

# Madhubani motifs: Documentation and their significance

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■ **ABSTRACT :** Indian paintings inspire us to create new designs using traditional motifs in textiles. Distinct colourful designs which are associated with the religious and mystical motifs are mostly practiced in the rural folk paintings of India. *Madhubani* painting have great potential in the international market because of its authenticity and rich heritage. Women paint figures from nature and myth on household and village walls to mark the seasonal festivals of the religious year and special events of life cycle. *Madhubani* paintings are adorned with colours utilized from indigenous sources along with plants extracts as fixatives. The article deals with the history of *Madhubani* painting, documentation of *Madhubani* motifs and studies their symbolism and also the use of natural dyes sources.

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Art serve both as a decoration and communication of emotion and ideas. Indian civilization being one of the oldest existing civilizations in the world today, is blessed with rich culture and heritage. Every region in India has its own style and pattern of art, which is generally known as its folk art. Indian artist and their paintings are world famous. The rural folk painting of India offer distinctive colourful designs which are associated with the religious and mystical motifs. The most renowned folk paintings of India include: *Patachitra* or canvas paintings of Odisha, *Nirmal* paintings of Andhra Pradesh, *Madhubani* paintings of Bihar and *Warli* paintings of Maharashtra. Among these the wall paintings or Mural paintings of *Mithila* region of Bihar are very popular all over the world (Anonymous, 2013). *Mithila* can be referred to as a famous genre of Indian paintings, which takes its name from the tiny hamlet of

'*Madhubani*' district, in the Indian state of Bihar, where this art form originated centuries ago. The style of *Madhubani* painting or *Mithila* painting are performed habitually in *Mithila* region of Bihar state of India and the adjacent parts of Terai in Nepal. The word "*Madhubani*" is derived from *Madhu*-honey, *Ban*- forest or woods and trees. It means forest of honey (Anonymous, 2015a and b). *Madhubani* paintings have been restrained to a dense geographical region and have been passed on to young generation through centuries. *Mithila* paintings originated during the time of *Ramayana* when king Janak commissioned artists to do paintings during the wedding of his daughter, Sita to lord Ram. Traditionally *Madhubani* painting was done on wall and after that floor painting is also started by the *Mithila* women to decorate their houses. Now days canvas-painting which are known as (*Pata Chitra*) is also done

by the *Mithila* women. The art is created on the walls that have been plastered with cow dung and mud paste to render a dark background. The female members of the house practiced the art as per the belief of that Gods visit each house in the morning to bless them with luck and prosperity (Anonymous, 2015c and d). *Madhubani* paintings started as a welcome painting on the walls, doors and floors for the Gods. These paintings have been originally depicted an assembly of symbolic images, such as images of lotus plant, the bamboo grove, fishes, birds and snakes in union, represented fertility and proliferation of life (Anonymous, 2016a). These have paintings for each occasions and festivals such as birth, marriage, holi, *Surya shakti*, *Kali puja*, *Upanayanam*, *Durga puja* etc. *Madhubani* painting deals with the five main styles; *Bharni*, *Katchni*, *Tantrik*, *Godna* and *Gobar* paintin. In 1934 the place Madhubani attacked by a big earthquake. In 1960, few members of the All India Handicrafts Board, Delhi came to *Madhubani* for survey. They attracted by the wall paintings of *Madhubani*. They gave suggestions to some local artisans to paint on cloth and paper in their traditional way. They also encouraged the women of *Madhubani* for commercial sale (Thakur, 1981 and 1982).

*Madhubani* painting have great potential in the international market because of its authenticity and rich heritage. Women paint figures from nature and myth on household and village walls to mark the seasonal festivals of the religious year and special events of life cycle. The paintings usually depicted nature and Hindu religious motifs (Aquiue, 1974 and Archer, 1949). Main themes of this painting are *Krishnaleela*, *Ramayan*, marriage and other mythological stories. *Madhubani* paintings are adorned with colours utilized from indigenous sources along with plants extracts as fixatives. Black colour is obtained by mixing soot with cow dung, yellow from turmeric or pollen. Blue from Indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria*), red from Kusum flower (*Sunflower*) juice or red sandalwood, green from leaves of the apple tree, white from rice powder, orange from palasha flowers (*Butea Monosperma*), raw materials mixed with goat milk, gum arabic and juice from bean plants (Agarwal, 2015 and Dhir, 1997). The colours are applied flat with no shading. There is normally a double line drawn for the outlines with the gap between the lines filled by cross or straight tiny lines. No sophisticated tools are needed in *Madhubani* paintings. Traditional artists are still

unfamiliar with modern paint brushes. For painting, brushes are made by using bamboo twigs and a small piece of cloth or cotton is attached to twig to do filling in paintings. The fine lines are worked using thin brushes made from thin and small twings of bamboo (Das, 2013 and Jain, 1997).

## ■ RESEARCH METHODS

### Documentation of motifs and natural dyes sources from Madhubani painting :

The secondary sources such as internet, libraries, encyclopedia and books etc. were used to identify and document the motifs and study their significance. Natural dye sources used in *Madhubani* painting were also documented.

## ■ RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the present investigation as well as relevant discussion have been summarized under following heads :

### Characteristics of Madhubani paintings :

*Madhubani* painting are characterized by the use of bold natural and artificial pigments. A double line border, simple geometric designs elaborate the main theme with ornate floral patterns. Symbols, lines and patterns support the main theme. They use distinctive abstract like figures of deities or human and the gap between two lines are filled with straight, cross and diagonal lines. Originally these painting were done with fingers, twigs, matchsticks with natural dyes and pigments, but now nib pens, brushes and acrylic paints are mostly used. No part of the painting is left blank is an unusual feature about this art form, even the background is covered with animal motifs, plant motifs, geometrical shapes or tattoo designs (Kumar, 2003a and b).

### Documentation and categorization of motifs :

In literature various types of categories were available for motifs like, mythological themes, abstract motifs, village scenes and Hindu deities, natural objects, geometrical motifs, animal and bird motifs, human motifs etc. (Mishra, 1960 and Parkask, 1994). These motifs were traditionally used by the women on the wall and floor during marriage, child birth, sacred thread ceremony of Brahmins and other religious occasions, which have

been discussed under the following heads:

**Animal and bird motifs :**

In the *Madhubani* paintings, motifs of animals and birds were seen along with the human figures. These paintings were incomplete without the use of animals and birds motifs. The animals were seen in the procession scenes. Animals like fish, elephant, horse, turtle, bull, snake, lion etc. were mostly used. The birds included in *Madhubani* paintings were peacock, parrot, sparrows and owl. Over all these motifs are used as symbols of love, fertility and procreation on the wall of wedding chamber. Through literature it was observed that fish is very popular motif of *Madhubani* paintings, which symbolizes good luck and holiness. Fishes are drawn in decorative manner and there is extensive use of geometric linear designs in the entire body of fish. Fine, intricate and rhythmic lines applied in the paintings. To depicts ornaments fish motif is used as nose pin.

**Abstract motifs :**

Abstract like figures of deities and human are most widely used in *Madhubani* paintings. A theme in abstract usually defines a message, statement or an idea e.g. *Ardhanarishwara* (*Shiv* and his consort *Parvati* share

one body).

**Floral motifs :**

The use of floral motifs in *Madhubani* painting are very common. These floral motifs also support the main theme of tree of life. Louts, bamboo tree and *Tulsi* were most widely painted during religious ceremony. There is no empty space seen in *Madhubani* paintings. The gaps are filled with paintings of flowers and various types of foliage.

**Human motifs :**

Human motifs were shown in different styles and poses in *Madhubani* paintings. Female figures doing house hold work, dancing female figures and village scenes were most widely painted. These were endowed with lovely faces, bulging eyes, bold features broad forehead and jolting nose, each one characterized by excitement, vigour moods, sentiments and dramatic intensity.

**Religious motifs :**

*Krishnaleela*, *Ramayan* and other mythological stories are the main themes of religious paintings. The paintings on mythological themes depict the escapades



Fig. 1 Contd...



Contd... Fig. 1



Fig. 1 Contd...



Contd... Fig. 1



Fig. 1 Contd...

Contd... Fig. 1



of Gods and Goddesses, stories of mythological wars, folklore of kings and figures of various Hindu deities. Different Hindu deities, like- Goddess Kali, Saraswati, Ganpati etc. are extensively painted. Natural objects like the sun, moon, and religious plants like *Tulsi* (sacred basil) are also widely painted, along with scenes from the royal court and social events like weddings. Generally no space is left empty. The gaps are filled with flowers, animals, birds, and even geometric designs. The colours used are bright - blue, black, deep red, light yellow, pink,

lemon and green. The bright red and yellow depict energy, passion and the binding force.

**Symbolism of motifs :**

*Madhubani* paintings reflect aesthetic taste, love for natural phenomenon, affection for the feminine beauty, divinity, and also the panoramic view of the day to day life of the people. The themes and motifs of *Madhubani* are rooted in Hindu mythology and epics, religious rituals and local flora and fauna (Anonymous, 2016). Animal

Table 1 : Symbolism of motifs	
Motifs used in <i>Madhubani</i> paintings	Symbolism of motifs
Fish	Fertility and Procreation Holiness and Good Luck
Peacock	Romantic love
Lotus	Female sexuality
Bamboo	Male sexuality
Parrot	The love birds
Lion	Strength
Sun	Gives light, a marriage must bring light to the family
Elephant	Larger family with great prosperity
Turtle	A symbol of <i>Vishnu</i> in one of his avatars. Associated with water with all its beneficent power with marriage
Snake	Venerated as the guardian of the underworld
Cow	Bond of love

Table 2 : Plant and their parts yielding fixers for binding colours (Jha, 2001)		
Name of the plant	Local name	Part used
<i>Acacia nilotica</i>	<i>Babul</i>	Gum
<i>Aegle marmelos</i>	<i>Bel</i>	Kernel
<i>Brassica campestris</i>	<i>Sarson</i>	Seed extract
<i>Citrus aurantifolia</i>	<i>Kagji nibu</i>	Fruit juice
<i>Commiphora mukul</i>	<i>Guggul</i>	Gum
<i>Ficus bengalensis</i>	<i>Bargad</i>	Latex
<i>Linum usitatissimum</i>	<i>Fisi</i>	Seed extract
<i>Melia azadirachta</i>	<i>Neem</i>	Gum and juice from different parts
<i>Musa paradisiacal</i>	<i>Kera</i>	Leaf juice

**Table 3 : Plants utilized for extraction of colours used in Mithila painting (Jha, 2001)**

Plant	Family	Vernacular name	Colour obtained
<b>Bract</b>			
<i>Bougainvillea spectabilis</i>	Nyctaginaceae	<i>Baganvilas</i>	Purple red
<b>Fruit</b>			
<i>Anthocephalus cadamba</i>	Rubiaceae	<i>Kadamba</i>	Off pink
<i>Kirganellia reticulata</i>	Euphorbiaceae	<i>Sikkat</i>	Green
<i>Morus alba</i>	Moraceae	<i>Tuti</i>	Dark red
<i>Punicaa granatum</i>	Punicaceae	<i>Darim</i>	Golden
<i>Solanum nigrum</i>	Solanaceae	<i>Bhutka</i>	Sky blue
<b>Bark</b>			
<i>Bauhinia variegata</i>	Caesalpiniaceae	<i>Kancnar</i>	Blue
<i>Pasidium guajava</i>	Myrtaceae	<i>Latam</i>	Shades of red
<b>Flower</b>			
<i>Argemone Mexicana</i>	Papaveraceae	<i>Kataiya</i>	Yellow
<i>Butea Monosperma</i>	Fabaceae	<i>Palas</i>	Orange
<i>Carthamus tinctorius</i>	Asteraceae	<i>Kusum</i>	Scarlet
<i>Clitoria ternatea</i>	Fabaceae	<i>Aparajita</i>	Sky blue
<i>Crocus sativus</i>	Iridaceae	<i>Kesar</i>	Saffron
<i>Helianthus annuus</i>	Asteraceae	<i>Suryamukhi</i>	Yellow
<i>Hibiscus rosasinensis</i>	Malvaceae	<i>Arhul</i>	Lighter shades of black
<i>Impatiens balsamina</i>	Balsaminaceae	<i>Tyora</i>	Shades of red
<i>Mirabilis jalapa</i>	Nyctaginaceae	<i>Sanjha</i>	Crimson
<i>Nycatanthes arbortristis</i>	Oleaceae	<i>Harsingar</i>	Orange
<i>Tagetes erecta</i>	Asteraceae	<i>Genda</i>	Yellow
<b>Fruit</b>			
<i>Anthocephalus cadamba</i>	Rubiaceae	<i>Kadamba</i>	Off pink
<i>Kirganellia reticulata</i>	Euphorbiaceae	<i>Sikkat</i>	Green
<i>Morus alba</i>	Moraceae	<i>Tuti</i>	Dark red
<i>Punicaa granatum</i>	Punicaceae	<i>Darim</i>	Golden
<i>Solanum nigrum</i>	Solanaceae	<i>Bhutka</i>	Sky blue
<b>Leaves</b>			
<i>Aegle marmelos</i>	Rutaceae	<i>Bel</i>	Green
<i>Camellia sinensis</i>	Theaceae	<i>Cai</i>	Brown
<i>Cannabis sativa</i>	Cannabinaceae	<i>Bhang</i>	Green
<i>Euphorbia purpureus</i>	Euphorbiaceae	<i>Lalpatia</i>	Brown
<i>Indigofera tinctoria</i>	Fabaceae	<i>Nil</i>	Blue
<i>Lablab purpureus</i>	Fabaceae	<i>Sem</i>	Green
<i>Lawsonia inermis</i>	Lythraceae	<i>Mehandi</i>	Henna
<i>Spinacia oleracea</i>	Chenopodiaceae	<i>Palak</i>	Green
<b>Root</b>			
<i>Artocarpus heterophyllus</i>	Moraceae	<i>Katahar</i>	Ochre and shades of red
<i>Beta vulgaris</i>	Chenopodiaceae	<i>Cukandar</i>	Red
<i>Daucus carota</i>	Apiaceae	<i>Gajar</i>	Shades of red
<i>Ficus religiosa</i>	Moraceae	<i>Pipal</i>	Shades of red
<b>Seeds</b>			
<i>Basella rubra</i>	Basellaceae	<i>Poro</i>	Red
<i>Bixa orellana</i>	Bixaceae	<i>Sita sindur</i>	Annatto
<i>Brassica campestris</i>	Brassicaceae	<i>Sarson</i>	Yellow
<i>Eleusine coracana</i>	Poaceae	<i>Marua</i>	Black
<i>Hordeum vulgare</i>	Poaceae	<i>Jau</i>	Black
<i>Oryzan sativa</i>	Poaceae	<i>Caour</i>	White
<i>Seamum indicum</i>	Pedaliaceae	<i>Til</i>	Black
<b>Wood</b>			
<i>Acacia catechu</i>	Mimosaceae	<i>Khair</i>	Chocolate
<i>Plerocarpus santalinus</i>	Fabaceae	<i>Raktacandan</i>	Deep red



motifs like lotus, fish, turtles, snakes and other elements of aquatic life have symbolic meanings, the detail of which has been discussed in Table 1.

### Documentation of natural dye sources :

Colours has influenced human psyche since ancient time. Colours have been an effective tool in breaking the monotony of life. *Madhubani* paintings are adorned with colours utilized from indigenous sources along with plant extracts as fixatives. The detail list of plants yielding fixers for binding colours have been discussed in Table 2.

### Conclusion:

Thus, it can be concluded that *Madhubani* painting is a Hindu style of painting. In literature motifs have been categorized into various categories including mythological themes, abstract motifs, village scenes and Hindu deities, natural objects, geometrical motifs, animal and bird motifs, human motifs etc. Earlier paintings were done with fingers, twings, brushes, matchsticks using natural dyes and pigments and are characterized by eye catching geometrical patterns. These paintings have depicted an assembly of symbolic images, such as images of lotus plant, the bamboo grove, fishes, birds and snakes in union, represented fertility and proliferation of life. Traditionally *Mithila* paintings were done only by the women of the house and dalit women only in the occasions of marriages. The obscure *Mithila* art contrived of hundreds and thousands of fine details; depicting human figures with proportionately big eyes and noses, telling the story of rituals ceremonies, customs and everyday life in the ancient *Mithila* region of Bihar.

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