



Mithila art: An analysis of various styles and symbolic values of Mahhubani Painting

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ABSTRACT

Folk art is a form of art which represents the cultural identity of a society, and is made by individuals without any formal training in art. In the Mithila region of Bihar, Madhubani painting is a folk art depicting Hindu style of painting that has now attained worldwide recognition. In its original form, it was used by women to decorate the walls and floors of their houses during the time of festivals, and to this date, it is mainly women from the Brahmin, Kayastha, and Dalit communities who practice this type of painting. Thus, there is a distinct social as well as gender stratification involved in Madhubani painting, and the present study tries to explore these issues and their social, economic, and cultural impacts on the society in general, and women in particular. The study would use both primary as well as secondary sources. Data related to different forms of folk art and their micro regional variations, socio-economic attributes etc. has been collected through primary survey that will include face to face interviews, focus group discussions, and in-depth observation. Based on these data, the study will try to assess the symbolic values of Madhubani painting as well as the role of socio-cultural fabric of the geographic space within which it is located in the evolution and development of different styles of Madhubani painting in the region.

Keywords: Madhubani painting, Gender art, Folk art, Socio-cultural fabric, Mithila art, Madhubani.

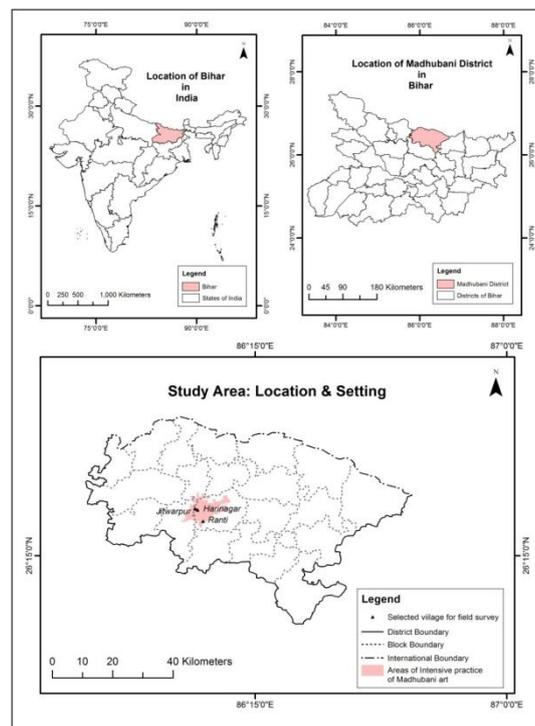
Citation: Suraj Prasad & Anjan Sen (2021). Mithila art: An analysis of various styles and symbolic values of Mahhubani Painting. *International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Studies*, 3(6), 43-53.

INTRODUCTION

In social sciences, there has been a tendency to treat folk and domestic ritual as an art, which expresses the soul of less technological cultures; an art which is not alienated from its cultural soul but is in amity with it. Such a construction of folk art, undoubtedly influenced by Indological studies, implicitly assumes a distinction between technological and primitive cultures, alienated works of 'high' art and non-alienated works of folk art. Folk art expresses socio-cultural attributes by transmitting shared community values and aesthetics. It involves a range of utilitarian and attractive media, including cloth, paper, wood, metal, clay, and more [1]. In case, traditional materials are not available, new substitute materials are often used, which results in contemporary expressions of traditional folk-art forms. It also replicates traditional art forms of various community groups – religious, ethnic, geographical, tribal, occupational, age or gender-based, who recognize with each other and society at large. Folk artists conventionally acquire skills and techniques through apprenticeships in customary community surroundings, though they may also be formally educated. The spiritual theme, geometrical symbols, linear pattern, daily used items and various motifs of flora and fauna are the subject-matter of gendered form of Madhubani paintings. But this work lacks comprehensive study on the elements of art like line, color, texture etc. depicted on the folk art [2]. Vishnudharmatara gives a classification of painting into *satya* natural, *vainika* lyrical, *nagara* sophisticated, and *misra* mixed. The origin of art is attributed to the sage Narayana who created Urvoshi the beautiful celestial nymph, by drawing a beautiful figure in thigh. This explains the origin of drawing. Narayana thought this to Bisvakarma, who successfully interpreted the entire theme of the universe by imitating it in art" Sivaramamurti [3]. There are two kinds of line used in Orissa painting tradition, engraved line, and painted line. While there is no gradation in the engraved line, painted line had a gradation [4]. Jamini Roy has given a contribution in modern art with the indigenous folk elements and colors in her paintings. It also shows the application of folk elements and motifs [5, 6]. Datta [7] discusses in detail about folk paintings of Bengal subcontinent. He made sincere efforts on elements on Bengal folk painting. The social-structural isolation of women folk in Hindu society, by the dint of castesystem, has been construed in the same fashion. *Purdah* otherwise, women have been controlled by the cultural codes of caste society, in favour of male interest in India, in general and rural India in particular. Mithila is not an exception to this masculine history [8, 9, 10, 11, 12]

However, the socio-economic trajectory of Mithila painting helps in the understanding of folk art as an unchanging art form and folk artists as conservatives in their works. Painting is generally done by folk artists or classical artists in three ways: wall-painting (*bhittichitra*), canvas-painting (*patachitra*) and floor-painting (*aripana*). Among all of these the wall-painting and the floor-paintings are traditional as well as so much popular in Mithila region. The Wall-paintings or

Mural paintings, popularly known as Mithila painting or Madhubani painting [13]. Chitra painting is usually made with rice paste and applied to an untreated freshly washed wall surface. It may be either daubed on directly with fingers, thrown in a spray, or painted with a verity of improvised tools, sticks, straw or cloth. This type of paintings is done by women on different ceremonial occasions [14,15]. Madhubani is a district in North Bihar, a place where art and crafts have reached its stage of excellence. This part of the country is renowned for various artistries such as wall paintings, canvas painting, floor paintings, and ornamental crafts like wooden toys, pottery toys and *papier-mache* products. Jitwarpur, Ranti and Harinagar villages are well known centers of Madhubani paintings in the region, i.e., they have been producing art within the domestic space on ritual occasions as well as for the market; and these villages are representative of the three dominant 'styles' in Madhubani paintings as well. Jitwarpur is known for Brahmana style, Ranti for Kayastha style, and Harinagar for Harijana style of Madhubani paintings.



Map-1: Location of the Study Area

The figures of paintings are executed primarily in profile with highly elongated eyes within a floral border. There are few landscapes and the scenes are depicted in a foreground closely juxtaposed together [16]. The linear treatments of drapery belonging to medieval period, for instance seated Buddha, standing Buddha, Bodhisattva Padmapani of Mathura, Gandhara, etc. The medieval folk art is characterized by the sharp acute line and its modeling capacity and also without the steady flowlines of the classical period. This line quickly and sharply drawn is the main exponent of the medieval tradition [17]. It is true that Kayastha paintings drift towards an arid deadness so far as color is concerned, but there is no doubt that they achieve a parallel and equal and equal intensity through their linear qualities [13]. The most important element is the precision and energy of their bounding and while, the *Brahmana* painting bear thin, wavering and nervous lines, the Kayastha painting have firm vigorous and precise lines. But there one thing is noticeable that Madhubani paintings either *Kayastha* or *Brahmana* are very colorful, and he has not mentioned here that basically colorful lines gives the textural effect on the painting. Mulkras Anand's book [18] explores the mythological Influences on the sources of the folk art of Madhubani, ignoring all the earlier writings on the subject. The most significant aspect of his contribution is the unique collection of very old paintings dating to the period when the paintings had just gained recognition. Thus, we have very good references of line and colour paintings as well as *Harijan* paintings, for tracing the elements of change and continuity in the painting style.



Fig1: Glimpses of Madhubani paintings
Source: Primary survey, 2019

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Since the beginning of the civilisation, Art and aesthetics has been an integral part of human society. From pre-history to modern times, line, color, form, etc. are the fundamental elements of Indian painting. The style, technique, theme and other characteristics of painting of every region are influenced by its culture and society such as Mughal miniature, Rajasthani painting and Pahari paintings. The modeling lines of Ajanta are replaced with sharp and thin lines. Rajasthani paintings are characterized by bolder use of color, conventionalized concept of human figure and ornamentation treatment of landscape. Palm leaf illustrations of Rajasthani painting are sophisticated in line and color [19,20]. Mahapurusha Srimanta Shankardeva (1449-1568), a personality who invented the Vaishnava cult, gave a new dimension to the culture of Assam. He initiated a new form of painting with his epoch-making drama festival chinajatra held in 1468 A.D, where he drew the imaginary pictures of heaven to use backdrops. The figure in the illustration of his manuscript he drawn in an angular pattern and lines are flowing type. The interest of architectural design of Shankardeva, which characterize by linear simplicity and extensive use of pillars that reflects on modern architectures [21]. Several contemporary artists such as K.C.S. Panikar, Jamini Roy, Binod Behari Mukharjee, Sanyal, Hebbar and many artists of 1950's are influenced and inspired by folk elements [22]. Folk art is such a form of art which is associated to common man without formal training. One such folk art, the Madhubani paintings, which is a Hindu style of painting, attained worldwide distinction adept mainly in Mithila and northern parts of Bihar and adjoining Nepal. Despite the fact that Mithila has a history of dominant Sanskritic traditions, it was a repository of almost every major religious idea in early India [23]. Folk art and folklores in Mithila are an essential part of women in the region. A major factor which supports in the evolution of mithila folk art (painting, Folklores etc) was the encouragement given to art and music by the Maithili rulers in past. The state has a rich history of patronage to these activities that created an environment for the rise of mithila painting and its unique elegance [24, 27]. The Artisan of this gendered form of folk art are simple housewives, most of them have never been to any art school for learning the skills. For every social and religious festival, the women folk of Mithila use to decorate the walls and floors of their houses (mostly the mud house). These paintings are accomplished in a very simple way to celebrate the festivities and auspicious occasions. Except India, there is barely any one country in the world, where folk paintings were introduced and dominated by females and were presented on the worldwide stage in a developed form. Madhubani paintings are not only visually appreciated but also won critical acclamation. The women painters of Madhubani lived in a closed community and society. It is believed that the tradition of Mithila painting flourished in the region after Raja Janak, an ancient Indian king of Videha, commissioned local traditional artists to paint murals in his fortress in preparations for the wedding of his daughter Sita (Mata Sita) to Lord Ram. At that time, the paintings were primarily done on the walls coated with mud and cow dung. The *kohbarghar* or the nuptial chamber was the space, where the wall paintings were customarily done. Originally, the paintings portrayed an assembly of symbolic images of the fishes, lotus plant, birds, the bamboo grove, and snakes in union. These motifs signify the fertility and proliferation of life. There used to be a custom that the newly married couple would devote three nights in the *kohbarghar* without co-habiting. On the fourth night the bride and groom would consummate the marriage enclosed with the colorful and aesthetic painting. The kohbar paintings were done only by women folk of the house, the village and the caste and only on the auspicious occasion of marriages. A kohbar painting comprises fish, paanpatta (betel leave), snake, union form of male-female, turtle, elephant, peafowl, sun, Tree etc. in general. Most of them symbolizes the auspiciousness, delicacy, beauty, fertility, growth, positivity, happiness etc.



Fig 2: Kohbar Painting portrayed on wall and canvas
Source: Primary survey, 2019 and 2021.

Humans have always portrayed their secular and religious feelings and emotions through their artwork. Folk art is that form of art which is linked to the common man. This art is related to a specific community, society, caste and religion. This form of painting is practice as a custom or ritual. Folk art is always adept by a group within the fringe of a community or society. But the geographical and cultural attributes of Mithila did not collaborate for artistic activities. Subsequently, the people of Mithila developed a completely different form of art, catering to their desires and perception, which presented the primitive impetuous and conventional existences in a distinctive manner. The study of Folk art establishes a deep association of art and culture other than the aesthetic deliberation. Due to their distinctive style and technique, they experienced enormous fame and recognition in the worldwide. Despite various economic constraints these artists made these wall paintings on every religious and social occasion. If we look at socio-economic and socio-cultural background, then it would be adequate to say that this art originated under the exclusive command and domination of the women artist of Mithila region. The variety and inventiveness make them perhaps most cultured and elegant of all popular paintings in India. The village painters of Jitwarpur express their skill through organic colours and free hand brush drawing [25]. The traditional folk paintings of Mithila popularly recognized as Madhubani paintings after the name of the sub-region of Bihar, have been well-preserved till today by the women folk of the region. These folk paintings, dating back to very ancient times are accomplished throughout the region of Mithila, constituting two very important traditions of *aripanas* or floor paintings and wall paintings, the most special of which are made on the occasion of nuptial ceremonies[26].

METHODOLOGY

The present study on enquiry into the **various styles and symbolic values of Mahubani Painting** is based on literature reviews, primary survey, telephonic interview, in-depth discussion, and Mithila painting's symbolic values. To know about the history and evolution of the Mithila art from wall and floor paintings to a commercialized present form of so called Madhubani Painting extensive and in-depth literature review needed. Literature review is the vital methodology used for the study. After doing the literature review, I have been to the study area (2019 and 2021) for primary survey as well as to verify the perception made from the literature review. Primary study helps in identifying the ground reality of the issue, which are significantly different from the previous study. Face to face interview, open discussion, questionnaire, etc., have been used as a tool for the study.

DISCUSSION

Caste element on the Madhubani paintings:

Madhubani painting of Mithilanchal is a gendered form of folk art, which is practiced by the married rural women folk of the Mithila region. The folk art is an expression of emotions, feelings and religious faiths, which also symbolizes the socio-cultural identity of the artisans which is subjected to the socio-economic fabric of the region. In Bihar, caste plays a vital role in every aspect of socio-economic and cultural lives in the rural societies, which is also subtly replicated on this art form. The villages of the different parts of the region are dominated by different communities or castes, and thus their cultural practices have been reflected on their artwork. Traditionally, the Madhubani paintings were done by the women from brahmin community. Sita Devi, a woman from Brahmin community was the forerunner of evolving the Bharni style of coloured painting on paper or canvas, which is done with rich variety of colours to portray or depict the stories from the traditional mythology such as Ramayana, Mahabharata and other mythological characters from ancient Hindu literature. In Hindu Varna system, Brahmin are specialized as priests, and thus, they had the exposure to the Hindu iconography and mythological texts to develop different themes for this traditional art work. The Bharni style of painting is bold and colourful in style, with rich line work around the coloured forms. The common subject of Bharni paintings are Hindu gods and goddesses like Vishnu, Krishna, Durga, Kali, Shiva, Ganesha, etc. The ardhha-narishwar form of Shiva-Shakti and Radha-Krishna are also used frequently in this style of painting. This symbolizes the equality of and

among male and female folk in the region. It also signifies that a male and a female make each other complete as the shiva and shakti completes each other's existence.



Fig.3 – Bharni Style of painting
Source – in.pinterest.com

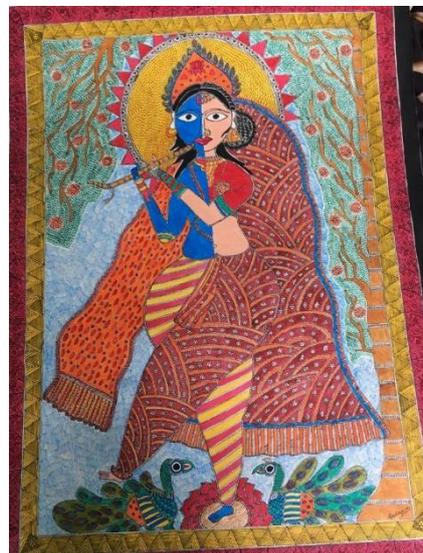


Fig. 4 - Radha-Krishna in Ardha-Narishwar form
Source: Primary survey, 2021

Later on, women from Kayastha community also engaged in this tradition. The unique feature of the Kayastha painting is the use of monochrome or just two colours. These paintings are also renowned as Katchni paintings since all the forms which were drawn were occupied by different types of rendering in place of filling colours. Ganga Devi, from Raseedput village of Madhubani district, was the pioneer of this style of painting. It evolved developed more in Ranti village of Madhubani district. In this style of painting, the themes were more or less same and difference was in the way the whole paper was covered by different types of line work (linearity). These paintings mostly depict flowers, animals, and other natural aspects with exaggerated expressions. The themes of the paintings were influenced by the artist's socio-economic status, lifestyles, creative levels and exposure to the outside world. The women from the upper hierarchy of society barely experimented with subject matters, themes, styles and motifs due to lack of revelation into the world beyond their restricted existence. So, their thought and imagination were limited to religious motifs and household rituals. Their Madhubani paintings became stylistic and intricate though variety was missing.



Fig. 5 – Kachni Style of painting

Source – <https://www.allkarts.com/madhubani-painting/>

In the mid-60s, women from Dalit communities (lowest in caste hierarchy) also involved in this art works that crumbled the domination of the upper-caste painters and established a new genre of painting (within madhubani painting), which is called as Harijana style of painting. The Harijan style of paintings largely come under two styles - Gobar, or cow dung painting, and Godhana, or tattoo painting. The gobar is attributed to Chamar artists (particular caste in dalit community), while, the Godhana to the artists of the Dusadh (particular caste in dalit community). These two sub-groups, unlike other Dalit communities of the region, took up professional painting and grown their own exclusive style of painting. The artists from these communities expressed their own mythologies into their art works. For example, Salhesh is a significant divinity in the Dusadh community. This God of strength and his legends featured prominently in the works of Dusadh artists.



Fig.6 - Godhana Style Madhubani Painting of OM

Source - <https://www.allkarts.com/madhubani-painting/>

The difference between the works of Brahmin and Kayastha women and the women from the lower caste communities are apparent from the themes and choice of colours. Dalit women chosen up the art from the upper-class families they served as domestic helpers and learned the skills by observation. Being new to this practice and due to lack of appropriate guidance, the style of paintings developed by the women of dalit communities like the Harijan displayed distinct and raw originality. Their paintings were less complicated and sophisticated than the paintings of the women from higher castes. They put importance on depth and beauty rather than decoration.



Fig. 7 – Raw Madhubani painting
Source – Primary Survey in Harinagar, 2019.

One major style of painting within the Mithila art, which has been evolved parallelly but usually done by male tantric artist in the region is Tantric painting. Krishnanandjha is the pioneer in the evolution of Tantric style of painting. Now-a-days his son Sanjib kumarjha is actively engaged in this particular form of art.



Fig. 8 – Portray of Nava Durga in tantric style of painting by Sanjib kumarjha
Source: primary survey, 2021.

Socio-cultural implication of the evolution of Madhubani Paintings:

Mithila is a patriarchal society, where significant number of the rural women are still illiterate. Therefore, it is no shock that in every rural household, men are the overriding decision makers from children’s choice of profession or work to selection of their life partners. Upper caste men have often been able to go for higher studies or have the choice to pursue their choice of profession. The upper caste women, in contrast, have been subjected to oppression from the male counterpart in every aspect of their life. They have been refrained to pursue their aspirations and very often, their voices have been ignored by the head of the families. The life cycle of these women is revolved around men from the control of their father, to the control of their husband, and then on their sons, and the lack of freedom of expression in a patriarchal society is often reflected on the art work of the oppressed women. which is depicted on the numerous paintings, and critically demonstrated in the figure below.



Fig9 - Woman as Beast of Burden by Sugata Kumari
Source: David L. Szanton

The domestic life of the lower caste women are marginally better than the upper caste women. Unlike the Upper caste women, they have more freedom to go out of their houses for work as domestic helper or agricultural labourer but after marriage, they remain under the control of male kinship. However, due to economic hurdles, the women from lower caste communities have some degree of freedom to go out of their houses for livelihood opportunities, which gives them the opportunity to observe the societal issues. Thus, the theme of the paintings of lower caste communities are more realistic, while the paintings made by the upper caste communities are spiritual.



Fig10 -Jeevikacentre at Ranti
Source: Primary survey, 2019

The implication of Mithila art or madhubani painting on the life of women of Mithila is vital one. Earlier, the socio-cultural practices of the society of the region were not different from typical north Indian rural society. It means, like in most rural society of northern India, the women of Mithila region were also not allowed to go outside, or to talk to other person (especially with male), they don't have any role in decision making or they can't even raise or express their voice. But, after commercialization of Mithila art, the women of the region not only become economically sound, but they started to move out of the village, district, state or even to other countries. They are experiencing more freedom and liberty compared to the past.

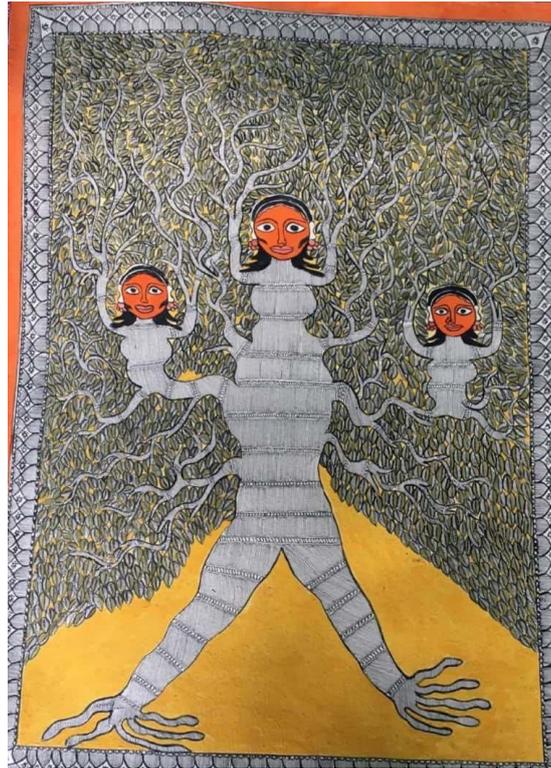


Fig. 11 -Mithila painting by Sanjib kumarjha
Source: Primary survey, 2021

The above painting of Mithila art is showing that women of the region has been transformed from the stable root to the walking root now, which symbolizes the freedom of the women in the region. They are no more like root of the tree, which is always there at one place for whole life. They can walk to anywhere now.

Breaking the Borders:

The traditional painters lived in a closed society, where caste and gender divide played a significant role in the development of different forms of the Madhubani art. However, in recent years, with the exposure of this art form to the global scale has transcended the artists from ritual setting to commercial sphere. The popularity of the paintings in both India and abroad has encouraged many poor rural women from the region to consider it as a source of income to improve family living conditions and send their daughters to school. Many of these painters have participated in numerous international art exhibitions all across the world, which gave them the exposure to expand their knowledge. With the increase in popularity of the Mithila paintings, various media houses have covered the untold stories of these rural women, which also helped to promote rural-tourism in the region.



Fig.12 - Breaking the Gender Border of Madhubani Art
Source: Times of India



Fig 13 -Commercialization of Madhubani Art
Source: fineartamerica.com

The commercialisation of the Madhubani painting has crumbled the core elements of this folk art, which was gender and caste. Today, there is no regional, religious, gender or caste barriers of the painters, which is distinctively reflected on their art works. Although, the modern painters have persistently tried to maintain the traditional Mithila themes, but they also experiment with the contemporary themes such as pandemic,terrorism, global warming, natural disasters, environmental conservation etc. Even, the paintings are not confined to the painters from Madhubani region. Now a days, various male painters from cities like New Delhi, Kolkata,Bengaluru etc. are also practicing Madhubani style of painting due to the growing demand. Apart from that, there is no caste monopoly on any form of the Madhubani paintings. With time, the Mithila art also evolved a new style of contemporary art within the art form, which usually portrays the contemporary issues in society or world.



Fig 14 -Madhubani Painting Showing Social distancing and wearing masks during Covid19
Source: Ambika devi

Thus, it is evident that the commercialization of the paintings has not only altered the basic structure of the paintings but also breached various socio-cultural borders, which was unchanged in the country for thousands of years.

CONCLUSION

The present study tries to examine the historical evolution of Mithila Art from traditional art to modern contemporary art as well a cultural heritage of Mithilanchal. This Art has a stimulating line in the progression of its commencement as a traditional folk art to its modern commercialized and contemporary form of Art. This paper also evaluates Mithila Art in terms of its geometric pattern, symbolic values, exaggerated forms, and other emotional and artistic expressions. The paper enquires thoroughly into the cooperation between the community and the art form of the region giving references to history, culture and social hierarchical set up. Madhubani art has been associated with the expression of religious faiths of the rural women of Mithilanchal, which also symbolizes the socio-cultural identity of the artisans. Historically, caste

plays a pivotal role in the rural societies of Bihar, which is also reflected on this art form. However, with the advent of globalisation, the sense of place has become passive. It has not only affected the economic sphere of the society but also has affected the social values. The commercialisation of the Madhubani painting has crumbled the core elements of this folk art, which was gender and caste. Today, there is no regional, religious, gender or caste barriers of the painters, which is distinctively reflected on their art works. Thus, it is evident that the commercialisation of the paintings has not only altered the basic structure of the paintings but also breached various socio-cultural borders from caste to gender, which was unchanged in the country for thousands of years.

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