

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mithilanchal: A Cultural Wonderland of Bihar

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ABSTRACT

Mithilanchal is a cultural wonderland tucked cozily in the northern plains of Bihar. It lies east of the River Gandak and South of the Nepal Himalayas. It is bordered by River Mahananda in the east and River Ganga to its South. One may admire it in the form of Madhubani paintings or relish it while snacking makhanas or fox nuts. Its literary genius may be cherished in the poems penned by the medieval poet Vidyapati, who has written love lyrics for the divine duo of Radha and Krishna. Vidyapati was also a devout Shivabhakt and he has written poems immersed in the bhakti of Lord Shiva. Very recently, Mithilanchal was in the news for the laying of the foundation stone of the Punaura Dham temple for Sita, the consort of Rama. This is, however, just scratching the surface. Mithilanchal has its own genre de vie with its distinct culture, its Maithili language, its religious ardour, its festivals, cuisines, rituals and customs, and of course the famous Madhubani paintings. It bravely keeps alive a great tradition of colour, vigour and vibrancy, even though it is ravaged by the flooding of its rivers particularly, Kosi, known as the sorrow of Bihar. However, the rivers do have their advantage too. They bring a thick layer of new alluvium and make the plains very fertile. There is plenty of agricultural activity and the festivities revolve around the agrarian calendar.

Keywords: cultural wonderland; festivals; cuisines; Madhubani paintings; Mithilanchal

FULL PAPER

Introduction

It is a land of Machh, Paan and Makhaan, that is fish, betel nuts and fox nuts. Dairy farming and fishing are widely prevalent. Almost every well to do household in rural Mithilanchal will have a number of cows and buffaloes. Milk and curd are a part of their daily eating habits. Kheer cooked with makhaan or fox nuts are considered a delicacy. Dahi chuda is very common for breakfast (Curd with flattened rice). Different varieties of fish are cooked in myriad ways, especially after frying them in mustard oil. Dalpithi or lentil dumplings are cooked with zeal. So is Bagiya made of either rice or gram flour. Another delicacy is the tilkor ka tarua, that is, fried leaves of tilkor wrapped in besan, which are crunchy and tasty. Arkanchan leaves are the vegetarian's delight if they crave for something fleshy to eat.

Local Food of Mithlanchal



MAKHANA (FOX NUT)



PAAN



tilkor patte k pakore



MAACH BHAT (FISH RICE



DALPITTHI



DAHI CHURA

Kurta dhoti with Gamchha is worn by men, whereas sarees with blouses are worn by married women. Generally married women opt for bright coloured sarees and put on a lot of bangles too. Lac bangles are very popular among newly wed ladies. in spite of the shroud of poverty which the region has to wear... the raiments are very bright and attractive. Salvar suits are worn by girls, whereas boys usually wear jeans and T-shirts. The Paag is the most prized headgear for men, which is a symbol of honour and prestige. No account of the garments of Mithilanchal can be completed without mentioning the Paag.

Historical context and mythology: The Kingdom of Videha existed ever since the Vedic Times and the Kings of this region were known as Janaka. The daughter of one of these Janaka's was Janaki, the consort of Lord Rama. She is also mentioned as Vaidehi the daughter of Videha. Generally, to the Indian public she is known as the goddess Sita. She is the most powerful and enduring feminine icon of this region. In fact, Sita encompasses the spirit of womanhood in the whole of India and not just Mithilanchal. She is the most outstanding female persona of this particular region and a role model for women since hundreds of years.

ART AND CRAFT: Mithila painting embellished sari is a prized possession, especially if the paint work is done on silk. Fish, Peacocks, parrots and twining creepers are generally drawn as motifs on the borders of these sarees. Now as commercial activity is catching on, this painting can also be seen on silk stoles and dupattas and even on menswear like dhotis and kurtas, forming delicate and colourful borders. Apart from sarees, Mithila painting is to be found on canvas, paper, silk scarves, even on walls and railway coaches. These are brightly done with bold and definitive outlines which are filled in. If the entire painting is filled in with designs, it is Bharni. If it has gaps, it is Kacchi. If it depicts the marriage of Shiva and Parvati, it is Kohbar art, usually in red and white. The central theme of these paintings, however, is the Swayamvar of Sita, also known as Vaidehi, the daughter of Videha, the old name of Mithilanchal.



MADHUBANI PAINTING



SIKKI ART



SUJANI ART

Madhubani paintings are in great demand not only among the elite Indians who love to flaunt ethnic fashion, it is also getting popular globally. Some of the artists have been bestowed with Padma Awards for their beautiful and intricate painting styles. Baua Devi, Mahasundari Devi, Pushpa Kumari are among the outstanding artists. Baua Devi was the only woman artist from India to show at the groundbreaking *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibit in 1989 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. The works of Baua Devi, Sita Devi and Mahasundari Devi were included in the show *Stories, Ceremonies and Souvenirs: Popular Paintings from Eastern India* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Sujani art is another art form typical of Mithilanchal. It is a distinct style of needlework, with motifs of birds, trees, leaves and flowers. Sujani is especially

prepared to layout soft mattresses for newborn babies. This needlework is also used to embellish wall hangings.

Sikki art is comprised of making household articles like bowls, boxes and decorative items from a tall grass known as vetiver grass. It is yet another peculiar art of Mithilanchal and is evolving on a commercial level... as greater finesse is achieved in crafting these household items.

When it comes to festivals there are a plenty of them. Hindu festivals of North India such as Holi, Dusshehra, Diwali and Chatth are all celebrated with great fervour and enthusiasm. However, some festivals like Sama Chakeva are unique to this region. This particular festival celebrates sibling love through simple expressions such as earthenware which depict Sama and Chakava and other clay toys. Chaurchand is another special festival of the Mithila region. It is important for married women and is dedicated to Lord Ganesha and Chandradeva (the moon god) and celebrated on the Chaturthi of Bhadrapad Maas in the Shukla Paksha. Jitiya Vrat, is a fasting ritual observed by mothers for the wellbeing and longevity of their children. Madhusraavani a festival celebrated during the monsoon season marked by worshipping the Snake God and Family Goddess. Vat Savitri Pooja is a festival observed by married women to pray for their husband's longevity and wellbeing. Jur Sital marks the Maithili new year celebration where people consume traditional dishes and donate earthen pitchers containing water to Brahmins.

Mithila's cultural identity is shaped by its literature. One of the oldest prose works is Jyothishwar Thakur's Varna Ratnakara which covers everything from geography to society. The poetry of Vidyapati influenced later Bhakti traditions in Bengal and North India. He is regarded as the Kavi Kokil of Mithilanchal. Mithila's literary memory is still heavily reliant on his padavali songs which are devoted to Krishna. In the folk tales of Mithila, Gonu Jha must find a special mention because of his witty and humorous anecdotes.

Mithilanchal comprises of Darbhanga, Madhubani, Muzaffarpur, Sitamarhi, Sheohar, Samastipur, Bhagalpur, Begusarai, Saharsa, Supaul, Purnia, Katihar and Araria. Studying the cultural geography of this region is a very exciting proposition indeed. There is something to find in every turn and every bend even though on the outside it looks as if there is a layer of poverty which envelops the entire landscape.

Conclusion:

The German geographer Otto Schluter and the American geographer Carl O. Sauer were the pioneers in the realm of cultural landscape. While Schluter pointed out the contrast between natural landscape and cultural landscape, it was Sauer, who

stressed on the agency of culture in shaping the physical landscape. In modern times we strive to understand the evolving relationship between human activities and the natural environment.... this becomes significant when we try to study the culture of a specific natural region. Here we have attempted to take a peek in the cultural heritage of Mithilanchal which has stood resilient in spite of poverty and the ravages of annual flooding. It has nurtured an ancient legacy of arts, crafts, customs, rituals, traditions and religious beliefs. It has not only maintained the continuity of its priceless heritage; it has also evolved in the modern age and even diversified into new channels. It has also acquired the rigor to survive in a globally competitive world and make its presence felt.

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