along with performances are created on the festival eve and auspicious occasions in Mithila region like *Gauripujana*, *Kojagratabrata*, *Satyanarayanpuja*, *Prabodhini Ekadashi*, *Deepawali* and *Chhata*. Women folks and girls in Mithila draw and paint *Aripana*, a type of Mithila art in the geometric structure of the *mandala*. These visual compositions are painted on the floor in front of the house. *Aripanas* are symbolic and mystical structures that represent the universe. The composition is considered as a *yantra* (instrument) of individual *sadhaka* for the meditation to achieve the union of oneself with the almighty. The divinity is supposed to reside at the center of the *mandala* in the visual composition (Sharma, 2020). The visual compositions along with cultural performances make life worth living creating faith and aesthetic pleasure at the same time. The primitive folks in the tribal community get energy from the ritual to endure the hardship of life. This is the pragmatic dynamism of the folk arts.

The *Aripan* (Fig.2) has the defined center in the composition on the lotus flower surrounded by other lotus petals. In the given composition, Vishnu *paduka* (feet of Lord Visnu) is the central image. This is the metonymical representation of divinity. This is used while meditating upon Lord Vishnu. Lotus is the symbol of wisdom, purity and enlightenment. The composition also symbolizes the union of *Prakriti* (nature or the female principle) and *Purusa* (individual self or male



principle). The harmonious combination of the two represents the union of the individual self and the universal spirit (Sharma, 2021). The contradictions of life have been resolved in our consciousness. Lydia Aran (1978) states: "*Aripana*, a magic circle representing a magically fortified space for rituals and domestic religious ceremonies, [is] the equivalent of the Tibetan *Mandala*. Like the latter it also represents the cosmos and the symbols used in these drawings express the cosmological concept of the tantra . . . . Ideally, the design of an *Aripana* should be revealed to the lady-artist as a result of meditation and general yogic experience" (pp.184-185).



Fig.2 Aripana

The structure of *Aripana* resembles the structure of a *mandala*. According to Stella Kramrisch (1964), "Mandalas are visual support of concentration and meditation, ritual aids on the way toward the center of the cosmos and self. Cosmos and self coincide in the image of central and main divinity of the mandala" (p.44). The cultural performance determines the figure of the principal divinity who is at the center of the composition in a symbolic or figurative form of divine power. For instance, the sun is the main deity in the *Aripana* created on the occasion of the festival of *Chhata*. Goddess Laxmi is the principal figure in the festival of *Deepawali*. The full moon is at the center of *mandala* created on the occasion of *Kojagratabrata*. The cow is at the center of *Gauripujana Aripana*.

Symbols like lotus, conch shell and wheel are frequent in Mithila folk arts that suggest abstract idea beyond the presented images. Plants, leaves, animals and birds around the compositions have both symbolic and decorative functions. The drawing of a square, rectangle, triangle and circle within the composition makes the work a geometric structure with order and harmony that supports the meditating individual toward the principal divinity (Sharma, 2014, p.44). The performance of the painting is a spiritual experience to the artists and audience as well. K. S. Srivastava (1999) throws light on the importance of devotion and meditation of the artist on the process of creating *Aripana*: "The artist ought not to work unless she is in a meditative state. The peace emanating from the

paintings 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 a god in deep prayer and her finished product will therefore correspond to her inner attitude" (p.143).



Fig.4 Kohbar in Line Drawing

The composition is connected to the artist's realization of divine power. *Aripanas* are composed on specific festivals and cultural performances. The creative activity goes hand in hand with aesthetic experiences. The meditation through the yantra of *Aripana* is considered to make a person balanced who can adjust himself in the world with harmonious relationships. This is the indirect application of art in life along with aesthetic experience.

The figures and structures of *Aripana* differ according to the festivals, ceremonies and auspicious occasions to be observed by the community. For instance, *SwastikavAripana*, *Sandhya Aripana*, *Kojagratav Aripana*, *Sarvatobhadra Aripana*, *Kalyandevi Aripana* and *Deepawali Aripana* are some of the compositions



Fig.3 Kohbar in color

named after the festivals. *Sarvatobhadra Aripana*, a "Square yantra" is "drawn around the sacred plant of Tulasi." (Rakesh, 1990, p.69). It is an auspicious symbol of the creative forces of

the universe. The artworks have spiritual values associated with the communities.

The female artists compose *yantras* (instruments) in *Aripana* painting even on the articles and commodities of daily life. Sometimes, they are “engraved on gold, silver or copper plates and worshipped or worn as amulets” (Rakesh, 1990, p.69 ). They are also drawn on paper and “inserted into talismans to be worn around the neck or arm” to protect people from evil spirits, diseases and other calamities. The devotees believe that such instruments have a magical power to protect them. The assimilation of art and culture contributes for consolation among the people. Maithili artists create *yantras* that are similar to *Aripana*. They also mark the images of deities and lotus flowers on their limbs by “pricking with seven needles” for the magical protection of the person (Rakesh, 1994, p.131). In Mithila, tattooing is also a popular art form for ages.

Mithila folk paintings are sacred (Brown, 1996). But they also include profane images. Maithili women artists paint *Kohbar*, a kind of Mithila composition, on the walls of the honeymoon room in the marriage ceremony to motivate the newly married couple for their union, fertility and reproduction. The union of the couple is the source of life. The union has continued the human generation for ages. These paintings are especially useful when the couple is young unaware of an erotic union of the boy and girl to continue the generation. The painting indirectly instructs the people. The struggle for life is hard due to hunger, disease and death in the world. Reproduction is a matter of struggle.

*Kohbars* are also painted on the colorful paper used for wrapping gifts at the wedding. The gifts are sent to the bridegroom during the period of courtship. The principal figures in the *Kohbar* are the bamboo stalk (male principle) and the open lotus flower (female principle). The figure of lotus flower is penetrated by the bamboo stalk (Fig.3). *Kohbars* are depicted in symbolic forms (Sharma, 2013, pp.182-84). The lotus flower symbolizes *yonis* (vulva), and the bamboo stalk is the symbol of *Lingam* (male's genital organ) according to the Hindu myths. These principal figures are surrounded by other symbols and images that support the central theme (Pal, 1978, pp.65-66). Aran (1978) states about *Kohbar*: "*Kohbar*, i.e. a composition centered around the *Lingam* (phallus) penetrating the *yonis* (vagina), often depicted in the form of a lotus flower, surrounded by mythological scenes and various sexual and fertility symbols. The *Kohbar*, painted on paper by a girl is sent by her to the boy of her choice as a marriage proposal; it is painted on the walls of the bedroom to ensure fertility; on the paper used for wrapping gifts during courtship as a proof of a

girl's accomplishment in the traditional art; and on the walls of the house for magic protection" (p.184). Other lotus flowers around the central figure are the symbols of infinite possibilities of creation and procreation in female fertility power of Mithila consciousness.

Subsidiary figures and images found in *Kohbar* are both decorative and symbolic suggesting values beyond themselves (Fig.4). The image, symbols and figures like a pregnant elephant, parrot, fish, turtle, the sun, Swastika, the moon, peacock, goose, betel leaf and mango leaf are connected to *Kohbar* (Nigam & Ranjan, 2014). They are placed in the background of the composition. The pregnant elephant is the symbol of reproduction. It inspires the girl to be the mother. The goose and the peacock are the vehicles of Saraswati and Kumara respectively. They are the symbols of harmony and peace. The Betel leaf is believed to be a sign of good luck. “Mango leaves are used to signify the importance of mango trees as a source of fertility” (Rakesh, 2005, Mithila Art: Continuing, p.I). *The swastika* symbolizes spiritual power and holiness. Turtles and fish are believed to be the incarnations of Vishnu. Thus, they are expected to bring good luck, prosperity and happiness to the devotees. The moon and the sun are the symbols of power, energy and long life.

The figures of *krida* (flirting) of Parvati and Shiva are the subject matter from *Shiva Purana*. The scenes of *raslila* (flirting) of Krishna with milkmaid is the subject matter from the epic *Mahabharata* (Das, 2021) Such erotic pictures are painted on the walls of the *Kohbarghara* to create a romantic mood in the newly married couples. Geeta Khadka (1995) draws an analogy in the union of Shiva and Shakti, and the union of male and female figures: "The devotee identifies the semen with Shiva and the menstrual flow with Shakti-- the dual sources of creation. By sexually uniting these two, the *yogi* symbolically achieves the union of Shiva/Shakti within himself or herself. The mingling of these two in sexual union, or even mere envisioning it, suffices to give a vivid experience of the cosmic union of Shiva/Shakti" (p.67). The erotic union of Shiva and Shakti or the male and female figures is connected to the union of the individual self with universal spirit (Singh, 2019).

*Kohbars* are rubbed, wiped and cleaned out after the four days believing that the bride and bridegroom have had successful contact till then. The pragmatic purpose of the painting is regeneration, fertility and reproduction (Mishra, 1978). Particular compositions are significant in special cultural performances, ceremony and festivals. These paintings have several layers of meanings ranging from ordinary mundane matters to the spiritual enlightenment of the *sadhaka*.

Sometimes, contrary elements have been assimilated in the folk paintings like eroticism and spiritualism (Thakur, 2017). The supernatural and real concepts coexist in the single visual work. The entire universe is interlinked making an organic unity. The holistic world view of Mithila folk arts contributes to create balanced humanity.

Mithila folks use homemade colors washable properties. The artists draw the figures on the floor using rice power, vermilion, colorful natural clay and natural colors extracted from leaves and flowers in the locality. The basic colors are yellow, blue, red, black, green and white. Black is taken from coal or a lamp. Yellow is extracted from yellow-colored flower petals (Singh, 2020). Rice powder works as white color. Green is extracted from the green leaves of the plants. These natural colors are mixed in water and applied on the floor. Women folks use their fingers to draw the figures and paint the pictures. Sometimes, a bamboo stick with the cotton tip is used as a brush (Sharma, 2013, pp.184-86).

In Mithila paintings, human figures are in profile with bold contours. The paintings are almost two-dimensional. Drawing are sketched in black and red colors. Then, the enclosed space is filled with colors. There is minimum contrast in light and shade. This makes the composition a two-dimensional art form. Bold outlines and vibrant colors like red, yellow, blue, white, green, and black add to the clarity of the visual composition (Rakesh, 2005). Pointed nose, large eyes and feet turned sideways are the characteristics of the human figures. According to Aran (1978): "The faces are usually shown in profile, though the eye is always drawn as seen from the front. The feet are always turned sideways like on ancient Egyptian reliefs. The difference in the size of figures has nothing to do with perspective and reflects only the relative importance of the figure in the overall composition. The faces, with their long, pointed noses and large eyes, show not a trace of Mongolian influence and add support to the hypothesis that the Mithila people may be pure descendants of the Aryan immigrants" (p.186). The main figure is at the center of the visual composition. It is bigger than other figures in the periphery. This plays a key role in deriving the significance of the work. Around the central figure, there are decorative and symbolic images (Singh, 2020). The simple forms of Mithila paintings contribute to enhancing life along with aesthetic pleasure through the visual presentation of mythical narration. Culture, myth, art and life are closely connected in Mithila folk arts.

### Conclusion

Mithila arts have pragmatic values. Visual works are intertwined with the culture and life of the Mithila community. Unusual and

supernatural figures are depicted on the surface of the composition having deeper spiritual and pragmatic significances related to real life. The symbols in art suggest beyond the presented images. The paintings create a balance between spiritual and secular motifs. They emphasize the union of the individual self and cosmic being. This ceremonial art form is a living cultural heritage of Mithila for ages. The art practice is lively and fresh since the surface is wiped every year and again new arts are created while celebrating the ceremonies and festivals. This creative process has renewed the Mithila culture and life. These folk forms try to resolve the contradictions of life and society in an aesthetic manner.

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