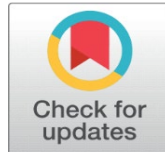
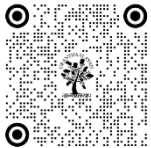


# WOMEN AS CUSTODIANS OF FOLK ART TRADITIONS IN INDIA: GENDERED NARRATIVES AND CULTURAL CONTINUITIES IN CONTEXT TO MADHUBANI ART OF BIHAR

Dr. Aditi Jha 

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Rachana Sansad College of Applied Art and Craft, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India



## Corresponding Author

Dr. Aditi Jha,  
[aditij@rachanasansad.edu.in](mailto:aditij@rachanasansad.edu.in)

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## ABSTRACT

Folk art in India embodies centuries of collective memory, community identity, and cultural resilience. Women have historically been the primary custodians of these traditions, transmitting artistic knowledge through domestic practices, ritual expressions, and communal storytelling. This paper explores the gendered dimensions of folk art in India, focusing on how women negotiate tradition and modernity, invisibility and recognition, domesticity and livelihood. Drawing on case studies from Madhubani Art traditions, the study situates women's artistic agency within feminist theoretical frameworks and cultural anthropology. The research argues that while globalization and commercialization have provided new opportunities for women artists, they have also reshaped the meanings, ownership, and sustainability of folk art practices.

**Keywords:** Women Folk-Artists, Madhubani Art, Cultural Narratives, Custodians

## 1. INTRODUCTION

India's folk art traditions constitute one of the world's richest repositories of intangible cultural heritage, embodying aesthetic values while simultaneously reflecting social practices, rituals, and community identities. Unlike classical art associated with elite patronage, folk art emerges organically from everyday life, rooted in domestic, agricultural, and ritual contexts.

Madhubani art, celebrated for its vibrancy and intricate motifs, exemplifies this intersection of culture and tradition. Originating in the Mithila region of Bihar and Nepal, it is believed to date back to the Ramayana, when King Janaka commissioned paintings for Sita's wedding to Lord Rama. Traditionally, women adorned walls and floors of their homes with these paintings during festivals, marriages, and religious ceremonies. Employing natural colors and simple tools such as twigs, matchsticks, and fingers, they developed distinctive geometrical and floral patterns that have since become iconic.

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Over time, Madhubani painting has expanded beyond its ritualistic and mythological functions. Today it documents lived realities, critiques social practices, and advocates for ecological concerns such as deforestation. In this sense, Madhubani operates simultaneously as decoration, aesthetic expression, and social commentary—particularly as it records the voices and experiences of rural women in a patriarchal society where literacy was historically confined to upper-caste men.

Women have been central to the continuity of this tradition. Their artistic labor, embedded within domestic and ritual duties, blurs the line between art and life, making their participation intrinsic rather than supplementary. Yet, their contributions are often marginalized in mainstream art history, where folk traditions are dismissed as “craft.” Such marginalization obscures the complex ecological, mythological, and cultural knowledge embedded in their work.

In contemporary times, commercialization has created new dynamics. While urban and global markets provide women artists with livelihoods and recognition, they also introduce debates around authenticity, authorship, and cultural ownership.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### Folk Art as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Folk art is widely recognized as a living cultural practice that embodies the collective identity of communities. Vatsyayan (1999) stresses that Indian folk and tribal arts cannot be viewed as static artifacts but as dynamic systems of knowledge, continually reinterpreted across generations. Similarly, Jain (2012) argues that folk art reflects the social, ecological, and spiritual frameworks of its communities, serving as a mirror of everyday life. UNESCO’s (2003) Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage highlights these practices as essential for maintaining cultural diversity in an era of rapid globalization.

In India, early documentation of folk traditions, such as Archer’s (1949) work on Mithila painting, often framed them as ethnographic curiosities rather than artistic practices in their own right. More recent scholarship challenges this reductionism by repositioning folk art within global debates on heritage and cultural politics (Mookerjee, 2009; Varia, 2011). Scholars increasingly emphasize the adaptability of folk art, showing how it responds to shifts in patronage, market demand, and socio-political contexts while retaining links to ritual and community life (Jain, 1998; Dalmia, 1991).

### Gender and Artistic Labor

Feminist scholarship has been pivotal in interrogating the invisibility of women in art history. Nochlin’s (1971) foundational essay argued that structural conditions—not lack of talent—explained women’s absence from canonical art narratives. Pollock (1999) extended this critique, demonstrating how art history itself is a gendered construct that privileges male-authored works. These frameworks are directly relevant to Indian folk art, where women’s creative labor has often been devalued as “craft,” “domestic handiwork,” or “ritual practice” rather than recognized as art.

Indian feminist scholars provide a more localized critique. Kumar (1993) argues that women’s artistic practices in rural India are deeply connected to their domestic and ritual responsibilities, yet embody sophisticated symbolic systems. Chatterjee (2016) highlights how women’s art functions as a gendered archive, encoding ecological wisdom, kinship relations, and social commentary. Such works blur the boundaries between the personal and the political, as domestic spaces become sites of cultural production.

### Case Studies of Women’s Folk Art in India

Madhubani (Bihar): Traditionally practiced by women to decorate walls during weddings and festivals, Madhubani paintings reflect fertility symbols, goddesses, and mythological themes (Archer, 1949). In the 1960s, women artists began painting on paper for sale, a transformation that provided economic opportunities but also introduced tensions around authenticity and market aesthetics (Jain, 1998; Varia, 2011). Scholars note how Madhubani serves as a lens into women’s religious devotion and social critique, with contemporary works addressing issues like dowry, caste, and environmental degradation (Kumar, 1993).

### Globalization, Market Forces, and Authenticity

The globalization of folk art has redefined its contexts of production and consumption. Scholars such as Dutt (2012) highlight the role of cooperatives and NGOs in enabling women artists to access income, education, and recognition. At the same time, Phillips (2006) and Mookerjee (2009) caution that market forces often privilege certain “authentic” styles, constraining artistic innovation and imposing external standards of value. For women artists, commercialization is thus

ambivalent: it provides livelihood opportunities and visibility while simultaneously reshaping meanings and ritual functions of their art.

This transformation raises broader debates on cultural ownership and intellectual property. When ritual art forms are commodified for global audiences, the collective authorship of women practitioners often becomes obscured, replaced by curated market narratives that privilege individual names or male representatives (Jain, 2012).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design, rooted in feminist ethnography and cultural anthropology. A qualitative approach is most appropriate for exploring women's narratives, symbolic meanings in art, and the socio-cultural contexts of production. The design emphasizes interpretive inquiry, allowing folk art to be studied both as a visual text and as a lived practice embedded in ritual, community, and gender relations.

- **Fieldwork** in Madhubani, Warli, Gond, and Mandana arts
- **Semi-structured interviews** with women artists.
- **Visual analysis** of artworks as cultural texts.
- **Comparative case study** across traditions.

Data were coded thematically to analyze narratives of continuity, gender, and modernity.

### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis of fieldwork, interviews, and visual documentation across the selected folk art traditions of Madhubani reveals four major thematic clusters: (a) Gendered Custodianship, (b) Intergenerational Transmission, (c) Negotiation with Modernity and Market, and (d) Symbolic Agency through Art.

#### 1) Gendered Custodianship of Tradition

In traditional Madhubani art, women emerge as the primary custodians of practice. Their artistic labor is often intertwined with domestic and ritual responsibilities, which blurs the distinction between "art" and "everyday life." For instance:

- Women's ritual wall paintings during weddings and festivals called "kohbar" preserve mythological motifs (Sita, Krishna, fertility symbols).
- Women are central to painting fertility symbols such as the mother goddess, signifying their embodied role in sustaining life cycles.
- The act of painting walls and floors during Diwali or marriage rituals affirms women's role as guardians of household prosperity.
- Interviews consistently highlighted that men rarely participate in these practices, except where commercialization has altered gender roles. This indicates that women's creativity functions as cultural memory within the domestic sphere, even as it remains under-recognized in institutional art discourse.

#### 2) Intergenerational Transmission

Transmission of folk art is primarily oral, embodied, and intergenerational. Mothers and grandmothers teach daughters informally through observation and participation during ritual events. In Madhubani villages of Bihar, artists described how children begin by filling colors in outlines drawn by elders, gradually acquiring skill and symbolic literacy.

A senior artist emphasized that "the painting is not taught in schools, it is taught in the courtyard, during the harvest." Among practitioners, younger women reported declining participation due to education and migration, raising concerns about sustainability.

This finding underscores that folk art functions as pedagogy within the household, where art-making is inseparable from socialization into gendered and cultural roles.

#### 3) Negotiation with Modernity and Market

Commercialization has reshaped these traditions, offering both empowerment and precarity.

Madhubani artists (especially post-1960s) gained visibility through NGOs and state patronage, transforming wall paintings into paper and canvas works for urban buyers. Women reported increased economic independence but also a loss of ritual context.

While some women artists gain recognition, they also face challenges of cultural appropriation, underpayment, and reduced agency over how their work is represented globally. Thus, modernity both liberates and marginalizes.

#### 4) Symbolic Agency through Art

Folk art functions not merely as decoration but as a form of symbolic agency. Women embed their lived experiences, ecological knowledge, and ritual wisdom into visual motifs.

In Madhubani, fish and lotus motifs symbolize fertility, survival, and community well-being. Depictions of farming, childbirth, and festivals reaffirm women's role in sustaining community cycles.

For many artists, art-making becomes a way to assert identity and resilience, especially in contexts of caste and tribal marginalization. One artist described her practice as "keeping the ancestors alive on our walls."

#### 5) Emerging Challenges

Findings also highlight challenges threatening sustainability:

- Declining youth participation due to migration, formal education, and disinterest in traditional roles.
- Commodification that privileges market-friendly styles while eroding ritual diversity.
- Institutional neglect of women's authorship in state exhibitions and academic discourse.

Despite these, many women innovate by integrating traditional motifs with contemporary themes—such as environmental conservation, gender justice, or migration—showing that custodianship is not static but adaptive and creative.

## 5. FEMININE DESIGN ELEMENTS IN MADHUBANI ART

Feminine design elements are fundamental to Madhubani art, reflecting the tradition's origins among the women of the Mithila region.

. The artwork is rich with motifs and themes celebrating fertility, nature, spirituality, and the daily lives of women.

Key feminine symbols and themes

#### Fertility and procreation

- **Fish:** Often depicted in pairs, fish are a powerful symbol of fertility, prosperity, and good fortune. Their pairing symbolizes a bountiful, thriving family.
- **The kohbar room:** A specially decorated room in a newlywed's house, its wall paintings are centered on fertility. Common motifs include the lotus and bamboo, which scholars often interpret as representations of the female and male reproductive organs, respectively, to bless the marriage with progeny.
- **The lotus:** In addition to purity, the lotus also represents female beauty and power. It is seen blooming in muddy water, a metaphor for life's colors and beauty emerging despite hardships.
- **The mango tree:** This symbol of abundance, fortune, and fertility often appears with branches full of fruit, representing a prosperous and healthy family.

#### Divine feminine

- **Goddesses:** Deities such as Goddess Durga and Goddess Lakshmi are commonly featured, representing the divine feminine's power, knowledge, and prosperity.
- **The Tridevi:** Depictions of the goddesses Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Parvati symbolize wealth, knowledge, and power, respectively.
- **The Ten Mahavidyas:** These ten tantric wisdom goddesses, embodying different aspects of the divine feminine, are a captivating and complex subject in Madhubani art.
- **Mother goddesses:** These figures, particularly in the Bharni style of painting, symbolize the creation and proliferation of life.

## Women and daily life

- Women's chores: Traditional paintings often feature women performing daily activities like winnowing grain or carrying pots, which represents the duties of a wife and mother.
- Feminine figures: Paintings often showcase the graceful, expressive faces of women with large, captivating eyes. In some portrayals, a woman carrying a pot on her head signifies womanhood, nurturing, and fertility.
- Wedding scenes: Madhubani is traditionally painted during auspicious events like weddings, and scenes of bridal processions and ceremonies are common.

### 5.1. FEMALE FOLK- ART CUSTODIANS OF MADHUBANI ART

A pioneering Madhubani artist, Sita Devi showcased the nature and influence of the arts in the socio-political development of benighted rural India. With her untiring efforts, she brought the bharni form of Madhubani paintings out of homes and exhibited it in public both across India and the world. Her contributions were officially recognized by the Government of India in 1981 and she was awarded the civilian honor of Padma Shri.

It was the efforts, popularity, strong determination, and commitment of Sita Devi that got her not only global recognition but also paved the way for the development of her village Jitwarpur as she always demanded. Her success gave her village its first primary and later secondary school, concrete roads, and electricity poles. Later, she also undertook a project of teaching Madhubani art to 1000 villagers for their social and financial empowerment.



A pioneering Madhubani artist, Sita Devi

Other female artists are Godavari Dutta was awarded Padam Shri at the age of 93 participated in exhibitions across the country and also visited Germany and Japan several times to present her Madhubani paintings.

Mahadunadari Devi's efforts supported the artists and art, she founded the cooperative society of Mithila Hastashilp Kalakar Audyogki Sahyog Samiti. Depicting the struggles of a Maithil girl in her painting, she highlighted the challenges that women were facing in the society. This inspiring artwork made her win her first award from the Bhartiya Nritya Kala in 1976. Later in 1982, award of Padma Shri in 2011 for her paramount contribution. Her legacy and artwork are kept alive by her sister-in-law Karpuri Devi and granddaughter Pushpa Kumari.

While Madhubani paintings sketch still retains its traditional essence of illustrating scenes from Hindu mythology and folklore, the young Dalit artist from Samastipur region of Bihar, Malvika Raj is making waves with her representation of the genre with an innovative twist centered around Buddha's epoch and Hindu narratives. A graduate from NIIFT, Mohali, she draws her most inspiration from the Kobhar form of Madhubani and creates paintings depicting the life and stories of Lord Buddha, Dalit leader Babasaheb Ambedkar and several other revolutionaries close to her heart. Her inventive paintings of Ambedkar's life narratives including the caste humiliations he faced, have been displayed at the prestigious University of Edinburgh.





Madhubani artist Malvika Raj

## 6. CONCLUSION

The case of Madhubani art illustrates how women's creativity has historically been confined to the private sphere, yet paradoxically it is through this very confinement that women emerged as the primary custodians of cultural memory. The walls, floors, and courtyards they adorned were not only aesthetic spaces but also symbolic sites where mythology, ritual, and lived realities intersected. By embedding gendered experiences into visual language, women artists ensured that folk art was simultaneously a form of cultural continuity and a subtle mode of agency.

However, the contemporary trajectory of Madhubani raises critical questions. As the art form entered the global market, the shift from ritual to commodity has altered its meanings. While commercialization has undeniably provided rural women with new visibility and economic mobility, it has also restructured the cultural politics of the tradition. What was once an intimate, community-based practice is increasingly curated for external consumption, often privileging certain motifs and aesthetics over others. This selective preservation risks flattening the layered narratives of Madhubani, where women's lived experiences, ecological wisdom, and ritual practices once coexisted organically.

Yet, rather than signaling loss, this transformation should be seen as a negotiation of cultural continuity in modernity. Women artists have not merely preserved Madhubani art; they have actively redefined it in response to shifting socio-economic realities. Their agency lies in balancing authenticity with innovation, reclaiming visibility within patriarchal structures, and ensuring that the art remains a living, dynamic tradition.

In this sense, Madhubani art exemplifies the larger gendered politics of folk traditions in India: women as both inheritors and innovators, navigating between preservation and reinvention. Their custodianship is not passive guardianship but a culturally active process, sustaining folk art as a space where heritage, identity, and gendered voices continue to resonate.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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