

### MITHILA ARTS

Mithila art is a traditional form of artwork practiced by women of the Mithila-speaking community in the Madhesh Province of Nepal. It holds significant cultural heritage value for the entire Mithila-speaking community. While the exact origins of this art form are difficult to trace, it is believed that King Janak ordered his citizens to decorate the walls of homes and streets with Mithila paintings to welcome Lord Ram when he came to Janakpur to seek his daughter, Sita's, hand to marry. This art form is now celebrated as one of Nepal's folk arts. Similar art form is also practiced in the Indian state of Bihar. It is often known as Madhubani Art.

Mithila art had been an integral part of the everyday life of Mithila-speaking people, depicting their culture (e.g., weddings), traditions (e.g., festivals), nature (birds, peacocks), and emotions (e.g., celebrations). These arts were traditionally made using natural materials, such as flour, clay, and cow dung. It used to be seen on most house walls of the Mithila community. However, this practice is slowly declining. Hence, this study was intended to gather reasons behind the disappearance of Mithila art from the everyday life of the Mithila community. This was the first study that was carried out to understand people's perception about Mithila Art and its status in the Madhesh province of Nepal.

This study also aimed to understand the impacts of NGOization, urbanization, and internationalization of Mithila arts on the everyday lives of Mithila women. It examined the evolution and factors contributing to the disappearance of Mithila arts, including the impact of climate change and mass migration of men and boys.

Additionally, this study aimed to assess how Mithila women engage with the changing practice of Mithila arts. Furthermore, the study assessed the type of interventions required to reviving and sustaining Mithila arts.

### FINDINGS

#### High level of awareness with declining practice of Mithila Arts

The study found that women's awareness about Mithila arts (in any form) is nearly universal (97%). More than half (57%) of the women had ever practiced Mithila arts. In terms of traditional wall painting, this proportion is lower with only about a third of them (36%) mentioning that their house walls were ever painted with Mithila arts in the past.

Majority of the women who were aware of Mithila arts had either painted the arts on their house walls (63%); or had prepared mud/clay statues and also painted on mud/ceramic utensils/substances (60%). Paintings on paper or canvas, clothes and on carry bags were less common among the Mithila women irrespective of urban-rural residence. For the majority of women who practiced Mithila art, it was self learnt (62%), followed by learning from mothers/grandmothers (41%).

#### Religious and aesthetic significance of Mithila Arts

A large proportion of women cited hobby (82%) and religious rituals (74%) as the major reasons for practicing different forms of Mithila arts. More than three-fourth of the women said that Mithila arts depict their

Mithila culture and the Hindu religion (78%), and about a sixth (16%) of the women felt that Mithila arts is the pride of Mithila community and hence highly valuable to them and their family. A smaller proportion (9%) also valued this art for its attractive colors and used it for house decoration.

Women made Mithila paintings during special occasions, festivals and celebrations like weddings, Bratabandha (sacred thread ceremony), mundan (head shaving ceremony), Deepawali, and Chhath Puja. The themes of the paintings varied widely, ranging from depictions of deities, birds and animals (such as peacocks, parrots, horses and elephants), and nature elements like flowers and trees. These paintings hold significant religious value within the Mithila culture. The depiction of Gods and Goddesses is believed to bring protection and blessings to the household. They are believed to safeguard the home from negative energies and evil eyes. As a result, Mithila paintings are often made on the outer walls of houses and in the Puja (prayer) rooms. Beyond their religious significance, Mithila paintings also served an aesthetic purpose, with women making these paintings to enhance the beauty of their homes.

### **Declining practices of Mithila Arts with improvement in socioeconomic Status**

Over three-fourth (78%) of women acknowledged the declining practice of Mithila painting over the years. Nearly a similar proportion (70%) of the women cited the shift in housing structure from traditional mud walls to concrete (brick or stone) walls as a noticeable change in the practice of Mithila arts. Similarly, one in four (25%) women pointed out the rapid disappearance of Mithila paintings on walls during cultural festivals or religious rituals.

The FGD participants were asked about the reasons for the declining practice, where they mentioned several factors. Firstly, the arts did not generate any income for community women, leading many to perceive it as a "waste" of time. Instead, women chose to prioritise activities that could contribute to earnings for themselves and their families. Secondly, the high cost of market-based colors and equipment served as another limitation for continuing Mithila arts. Additionally, the priority given to girls' education often limited the time available for practicing the art. Interestingly, despite some female participants actively engaging in income generation, they also emphasized the declining interest towards Mithila arts. Young women in the community expressed a preference for using mobile phones and engaging on social media platforms rather than practicing Mithila arts during their leisure time. They further commented that the complaint of 'lack of time for Mithila arts' was merely an excuse used by those who lacked interest in painting.

*“Whether I want to paint or not depends on my interest. If I am interested, I can manage the time for paintings. So, it depends on an individual, whether they can manage their time for the paintings or not. Education and job have nothing to do with it because we are not painting them out of compulsion but for our culture.”*

*- Female Participant, FGD*

### **Shift from natural materials to modern colors and equipment in Mithila Painting**

Traditionally Mithila arts were made using the locally available natural products. Women participants recalled using cow

dung, natural dyes from plants and vegetables, vermilion, turmeric, charcoal, rice flour, and different types of muds/clay- red mud/clay ‘Geru’, white mud/clay ‘Chuna’ for coloring the art. Wooden broom sticks were beaten to form bristles and were used as a painting brush. However, in recent years modern colors and equipment are used for painting. Furthermore, with the availability of modern colors and apparatus in the market, the younger generation is reluctant to touch/prepare traditional colors derived from mud, cow dung and plants.

*“Traditionally Mithila arts was made using fingers and the art did not have perfect shape and the crooked design is the identity of Mithila arts. Now there is availability of painting brush which gives fine art and people prefer decorating the walls using painting brush for better design.”*

*- Teacher, Siraha*

### **Infusion of Mithila Arts with modern Arts gives a breakthrough for fusion Arts**

Professional Mithila artists mentioned about the growing interests on Mithila arts among the development partners they worked with. They also believed that development partners adopting the thematic art to depict their areas of work has given a breakthrough for fusion art. One of the examples cited by these artists was redesigning the logos of Sustainable Development Goals on the walls of UN house using Mithila arts. Feminist artists are also engaged in designing Mithila arts beyond the traditional religious rituals, culture and festivals and fusing these with the community awareness messages against the harms of child marriage, which is illegal yet commonly practiced in the country, particularly in Madhesh Province.

### **Decline in agricultural production forcing men to migrate and thus impacting the practice of Mithila Arts**

The study found that nearly three in four women believed that there is a connection between climate change and the labor migration of men and boys (72%). When asked to explain this link, dwindling income sources of the family was the general response given by nearly all women respondents (99%). In addition, a quarter of the women (25%) linked climate change with drying up of the sources of water for irrigation which affected agricultural productivity that forces men to migrate to substitute farm incomes.

Participants in the FGD noted a decline in the production of specific plants traditionally used as painting brushes and for extracting natural colors, primarily due to climate change. Furthermore, the study found that the decrease in agricultural productivity has compelled men to migrate in search of alternative sources of income. As a result of male migration, women are left with increased household responsibilities and have limited leisure time for engaging in Mithila painting, despite their interest in it. Additionally, the absence of male members during auspicious occasions such as Sama Chakhewa—a festival celebrated by sisters wishing longevity, health, and prosperity for their brothers—has also contributed to the declining practice of Mithila arts.

On the other hand, key stakeholders perceived that male migration is one of the reasons for fusion art. With migration, people get exposed to western culture and try to fuse it with Mithila arts. They further cited, emergence of Mithila arts in flex, canvas and paper as the results of male migration because Mithila arts are mandatory during

weddings and the only option for those living abroad or outside the Mithila community is using Mithila arts made on flex, canvas and paper.

## CONCLUSION

A large majority of Mithila women have been practicing this form of art for more than 10 years and intend to continue in the future, primarily due to its relevance and necessity during socio-religious festivals and marriage rituals. Many learned the art through self-practice, while some were taught by their mothers or mothers-in-law. However, there is a low level of inter-generational transfer of these skills, with younger age groups showing little interest in traditional arts, particularly in wall and floor paintings. Key stakeholders have noted a high reluctance among this age group to work with mud, clay, cow dung, natural dyes, etc., partly due to limited leisure time, especially for school-going girls.

There was a universal apprehension among women that male labor migration was triggered by dwindling family income, which was in turn affected by depleting sources for irrigation, leading to reduced farm productivity. Mithila artists echoed these concerns and linked climate change with the disappearance of traditional Mithila painting materials. They attributed the decline in agricultural activity and production to climate change, resulting in women's inability to access the vanishing farm-based raw materials. Consequently, women have become dependent on costly modern colors and brushes from the market.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Civil society organizations, including women cooperatives, involved in the promotion and preservation of traditional

Mithila wall paintings should encourage all community members and families to allocate space for depicting Mithila arts on the exterior walls of their homes. Additionally, they should promote the display of mud relief arts and ceramic paintings prepared by family members.

- Engage local government bodies and professional artists in promoting Mithila arts by organizing art competitions at schools and within communities. Encourage local governments to host annual art exhibitions for local women artists and students, allowing them to showcase their work during local festival seasons. Additionally, organizers should present awards to recognize and reward their contributions.
- Research is needed to examine the impact of married male migration on spouses left behind, particularly regarding their time allocation and engagement in personal interests, including Mithila arts. This research should consider how the workload and responsibilities associated with male-specific household chores affect the spouses who remain at home.

### Study Design

The study employed a mixed-methods design. The quantitative component consisted of a household survey conducted among 500 Mithila-speaking women aged 18 years and over. The participants were selected from both urban and rural areas in two study districts, Dhanusha and Siraha. The qualitative component included Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders and opinion leaders who had professional experience or were familiar with Mithila arts. Additionally, In-Depth Interviews (IDIs) were conducted with women or their family members who had engaged in Mithila arts. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were also held with men and women aged 18 and above, representing the Mithila-speaking community.

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