
Complementing Art Tourism through Folk Art: Analysing the potential of Art Tourism through Mithila painting in Mithilanchal (Bihar, India).

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Abstract

Mithilanchal (in Bihar) is an essential place in India's cultural landscape due to the centuries-old practice of Mithila painting in the area, which has attracted several researchers, scholars, and writers from different parts of the world over the years. Various NGOs have also played an important role in the popularisation and evolution of this art in the global market. The Government of India has launched multiple initiatives to promote this area as a destination for international tourism, including regional tourism development plans such as the Ramayana Circuit and the Ayodhya Circuit, which connects Janakpur (Nepal) in the Mithila region. The study suggests that various non-governmental organizations and government agencies have been advocating for Madhubani art, aiding its broader visibility. Artists have consistently innovated this art form across fashion, handicrafts, and other creative avenues to gain international acknowledgement in the digital age. Tourism has been shown to aid in restoring the local community's pride and engagement with their cultural heritage, traditions, and values. Additionally, tourism can assist in revitalizing traditional skills and fostering a connection to the cultural environment.

Keywords: *Mithila Art, Art Tourism, Mithilanchal, Cultural Tourism, NGOs.*

Introduction

Mithilanchal is a significant region on the cultural map of India due to the centuries-old practice of Mithila painting in the area, which has attracted several researchers, scholars, and writers from different parts of the world over the years (Szanton 2004; Heinz 2003; Thakur 1982; Vequaud 1977). In 1973, German filmmaker and folklorist "Erika Moser" has been there for months in villages of Madhubani vis-à-vis Jitwarpur, Ranti, Harinagar, etc. He closely observed the local rituals of Mithilanchal and the wall art of Mithila (Mithila Paintings), which was also portrayed on paper. He has planned several exhibitions in Germany (Europe) and established an Art centre in the Jitwarpur village in Madhubani. Ray Owens (1976) and Moser played a significant role in developing a creative framework and international marketing strategy for Mithila art (Heinz: 2007). Yves Vequaud's work (in English, French and German), *The Art of Mithila* (1977), *L'Art du Mithila* (1976) and *Die Kunst Von Mithila* (1977) with pictures of Eduard Boubat facilitated to accomplish global appreciation that shaped a new line of art enthusiasts and consumers far in the western world (Singh & Shyju., 2020). Drawing from the influences of Archer and Vequaud, Hasegawa and David Szanton helped to popularize the style through their ongoing efforts and scholarly contributions. Their contributions not only popularised the art forms, but he also provided a platform to several artists, such as Sita Devi, Yamuna Devi, Jagdamba Devi, Maha Sundari Devi, Ganga Devi, Godavari Dutta and Ookha Devi etc., globally. They were also given chances to showcase their works in national as well as international exhibitions worldwide (Magiciens de la Terre., 1989; Musée De Varine-Bohan., 1973;). These artworks have been showcased in galleries and exhibitions across multiple countries, such as Japan, the U.S.A., Germany, Canada, France etc. The Mithila Museum, located in Tokamachi, Japan, was established by the prominent admirer of Madhubani art, Hashegawa Bahadur Singh, and it showcases approximately 1000 Mithila paintings that encompass diverse themes, motifs and styles. (Singh 2020).

1. Background of the study

Since the 1960s, various scholars, filmmakers, independent researchers and art lovers from different parts of the world have contributed immensely to the evolution of Mithila art. Nonetheless, in addition to the efforts of these academics, numerous NGOs have also made a considerable impact on the advancement and growth of this folk art within the international market of art-lover. In 1977, American anthropologist Raymond Owens was fascinated by the striking beauty of specific artworks on paper that he came across during his study visit to Mithilanchal. Owens noticed that the intermediary was sternly undervaluing the artisans' work and forcing them to produce paintings on a given design and format to earn a decent living from their artwork. He then motivated the artists to concentrate on the originality of artwork by focusing on their genuine interests, creating paintings they were passionate about, and proposed to purchase them for 10 to 20 times the rates offered by the dealers (intermediary). Upon returning to the US, Owens shared the paintings he bought with his colleague, anthropologist David Szanton, who was just as captivated by them. They started organizing exhibitions and collecting donations to uplift the age-old art practices in Mithilanchal, particularly the livelihood of the artisans in the region in general.



Fig. 1. Mithila Artisans Practicing Mithila Art, Jitwarpur (a) & Young Mithila Artists with their Artwork, Satghara (b).

Source: *Primary Survey, 2022.*

In 1980, together with some other colleagues, they founded the Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF), a non-profit organization classified as 501(c)3, aimed at preserving the Mithila art tradition (Folk painting of Mithila)—an ancient art form created by women in the Mithila region of Bihar, which borders Nepal. Currently, the EAF is dedicated to its goal of promoting Mithila art and its artists via exhibitions, publications, lectures, and notably through the Mithila Art Institute, a free art school founded by the EAF in 2003 to inspire and educate future Mithila painters.

2. Study Area:

The Mithila Region, also known as Mithilanchal, is a cultural and geographical area located in India and Nepal. It is bordered to the west by the River Gandaki, to the north by the Himalayan foothills, to the east by the Mahananda River, and to the south by the River Ganges (Mishra 1979; Jha 1997). Maithili is the native language of this region. The region was first inscribed in ancient texts as the Videha kingdom during the Vedic period, which was one of the major political and cultural centres of ancient India (Witzel 1989). The present study is confined to the Mithila Region of Bihar, which comprises 20 districts of North Bihar, viz. Begusarai, Bhagalpur, Darbhanga, East Champaran, Khagaria, Madhepura, Madhubani, Munger, Muzaffarpur, Saharsa, Samastipur, Sheohar, Sitamarhi, Supaul, Vaishali, Purnia, Araria, Katihar, Kishanganj and West Champaran.

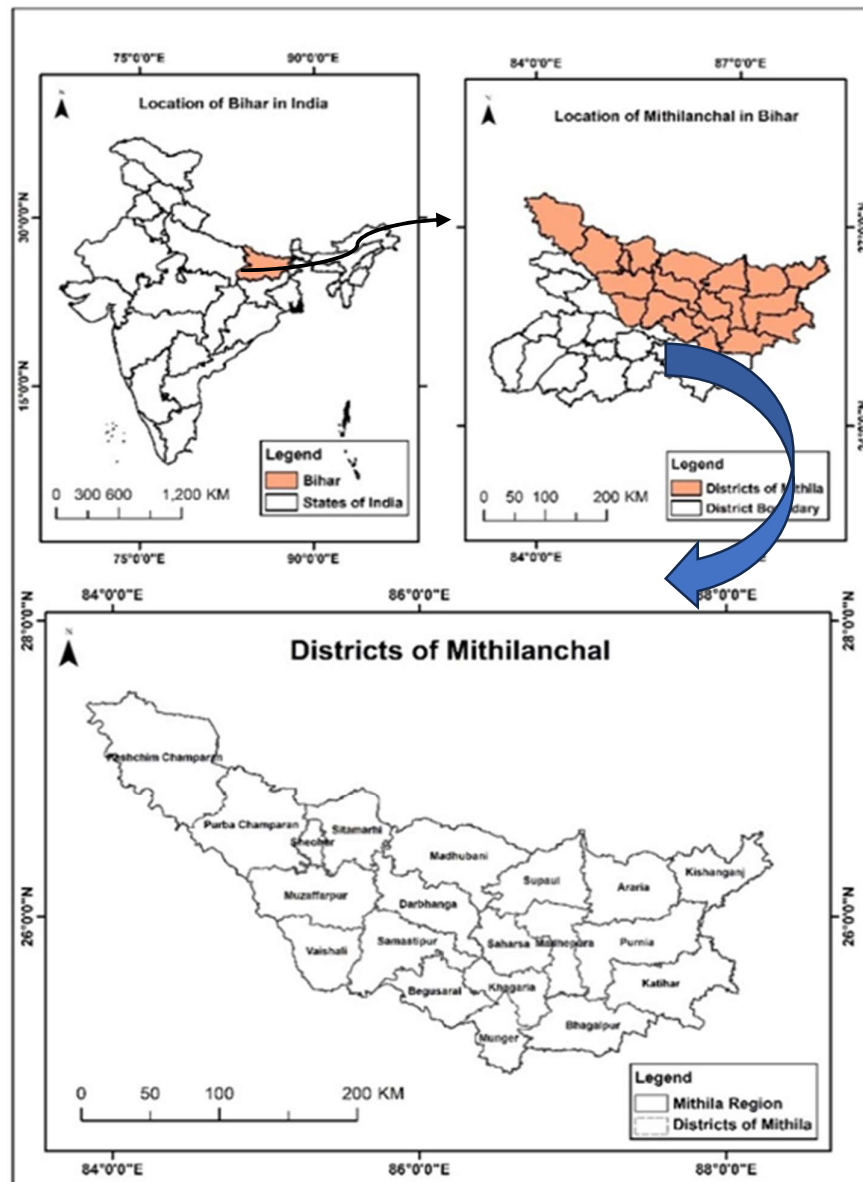


Fig 2. Location of the Study Area after (Prasad and Sen., 2021).

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on the Census Map of 2011

3. Methodology of the Study

The data sources encompass both primary and secondary sources. Information about various types of folk art, along with their micro-regional differences and socio-economic characteristics, has been gathered through a primary survey. The main data was collected via in-person interviews, focus group discussions, and detailed observations carried out during field visits to chosen villages such as Satghara, Jitwarpur, Ranti, Rajnagar, and Harinagar. The secondary data was collected from the Office of Development Commissioner (Handicrafts), the Ministry of Culture, and the Governments of Bihar and India.

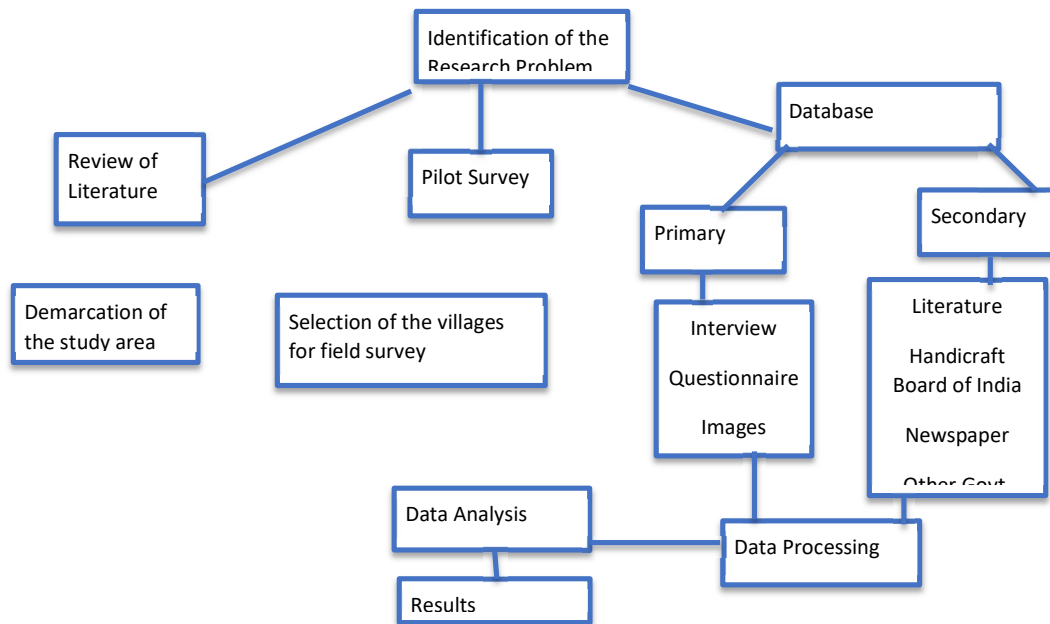


Fig. 3. Flow chart of the Methodology of the study.

4. Results and Discussion:

4.1. Role of NGOs in promoting Mithila Art:

4.1.1. Ethnic Arts Foundation

Co-founder and President of the Ethnic Arts Foundation since 2002, David Szanton has contributed to the academia widely in India on Mithila art and helped in the institutionalization of the Mithila Art Institute. He envisages to gain appreciation and gratitude for the folk tradition of Mithila art. Also focused on income opportunities to sustain life for the artisans of Mithila, Bihar. Joe Elder is a co-founder of both the EAF and the Mithila Art Institute and a professor specializing in the sociology, languages, and cultures of Asia. He is recognized as one of the foremost South Asian scholars in the United States. He has created 25 documentary films about the area, focusing on the Mithila painters. Parmeshwar Jha, along with Joseph Elder and David Szanton, is one of the co-founders of the Mithila Art Institute. Growing up in Madhubani, he developed a sense of belonging to the folk traditions. In countless ways, he has supported both the artists and the Institute and assisted the EAF in organizing exhibitions to showcase the art in the US, India, Europe, etc.

4.1.2. Mithila Art Institute's (MAI)

To enhance the cultural preservation of Madhubani for future generations, the Mithila Art Institute has been founded by the Ethnic Art Foundation. In addition to creating the market potential of Mithila Arts,

the institute's role has also been to foster creativity within the traditional themes of these artworks. Students in the region are now blending different styles of Madhubani paintings, incorporating elements of line, colour, and tattoo art. Significantly, as noted by the MAI secretary, the restrictions on caste have diminished, with students from various villages and different castes now enthusiastically engaging in Madhubani painting as a profession. Additionally, a noteworthy transformation is the involvement of men in this field. Although Madhubani painting is mainly associated with women, it has become socially acceptable for men to seek a career in this art form. It is also crucial to understand that the significant commercialization and appealing financial benefits associated with the paintings have motivated both men and individuals from various castes to engage in this traditional art form. As a result, the EAF plays a crucial role in transferring assets and meaning within the cultural exchange of Madhubani and its commercial networks (Zelizer, 2004), where the economic activities arising from the sale and display of Madhubani not only contribute to financial gain but also include social dimensions and cultural importance.



Fig. 4: women practising Mithila art in Madhubani (a) & (b).

Source: *Primary Survey, 2022.*

Since Szanton left India, the functioning of these organizations has deviated from their aim and objectives. The middlemen also control these institutes and organizations. Nowadays, it is becoming a more or less profit-making institution, which presents huge constraints on the growth and development of Indigenous art of Mithila painting and its artisans.

4.1.3. Mithil Asmita

Mithil Asmita is a well-regarded social enterprise dedicated to preserving and promoting traditional Indian art forms, particularly emphasizing Madhubani painting. It is an organization led by women dedicated to creating sustainable employment opportunities and ensuring a dignified life for rural women artisans. Each product or service provided by Mithil Asmita contributes to the livelihood of at least one traditional artist. The NGO aims to preserve the authentic Mithila Paintings (Madhubani Paintings) in their centuries-old free-hand style by offering genuine artists from Mithilanchal a platform to display their work and a marketplace to sell their products.

4.1.4. Mithila Kala Vikas Samiti

Mithila Kala Vikas Samiti, a Non-Governmental Organization founded in December 1983 under the Societies Registration Act of 1860, seeks to enhance Art, Culture, and Skill development to create employment opportunities for both rural and urban impoverished individuals and to provide primary education for underprivileged children, as well as to alleviate poverty and promote sustainable development through income-generating initiatives. Since its establishment, the organization has focused on designing and executing programs for marginalized communities, including SC, ST, OBC, and other disadvantaged groups. It has been actively engaged in community development, particularly in the cultural sector, with support from both national and state-level funding sources.

5. Mithila Art and Cultural Tourism

With the advent of globalization, Indian culture has left a significant mark on global visitors, even with the intense rivalry among international travel destinations. The increasing appreciation and rising interest in Indian art, history, and culture continue to be a priority for prospective global tourists (Ministry of Tourism, GoI, 2016). Tourism, culture, and community are deeply intertwined, as culture offers the necessary framework to sustain communities, while communities, in turn, nurture and perpetuate culture. Additionally, tourism contributes financially to culture, while culture supplies essential material for tourism activities. Local communities are essential in promoting sustainable tourism by engaging in activities that are grounded in local culture, and tourism provides economic advantages to these communities (United Nation World Tourism Organization, 2016). During the field survey, most of the artisans opined that cultural tourism in the region should be promoted to boost art tourism in Mithila so that the Mithila artists can have some stability and encouragement to do the artwork in the region.

The Mithila region, located in the northernmost part of Bihar, holds significant promise for development as a cultural tourism hub. The tradition of Madhubani art has persisted in the form of Mithila Art within Mithilanchal. The women in the area have engaged in these artistic practices for hundreds of years (Singh, 2020). Throughout the centuries, Mithila art has persisted within the daily traditions of households and continues to reveal itself in vibrant, captivating forms characterized by their innocent charm and straightforwardness (Chattopadhyay, 1995).



Fig. 5. Rajnagar Palace (b) & Durga Temple inside the Palace(a).

Source: Primary Survey, 2022

Madhubani painting is considered to have developed in Mithila in present-day Nepal, the birthplace of Sita, daughter of Raja Janak. According to the local folklore, Lord Rama, the king of Ayodhya, travelled to the region of Mithilanchal and met Sita for the first time in the forest of Madhubani (forest of honey)-from where the word Madhubani is believed to have been derived. As per the narration in Ramayana, Lord Rama broke the mighty bow of lord Shiva, which was a precondition for the wedding of Goddess Sita by her father Janaka, the king of Mithila. When Rama met the requisite condition to marry his daughter, Raja Janaka commissioned a group of artists to decorate the wedding venue with bright and colourful paintings to showcase an incredible impression of the region's rich culture for the guests. Afterwards, the tradition continued for centuries, and village women painted their homes with bright colours during the marriage ceremonies, which became an integral part of Mithila culture. Madhubani and the adjoining areas serve as a significant hub for Mithila Art, with convenient access through roadways, railways, and air travel from all major urban centres in India. The area boasts a variety of tourist attractions, including natural wonders, cultural highlights, and numerous human-made landmarks. Various local fairs and festivals enhance the charm of Mithila, positioning it as a promising site for cultural heritage tourism. Recent advancements and recognitions have elevated the status of Madhubani paintings, leading to increased global popularity and appreciation.



Fig. 6. Shyama Kali Temple (a) & Idol of Maa Durga (b) in Rajnagar Madhubani.
Source: Primary survey, 2022.

Potential Tourism sites aligned with the Cultural Heritage of Mithila

The advantages of more robust connections between tourism and culture encompass beyond the monetary profits: visiting to immerse oneself in different cultures fosters a deeper understanding of cultural diversity, which further creates new cultural connections and contributes to the preservation of our cultural heritage (UNWTO, *Tourism and Culture Synergies*, 2018). The long-established cultural practices in this area could serve as a significant draw for tourists (Lal, 2008). The Mithila folk art and crafts have gained significant recognition globally, with various Southeast Asian countries, including China, Japan, Sri Lanka and Nepal, placing particular emphasis on these artistic expressions. The Mithila region has the potential to leverage its cultural heritage as a tourist destination, particularly given the rising admiration for Mithila art (Singh et al., 2020).

The art is considered one of the most recognized types of Indian folk painting and a prominent example of handicrafts, and it enjoys high demand in both domestic and international markets (Sharma, 2016). However, it is important to conduct strategic marketing and promote these distinctive and culturally valuable art forms (handicrafts) as assets for tourism (Sibi & Swamy., 2016; Weaver., 2010; Hall., 2007;). Researchers have recognized "Indigenous resources" and "Indigenous tourism" as viable options to foster positive development for communities and help maintain a particular region's distinct cultural identities. This study focuses on the art of Mithila, specifically "Mithila Painting," for further analysis. As a traditional cultural expression, Mithila originates from one of India's ancient civilizations and is referred to as the Mithila Region in historical documentation (Sinha, 2007). The region is renowned for numerous reasons, including its ancient cultural heritage, its status as the birthplace of the first democratic system—Vaishali, early religious traditions, historic centres of learning like Vikramshila, vibrant living culture, and the unique and rich artistic legacy of crafts, such as "Mithila Painting," which showcases profound cultural practices, artistic heritage, and creativity. Despite facing various problems and obstacles in promoting tourism based on untapped resources (Sibi & Swamy., 2015; Sinclair., 2003; Getz & Jamieson., 1997), it is essential to enhance the marketing potential of Mithila art through cultural or art tourism.

Table 1: Potential Tourist spots in Madhubani and Darbhanga Districts.

Sl.No.	District	Potential tourism spots	Significance
1.	Madhubani	Ugana Mahadev Temple, Pandaul	Lord Shiva's Bond with Vidyapati
		Somnath Mahadev Temple, Saurath	Known for the annual Sabha held by Maithili Brahmins for negotiating marriages.
		Kapileswarsthan, Madhubani	Known for Lord Shiva Temple
		Shyama Kali Temple, Rajnagar	dedicated to Devi Shakti within the premises of Rajnagar Mahal
		Rajnagar Mahal, Rajnagar	A royal Brahmin palace constructed by Maharaja Rameshwar Singh of Darbhanga (1884-1929) to function as the administrative capital of the Darbhanga Raj.
2.	Darbhanga	Ahilya Asthan, Ahilya gram	Located on the way to Janakpur, Lord Ram stepped on a stone that transformed into a woman named Ahilya.
		Chhaprar, Bahadurpur	The temple of Lord Shiva is located at the river bank of the Kamla, where a fair is held during Kartik and Maghi Purnima.
		Kusheshwar-asthan	This sacred site dedicated to Lord Shiva holds significant ecological, faunal, floral, geomorphological, and natural value. It has been designated as the Kuseshwarasthan Bird Sanctuary in accordance with the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972.
		Chandradhari Museum, Darbhanga	Historical and Cultural Significance

6. Conclusion

At present, numerous non-governmental organizations and government agencies have worked to promote Madhubani art and facilitate its broader recognition. Whether handicrafts, fashion or various creative concepts, artists have consistently adapted this art form to achieve international recognition in the digital age. Numerous designers have

incorporated various Madhubani art patterns and motifs into their ethnic wear collections, including stoles, sarees, salwar kameez, long skirts, and more. Many common items, such as pencil cases, bags, and diaries, are crafted using Mithila art and have gained significant popularity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, masks featuring Madhubani art became quite trendy and received considerable recognition across different areas.

The Indian government has launched various initiatives to promote this area in the global tourism sector, including regional tourism development programs such as the Ramayana Circuit and the Ayodhya Circuit that connect Janakpur (Nepal) within the Mithila region. Key attractions of both circuits are located in the Mithila area. With cultural tourism expected to continue being a significant segment of the tourism industry, there is an increased opportunity to rejuvenate Madhubani art via cultural tourism (Singh et al., 2020). The wider variety of cultural experiences enjoyed by tourists will lead to a more significant number of stakeholders participating in this market. Local people play a significant role in the sustainable development of cultural experiences (UNWTO, *Tourism and Culture Synergies*, 2018). The Mithila region benefits from being near Bodhgaya, a highly frequented Buddhist pilgrimage location that is also recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site, located approximately 200 kilometres away. Additionally, Janakpur in Nepal, a significant site for Hindu worship, falls within its borders.

Tourism has been shown to aid in rekindling the local community's pride and enthusiasm for their culture, traditions, and values. It can contribute to reviving traditional skills and foster a sense of connection to their cultural heritage. These cultural elements have consistently intrigued modern travellers as they explore and visit various locations (Singh & Shyju., 2020). More in-depth exploration of these elements, along with the development of a strategy to present the cultural attributes of this region to tourists, will undoubtedly enhance the conservation of the region's cultural heritage.

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