

# CAUGHT IN THE WHEELS OF COMMERCE? THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF MADHUBANI PAINTING IN INDIA

*Filip Vermeulen and Bhagyalakshmi Daga*

## 8.1 Introduction

The contemporary Indian art market has been growing over the past couple of decades. This is said to be fuelled by both a robust economy and the exponential growth of a new demographic of art buyers – the expanding middle class. Stakeholders in the art market now cater to these new affluent buyers with carefully developed artistic interests. These collectors, along with the private and non-profit sector investing in market infrastructure, have altogether contributed to the emergence of an ecosystem that is gaining widespread attention. Indian art is increasingly sought after by collectors both in India and abroad, and more and more contemporary Indian artists are now appearing in international biennials, exhibitions, and fairs (Vermeulen 2015; Komarova 2018; KPMG 2018). India's art market infrastructure is also expanding with the India Art Fair established in capital New Delhi since 2008 and the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in the Southern Indian town of Kochi since 2012. At the same time, India's inclusion in the global art market is also having a visible impact on traditional and folk-art practices.

The arts and crafts sector is said to be particularly sophisticated in India, forming the second-largest source of employment in the country after agriculture (Mohi-ud-din et al. 2014). The case of Madhubani painting gives us an understanding of the impact of globalization and commercialization on a traditional folk art. For years, the women of Madhubani have participated in wall and floor paintings depicting not just spiritual images but also certain rites of passage in Hindu culture, such as marriages, births, etc. It was only in the late 1960s that these wall paintings were transferred to paper and sold nationwide. Today, Madhubani art is witnessing a surge in national and international popularity with a growing demand for diversified products, such as sarees, tiles,

notebooks, etc., all of which can easily be purchased both offline and online. The commercialization of this art form brings a combination of various opportunities and challenges for the different artist clusters in the region. There is little doubt that many families in the Madhubani region depend on their art for their livelihoods. At the same time, one could argue that while globalization and the establishment of a modern style market for the visual arts in India have transformed it into a marketable fine art, the engulfing process of commercialization may be eroding the traditional meanings of this unique expression of Indian folk art and culture.

Fieldwork undertaken by the authors in November 2016 in the two artist villages Ranti and Jitwarpur in Madhubani, in the Northern State of Bihar in India, reveals not just the process and impact of the transformation of this art form and the market on the artists but also the strategies they employ to deal with the increased demand for their work. The authors have visited the homes of 16 artists in both the villages, most of whom either speak the local language Maithili or Hindi to communicate. In addition to in-depth semi-structured interviews and collective discussions that were recorded, direct observations and field notes also aid in this analysis of the Madhubani art market.

The rest of this chapter is organized as follows. Section 8.2 presents an introduction to Madhubani art comprising of a brief history as well as unique characteristics of the traditional art. Section 8.3 explores the discovery and the subsequent transformation of the art form. The process of commercialization of Madhubani art and its implication for the artists as well as the market forms are the focus of Section 8.4. Section 8.5 investigates the role of middlemen who have made themselves all but indispensable in the market, while Section 8.6 evaluates the impact of the digital revolution on the market, and its gradual inclusion in the global art market. Section 8.7 presents a discussion on the role of institutions such as art schools and cooperative societies in protecting artists from exploitation. The final section discusses the transformation of Madhubani art into a near fine arts practice and concludes by posing questions on the possible erosion of traditional meanings attached to this unique expression of Indian art.

## **8.2 Madhubani art – historical context**

Madhubani, a small town and district in the Indian state of Bihar, boasts a rich cultural heritage that goes back over 2,500 years (Kaushik 2019). It is also the home of the traditional art style called Madhubani or Mithila art. In its earliest form, this art served a distinct purpose in the lives of Madhubani dwellers. Essentially, a day-to-day domestic ritual activity, for centuries it was practiced by rural women living in closed societies in the Madhubani region. It is believed that “the original inspiration for Madhubani art emerged out of women’s craving for religiousness and intense desire to be one with God” (Madhubani Art Centre 2015: para 13). Based on the earliest references to these artworks dating

back to 14th century texts (Mishra 1979), they were originally painted by the women of *Brahmin and Kayasth* (upper) castes on the walls (*kohbar*) and floors (*arpana*) of their houses during auspicious events such as wedding and births.

Vermeylen and Sarkar (2019) describe how the participation in the art practice relates to various rites of passage from birth to death:

Sathhudi, a ritual observed during the seventh and ninth months of pregnancy; Chatiyar puja, done on the sixth day after the birth of a child; Annaprashan, the child's rice-eating ceremony; Akshararambh, to mark a child's entry into the world of learning; Janaur, to mark the symbolic rebirth of young Brahmin boys and also marriages and deaths. Festivals like Chhath and Chauth Chand are also occasions for practicing this ritual art.

(Vermeylen and Sarkar 2019: 166)

The *arpana* or floor decorations, painted using *arva chawal* (rice) and *sindoor* (vermillion), usually depicted spiritual figures as well as motifs and images from life and nature.

The *kohbar* (Figure 8.1), painted on the walls of the *kohbar ghar* or the nuptial chamber, incorporated symbolic images of the lotus, fishes, birds, turtles, and snakes, to represent union and fertility. According to artist Godavari Dutta, the occasion of Ram and Sita's wedding from the Hindu epic *Ramayan* led to the creation of the *kohbar*, ultimately becoming the symbol of Madhubani art.<sup>1</sup> Initially, the paintings were limited to the walls and floors of mud houses. The process first included a coating of cow dung on walls to ensure absorption of colours, followed by another layer of smoothed mud to flatten out the walls. The colours were naturally prepared, using extractions from different leaves and flowers.

Studies suggest that this folk-art first came to be known to the outside world in the early 1930s following a massive earthquake in Bihar (Rekha 2010; Heinz 2006). The damaged painted walls were discovered by British officer William G. Archer during his inspection of the region. Intrigued by its similarities to the works of Miro and Picasso, he took back several black and white photographs to London which became the first known documentation of this art (Ghosh 2013).

However, it wasn't until the critical drought and consequent famine that struck Bihar in the late 1960s that the exploration and research of Madhubani art officially began, under the orders of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. As Ghosh (2013) describes, the agricultural economy of Madhubani was severely crippled and consequently, representatives of the All India Handicrafts Board were sent to the villages as part of a larger initiative to alleviate the acute poverty in the area. For several years, aid worker and artist Bhaskar Kulkarni and his team researched not just the marketability of the art and its potential as a source of income but also strategies that might help bring attention to the artists that needed support and nurturing.

National Awardee Bibha Das recalls her late mother-in-law and master artist Mahasundari Devi as one of the first women to lead the transformation of Madhubani art.<sup>2</sup> In spite of the stringent *pardah* (veil) customs – a form of female segregation that prevented women from communicating with outsiders or possessing an occupation outside of the domicile – she was encouraged by Kulkarni to replicate her wall compositions on the handmade papers and colours he provided. Ultimately Kulkarni went on to inspire scores of women in the villages to do the same, periodically selling their paintings all over the country and providing the women with a steady source of income. As Gita and Arun Wolf (2015: 65) highlight, state interventions such as these “turned a household practice into a vivid art form that was commercially viable”.

### 8.3 Madhubani art – a transformation

As illustrated earlier, the very first steps towards the commercialization of this art form were taken in the 1960s. The transfer of wall paintings to paper had vast consequences for Madhubani and its inhabitants. Heinz (2006: 18) explains this slow detachment and transformation of the art by from its traditional meanings to an artistic product as Kulkarni “created a class of artists, consciously attempted to professionalize them and successfully turned some into international celebrities”. Heinz further states that not only had this attempt to bring economic relief to the poverty-stricken region of Bihar been successful in providing formerly segregated women in a patriarchal society with a steady source of income, it was also empowering them to be more independent, take ownership of their art, and live with dignity. At the same time, the growing prestige of Madhubani art started to draw the interests of both national and international buyers, filmmakers, and scholars to a previously overlooked part of Bihar.

Commissioned works for hotels, fairs, as well as in private domains steadily brought attention to these artists (Rekha 2010). Encouragement of artists from all backgrounds through state and national level awards also saw a surge in interest for the art form, especially among international collectors. The foreign currency being increasingly spent in the area did not go unnoticed by the government and private funders, as various schemes, NGOs, and societies such as Gowri Misra’s SEWA Mithila and Parampara Project,<sup>3</sup> as well as The Ethnic Arts Foundation by Raymond Owens<sup>4</sup> were set up in collaboration with the artists to develop the art form and set up an outlet for sales.

Madhubani painting has no discernible association to any conventional school of art, and therefore stood out for its raw originality. “Mithila art has its own style, its own identity, its own model . . . it represents something for us” notes Godavari Dutta.<sup>5</sup> Women of Madhubani were not educated, nor possessed any formal art training. The artistic practice, therefore, has been confined to the geographical range of Madhubani and has simply been handed down from mother to daughter, one generation to the next. Wolf and Wolf (2015)

illustrate how even when exploring different themes in their works, artists continue to frame their works with traditional borders and patterns in order to keep “a common visual vocabulary alive” (66). Thus, any personal artistry aside, the overall formal art style of Madhubani has remained more or less unchanged.

However, the differences between works become more apparent when the caste system – a social order system in India based on traditional occupations – comes into play. In Madhubani, too, caste-based art styles began to slowly emerge in the 1970s, each caste employing certain unique characteristics, images, and styles in their works (Donier 2009). The paintings from the lower castes (*Dalits*) were considered simpler and less ornate in comparison to the ones from the upper castes (*Brahmins*, *Kayasthas*). As Berger and Heidemann (2013) describe, most discourses on the art had been limited to the works of upper castes for decades until the visit of anthropologists Erika Moser and Ray Owens to the Dalit village Jitwarpur in the 1970s. Moser encouraged the Dalit women to provide for themselves by creating artworks like the Brahmin and Kayastha women. Unfamiliar with the elaborate styles and images of the upper caste artists, the Dalit women began creating their own style of works inspired by their traditions and lives. Thus, while the Brahmins and Kayasthas focused primarily on religious themes in their paintings, the Dalits allowed themselves a greater freedom of expression by capturing their oral history in their works and illustrating the lives and struggles of their community. Dalit women were persuaded to work on handmade papers and use colours employed exclusively by the upper castes. At the same time, inspired by the growing prestige of the Madhubani art community, a marked gender shift was witnessed with several men also participating in the practice of the art form. As evidenced by field observations and the interviews conducted, this shift has become even more pronounced over time, with an increasing amount of men practicing this art.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, a fascinating development in this earlier process of commercialization has been the organic emergence of the different styles of Madhubani painting such as *Bharni* (color), *Kachni* (line), and *Godna* (tattoo), all of which originated from different castes. While *Bharni* or colour paintings use solid and vibrant colours to fill in enclosed areas, the *Kachni* or line paintings (Figure 8.2) make use of thin, delicate lines to create patterns (Vermeylen and Sarkar 2019). *Godna* or tattoo style painting initiated by artist Chano Devi<sup>7</sup> was derived from the simple tattoos that Dalit women had on their arms and legs.

While at first the *Kachni* and *Bharni* style were limited to the upper castes and the *Godna* style to the lower ones, these established demarcations are slowly starting to blur with time, at least for several young Dalit artists who are actively employing the different art styles and merging them with their own (Figure 8.3). These distinctions still seem to exist for the upper caste artists, however. When asked about the merging art styles today in the interviews conducted, some upper caste artists appeared rather affronted, quickly rushing to deny their participation in them,<sup>8</sup> indicating some ongoing tensions within the art community, at least as far as the caste-based art styles are concerned.

### 8.4 Process of commercialization

Older generation artists could not fully comprehend the economic dimension of their craft, as they lacked entrepreneurial skills. Most artists, even today, take more of a ‘wage worker’ approach to their activities rather than an entrepreneurial one, whereby they would take the initiative.<sup>9</sup> However, the establishment of various cottage industries and handicrafts organizations in the state was instrumental in selling the artworks through their outlets, popularizing them both nationally and internationally. Several NGOs and organizations such as the *Mithila Art Institute*, *Mithilasmita*, *Ethnic Arts Foundation*, and *Jeevika* have contributed towards empowering thousands of artists, by providing them with support, training, and exposure, as well as facilitating nationwide exhibitions and direct sales with buyers.

An area of discourse is the disassociation with the status of ‘art’ which influences the treatment of the artists’ works. The creators often refer to themselves as artisans and not artists, suggesting a divide in how their work is perceived, not just by them but also by the market. Kaushik Jha of Mithila Art Institute finds that the treatment of Madhubani art as a handicraft reduces it to a tradeable decorative commodity, devoid of the unique characteristics usually associated with art.<sup>10</sup> The commercialization of this art form has led to its display and expression on various diversified products, and derivatives of the original Madhubani imagery and prototypes (Figure 8.4). Beginning with the transfer of the wall paintings to handmade papers in the 1960s, the traditional art can now be found on a broad range of products and materials such as sarees, cushion covers, drapes, t-shirts, tiles, jewellery boxes, cups, glasses, notebooks, toys, etc. Such objects make for a more widespread commodity than a painting and increase the range of its uses (Sarkar 2016).

Artists in the village of Ranti assert that the demand for diversified products is substantially more than paper paintings, usually bringing them twice the earnings. Artist Abha Das sells around 12 sarees with Madhubani imagery a year, each fetching her nearly €130, compared to 3–4 large paintings per year for roughly €60.<sup>11</sup> Artists are also hired on commission by the private sector to display visual commentaries and interpretations of themes for events and festivals (for example, Indian spices brand *MDH Masala* commissioning a Rajasthani Holi scene in Madhubani style of painting<sup>12</sup>). Although overall, paper paintings continue to be the largest sellers, the market for diversified products is, without a doubt, developing. Local co-operatives like Shilp Sangh are increasingly involved in this commodification process, encouraging their artists to create new products that possess a distinct market advantage (see later).

### 8.5 The role of intermediaries

In markets where intermediaries exist due to any sort of market imperfections, situations concerning power imbalances can transpire. Intermediaries like art dealers have been very perceptive in assessing the commercial potential of

Madhubani art, making them all but indispensable in the market. Dealers control the information concerning demand for these goods in distant markets, and are uniquely positioned to organize transport and sales.

Artist village Jitwarpur, which houses most of the artists belonging to lower castes, consists of scores of unregistered artists working from their homes. While official statistics are unavailable on the total number of artists employed in the Madhubani art market, multiple studies have attempted to evaluate the size of the clusters in Madhubani. It is estimated that of the 400 houses in Jitwarpur, approximately 250 houses in Jitwarpur have multiple household members partaking in Madhubani paintings (Ghosh 2013). It is also estimated that in 2015, more than 26,000 workers engaged in the process of production, sales, and promotion of Madhubani art were registered at the Office of the Development Commissioner (Handicrafts) in Madhubani (Jha et al. 2017).

In most households in Jitwarpur village, every family member, from young children to seniors, is involved at some level in producing artworks. A single-family member is often responsible for the entire production process, with other members assisting them at different stages, such as mothers doing the illustrations and outlines while the children colour in. Artists of Jitwarpur primarily work with *Bharni* or colour paintings, which can be produced at a fast rate, especially when the division of labour is applied. There is also hugely demanded in the market because of the rich colours used.

However, based on Godavari Dutta's narrative,<sup>13</sup> as well as the accounts of families interviewed, major obstacles for the artists happens to be uncertainty and information asymmetry. Most artists have little to no connections outside the village to take their paintings around.<sup>14</sup> For example, participation in exhibitions requires access to either national or state government agencies, or financial resources to purchase a spot in them, both of which are severely lacking for the villagers. Furthermore, while several artists had information concerning prices at which the dealers were selling their works, they also reported having no contacts in the larger market, who could be willing to aid in direct sales. Additionally, most of the artists can only properly converse in the local language *Maithili*, not to mention that a majority of artists are women who cannot move out of the village to sell their works, which further limit the sales opportunities for Madhubani artists.

As a result, these artists face many entry barriers which impede access to the market (Figure 8.5). It is therefore no surprise that a large section of the market for *Bharni* paintings from this village is now occupied by a growing horde of middlemen or dealers with a well-connected network of buyers, both within the country and globally. At the same time, the dealers are aware of the different artist families in the villages. "They know us and our work because our mothers and grandmothers . . . are famous. So, they know the houses, the districts, and where we live. That's why they keep coming here to take our works to the cities", comments artist Sheela Devi of Jitwarpur.<sup>15</sup> And while we lack solid evidence to support this claim, it appears that dealers collude rather than

compete, in that they tacitly agree which artists will supply a particular dealer, thereby maintaining a stronghold on the market as well as limiting entry of new dealers into the market. These dealers, then, facilitate exchange by buying or commissioning hundreds of paintings every month in bulk, generally for a negligible fixed price for a batch of paintings featuring popular motifs such as the tree of life, and ultimately selling them to bigger buyers in the major cities.<sup>16</sup>

Dealers employ various techniques to ensure and safeguard their position in the market. Primarily, artists are discouraged from signing their works, so as to avoid any future direct contact with the buyers.<sup>17</sup> This further increases the artists' dependence on a steady monthly income from the middlemen. According to artist Runa Das:

Earlier foreigners would come to the artist's house to buy paintings. Now the hotels they stay in tell them where to buy the paintings from because they have deals with dealers. . . . And other times these dealers even show up at the hotels to make sales.<sup>18</sup>

This observation was echoed by several other artists interviewed as well, which suggests that this may be a common occurrence. Dealers purchasing in bulk also particularly consider works that incorporate repetitive styles, designs, and themes befitting the demands of the urban market. Artist Ranjan Paswan laments that heavy exploitation, often by uncertified middlemen, is rampant, rendering the artists helpless as they settle for poor compensations for their hard work, especially in lean periods.<sup>19</sup> Thus, due to fewer opportunities for direct sales, the market appears to be almost entirely intermediary-driven, instead of customer-driven. In this business model, it is clearly in the best interest of the dealers to separate the end-buyers from the creators, making them all but indispensable.

### **8.6 The promise of digital revolution and inclusion in the global art market**

Some alternatives do exist, however. Media and telecommunication access are less of a challenge for the artists today. While a minority of older established artists rely chiefly on fairs and direct contact with patrons for business, some younger artists make use of social media platforms such as Facebook pages and groups, Amazon, and smaller web portals, such as *eMithilaHaat*, *mithilapaintings.com*, *worldofmadhubani.com*, *madhubaniart.co.in*, *localqueen.com*, etc., to promote and sell their products. These websites list not just paintings, but a variety of different Madhubani products created by artisans. However, based on anecdotal evidence as well as an analysis of the websites, we ascertain that nearly all platforms tend to solely promote works of established artists. Especially sales on popular Indian e-commerce websites, such as *snapdeal.com*, *engrave.in*, and *chumbak.com*, tend to be larger for derivative works and crafts than paintings. Some artists informed us that often works are bought by middlemen or businesses



and put up for sale on e-portals, but the artists themselves have no means of addressing these issues.

Some business is also conducted through WhatsApp, where artists communicate with existing buyers and share images of their current works.<sup>20</sup> But it presents little scope in connecting with potential buyers and the practice is not too common. Artist Ranjan Paswan acknowledges that younger artists are more active on social media and “are much further in the race because they can reach their customers directly”.<sup>21</sup> In general, artists are not tech-savvy and have not been able to fully take advantage of digital marketing due to a lack of knowledge and training in the matter, ultimately finding themselves disadvantaged due to a lack of direct interface to communicate with their customers. This further illustrates the scope and need for policy intervention.

At the same time, the global interest in the art form has contributed to the growth and recognition of some artists. Vermeylen and Sarkar (2019) elaborate on the apparent increase in the visibility of contemporary Madhubani artists in the art market over the years. Renowned artists such as Dulari Devi, Amrita Jha, and Bharti Dayal participate in yearly exhibitions and fairs across the country. Paintings of the more popular artists have also made it to various museums and exhibitions in France, Germany, and the United States, significantly helping to familiarize the Western audience with this kind of folk art. Godavari Dutta has been instrumental in setting up the Mithila Museum in Niigata, Japan, considered a treasure house with over 15000 paintings.<sup>22</sup> International interest has gradually piqued with not just returning foreign buyers and collectors but also academics and filmmakers such as Ray Owens and Joe Elder, curious about the dynamics of this art form. Despite the surge in popularity, however, the market is restricted to selective fairs and exhibitions in the country for most artists. While the state and national level awardees are invited to special events and exhibitions organized by the government, most artists depend on their own network of intermediaries and returning buyers to sell their works.<sup>23</sup>

## **8.7 The role of institutions and co-operatives**

Some creator-driven initiatives in Madhubani despite, or perhaps due to, the intermediary-driven market situation appear to yield fascinating outcomes. Finding themselves disadvantaged as a result of limited access to their buyers, the people of Madhubani have been resourceful in joining forces in distinct ways to overcome their adversities. In this section, we explore two different models for the provision of skills and resources as well as protection of artists’ interests identified in our fieldwork in Madhubani.

### ***8.7.1 The academic approach: Mithila Art Institute***

Troubled by the pronounced exploitation of artists, the Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF) was set up by anthropologist Raymond Owens in 1980 to contribute to

the continual development of Madhubani Art, and to ensure these artistic skills are passed on to new generations of artists. Since then, EAF has focused on making the production of original and aesthetic Madhubani artworks an economically viable activity. The Mithila Art Institute (MAI) (Figure 8.6) was consequently set up in the heart of the town of Madhubani, offering free one-year training programmes to support, encourage, and develop new generations of Madhubani artists, irrespective of their castes.<sup>24</sup> The MAI trained over 400 young artists since the founding of the institute in 2003, until it closed its doors in 2019.<sup>25</sup>

Out of hundreds of applicants, 25 students were competitively selected every year. During the first year, training took place for 4 hours every day, and while students did not receive any stipends, they also do not pay any tuition or material fees. Operational costs were covered by the foundation and donors. In essence, MAI aspired to get students motivated to learn to paint out of love and respect for their cultural heritage and not for immediate monetary gains. At the end of each year, a select number of exceptional students were encouraged with scholarships to continue for the second year of advanced training and special projects.<sup>26</sup>

Various master artists were involved in designing the curriculum and teaching at the institute. While the first six months were dedicated towards “the culture and command of traditional Mithila iconography”, the last six months allowed students to work on any range of subjects. Kaushik Jha, the Chief Administrator of MAI, asserts that the institute aimed to develop the artistic skills of students, encouraging them to create works that are rooted in tradition while at the same time allowing them to express their original interests and ideas. Ranjit Paswan, a graduate of the programme told us he finds it important to have a unique style and message so his work “stands out in the crowd and interests the public . . . especially when everybody is making the exactly same thing several times”.<sup>27</sup>

Students were also taught interpersonal and presentation skills, and networking to establish contact with buyers and ultimately build their brand. Furthermore, the institute also acted as a gallery and an agent for the graduates, with 70% of the revenues from sales going to the students. Thus, the students have a strong incentive to continue producing their best work. In contrast to the works produced in the villages, the paintings were all signed, with small descriptions of the work written by the artists on the back of each painting.<sup>28</sup> As a result, prices for paintings offered for sale through the MAI website were substantially more expensive than the ones which can be purchased in the villages.

Thus, the MAI has been instrumental in the recognition of this art form almost as a fine arts practice. It is important to note, however, that the certificate provided by the institution has not been recognized by any formal educational organization or board. Considering the general preference towards formal education, an uncertified diploma may not have seemed encouraging to students, especially since it is a rigorous programme that runs at the same hours as formal courses in colleges and art academies.

Right until they closed their doors, MAI maintained a strong digital presence; the institute website was frequently updated with hundreds of paintings

on display by graduates that could be purchased through any one of the sophisticated digital payment methods.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, MAI promoted engaging content such as exhibitions, artworks, and market and artist news on their Facebook page, enabling a global reach and interaction. Then manager Kaushik Jha stressed the value of hand-made works, but recognized a possible market for digital paintings, believing this could create unique opportunities for the artists. However, the focal point of the institution remained paintings, and deviation from the norm was highly discouraged. Overall, MAI trained artists work primarily in the traditional sense, on paper paintings, wall paintings, or murals. Cloth and other products are just pure business and have nothing to do with art, Kaushik Jha stated.<sup>30</sup> Thus, the focus of MIA was not to operate as a business enterprise but to create value for original Madhubani paintings.

As traditional as the teachings at MIA may seem, it did not stop the artists to experiment with new and contemporary subject matter: graduates presented powerful critiques of contemporary issues in their paintings, ranging from global issues of terrorism to ones more intimately tied to their biographies such as sexism, violence, and poverty. Some even create their own painting styles, while others combine existing ones such as line and colour painting. Consequently, there is a discernable difference in the quality and style of works from graduates compared to the artists of Ranti and Jitwarpur. The works by the MIA artists also tend to be in much better condition due to adequate storage facilities, which are lacking in the villages. Furthermore, the association with MAI and its network provides most graduates with a greater chance to expand their reach and establish themselves as professional artists, as evidenced by their roster of alumni achievements.

The main reason given for the closure of MAI in the Summer of 2019 is the foundation of a Mithila art academy by the state of Bihar: the Mithila Chitrakala Sansthan. This new government-funded institution employs salaried instructors and promises to provide a range of facilities for students and the opening of a museum dedicated to Madhubani art. These are amenities that MAI could not provide as it operated on donations, volunteers, and to some degree on the revenues from the sales of artworks.<sup>31</sup> Bittersweet as it may have been for the staff and students of MAI, the launch of a proper state-run and certified academy also signifies the ultimate recognition of Madhubani art as a part of Indian heritage – something MAI always sought to accomplish.

### ***8.7.2 The commercial approach: Shilp Sangh***

Far removed from the academic environment is Shilp Sangh. A co-operative society in the village of Ranti, it comprises 52 women skilled in Madhubani art.<sup>32</sup> Set up with the support of multiple foundations and organizations (such as The Asian Heritage Foundation, Japan Social Development Fund, Jiyo!, and the Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project-Jeevika), Shilp Sangh was established in 2008. The initial investment was provided by Jiyo! and Jeevika. Shilp Sangh has since worked towards providing sustainable livelihoods and ownership to the

women of Ranti through their own skills while at the same time promoting the art form. Women are routinely provided with skill development training and mentoring during training sessions held every 3 months. This is done to ensure support for budding artists as well as a constant flow of artisans being brought into the co-operative.

Unlike the individual entrepreneurs in the villages or a training ground like MAI, Shilp Sangh is essentially structured as a democratically operated producer collective (Figure 8.7). There is a centralized core of decision-makers in place (such as an appointed president, secretary, and treasurer), who handle day-to-day management. The women gather to work every day in their outdoor open studio, and hold regular meetings to discuss their orders, payments, and expenses, as well as potential products and markets to explore.

Co-operatives like Shilp Sangh also protect these artists from exploitation from middlemen, helping them by negotiating fair trade prices. Artists have lamented that they were forced to accept the lower prices set by the middlemen who purchased from them until they joined Shilp Sangh. Furthermore, for hundreds of women who aren't allowed to work outside of their home, the economic contribution made by Shilp Sangh helped legitimize the activity of making and selling Madhubani artworks. This has added value to their lives and given them dignified means of providing for themselves.

Shilp Sangh focuses on design-led development, encouraging artists to be creative about producing new works under the traditional art domain that may have a distinct market advantage. They target a lot of their products towards the ever-increasing young/urban markets. This presents the most interesting case of the effects of commercialization. The organization boasts of a wide variety of commodities being produced by the collective. From home furnishings such as cushion covers, curtains, bedspreads, and napkins; to apparel such as dupattas, scarves, and sarees; to even toys for children. In addition to these, small trinkets and boxes, wedding cards, bookmarks, diaries, and calendars, kitchen, as well as garden accessories are also produced. The women maintain that these diverse products tend to be bigger sellers compared to paper paintings. The works are generally affordable, and while heavily ornate, carry qualities of being mass-produced; it is difficult to tell one piece apart from the other.

On average, Shilp Sangh makes Rs. 5–6 lakhs (6000–7000 euros) in sales per year (BRLP 2016). While the bulk of the works is sold to local wholesalers and retailers who further supply their goods to the major cities (e.g. Delhi Haat), Shilp Sangh also facilitates some trade by participating in fairs and exhibitions (BRLP 2016). Commissioned works are also undertaken, such as the Lotus Pond installation at the Mumbai International Airport. Some business is conducted directly with regularly visiting customers, but there is no direct export system in place (BRLP 2016).

Shilp Sangh has some digital presence with an appointed representative to handle their Facebook page, although it shows irregular activities and updates. There is no direct way to make online purchases nor are products for sale

displayed on their page. However, dozens of artworks are available for sale on amazon.in, usually with the title ‘Shilp Sangh Jeevika (material) (subject/theme) (size)’. Thus, the works are sold as products of a faceless collective, with no means of reaching the creative person behind it. In the end, in light of the intended audience which is not prepared to pay a premium for unique works by a branded artist, this model has proven to be viable for all parties concerned.

## 8.8 Conclusions

The hidden traditional folk art of Madhubani paintings is now recognized as not just fine art but also an important expression of Indian heritage. In addition to the more customary paintings, the age-old tradition got commodified through the application of the Mithila iconography onto a wide variety of objects. With the dissemination of this colourful imagery both within India and abroad, Madhubani art has become an export commodity and has entered the international art scene and market. This is evidenced by several featured exhibitions in Europe, Japan, and the United States and their visibility on offline and online trading platforms. The growing popularity of Madhubani imagery and increasing trade has also led to a more segmented market, whereby the high-end artists supply (signed) unique paintings to veritable art collectors, while a wide variety of mass-produced derivatives finds its way to buyers less concerned with quality and originality.

Furthermore, our evidence shows that this is a market very much dominated by the dealers. Middlemen have been instrumental in connecting the production centres in remote Bihar with the market outlets in the major cities, and beyond. As a result, they are in a position to control and steer the production, rendering most artists in Bihar dependent on the demands of the dealers and which allows dealers to charge high commissions. During our fieldwork, artists complained of this lack of independence, which also explains the emergence of local artists’ cooperatives such as Shilp Sangh to gain some negotiating power and claim a larger share of the profits. At the same time, while the digital revolution does open some avenues for trade and independence for the creators, the overall potential seems untapped and unexplored.

It should be recognized that the trade in Madhubani paintings and all its derivatives has lifted many families in the district out of poverty. Hundreds of family production units in the villages of Ranti and Jitwatpur alone now earn their livelihood practicing Madhubani art. Furthermore, we observed that the growth of this creative industry holds the promise of paving the way for upward social mobility by attempting to break deeply rooted caste barriers, although this will be a slow process. Finally, when asked whether they lamented the loss of spiritual meaning resulting from the commercialization of their beloved art form, the artists pointed to the roof over their heads, suggesting that it was a small price to pay.



Figure 8.1 Kohbar painting by Godavari Dutta, 2016

Source: Photograph by authors.



Figure 8.2 Line painting by unknown artist, 2016

Source: Photograph by authors.



Figure 8.3 A Bharni- and Godna-style painting by artist Ranjan Paswan, 2016  
Source: Photography by authors.



Figure 8.4 Cushion cover with Madhubani art, 2016  
Source: Photograph by authors.



Figure 8.5 Art dealer selling Madhubani paintings at Dilli Haat, 2020

Source: Photography by authors.



Figure 8.6 Student at Mithila Art Institute, 2016

Source: Photography by authors





Figure 8.7 Outdoor open studio of Shilp Sangh, 2016

Source: Photograph by authors.

## Notes

- 1 Dutta, Godavari. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 2 Das, Bibha. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 3 “Gauri Mishra – The folk paintings of Mithila (Madhubani)”, Parampara Project, accessed January 22, 2020, [www.paramparaproject.org/individuals\\_gauri-mishra.html](http://www.paramparaproject.org/individuals_gauri-mishra.html)
- 4 “About” Ethnic Arts Foundation, accessed January 22, 2020, <https://ethnicartsfoundation.com/about/>
- 5 Dutta, Godavari. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 6 Multiple artists in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 7 Paswan, Vinod (Son of Chano Devi), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 8 Identities hidden (Artists) in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 9 Multiple artists in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 10 Jha, Kaushik. (Administrator, MAI), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 11 Das, Abha. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 12 Das, Bibha. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 13 Dutta, Godavari. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016
- 14 Multiple artists in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 15 Devi, Sheela. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 16 Multiple artists in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.

- 17 Multiple artists in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 18 Das, Runa. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 19 Paswan, Ranjan. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016
- 20 Jha, Sudhir. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 21 Paswan, Ranjan. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 22 Dutta, Godavari. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 23 Paswan, Vinod (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 24 “Home”, Mithila Art Institute, accessed January 22, 2020, <http://mithilaartinstitute.org/Home/Index>
- 25 “A Message from Prof. Parmeshwar Jha. President”, Mithila Art Institute, accessed January 22, 2020, [www.facebook.com/MithilaArtInstitute/](http://www.facebook.com/MithilaArtInstitute/)
- 26 Interview with Kaushik Jha; <http://mithilaartinstitute.org/Home/Index>
- 27 Paswan, Ranjit. (Artist), in discussion with the authors. Madhubani, November 2016.
- 28 “History”, Mithila Art Institute, accessed January 22, 2020, <http://mithilaartinstitute.org/Home/History>
- 29 At the time of writing, the website was still active and paintings from the extant stock could be purchased online: <http://mithilaartinstitute.org/Home/Paintings>
- 30 Interview with Kaushik Jha
- 31 “A Message from Prof. Parmeshwar Jha. President”, Mithila Art Institute, accessed January 22, 2020, [www.facebook.com/MithilaArtInstitute/](http://www.facebook.com/MithilaArtInstitute/)
- 32 Situation at the time of fieldwork, in 2016.

## References

- Berger, P., and Heidemann, F. (2013). *The Modern Anthropology of India: Ethnography, Themes and Theory*. London: Routledge.
- BRLP. (2016). *Study on the Back End Value Chain Analysis of Cluster*. Bihar: BRLP.
- Centre, M. A. (2015). About Madhubani art. Available at: [www.madhubani.com/about-madhubani-art.aspx](http://www.madhubani.com/about-madhubani-art.aspx)
- Donier, W. (2009). *The Hindus: An Alternative History*. New York City: Viking Press.
- Ghosh, S. (2013). *An Interactive Need Assessment Survey and Design Study of Madhubani Painting of Jitbarpur, Madhubani district, Bihar*. Patna: Design Clinic Scheme.
- Heinz, C. B. (2006). Documenting the image in Mithila art. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 22(2), 5–33.
- Jha, A. K., Mishra, J. M., and Chandran, A. (2017). Indigenous tourism in India: Evaluating the strengths of Mithila painting art and heritage and suggesting integrated marketing development approach for sustainable promotion. *Atna-Journal of Tourism Studies*, 1–34.
- Kaushik, S. (2019). Madhubani—the exotic art of Mithila. *Researchers' Guild*, 1(3), 1–6.
- Komarova, N. (2018). Between the market and noncommercial art institutions: Early career strategies of contemporary artists in emerging art scenes. *Poetics*, 71, 33–42. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2018.11.004>
- KPMG. (2018). *Visual Arts Industry in India: Painting the Future*. KPMG – FICCI. Delhi, India.
- Mishra, V. (1979). *Cultural Heritage of Mithila*. Allahabad: Mithila Prakasana.
- Mohi-ud-din, T., Ahmad Mir, L., and Bhushan, S. (2014). An analysis of current scenario and contribution of handicrafts in Indian economy. *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*, 5(9), 75–78.
- Rekha, N. (2010). From folk art to fine art: Changing paradigms in the historiography of Maithil painting. *Journal of Art Historiography*, 2, 1–20.

- Sarkar, A. (2016). *'In Stock' on Amazon: The Cultural Globalisation and Deterritorialisation of Madhubani*. Rotterdam: Erasmus University Rotterdam.
- Vermeulen, F. (2015). The India art fair and the market for visual arts in the global South. In Velthuis, O. and Curioni, S. B. (eds.), *The Globalization of Markets for Contemporary Art*, pp. 31–54. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vermeulen, F., and Sarkar, A. (2019). The commodification of art: Moving Indian painting in the global market. *Proceedings of the 34th World Congress of Art History*, 16, 166–169.
- Wolf, G., and Wolf, A. (2015). *Between Memory and Museum: A Dialogue with Folk and Tribal Artists*. Chennai: Tara Books.