

## Imaging The Goddess: Visual Folk Narratives from the Mithila Region

**Archana Verma**

*School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi<sup>1</sup>*



The perceptions, modes of expression and narratives which are generally classified as ‘folk’ are contesting for space with what are called the ‘scientific’ modes of expression as the latter provides the dominant pointers of lifestyle in the modern world. This contest for space has resulted in the folk culture to respond to the dominant, mainstream society in ways which have often either modified its own nature or alternatively led to an assertion of its Self identity. This paper deals with the various images of power equations which occur in the expressions of the folklore, especially the ritual paintings made by the women of the Mithila region in the state of Bihar in India.

The figure of the Goddess has fascinated the scholars as much as her devotees. For, she is malevolent as well as protective at the same time. Besides, for Western scholars of early 20<sup>th</sup> century and even later, who were more familiar with the notion of a formless Divinity of the Semitic religions, who if ever could be described in figurative terms, had to have a masculine form, the concept of a divine figure in the feminine form has been intriguing. The term ‘folk’ for the Mithila paintings is also rather anomalous in the large array of folk traditions of India, for as the following discussion will show, the paintings of Mithila do not really fall within the framework of ‘folk’ arts of other genres of India.

As Richard Dorson shows (Dorson, 1968), from its initial conceptualisation, folklore has suggested the outlines of a hidden, forgotten and backward culture. This culture of the folk was hidden in two ways – deep in remote time, in a prehistoric past, when early humans perceived the world animistically and in places far off, away from the busy centres of civilisation, in the peasant villages of the countryside and mountain ridges.

Early definitions of folklore include a conception of bygone culture, popular antiquities and survival of a traditional society. Coupled with this notion were terms like superstitious, illiterate, backward, primitive etc. These perceptions led to the scholars on the 19<sup>th</sup> century to collect information about the lifestyles, beliefs and customs of the rural people and to bring them to light to ‘salvage a little known, vanishing culture.’

---

<sup>1</sup> The author is a researcher on Ancient and Medieval Indian Art and Architecture, School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi  
Email: archana3v@yahoo.co.in

By 1846 several currents of interest were converging in the antiquarian societies of London to signal a new field of learning. These mingling interests included the culling of popular antiquities from all kinds of literary records, the observation of living antiquities in the countryside and the reconstruction of a 'heathen' mythology from oral and written memorials. One such antiquarian, William John Thoms (1803 – 1885) perceived the confluence of these inquiries and decided to call attention to them with an appropriate new term (Dorson, 1968, 51-52) His celebrated letter (Dorson, 1968, 52-54) to *Athenaeum* for the first time designated these popular antiquities as 'folklore' and also announced a design to further a study of folklore.

However, another image of the 'folk' has also existed, depicting them as simple, unspoilt, pastoral, close to nature and possessing a noble persona. Edward B. Tylor, considered the father of anthropology, published his *Researches into the Early History of Mankind* in 1865 and his *Primitive Culture* in 1871, (Tylor, 1871, 97-111 in Dorson, 1968, 181-182) now classic works filled with references to and illustrations from collections of peasant folklore and 'savage' myths. According to him, pre – historic people (whom he referred to as savages) preceded the Aryans and so, his theory of uniform descent of all people on the ladder of cultural evolution perceived one stage easily gliding into the next. In *Primitive Culture*, Tylor introduced a concept which would form the foundation stone for a school of anthropological folklorists. This was the doctrine of survivals, relating the beliefs and practices of long vanished savages to the folklore of modern peasant. In adopting the term 'survival' Tylor replaced the pejorative 'superstition' with a more meaningful and expressive word calling immediately to mind his whole evolutionary position. Indeed, all genres of folklore, from games of chance to proverbs and riddles, manners and customs, rhymes and tales, survived in modern society as fragments of primitive culture (Dorson, 1968, 181-182).

Among the many readers influenced by Tylor's new vision was Andrew Lang. Reacting quickly to Tylor's portrayal of pre – historic savages eyeing a jungle populated on all sides with vital spirits, Lang opened a trail leading directly to the modern peasant, giving it a strongly anthropological hue. Beginning with Tylor's theory of evolution and doctrine of survivals, Andrew Lang brought into evidence recent collections of savage and peasant folktales to intensify the shaft of light cast by folklore over the dim past. (Lang, 1873, 618-631, and Lang, 1910, xi –lxx in Dorson, 1968, 81, 193.

In both kinds of perceptions of the folk society described above, viz., the antiquarian and folklorist, the folk represented a world different from the centres of power, wealth, progress, industry and intellectual and political activity in the metropolises (Dorson, 1978, 11). However, it has been increasingly felt that "folk" need not apply exclusively to country folk, but rather signifies anonymous masses of tradition-oriented people. If country folk move into the city, they do not thereby forfeit the interest of the folklorist. (Dorson, 1978, 23) Today, the studies on folklore take the view that the 'folk' comprises the marginalised sections of the society who have not been able to benefit from the modern technological knowledge system.

The folk or the popular narratives, whether in oral, visual or theatrical forms, can show multiple layers of symbolism, the power equations and often a contest for space and visibility. Often, these symbolisms are expressed through rituals observed during festivals. Roger Chartier says that 'popular' qualifies a kind of relation, rather than a set of artefacts. It is a way of using cultural products such as legitimate ideas and attitudes (Chartier, 1985, 233). It is also a relationship of defiance and defence regarding dominant images. (Kaplan, 1985, 22)

If we consider that the Mithila paintings have been traditionally created by women from the two uppermost castes of the Mithila society viz., the Brahman and the Kayastha, it is evident that what these paintings refer to as 'folk' do not fall into either of the categories of 'folk' described above. Here, it is also important to remember that the division between 'folk' and 'canonical' (or 'classical') was made in the Indian context by the British archivists who wanted to distinguish between the art created by the 'high culture' and 'craft' made by the artisans of India. However, if we take the view that the folk can be defined as the art of the people who do not enjoy a high status in the society, the Mithila paintings still defy this category, since they are made by women from the uppermost caste. This paper attempts to explore this dichotomy. Here, by 'narrative' I imply the texts created in visual form and the act of their making and singing ritual songs which can be defined as a performance, both in visual and verbal form (since there is no dance or play involved). These paintings and the accompanying songs are beliefs are texts in their own right, as much as literary texts. On one level, they question, comment upon and redefine the dominant discourse on the social equations, while on another level, they also accommodate the dominant social discourse. this paper also recognises the fact that every visual is performative in nature and every performance has a visual content.

Mithila was part of the ancient kingdom of Videha. Tirabhukti was another name for Mithila and it gained popularity during 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> centuries A. D. The name Tirhut, British division in north Bihar consisting of Darbhanga, Saran, Champaran and Muzaffarpur is derived from Tirabhukti. Historically, the term Mithila has been used as a cultural region rather than a political or geographical unit. The tradition of making floor designs with rice powder paste and wall paintings in vegetable colours is very popular in this region and these paintings are made on all festive occasions and during the observance of rites of passage. When a marriage is arranged, paintings on wrappers for vermilion are sent by the bridegroom's family to the bride's family. These are traditionally made on thin handmade paper made from fibrous organic matter. Their usage shows that these paintings have always had a ritual significance.

The Goddess is the patron deity of the Mithila community. In all the festivities and the rituals, she takes a prominent place in her different aspects. These aspects encompass the wide spectrum covering her visualisation as Kali who lives outside the norms of social circumscription, Durga or the great Goddess of victory and Parvati/Gauri or the benign or the subdued consort of Siva. The region is studded with a number of centres of Goddess worship where this cult is followed in its various forms, often including the Tantric mode of esoteric worship.

The paintings of Mithila have evolved a language of their own for depicting the Goddess for different ritual purposes. Notions of magical power, protection, marital bliss and often uncircumscribed danger form the undercurrents of these paintings which are regarded as essential to the rites which are performed. The rituals themselves derive from the Brahmanical system which defines the dominant mode of expression in the society. It has been successfully shown that the rituals of the Maithil community have their origin in the Dharmasastra texts of early historical period (Jain, 1997). This leads us to some vital questions viz., if these paintings are made by the women from the dominant castes of the region for the purpose of observing rituals of the dominant religious expressions, why are they called 'folk'? Can the non – institutionalised, non – canonical style and transmission process of this art form be considered the only basis for categorising it as 'folk'? Is it possible to locate the folk basis of these paintings outside the realm of the process of making of this art form? Perhaps the answer to these questions lie more in the way 'folk' should be defined than in the process of art creation. This is one of the concerns of this paper.

### **Visuality of the Performance and the Multiple Visualisation of the Goddess**

The study of the Goddess cult has often been intertwined with a discussion of the independent nature of the forms of the Goddess such as Kali or Durga.<sup>2</sup> This has been contrasted with the subdued Goddess in her form of a consort. These writings have an underlying emphasis on the process of circumscribing the woman through the domestic space. If this is the case, then it is interesting to see the ways in which a woman negotiates her environment in a community which worships the Goddess as her patron deity. Also, it is important that it is the women who make these paintings in the Mithila region.

The minor goddesses, referred to as 'Naina Jogin' are attributed with magical powers which can be dangerous. But, when appeased through worship, they can protect their worshippers. In order to protect the newly married couple or the new born child from the 'evil eye' it is essential to appease these divinities.

To this category also belong the paintings of Kali who lives outside the social prescriptions, but is perceived as the force that protects her devotees who appease her, often with animal sacrifice. Some of the paintings show her as presiding over the esoteric Sriyantra along with the corpse of Siva whom she rides highlighting her position outside the social fold as well as with esoteric worship. Here, it is important to note that the act of painting the image not only initiates but involves the act of worship. The creation of painting is likened to the creation of a sacred image.

The rite of Gauri worship is largely associated with the belief that she gives long life to the husband of the woman who worships her. Ideas of prosperity, conjugal bliss and perpetuation of family ties are intertwined with this practice. It is considered the most important worship a married woman can offer. This is the subdued goddess granting happiness to a woman who has been circumscribed according to the social norms.

---

<sup>2</sup> This is elaborately argued in the various chapters of Hawley and Wulff (Eds.), 1984.

Paintings depicting the Hindu rites of passage frequently project the woman as the agency for the conduct of these rites. Most of these rites take place in the domestic space in the family environment and women are depicted as a strong visual presence in these paintings. Performance of these rites thus, has a marked feminine visual association. The visual narration of the Hindu epics such as the Ramayana not only provides a visual channel for the perpetuation of the epic tradition within the community, but also tends to translate the dominant Brahmanical discourse through this process of narration, with no prominent attempt at an alternative narrativisation.

Durga Puja is celebrated in the confines of homes as well as in public spaces as a festival of the masses. In the public arena, huge clay idols of the Goddess are made and kept in temporary enclosures, where priests are called and Brahmanical worship is offered for 9 days to celebrate the victory of the Goddess over the demons. This practice is not peculiar to Mithila region but is common to a large area of India. In the domestic space however, women paint the images of Durga on the walls and on the doorway of every room of the house in the Mithila region. Worship is offered to the goddess in the family shrine where usually an image of Kali the patron deity is painted at this time. A major aspect of offering worship is singing folk songs in her praise and these songs are invariably sung by the women. Here, it is important to note that this feature of singing song accompanies all rites observed by this community. It is as though the Goddess pervades the whole domestic space at this time of the year. Her paintings on the doorway seem to guard the household. However, though all goddesses are perceived to be the manifestations of the same Great Goddess, here a clear distinction is made, for here it is never the subdued Gauri who is painted at the time of Durga Puja but the powerful Great Goddess, who is perceived as omnipotence in feminine form. She protects her followers and destroys the evil forces. Again, painting her figure is equivalent to creating a sacred image and the women are the creators of this sacred image.

### **Performativity of the Visual Text**

Every visual text has a performative aspect, since a visual is meant to be displayed and it conveys a meaning because the audience views it. The paintings of Mithila are always made to be viewed by the community and have a distinct performative aspect. Even after the ritual need of the painting is over, it stays on till the next festive occasion when a fresh painting is made.

The visuality of the painting communicates the idea to the audience and crystallises it in their minds. The narratives which are depicted in the paintings and the symbolic motifs which narrate the story, are shared within the as they circulate among the audience which views the paintings. The visual image acts as a vehicle for reinforcing the tradition within the community. Women act as the agency for this dissemination and reinforcement process, since they are usually the painters. The domestic space thus, acts as the perpetuator of the ritual.

From the above discussion, something very interesting emerges. The community follows the Brahmanical practices as a way of life. However, through these paintings, songs and their associated rituals, women of the community have

evolved an elaborate vocabulary of a parallel religious – ritual system which they articulate simultaneously when the Brahmanical rites are being performed. The rites are not regarded as complete either without the Sanskrit vocabulary being articulated by the Brahman priest or without the paintings, songs and the rituals articulated by the women. These two systems thus, are complementary to each other. This leads to the question – when there is a set of canonical rites being followed, why does this parallel system exist and why do the women perform it? Here, it is important to remember that the parallel system also articulates much of the Brahmanical vocabulary, but its mode of articulation is non – canonical. Hence, it can't be perceived as the remnant of a pre – Brahmanical culture. Rather, it reflects a much more complex situation which serves to reinforce the canonical vocabulary.

Perhaps we can attempt to resolve this issue by looking at the nature of this community. It follows a patriarchal system and the decision making space available to women is directly proportional to the social status and the economic prosperity of the family. This means that there are a few women who can have a strong say in the decision making process, but as we go down the social scale, this space becomes more and restricted. At the same time, there is a dominant discourse circulating in the community on the power of the Goddess and therefore, of the woman. In such a situation, women assert their power by articulating a distinct language of their own in the ritual arena of the domestic space. For, the domestic space traditionally belongs to them. This is perhaps an attempt to claim the space which is denied to them in the public sphere. Hence, the priestly rites have to converge with the rites of women, the Sanskrit chants have to coincide with the folk songs and the Brahmanical image has to coexist with the folk paintings.

This brings us back to the question of what is folk art. Perhaps it would be apt to define folk art as that created by the people who are marginalized in the environment in which they live. This art may or may not reflect a rural setting, but often it reflects an attempt to evolve survival strategies in the situation of marginalisation, apart from being non–canonical in nature.

The above discussion also throws light on the attempt of the Indian state to empower the women of Mithila by providing a commercial outlet to their art which makes them financially self – sufficient. This feature has had some important impact on this art practice. The paintings made by the women are no longer only ritualistic in nature. Features of early modern technological lifestyle are also introduced by them. This has deritualised this essentially ritual art form.

Seeing the financial prosperity of women, some men have also begun to make these paintings for commercial purpose. In such cases, the conventional patriarchal mode gets established where the man earns through these paintings and the woman is dependant on him. Now she has forsaken the ritual domestic space and the access to the modern professional space is denied to her. In cases where she is the major breadwinner of the family, she does command a lot of power in financial matters and this is where the state has been successful. However, the research is required to see whether such a woman is just a source of income to her family or whether she is the decision maker too, for without this power, just the economic strength does not really empower a woman.

## Theorising Feminine Space

Culture has often been explored to show the ways in which the cultural symbols empower men to be active and creative while marginalizing women as passive and the Other.<sup>3</sup> However, the discussion in this paper shows a situation in which women, though circumscribed in the domestic space, take on an active and creative role and use the medium of the visual narrative to mark a strong visual presence in the Brahmanical ritual space which is predominantly patriarchal in nature. However, it is to be noticed that this visual narration closely follows the Brahmanical patriarchal system. This necessitates an attempt to rethink the form of the feminine territory in this society. Perhaps it would be a relevant proposition here to say that a dominant cultural ideology works through ritual situations to construct people in subject position. Along with these come the illusion of freedom and misrecognition of the true, objective nature of the self and society.<sup>4</sup> Hence, a visual and performative demarcation of the feminine territory does not necessarily contest the dominant power discourse in the cultural arena. Here, Lacan's Symbolic Law would also perhaps be relevant, according to which the self is not sovereign over its own sense of identity, but is constructed by power discourses and cultural forces like, language, text, symbols etc. which are patriarchal in nature. According to Lacan, desire, fantasy and illusion produce inequalities because they are constructed by symbolic structures which are in turn, shaped by relations of power (see Smith 2001, 206-213) the visual and performative assertion over the ritual space by the women thus, gives them a perceived sense of power<sup>5</sup> over a predominantly patriarchal arena which pervades the domestic space traditionally defined as feminine. This sense of power however, doesn't often translate into a control over the decision making space and a sense of freedom from the patriarchal structure.<sup>6</sup> Also, since the feminine identity is constructed by the cultural discourses of power, this identity replicates and reinforces these discourses these discourses in the process of its visual and performative assertion. The folk narrative in this case does not critique or question the dominant cultural ideology, because it is constructed by it, rather it provides a psychological outlet to the subject to shape a world for itself which is largely illusory. The images of the Goddess provide the venue for this articulation. This paper shows the subtle

---

<sup>3</sup> There has been extensive discourse on this line of argument, covering various aspects of culture. For a psychoanalytical approach to the cultural categorisation of women, see Mitchell, 1974.

<sup>4</sup> This perception has emerged from Althusser's position on ideology and state institution. See Benton (Ed.), 1984, 198, for a summary of his ideas, which have been modified for the purpose of this paper.

<sup>5</sup> The perception that the assertion of a visual presence in the cultural arena can be illusory has emerged from academic discussions with Anuranjan Pegu of the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

<sup>6</sup> This is demonstrated by the life of Ganga Devi (as recounted by Jyotindra Jain), who was turned out by her husband who married for a second time but after she became financially sufficient, she wanted to write her will in the name of her co-wife's son 'because after all he was her husband's offering,' (Jain, 1997, 21). Jain's account however, does not bring out the inability of the financial sufficiency to give the woman a control over the decision making space and to erase the patriarchal structure.

dynamics of power relations that exist even within a dominant stratum of society, which should not be seen as a monolithic structure. The notion of 'folk' here transcends the conventional categorisations of the society into the 'dominant high culture' and the dominated 'low culture' and shows that domination can exist even within the same social group. Hence, the definition of 'folk' for these paintings does not only deal with their style of depiction but also with their position in the dynamics of power relation within the community.

.....

### References

- ARCHER, W. G. (Ed.), 1963, *Love Songs of Vidyapati*, London, George Allen and Unwin.
- ARCHER, W. G., 1948, "Maithil Painting," *Marg* No. 3, Bombay
- BAXANDALL, M., 1989, *Patterns of Intentions, On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.
- BENTON, T. (Ed.), 1984, *The Rise and Fall of Structural Marxism*, London, Macmillan.
- CHARTIER, R, 1985, "Culture as Appropriation, Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France" in S. KAPLAN (Ed.), *Understanding Popular Culture*, The Hague, Mouton.
- CLIFFORD, J., 1988, *The Predicament of Culture, Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press.
- DORSON, R. (Ed.), 1968, *Peasant Customs and Savage Myths: Selections from the British Folklorists*, Vol. I, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- DORSON, R. (Ed.), 1978, *Folklore in the Modern World*, The Hague, Mouton Publishers.
- HAWLEY, J.S. and Wulff D.M. (Eds.), 1984, *The Divine Consort*, Delhi, Motilal Banarasiidass.
- HUNT, M. (Tr.), 1910, (Written in 1884), *Grimm's Household Tales*, Vol. I, London, G. Bell and Sons, pp. xi – lxx.
- HUYLER, S. P., 1996, *Painted Prayers, Women's Art in Village India*, Ahmedabad, Mapin.
- JAIN, J., 1997, *Ganga Devi, Tradition and Expression in Mithila painting*, Ahmedabad (India), Mapin, and Niigata (Japan), Mithila Museum.
- KANE, P. V., 1968 – 1977, *History of Dharmasastra*, Poona, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute.
- MILLER, B.S. and Archer, M. (Eds.), 1985, *Songs for the Bride: Wedding Rites of Rural India*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- MITHCELL, J., *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, London, Allen Lane, 1974.
- SMITH, P. 2001, *Cultural Theory – An Introduction*, Massachusetts, Blackwell.
- TYLOR, E.B., 1871, *Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art and Custom and Primitive Culture*, Vols. I and II, London, J. Murray, Vol. I.
- VEQUAUD, Y., 1977, *Women Painters of Mithila*, London, Thames and Hudson.