

The ‘Asian Elephants’ in ‘Madhubani’ Paintings’ - India Legends, Mythology and Iconography

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Origin of Madhubani Painting with Elephants as a Theme

Madhubani is a particular style of ancient folk painting tradition practiced in parts of Bihar in North India. Its name is derived from a region called ‘Madhubani’ fairly represents the centre of a territory historically once known as Mithila,¹ which was part of the ancient kingdom known as Videha during the later Vedic epoch.² According to some scholars the painting styles in Mithila practiced exclusively by the Harijan³ women known originally as the Mithila painting,⁴ According to some scholars the folk painting style that emerged in Mithila was done by the non Brahmanical Harijan women; when the upper caste women were involved in this painting style it attained the name Madhubani meaning the adorable (honeylike) Chaudhuri, Sarit K., Sucheta Sen Chaudhury; SAGE Publications India, 24-Sep-2014, p.12 was later on with the linguistic and socio-religious influence of Maithili Brahmins and Kayastha⁵ communities in the region gained the name Madhubani (madhubani chitrakari).⁶ In terms of antiquity, the Madhubani folks link the emergence of their painting tradition to the periods of Ramayana.⁷ In this regard, the local legend says that the King Janaka, the ruler of Mithila, made an announcement to get the city painted colorfully for the wedding of his daughter Sita with the Hindu God Rama. Consequently, the delighted women folks transformed the entire city into colorful panorama with floor paintings (alopan/aripan chitrakari), wall paintings (bhitti chitrakari) and canvas paintings (pata-chitrakari) which is marked as the emergence of painting tradition per se in Mithila. The historical account on the existence of Madhubani/Mithila art may be gathered through various secondary textual sources as well.⁸

In an etymological sense, the Sanskrit⁹ term ‘Madhubani’ literally meant the ‘forests of honey’ (madhu (honey) + ban (forest) and symbolically referred to the Nature as ‘honey-like- adorable forest’. Accordingly the Madhubani folks expressed their everlasting adoration to Mother Nature through their Nature based paintings which involved motifs of plants, trees, birds and animals etc, and among several quadrupeds the elephant seems had been one of the desired subjects. The images of elephants seen in Madhubani paintings are classified as the Asian elephants and the same is known as ‘Indian elephants’ in India.¹⁰ Their physical structure such as slightly smaller body and tusks, rounded back, ears large in flat settings, skin light gray to black in color etc. separate them from the other elephant species found elsewhere in the world.¹¹

The existence of elephants in India is prehistoric. In this regard, the earliest literary evidence is found in Vedas¹² (circa 1500 – circa 500 BCE) which mentioned about the celestial elephant Airavata¹³ the vehicle (vahana) of the Vedic God Indra;¹⁴ further to this, in the post-Vedic Epic Ramayana the elephants for their immense strength are mentioned as having been appointed as guardians (digpala) of quarters (dig/disha) of the Universe;¹⁵ and the Puranas (circa 200 BCE- 500 CE),¹⁶ considered their origin as divine birth, apparently associating them with several Hindu gods and goddesses. The earliest tangible historical evidences on elephant's presence on the Indian subcontinent¹⁷ are traced since the prehistoric Indus Valley seal (circa 2800 BCE)¹⁸ to the motifs associated with 'elephant cult' in vogue during the Mauryan rule (circa 2nd Century AD)¹⁹ prevailed in Mithila region. Further to this, historically since 1st century A.D. Mithila was under the rule of Kings (e.g. Bahasatimitra or Brahmamitra),²⁰ and in royal tradition the elephants were measured as "ornament for any battle-array", and the 'pride of a king'.²¹ Thus the folks in Mithila exposed to other social, religious and political cultures in relation to elephants, had every reason to revere and incorporate the pachyderm in their lifestyle and in arts.

Depiction of Elephants (Hathi) in Madhubani Paintings: Legends/Myth and Iconography

The earliest depiction of elephant in the folk painting in Madhubani region could be of the Dushadhs, the original non-Brahmin local folk inhabitants of Mithila region, who paint elephant as the mound (vahana) of their King Raja Sailesh, the hero of their epic Mahagatha.²² The Dushadh's theme is normally the combat between their local Deities and their Heroes versus those of the dominant castes entered their region. In Dushadhs compositions the King Sailesh their Hero is shown leading the battle on his mound the Royal elephant (Fig. 1). The Dushadhs concept appears very indigenous. They used tattoo (goadna) style brush strokes and normally made monochromatic work using the organic colors on the texture dipped and dried with cow dung. On the other hand the subsequent leading folks namely the Maithli Brahmins and Kayasth communities in the region formed their elephant oriented visual creations on mythological themes, incorporated with pastoral symbols and painted with organic colors. Apparently, the painting traditions that existed earlier in the region were gradually taken over by the Madhubani styles. Some of the significant elephant based themes in Madhubani paintings are as follows:

Elephant in Nature Based Madhubani Paintings

The Madhubani painters depict bond between animals, birds and the Nature with artistic magnificence, and the elephant/s is one of their most desired subjects. In Nature based compositions, the elephant is placed in a very artistic manner as single, in pairs or in groups set amidst dense green foliage, juxtaposed mostly with the peacock bird which altogether displays harmonious bond between flora and fauna in the forest. The elephant in Madhubani tradition is considered as a symbol of royal, ceremonial and a mark of prosperity as well. Thus its image delineated in realistic zoomorphic folk style, bears natural skin tone i.e. black (shyama) and the insignia of riches depicted in geometrical designs painted in striking warm hues such as red (sindura), orange (narangi), yellow (peela) etc. The Nature around the elephant in the Nature based painting is always painted in greens (haria). The

Madhubani artists do not conform to any fixed iconographic tenets; consequently their creation holds individual expressions. Besides this, their painting style i.e. hatching (kachni) and shading (bharni) by bamboo twig (bharru) is a specific Madhubani feature, that makes the work of art aesthetically rich (Fig. 2), is followed homogeneously by every Madhubani artist.



fig. 1 'Harijan' Folk Painting (Goadna style)
Demi God/Hero Salhesh Dussah
Madhubani, Bihar, North India



fig. 2: Elephant in Nature Based
Madhubani Painting

Elephant - Symbol of Royalty in Madhubani Painting

Mithila since the period of Ramayana (circa 7th-8th century BCE)²³ was ruled by kings, and the elephants had been an essential part in the royal household. For its massive physique and immense strength the pachyderm was considered as an emblem of royal and a status symbol. Further to this, elephants were the royal vehicles, prowess in the war and the pride of a king hence they were given royal status decked in royal style embellishments. Such majestic feature of the elephant was admired by Madhubani artists who delineated elephants in zoomorphic form, in natural skin tone i.e. black (shyama), portrayed in royal style with rich embellishments in geometric motifs, and in instances showed them aggressive with royal roar (Fig. 3).

Elephant - Fertility Symbol in Madhubani Painting

The elephant is the largest living mammal on land and has long life span similar to human i.e. around eighty years. Its gestation period also is longer which is nearly two years (24 months); besides this from the age of twelve onwards the female elephant every three to four years produces a calf.²⁴ For these qualities the pachyderm is considered as a symbol of fertility and long life. In Madhubani paintings the artists depict the baby elephant within the body of its mother elephant, both in terms of their physical features look identical, however the Mother is in larger scale comparing to its baby. Also the mother elephant is normally shown in natural skin tone i.e. black (shyama) and the baby is in light color, such contrast brings aesthetic sense in the composition (Fig. 4). These fertility oriented works are used on ceremonial occasions relating to pregnancy, child birth etc. Also mother and baby elephant images are considered auspicious and are hung in Madhubani houses for the gain of fertility and fecundity.



fig. 3 Elephant Symbol of Royal in Madhubani Painting



fig. 4 Elephant Symbol of Fertility in Madhubani Painting by Jayalakshmi Yegnaswamy

Elephants – in Mythological Compositions in Madhubani Painting

The Madhubani folks especially the Maithli Brahmins and Kayastha communities follow Hindu religion practice in their folk style and in this context several Hindu mythologies relating to Vedic and Puranic gods and goddesses are incorporated in their paintings. Regarding elephant there are a number of myths in Hindu scriptures some are incorporated as subject matter in Madhubani paintings.

Elephant as Guardians (*Digpalas*) in Madhubani Painting: For immense physical strength the elephant has been a symbol of command, power; and for these qualities the pachyderm is mythically appointed as the guardian deities (*digpalas*) of the quarters of the Universe (*dig/disha*) as described in the *Ramayana*.²⁵ The Madhubani artists have absorbed this concept in their own folk style as seen in the given example (Fig.5) where four elephants are positioned in four corners depicting them as protectors of the four quarters (*dig/disha*). The Madhubani communities especially the Maithili Brahmins and the Kayasthas follow the lunar almanac (*panchanga*) and thus they are aware of cosmos alongside the mythical Hindu deities as well.

Elephant in Birth of Ganesha Myth in Madhubani Painting: Puranic narration on the birth of the elephant face Hindu god Ganesha is one of the desired subjects in Madhubani painting. According to the myth God Shiva instructed his son Ganesha to guard his Mother Parvati who is in a chamber and the playful Ganesha for some reason failed to do so. Consequently his father God Shiva beheaded him in anger and later upon Parvati's grievance and request he tried to fix the head of his son; however as he did not find it hence with no other choice fixed an elephant head on the body of his son Ganesha. The myth is visually presented in a colorful manner in Madhubani style which besides divine figures contains foliage and other animals including the elephant (Fig.6).



fig. 5 Elephants as Guardians (*Digpalas*) in Madhubani Painting



fig. 6 Elephant in Myth – Birth of Ganesha in Madhubani Painting

Elephant Vehicle (vahana) of Rain God (Indra): Mithila which historically came under the sway of Vedic cultures consequently had incorporated several Vedic deities in their local tradition and the Rain God i.e. Indra is one among them. The Madhubani artists worked on their own right and thus their image of gods bears iconography as per their individual discretion. In the given example (Fig. 7) the anthropomorphic figure of Rain God (Indra) has two hands and is bereft of any iconography weapon (ayudha); he is seated on elephant (Airavata) which unlike the Vedic 'Airavata's' white (shveta) skin tone bears natural black (shyama) skin tone. The rain drops symbolize the deity as Rain God. As per Madhubani painting tradition the foliage signifies forest where the deity is seated on his mound (vahana) elephant (Fig.7).

Elephant - in Gowri-Pujan: According to Hindu ancient scriptures (Vedas and Puranas), and in local belief, the wedding of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati is considered the most successful of all Gods and Goddesses in the Hindu pantheon. Goddess Parvati for her golden skin color is called Gowri is worshipped by women folks on Gowri-Pujan to seek her blessings to grant a husband like Shiva. On this occasion the in Madhubani tradition the image of colorful elephant is included with other oblation materials in Gowri-Pujan (Fig.8).

Elephant Face God Ganesha in Madhubani Paintings: Exposed to Hindu Classical myths the local Mithila folks embraced the foremost auspicious elephant faced god Ganesha in their tradition. The image of Genesha in Madhubani paintings bears folk features with some classical iconography. Accordingly the deity is seen having elephant face with trunk, flat ears and tusks, and the physique in human form seated in cross legged posture (padmasana), having four hands (chaturbhuj) attributed lotus (padma) and other objects; as per Madhubani tradition the deity is seated amidst foliage and his Classical iconographic mound (vahana) the rat (mushaka) is not seen (Fig. 9).



fig. 7 Elephant Vehicle (Vahana) of Rain God (Indra) in Madhubani Painting



fig. 8 Elephant Image for Gowri Pujan in Madhubani Painting by Jayalakshmi Yegnaswamy

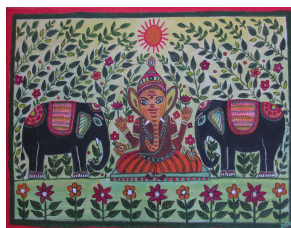


fig. 9 Elephant Face Hindu God Ganesha In Madhubani Painting by Jayalakshmi Yegnaswamy

Elephants in Social Event Based Madhubani Paintings

Elephants in Madhubani tradition are considered exclusively an auspicious animal; therefore its images are painted only for the auspicious events. In Madhubani tradition the social events and religious practices both are indivisible, hence some worships are also social events and the image of elephant is depicted significantly in paintings made specifically for such socio-religious events.

Chathpujan:

It is an annual worship of the Goddess performed by the Madhubani/Mithila women folks. The painting in this context is very rare and complex too. The Madhubani artists depict mortal images mostly female engaged in varied rituals; and seven female divine figures (satmata) are placed in the center. These ritual based Madhubani paintings are need based hence they are very rare (Fig10).

Satkanya/Satmatrika-Pujan:

Satkanya or Satmatrikas signify seven divine sisters or seven mother deities and worshipping this group is an age old folk tradition.²⁶ Saptakanni/Saptamata/Saptakanya where the heptads are worshipped in folk realm; in Classical arena they are One of the Goddess in the group is Indrani, the consort of the Vedic god Indra whose mount (vahana), similar to Indra, is the elephant. In the given example (Fig. 11), the image of Indrani is shown in an anthropomorphic form, in standing posture on the seventh place (on right hand side) holding lightening weapons (vajrayudha) in her raised hands, beneath her the image of her mount (vahana) elephant is shown in realistic form in black (shayama) skin tone with colorful decorations on it (Fig. 11).



fig. 10 Elephant in Chathpujan
In Madhubani Painting



fig. 11 Elephant in Satkanya/matapujan
in Madhubani Painting

Lakhmi-Ganesha Pujan:

The Madhubani folks consider the pair of Lakshmi – the Hindu goddess of riches and the foremost auspicious elephant faced Hindu god Ganesha as mark of fecundity. In such paintings the Ganesha bears his elephant face with flat big ears, swinging trunk, tusks and as a godly figure is given light bright golden hue; rest of his body is in human form, in seated posture with four hands (chathurbhuja) having attributions (ayudha); and he is juxtaposed with goddess Lakshmi in an aesthetically rich style (Fig.12).

Kohbar:

In Madhubani tradition, the Kohbar painting or simply called Kohbar refers to the auspicious marriage diagram made in a chamber to perform marriage ritual activities. These designs are specific and made exclusively by women folks from Madhubani/Mithila region. The Kohbarghar is a marriage (Kohbar) chamber (ghar) assigned to newlyweds who live there for over a week. Traditionally, this chamber is decorated with symbols of love play of Hindu God Shiva and his wife Parvati, Radha and Krishna, the parrots, lotus flowers - the symbols of love; snakes, fishes, foliage and fruits etc as the fertility symbols; the mortal couple and sun and moon signify the moving life phenomenon, and the elephant which is emblematic of strong sexual power is placed amidst the Kohbar composition. In some paintings a single elephant is shown worshipped by the bride (Fig. 13) whereas in some compositions Goddess Parvati is seen seated on the elephant (Fig. 14). The painting in Kohbarghar is done both on walls (bhittichitra) and on paper or cloth (patachithra) that is decoratively hung on the walls.



fig. 12 Elephant Face Ganesha with Goddess Lakshmi In Madhubani Painting



fig. 13 Elephant in Kohbarghar (Marriage Chamber In Madhubani Paintin

Gosainghar Puja:

Also called the Ghar-Gosain, is a chamber assigned for family deity (kuladev) in the Madhubani household. The space is located mostly in a corner of their kitchen. The tradition of 'Ghar-Gosain', perhaps was originated by the Harijan Dushadhs communities, and later on was embraced by the Brahmins, Kayastha as well. In Ghar-Gosain composition the elephant is painted as the mound (vahana) of gods or goddess. These paintings are done mostly on the wall of the Gosainghar (home-shrine), and stylistically the work does not confine to any specific iconographic tenet rather it bears individual expression of the artist (Fig. 15).



fig. 14 Elephant in Kohbarghar (Marriage Chamber)

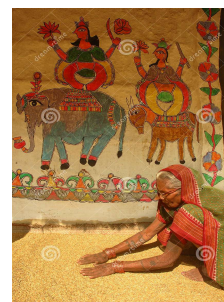


fig. 15 Elephant in Gosainghar (Home Shrine for Family Deity) in Madhubani Painting

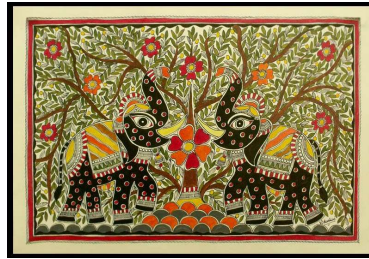


fig. 16 Elephants with Stencil in Acrylics
(Modern Material) Madhubani-like-Style

Conclusion

Mithila since the distant past shared its borders between South Nepal and North India, precisely Bihar. Consequently, the folk culture and arts are shared by both regions. However, the painting style that bears the name Madhubani is a specific folk tradition of Bihar in north India. Exclusively done by women, the Madhubani painting tradition once confined within their families was later on commendably succeeded in getting National recognition around the year sixties and further it received the international recognition as well.²⁷

Receiving such recognition on one hand empowered Madhubani women folks who could earn their livelihood comfortably by selling their work of arts. However, on the other hand as its popularity increased the market demand in instances lead to exploitation, curbing the originality. It is observed that on commercial grounds the artists from other cultures also create Madhubani paintings but they totally ignore the folk sentiments in composing the work. The original iconography of Madhubani painting is its flora and fauna always present in the composition; the almond shape eyes on human, animals and birds are one of the identifiable features of Madhubani art; also the compositions are set traditionally inside a colorful decked enclosure (Fig. 1 to 15); also the painting is done on hand made paper sometimes treated with cow dung, the artists use twig (bharru), fingers, natural organic colors derived from flowers, fruits and minerals, and use specifically the hatching (Kachni) shading (Bharni) and use delicate fine lines to fill the painting. However the modern creators of Madhubani art ignore the folk methodology instead they use stencil designs, synthetic colors and apply their own interpretation that tamper with the original Madhubani composition and style as seen in the given example a pair of roaring elephants (Fig. 16). It is a fact that similar to any other heritage the Madhubani folk style that originated and practiced in Bihar holds great historical, cultural and social value which needs to be preserved; also the artists should be encouraged to create works based on original folk concepts in order to retain originality and Madhubani heritage.

References and Notes

¹ http://madhubani.bih.nic.in/d_history.htm

The district of Madhubani was carved out of the old Darbhanga district in the year 1972 as a result of reorganization of the districts in the State of Bihar. This was formerly the northern subdivision of Darbhanga district. It consists of 21 Development Blocks. Bounded on the north by a hill region of Nepal and extending to the border of its parent

district Darbhanga in the south, Sitamarhi in the west and Supaul in the east, Madhubani fairly represent the centre of the territory once known as Mithila and the district has maintained a distinct individuality of its own. Today Mithila in south Asia lies between lower range of Mount Himalayas and the River Ganges (Ganga) shared between Nepal in the north East side and the Indian State of Bihar. The Madhubani painting is practiced in the Mithila state of Nepal (by diaspora of Indian origin) and in the Bihar state of India.

² Jain, Jyotindra; *Ganga Devi Ganga Devi: tradition and expression in Mithila painting*; Mapin Pub, 1997, p.24

³ Harijan: Refers here to the original inhabitants (aborigines) of Mithila region; practiced local traditions until the arrival of Classical populace in the region. >http://madhubani.bih.nic.in/d_history.htm<

⁴ According to some scholars the folk painting style that emerged in Mithila was done by the non Brahmanical Harijan women; when the upper caste women were involved in this painting style it attained the name

Madhubani meaning the adorable (honeylike) Chaudhuri, Sarit K., Sucheta Sen Chaudhury; SAGE Publications India, 24-Sep-2014, p.12

⁵ Brahmins and Kayasthas in the Hindu Caste classification are the upper castes in Mithila region, who follow Classical traditions and its socio-religious beliefs.

⁶ Sanskritization on Indian subcontinent is estimated around circa 4th century A.D.; during this period several local cultures (aborigines) were curbed, eliminated or transformed to the Classical traditions.

http://madhubani.bih.nic.in/d_history.htm

⁷ According to scholars the events in Ramayana relating to the divine King Ramachandra are dated around circa 7th-8th century BCE, however the Great Epic as such was written in prose and poetic for much later. Guruge, Ananda W.P.; *the Society of the Ramayana*, pp. 35-41 Bose, Mandakranta; *The Ramayana Revisited*; Oxford University Press, USA, 2004

⁸ Davis, Coralynn, V; *Maithil Women's Tales: storytelling on the Nepal-India border*; University of Illinois Press, 2014, p.194-95

⁹ The spread of Sanskrit took place around circa 4th century AD onwards where several places, deities etc were given Sanskrit names; so the place Madhubani attained Sanskrit name.

¹⁰ In Madhubani/Mithila area elephant is called 'Hathi' in the local Maithili language.

¹¹ African elephant is another species of elephant which has bigger physique, tusks, ears and unlike the Asian elephants which are easily tamed, the African elephants live mostly wild.

¹² Birdwood; *The Industrial Arts Of India*; Committee on Council on Education, London, 1884, p. 131

¹³ Williams, George Mason; *Handbook of Hindu Mythology*; ABC-CLIO, 2003; p.52

¹⁴ Dalal, Roshen; *Hinduism: An Alphabetical Guide*; Penguin UK, 2014

¹⁵ Valmiki; Robert Goldman (Ed.); *Ramayana: Book 1: Boyhood*, Book 1; NYU Press, 2005, p.222-223

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Hinduism

¹⁷ Indian subcontinent: include India, Nepal, Bangala Desh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka.

¹⁸ Heesterman, J.C.; Albert W. Van Den Hock, Et Al.; *Ritual, State, and History in South Asia: Essays in Honour of J.C. Heesterman*; BRILL, 1992

¹⁹ Gupta, S.K.; *Elephant in Indian Art and Mythology*; Abhinav Publications, 1983, pp. 11-14

²⁰ Aquique, Md.; *Economic History of Mithila*; Abhinav Publications, 1974, p. 16

²¹ Parameshwaranand, Swami; *Encyclopaedic Dictionary of Puranas, Volume I*; Sarup & Sons, 2001, p.63

²² Ranjan, Aditi; M.P. Ranjan (Ed.); *Handmade in India: A geographic Encyclopedia of Indian Handicrafts*; Abbeville Press, 2009, p.185

²³ Guruge, Ananda W.P.; *the Society of the Ramayana*, pp. 35-41

²⁴ Prothero Donald, R.; Robert M. Schotch; *Horns, Tusks, and Flippers: The Evolution of Hoofed Mammals*; JHU Press, 2002 , p. 187

²⁵ Valmiki; Robert Goldman (Ed.); *Ramayana: Book 1: Boyhood, Book 1*; NYU Press, 2005, p.222-223

²⁶ Saptakanni/Saptamata/Saptakanya where the heptads are worshipped in folk realm; in Classical arena they are known as the Saptamatrikas; the Madhubani folks in paintings have adopted the Classical Iconography as seen in Fig.11 in this article where Indrani is attributed elephant as her mount (*vahana*). Yegnaswamy, Jayalakshmi; *Saptamatrkas in Karnataka*; University of Mysore, 2008.

²⁷ Claus, Peter J.; Diamond Et. Al.; *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia : Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka*; Taylor & Francis, 2003, p. 404