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Visual Representation of Mithila Culture Through Mithila folk arts

A study based on the search for cultural significance

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VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF MITHILA CULTURE THROUGH MITHILA FOLK
ARTS
(A study based on the search for cultural significance)

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Cover painting portrays Rama and Sita's wedding
Art by Amit Kumar Dutt
Style: Madhubani painting

Abstract

Mithila paintings are at the center to signify the cultural importance not only in Nepal and India, but also in other countries. The artists of Mithila devote their much time to portray different cultural aspects and their importance, however, the artists have not got much recognition from the Nepal government. Yet, they keep on painting to promote Mithila culture globally. In this context, the present study seeks to explore the visual representation of Mithila culture through Mithila artifacts.

The current study is the result of the field visit conducted in Janakpur and its neighboring villages in Nepal in June 2016. This study includes the voices of the artists, amateur artists of villages, scholars, teachers, social activists, and together with the researcher's observation notes. Based on the theories of representation, the study aims at finding out how different cultural practices of Mithila are understood through the folk arts and cultural representation is needed to spread the message around the world. This thesis can be used to develop the tradition of Mithila paintings and to preserve the indigenous culture. The findings show how cultural representation and its signifying practices are portrayed through Mithila artifacts.

Key words: Mithila paintings, representation, wedding, indigenous art

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Glossary of non-English words

<i>Angan</i>	Open space in front of house
<i>Ardhanarishwara</i>	Incarnation of God Shiva in form of half man and half woman
<i>Aripana</i>	Diagram or paintings made on floor on special occasions
<i>Bidh-bidhata</i>	Planner of destiny
<i>Diyos</i>	Candle
<i>Gauri-puja</i>	Prayer to goddess
<i>Ghunghat</i>	Purdah
<i>Jaymala</i>	Garland
<i>Jhijhiya</i>	Popular festival of Mithila
<i>Kamaldaha</i>	Pond of lotus
<i>Kanyadaan Kanyadaar</i>	Handing over the bride
<i>Kohbar</i>	First few nights spent by newly-wed couple after marriage
<i>Kohbarghar</i>	House where newly-wed couple spent their first few nights together
<i>Latpatiya suga</i>	Dancing parrots
<i>Madaba</i>	wedding mandap
<i>Maithils</i>	Peoples living in Mithila
<i>Mehdin</i>	Color extracted from a special henna plant
<i>Naina-jogin</i>	Goddess of eye
<i>Pairkshan</i>	Wedding ritual
<i>Parda</i>	Curtain
<i>Saatphera</i>	Seven circumambulation
<i>Sheshnaga</i>	King serpent; mount of god Vishnu
<i>Sindoor</i>	Vermillion powder
<i>Sindoordaan</i>	Giving vermilion to the bride
<i>Subha Labha</i>	Sign of good omen and good fortune
<i>Sumukha</i>	Holy face
<i>Swayamvara</i>	Custom of choosing groom by bride herself
<i>Triratrivrata</i>	Vow of three nights celibacy
<i>Trishul</i>	Weapon of God Shiva

Abbreviation

JWAP	Janakpur Women's Art Project
JWDC	Janakpur Women's Development Center
NGOs	Non -Governmental Organizations
INGOs	International Non-Governmental Organizations
VDC	Village Development Committee

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1. Introduction

The thesis is concerned with Mithila paintings and their representational values for the promotion and preservation of Mithila culture. The Mithila folk arts are the epitome of glorious cultural heritage of Mithila region. These Mithila folk arts have time immemorial history and significance for all the peoples living in Mithila. Specially, Mithila folk arts express the cultural, social, religious and way of life which *Maithils* (peoples living in Mithila) live, think and create. These arts have different symbols used in particular ceremonies, and they have their own culture and religious significance. The symbols and images used are contextual and are depicted for the happy and successful marriage life and other rites and rituals – rites and rituals are taken as synonymous. They are done on wall, floor, body, pot; especially made of clay or cloths. Mithila folk arts can be classified into categories like cloth making, utensils making, paintings, potteries, handicrafts, wood work, making garlands, making bangles, tattooing, doll making (Rakesh, 2005). From this classification of Mithila folk arts, it can be said that Mithila culture is rich in arts. For more understanding of Mithila folk arts, here are listed some Mithila paintings with short description.

*Kohbar*¹ painting: The exact and precise definition of the word *Kohbar* is not known in English but it is widely popular in Mithila region, and it is meaningful when it is added with *ghar* (house). Together, *kohbarghar* means nuptial chamber or wedding room where a few of the most important rituals are conducted and the newly married couples reside for at least their initial four days together. *Kohbar* painting refers to the decoration with exotic, intricate and exuberant paints which are crucial for their honeymoon. There are many symbolic images like the lotus plant, bamboo grove, fish, birds, and snakes in union which represent fertility, sexual ability and proliferation of life. They are drawn collectively by the ladies of the bride's family and those of the locality in the nuptial chamber only on the occasion of marriage ceremony.

*Aripana*² : *Aripana* is another kind of Mithila art. Its name is different in different geographical settings. It is a magical and mysterious circle which is drawn on the floor to purify and sanctify the particular land for worshipping purpose, especially at Deepawali³ .

¹ Kohbar in Mithila refers to the first few nights spent together by the newly wed couple.

² Aripana refers to the diagram or paintings made on floor or yard, especially on different occasions of Mithila.

³ The festival of lights and firecrackers in which the peoples worship goddess of wealth; Laxmi

Godana (Tattooing): This folk art is done on a human body, especially on skin. It is similar to the most popular fashion of West. Tattooing is called *Godana* in the local language. The people of Mithila have great fascination for the skin decoration. Women, especially, are fond of this. They make tattoos on their body for womanhood. It used to be done with the help of needles, which was a painstaking process. Now, with the advent of machine, the tattooing process has become easier than that. According to customary belief among *Maithils*, it is only their tattoos that they can keep until the time of death.

Mehdin (Henna): Like tattooing, it is also body painting, but it is generally painted on the hand and feet. It has also ritualistic significance. It is very important during marriage ceremony. It is said that the more reddish the color of henna becomes on the hand of the bride, the more love she will get from her would be husband. The reddish-brown color stands for the prosperity that a bride is expected to bring to her new family.

1.1 Statement of Problem

The ancient Mithila was happy and prosperous since it was ruled by the very wise philosopher king of that time. They were concerned with the promotion and preservation of their cultures. Culture has been an integral part of peoples living in a territory and the making of an identity. It puts an emphasis on the cultural background of *Maithils* – initially, the artists used to focus festivals; later, they started to use everyday lifestyles of peoples and their actions on different occasions like education (equal education to boys and girls), marriage (the negative side of polygamy, the negative aspects of dowry system in marriage and so on). Therefore, most of the Mithila folk art captures the everyday life of the peoples.

Mithila painting does not only represent the uniqueness of *Maithil* cultures, it is also unique in styles. It uses the natural vegetation color in the paintings to color them. It exploits the naturally found materials to make it more beautiful and meaningful. Previously, peoples were reluctant to identify with the paintings. The artists practicing Mithila paintings did not want to be called painters. Even though it was hard to sustain themselves with this profession, some artists kept on making Mithila paintings for themselves. The Mithila artists did not get any support from the community or the state in the beginning. Due to the persistent efforts towards Mithila paintings, their works have received national and international recognition. It is a different story now regarding the arts. Still, common peoples are not so much oriented towards the promotion

and preservation of culture. They are busy in their household chores. The state also seems reluctant to promote and preserve Mithila paintings.

This thesis studies significance and importance of Mithila culture through Mithila folk arts. The reason behind choosing Mithila paintings for the Master's thesis is to show cultural significance and to go against the exotic representation of Mithila paintings by some scholars. Another important reason for this is show cultural awareness among *Maithils* and make them feel proud of Mithila culture. Arts can express even abstracts ideas like values, traditions, beliefs etc. They play the role of stimulus, by which the targeted goal can be achieved. They can empower people with dignity and self-respect. With folk arts, the younger and future generations get chance to know about their tradition. The way some peoples from Mithila are interested to continue the tradition of Mithila paintings, the future generation will surely keep Mithila paintings alive. Kin F. Dunphy writes, "within the cultural dimension, arts participation can be considered in terms of its intrinsic value, with the experience of being worthwhile in its own right for individuals and the community". Kin further cites Kingma who argues that arts give expression to cultures which depicts the societal values. The art is an expression of culture which becomes the storehouse of perceived values and provides fertile ground for promotion, preservation and significance of culture (Dunphy, 2009).

In this context, I am undertaking this study to explore the cultural significance of Mithila through Mithila paintings to find the answer to the following research questions.

1.2 Research Questions

1. How do Mithila paintings represent the cultural significance of Mithila?
2. What are the symbols and motifs and their representations to seek for cultural significance?

1.3 Significance of the Study

Much research has been done on Mithila folk arts in relation to women, creativity and their empowerment (LaDuke, 1981; Lee, 1987; Mishra, 2003; Wilkinson-Weber, 2004), but there has been minimal research done specifically on the cultural significance of Mithila. Mithila is a culturally rich land with lots happening. In the case of Mithila paintings, there has been some researches on the Mithila folk arts. This study will help the interested peoples know more about the different practices of Mithila culture. I believe the study on the representation of Mithila

culture helps not only the interested people to know about them but also the peoples living in Mithila. The study will further tell about the different perspectives not only from the researchers, but also the perspectives of local artists, peoples, women who are not artists but also the practitioner of Mithila folk arts. The study will be helpful, as it reveals what is actually happening and what measures should be taken to promote and preserve Mithila folk arts tradition.

1.4 Structure of Thesis

The thesis has been divided into six chapters. Chapter 2 gives the background information on the short history of Mithila and Mithila paintings with modern practices. Chapter 3 sheds light on the theoretical and conceptual framework of the study. Chapter 4 focuses on the methodological procedures for the study and reflection on the use of the methods. Chapter 5 outlines the analysis. Finally, Chapter 6 presents a brief conclusion.

2. Background Information

This chapter deals with the background information of the thesis. In the beginning of the chapter, I am going to provide the historical background of Mithila region and its social, political and cultural practices. Then, it talks about the historical development of Mithila folk arts in Mithila and presents the status of indigenous communities of Nepal.

2.1. Historical background of Mithila in Nepal and its social, cultural, political, economic practices

The scholars mark the beginning of the Mithila kingdom, which used to be known as Videha, to the first century BC. The kingdom is mentioned in the great epic of Hindus, Ramayana where Sita is believed to be the princess of the kingdom. There are different views regarding the ancient capital of Mithila; some believe it is in Vaishali, which is in India now, while some think Janakpur is the capital of ancient Mithila. Janakpur is in Nepal, which lies in the south of Nepal (Minahan, 2012). Earlier the kingdom was ruled by Janaks⁴ but later the last Janak king was publicly dethroned and for hundreds of years the Maithili state was governed by elected members. From the sixth to ninth centuries, the state was ruled by Buddhists. Later, the Hindus overpowered them and established a kingdom ruled by Hindus as most of the population was Hindu. According to Minahan (2012), the Hindu dynasty was established in the ninth century. After that, around 1224 the Maithili literature is believed to appear. Minahan (2012) continues telling that in the fourteenth century a new power took control under Brahmin kings who continued to be in the power until 1526. The Mithila state flourished under the Khandavala⁵ dynasty in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Later, in 1765, the British took control (Minahan, 2012) and in 1816 there was a treaty consent named the Sugauli Treaty⁶, which divided the kingdom into two parts with the large portion going to India and the small one to Nepal (Brass, 2005(Karki, 2002)).

Mithila was a vast kingdom, ruled by King Janak. Later the successor kings were also called Janaks (Minahan, 2012). Among them, King Janak named Sheerdhvaj was intelligent, benevolent and kind-hearted. Once the kingdom was plagued by drought. Then there was an

⁴ In the ancient Mithila, the kings used to be called Janak

⁵ Name of the dynasty

⁶ Karki, A. K. (2002). Movements from below: land rights movement in Nepal. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 3(2), 201-217.

oracle which told him to plough the field by himself. He did as it was told in the oracle. When he was ploughing the field, the plough got stuck, and there was the birth of Sita, later known as the daughter of Janak. Janak was equally fond of art. It was the time when Rama came to marry Sita from Ayoudhya⁷ to Mithila, King Janak asked his peoples to decorate their houses by paintings. The peoples painted their walls and floor of their houses to impress Rama and his marriage attendants⁸. It is believed that the Mithila paintings started in the Madhubani district of Bihar, India (Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka, & Whelpton, 2012).

Mithila covers most of the parts of northeast India and some of the parts of southeast Nepal. Most parts of Mithila comprise the districts of Champaran, Sitamarhi, Muzzaffarpur, Madhubani, Darbhanga, Samastipur, Saharsa, Monghyr, Supaul, Vaishali and parts of Munger, Begusarai, Bhagalpur and Purnia of India and the districts of Morang, Sunsari, Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, Sarlahi, Rauthat as well as some portion of Jhapa, Bara, and Parsa (Jha, 1997; Rekha, 2014). The modern Mithila is also popularly known as Vedeha, or Tirhut which falls in between 25°52' North latitude and 84°56' and 86°46' East longitude (Jha, 1997).

The area and territory of the great Mithila region varied from time to time. Yet it is believed that the region stretches from the foothills of Himalayas of the north to the Ganga River of the south and from the Mahananda River on the east to the Gandaki River on the west. The total area of the Mithila region might have been estimated to be about 2500 square miles (Jha, 1997). But, this huge region was divided into two parts; the large portion is in India whereas a small portion fell in Nepal.

⁷ One of the famous religious places of Hindus in India, where god Rama is supposed to born

⁸ It has been mentioned in the greatest epic of Hindus Ramayana



Figure 1: Mithila region of India

Source: <https://srikhandibhitha.wordpress.com/author/srikhandibhitha/>



Figure 2: Mithila region in Nepal

Source: <https://srikhandibhitha.wordpress.com/author/srikhandibhitha/>

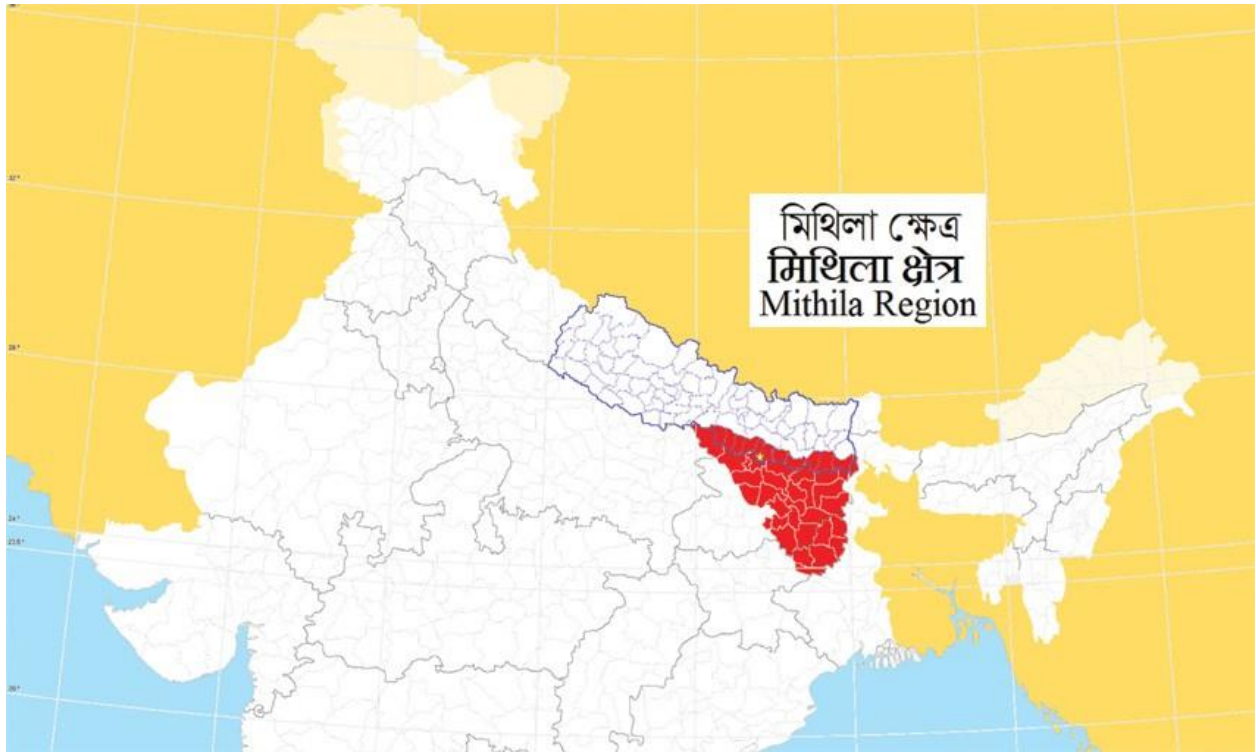


Figure 3: The Great Mithila Region
Post

Source: The Kathmandu

2.2 Janakpur as Capital of Maithils

Janakpur is also known as Janakpurdham, which means the place of religious significance for Hindus. Janakpurdham lies in the southern central part of Nepal. It is one of the most visited places of the country. Lately, it has been named as the capital of Province no. 2, which has brought a bit confusion among the peoples living in this province. There are other different places in Mithila which can equally be named the capital of the province no. 2. So, the peoples who are not living in or around Janakpurdham speak for another place for the capital. I do not think this confusion will harm the historical importance of Janakpurdham. The center of Mithila region is Janakpur, which is the producer of Mithila paintings also known as Janakpur paintings.

2.2.1 Historical development of Janakpur

Nepal, at present, has been divided into seven provincial states. Lately, it has been passed in parliament with a majority. On January 17, 2018, their temporary capitals were announced. Among these seven states, Province no. 2 lies in the central southern part of the country, and its temporary capital is Janakpurdham. The nomenclature of the provinces has not been done

yet, but there is a large discussion about it. There are many suggested names for the Province no. 2. Yet, most of the people seem to be using 'Mithila' for the region.

The ancient Mithila was bigger in area which was bounded on the north by the Himalayas, on the south by the Ganga River, on the east by the Koshi River and on the west by Gandaki River. The ancient Mithila was known as the 'Vaidehi dynasty' which bestowed the title of Janak to the kings. Later, the capital of Mithila started to be called Janakpur (Burghart, 1978). Burghart further mentions, according to Ramayana, when the twenty-third generation of Vaidehi dynasty was hit with drought, King Janak went to plough the soil to save his people from the famine. While ploughing the soil, he found a baby girl, and he brought her home. He named her Sita. When Sita became a maiden, King Janak made an announcement that the person who can string a bow would be the one who Sita would marry (Burghart, 1978). Almost all the Maithils agree with what Burghart mentions from Ramayana. The bow was of god Parshuram, and it was very heavy. So, King Janak thought if a prince could string the bow then he would have been a warrior and there is no problem in their marriage. Many princes came to take part in the ceremony. Rama, the prince of Ayodhya also came there with his brother and their Guru. No any prince could fulfil the promise of King Janak. Eventually, Rama strings the bow and the auspicious marriage took place (Burghart, 1978).

There are, however, multiple versions of the story of the 'Ancient Mithila'. One among them suggests that Nimi, a son of Ayodhya King Manu came to the 'land of sacrifices' named as Videh with his son Mithi. Later they named the place after Mithi's name, called 'Mithila'. Similarly, there is another version of the story of Mithila. It is said that there was a sage Mithi and after whom the region was named Mithila⁹. Whatever version of the story of Mithila is, there is one thing common; a culturally fertile region.

2.2.2 Janakpur at Present

Janakpur has been one of the prominent religious spots for the Hindus since ancient times and it is no different today. There are so many things which have made it famous among Hindus and others, such as temples and ponds that are the attractions of the pilgrimage. There are so many temples and ponds which add beauty to the city. Janaki temple, among the most famous temples of Nepal, is visited by people everyday in great numbers. Peoples from India and Nepal can be seen with huge crowds. Janaki Temple was built in 1991 by a donor from India. The

⁹ http://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/16641/7/07_chapter%203.pdf

temple is the heart of the city (Gellner et al., 2012). Since I am an inhabitant of the area, I know Janakpur well. It is very famous among Hindus. As there are so many temples, people love to go to temples in the morning and evenings. They go to the temples to get blessings from the deities kept in the temples. On special occasions, flocks of people can be seen in Janakpur to pay homage to the gods and goddesses. Those occasions are *Bibahpanchami*, *RamNawami*, *Chhath*, *Dashain*¹⁰, and so on. These festivals represent the belief system of Maithil peoples towards gods and goddesses. In the name of god, they slaughter many innocent goats on the eighth day of Dashain, and they happen to blame and make god(s) happy at the same time. People long for something like success in business, passing exam, yielding good crops and so on and vow to god to sacrifice a goat, cock, buffaloes, sheep if it is fulfilled. It is a matter of debate whether sacrificing the animals in the name of god is acceptable or not. When I asked some people about their opinion, I found mixed views. The younger generation is more against the sacrifice of animals while elderly peoples believe in it. This tradition has existed since ancient times as a practice of indigenous people. They believe in this kind of ceremony. I still remember when my mother told me how she dreamed scary and misfortune things because she had vowed that she would offer two goats if her wishes came true. Sometimes, my eldest brother and I used to show our reluctance to doing such things. Sacrificing goats is not a new phenomenon, it has been done since ancient times. The difference is that in the past humans used to be sacrificed, while later, in the place of human beings, animals and plants started to be used as a sacrifice (Frazer, 2008). In Mithila, animals, birds, plants, fruits, vegetables can be seen as scapegoats.

¹⁰ These are special occasions when peoples from Nepal and India visit Janakpur with their family members. They come to Janakpur despite difficulties faced during journey. Bibahpanchami is celebrated as the day when Rama and Sita had got married. Rama is regarded as ideal man while Sita is known as pious and sacred. Similarly, RamNawami is celebrated in every month of March and April. On this particular day, stories of Rama and Sita are told, hymns is recited. In the same way, on the day of Chhath, peoples are gathered around all the ponds and pray sunset and sunrise. At Dashain, there are 10 days of celebrations. The city is decorated as bride. The temples are with glittering lights. The city is kept clean. Peoples visit temples in the early morning and in the evenings. On eighth day of celebration, there is a huge number of goats are sacrificed to the goddess of power.



Figure 4. Janaki Temple of Janakpur

Source: The Kantipur Daily Newspaper

2.3 Development of Mithila Paintings in Nepal and their practices

The Mithila native folk art has been handed down from generation to generations. The young Maithil girls learn this art from their mothers, grandmothers, neighbors, relatives. It is a native art drawn on the auspicious occasions celebrated in the Southern Terai¹¹ of Nepal and Bihar of India.

2.3.1 A Brief History of Mithila Painting

In 1934 a devastating earthquake hit the northern part of India and caused havoc in the southern part of Nepal. After the huge earthquake, a young British officer William G Archer came to visit the site, and very interestingly he noticed the beauty of wall paintings of Maithil peoples. C. B. Heinz mentions how the young officer noticed that the '*parda*(curtain)' was broken by the earthquake. In Mithila, patriarchy has been a dominant factor since long time. '*Parda*' refers to the boundary of patriarchy which causes the limitations of women's potentiality. Heinz

¹¹ One of the geographical regions of Nepal; Nepal is divided into three geographical regions – mountains, hills and terai. Mountain regions lies in northern part of the country while terai region is situated in the southern part and the mid part region is called hill region.

further mentions that it was not the women's faces that enticed him, it was the beauty of the paintings (Heinz, 2006). Later, Archer documented the images in a contextualized form and these images came to the world. During the period of the 1960s and 70s, some artists started to turn it into more a portable craft. For an example, Ganga Devi in the 1960s, Heinz mentions (Jain, 1997), primarily used paper, which was introduced in Mithila to convert the traditions of rituals floor and wall paintings into a more portable craft gaining both prestige and income (Heinz, 2006).

Paintings on paper have changed the Maithil women's lives dramatically. Since paintings on paper started helping them to earn some money, the shift could be seen in the gender roles. Initially, the women, who were limited by patriarchy, now can earn money themselves and feel independent. Apart from the income, they also gain social, local, national and international recognition. The women and their paintings are exported to other countries which have helped them live freely¹².

According to the respondents, there is much similarity between Janakpur paintings and Madhubani paintings. They share similar themes and style. Mithila paintings in Nepal include the everyday lifestyle of people living in Mithila. It represents social, religious, economical, political agendas with vivid display. In 1989, Janakpur Women's Art Project (JWAP) was founded with the help of the scholar and professor Dr. Rajendra Bimal and the American Claire Burkert. They aimed to promote Mithila paintings in Nepal as they are flourishing in India. After three years of the registration of the JWAP, JWAP was changed into Janakpur Women's Development Center (JWDC); it was the first official nongovernmental organization in Nepal for the promotion of Mithila arts and the empowerment of the local women and artists through this indigenous art. At present, the center of JWDC is built in the Kuwa village in 1994 in the traditional Maithil style. The JWDC focuses on giving training to those women who are economically poor (Davis, 2007), deprived of formal education and suppressed and oppressed in patriarchal clutch. In spite of making the artists economically motivated, most of the women are still in the same status quo. There is slight change in their lifestyle, but they are still in the same deplorable situation. Visiting the field and talking to the artists made me draw the conclusion that those artists who are involved in Mithila paintings project, their lifestyle is slightly improved. Yet, they are still in the same circle. Their art represents much more than the reality, their art gains much attention and recognition, the artists are not considerably improved.

¹² <http://www.mithilapaintings-eaf.org/history.html>

I personally feel it is not only the organization which helps the women out of this circle, it is also local peoples and the state that should come together to help this indigenous art flourish in better way. They should also give motivation to the artists so that they can give their best effort to make the art.

2.3.2 Materials used in Mithila paintings

The Mithila art has been in continuation for a long time from generation to generation. Initially, the Mithila paintings were done by mud and cow's dung. The practice of making wall paintings with cow's dung and mud is still in existence. However, it is not being practiced as often. During the religious ceremonies, the Hindu women of Mithila draw different diagrams to show homage to their deities. They still practice Mithila paintings with mud and cow's dung; nevertheless, there is no difference in the precision and clarity of Mithila paintings. Besides, mud and cow's dung, the artists also use different materials to commercialize and continue the tradition of Mithila paintings.

From ancient time, in addition to cow's dung and mud, natural colors have been used. Different natural colors have been extracted from plants, stones, vegetables and other natural things found in the nature. There are various natural colors like yellow, brown orange, dark brown, very light brown, green, brown, pink, red, orange, orange red, grey, black. The things which are the source of the colors used for the paintings are turmeric, carrot, red rose, pink rose, Kashmiri chili powder, black coffee, green leaves of spinach, henna powder, beet root juice, *sindoor*(vermillion powder) , coal, black powder from used batteries.

In addition to natural colors, the artists produce papers according to them. First, they mix cow's dung with water and then they sieve the mixture with cotton cloths. Later, they apply the mixture on the paper and the paper is dried. They apply this method so that the natural colors look bright on the canvas. The canvas is of different types.

2.4 Summary

This chapter aimed to give the background information for my thesis. The thesis is on the representation of Mithila paintings. So, the chapter provides the historical development of Mithila paintings with the historical presentation of the geography along with the modern tradition of Mithila paintings.

In the next chapter, I present the theoretical and conceptual framework of my study and discuss the theory of representation and culture.

3. Theoretical Conceptualization

This chapter aims at presenting the theories on representation and indigenesness of the Maithils to provide a foundation for understanding the representation of indigenous Maithils and their culture, in Mithila paintings in particular and of that in the books or motion pictures. This chapter, first, addresses the concept of representation. Then, it proceeds to observe the basic representation in Mithila paintings. It further explores the cultural significance. In Nepal, Maithils have long been humiliated in the community populated by people, especially from hill region. Peoples of the hill regions think they are the real inhabitants of Nepal whereas peoples living in the Mithila or Terai regions have migrated from India. The peoples from Mithila have always been called 'dhoti'. 'Dhoti' is a costume worn by peoples of Mithila. The temperature in Mithila is very high especially in summer. So, the peoples have to wear 'dhoti'; a thin cotton cloth. However, the peoples from hill region always mock the culture practices of Mithila. When I was in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, I was the victim of the discriminatory practices. I was often called 'dhoti'. This study undertakes the representational values and cultural importance shown by Mithila paintings.

3.1. Hall's Concept of Representation

A representation is defined as the construction of concept; it connects meaning and language to culture (Hall, 1997). The construction of concept, according to the constructionist approach, makes meaning through representational systems – concepts and signs. The practices of representation are highly embedded in cultural studies and have occupied an important place in the study of culture. According to Stuart Hall (1997), representation means the use of language, signs and images which stand for something or represent things, culture or the world meaningfully. It has become an important part in the meaning making process. He further adds three different types of theories of representation – the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist approaches to representation. The artists of Mithila paintings use these theories of representation to express the cultural practices and its importance. The Mithila paintings portray the meaning of cultural significance.

According to the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary cited by (Hall 1997), there are two relevant meanings to the term 'representation' – firstly, to represent something is to describe or depict it by description, portrayal or imagination and secondly, it means to symbolize, stand for or substitute for something (Hall, 1997). In Mithila paintings, both meanings are relevant. Artists

use their imagination to depict or describe something and at the same time they use symbols to be a specimen for something. Thus, representation is the production of meaning of the concepts through language, images, paintings. It also enables us to refer to either the real world of peoples, culture, or to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and event (Hall, 1997).

Hall (1997) continues to discuss representation. There are, according to him, two processes of the system of representation. First, there is the system of representation by which all sorts of objects, peoples and events are correlated with a set of concepts or mental representation. Second, language is the system of representation which is involved in the overall process of constructing meaning. Since my project is on paintings, I am focusing on these two systems of representation. The first system of representation is not only consisting individual concepts, but also of different ways of organizing, clustering, arranging and classifying concepts, and of establishing complex relations between them. Hall (1997) further states this system of representation includes both abstract and concrete concepts, from highly obscure and abstract things like love, friendship or death, to people or material objects, like chairs, desks and so on. In Mithila paintings, both the concepts are portrayed well. In order to have better understanding of Mithila paintings, I am going to use Hall's concept of representation to form, motif and context of the Mithila paintings. The form comprises all visual and physical characteristics of work, such as lines, colors, perspectives, figures, ground, ornaments, paintwork, style of work, experience while motif includes what the paintings represent through figures, landscapes, objects, decorative items, traditions and so on. Similarly, context matters what made the paintings come out and what are the political, religious, cultural, historical, ideological components for out better understanding. As a viewer, I have witnessed the paintings which deal with different elements of culture. The second system of representation is the use of language to create meaning. Language, here, is used in a very broad and inclusive way. As language used to express meaning, visual images like paintings are also used to express meaning (Hall, 1997).

These two systems of representation are at the center of meaning making process in culture. The first makes us able to produce meaning to the world by constructing a set of correspondences or a chain of equivalences between things – people, objects, events, abstract ideas etc. and the second produces a set of correspondences between our set conceptual map and a set of signs through language or paintings which stand for or represent those concepts (Hall, 1997). The representation is the result of making meaning, but the meaning is not

inherited in things, it is constructed. It is the outcome of a signifying practice – a practice that produces meaning.

After describing two systems of representation, Hall discusses three approaches to explaining how representation of meaning through language or painting works. They are the reflective, intentional and the constructive or constructivist approaches. In the reflective approach, meaning is thought to be hidden in the object, person, idea or even of the real world in which painting or language functions like a mirror. For an example, in the fourth century BC, the drawing and paintings mirrored or imitated Nature. The second approach to meaning in representation argues just opposite to the first one. In this approach, the author, painter, artist, subject is at the center. By paintings, the artists intend to deliver their meaning to the audience. Finally, the third approach recognizes that neither things in themselves nor the individual can fix meaning. Constructivists do not deny the existence of material world and intention the individuals carry. They believe it is the system that is used to represent our concepts (Hall, 1997). Symbolic practices and processes are very important in representation for making meaning. The constructionist approach to the representation introduces symbolic domain of life, where language of paintings functions as signs, into the very heart of social life itself.

According to Norman Bryson (2013), it is a bit difficult to understand all the terms of the language of paintings in the beginning, but to know how the representation works in the paintings it is important to pick out main points (Bryson, 2013). For Bryson, the language of painting does not function simply to reflect or imitate a meaning which is already in nature, but it also produces meanings. The act of painting is a signifying practice. There are some points to be considered regarding paintings. First, for Bryson, the mode of seeing which means the painting invites the viewer and the language of paintings functions to place viewers in a certain relation to meaning. Second, the relationship to the theme which is posed by painting. Third, finding out the distorted meaning in painting. Last, the importance of creatural and geometric space in painting (Bryson, 2013).

Later, Hall (1997) brings the reference of discourse, power and knowledge of Michel Foucault to know more about representation. For Foucault, the production of knowledge and meaning is the outcome of discourse. He is concerned with the whole discursive formation of a text or representation for meaning. His definition of discourse is much broader, which includes social practices, forms of subjectivity, and power relations. He is always more historically specific which makes him able to see forms of power or knowledge are always rooted in particular

context and histories (Hall, 1997). Thus, I will try to apply Foucault's method cited in Hall's *Representation. Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices* to Mithila paintings. The painting could be said to capture and represent a discursive event (Hall, 1997).

Hall (1997) refers some key points of Foucault's theory of representation and about the role of the subject. Foucault tells that a painting shows or represents a scene of something painted or portrayed. It is also a painting which tells us something about how representation and subject work. Representation and subject are the underlying message of a painting. Representation in painting is not about a true reflection or imitation of reality, it is all about the discourse which it portrays. Foucault keeps on telling about representation that it works through the complex interplay between presence and absence. In other words, it works as much through what is not shown, as through what is shown. Interpreting a painting gives meanings. Foucault tells that the discourse of painting deliberately keeps the viewers in the state of suspended attention; an oscillating process of looking. So, its meaning is always in the process of emerging. There is no final meaning.

After this, Foucault argues how the paintings work as discourse. He tells discourse includes the spectator's look at the picture and follows with the relationships of looking as represented in the picture. So, the spectator is doing two kinds of looking: looking at the scene from the position outside and at the same time looking out of the scene by identifying with the picture. In the same way, Foucault argues that painting does not have a complete meaning. It means the painting has meaning in relation with the spectator who is looking at it – the spectator completes the meaning of the painting. Meaning, therefore, is constructed in a dialogue between the painting and the spectator. Foucault says for the painting to work; the spectator must identify with the subject of the discourse of the painting then only they become the ideal producer of the meaning. Similarly, Foucault gives another point about representation; representation occurs from at least three positions in the painting. First, he says, the spectator whose look puts together the different elements of the picture for the overall meaning. Second, there is the painter who paints the scene. The painter has a double role to play; an actor and a spectator. And the third, we may say the scene which makes sense for meaning.

3.2 A debate over meaning and representation

To produce meaning out of text or context is a matter of debate. A lot of theories have talked about making meaning from the text in itself or going back to its context. Some theories focus

on autonomy of the text while some go with the intention of the author or painter behind writing the text or painting the arts (Tyson, 2014). Hart (1995) brings a debate over meaning and representation. He mentions how the transformations have occurred and brought a debate over the politics of representation when Hindu women's ritual art has undergone its journey from the wall paintings in Hindu houses to the canvas paintings in the Western art museum (Hart, 1995). The conflict in this debate centers on two approaches to representation of Mithila arts in a Western art museum – one approach should be based on the context information that is highly important in making meaning while the other feels that all arts, including non-western art, should be treated as autonomous – primarily as a visual experience without the burden of context information (Hart, 1995). Hart further mentions that these differing approaches can be illustrated by two cases – one is *Festival of India* in which the indigenous context was incorporated seriously, while another is *Magiciens de la terre*, in which context was minimized (Hart, 1995). The second case, Hart writes, was controversial because there was little or no contextual information. As far as my opinion is concerned, to deduce meaning out of Mithila paintings one should go to the indigenous context. Going into the context, they can grab the true and authentic meaning of what Mithila paintings aim at representing.

4. Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodology of the thesis and fieldwork experience. To begin with, it talks about the study area and the informants and then describes how and why I have chosen the study area and informants for my project. This chapter also discusses and describes the field experience, the data collection and the research process. I am also going to explain the choice of methodology and discuss why I have used it for this thesis. I, furthermore, explain the process of data collection and the challenges I faced during that period, and, I explain the advantages of data collection for the research. Being a researcher, I was stressed dealing with the ethical issues. So finally, in this chapter, I present my role as a researcher and the story of maintaining ethical issues during my whole project.

4.1. Study Area

As mentioned above, Maithils are mainly found in the Province No. 2 of the federal democratic republic of Nepal. The Province No. 2 consists of eight districts; Bara, Parsa, Rauthat, Sarlahi, Mahottari, Dhanusha, Sirha and Saptari. In this region, the majority of peoples are Maithils though there are other people from another descendant. Having eight districts in this region, Janakpur is the center for the practice of Mithila paintings. It lies in the Dhanusha district. I am also from there, so it was a bit easier for me to do my fieldwork.

Mithila region covers some northern part of India and some southern part of Nepal. Culturally, it is very rich not only in terms of Mithila paintings but also in other aspects. The focal point of my research is visual representation of Mithila culture in Nepal. So, the area of this project is Janakpur. Janakpur is an ancient religious place. It lies in Dhanusha district of Nepal. It is famous for the ancient temple called Janaki Temple, which has much to do with the paintings. It has facilities of roads, electricity, drinking water, schools, colleges etc. The main occupation of the peoples living in this district is agriculture. Besides agriculture, some are involved in business, teaching, and social services, while the youth, in particular, go to gulf countries like Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain etc for monetary purpose. Still there are some who practice Mithila paintings not only for economic purposes but also to keep the tradition alive in present and future generation.

This research primarily focuses on the visual representation of Maithil culture in Mithila paintings practiced in Janakpur. Mithila paintings portray the broader spectrum of Maithil

culture. They play a pivotal role to diffuse the cultural identity and cultural significance throughout the globe.

4.2. Selection of informants and accessing the informants

The study has been conducted in Janakpur, the capital of Mithila region and some of the villages nearby it. For the research, I chose a general to specific method. First, I decided to collect general ideas about Mithila paintings and tried to understand the mechanisms relating to them. The main purpose behind it was to get knowledge so that I can dig something important through my study for the society and culture. In Mithila, Janakpur Women's Development Center (JWDC) is the main and the first official non-governmental organization in Nepal. The establishment of JWDC has served two basic purposes: promoting the Mithila traditional arts in and out of the country and generating income for the subsistence of the family and themselves. This organization lies in Kuwa village on the outskirts of Janakpur in 1994. It trains mainly women who are highly interested in carving Mithila paintings and women from poor background. While I was in Norway I had contacted my friend named Dharmendra Kumar Jha who had arranged my meeting with the activists of Mithila culture. He helped me to find organization and informants. I would like to thank him for his kind help. The organization helped to get information from the artists. Then I interviewed them and collected data. I had a group interview with them as well as personal and informal interview with some of them.

For a better understanding of history and the culture of Mithila, I contacted the scholars of Ram Sagar Ram Swarup Multiple Campus, Janakpur who helped me for my project. Then, I also managed time to go through the theses done on Mithila paintings and Mithila relating issues at the Central Library of University Campus, Kathmandu and the library of RRM campus Janakpur which turned a great source for my research to be done.

4.3. Field experience

I conducted my field work in June of 2016. During the span of my field work, I spent nearly two weeks in my home and a week in Kathmandu for the thesis and some talks with the scholarly renown personalities from Mithila region. Though I had organized the talks from Norway, I had difficulties in getting information from the respondents. In the beginning, the respondents were shaky and reluctant, but when they learned my purpose, they started opening up. It was not the case meeting lecturers and professors of campuses of Janakpur and Kathmandu. Later I found it quite easy to get information from them. None of the respondents

refused to answer my questions. While I was with the professors and lecturers, I did not only get information but also got valuable suggestions related to my research. They also helped me with some physical books, internet sites and articles so that I could get information regarding Mithila culture and identity.

During my first two weeks of field work, I spent time with one of my friends and social activists who helped me to reach Janakpur Women's Development Center (JWDC) where I introduced myself to some of my respondents. The respondents were mainly women and some young girls along with some men. One thing was common that most of them are from poor economic backgrounds looking for something to earn by paintings. Recently, there has been a great interest in Mithila paintings. Some young girls are promoting them for wedding ceremonies. Some are even hired and given money for decorating the walls, floors and canvases so that the wedding would look grand. It was very difficult to gather everyone together for the group interview as they were very busy with their daily activities. It was the peak time for the paddy plantation so they were very busy. Later, they managed time for me and I got the data needed for my project.

It was very challenging job to go to field and collect data. For primary data, I had to wait some time for the artists to gather together for a group interview. Similarly, for secondary data, I had to go to India to get the recommended books. Not much research has been done on Mithila paintings, so it was also a difficult job to get a copy of previous research done on it in a very short period of time.

4.4. Data Source and Method of Data Collection

4.4.1. Interviews

The interview is pivotal for research. In research, it is a face-to-face conversation with purpose between the seekers and respondents which tries to understand the complete atmosphere. In other words, it seeks to understand the experiences, feelings, opinions of an individuals and particular phenomena. An interview is one of the means to get data for the research. It has been the primary source for the researcher to get the contents and context of different people's everyday social, cultural, political and economic life (Crang & Cook, 2007). As a source of getting information, interviews can range from highly structured to semi-structured or an unstructured mode of interview (Crang & Cook, 2007; Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 1998). An interview is widely used, exploratory in nature and a flexible method so that

interviewees get freedom to express themselves. Since my research is on paintings, which I do not possess much knowledge on, interviews gave me an insight so that I could dig deeper on related issues of the topic of my research. It gave me an opportunity to explore the real voices of the informants. I tried to create a full environment so that the informants could express their opinion with full freedom.

While I was in the field, I wanted to do structured interview. I had prepared a questionnaire with some guided questions. As structured interview demands a rigid way of getting information like not slipping away from the focused questionnaire (Crang & Cook, 2007), I did not get that atmosphere and changed to a semi-structured and unstructured mode of interview. I had prepared different questionnaire for different types of informants like representatives of institutions, teachers, artists. The informants, as I have mentioned earlier, were not so open. Later they gave answers to the questions freely and openly. There had not been any sorts of manipulation or pressure from outside. The questions were relating many issues like identity, culture, representation, women's role in society, art, etc. Though the questions were followed serially, they were asked.

Observing the environment, the semi-structured interview was employed, which provided more freedom so that the informants can discuss the topic in more details. It is not a strict scheduled guide of questions which may limit the respondents (Hancock et al., 1998), rather it should be conducted more sensitively and with flexibility with the interest of interviewer or interviewees. Mostly I followed this type of interview during my field work for the data collection. Besides it, I used unstructured interviews which was completely informal. Theoretically, it was unstructured, yet somewhere it was semi-structured as I had intention to get intended responses.

4.4.2. Focus Group Discussion

In research, focus group technique equally plays a vital role to get the real atmosphere of the target community. It is a form of interview comprising several people, usually at least four respondents. Though it needs some modifications to get the data sought for, the flexibility in data contents is the greatest advantage of focus groups (Berg, 2009; Bryman, 2015). Through focus group discussion, the researcher tries to seek psychological, socio-cultural, political characteristics of the individuals or groups. The flexibility makes it less intimidating for the interviewees to deliver the responses. In spite of having flexibility in nature, it sometimes goes beyond the topic and it is likely to reveal complex, contradictory and shifting definitions (Seale,

Gobo, Gubrium, & Silverman, 2004). The researcher should be very keen to keep the discussion on topic.

Focus group discussion is a more flexible mode of interview to get information from the participants. In this mode of data collection, the researcher allows the respondents a free and fair discussion environment. The goal of this method is to find what is useful, interesting and important (ibid, 2004). It also gives the researcher insight to gain perspectives and reflections of the people involved. To do so, I had a very good session with the artists of JWDC.

A focus group is generally based on unstructured interviews, in which the participants bring with a wide range of perspectives relating to the topic; it sometimes turns out to be more complex and contradictory (Hancock et al., 1998; Seale et al., 2004). Due to these kinds of responses from the interviewees, the researcher obtains a more realistic picture of what and why they think like that. This mode of interview helps to gain more insight into the community.

For focus group discussion, I had chosen the artists of JWDC. Among them, most of them were young women aged ranging from 25 to 40, while some were also young girls along with some elderly women and few male artists. In that discussion session, there were eight participants, and we had a very good session for one and half hours. We started with introductions, which provides the purpose of the project, some parameters for the session, some warm-up questions so that they could go into the discussion and later with a series of designed questions to get the real picture of the issue relating to project. At last, we ended the session with summary and sincere thanks to them.

The discussion was mainly based on the issues relating to Mithila, which are depicted on the canvases by the artists. Since the artists are from the same region, it went smoothly. Later, I found some contradictions among the artists with their perspectives. The complex and contradictory responses made me very keen to work on a project with more enthusiasm. Since most of my respondents were mature enough, they gave articulate answers. However, there were some questions which some of them did not answer to the point. With this focus group, I became clearer about my role. It was very tough for me and exciting too.

4.4.3. Painting Observation

Observation is one of the widely used method of data collection to study the target group. It is very useful to gain knowledge of socially and economically sensitive groups in natural setting

(Bryman, 2015; Crang & Cook, 2007; Mulhall, 2003). Doing ethnographical research is different from the research being done on artifacts relating to social culture, issues and so on. Yet a researcher uses his eyes to observe the paintings and play with the shades of colors and spaces in the paintings.

During my field visit, I used observation as a technique for data. I came to know the meaning of the shades of colors to some extent and uses of geometrical signs used in Mithila paintings. Not only these, I also came to know the complete process of Mithila paintings; beginning to end.

4.5 Successes and Challenges in the Use of the Methods

4.5.1. Reaching the Informants

Since I am from the same community, it was not too difficult to reach the informants. From greeting to language and dressing, everything is familiar to me and it was helpful for me for the success of my field trip.

After reaching the field, my friend helped me to meet the respondents. It was not a difficult task for me to have conversation with them. I found they were quite open and amicable to share their feelings and idea. However, they were a bit reluctant in the beginning. In Mithila, whenever anyone goes there to collect data, the peoples always become unwilling to answer the researcher's question. It is because the researchers have used the data for their personal benefit. Janakpur is a not so big city with nearly 200 thousand inhabitants. It is a majority Maithil population. With the help of my friend, I reached to the informants quite easily, but due to monsoon time, it was very difficult for them to manage time. Since most of the artists do farming as their main profession, they had to go to work in the morning until evening. So, I had really got tough time to get together with them. Another challenge I faced was the slippery and muddy roads. During the month of June, there is high chance of downpour in Mithila. It was the same month when I had gone there for data collection and I experienced slippery and muddy roads to reach to the respondents.

At some point, it appeared a great obstacle for data collection. The artists were very doubtful at first as I were the agent working in a big NGOs or INGOs and earned a lot of money for that. Later, I tried to make the situation clear that I was simply a student and the project is the part

of my study. Then, they understood and agreed to respond me. But it was not like it was with the informants who were teachers and professors at colleges.

4.5.2. My role

I am from the same community I am writing about. I share the same culture, language, customs, costumes, greeting style and so on. In this sense, I am an insider. An insider researcher shares identity, language and experience with the informants (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). I did not even feel that I was in a different environment while interviewing them with one to one or focus group discussion. The responses made me feel very close to the situations. The whole atmosphere made me feel I was a complete insider researcher. However, my role of insider researcher was challenged when they started talking about the process of paintings and the use of colors. Carrying out research with insider's or outsiders' perspective is still the subject of debate. Almost all the research on culture has been affected by this dual natured perspective. So in my research, I have tried to combine both insider's and outsider's perspective.

I am quite familiar with the custom and costumes of Mithila community. It was not difficult to develop rapport with the people because I know the norms and values regarding the social etiquette. Despite being rooted in the community, I felt like an outsider when I was told about the making of art regarding Maithil culture. I know very little about the art and the shades of color. In relation to this, I carried out my role of outsider's perspective. This research is a good mix of both emic and etic system.

4.5.3 Language Issues

I am originally a Maithili language speaker and the research I am undertaking is in the Maithili language speaking community. So it was not difficult for interviewees to conduct interview in their mother tongue. It is always important to conduct an interview in the participants' language to maximize the quality of data (Irvine, Roberts, & Bradbury-Jones, 2008). During the interviews and focus group discussions, the use of language was Maithili. In the Mithila region, Maithili is the main language of communication. It works as a lingua franca in Mithila. Some respondents speak the Nepali language equally well. In Nepal, Nepali is an official language. One has to study in Nepali for schooling. There is no room for the local language. Despite occupying the second largest speaking language in Nepal, Maithili has not been made compulsory or voluntary in school. As a result, people can speak but cannot write well. All the data was taken in the Maithili language. For analysis of data, I have translated the interviews

and discussion notes into English. There is always something added and subtracted when translation is made. Yet the accurate translation is crucial for the credibility of the findings. For this I showed my translation to the professional ones so that I can make sure the credibility of findings is still there. They made few corrections.

4.6 Ethics

It is often difficult to define ethical issues, yet in social research they are used while conducting research in a particular area or population. Ethical decision is applied almost all the processes of doing research; from beginning to the finalizing the thesis (Ali & Kelly, 2004).

Ethics plays a dominant role in the entire process of doing research. In doing social research, ethics is a set of moral principles that govern the researcher's professional behavior which respects research subjects and promotes the aim of the research. It helps to collect genuine data and use them for analysis. It empowers the researcher to know about the certain norms and values of the society where they are going to conduct research. Overall, ethics is not limited to the set of norms, it also enforces the researcher for right behavior and conduct to the values and understanding of the culture.

Ethics respects the privacy of informants and their collaborative work. It also gives informed consent to the participants. In other words, the participants should be given enough information about the research and potential risks involved in the participation. The aim of informed consent is to give informants the rights of decision-making whether to be involve in the research activity or not (Ali & Kelly, 2004). Chilisa, 2011 argues that informed consent also involves informing the participants about how much confidentiality and anonymity the researchers are able to give them (Chilisa, 2011).

Before I started my field work, I was well prepared to maintain ethical codes and conducts. Once I got the official letter from the University of Tromsø of Norway, I started asking for the consent of the possible involved informants in the research. Using the authentic recognition from the Sami center, I introduced myself to them with the purpose of my research. Before interviews were taken, I informed all of the possible outcome of the research. I also informed them about sovereignty and autonomy of the informants. They were free to ask anything or to leave the interview any time. I made them sure that the participation is voluntary and there was no obligation to take part into. It was also told that the interview would take place according to

their suitable time. Most importantly, I informed them that they would not be harmed in any way.

4.7 Summary

The chapter aims at presenting the methodological issues of the study. It outlines the details of the field work for the project. The field was conducted in Janakpur of Dhanusha district. For data collection, I used semi-structured and focused group discussion along with painting observation for the primary data while I used archival reading for the secondary ones. It also presents the challenges and successes of field work. And, finally, it covers the ethical norms implied during field work for data collection.

5: Wedding Rites, *Kohbar* Paintings Variation and interpretation

Mithila celebrates auspicious rites and rituals of marriage, though there are some differences in them according to different communities in Mithila region. Despite having different rites and rituals for a wedding based on caste, they have some common rituals which have been glorious to observe.

5.1 Wedding Ceremony

Though features of the Hindu marriage ceremony, as described in the Dharma sastras, are generally followed in the more traditional way throughout most of northern India and southern Nepal, the rituals of *triratnivrata* (vow of three nights of celibacy) and Chaturthi karma (the rites of fourth signifying consummation of marriage), mentioned in some early dharma sastras, which have apparently lost importance elsewhere, have survived and flourished in Mithila. These two rituals have a direct connection with the present practice of the installation of a *kohbarghar* (wedding chamber; where wedding is finally done), as also the rituals conducted within it, and are therefore worth describing in detail here.

These rituals in Mithila not only reveal the ancient roots of the living traditions of the *kohbarghar* and *gauri-puja*¹³, but also demonstrate how *kohbarghar* and *gauri-puja* complement each other to provide a comprehensive and meaningful picture of the complex Maithili cultural situation.

Practically the entire wedding ritual at the home of the bride takes place in two separate spaces, which are duly consecrated; one is *madaba* (wedding mandap) and another is *kohbarghar*. The rituals relating to taking vows of nuptial knot take place in the *madaba* while those of relating to consummation and *gauri-puja* occur in the *kohbarghar*. The *angan* (the courtyard of the house) is very significant for the wedding rituals. It is the place where most of the wedding rituals are done like the barber's act of haircut to the male members of the family; it is very important to look good and groomed at wedding so they get their hair dressed and cut, and other activities like preparing things for marriage. It is reckoned as the sacred place where mostly female members worship the Tulsi plant (basil plant) daily. It is also the place for the celebration of almost all the annual festivals and vows, together with the rites associated with solemnization of marriage.

¹³ A sacred prayer to the goddess of entire universe

On each ritual occasion, the space of the *angan* is consecrated fresh, unlike the temples or divine images. The *angan* refers to yard. It is an open space in front of house. The *angan* is not always sacred, but it is required to make it pious on an auspicious occasion. Therefore, it is freshly made sacred with cow's dung. On the other hand, temples and divine images are always considered sacred. The required space from the *angan* is therefore smeared with cow dung and then the sacred diagrams (*aripana*) is drawn with the paste of powdered rice. Finally the space becomes worthy for the rituals conduct and other sacred rites.

5.1.1 Making of Madaba as representation of a sacred place

The ceremony of building of the *madaba* is comprised of a thatched roof and bamboo structures. It is built in the *angan* about five days prior to the wedding for Brahmin and Kayastha¹⁴. There are many castes living in Mithila. Among them Brahmin and Kayastha are regarded as high caste. But for other caste *madaba* is built a day before the marriage. Sections of the thatched bamboo frame roof are first prepared on the ground and then placed over the house-like structure. Then, the would-be bride places impression of her palm dipped in the rice paste five times on the roof, and worships it by anointing it with vermilion and attaching a yellow cotton thread to it. On this occasion, married women from the bride's own caste and neighborhood are invited and given vermilion so that they can apply in the central parting of their hair. During the process of installing Madaba, the women from the neighborhood are invited to sing a song related to the wedding canopy. The songs are prayer to God in the beginning and later they make humorous remarks on family members. When the *madaba* is completed, it is kept sacred and people wait for the arrival of bridegroom. It is further sanctified on the arrival of the bridegroom at the bride's house.

Madaba is regarded as one of the most complex wedding rituals of Mithila. As a member from this community, I have also taken parts in making *madaba* many times. I have experienced how each rite is supposed to be performed at the right time. Any delay may be taken as a bad omen. During my marriage, my mother told me to be ready for the rituals for wedding in time. For an example, I had gone to my relative's home for the wedding. For putting roof over the *madaba*, I along other members was called in early morning to perform the ritual. People from different castes come to see it. When installing it, mostly people are from the same caste and community. Some rites can only be done by women whereas some by married men. In Mithila paintings,

¹⁴ Superior castes among peoples living in Mithila

Madaba has been represented as a pious place where Lord Ram and Sita are seen exchanging garlands to each other. In the recent time, many weddings are being taken place in temples by exchanging garland made of flowers and putting vermilion in the parted hair of bride's head. Temples are considered sacred all the time, and they are easily accessible for an event like a wedding. When the marriage takes place in temple, many rituals are not performed. Still, some important wedding rites are conducted. Wherever marriage is done, it is like a ceremony. In Mithila, peoples consider marriage a gateway to heaven. Similarly, the audience also gets chance to bless the newlywed couple. The attendants get a good feast. In that way, they enjoy the day.

5.1.2 Wedding a Mango Tree

In Mithila, one of the fascinating rituals during wedding is marriage to a mango tree before the groom or the bride marries one another. The figure shows the traditional style of depiction of the mango tree laden with fruits. The Kayastha men and women are married to the mango tree before they wed their bride or groom. During my wedding, I went to marry a mango tree before I set out to my wife's home for marriage. It represents fertility. If a Maithil marries a mango tree laden with fruits, it refers to family breeding after marriage.



Figure 5. Mithila painting (wedding to a mango tree)

Source: The Kathmandu Post

5.1.3 Reception of Bridegroom

In Mithila culture, before the groom sets for the wedding at a bride's home, the groom's house is decorated with different paintings and other artificial decorations. The people take feast organized by the groom's family, and they prepare for the wedding procession. The wedding procession marches with the groom dancing and singing. After the groom comes to bride's home for wedding, he is given *paan* (a betel leaf with areca nut) which has been kept in bride's mouth a while ago in the time of first reception. At the door of bride's home, the women come to see the groom by singing song. They sing:

“Chalu chalu pairkshan sakhi he, Rama san jamaiya he suhaban lage...”

Its meaning is that the Maithils reckon the groom as God Rama (Vishnu), who is known as the ideal man in Hindu mythology scripture Ramayana (Brown, 1983). They see the groom as an ideal man, who will never make his bride unhappy. As God Rama came to wed Sita, similarly, a groom comes to wed the bride. In Hindu mythology, it is believed that the groom is an ideal man and the Maithils think that the groom would act as the God Rama did. In the song, it is said that women call every other women to come forward and make the moment glorious. In *pairkshan*¹⁵ time, the would-be mother in law of groom and other related women come forward and do *pairkshan* while throwing mango leaves back over their head and putting kohl; an ancient eye cosmetic, in the eyelids of groom. And then, they give betel leaf which is a bit eaten by the bride. It is believed that if the groom eats leftover betel leaf of the bride there is a long bond between them. There is the high chance of intense love between them. After that ritual, the groom is asked to circumambulate the wedding booth three times and further he sanctifies it which has been anointed by the bride at the time of installation. When I asked one of my respondents, she told:

“pairkshan k matalab nichhaur kanai hoi hai. Rasta paira pa dain jogin sab k najar utara k lel aaikha me kajar aa aam k pata nichhaur ka ka pacchadi pheka hai”

She means to say that *pairkshan* means to get rid of the evil cast which might have been casted by witches while groom's way of going to bride's home for wedding. Mango leaves are regarded auspicious because the mango leaves are regarded as seats for the deities. The leaves are used in almost every rituals of Hindus living in Mithila from birth to death. When we

¹⁵ This ritual is very important in wedding in Mithila. It helps to cast away the evil eyes which are believed to come with groom while coming to bride's home for marriage.

organize any religious program, we need it. It represents holy and sacredness and a chamber for deities. It also represents freshness. It has also scientific meaning. Recently, there has been a change in perception. The green leaves absorb carbon dioxide and keep environment clean and fresh. So, besides the ritual, it is an indigenous way of keeping the environment fresh and beautiful, and it also purifies the souls. Further, kohl is also mentioned, which is used for decoration. Kohl is regarded as a sign to get away of evil cast. It has been mentioned in many songs. Kohl is still being used on cheeks of a child so that they should be safer from the evil eyes. In Mithila, it is highly believed that the gaze from some peoples is not good and the gaze can cause a mishap. I asked one of my respondents, she answered that the evil eyes may cause somebody to die.

5.1.4 *Jayamala*¹⁶ in Wedding

Jayamala means victory garland (Henry, 2003; Pauwels, 2004). In other words, it is also called *syambar* (*swaymvara*)¹⁷. After *pairkshan*, the groom is taken to the place where *swaymvara* takes place. The place is highly decorated with glittering lights around. It looks as *swambar* described in Hindu scriptures. Soon after the arrival of groom to the *swambar* place, the bride is taken to the place along with her friends singing songs. First, the bride circumbulates (walk around) the groom and then she puts the garland made of auspicious marigold over the groom's head. The groom also puts the garland over the bride's head. The photographer keeps on taking picture of both and the audience claps during the joyous moment. The marriage attendants throw flowers to the bride and the groom with pleasant scream. According to respondents and local views, the groom is received as superior to her. So, the bride takes five rounds of him and touches his feet. On the other hand, some scholars like Henry (2003), argues that *jayamala* refers to the equality between the groom and the bride (Henry, 2003). In *jayamala* ceremony, another thing is also noticeable. Generally, in Mithila, girls do not have *ghunghat*¹⁸. But soon after marriage, they have limitations like *ghunghat*, not much access to the public, limited to household chores and the like. The dynamic has been changing continuously now. Over last five to ten years, the women of Mithila have started to upgrade themselves. They resist to be

¹⁶ Jaymala is a wedding ritual in which the bride and the groom put garlands to one another.

¹⁷ Syambar is a mythological term which means to win bride; in greatest Hindu scriptures like Ramayana, Mahabharata, this rite has been mentioned. In Ramayana, when king Janak of Mithila had announced swambar, there had been many prices to win his daughter. Later, Rama broke archer and win his daughter as bride. And then they garland each other that is called Jayamala. In another scripture Mahabharata, Arjun; the then greatest archer in the world wins Draupadi by hitting arrow in the eyes of moving fish looking its reflection in the water. There also they garland one another.

¹⁸ Purdah; curtain. It refers to one corner of saree over women's head covering their face after marriage

limited to *ghunghat* or only household activities. They have started doing their own business. The women of Mithila who are interested in Mithila paintings do not care what other peoples think of them. The women keep going on with their arts. They are getting more education and deciding for themselves how to live life¹⁹. Many women have adopted Mithila paintings as their profession to support their family and their education. The change has had a positive development in Mithila paintings. In the recent days, *jayamala* has given women major changes in the fully patriarchal society. Women see themselves in equal strata since they garland the groom as the groom does. It also contradicts the rites of *ghunghat* (Henry, 2003). But still, many people think in a traditional way and ignore the groom's garlanding her.



Figure 6: Contemporary Wedding in Mithila
the attendants of my Marriage.

photo by Pujan Mandal; one of

¹⁹ <http://www.bbc.com/nepali/news-43537853?SThisFB>

5.1.5 *Sindurdaan*²⁰ (putting vermillion)

After coming from the *jayamala* ceremony, the groom is called in wedding mandap. When the sanctification of Madaba is done by the groom, the husking of rice takes place in a wooden mortar with a large pestle. Since I have been up brought in this culture, I know the culture to some extent. This ritual stands for fertility. This is highly symbolic. The groom along with seven other members from the bride's side are tied together by a cotton thread around them by the barber. They collectively hold a large wooden pestle in their hands and pound some paddy in the mortar. With the help of the wooden pestle they try to husk the paddy, which has a clear symbolic significance in Mithila culture. The wooden mortar and pestle refer to male and female genital organ respectively. The husking symbolizes the union between the couple. Similarly, curry – stone and stone roller also have a cultural value which are always kept together. The family takes dinner at night and after that, they are always kept together, which means the families do not want separation of the couple. According to one lady respondent, when the young women are asked to pound rice with mortar and pestle, they get shy because the mortar pestle stand for the enactment of sexual act between the couple. After this rite, the purohit asks the groom to put vermillion onto the central parted hair of bride's head. When this act is being done, the bride and her family members start crying. The women also sing songs based on that situation. The song is:

“Baba baba purake baba nahi bolata ho, baba k kar jori bar senur dale li ho...”

Its meaning is that the bride keeps on calling everyone in the family but no one seems to listening her. Everyone seems to be deaf and cries thinking that she is going to her marital home leaving her parents' house where she has been brought up to her adolescent (Henry, 2000). Traditionally speaking, the bride is going to start her new family with the family of the groom's. The parents teach her to be tolerant to everyone even if she endures injustices or is beaten. In the past, beating a wife used to be common. If the wife was unable to give birth, she was blamed. Similarly, if she did not give birth to son, she used to be scolded as it was only her fault. In the same way, if she did not bring a dowry, she used to be beaten. But now the situation is changed. The brides no longer put *ghunghat* any more and they clearly express their interest in doing their work. They are not limited to household chores. They have started going to offices like

²⁰ *Sindurdaan* (putting vermillion; which is an auspicious red powder in the central parted hair of the bride's head) is the most important wedding rite of the night. Unless it is done, the marriage is not finished. This red powder gives certificate to the couple to have private affair. During this rite, bride cries along other family members of hers.

men. The contemporary Mithila paintings show changes in many sectors. They vividly portray the social issues relating to the traditional way of perceiving it. The Maithil artists have started painting against social discrimination, gender discrimination, dowry, polygamy, *ghunghat*, and like.

5.1.6 The custom of *Saat Phera* (circumambulation around pious fire lit)

According to Vedas, marriage is made in the heaven. It is also believed by most of the Maithils too. Once the marriage is solemnized, the two souls are joined for seven lifetimes. The seven vows of marriage are the seven promises the couple makes to make their life happy and prosperous. Without them, according to the Hindu belief system, the marriage is not done. This ritual deepens the bond between the newlywed couple. With each circumambulation, they make one promise for their future life. The seven promises along with seven circumambulations around the pious fire are very important to Hindu wedding system as it sanctifies the union and brings the social recognition to marriage. The seven circumambulations carry symbolic significance to Mithila wedding system. Each circumambulation does have meaning in advance to entering conjugal life.

5.1.7 *Kanyadaan* (Handing bride to groom)

Kanyadaan is regarded as one of the sacred rituals of the Mithila wedding. It is the best and yet toughest ritual for Maithils. The term '*Kanyadaan*' is comprised of two words; *Kanya* (young unmarried girl) and *daan* (to give). The bride's parents along with her relatives feel proud to do this ritual. They think that they achieve salvation through this ritual. *Kanyadaan* is far more valuable than *gaudan* (gift of cow) and *sondaan* (gift of gold) (Brown, 1983). When I asked some of my participants about this ritual, they had the common view about it. They still see it as achieving salvation after giving their daughter to the groom. This traditional view is rampant in Mithila. They said:

“*kanyadaan jiban me sab koi k kara chahi. Yai sa moksha aa kriti milai chhai. Yi daan duniya k kono dosar daan sa anmol aa niman chhai. Log kono dosar awasar pa gaudan aa sonadaan se ho karai chhi muda kanyadaan ta sabsa upar chhai. Aadami apan jiban k tukra dosar k hath me dadai chhai...*”

They mean to say that there is no greater gift than the bride's parents presenting her to the groom. They think it is always hard to give one of the organs to them. Parents always think

their daughter as an organ of their own body. They do not think it is any burden (some parents think their daughter as burden to them because her parents need to give dowry to the groom family for her marriage) to keep their daughter home, but it is customary that they must go to somebody's home to begin their own family. Despite this thinking about the ritual, some thinkers have started questioning the ritual called '*kanyadaan*' (Mishra, 1977). This ritual is portrayed as an evil custom as giving their daughter away like commodities. Sometimes, the daughter is seen as an object or person of the other family. So, the daughters, in general, are not sent to school for education. Some parents argue that since girls must get married and have to go to run another family, there is no point in sending them to school. In Mithila, dowry is another prevalent curse. Due to the dowry, the daughters are not sent to school. On one hand, they give their daughter away and, still they must give some money, jewelry and other common things to groom. Sometimes, the peasant farmers must take on debt with huge interest for their daughter's or sister's marriage. As a result, the fathers go to Gulf countries to earn money to pay back the debt soon after the marriage. When I asked one of my participants about it, she said:

“ki karbai bauwa, yi sab ta kara partai na. Bauwa k biyah k lel je karja lene chhiyai u ta diya partai na. Aaha sab dekhbe karai chhi ki ghar me kichh na hai. Sab karje s hoi chhai. Biyah me dahej sa laka khana pina lata kapda bhoj bar bidai sab k lel karje liya parlai. Dahej me 5 lakh rupaiya, ego motorcycle, du bhair sona aa 40 bhai chani. Yi ta kani din bidesh rahai tyai dware kani kani paisa rahai na ta saf saf karja me duib gel rahti...”

She means to say that her husband had come from Saudi Arabia on vacation. Since her husband had been in Saudi, he had earned some money for their daughter's marriage. But that was not sufficient. So, they had to borrow some money with huge interest. For the dowry, they had to give 500,000.00 rupees, one motorbike, 10 gram gold and 40 gram silver along with some other daily used things like bed, utensils and such.

With this ritual, there had been one meaning in the past, but now it has changed and has multiple meanings, as argued by Foucault (Hall, 1997). For me, as an insider I really want some rectification in the term like '*Kanyadaan*'. Since girls are not objects, how anybody can decide to give them away? Another thing, the painting represents the absence, which is not depicted so clearly in the painting. That is the dowry. This has become an evil custom which has trapped

people in a vicious circle. Despite girls' access to education, the *kutumba*²¹ of the groom still asks for a dowry. Due to the dowry, many girls are committing suicide. When the parents of bride are unable to fulfil the demands of groom's side, they torture and beat the bride²². Sometimes the bride is not taken home by in-laws if the dowry is not fulfilled. Seeing this, I think the paintings are doing an important job to make people aware of the bad consequences of the practice. I stand against of this practice. As an insider, it is a bit difficult to go against it, but by resisting this course of action, later, this evil custom will be eradicated.

5.2 *Kohbarghar* (wedding chamber)

After the completion of above mentioned rituals, the couple finally gets ready to start family life. Before entering into the conjugal life, the ritual relating to *kohbar* is yet to be completed. When they depart from bride's parental home, the women from the groom's side get ready to complete the ritual of *kohbar*. The rituals performed in *kohbarghar* have significant implications. They represent myriad of meanings. The concept of the mysterious *naina-jogin*²³ motif itself along with pictorial rendering and its ritual enactment carry great meaning in Mithila. Most importantly, these rituals performed, here, are peculiar in nature which make it to be considered as indigenous paintings of an indigenous community. The images portrayed in *kohbarghar* have constraints in meanings in earlier studies. Traditionally speaking the images are mostly in relation to conjugal life for the newly-wed couple. In contemporary time, the meanings have been changed into myriad interpretations (Jain, 1989). Earlier, in *kohbarghar*, there had been the traditionally bound images like snake, elephant, peacock, bamboo, palm print and some more which has been replaced by modern technological equipment like bus, roller-coasters, buses and even airplanes to some extent (Dallapiccola, 1999; Jain, 1989).

When the groom and the bride enter into *kohbarghar*, the bride puts a red mark of vermilion in the painted motif of the bamboo grove while the groom does the same to the painted motif of the lotus plant. The ritual of offering vermilion to the bamboo grove by the bride and to the lotus plant by the groom represents the symbolic union of male and female. Traditionally speaking, the ritual shows the act of putting themselves into copulation. Besides that, it also represents fertility. The bamboo grove and lotus plant are themselves charged with growth and

²¹ Relatives; father, mother, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, cousin, etc...

²² <http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2016-08-09/daughter-in-law-beaten-half-to-death-over-dowry.html>

²³ Goddess with magical power protects the newly wed couple from evil spirits or eyes.

fertility. When I interviewed some females, they responded that the bamboo and lotus have one similarity; immense growth and fertility power. According to them, these images carry the meaning that soon after the marriage, there is an expectation of a baby. Therefore, the images of bamboo and lotus and actual bamboo and lotus flower are used in many occasions. The importance of bamboo is common in Mithila. It is used from birth to death. When people die, they are also taken to a funeral site on a carrier made of bamboo. So, the bamboo grove has significant implications. By the time the ritual of *kohbarghar* is completed, it is almost early morning, and then the groom and the bride perform *gauripuja*. To perform *gauripuja*, a small elephant made of clay is needed. There should be placed the following things on the head of that elephant; a silver ring, a piece of wood, and areca nut. And sitting in front of the painted wall, the bride performs *gauripuja* by putting vermilion powder on the head of the elephant three times. Later, she will put the vermilion on her parted hair. When she performs the ritual, the groom stands by her, holding her hand. This ritual is expected to be performed in *kohbarghar* in precisely same way every morning as long as the groom stays at the bride's house.

5.2.1 Mithila Painting in *Kohbarghar*

Mithila paintings painted in *kohbarghar* are known as *kohbar* paintings. They are painted on the walls of *Kohbarghar* of the newly-wed bride so that her marriage would be blessed. Some *kohbar* paintings encompass most of the motifs together into a single portrait while some portraits are depicted separately on a piece of paper or wall in *kohbarghar*. It is interesting to note how the groom and the bride both perform *gauripuja* together, which is an integral part of *kohbar* paintings executed on the central wall of *kohbarghar*. *Kohbar* painting is an epitome of copulation between the groom and the bride after marriage, which takes place in *kohbarghar*. This is a peculiar feature, which make Mithila different from other cultures. Indigenous culture does not assimilate; rather, it celebrates the differences. In Hinduism, it still is traditional that the vermilion on the parted hair is an indication of her marriage. The red powder on the parted head of bride represents that she is married. If she does not put vermilion on after marriage, her husband is considered to no long be in this physical world. When I asked one of my participants about the importance and implication of vermilion, she told,

“Ek chutki senur suhag k nishani hoi hai, aa pati k aayu badhab k lel se ho lagbai hai, aa kono bhi subhghari me yai k prayog ka sakai hai...”

She means to say that the use and importance of vermilion is prevalent in Mithila culture. It represents the longevity of her husband, and it can be used in any auspicious occasion. However, in some of the religions like Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism in Mithila, people do not follow the system of putting vermilion on the parted hair of bride's head. Vermillion, traditionally, might have much importance or implications in the Mithila culture, but personally, I feel vermilion makes the women of Mithila restricted. When they are not married, they are more free and do not use *ghunghat*. Soon after of their marriage, they start putting *ghunghat* on their head. They are not allowed to go to an office in some cases. They cannot eat together with their family. I still vividly remember the scene of my family. Whenever my father did not eat, my mother was not allowed to eat. Because of these things, I see them as a 'maid' without salary. They are simply termed as 'Other' (Butler, 1986). But recently, with development of more schools and access to education, such tradition is dying out. That is a good sign for the cultural development.

For the rituals to be done at *kohbarghar*, the walls of it are painted with images, motifs, and symbols indicating the union of the bride and the groom, connotating not just erotic images but images denoting fertility, proliferation and regeneration. When we observe the painting closely, we find so many things interplaying together to make the marriage solemnized. They are fish, snake, peacock, bamboo, deities (sun, moon) , elephant, lotus, pitchers, mat, betel areca, vermilion, tortoise, swastika sign, *naina-jogin* (goddess of eye), *bidh-bidhata* (birds indicating future), worms, centipedes, toads, leaves, ant and so on (Brown, 1996). Since there are variations in *kohbar* paintings, there are many images or symbols put together to make it meaningful and coping with the problems of present time. The purpose of *kohbar* paintings in *kohbarghar* is to ensure a healthy wedding through the blessing of offspring. Healthy children are considered a reward for the physical unification of newly married couple.

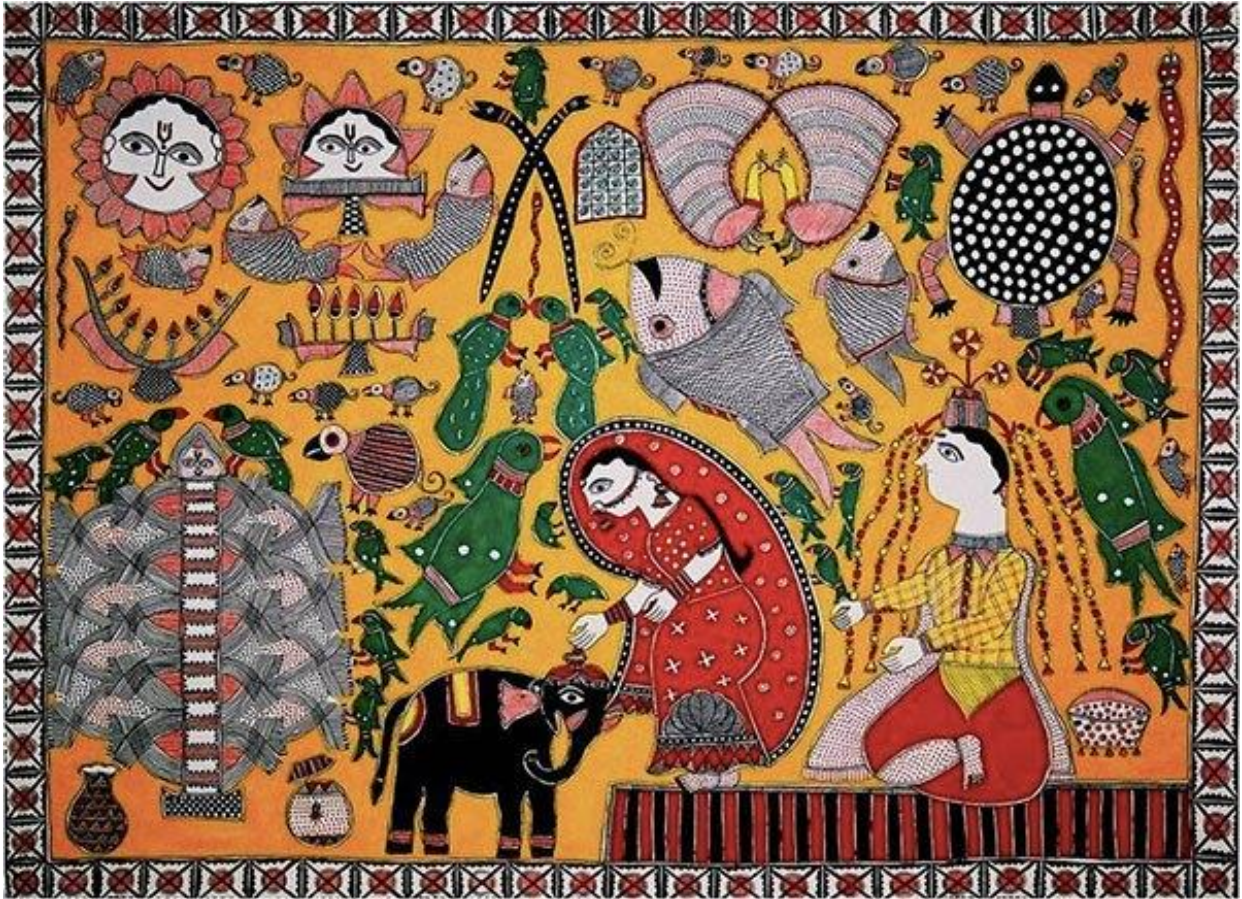


Figure 7: Kohbar painting (contemporary)

source:

Engrave

Figure 1 displays the contemporary mode of *kohbar* painting. It is an amalgam of different colors. It has covered all space with certain geometrical diagrams and images of different symbolic characters. It is a paper version of a *kohbar* painting that is traditionally painted on the walls of the *kohbarghar* where the groom and the bride spend their first night together after their marriage ceremony. On the surface, it seems completely puzzling. Even though I am from the same culture, at first I was not able to get the meaning of all the characters as per the Mithila tradition. Later, with the help of Mithila artists, I started getting the contextual meaning of those symbols and images. The painting contains different symbolic images. On the all edges of the canvas, the swastika signs are marked. On the bottom of it, the bride and the groom are following the traditional *gauripuja*. The groom is sitting on the mat and to his left side there is a basket containing flower and leaves for the prayer to Gauri, the goddess of power. The groom is still with the wedding hat and the bride is in her wedding saree. She is offering vermilion on the head of the elephant made of clay. On the left corner of the painting, there is bamboo, which possesses great meaning in Mithila culture. On top of the bamboo, peacocks are sitting together.

On the top of left corner, there are the images of the sun and moon portrayed. It is said that the sun and the moon are the witness of the marriage. Just below the deities sun and moon, there are the images of fish. Besides the sun and the moon, there is intertwining images of snakes, which connotates meaning relating to copulation. To its right side, the dancing peacocks are portrayed and on the top of its right corner, the image of turtle is carved. Overall, there are images everywhere. Taken into the context, the images and symbolic characters have different meanings. For the kohbar paintings, as they are meant to be displayed into *kohbarghar*, there are symbols indicating male and female genital organs whereas in the paintings displayed outside *kohbarghar*, there are no such images found. If they are found, they are not meant for the phallic or *yonic*(female genital organ) symbols (Brown, 1996).



Figure 8. A Kayastha style of *kohbar* painting, painted by Manisha Jha

Figure 2 is another variation of *kohbar* painting from the Mithila region. This version is called Kayastha. Kayastha is also regarded as the highest caste people in Mithila after Brahmins. The boarder of the painting is painted with the images of fish while on the all corner there is a swastika sign. In the lower corners, there is a scene of marriage between *jayamala* and *gauripuja*. To the left corner the bride is being taken to her marital home by palanquin. On the

center of the painting, there are many lotus blossoms pierced by bamboo shoots. There are the pictures of Lord Shiva and Parvati, other gods like sun and moon and on the right corner, there is the image of the creator of the world, Bramha²⁴. There are also the images of birds and turtles, elephant, snake along with a bamboo grove. As usual, this painting is equally occupied with space.

Kohbar paintings always displays the shared meanings or shared conceptual maps (Du Gay et al., 2013). Hall (1997), however, argues that only a shared conceptual map is not enough. Therefore, to represent meaning or cultural value, there must be a shared language by which the meaning can be communicated (Hall, 1997). A shared language refers to the language of the paintings. He further says that the shared conceptual map should be translated into a common language so that the viewers or listeners or readers can correlate the concepts with the images. The images the artists use are signs which represent the shared values of Mithila through artifacts which later make up the meaning-system of Mithila culture (Hall, 1997). According to systems of representation argued by Hall (1997), it is possible to make meaning of our system of culture. No doubt, the art displays the culture system at best way. Possibly the work of art is a privilege of expression in our culture. However, it leads to a question of representation (Aamold, 2014). Art may also express what is not there. It may comprise metaphysical ideas, memories, experiences relating to environment, concepts of economy, politics – possibilities of pluralism in meaning. Therefore, the contemporary art can be understood as questions, inquiries, hypotheses etc. (Aamold, 2014).

The contemporary Mithila art also has become an encompassing character. It has started portraying the daily life of the Maithil peoples and their belief system from life to death as well as the bond between the belief in God, nature, and human beings. In the context of the recent political system of Nepal, there has been a huge transition. The Nepalese have successfully ended the monarchy system of Nepal, and they have started a new reign in the country. During the movement, there has continuously been intra-nation protests regarding different rights to different communities. My concern here is whether Mithila paintings produce such arts on social and political issues or not. In interviews with participants, I asked these questions about the representation of social and political issues. They responded very well. For them, besides the traditional rites and rituals, they have started giving focus on social political issues for awareness among peoples. They have become inclusive. They are giving priority to such social

²⁴ God who is supposed to create the world, in Hindu mythology

and political problems as: untouchability, identity, education, dowry system, sex identification, polygamy, and so on.



Figure 9. Mithila painting displaying everyday life of Maithils Source: Janakpur paintings

Figure 3 is an example of everyday life of people living in Mithila. It has covered most of the activities people are doing in Mithila region. For an example, in the lower part of the painting, people are cooking, selling some stuffs, and washing. In the upper part of it, people are grinding lentils or flour. In the right corner, two women are performing the Jhijhiya²⁵ dance. In the center of the picture, there is clearly a portrayal of how Maithil women perform household chores like getting water from the well or hand pipe (nowadays) and then cooking food alone for all the family members. Overall, the painting discloses some aspects of daily life, especially of Maithil women.

Kohbar paintings, in recent time, have been read with different mindsets. As Aamold (2014) argues, the art may represent the gap, too. Similarly, some of the readers have started reading

²⁵ Jhijhiya dance is very famous in Mithila region. It is played during the time of Dashain (the greatest festival of Hindus, celebrated generally in the month of September. In this cultural dance, women both married and unmarried keep the pitchers made of clay with many holes in them on their head and do dancing. This dance is dedicated to goddess Durga.

with critical eyes how kohbar paintings are the product of male chauvinism in Mithila culture. Some of the feminist thinkers like Rani Jha²⁶ observe the paintings in the wake of feminism. Rani Jha argues the traditional Mithila paintings have limited women within four walls of house. She also notices Maithil women are cherished for beautiful jewelry and sarees, but they enjoy no freedom. It is always men who go away from home for earning or living. Wives are left at home, waiting for their husband. As I have already mentioned, in the past the brides were not allowed to go out for working or living. In this fast-growing world where everything seems to be changing, now it is the time Maithil women should take initiative. The contemporary Mithila paintings represent the burgeoning issues of Maithil society using vivid colors and message. For an example, the artists have started doing paintings on the issues like polygamy, female infanticide, elderly problems (another current issue in Mithila where old parents are forced to go to elderly care home), environment conservation, the importance of education especially for women in the context of Mithila, political awareness, identity affirmation, and so on.

5.2.2 Symbolic Representation of *Kohbar* painting

The wall painting of *kohbarghar*, which is very rich in tantric symbolic images, is designed to promote fertility and proliferation, and to prevent disease (Brown, 1982; Jain, 1989). According to Jain (1989), *kohbarghar* means *kamaldaha* or *purain* (lotus plant). Since there are many variations of *kohbar* paintings in Mithila, few things are common in all of them. The images of the lotus flower, buds, snake, turtle, birds, bamboo, deities, god and goddesses and other aquatic creatures are depicted around seven mandalas of *kohbarghar*. The dominance of aquatic flora and fauna makes us feel the painting as *kamaldaha*, where the lotus flowers are floating. Some others believe it is merely a ‘nature painting’. The wall painting of *kohbarghar* is made after consulting purohit. When the purohit gives the auspicious date to make the wall consecrated, the people make the surface of the wall holy with rice-paste. And then, a red dot is marked in the center of the painting. The red dot represents many meanings such as it is the color of vibrant energy for fertility, good luck, sound health, blessed married life, love, safety of childbirth, prosperity, protection from evils. From that red dot, the stems of lotus are drawn. In Mithila painting, the space is fully occupied. When I asked about such complex kind of paintings to the artists, their response was just to avoid barrenness. The main purpose of marriage in Mithila is for child bearing. When the couple fails to have baby, the blame is always on to women. Most

²⁶ Rani Jha, a PhD scholar from Darbhanga University and Painter and teacher at Mithila Art Institute.

surprisingly, when they cannot have son, women are only the accused one. Therefore, to avoid infertility, they do not leave space in the wall painting of *kohbarghar* (Madhok, 2005).

In almost all *kohbar* paintings, a vertical stem pierces a round and fully-grown lotus, which is highly charged with tantric symbolism. A vertical stem that is considered phallic pierces the circular beautiful beauty of yoni (Brown, 1982, 1996; Jain, 1989; Thakur, 1981). Another possible interpretation of the lotus motif is as a symbol of good fortune and abundance. In Hindu mythology, Goddess Laxmi resides on a fully grown lotus and Goddess Laxmi is the source of good fortune and abundance. In Mithila culture, during the festival of light, named Deepawali, almost on every walls of the houses, there is the painting of the Goddess Laxmi with lotus blossoms. The wall painting of *kohbarghar* also includes a mat on which the couple spends their first four consecutive nights. The mat is interwoven with a kind of reed found abundantly in the Mithila region. When I asked about the value of mat in *Kohbar* painting, one of my respondents told me that the mat is holy. Since it is made of reed, it is sacred to perform ritual on it. She kept on telling about the existence of the mat; nowadays people no longer use it because of the modern kind of bed or other house appliances. Next to the mat, *kalasha*²⁷ is placed, which represents something good. It is the symbol of a good omen. When any member of family is set to do something adventurous, like business, studies abroad, or employment, *kalasha* is placed on both sides of the main gate of the house. Doing this is considered always good.

Birds in *kohbar* painting have symbolic significance. Their representation in the painting is symbolically linked with the couple's daily course of life. Sometimes a number of parrots are painted around the lotus blossoms while in some other variations of the *kohbar* painting a pair of playful parrots are portrayed. Parrots, according to Hindu mythology, are *bahana*²⁸ or mounts of Kama, the god of love and desire. To add further, a pair of parrots in dancing mode represents the union of the newly-wed couple. They are called *latpatia suga*²⁹ which symbolizes the harmonious relation between the groom and the bride. Sometimes instead of parrots, the artists make peacocks, which is also symbol of beauty and love. Most importantly, a pair of mythological birds are also an integral part of *kohbar* paintings. This pair of

²⁷ A pitcher full of water from well or river which is considered holy; without this no occasion is seemed to be completed. In Mithila, it occupies a great space.

²⁸ In Hindu mythology, all god or goddesses have mounts by which they travel from one place to another

²⁹ A pair of dancing parrot

mythological birds are called *bidh-bidhata*³⁰ in the Maithili language. Similarly, the images of fish, turtle and serpent are portrayed, which represent masculine and feminine forces of the nature. They are depicted almost every auspicious occasion of Mithila (Jain, 1989).

Like the lotus motif, the image of bamboo carries great place in *kohbar* paintings. The bamboo grove motif is painted straight in the painting which represents the groom. It is regarded as the symbolic male counterpart to the lotus motif which is female. The bamboo grove is also the symbol of power and tenacity. Like the lotus plant, it also germinates rapidly and quickly. It represents productivity and also anchor to the family. No matter how much stronger wind or rain comes, it stands straight. So, in the painting, due to these two motifs, one can critique that they stand for fertility, productivity, and life.

In some *kohbar* paintings, we can notice that the groom and the bride are being carried in palanquins towards the groom's or bride's marital home. According to Hindu mythology, when the wedding is finished, the bride and the groom are being carried in palanquins towards their destination. Marriage is always considered to be a sacred ceremony. Therefore, the groom and the bride are being carried home without stopping anywhere. In today's time, palanquins are replaced by motor cars. In the past, there had not been as much access to motor cars. Even if there was, they would have been too expensive to afford. Now, there are many cars found in the region at an affordable price. So, people prefer to use cars instead of palanquins. There is also another reason. Peoples nowadays do not want to carry palanquins.

The images of various gods and goddesses are painted in *kohbar* paintings or sometimes on outer walls of *kohbarghar*. These gods and goddesses are depicted in pair to symbolize the ideal pair. They are named Shiva-Parvati, Krishna-Radha, Rama- Sita. The symbolic representation of Shiva and his counterpart Parvati makes the couple stay as a pair. They symbolize opposite yet harmonizing powers of the sexes (Vequaud, 1977). A serpent is also seen encircling the lingam which represents guardianship. On top of the painting, the images of sun and moon can be noticed, which symbolizes the witnesses of wedding and character for the enduring love between the couple. Sometimes on the outer wall painting of *kohbarghar*, there are various gods and goddesses portrayed. These heavenly pairs represent the divine constructions of very different relationships between men and women. In Maithil culture, these

³⁰ A pair of birds which determine the course of newly-wed couple. It is also believed in Mithila culture that if anything bad is going happen in their future, this pair of birds make them alert. Still it happens, it is believed that it was in peoples's destiny.

pairs are taken as ideal pairs. So, their images in *kohbar* painting are the symbol of becoming an ideal couple. From the very first time of civilization, the relationship between man and woman has been thoroughly discussed. Even before the birth of human civilization, the relation has been discussed in mythology books. If we see it from the western world, there is Adam and Eve; or, if we see it in the oriental culture, there are many pairs like Shiva and Parvati, Rama and Sita, Krishna and Radha and so on. Studying these pairs, it is seen that both male and female are complementary to one another. This idea is further exemplified by an image of *Ardhanarishwara*³¹ where Lord Shiva takes half form of His consort Parvati. However, these ideal pairs are questioned by the scholars contemporary Mithila. When I asked a person named Raj Rajak to shed lights on the relationship between Rama and Sita, he told me that Rama was not an ideal man. According to Raj, Rama was an agent of patriarchy. He, further told me when Sita was freed from Ravana, she had to give ordeal to prove chastity. Similarly, when Sita was pregnant, she had to live in jungle despite she was the queen of Ayodhya. The treatment of Rama to Sita in term of *Agni pariksha* (fire ordeal) and his abandonment during her pregnancy have made people feel suspicious to ideal man Rama (Hess, 1999; Uberoi, 1990).

³¹ Ardhanarishwara is a Sanskrit term made of three terms; ardhha (half), nari (woman) and ishwara (god); it means Lord is half woman (Seid, 2004).



Picture 10. *Ardhanarishwara*
gallery

Source: Madhubani paintings online

Picture 4 is an example of Lord Shiva's form of *Ardhanarishwara*. In the image, the right part is male and the left is female. It is further noted by the color of skin. Lord Shiva's skin is blue while His consort Parvati's skin is white. In Mithila painting, color has greater place and symbolic significance. The image of *Ardhanarishwara* tells us that to be a more complete human being, we must be both male and female, and we should have both masculine and

feminine quality and attitude. The artists create *Ardhanarishwara* to help their viewers to know the god's harmoniously merger duality. The image of *Ardhanarishwara* portrays a perfect marriage. Although Lord Shiva and His consort Parvati took human form, they are seen harmoniously united in the form of *Ardhanarishwara* (Seid, 2004). The image represents the equality between male and female. About Lord Shiva's form of *Ardhanarishwara*, there are many tales in the Hindu mythological scriptures. Whatever the story may be, the form of *Ardhanarishwara* represents the union of lingam and yoni in an inseparable and harmonious form.

Similarly, the image of goddess with magical power which protects the couple from the evil eye, is painted on the painting of *kohbarghar*. The goddess is known as *naina-jogin* which means the goddess of eye. She is portrayed wearing a saree with veil. It can be seen in the figure 2. The right side of her head is covered while her left eye is looking at *kohbarghar*. Her eye is spreading magical atmosphere in *kohbarghar* so that the bridal couple could consummate and make the wedding fruitful. As name suggests, the goddess of eye fulfils her responsibility. About *naina-jogin* I found the same response from the participants.

5.3 Interpretation of Motifs used in Mithila Paintings

Mithila paintings visually represent Mithila culture through beautifully carved images on wall, floor, paper, and different parts of the body. They are charged with different symbols, which are interpreted in relation to context and time of the society. Sometimes they are interpreted in another way because one is unaware of the meaning of the symbols, yet it is possible to appreciate these paintings because of their pattern, use of colors and strangeness. Everything is contextual. So, the arts performed in Mithila region, have their own contexts, symbols and images just as folk songs depict the everyday life of people living in the community. Mithila folk arts also portray the people living in that region. Since many critical theoretical modes have their own way of interpreting the world, to make meanings looking at Mithila paintings, it is necessary to know the right ritual performances and ceremonies, Cultural, social, economic, religious and similar elements of the culture are essential to understand.

Mithila paintings have their own symbolic significance and motifs. Mithila has rich tradition and cultural practices. Almost every ceremony is embedded with its religion, culture and society. Peoples living there know the value and importance of cultural practices; they know the motives behind the particular things or symbols used for the practices. While I was

conducting field work in Janakpur and its surrounding villages, I came to know about their deep connection with the practices.

5.3.1 Leitmotif: Lotus and Bamboo

In 1934, Madhubani, a district of Bihar, India, was struck by a massive earthquake (Das, 2013). At that time, an Englishman William G. Archer, who was an officer in India, visited the place and got enthralled by the beauty of paintings (Owens, 2009). He collected the paintings and let them spread out of the Madhubani district. He studied the paintings and interpreted the symbols used in them. According to Archer, the motifs like lotus and bamboo are the sexual organs of bride and the groom respectively (Owens, 2009; Thakur, 1981; Vequaud, 1977). The lotus circle is not only a circle, it also represents the bride's sexual organ while the bamboo does the groom's genital organ; a phallus. Archer also mentions in his book, *Mithila Painting* (1949) that the lotus and bamboo represent fertility since they proliferate rapidly. He has the same opinion to see the intertwining snake in the *kohbar* painting. He interprets the symbols based sexual motives. He sees Mithila paintings as 'exotic,' what Linda T. Smith severely criticizes in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (Smith, 2013). Archer also refers to the image of tortoise. He finds it the strange shape. Its image in *kohbarghar* painting is erotic. The head and tail coming out of the shell looks exactly the bamboo piercing the lotus ring.

Another Mithila paintings patron Yves Vequaud interprets the motifs, lotus and bamboo, as female and male reproductive organs respectively. He writes that the design and composition of *kohbar* painting is highly symbolic, charged with tantrism as the bamboo shoot. A phallus (lingam) penetrates beautiful yoni, the female genital organ as fully grown lotus. He made a huge collection of Mithila paintings. In the same wing, some other scholars like Upendra Thakur (1981) have also interpreted the leitmotifs in relation to the tantric (Madhok, 2005). They have read *kohbar* paintings in relation to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis theory. For them, any round images represent female sexual organ while the pointed ones do the male's ones. However, there are some scholars who see *kohbar* paintings with different point of view. Their way of representing the paintings is different from what William G Archer, Upendra Thakur, Yves Vequaud have presented. These scholars have looked Mithila paintings in the wake of Freud's concept of psychoanalysis which talks about any pointed object as 'phallus' and any round object as 'yoni' (Tyson, 2014). There are some scholars, field work participants,

and critics who believe the Mithila paintings are more than mere symbols of male and female genital organs.

Brown expresses how the repeated saying becomes truth (Brown, 1996). Brown argues how the meaning of the Mithila paintings has been concealed by the interpretive agendas brought by outsiders. The outsiders have imposed their intellectual preoccupations into the meaning making process of Mithila paintings. The scholars carry their own intellectual preoccupations of cultural productions of others as icon or texts to interpret using their own hermeneutics (Brown, 1996). As a result, there may come the chances of misrepresentations. Brown does not negate the term plurality of meaning, yet she does not welcome the scholars with their own intellectual preoccupations to interpret the productions of others' culture. The distortion of meaning is inevitable but the question is posed: to what extent or how much distortion of meaning is possible? In relation to Mithila paintings, the scholars like Archer, Vequaud, Thakur, Jain have read the paintings with their own intellectual paradigm or theories, what Brown calls 'alien paradigm'. As a result, they have seen only 'phallus' or '*yonic*' symbols in the Mithila paintings.

My point of view regarding tantrism used in Mithila painting is quite similar to Brown's. Brown, while interviewing the artists of Mithila paintings, did nowhere get the lingam or *yonic* interpretations from them. Brown does not deny the interpretation made by some scholars regarding sexual union, it is not on surface level. Mithila culture is far more subtle and complex than that (Brown, 1996). When I asked about the images to my participants back in Nepal, they did not refer them to the sexual union or sexual images except one place when the rice is pounded by mortar and pestle. The ritual of rice pounding in mortar by pestle is also described in Maithili songs where it is clearly mentioned the meaning of sexual union of male and female. So, I agree with Brown that the meaning of sexual union may be there but in hidden form.

Similarly, another scholar Jyotindra Jain (1989) criticizes some scholars' preoccupied ideas about Mithila paintings. He goes against those who see sexual union in *kohbar* paintings. According to him, the lotus and bamboo do not represent of any sexual union (Jain, 1989). Like many participants expressing their views regarding the meaning of leitmotifs, Jain (1989) also talks the same about them. Lotus, as some scholars view as a female genital organ, is contrarily taken by Jain and says that the lotus rings in the *kohbar* paintings does not represent any sexual motif. Rather, they are leaves of lotus flower and the pierced bamboo is the root and stem of it (Jain, 1989; Madhok, 2005). So, lotus and bamboo represent floral importance in the paintings.

For many participants, lotus and bamboo represent good omens for the rituals. They may represent different things for different scholars or critics, but for Maithils they are just symbols of good fortune. Jain also points out that lotus and bamboo are found in abundance in Mithila and they proliferate rapidly. In that case, they may symbolize fertility when they are portrayed in *kohbarghar* paintings. In Mithila, lotus and bamboo are used in almost every rituals and holy occasions. As a resident, I have experienced how my mother used lotus and bamboo along with mango leaves, betel leaves in different occasions.

Brown criticizes Frenchman Vequaud's views about Maithil women who, according to him, are used to draw sexual motifs on papers for marriage proposals. Brown counters him saying that Mithila has never been so exposed on sexual matters. There is no tradition for girls choosing the groom for themselves. The marriage is arranged by the parents of both parties. In this sense, Vequaud's ideas of 'marriage proposal' is futile (Brown, 1996). Figure 1. is an example of the arranged marriage in Mithila. When I got married, my father, brother, friend and I went to my wife's home to meet her. We talked and exchanged some interests on different topics. While we were there my wife's father came forward with tea and biscuit which is tradition to welcome the guests. We had a small talk and we came home and told everything to my mother. Later, my parents and my wife's parents arranged everything for our wedding. My example completely criticizes Vequaud's ideas of marriage proposal by young girls. However, there are some changes in weddings nowadays. At present, arranged marriage through love is happening. In other words, they fall in love then they let their parents know. After that, their parents arrange everything for their wedding.

In general, lotus is regarded as a symbol of culture and civilization. Tulsi Das³², the writer of one of the great Hindu mythological books, *Ramcharitmanas*³³, has mentioned 'lotus' several times in this mythological epic. He sees Rama and His wife Sita in the form of lotus. There are seven episodes of *Ramcharitmanas*. In *Sundar Kanda*³⁴, When Ravan, the king of Lanka

³² Tulsi Das is a saint poet and devoted his entire life writing about Lord Rama and His deeds on the earth. He is also considered an incarnation of Valmiki who had created the greatest epic Ramayana. Tulsi Das used love his wife a lot. So, even for a few moments separation, he could not bear. Once his wife had gone to her maternity, he also followed her and entered into her room at night. Seeing his deeds, his wife told if he had devoted half per cent of love to Lord Rama, he would have got salvation. Taking her words into consideration, he started writing books about Lord Rama and His actions. *Ramcharitmanas* is greatest among all (Mathur & Chaturvedi, 2004).

³³ One of the greatest mythological epics of Hindus, it made easier for the commoners to sing the lines and perform enactment on the stage during 'Ramlila' (dramatic enactment of the story of Lord Rama and His deeds) (Jindal, 1955).

³⁴ One of the seven episodes of *Ramcharitmanas* where Sita is kidnapped by Ravana, the king of Lanka

threatens Sita to be his wife or Ravana is going to kill her. In response, Sita told Ravana that the lotus flower cannot bloom in the glow of a firefly. In this story, Rama is the Sun, Sita the lotus flower and Ravana is the firefly³⁵. Vidhyapati³⁶, the greatest Maithil poet has also used lotus in his poems. In many of his poems, he has compared his beloved with lotus and the moon. Similarly, bamboo is used with great importance in Mithila; it is also regarded the friend of birth and death. It represents lineage. It also represents responsibility. In spite of draught, for an instance, the bamboo stands firm and it blooms. So, there are multiple stories, values, belief system, rituals, traditions, customs, and so on regarding the leitmotifs – lotus and bamboo. If someone is restricting them only to sexual symbolic objects, then they are not able to understand the Maithil culture.

5.3.2 Various Birds

Birds play equally important roles in Mithila. They represent various belief systems in Mithila culture. For an instance, a crow is regarded as a messenger, but most often it is not a good omen if the crow's cackling. Similarly, a peacock is a symbol of beauty which is depicted in the Mithila paintings. It is also the mount of god Kartik, son of Lord Shiva. In the same way, the eagle is the mount of Lord Vishnu and the swan is to Lord Brahma, creator, and Saraswati, the goddess of learning. So, the place of the images of birds in Mithila paintings are of much importance.

Latpatia suga (a pair of parrots): Literally, *latpatia suga* refers to the pair of playful parrots, portrayed as beak-to-beak union. They are drawn as flying in circle, chasing one another in a playful manner which represents making love and ultimately refers to the consummation between the groom and the bride. Many scholars regard the symbol as a union between the groom and the bride, yet many Maithils do not know about it. For them, parrots are holy and dancing parrots refer to the pleasant environment of wedding ceremony.

Bidh-Bidhata: This motif represents two birds facing each other in a beak-to-beak union painted above the central lotus ring. Its place is very important so that the divine pair of birds could see total accounts of the newly married couple. *Bidhata* is one who is believed to write a person's fate from the sixth day after their birth to death. *Bidhata* is also believed to be the manifestation of Lord Brahma, the creator of the world. There is a common saying in Maithili, '*Bidhanaka*

³⁵ <http://www.sandipani.org/hanumanji-witnesses-ravans-conversation-with-sitaji.aspx>

³⁶ A Maithil poet, born in India and died in Nepal.

likhal metalo nai jay'. Its meaning is that once the fate of a person is written by *Bidhata*, it can never be omitted or erased.

Naina-Jogin motif: For the *kohbarghar* ritual, the portrayal of *Naina-Jogin* is very important. In Mithila culture, *Naina-Jogin* is assumed as a goddess with magical power that protects the groom and the bride against evil eyes. Still, Maithils believe in evil eyes casted by a 'witch'³⁷. It is believed that the evil eyes may be casted to the groom and the bride. To protect them from those evil casts, the goddess *Naina-Jogin* comes into action to ward off the evil eyes. Despite some variations in the images of *Naina-Jogin*, it is generally portrayed as a woman standing, with long loose hair and carrying a basket on her head. The most striking feature of the portrayal is the traditional way of covering the entire head and the face, leaving one eye exposed and the left side of her face. The goddess does not only ward off the evil eyes, she also cast magical environment with the help of auspicious rice and turmeric in the basket, in the marriage chamber where the consummation takes place.

Fish motif: Fish is an integral part of Mithila paintings. It is very common to see fish in Mithila paintings. It has symbolic significance. First, it is the symbol of 'good omen'. Secondly, it is regarded as one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu³⁸. It also represents love, auspiciousness, fertility and good luck. As Maithils are theists, they believe in gods and goddesses. The first incarnation Lord Vishnu took was Matsyaavatar³⁹. In almost every paintings, fish is common. At great festivals like Deepawali, Dashain, Chhath and like, people draw images of fish on their walls, orchard, and on Kalash⁴⁰ (water full pitcher). Thus, the fish is very important in Mithila

³⁷ There is a belief system in Mithila about witches and witch-doctors. The witches are mostly women while witch-doctors are mainly men. The deformed women and sometimes widows are regarded as witches. As far as I am concerned, I do not believe in so-called termed 'witch' or 'witch-doctor'.

³⁸ There are three GODs in Hindu mythology; Brahma; the creator, Vishnu; the preserver, and Shiva; the destructor.

³⁹ It is the very first incarnation of Lord Vishnu who took the form of a fish and saved the human civilization. Once a demon stole all Vedas from Lord Brahma when He was sleeping. Then, the demon took all knowledge from them and hid those Vedas into the deep ocean so that no one could be knowledgeable. Seeing this, Lord Vishnu became much worried and stressed if those were taken by other demons. In the then time, there was a kind named Manu who was a true devotee of Lord Vishnu and he used to perform penance everyday. One day, he found a small fish in his kamandalam (a small pot mostly carried by sages). To his surprise, the fish asked for help and not to put it in ocean because the big fish might have eaten it. After that, he brought the fish in his kamandalam home. In the morning, he found the kamandalam was not big enough for the fish because the fish had grown bigger. Later, the king tried to save it putting in a bigger pot to pond, river and finally, into the ocean. Even the ocean became smaller for it. Eventually, the king saw the Lord Himself in the form of fish. The Lord ordered him to make a ship and put seeds of all plants and animals as a huge storm was sure to hit. It happened same but the fish guided the ship to the safety and while taking the king and other animals, the Lord taught all the Vedas to the king.

<http://hindumythologyforgennext.blogspot.no/2011/11/matsya-avatar.html>

⁴⁰ Generally in Mithila, before prayer to God, people put kalash which is a sign of good omen

culture as it is regarded as very auspicious and holy. However, people eat fish. At that moment, they forget about the Lord Vishnu's incarnation.

Tortoise motif: This motif represents for longevity since tortoise lives for longer. It also represents one of the incarnations of the Lord Vishnu. This incarnation is called Kurmaavatar⁴¹. Some critics or scholars have presented its form in different way. The tortoise has been termed as the form of sexual union between the groom and the bride (Archer, 1949). Its weird portrait made him speak like that. While Brown countered him saying that there may be the element of sexual union between the groom and the bride, but since the society is not so open it is not justifiable to produce meaning out of sexual union (Brown, 1996). In a wedding, the tortoise's shell is used to kindle 'diyos,'⁴² which is used in many rituals of the wedding. The tortoise also represents bearing responsibility. To churn the ocean, there was no one or nothing to bear the weight. Then, the lord Vishnu came in front in the form of tortoise and helped get the work done. Thus, it is a very important part of Mithila paintings.

Conch-Shell (Shankha) motif: Like Naina-Jogin, conch also casts evil spirits away. It is an equally important motif in the Mithila culture, especially in Mithila paintings. It has been mentioned that the conch is a sacred emblem of Lord Vishnu in Hindu mythology. It represents fame, longevity, prosperity. Its sound is believed to cast off the evil spirits. In one of the greatest Hindu scriptures named Mahabharata, the conch is used as a war trumpet. Its sound means the start of war and again its sound refers to the end of the war of that particular day⁴³. It has been used when somebody dies in Mithila so that the dead person could rest in peace in the heaven. Similarly, it has also been used in ayurvedic medicine for the treatment of diarrhea, pimples, indigestion, abdominal pain, heartburn, irritable bowel syndrome and so on⁴⁴.

⁴¹ This incarnation is Lord Vishnu's second incarnation to help gods and goddesses when they were powerless after the war against demons. To create cosmic equilibrium, Lord Vishnu took the form of Tortoise on back of which He hold Mount Mandara and the serpent worked as rope to churn the ocean to find elixir or something invaluable so that the cosmic equilibrium can be maintained. To churn the ocean one end was held by gods whereas another end of serpent help by demons. The Lord had to take this form because the weight of Mount Mandara could not be held by any other object or the earth itself while churning ocean. This story has been presented in many mythological books of Hindu religion.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EYWPT-PI2j8>

⁴² Handmade candle. Small amount of oil is kept into the shell and wrapped long cotton is soaked in the oil to lighten the candle.

⁴³ In Mahabharata, when Pandavas and Kauravas were fighting for the kingdom called Hastinapur. There had been so many rules in the war. One of them was the sound of conch. There had been agreement that in the morning the sound of conch is the sign of the beginning of war whereas after sunset its sound will be the sign of the end of the war of that particular day. The war continued for eighteen long days

⁴⁴ <https://www.ayurtimes.com/shankh-shankha-bhasma/>

Elephant motif: This motif symbolizes royalty and richness. In almost every epic of the world, horses and elephants represent royalty, prosperity and richness. In Mithila, it is also believed that the elephant brings prosperity and richness in the home and the couple gets happy throughout their life. The elephant has also religious significance. It is regarded as the god Ganesha⁴⁵. The elephant is also the mount of Indradeva⁴⁶.

Swastika motif: Swastika in Mithila represents Lord Vishnu (Thakur, 2003). It is widely used in *aripana* paintings of Mithila. It is used for auspiciousness and peace. The swastika mantras are used when Maithils build houses, do wedding ceremonies, sow seeds in the field, begin of journey, start business, and most importantly they are used when a child is born. I have noticed even my father and mother use the swastika image on both sides of the main entrance of my house and the doors of each rooms. It is always accompanied with two words ‘Shubha’ and ‘Labha’⁴⁷. In Mithila paintings, the symbol of swastika is often combined with the form of Ganesha and his two wives; Ridhi and Siddhi⁴⁸. Conch-shell swastika is the symbol of Ganesh and prosperity. In Mithila, almost every religious occasions include swastika to make or bring good fortune.

⁴⁵ God Ganesha is known for his wisdom. He is one of the two sons of Lord Shiva. Once Lord Shiva asked His sons to circumambulate the world. Then, he used his wisdom and start circumambulating his parents. When Lord Shiva asked the reason then Ganesha told that parents are the world. And then after Ganesha is regarded as the god of wisdom.

⁴⁶ The king of gods and goddesses, resides in the heaven. He is often portrayed as who loves music and dancing in the heaven.

⁴⁷ Shubha and Labha refer to ‘good omen’ and ‘prosperity’ respectively. When people start their business they use swastika image for the prosperity and good time. Even when they celebrate any auspicious occasion, they use it. So, in wedding too, they use this image very much. As a participant and observer, I have witnessed all these things. The response of other respondents are similar to mine. People in Mithila believe in spirituality.

⁴⁸ Riddhi and Siddhi are believed to be consorts of god Ganesha, Ridhi refers prosperity, progress, material enjoyment (bhog) while siddhi is linked with ultimate achievement (moksha). Similarly, buddhi means intelligence. Most often it is confused whether these are his consorts or not. Some mythological books mention that they are his wives while some express that these are the forms of his own appearance. That is why, he is worshipped first among any other gods and goddesses. (<https://rudrakshayoga.wordpress.com/2013/07/02/secret-meaning-of-lord-ganesha-and-his-wives/>).



Figure 11. *Sumukha*⁴⁹ Ganesha
gallery

Source: Creative Mithila online

The figure no. 6 is an example of *Sumukha* Ganesha. In the center of the picture, an elephant's head can be seen. God Ganesha is half human with an elephant's head. In the center of the bottom of the image, two kalash pots with mango leaves and coconut on top can be seen. Just below the kalash pots, a rat is noticed, which is believed to be the mount of god Ganesha. At the bottom of the painting, there are many *diyos*⁵⁰. On the left side of the painting, the image of swastika and symbolic Om can be noticed while to the right side of the painting there is the complete image of god Ganesha with four hands. On the side of it, there is also the picture of 'trishul'⁵¹, the weapon of Lord Shiva. These symbols all have their own importance in relation to Mithila paintings. The swastika sign is very importance not only to the Mithila culture, it

⁴⁹ Sumukha refers to auspicious, holy face. Ganesha is believed as the most intelligent god among all. That is why, he is worshipped first. Sumukha means sacred, having benevolent heart.

⁵⁰ Diyos are used in the festivals like Deepawali, Chhatha, Dashain, and other religious ceremonies or rituals; wedding, funeral, birth, and such. Diyos mean earthen lamp into which oil and cotton are kept and then ignite them so that they could give light. It is also believed in Mithila community that the use of diyos means warding off darkness or ignorance. Light refers to knowledge.

⁵¹ Trishul refers to the weapon of Lord Shiva which is a long -handed trident. Lord Shiva had once used this weapon to behead the original head of god Ganesha. Later, Lord Shiva made god Ganesha come back in life with the head of an elephant.

also occupies great place in Canada. The Canadian town refuses to remove the Swastika sign from the park because the sign represents peace. The symbolic Om represents the entire universe while '*Shantih*' refers to the peace. Generally, '*Om Shantih*' is uttered together for the peace everywhere. In the absence of Om, it does not give the complete meaning. In the picture, god Ganesha carries lotus in one of his four hands which also represents peace. Thus, the scholars who relate lotus to the *yonis* symbol, they are not fully in accordance to the social etiquette. The two eyes discern the good and the evil same as the two eyes of the Swayambhunath⁵² temple in Kathmandu do.

Snake motif: This motif is found abundantly in Mithila paintings. It has many meanings to tell. For most of the Hindu peoples of Mithila, the snake represents the form of god. On the auspicious occasion of *Nagapanchami*⁵³, Maithils make a prayer to the snake by offering milk. In my community, especially, people do not go to offer milk to the snakes. Rather, they draw paintings of snakes on the walls of their house and the puffed rice is scattered everywhere thinking that the snake will come to eat those. They also paste pictures of snakes, intertwining snakes on the gate of the door of their houses. Cobra is always present around the neck of Lord Shiva, while *Sheshnaga*⁵⁴ is always shown with Lord Vishnu. Lord Vishnu takes rest on *Sheshnaga*.

Mithila paintings, especially *Kohbar* paintings, have many motifs. Some of them I have discussed here while some of them I have not mentioned. For the limitation of the dissertation, I have deliberately omitted some other symbols. However, I have tried to include the most important ones.

Despite carrying meaningful aspects of Mithila culture, Mithila paintings are not being promoted by any INGOs or NGOs except few or the government of Nepal. In India, the artists are being encouraged to promote and continue Mithila folk arts. They are frequently motivated for the preservation of their unique culture. For this brave act, the government of India honors them with prestigious awards, like the National award, Padma Shri and like. Ganga Devi is believed to be one of the leading evangelists of the Mithila painting tradition. She made those paintings popular not only in India, but also outside of India. For this act, the government

⁵² One of the most famous temples in Kathmandu, Nepal

⁵³ Nagapanchmi often falls in July or August every year on the fifth day of moon (<http://metro.co.uk/2017/07/27/nag-panchami-2017-what-is-it-how-is-it-celebrated-and-why-snakes-are-worshipped-6746103/>)

⁵⁴ Sheshnaga is often regarded as the king of all serpents. According to Hindu mythology, it is the bed of Lord Vishnu, where He takes rest (<http://www.webonautics.com/mythology/sheshnag.html>)

honored her with the National Award and later, Padma Shri Award . On the other hand, the government of Nepal seems to be indifferent towards the cultural preservations of indigenous peoples. The local people are also not following the cultural tradition. There are several reasons for this. First, the government shows reluctant attitudes towards the preservation and promotion of Mithila culture and language. Secondly, the modernism has a great impact upon the tradition. Similarly, another possible reason could be poverty which compels the youth to go to other countries like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Malaysia, and so on for the employment. There are some other reasons too.

While conducting field work, I visited some of the villages of Dhanusha district. What I found was that the tradition was on the verge of distinction. It was the rainy season, so it was the time of paddy plantation. I still remember, when I was young, I used to visit fields where the workers were singing and planting the paddy seedlings. On the contrary, at the present, I did not get chance to listen those songs. Not only that, in the past, women used to have tattoos on their right hands and other parts like their neck, arm and legs. But in today's generation, I did not see any. They do tattoos but the modern ones. Maybe some 15 to 20 years ago, my eldest brother used to make picture of gods and goddesses on the walls during the festivals like Deepawali, Chhath, and other occasions like wedding. Now, it has been replaced with the modern paints or picture. The peoples have started using more modern things rather than the traditional ones. While I was in field, I noticed that the Mithila arts are disappearing day after day. I really feel there should have been revitalization programs so that the folk arts can be retrieved.

6: Conclusion

The current thesis has sought to explore the significance of Mithila culture through visual representation of Mithila folk arts. This study is the result of a qualitative fieldwork which was conducted in Janakpur and its nearby villages in Nepal in June, 2016. The study includes the voices of Mithila artists, women, teachers, professors, scholars of Mithila with the observations of researcher and documentary analysis. Based on the theory of representation, this study seeks to explore the cultural importance through Mithila artifacts. This study can also be used to implement to preserve the indigenous culture which has earned lots of recognition in and out of nation.

This study has shown the initiatives of peoples of Mithila to save their culture through different ways. One among them is the portrayal of the cultural practices onto canvas. The purpose of this study is to show how the course of time has changed the artists' from more divine rooted theme to common life. Yet the basic pattern is same as previous. However, Mithila paintings have now become more inclusive. The artists have started to work on biography, folklore rustic life, marriage ceremony, legendary figures, nature as well as critical outlooks on social, economical and political events – local, national and international activities. This study has shown how the representation of Mithila culture through the paintings goes with the flux of time which refers to dynamism and transformation in artistic motives.

Mithila paintings are an intricated patterned art. It takes long time to prepare Mithila paintings; from making canvas to pigment followed by the geometrical patterns. In spite of long and complicated process, the artists give their full devotion towards their creation which ultimately works as an asset to Mithila culture. The artists play a prominent role for the promotion and preservation of Indigenous arts and Mithila culture. This study has tried to capture some of the important cultural rituals of Mithila with their symbolic significance. The study also reveals how these cultural rituals are very much close to the life pattern of Maithils that they spend and how these ceremonies have a strong connection with religion, culture and society of Mithila. By this study it can be seen that Maithils know pretty well to use the symbols and images in a particular context to represent the intended meaning.

The central focus of this thesis is to show different rituals at wedding in Mithila which are integral theme of Mithila paintings. Mithila paintings are an outcome of indigenous peoples' cultural representations of their customs, rites and rituals. Initially, the paintings were more

inclined to the representation of deities, gods, goddesses and different rituals happening at wedding. Now, in recent times, the paintings have become more inclusive. The artists have started to work on social issues like dowry system and its effect in society, equal access to education, the negative effects of polygamy, girl trafficking, along with political, economic and religious commentaries. At present, Mithila paintings have become diverse in theme.

This thesis explores some rituals at wedding in Mithila which are the crux of Mithila paintings. the artists use different symbols, motifs, colors, canvases, to portray the contextual paintings which deal with the particular occasions. For an example, *Kohbar* paintings carry immense importance at wedding. The paintings express the great coordination between the material (physical) and spiritual aspects of life. To sum up, Mithila paintings (*Kohbar*) paintings are at the center of Mithila culture. The paintings are laden with the utmost cultural values which are the practiced by indigenous peoples in Mithila.

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