Film Guide:

MITHILA PAINTERS: FIVE VILLAGE ARTISTS FROM MADHUBANI, INDIA

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MITHILA PAINTERS: FIVE VILLAGE ARTISTS
FROM MADHUBANI, INDIA

Film Guide

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SYNOPSIS

Over the years, people of the Mithila-speaking region of northern Bihar and south-eastern Nepal (a region known as Madhubani, or "honey forest") have developed a distinctive form of folk painting on the walls and floors of their village homes. This painting has special significance for women and women's readiness for marriage.

During a drought in the mid-1960s, Baskar Kulkarni from the All India Handicraft Board in Delhi arrived in Madhubani and recognized the paintings for their income-earning potential. He urged the villagers to make their wall and floor paintings on large pieces of heavy, handmade paper that he provided, so that they could be sold commercially to alleviate the poverty of the region. Many village painters responded.

This video focuses on five village painters: four women (including two Mahapatra brahmans, a kayasth, and a low-caste dusadh) and one man (the son of a brahman tantric priest). All five follow the main conventions of Mithila painting. Yet each one has favorite themes and stories (such as the story of a boy's murder in the village and the story of the young wife whose adopted father was a cobra), and each one paints with a unique, individual style and choice of colors. Through accounts of their lives, highlighted by samples of their paintings, this video illustrates the range of impacts that painting has had on the lives of villagers -- especially women -- in the Madhubani region of India.

This video concludes with footage of the annual Chait festival during which certain tray-bearing married women stand in a body of water and watch the sun set and, next morning, stand in the water again and watch the sun rise amidst rituals and sparklers. The footage is accompanied by a Mithila painting of the same Chait festival.

SUGGESTED USE

Anthropology
Anthropology of Religion
Art History
Comparative Literature
Comparative Religion
Folklore
History of Religion
History of South Asia
Literature
Religions of South Asia
Sociology
Sociology of Religion
South Asian Studies
Women's Studies
World Religions
MAP OF THE MADHUBANI REGION OF INDIA AND NEPAL

The Madhubani region includes the town of Janakpur in Nepal and the towns and villages of Jitwarpur, Madhubani, Darbhanga, and Saharsa in India. A language called Mithila – or Maithili – that includes linguistic features from Hindi and Bengali is widely spoken in this region.

This region is replete with history. According to legend, Gautama Buddha was born in Kapilavastu, achieved enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, and taught his first sermon in Sarnath, just north of Varanasi (Banaras, Kashi). According to the epic Ramayana, Sita, the epic’s heroine, was born in Janakpur. Lord Ram, the epic’s hero, was born in Ayodhya, and it was to Ayodhya that Ram and Sita returned after Ram’s victory in Sri Lanka. Mithila painters often report a sense of geographic and historical closeness to the epic characters.
SITA DEVI

Sita Devi lives in the village of Jitwarpur, about one and a half miles north of Madhubani town. She is a member of the Mahaputra brahman caste. Traditionally, in India, brahmans are the highest caste because they are the ones entitled to perform sacred ceremonies. In the Mithila section of India, the Mahapatras are among the lowest of five categories of brahmans, because they perform sacred ceremonies associated with the dead. When a death occurs, or on the anniversary of a death, Mahapatra brahmans are feasted and presented with gifts by the deceased's relatives -- the largess of the feast and gifts depending on the income of the relatives.

Sita Devi was born around 1911, the youngest daughter of the wealthiest landlord in a village in Saharsa district. After five years of schooling, when Sita Devi was eleven, her father arranged the first stage of her marriage with the son of a high-status family in Jitwarpur, a village in Madhubani district just west of Saharsa district. At the age of sixteen, Sita Devi underwent the second stage of her marriage and joined her husband in Jitwarpur. Only after the wedding did it become apparent that her husband's family was desperately poor. Sita Devi's father (and later her older brother who inherited his father's land) occasionally sent bags of rice to Sita Devi. And Sita Devi periodically returned to her home in Saharsa for a month or so at a time, where she could get enough to eat.

Despite the fact that Sita Devi gradually sold her dowry jewelry, her husband and his family fell increasingly into debt. There was not enough food to eat. Malnutrition and poor health began to take their toll. Sita Devi's first daughter died of cholera at the age of five. Her second daughter died in infancy. Then her first son, Ram Dev, was born -- and then a third daughter, who also died in infancy.

Sita Devi now increased her dedication to the powerful goddess, Durga. She memorized a long poem praising Durga, and she began reciting it daily to protect her son's and future sons' health. The poem, composed in a mixture of Sanskrit, Hindi, and Maithili (the mother tongue of some 20,000,000 people living in northern Bihar and southern Nepal), ends as follows:

I cry to you to help me bear my grief,
To make endurable the pain I feel,
For only you can bring me victory.
O Mother, help my family and help me.
My life is in your hands; you are my life,
You will I serve while I remain alive.

(Owens, Raymond Lee. 1981, p. 86)
Sita Devi's fortunes began to change. Two more sons were born; they survived infancy. By now it was clear to Sita Devi and her brother, who had inherited all their father's land, that Sita Devi's three sons had no future if they remained in Jitwarpur. So the three sons went to live with their uncle in Saharsa district. Their uncle was wealthy enough to pay their school fees. In time, Ram Dev, Sita Devi's eldest son, completed high school and two years of teacher's training in Saharsa. Surya Dev, her second son, finished the eighth grade in Saharsa and then returned to Jitwarpur to complete his teacher's training. Sita Devi's youngest son dropped out of school in the ninth grade. But by then Baskar Kulkarni had arrived in Madhubani district, and Sita Devi had begun to earn money from her paintings. With that money, Sita Devi's family had bought land. So Sita Devi's youngest son looks after the land. He does not plow the fields or gather the harvest; that would be demeaning for a brahman -- even a Mahapatra brahman. But he supervises and pays the lower-caste laborers (some of whom are "24-hour servants") who farm his family's land.

Life in Jitwarpur took a dramatic turn for the better in 1966. Several years of severe drought had plunged the region into financial distress. Crops had repeatedly failed; there was no work; and there was little food. Then Baskar Kulkarni, a Delhi artist, arrived in Madhubani district on a mission from the All India Handicraft Board. The Board had heard that women in Madhubani district painted. Baskar Kulkarni's job was to look at the paintings to see if there might be some way these paintings could be sold and the region's poverty alleviated.

Initially, Baskar Kulkarni alarmed the Madhubani villagers. His long black hair, bushy beard, and pajama-kurta costume identified him as an outsider. He wanted to contact women -- something frowned on by the conservative local society in which a family's honor is reflected by the degree of seclusion in which it keeps its women. High-caste brahman families refused to have anything to do with Kulkarni. They felt it was demeaning even to speak of living off the earnings of their wives and sisters. They told Kulkarni to approach lower-status brahmans, such as the Mahapatra brahmans.

Kulkarni took their advice. He went to Jitwarpur, a village dominated by Mahapatra brahmans. Even before the drought, Jitwarpur had been an impoverished village. Less than half the village (of three-hundred families) owned any land other than a house plot. Land that was owned was often scattered in four or five disconnected plots. Kulkarni found himself welcomed in Jitwarpur with cautious interest. He recognized the income-earning potential of the paintings and urged the villagers to make their wall and floor paintings on large pieces of heavy, handmade paper that he provided.

Women, including Sita Devi, responded to Kulkarni's urging. In time Kulkarni left Jitwarpur with rolls of 30" by 22" Madhubani paintings to be sold in Delhi through the All India Handicrafts Board. Swami Mehndiratta, the owner of the Chanakya Art Gallery in Delhi, was so impressed with Madhubani paintings in general and Sita Devi's paintings in (continued)
particular that in 1969 he decided to put on a show featuring Sita Devi’s work. To prepare for the show, Mehdiratta traveled with Kulkarni to Jitwarpur, taking with him a roll of ‘paper canvas’ that could be stretched like artist’s canvas and thus displayed without framing. He cut the roll into 5’ by 5’ and 5’ by 10’ sections, gave the sections to Sita Devi, and asked her to fill these ‘canvases’ with whatever figures or designs she wanted. Sita Devi enlisted the skills of her two eldest sons, Ram Dev and Surya Dev. She outlined the figures; they filled in the spaces between the outlines with vivid colors: reds, pinks, yellows, blues, oranges, and blacks. In time Surya Dev’s skills increased. By August 1969 Sita Devi’s and Surya Dev’s train tickets arrived, and they left for Delhi with their paintings.

In Delhi’s Chanakya Art Gallery, Sita Devi and Surya Dev gave daily demonstrations of their painting. The media were intrigued. Photographs and stories about Sita Devi and Surya Dev appeared in the press. India’s Prime Minister Indira Gandhi read of their presence in Delhi and invited them to tea. On the appointed day, Sita Devi and Surya Dev were driven in a car to the Prime Minister’s residence where they enjoyed tea and snacks. Then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi asked Sita Devi to paint a picture while she and her family watched. Sita Devi seated herself on the floor and, using a matchstick as a brush, proceeded to paint the goddess Durga. When Sita Devi was done, she presented the painting to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi saying that she wished to give one powerful Durga to another powerful Durga.

Sita Devi’s growing reputation attracted novel assignments. Gira Sarabhai, daughter of one of the richest families in India, commissioned Sita Devi, Surya Dev, and two other Mithila artists to travel by train to Ahmedabad to paint "Mithila" figures on the "mud" walls of her new home. In 1970 Sita Devi and Surya Dev spent eight months painting "Mithila" figures on straw boards to be installed on the walls of the posh Madhuban room, a 24-hour air-conditioned coffee shop in New Delhi’s Akbar Hotel (shown in an opening sequence of this video). In New Delhi, Surya Dev’s knowledge of English (albeit weak) helped significantly in selling Madhubani paintings to English-speaking tourists. In 1972 on the Expo-72 grounds in New Delhi a mud village was constructed for the Expo visitors. Sita Devi and Surya Dev were commissioned to decorate the mud walls of that village with Madhubani paintings.

In 1975 Sita Devi was invited back to Delhi to receive a Master Craftsman award (the highest national award given to folk artists) from the President of India, Fakhruddin Ali Ahmad. And in 1976 Sita Devi and Surya Dev flew to the United States to demonstrate their painting first at the American Folk Life Festival in Washington, D.C., and later in New York City. Their trip included a stopover in East Berlin. Sita Devi brought back to India her "Madhubani-style" paintings of blond wrestlers in Germany, Washington’s Arlington National Cemetery, and New York’s World Trade Center.
In 1977 Sita Devi and Surya Dev were invited to stay in the first-class retiring room of the Varanasi train station while they painted wood panels to be installed in the station’s newly-expanded spaces. For the first time in her life Sita Devi used a paint brush and oil-based paints.

In 1977 the Master Craftsmen’s Association of Mithila was established with two purposes: to encourage Mithila painters to maintain the highest artistic standards, and to support fair prices for Mithila artists. Sita Devi and two other local women who had won Master Craftsman awards were asked to serve on the governing board of the Master Craftsmen’s Association of Mithila. By the 1980s Sita Devi had attained a position of eminence among Mithila artists. Her paintings received the highest earnings. From those earnings she had bought land, built a home, and established her family on a sound financial base in the village of Jitwarpur. Sita Devi attributes much of her success to the goddess Durga: "With the grace of Durga I went to America. I got three sons -- two are teachers -- more than ten grandsons and granddaughters, six acres of land, two bullocks, and one cow -- all by the grace of Durga."

GANGA DEVI

Unlike Sita Devi, who is a member of a Mahapatra brahman caste, Ganga Devi is a member of a kayasth caste. Kayasths are considered to be high ranking, but not as high as the brahmans. According to tradition, they are descended from families that served various rulers as accountants, bookkeepers, and deputies.

By her own account, Ganga Devi had a happy childhood, growing up in the village of Chatara. She recalls playing with a girl doll and even painting two kohbar marriage designs on the wall for her girl doll. As Ganga Devi grew older, she and her elder sister became skilled in all the art work associated with Madhubani weddings, including painting the kohbar marriage designs, the bamboo god, and the tantric lady, and making clay lamps, horses, and elephants. Sometimes she and her sister would spend six months preparing all the paintings and other art objects for a forthcoming wedding.

But when it was time for Ganga Devi’s own marriage, her luck ran out. Ganga Devi was not physically attractive. Despite the fact that her family was quite prosperous, her brother had trouble finding her a husband. When he finally found one, her husband’s standard of living was much lower than that of her own family. When Ganga Devi moved into her husband’s home after the wedding, she was pained to see its miserable condition. Her in-laws were poor; it was hard for her to get one full meal a day.

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Ganga Devi's poor nutrition hampered her ability to bear children. Her only child, a daughter, died in infancy. As the subsequent years passed childlessly, Ganga Devi became increasingly anxious and increasingly religious. She took initiation from a Boismab (Vaishnav) guru in Nepal and spent portions of every day praying and visiting local shrines and temples. But nothing helped. Seven years passed, after which, according to local custom, a husband can take a second wife in order to have children.

Ganga Devi was grief-stricken when she surmised that her husband was considering a second marriage. To prevent him from marrying again, she took a vow to fast for a month on the banks of the Ganges river, drinking only fruit juice and water. At the end of the month she looked like a skeleton. Unmoved by her efforts, her husband arranged for his second marriage. In desperation, Ganga Devi went to her guru. Her guru advised her to remain in the marriage as a co-wife and to take up commercial painting.

When her husband's second wife moved in to her home, Ganga Devi was initially treated as a household servant. She slept on the veranda. Sometimes she ate millet while the rest of the household ate rice. But within a year of starting to paint, Ganga Devi received the National Master Craftsman award. The award brought her some income and some international fame. She was sent by the Indian government to participate in an exhibition in Moscow. There she saw a hotel with electric lights, restaurants, and elevators that looked like a giant palm tree. She captured that impression in one of her paintings.

With the wealth provided by the Master Craftsman award, she bought farm land she registered in her own name. She also paid for a new room to be added to her husband's house so that she no longer slept on the veranda. As Ganga Devi's co-wife began to have children, Ganga Devi was called on to help raise them. In time her co-wife's little son became her constant companion, accompanying her on her daily visits to local shrines and temples.

As with the other Mithila painters, Ganga Devi draws inspiration for her paintings from the activities she sees around her as well as from the rich store of folktales and religious legends in Madhubani. One of her paintings seen in the video tells a story from the Ramayana about a beautiful wife named Ahilya. According to the story, Ahilya's beauty attracted the unwanted attention of Indra Maharaj, the god of the rains. Through his magic powers, Indra Maharaj assumed the appearance of Ahilya's husband, joined her in bed, and had sex with her. Ahilya's husband returned just in time to see Indra Maharaj leaving the house. Accusing Ahilya of infidelity, he imprisoned her in a stone. There she remained until Lord Ram, the divine hero of the Ramayana, learned from his guru what had happened, touched the stone, and released Ahilya. Ganga Devi once said, "I was just like Ahilya before receiving the National Award. I had been condemned to be in a stone, but I was freed."

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Another of Ganga Devi's Ramayana-inspired paintings shown in the video is of a low-caste woman named Sabri. When Sabri was young, she had been told that some day she—a low-caste woman—would receive Lord Ram. The years passed, and nothing happened. Then one day, when Sabri was in her late forties, Lord Ram and his brother, Lakshman, appeared before her. She had nothing to give them to eat but some wild bel fruit. Wild bel fruit can be quite sour. So Sabri took a bite out of each fruit and gave Ram and Lakshman only the least sour ones. By biting each fruit and leaving traces of her saliva on it, Sabri ritually polluted each fruit. Nonetheless, Lord Ram and his brother Lakshman ate the fruit, assuring Sabri that the purity of her heart erased any traces of pollution from the fruit.

Ganga Devi finds a parallel between herself and Sabri. "The low-caste neighbor women who saved me in my dark days now comes to me almost daily for my blessing. She says, 'You have suffered so much and succeeded. You must be a great soul!'"

KRISHNANAND JHA

Krishnanand Jha is one of the few male artists in Mithila. Out of 180 village painters registered with the Master Craftsmen's Association of Mithila, only 7 are men. Several more men who help their wives/mothers by coloring within the outlines they draw are not registered with the Association. Krishnanand Jha is a brahman of a higher rank than the Mahapatra brahmans. He is also a tantric. Tantrics stress the female forms of divine power, focusing on the primacy of the feminine principle (shakti) that infuses energy into otherwise lifeless matter. Tantric priests, as part of their training, learn to paint representations of this feminine principle in diagrams on floors, in notebooks, or on pieces of paper. There is even some speculation among scholars that Mithila wall and floor paintings and tantric arts and rituals involving wall and floor paintings may go back to some common source many centuries ago.

Krishnanand Jha's father was a highly respected tantric priest—-one who had become skilled in painting tantric figures and who wore the characteristic red robes. When Baskar Kulkarni arrived in Madhubani in 1966, Krishnanand Jha's father's paintings were among the first he bought, they were so skillfully done. During the next few years, thanks to Baskar Kulkarni, Krishnanand Jha’s father earned considerable amounts of income from his paintings. Then his eyesight began to fail, and he had to give up painting.

His son, Krishnanand Jha, as a youth underwent a ceremony in which he bathed, had his head shaved, received the sacred thread worn by brahmans, and began the life of a tantric student. His father was his teacher. Krishnanand Jha learned Sanskrit so that he could read the Mahavidya ('great knowledge') tantric texts with their graphic descriptions of the horrific

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forms of goddesses One of these goddesses is Chinnamasta who holds her own severed head while jets of blood shoot upward from her neck. The *Chinnamasta Tantra* describes the goddess as follows:

... she holds her severed head and a knife.
Naked, she drinks voluptuously the stream of blood-nectar flowing from her beheaded body ...
She has three eyes. Her breasts are adorned with lotuses.
Inclined toward lust, she sits erect above the god of love, who shows signs of lustfulness.


Textual descriptions such as this can readily be painted. Krishnanand Jha also learned of tantrism's periodic reversals of more general Hindu behavior. For certain night-time rituals tantrics gather in unlikely places such as cremation grounds, eat meat, drink alcohol, and afterwards engage in unusual sexual activities. Tantrics believe that, in appropriate contexts, such acts can contribute to enlightenment. While still a student, Krishnanand Jha learned to paint *yantras*, geometrical symbols representing goddesses, charms, and sacred mysteries. The quality of *yantra* painting in Madhubani has improved with the introduction of "geometry box" compasses, rulers, and angles that helped produce symmetrical figures.

Krishnanand Jha had not planned to be a painter after he grew up. He completed high school and college and then looked for work. But no jobs were to be found. So finally, according to him, he threw his diploma in the river and became a painter.

Most of Krishnanand Jha's early paintings were of tantric beings such as the ten forms of the Mother Goddess Kali (or their symbols or *yantras*). He also painted well-known events from the lengthy Hindu epic the *Ramayana*. His style of painting is unusual. Instead of tracing outlines and then coloring the empty spaces, Krishnanand Jha employs the kayasth technique of drawing red and black lines, allowing the closeness of the lines to give a lighter or darker red and black color.

Although Krishnanand Jha does not follow all the tantric precepts (such as wearing red clothes), he remains impressed by his father's teachings regarding right and wrong and the importance of brahmans standing up for what is right. When Phool Jha was murdered in Jitwarpur, it put Krishnanand Jha's ethical principles to a test.

Phool Jha was a Mahapatra brahman boy who grew up in a house next door to Sita Devi's in Jitwarpur. 'Phool' means "flower," and Phool Jha was named after one of the last of many pilgrimage places his mother visited before he was conceived. Phool Jha grew up being indulged (perhaps even 'spoiled') by his mother. He had little respect for his father,

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who was prone to temper outbursts and petty deceptions. Phool Jha had even less respect for his father after his father was beaten and robbed on several occasions by a gang led by the son of the headman of an adjacent village. The gang, composed mostly of youths, roamed the countryside profiting by extortion, theft, and smuggling (the Nepal border was only thirty miles away).

When Phool Jha was about seventeen years old, he decided to join the gang. His involvement increased early in 1977 when he bragged to the gang that he could arrange a nighttime meeting with a pretty girl from his village. When he failed to deliver the pretty girl, the gang forced him to lie on his back. They placed a pole across his neck and sat on the pole until he choked to death. They then poured acid on Phool Jha’s face to conceal his identity, and dumped his weighted body into a well they thought was abandoned. But the well had not been abandoned. Phool Jha’s body was discovered and retrieved from the well. One of Phool Jha’s uncles called the police who took Phool Jha’s body for an autopsy. The autopsy established that Phool Jha had been murdered by strangulation.

The police then gave a tracking dog a sniff of Phool Jha’s sandals and ordered the dog to "search." The dog led the police directly to the last place Phool Jha had gone on foot -- the house of the village headman. The police ordered the dog to "search" again, and the dog hurled itself at the headman’s door. A crowd of about 150 villagers who had been following the police cheered. For years they had suspected the headman had murdered people -- possibly as many as six. But no one had ever succeeded in producing reliable evidence. With the evidence provided by the tracking dog, the police arrested and jailed the headman, his son, and members of the gang.

The court case dragged on for eight years, delayed by the tactics of the headman’s lawyers. During those years the headman lodged false court cases against witnesses to try to intimidate them and get them to withdraw their testimonies. Krishnanand Jha took a personal interest in the case. He convinced the witnesses to stand by their testimonies. He kept up their spirits and helped them get their false cases dismissed. Throughout this period he supported himself and his efforts by his paintings. Finally, after eight years had passed, the lower court in Madhubani found the accused guilty. Phool Jha’s relatives and neighbors were overjoyed. Justice had triumphed.

Their joy, however, was premature. Those accused of murdering Phool Jha appealed the verdict to the state court in Patna, the capital of Bihar. The two-hundred-mile round-trip between Jitwarpur and Patna was too far for many of the Jitwarpur witnesses to travel. The hearings did not go well. In the end the state court reversed the lower-court’s verdict and found the accused men to be not guilty. The villagers were disappointed. Nonetheless, they felt their efforts had not been in vain. By pulling together, they had exposed and taught a lesson to the most powerful men in the area.

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When Krishnanand Jha was asked why he put so much effort into the murder case, he replied, "A brahman should always serve as a model for others to follow. I did merely what my father taught me to do."

Krishnanand Jha is highly respected even as an artist among Madhubani painters. He entered one of his works in the first Master Craftsmen’s show in Madhubani. To his surprise, he won third prize in the line-drawing competition. Krishnanand Jha subsequently became treasurer of the Master Craftsmen’s Association of Mithila -- an important position requiring both skill and integrity. It is his responsibility to see that village artists are reimbursed for their paintings sold at foreign exhibitions.

Krishnanand Jha may not be following exactly the footsteps of his father, a tantric priest. But in his own way he may be serving Jitwarpur’s villagers equally effectively through his painting and through his role as treasurer of the Master Craftsmen’s Association of Mithila.

SHANTI DEVI

Shanti Devi lives in the village of Laheriaganj, close to Jitwarpur. She is a member of the dusadh caste -- a low caste with its own priests, deities, traditions, and folklore. During the days of the British, the dusadh were classified as a "criminal caste," since some of them had engaged in highway robbery. Restrictions were placed on the movements of "criminal caste" members -- especially at night -- and "criminal caste" members were required to keep the police informed of their whereabouts when they were not in their villages.

In 1947, when India became independent, "criminal caste" restrictions no longer applied. In fact, by then the dusadh had been identified by the Government of India as a "Scheduled Caste" -- a caste that, for ritual reasons, had been systematically discriminated against by its higher-caste neighbors. After India’s constitution was enacted in 1950, the dusadh (and other government-designated "Scheduled Castes" and "Scheduled Tribes"), because they had been discriminated against for so many centuries, became entitled to guaranteed representation on elected bodies and preferred employment in government jobs. Despite such constitutional provisions, many people in Mithila continued to look down on the dusadh and to treat them as members of a low -- possibly even "polluted" -- caste.

Shanti Devi’s father died when Shanti Devi was only a few years old. Her widowed mother supported herself and her children by breaking bricks into chips to be used as road gravel and by working in the home of a brahman lady. One day the brahman lady asked, "Why aren’t your children in school?" Shanti Devi’s mother replied that she thought schools (continued)
were only for upper-caste children, not for low-caste dusadhs. The brahman lady assured her that her children could go to school, even though they were dusadhs. So Shanti Devi's mother sent her and her brother to school and turned down several remarriage proposals to be sure her children remained in school. As a result, Shanti Devi managed to complete high school before she was married to a dusadh priest. Today she is one of the most highly-educated painters in Mithila.

Shanti Devi began painting as a young bride of sixteen, using as her subjects both current political events (such as the 1980 elections) and well-known deities from the overarching Hindu tradition, such as the goddess Kali and Lord Shiva. Then Shanti Devi began to wonder what would happen if she painted some of the low-caste dusadh deities such as Lord Salhesh and members of Lord Salhesh's family. Her early paintings of Lord Salhesh looked a great deal like Lord Shiva of the overarching Hindu pantheon. So she increasingly distinguished between the gods and goddesses of the high Hindu pantheon and the more down-to-earth dusadh's gods and goddesses. In time she found a ready market for her colorful representations of the dusadh's Lord Salhesh as half-parrot half-man, and of Lord Salhesh manifesting himself omnipotently in every flower and tree. Shanti Devi borrowed ideas from the stories told by her father-in-law, Ram Swarup, a renowned dusadh shaman and healer. One such story that she painted went as follows:

In ancient times, dyans ruled the world and kept a careful watch on anyone who threatened their power. Dyans were women who practiced secret magic for evil purposes. In those days, a Queen gave birth to a wondrous son, Kharik. When Kharik was three days old, the Queen rocked him in a beautiful cradle that hung from the sky. But, alas, the beautiful cradle caught the attention of the dyans, and they brought it crashing to the ground.

When the dyans saw the wondrous baby sleeping in the cradle, they could tell that, if he grew up, he would threaten their power. So they snatched him out of the cradle and imprisoned him in a cage composed of all kinds of living, poisonous snakes.

The devastated Queen began to die of grief. But the god, Govind Maharaj, appeared to her and consoled her. He assured her that another child would be born to her on the evening of the second day. Then, unbeknown to the Queen, the god, Govind Maharaj himself, entered her womb as a baby ready to be born. Sure enough, on the second day the Queen began to have labor pains. She sent a servant to fetch the midwife from the neighboring village. The midwife (who was a dyans) insisted she be carried all the way to the Queen on a palanquin. By the time the palanquin had been arranged for and the midwife had arrived, the baby was already born.

When the newborn baby (who was really the god, Govind Maharaj) saw the midwife, he announced, "Be careful; she is a dyans!" Amazed, the dyans midwife lied to

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the Queen. "You have given birth to a kayma demon. Before the neighbors hear of this and spread rumors about you, put this kayma into a box and deposit it in the Ganges river." The dyam midwife then bribed the royal astrologer to support her false story.

The royal astrologer assured the King that the baby was a kayma and had to be disposed of. With profound sorrow the King placed his baby in a box and carried the box to the Ganges river. The Queen of the Ganges retrieved the box, rescued the baby, and, with great delight adopted the baby. The Queen of the Ganges raised Govind Maharaj, training him in the classical wisdoms as well as in the arts of hunting and warfare. In time, Govind Maharaj grew up, returned on horseback with two companions, attacked the dyams, and rescued his brother, Kharik, from the cage of poisonous snakes.

The story of Govind Maharaj has special importance for the low-caste dusadhgs. They believe that Govind Maharaj of their folklore is a manifestation of Lord Krishna, a deity widely-worshipped by all castes throughout India.

Shanti Devi now uses her considerable income as a painter to send her children to an English-medium school. She herself is studying privately for her B.A. She and her dusadh-priest artist husband both received National Master Craftsmen’s Awards. And the Indian government is building them a brick house -- the first brick house to be built in their low-caste dusadh neighborhood.

BAUA DEVI

Baua Devi was the only surviving child of a brilliant Mahapatra brahman pundit in the village of Simri. As a little girl Baua Devi loved to watch her grandmother, one of the finest artists in Simri, paint birds, flowers, and human figures on the village walls and courtyards. When Baua Devi was five years old, her father arranged the first stage of her marriage with Jagannath, the nine-year-old son of a Mahapatra brahman pundit friend in Jitwarpur. When it was time for Baua Devi to begin school, she moved to a nearby village where she lived with her maternal uncle. She was an adept pupil, finishing her work early, and asking her teachers for more. She continued her studies through the fifth grade. Then, when Baua Devi was twelve, her father arranged the second stage of her marriage. Upon completion of the wedding ceremonies, Baua Devi moved to sixteen-year-old Jagannath’s home in Jitwarpur. There her life took a turn for the worse.

Her mother-in-law was obsessed with the steady decline of the family’s fortune. Since Baua Devi could read, her mother-in-law entrusted Baua Devi with his land records. When the family fortunes continued to decline, Baua Devi’s mother-in-law would find fault with Baua Devi, report the fault to Jagannath, and Jagannath would beat Baua Devi. If Baua Devi read a book or wrote a letter during a free moment, her mother-in-law would also complain to Jagannath that Baua Devi was showing off, and Jagannath would beat Baua Devi.

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Finally, after seven years of marriage, Baua Devi became pregnant. Her mother-in-law now "separated" Baua Devi and Jagannath from the rest of the extended family. According to the terms of the "separation," the couple received less than three-quarters of an acre of land. They were supposed to subsist on the income from this land without drawing any longer on the resources of the extended family. Baua Devi and Jagannath suffered from hunger. Their baby was born weak; it lived only six days and died. Baua Devi mourned her baby’s death for months.

This was about the time when Baskar Kulkarni arrived in Jitwarpur. Baua Devi’s mother-in-law, knowing about Baua Devi’s skills as a painter, received paper and colors from Baskar Kulkarni and gave them to Baua Devi. After Baua Devi had completed the paintings, her mother-in-law took them to Baskar Kulkarni and pocketed what the paintings earned.

Jagannath was appalled when he learned what his mother was doing. He told Baua Devi to go directly to Kulkarni, receive the paper and colors herself, deliver the paintings she completed, and get from Kulkarni’s own hands the money for her pictures. When Baua Devi met Kulkarni with her pictures, he couldn’t believe that someone so young could do such good work. So Baua Devi painted a picture while Kulkarni watched. From then on, Kulkarni dealt directly with Baua Devi.

In time, Baua Devi’s husband, Jagannath, became part of her team. Baua Devi now outlines the drawings, and Jagannath adds the colors. Baua Devi paints snakes with special verve. Snakes occupy a significant place in many Mithila songs and stories. On one occasion Baua Devi prepared a series of snake paintings, each one illustrating another segment of one of her favorite folk stories about snakes. The oral narration of the folk story goes as follows:

One day two young boys, for their amusement, were throwing rocks at a pair of small cobras. They scurried near a young wife scrubbing her metal pots down by the pond. She pitted the snakes and tipped over two metal pots to protect them. She then sent the two boys on their way. When they had gone, she lifted the pots.

To her surprise, the snakes spoke to her. "Young woman, we are most grateful that you have saved our lives, and we would like to repay you. We know you are an orphan girl. Though you are married, you have no family to whom you can return on special days. Let us become your family, for we can assume human form, and we have a substantial house. On the next special day we will return in our human form to fetch you." The young wife, quite bemused by the prospect, agreed.

The two snake brothers had a somewhat harder time selling the idea to their own family. The mother snake was immediately receptive. She appreciated the fact that her sons’ lives had been saved, and she rather liked the idea of a daughter coming to visit. But the father snake was a problem. He was so full of poison that he was unwilling to change into a human form despite his sons’ entreaties. Finally the mother prevailed. She got the father to agree to curl up in some remote corner of the house

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on the next special day and let the mother and sons extend hospitality in their human form to the young wife.

When the next special day arrived, the two snake brothers assumed human form and set out to fetch their sister. They greeted their sister, who was both startled and pleased that things had worked out as promised. The young wife washed the dust from her 'brothers' feet and arranged for them to take rest while she prepared a meal for them and made sweets to take with her to her 'family home.' Her 'brothers' arranged a palanquin to take their 'sister' home.

Safe above the muddy road, borne on a palanquin by four strong men, the young wife had a very pleasant journey 'home.' Following tradition, the young wife wept when she greeted her mother. Her 'mother' displayed an earthen lamp to ward off evil spirits and washed her 'daughter's' feet. And then, of course, the young wife washed her 'mother's' feet, and they embraced. The mother prepared a special meal for her 'daughter.' The only household work the mother allowed her to do was to light the earthen lamp at night before the household deities. Every evening the daughter lit the earthen lamp and placed it on what she thought was a lamp stand before the family deity. The lamp stand, however, was actually the head of the coiled-up father cobra.

Each evening when the daughter placed a lighted earthen lamp on the father cobra's head, it not only assaulted his dignity; it also burnt him. Finally the father cobra lost his patience. "This is too much!" he exclaimed, "Not only am I treated like a lamp stand; I am also burnt on my head! I shall settle my score with that young wife with one fatal bite!"

The snake mother and sons were horrified at the father cobra's deadly threat. They pleaded with him: "She cannot die while a guest in our house, for that will bring dishonor to our family." Reluctantly, the father cobra agreed to wait till she was back in her husband's house before he killed her.

The distressed mother thought of a plan that might possibly save her 'daughter's' life. The day before her 'daughter' left to return to her husband's house, the mother instructed her: "Back in your husband's home, every evening, after you've eaten, you must change your clothes, fry a little rice, add milk, and place it on leaves at your front door and in the middle and four corners of your room." (The mother knew, as does everyone in Mithila, that fried rice mixed with milk is the favorite food of cobras.) "Having placed the food, you should recite the following prayer for the long life of your family: 'King cobra, bearer of sparkling gems, come into my house and fill it with precious stones. May my father, mother, uncles, aunts, and all their children prosper, for it is by their blessing that I eat milk and rice in a golden cup.' Then clap your hands three times and say: 'O, saint, make it so! Make it so!'"

On the last day of their 'sister's' visit, her 'brothers' bought her a new sari and gave it to her as a farewell present. Her 'mother' combed her 'daughter's' hair in preparation for her journey back to her husband's house, and made sweets for her

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daughter to give to her in-laws. The time arrived for the final leave-taking. The traditional tears and weeping were enhanced for the mother by her secret fears for her 'daughter's' life. As the 'daughter' got into the palanquin, her 'mother' admonished her, "Be sure to follow my advice carefully."

The palanquin took the young wife back to her husband's house. That evening the young wife, after she had eaten and changed her clothes, fried some rice, mixed it with milk, and placed a little at the front door and in the middle and four corners of the room. In the meantime the father cobra, despite the mother's entreaties, had set out across the countryside to kill the young wife.

As the father slithered into the young wife's house intent on killing her, he spotted his favorite food, fried rice and milk, at the door and in the center and corners of the room. By the time he had eaten all of it, he felt pretty good. He then heard his 'daughter' recite the prayer her 'mother' had taught her: "King cobra, bearer of sparkling gems, come into my house and fill it with precious stones. May my father, mother, uncles, aunts, and all their children prosper, for it is by their blessing that I eat milk and rice in a golden cup." The father cobra then heard his 'daughter' clap her hands three times and say, "O, saint, make it so! Make it so!"

The snake father then said, "What a fool I have been to take offense at this young woman who only wishes the best for me and my whole family! She wishes to eat milk and rice from a golden cup. Let it be so!"

Since snakes are the guardians of the precious-stone treasures of the earth, the snake father filled his 'daughter's' house with sparkling gems and then slipped quietly away to his home village.

Baua Devi now earns more for her paintings than any other woman in Jitwarpur, including Sita Devi. Income from her paintings has enabled her to double the amount of land her family owns, buy a new house, and pay for her father-in-law's shradh (memorial ceremony) as well as for an exceptionally-costly celebration of the first stage of her eldest daughter's marriage.

Baua Devi is not happy that her daughter was only eight years old when the senior members of the family arranged the first stage of her daughter's marriage. Her daughter had not yet received any education. "All I could give her were beautiful gifts," said Baua Devi sadly. Baua Devi is making sure her second daughter acquires an education before the first stage of her marriage. To guarantee this, Baua Devi is using the earnings from her own painting to pay for her second daughter's English-medium education. She is refusing to let any family member discuss possible marriage negotiations. "I hope that someday my second daughter can get a good job and earn a large salary ... I am insisting on it. Besides, I am paying for it, and I will someday benefit from it."

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Like other successful Mithila painters, Baua Devi has sometimes been commissioned to paint special events such as the annual Chait festival. As a rule, Chait is celebrated on the sixth day of Kartik, the eighth lunar month that usually occurs in November. Chait is a time for family reunions and for wearing new clothes. It is also a time for fulfilling vows and worshpping the sun and moon.

During the year preceding Chait, married women may have vowed that if the gods granted them some boon -- restored a family member to health, provided a generous harvest, etc. -- at the next Chait festival they would make an offering to the gods and would worship the sun and moon.

The morning before Chait, married women who have made such vows begin to fast. That evening those married women, carrying bamboo trays holding coconuts, fruits, and sugarcane, enter a body of water, where they stand and watch the sun set. Only then do they return home. The next morning before dawn those married women return to stand in the water again with their bamboo trays. They now wait for the sun to rise. The sun rises on an unforgettable scene of celebration with children lighting sparklers, ritual objects displayed on the shores, and priests and specialists repeating prayers. Only after the sun has risen do the married women emerge from the water, feed brahmans, break their fasts, and join the festivities.

The film ends by showing a Chait festival and Baua Devi’s 5-foot by 12-foot Madhubani-style painting of a Chait festival complete with married women standing in the water, children playing with sparklers, and food and ritual objects displayed on the shores.
Joys and Sorrows of Extended Families

For each of the five artists presented in this video, the social institution that is most important in their lives is their family. By "family" they do not mean just their parents, siblings, and children. They mean an extended set of relatives, some of whom can (and do) make heavy demands on their time and income -- others of whom can (and do) save their lives or the lives of their close family members. Often the same relatives can do both. All the extended family members are bound together by the recognition that they are members of the same caste, or lineage. Together their lineage will rise or fall in the eyes of the general public, depending on their behavior, their wealth, and their ability to get their own way. In villages in the Madhubani region of India, distinctions are made between "big" people and "little" people. "Big" people are those who are influential; "little" people are those who are not. The number of "big" people in a caste helps raise or lower that caste's status within the region. There is thus a complex set of relationships between the immediate family, the extended family, and the lineage or caste.

For women, two sets of families are important -- the families into which they are born, and the families into which they are married. In the Madhubani region of India, custom dictates that men arrange the marriages of their children, negotiating with male members of their castes (e.g., Mahapatra brahmans, kayasths, dusadhs, etc.) in other villages who have sons or daughters of an appropriate age. Negotiations can begin when the children are quite small, and the first stage of the marriage can be completed before the child has reached school age. Family finances play an important role in marriage negotiations. The bride’s parents are required by custom to send her to her husband’s home with as large a dowry as they can afford. It is widely presumed that the more dowry a man can provide, the greater the likelihood that he can find a good husband for his daughter. This is not always true. During the marriage negotiations, important information can be kept concealed by one side or the other. Miscalculations can, and sometimes do, occur.

Both Sita Devi and Baua Devi discovered, after they had completed the second stage of their marriage and had joined their husbands’ families in their husband’s villages, that their husbands’ families had successfully concealed the extent of their own poverty. Before long, the dowries Sita Devi and Baua Devi had brought with them had been reduced to nothing to pay for their in-laws’ debts and daily expenses. Both Sita Devi and Baua Devi suffered as a consequence. Sita Devi's lack of adequate nourishment and shortage of money for medical treatments contributed to the early deaths of several of her children. In her despair, she turned to the goddess Durga for relief. Baua Devi’s undernourishment probably contributed to the seven years that passed before she became pregnant. Then, unhappily, her mother-in-law "separated" Baua Devi and her husband from the rest of the family and required them to live off the income from less than three-quarters of an acre of land. As a consequence, both Baua Devi and her husband suffered from malnutrition. Their baby died six days after it was born. Baua Devi had recurrent nightmares for many months.

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Ganga Devi was even less fortunate. After the second stage of her marriage and after she had moved into her impoverished husband’s house, it was hard for her to eat one full meal a day. Her only child, a daughter, died in infancy. Then seven years passed during which she remained childless. After seven years a husband is allowed by local custom to take a second wife so he can have children. That is what Ganga Devi’s husband did — despite Ganga Devi’s pleas and, eventually, her month-long fast. After her husband’s second marriage Ganga Devi became a servant in the home of her husband and his new wife, sleeping on the veranda and helping with household chores.

Not wanting to strain relations with their in-laws, both Sita Devi and Baua Devi concealed from their relatives the extent of their hardships in their husbands’ homes. Sita Devi’s brother eventually found out and did what he could to help (without humiliating her in-laws). After harvests he would send her bags of grain. He would invite Sita Devi to return to the village of her childhood several months each year where she could get enough to eat. And he would send her back to her husband’s village with gifts and sweets. Perhaps the most important help Sita Devi’s brother provided was to arrange for her three sons to come to his home in Saharsa district for their schooling. Sita Devi’s brother was wealthy enough to pay for their school fees. He also saw to it that the three boys ate better in his home than they would have in their mother’s home. Several years later, when the three boys did return to their mother’s home, they had received enough education to better their lives. One son, Surya Dev, had even learned enough English so that he could accompany Sita Devi on her trips to Delhi and the United States and serve as her translator.

Typically, extended families include many people living under one roof and often eating from one fireplace. Opportunities for differences, tensions, and misunderstandings abound. In an extended family everyone contributes to the common financial pool, and everyone’s needs are addressed from that common pool. But questions of how members’ needs are presented, who addresses those needs, and when financial payments are made are open to varying degrees of negotiation. Times of greatest tension arise when a senior male family member dies and his property must be reapportioned among the other members of the family. But tensions also arise whenever the extended family is called upon to make collective decisions (such as whether or not to start a child’s education or to begin a child’s marriage negotiations) or to lay out large expenditures such as to purchase land, build a house, pay for first-stage and second-stage marriages (with their accompanying dowries) and death-memorial (shraddha) ceremonies. Only under unusual circumstances is every member of an extended family equally happy with some collective decision. Memories are long, and grudges can be carried for many years.

Take what happened to Sita Devi. One day she overheard her daughter-in-law (Surya Dev’s wife) remark, "Look at that old lady [i.e., Sita Devi]. She consumes a lot of milk just in her tea. My children don’t have milk to drink. When she dies, I won’t celebrate her shraddha [death memorial] ceremony. I won’t even make sweets for the ceremony."

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Sita Devi was stunned. Her earnings had put the family on its feet. Her earnings had bought the family land. Her earnings had paid 19,000-rupees for her late-husband's shraddh ceremony that had brought honor to the family. And now her daughter-in-law was begrudging her some milk in her tea!

Angrily, Sita Devi told her daughter-in-law, "After my death I won't come to you for a single sweet. Let me eat sweets now! Let me drink milk till I die! ... I can take care of myself. I won't touch your milk. I’m not going to touch a single grain from your house."

At that, Sita Devi "separated" herself from the family, set up her own fireplace and started cooking and eating by herself. In no time the entire village knew of the quarrel between Sita Devi and her daughter-in-law. Gossip had a nitre.

Eventually Sita Devi’s daughter-in-law made a grudging apology to Sita Devi; there was a truce; and Sita Devi resumed eating with the rest of the family. But the wounds and the memories of the quarrel remained on both sides, ready to burst into the open at the next provocation.

Some Foreigners and Mithila Painting

In 1969 a French writer, Yves Vequaud, visited Delhi and was charmed by Mithila paintings. He traveled to the Madhubani region of India and met several Mithila painters. The next year he returned for two weeks and learned more about the Madhubani area and the Mithila painters. In 1973 he returned with a French photographer, Eduard Boubet, who photographed a number of paintings, some of which were incorporated into an article Vequaud wrote for Atlas, the Air France in-flight magazine.

The French filmmaker, Andre Malraux, was struck by Vequaud’s article and Boubet’s photographs. Malraux helped lay the groundwork for Vequaud to shoot a documentary film for French television. In November 1973 Vequaud returned to India to make preparations for the first film he ever made.

Early in 1974 Vequaud was joined by a cameraman, soundman, other film crew members, and several personal friends, all of whom were eager for the adventure of making a film. They returned to France after staying in Madhubani through April 1974 and shooting seven-and-a-half hours of footage.

Vequaud’s film was a docu-drama entitled A Day in the Life of Mithila. Set in Jitwarpur, and using Surya Dev (Sita Devi’s English-speaking son) as an Assistant Director, Vequaud had village actors enact a wedding day that provided a background for Mithila

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traditions. The Jitwarpur villagers were offended when they discovered that the man selected to play the "groom" was a brahman while the woman selected to play his "bride" was low caste. Surya Dev assuaged the villagers' sensibilities by having an already-married brahman couple (sufficiently veiled as to be unrecognizable by the audience) re-enact their actual marriage ceremony in which the groom places red powder in the part of his bride's hair, considered by many to be the act that permanently weds a woman to her husband. Vequaud's film included a sequence of a young woman drawing a voluptuous figure on the floor, and a laughing battle (presumably during the spring Holi festival) in which a young man thoroughly drenches his young sister-in-law with red water.

According to Ray Owens, "A book could be written about the making of the film, the village vis-a-vis its image in the film, relations between the villagers and the film-makers, and relations among the film-makers themselves. Violence was avoided, and the film was completed." (Owens, Raymond Lee. 1981, p. 124)


Vequaud's film and book received mixed acclaim. According to Owens: "Vequaud's book and film have been criticized for ethnographic inaccuracies, principally for seeing the patrilineal, patrilocal, male-dominated society of North India as a matriarchy, describing paintings as marriage proposals delivered by young girls to prospective grooms (which they are not), for implying that the festival of Holi and a tantric goat sacrifice are part of a marriage ceremony, and for not taking into account the presently commercial aspect of Mithila painting. However, both contain beautiful photography of local scenes, and the book as the best collection of Mithila paintings so far published. Moreover, the service he has rendered in making Mithila paintings more widely known through his articles, film, book, and exhibition, and even in demonstrating that they can be sold for two to three thousand francs has been of immense benefit to the villagers." (Ibid.)

U.S. anthropologist Ray Owens and his ethnomusicologist wife, Naomi Owens, conducted extensive research in the Madhubani region of India. In 1977, with the help of other anthropologists, art historians, and those concerned with the survival of traditional art forms, they established the Ethnic Arts Foundation. The purpose of the Foundation was to help Mithila painters (and traditional artists in any part of the world) maintain the quality and integrity of their work and receive a greater share from the proceeds from their artistry. The Ethnic Arts Foundation chose as its logo Ganga Devi's painting of Ardhinarishvra, the ultimate divine being represented as half male and half female (Shiva and Parvathi, Mahesh and Gauri, or any other male and female combination). [See Ganga Devi's painting of Ardhinarishvra on page 23.]
Ardhinarishvara

(Half Male/Half Female Deity)

Symbols of Lord Shiva on left, Goddess Parvathi on right

Madhubani painting by Ganga Devi
Interpreting Symbols Cross-Culturally: Mithila’s kohbar paintings

According to Pandit Govind Jha’s *Kalyani Kosh: A Maithili-English Dictionary* (published in 1999 by the Maharajadhiraja Kaneshwar Singh Heritage Foundation in Darbhanga, Bihar, India), kohbar is a painting in the bedroom of a couple meeting for the first time after marriage. Kohbar paintings typically consist of (1) a ring of six circles with (2) a seventh circle in the center. Behind the center circle, and reaching from the bottom to the top of the painting is (3) a vertical object with a design at its top (see Fig. 1). Aside from these three standard kohbar elements, artists are free to add whatever further items they wish: stylized borders, figures of humans, animals, household objects, foliage, etc. (see Fig. 2).

To observers familiar with Freudian symbolism, the interpretations of kohbar paintings may seem obvious: the vertical object is an erect penis, the circles (and the ring of circles) are vaginas, and the paintings themselves represent heterosexual union. The facts that kohbars are painted in marriage bedrooms, that some kohbars show the bride and groom entering the marriage chamber (see Figs. 3 and 4), and that occasionally kohbars include the upward-downward-united-triangles tantric design representing heterosexual union (see Figs. 1, 4, and 8) lend credibility to Freudian interpretations of kohbar paintings.
In Madhubani the identification of kohbar paintings with marriage is so strong that the presence of a kohbar signifies that a wedding is taking place. Lalita Devi's painting of a wedding includes a kohbar in the upper left-hand corner (see Fig. 5). Other wedding symbols Lalita Devi included in her painting are Lord Shiva with his trident, auspicious snakes, fish, a tortoise, an elephant, and the sun and moon god. When Mithila artists were asked to paint their life stories, a kohbar painting in the sequence of their life events "stood for" their getting married. This is the case in Ganga Devi's painting of her life story (see Fig. 6). In this painting, to the right of the kohbar, Ganga Devi and one other person are being carried on palanquins, a frequent way of arriving at weddings.

The plausibility of "obvious" Freudian interpretations of kohbar paintings lends support to hypotheses that some symbols (i.e., of penises and vaginas) may be universal and cross-cultural. Based on such hypotheses, the fact that in the villages of Madhubani some girls start painting such sexually-charged kohbars at an early age has implications for the sexuality of girls and women in this region of India.

"Obvious" though such Freudian interpretations may seem, they may not be completely correct. Godavari Dutta said her kohbar painting (see Fig. 7) shows a pond with one central lotus and six surrounding lotuses (all of which have women's faces). The design atop the vertical object has a male face with a moustache and a Vaishnavite forehead sign. Auspicious pond creatures (tiny snakes, tortoises, millipedes, etc.) swim between the central lotus and the surrounding lotuses. Outside the pond, in the lower right-hand corner of the kohbar, sit a bridal couple, the groom wearing a traditional kayasth-caste headdress, the bride praying before an elephant image for the long life of her husband. Above the bridal couple
are clusters of auspicious bamboos and, higher yet, betel leaves. In the upper right hand corner is a black bee. In the lower left-hand corner of the kohbar stands Lord Shiva (holding his trident, and with the Ganges River flowing from his hair) with his consort, the goddess Parvathi. Above them are the nine planet deities, the five planets, and in the upper left-hand corner the sun and moon gods.

Vimla Dutta's kohbar painting contains many of the same figures (see Fig. 8). In the lower right-hand corner a bride prays before an elephant image for the long life of her husband. In the lower left-hand corner stands Lord Shiva (with his hand-drum, and with the Ganges River flowing from his hair). Above him are the nine planet deities, the five planets, and the sun and moon gods.

Regardless of the universal applicability or non-applicability of Freudian symbol interpretations, interpreting the symbols in kohbar paintings in Madhubani is greatly enriched by knowing details of the lives and settings of the artists creating the kohbar paintings.
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