

The *Kohbar Ghar*: A study of sacred space and ritualistic paintings in Mithila marriage traditions

Shashi Singh*, Fulena Rajak & Anjali Sharma

Department of Architecture and Planning, National Institute of Technology Patna 800 005, Bihar, India

*E-mail: shashis.ph23.ar@nitp.ac.in

Received 04 August 2025; revised 22 November 2025; accepted 14 January 2026

The painting tradition of *Kohbar Ghar* (nuptial chamber) is a tradition of intricate wall paintings in the room where married couples meet for the first time after marriage. Rural-urban migration and time shortened marriage ceremonies are causing folk art and cultural practices to decline, resulting in loss of roots and near extinction of these traditions. The objectives of the research are to examine the cultural, social, and ceremonial significance of the *Kohbar* paintings in connection to Mithila marriage practices; understand the religious iconography and metaphorical meaning behind the decorations at the *Kohbar Ghar* and study how *Kohbar* painting traditions have been maintained and adapted as it has been affected by modernity and commercialization. The descriptive research used primary (museum visits) and secondary (web resources) data to analyze these issues. Unlike earlier aesthetic or historical works, this paper analyzes the meanings of symbolic motifs and their links to Mithila's socio-economic background. It highlights *Kohbar Ghar* as an important element of the living heritage of Mithila, as well as strengthening the discussion of the cultural heritage and the differences between regions. The research discloses that *Kohbar* paintings and cultural symbols of the Mithila community maintain their culture despite commercialization representing their values, beliefs, and aspirations, and discussing the recent developments of using new techniques and materials and the preservation activities of museums and exhibitions. This paper investigates the religiousness and ritualistic implications of *Kohbar* painting traditions during Mithila weddings.

Keywords: Cultural identity, Fertility symbols, *Kohbar Ghar*, Madhubani paintings, Religious motifs, Sacred space

IPC Code: Int Cl.²⁶: B44D 2/00, C09B 61/00

The history and development of human settlements, customs and traditions in Mithila is extensive. It had been formerly known as the Mithila Kingdom. The *Mithilanchal* (Mithila region) was cited by Satapatha Brahmin for the first time. The other Buddhist, Jain, and Sanskrit texts also mention it as religious area and unique territory of Mithila. Satapatha Brahmin claims that this was once a wooded region and a wetland where non-Aryan communities lived. Once Gautam Rahugan, Madhav Videha and Baiswanar landed this area, it became an agrarian land furthermore progressively became a hub of Aryan civilization¹.

Madhubani folk painting started in North Bihar's Mithila zone of India. In the whole Mithila region, the most commonly used word for painting is *likhiya*, which is originated from the Sanskrit name *alekhya* (signifying both writing and painting). Traditionally, these paintings were created during festivals, ceremonies, and significant occasions like weddings. The Brahmin and Kayasth communities are

traditionally responsible for depicting mythical and religious themes. Madhubani paintings feature Hindu deities like Durga, Rama, and Krishna, along with nature-inspired elements such as trees, birds, and celestial entities. The art symbolizes devotion, celebration, and harmony with nature².

A majority of experts have overemphasized the symbolic and ceremonial significance of Madhubani folk art since W.G. Archer's (British art historian and civil servant) seminal essay on the subject in 1949³⁻⁷. Rarely have they gone beyond broad depictions of symbols with "fixed" or persistent illustrations, which are generally categorized under the heading of "community-styles". The South Asian tradition study that predominates in the research of traditional and tribal art forms, places excessive stress on the exploration of folk art in terms of philosophical as well as symbolic interpretations⁸⁻¹⁰.

According to tradition, the two rituals like *Triratrivrata* (the vow of three nights of refrainment), *Chaturthi karma* (the rituals of fourth symbolizing marital union) were conducted within *Kohbar Ghar*

*Corresponding author

(the nuptial room). Adorning the walls of the *Kohbar* through various illustrations is an age-old tradition in Bihar's Mithila region.

The murals' motifs include fish, birds (parrots), sacred lotus plants, bamboo woods, tortoises and entwined snakes are painted – all of which are representations of fertility and the continuity of life. The practice of decorating the wall of the nuptial room continued until the early 1960s, when drawing paper along with cloth became widely available and affordable in the villages¹¹.

Khobar's paintings are cultural, reflecting Maithili culture and daily life, where women are portrayed in many ways. The nuptial chamber artwork is filled with symbols that represent every facet of Maithili existence and are imbued with practical significance and wisdom¹². Traditional wisdom and folklore are native and ethnic people's knowledge, encompassing folk culture, dance, art, music, handicrafts, designs, literature, medicines, biodiversity, plant varieties, and it needs to be preserved¹³.

However, the *Kohbar* painting tradition is vanishing due to rural-to-urban migration and the modern trend of shortening or simplifying marriage ceremonies due to lack of time available for leisurely wedding rituals. This disconnects from heritage that could lead to the permanent loss of a unique cultural practice and artistic expression.

While previous studies have focused primarily on the symbolic or genealogical dimensions of *Kohbar Ghar* paintings, limited attention has been given to how these ritualistic practices are experienced, adapted, and reinterpreted in contemporary social contexts. However, recent changes in social customs, mobility, and modernization have redefined the existing ritualistic and experiential dimensions of these sacred spaces. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how

the historical and symbolic essence of the *Kohbar Ghar* continues to influence the spatial, aesthetic, and ritual practices of modern Mithila weddings.

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Materials and Methods

The present research is based on a descriptive research design and a profound study of the *Kohbar* painting tradition of the Mithila Region. This paper explores the relevance of *Kohbar Ghar* paintings in Mithila culture by using both the primary and secondary sources. The study was given the primary observation period between April 2025 and June 2025 within the selected museum collections and cultural archives in Bihar and Delhi that have Mithila and *Kohbar* paintings. The visits were arranged two to five days long with an opportunity to undertake elaborate visual records and analysis of exhibited artefacts within the context. The secondary data used in the observations consisted of the published literature, exhibition catalogues and archival documents on Mithila art and the marriage rites.

Study area

Madhubani, literally meaning “forest of honey” is a unique region in India, formerly known as the northern sub-division of Darbhanga district. It is renowned as the birthplace of Sita, the founders of Jainism and Buddhism – Lord Mahavira and Lord Buddha, as well as being a center of Sanskrit traditions and learning. During India's independence movement, Madhubani (Fig. 1) became a prime center



Fig. 1 — Location of Madhubani District (adapted from: https://maps.google.com/?cid=10675365798624711264&g_m)

for nationalistic sentiment and khadi production. Post-independence, the district has gained fame on the cultural landscape of India for commercial paper reproductions of traditional Mithila wall and floor paintings. The region has produced beautiful specimens by artists like Sita Devi, Jagdamba Devi as well as Baua Devi, from nearby villages (Jitwarpur, Ranti, Bhawanipur, Rasidpur, Rajnagar, Harinagar, Lahariaganj, Shayam, Simri etc.)^{14,15}.

Results

Mithila paintings, rooted in the socio-economic landscape of Mithilanchal region, have historically been a female-centric art form exhibiting their importance in maintaining cultural identity. The categorization of these artworks differs, featuring important themes such as the *Kohbar Ghar*, a holy wedding chamber that plays an important role in Mithila marriages, decorated with symbolic designs that signify fertility and abundance. As time has passed, the transition from courtyard enclosures to global museums has raised the profile of this folk tradition, leading to its global recognition. The imagery found in *Kohbar* paintings, abundant with holy symbols, enhances the relationship between cultural identity and ritualistic traditions. The differences in *Kohbar* paintings showcase the distinctive traditions of various communities, while modern artists are experimenting by fusing traditional methods with contemporary styles. Recent exhibits like "*Kohbar – Root to Roots*" highlight the dynamic character of these artworks, affirming their significance in both ceremonial and artistic contexts.

Women-centric painting

It is one of the earliest customs of painting evolved by women, done by females (Fig. 2) and protected by females; passed on verbally across generation. Mithila's *Angana* (courtyard) is totally a woman's area. Many village women usually gathered to paint walls for weddings, ceremonies and other regional celebrations which led to the creation of their customs, paintings and songs. Mithila painting initially appeared as *Aripan* (floor art) and *Kohbar* (wall art), created by females during customs and ceremonies. In order to invoke divine blessings, the beautiful designs appear on the walls of *Gosaunighar* (shrine house), the *Kohbar Ghar* and the internal courtyard during family celebrations such as festival, weddings, *pujas* (worship ritual) and *vratas* (religious vow)¹¹.

Mithila painting

Mithila painting, a traditional Indian folk art from the Mithila region, is categorized into three main types: *Bhittichitra* (wall painting), *Bhumi-Sobha* or *Aripana* (floor painting), and *Pata-Chitra* (canvas painting).

Among the three types, *Bhitti Sobha* or *Kohbar Lekhana* (Mithila wall paintings) is specifically created on the walls of three significant places within a Mithila home. These include the *Gosauni-ka-Ghar*, which is the room dedicated to the family goddess or deity; the *Kohbar Ghar*, commonly known as the "honeymoon" room for newlywed couples, adorned with images of gods and goddesses; and the *Gosauni-Kohbar Ghar-ka-Koniya*, which refers to the verandah outside the *Kohbar Ghar*, also devoted to the worship of family deities (Fig. 3). These paintings hold deep cultural and religious significance,



Fig. 2 — Women involved in Madhubani paintings at Jeevika Centre, Jitwarpur Village

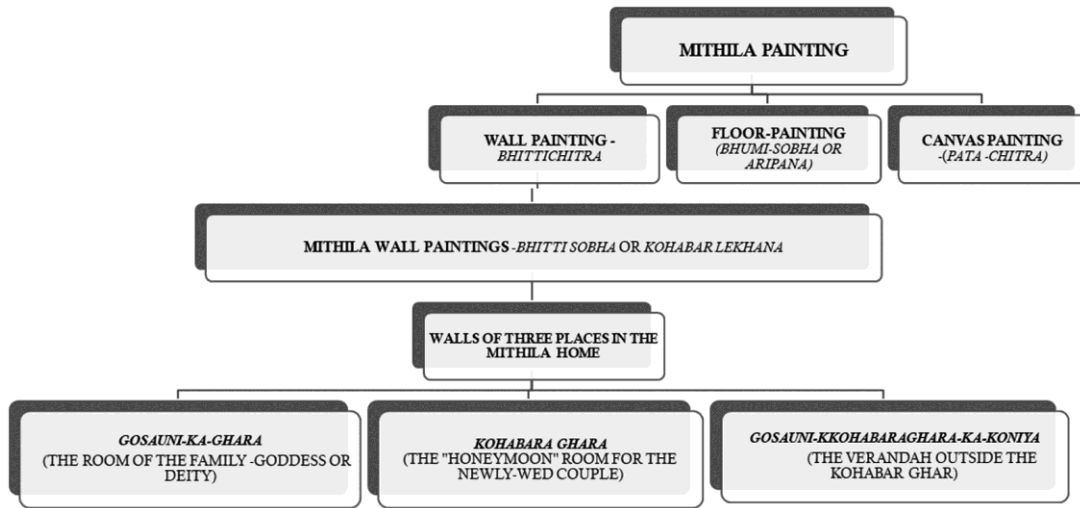


Fig. 3 — Mithila Art: Traditional wall painting

reflecting the traditions and beliefs of the Mithila region².

Understanding the *Kohbar Ghar*

The *Kohbar* is a particularly adorned space with intricate wall paintings where married couples meet for the first time after marriage. *Kohbar* paintings, of the community, feature lotus rings with faces inside and a vertical stem piercing through the central ring, topped by a similar face. The vertical object represents the lotus stem rooted at the pond's bottom. The lotus symbolizes fertility and abundance, inspired by local monsoon-covered ponds. The *Kohbar* compositions incorporate additional fertility symbols, such as snakes (divinity), fish, and tortoises (love).

Celestial bodies like the moon and sun, along with deities, are painted as witnesses to the marriage ceremony. The central image of Durga often adorns the *Kohbar Ghar*, emphasizing the sanctity of the event. Surrounding paintings of *Purain* (lotus petal) are accompanied by deity illustrations, enhancing the auspiciousness of the marital ritual (Fig. 4). In the paintings of the walls of this room, only one colour is used –*gairika* (red ochre), a mineral pigment, *i.e.*, red colour. It is very interesting to note that women of all ages participated in Mithila painting. The youngest generation fills up various forms, middle-aged women made sketches, and the oldest *ahibhati* (married women) placed a dot in the centre of the wall. The wall paintings are brightly colored, common in the *Gosāuni-ka-ghar* (deity room). The popular themes are *Harisaunapūjācacitra* (Harisauna worship ritual art) and *sarovaracitra* (family pool picture) with fish,

Fig. 4 — *Kohbar* Painting by Ganga Devi displayed at National Crafts Museum, New Delhi

turtles, and hand imprints. It is based on ritualistic Style shown through flowers painted around the *Gosāuni-ka-ghar* entrance. Inside the *Kohbar*, four women called *Naina Jogin* (mystical female protector with one eye) are drawn in the corners, carrying articles, bamboo bush with birds on one wall and stylized lotus plant with human-faced flowers (moon depiction) on another. Paintings in verandah shows scenes of Mithila's rural life, food carriers, mango, pomegranate, jackfruit trees (fertility symbols), peacock love scenes and Krishna's playful act of stealing maidens' clothes, appealing to festive gatherings which symbolizes fertility, joy, and cultural vibrancy¹².

Socio-economic characteristics of Mithila region

Mithila has a patriarchal society where rural women are often illiterate and men dominate decision-making. Men from affluent socio-economic background often pursue higher education and follow their chosen professions. The Mithila region's socioeconomic structure has a significant impact

on both artistic creation and individual expression. Not only does the subject extent of creative representation depend on factors like caste, occupation, and income, but it also affects access to resources and marketplaces. Paintings from Brahmin and Kayastha communities are more spiritual, while those from Dusadh community are more realistic¹¹. Traditionally, painters from Brahmin and Kayastha communities portrayed religious and ritual situations, while Dusadh community artists, have concentrated on local deities, everyday life, and economic inequality as shown in Table 1.

The commercialization of Mithila art has transformed the lives of women in the region, allowing them to move out of their villages, to various places in the districts, states, or even to other nations, for greater freedom and liberty. Opportunities lie in tourism, infrastructure, and artisan empowerment.

Importance of Kohbar Ghar in Mithila weddings

It is a holy place and newlyweds are blessed by the gods and ancestors therein so that their marriage life becomes successful and fruitful. The *Kohbar Ghar*, in a spiritual sense, is a representation of the balance of *prakriti* (nature) and *purusha* (the cosmic spirit), that is, harmony in marriage. The process of making these wall paintings is a socially binding activity since the women give joint effort on these paintings, which creates a feeling of community. The *Kohbar Ghar*, in addition to its ritual importance, plays a critical role in the continuation of the cultural heritage of Mithila, which means that the cultural traditions and forms of art can be passed through generations¹⁶.

Iconography: symbols and motifs

The iconography of the *Kohbar* paintings (Fig. 5) is an intricate fusion of symbolic themes that express the cultural, spiritual, and social values of the Mithila community. Six distinctly feminine faces encircle a seventh in the middle. It is a line that is typically created with red and black paint or ink. When a bride and groom spend their first night together in a Mithila compound, it is customarily painted on the wall of the room (*Kohbar ghar*). *Kohbar* comes in *Brahmin* and *Kayashtha* forms¹⁷.

Kohbar paintings usually showcase faces inside the rings of the lotuses. Lotus symbolizes fertility and abundance. Fish symbolize fertility, abundance, and water's life-sustaining qualities. The tortoise in Indian culture symbolizes stability, protection, and longevity, often placed near the lotus or central motifs in paintings, symbolizing a stable foundation for a couple's life; bamboo, symbolizing growth, strength, and continuity of lineage. It represents the groom and his family. The vibrant feathers of a pair of peacocks symbolize beauty, love, renewal, joy, celebration, and marital fidelity, often depicted as a symbol of romantic union. Parrots symbolize communication, love, and companionship. Snakes symbolize regeneration, protection, life continuity, fertility, and interconnectedness.

Kalash (sacred pot), a symbol of abundance, fertility, and divine blessings, is often adorned with mango leaves and a coconut in paintings, symbolizing prosperity and spiritual energy. Elephants represent

Table 1 — Social influences on motifs and artistic agency in Mithila painting




Social group	Common motifs and themes	Artistic style (s)	Pictures	Socio-economic narrative/agency
(Brahmin, Kayasth)	Hindu deities (e.g., Krishna, Shiva-Parvati), religious epics, mythological scenes.	<i>Bharni, Kachni</i>		Reinforcement of religious tradition and identity; patronage-based sustenance.
<i>Dalit (Dusadh)</i>	Local heroes (e.g., Raja Salhesa), folk deities (Rahu), animal and tattoo-inspired patterns, social justice themes.	<i>Godna</i>	 	Expression of daily struggle, social assertion, resistance, and emerging collective identity.



Fig. 5 — *Kohbar* paintings showcasing religious symbols and motifs (a, b & c) at Sanskriti Kendra, Aya Nagar, New Delhi by Artist Shanti Devi (d, e & f) At National Crafts Museum, New Delhi by artist Ganga Devi

strength, wisdom, and royal prosperity, whereas cows symbolize purity, nourishment, and maternal care. Marriage ritual depictions feature the bride and groom thanking Parvati. *Naina Jogin* is a mystical and spiritual concept which refers to a divine, yogic, or supernatural figure—often feminine—believed to embody divine sight, spiritual awakening, and the inner connection to the cosmos. The sun symbolizes masculinity and life force, while the moon symbolizes femininity and emotional stability. Sun, moon, and idols act as witnesses to marriage. Mythological figures like Kamadeva and Rati, the god and goddess of love, are depicted to bless the couple with romantic and emotional harmony. Goddesses like Durga occupy the center, blessing the event symbolizing protection and prosperity. Shiva and Parvati – drawn in the lower left corner, represent celestial grace¹¹.

Connection between sacred places and cultural identity

The *Kohbar Ghar* also plays its role in preservation of the cultural wealth as it is a sacred place where traditions, rituals, and art - which depict the community ethos -are followed, observed, and performed. It ensures continuity of cultural traditions across generations by relying on Mithila paintings and figurative designs. It is also an illustration of community beliefs, an artistic expression of the Maithili interpretation of fertility, plenty and divine

blessing and a reinforcement of shared values of family and continuity. The *Kohbar Ghar* adorning custom is a collaborative practice, which brings people together, creating a stronger sense of identity. Being a visual embodiment of cultural identity, its design, symbols, and rituals redistribute Mithila's heritage. Women play an important part in this tradition. They demonstrate their artistic and spiritual contribution to the community by using Mithila paintings, and it shapes the way of gender roles and identity in the community. Finally, the *Kohbar Ghar* can be an icon of cultural pride that will give the Maithili identity more power across the borders and preserve its vast heritage for future generations¹⁸.

Importance of Mithila painting in the wedding ceremony

The *Kohbar Ghar* paintings make the places of a sacred zone, combining the physical environment with the cosmic and supernatural energies, and thus, making it a divine shrine of wedding rituals. Even the symbolic images such as the lotus, bamboo, fish and peacocks have profound meaning regarding fertility and reproduction and are invoked during the rituals to grant children to the couple. Moreover, the art work symbolizes harmony in the universe as well as in marriage and symbolizes the balance of the opposite sides and encourages interrelation and unity between the spouses. Besides being a ceremonial art, these

paintings serve as a connection to the cultural identity, as they describe the tale of the heritage and common values of Mithila people. They also play an educational and social role, depicting mythological tales and moral lessons that guide the couple in understanding their responsibilities in marriage. Even after the wedding, the paintings continue to hold significance, serving as reminders of vows and blessings, reinforcing the spiritual and cultural essence of the sacred union¹⁶.

Rituals performed in the *Kohbar Ghar*

Hindu marital customs in Mithila, India, includes rituals of *triratrivrata* (three-night vow) and *Chaturthi karma* (fourth day ritual), which have thrived in Mithila and survived. These customs are closely connected to the setting up of a *Kohbar Ghar*, a venue of weddings, and the rituals conducted within it (Fig. 6). The wedding rituals take place in two consecrated spaces: the *madap* (wedding ceremonial pavilion) and the *Kohbar Ghar*. The courtyard of the house, is crucial for the wedding rituals, where grooming and preparations are performed. The courtyard is consecrated fresh on each occasion, unlike temples or divine images. The space is covered with cow dung and decorated with holy diagrams using powdered rice paste, making it suitable for the ceremonies and holy rituals. *Kohbar Ghar*, a ritual in Mithila, involves the couple entering the conjugal life after completing marriage rituals in *mandapa*.

The rituals, which include the *naina-jogin* motif and pictures, hold significant meanings in Mithila. The images in *Kohbar Ghar* have evolved over time, with contemporary interpretations changing over time. The bride and groom offer vermillion to a bamboo grove and lotus plant, symbolizing the conjugation of male and female, and fertility. In Mithila, bamboo is widely used from birth to death, and is also used in funerals. After the *Kohbar Ghar*

ritual, *Gauri puja* (goddess Parvati worship) is performed by bride and groom, which involves placing vermillion powder on a clay elephant's head and putting it on her parted hair. This ritual is performed every morning, with the groom standing by the bride's side. Various blessing rituals like *Chumavan* (blessing ritual) are performed, offering prayers for the couple's prosperity, along with playful customs like *Ungarala Aata* (finding the ring), which fosters bonding. The images in *Kohbar Ghar* have evolved over time, with modern technology replacing traditional images¹⁶.

Regional variations in *Kohbar* paintings

The *Kohbar Ghar* paintings exhibit social group and community variations, reflecting the unique artistic and cultural traditions of different groups (Fig. 6). Brahmin style focuses on religious themes and presents gods like Shiva-Parvati and Vishnu, as well as elaborate red-and-white patterns and sacral symbols, such as lotus, sun and moon. Kayastha style is more narrative and ornamental, with geometric patterning, vivid colours and symbols such as fish, tortoises and peacocks, which is a symbol of prosperity and abundance. Harijan/Dalit style on the other hand is simpler but bold and makes use of earth colors and depicts animals such as elephants and snakes which indicate their strong affiliation to nature. Geographical variations also make significant contribution in differentiating these art styles¹¹.

In Northern Mithila, the artists use cooler colours and put the images of mountains and rivers reflecting the importance of divine blessings and the presence of nature. Southern Mithila, on the contrary, depicts warmer colours, floral patterns, and human figures, symbolizing fertility and daily life. Techniques of art are also different according to the region. Traditional practices are still upheld in the rural societies where



Fig. 6 — Variations in styles (a) Bharni style (b) Kachni Style (c) Godana Style (Paintings done by artists of Jitwarpur village)

the natural pigments are used in painting which is directly applied on the walls. The urban artists on the other hand have adapted new materials, synthetic colours and moved to canvas and fabric paintings, which are more commercial. This form of art is also influenced by socio-economic factors. Wealthier societies tend to employ synthetic pigments and more complex styles whereas rural artists remaining with natural materials and classical styles.

Discussion

Contemporary *Kohbar* art has evolved and early traditions of *Kohbar* using mud walls are long past with modern art incorporating contemporary themes of education and female empowerment. Artists are

merging tradition and innovation through the engagement of workshops, exhibitions and government programs.

Modern approaches

The reproduction of *Kohbar* paintings into other mediums has enabled this ancient art to thrive on surfaces other than the mud walls. Nowadays, *Kohbar* designs are revived by the artists on canvas, paper and cloth (Fig. 7), satisfying the commercial demand without losing the cultural integrity. Digital tools have also increased opportunities and allowed mass production of textiles, home furnishings, and fashion. Alongside these changes, thematic expansion has broadened the scope of *Kohbar* paintings. While fertility and marriage



Fig. 7 — Madhubani inspired décor and products (a) Madhubani painting on reception wall of IGNC, New Delhi (b) Saree (c) Wall hanging (d) Lamp

remain central, modern themes such as education, women's empowerment, environmental conservation, and political commentary have found a place in the art form. A fusion of traditional motifs with abstract styles has also given rise to contemporary interpretations.

With increasing commercialization and global recognition, *Kohbar* paintings have gained a place in international art galleries and are now sold as standalone art pieces. Their motifs are frequently incorporated into interior wall décor, utility items and textiles and fashion (Fig. 7), appealing to younger audiences and ensuring the art's continuity. Various revival efforts by the government and NGOs have further strengthened Mithila art, offering workshops and financial support to rural artists. This has particularly empowered women in rural Mithila, allowing them to sustain livelihoods through their artistic heritage.

Despite modernization, *Kohbar* paintings remain significant in contemporary rituals. In urban weddings, decorative panels featuring *Kohbar* designs are used to preserve tradition, ensuring that the sacred symbols of lotus, fish, and other fertility motifs still play an important part in wedding rituals. This harmonious fusion of old and contemporary elements ensures the lasting significance of *Kohbar* art in cultural and commercial environments^{11,19}.

Shift in techniques

Kohbar paintings have evolved styles and techniques as with materials and techniques. Many artists now use synthetic paints to Linked Lastingness. Nevertheless, there are attempts among some traditionalists to preserve the true essence of the artwork through natural pigments prepared from minerals and plants. Ritual meaning of *Kohbar* paintings has also been affected due to the necessities of standardization of designs to make them marketable with concerns on the original meanings of the symbols painted. Art schools and workshops are now offering education in both traditional and contemporary techniques, assuring that the young generations are learning and developing the art, while respecting its origins. In addition, online channels have enabled artists to reach audiences worldwide making *Kohbar* paintings more accessible and commercially viable. In spite of these, the art has its obstacles and criticism. There is the over-commercialization of *Kohbar* paintings and this has raised concerns that some sacred and ritualistic nature

of the paintings might get compromised. Opponents argue that the cultural value of the art work might be killed by mass production and the contemporary modifications. Internationally, *Kohbar* paintings serve as cultural advocates, representing Indian art at foreign exhibitions and cultural festivals. This exposure has also caused the mixture of world artistic influences causing a blend of the traditional and modern style. To keep this balance, the input of contemporary artists is essential. Many artists strive to preserve tradition while embracing innovation, elevating *Kohbar* paintings from ritualistic folk art to a recognized form of fine art, ensuring its continued relevance in both cultural and commercial landscapes^{11,19}.

Recent work by contemporary artists

In November 2024, the Bihar Pavilion was awarded the prestigious Gold Medal in New Delhi, at the 43rd India International Trade Fair (IITF). The pavilion was recognized for its exceptional design, thematic presentation, and commitment to sustainability. The theme, "*Viksit Bihar under Viksit Bharat @ 2047*," highlighted the state's progressive journey towards development. The pavilion featured 75 stalls showcasing Bihar's traditional arts, sustainable industrial practices, and innovative initiatives like the *Mukhyamantri Udyami Yojana* and Startup Bihar, emphasizing entrepreneurship and innovation.

On December 1, 2024, in celebration of Madhubani's Foundation Day, a historic event was organized at the *Mithila Chitrakala Sansthan* in Madhubani, Bihar. Approximately 910 artists from across the state collaborated to create a 1,900-foot-long Mithila painting, covering 182 distinct themes, all within a single day. This monumental effort was spearheaded by the Department of Art, Culture, and Youth, along with the Industry and Tourism Departments of the Bihar government. The program not only highlighted the Mithila region's rich cultural legacy but also set a new world record for the longest Mithila painting created in one day.

Kohbar-root to roots - *Kohbar* paintings exhibition

Root to Roots -The three-day *Kohbar* paintings exhibition from 15th-17th November, 2024 at Bihar Lalit Kala Academy, Patna has Mithila *Kohbar* paintings of 52 artists of the state showcasing variety of cultural expressions based on similar themes. During the event, senior painter Bimla Dutt released

her coffee table book *Mithilak Pavani Tihaar and Solah Sanskar*, emphasizing the transition of artists from personal to societal painting. Bihar Vidyapeeth president highlighted how Mithila paintings were historically part of education, allowing even uneducated women to excel in art. Art expert Manisha Jha presented the evolution of *Kohbar* paintings, tracing them from Archer's 1934 photographs to contemporary times, showcasing works by Ganga Devi, Godavari Devi, and Bimla Dutt. Mridula Prakash stressed the need to sustain *Kohbar's* social tradition.

A seminar on "Art and Market - Business Scenario of Mithila Painting" featured insights from several scholars, who discussed how social media bridges rural artists with markets. Another seminar on the theoretical and artistic aspects of *Kohbar* art emphasized the need to balance tradition with commercial viability. The event highlighted *Kohbar* art's historical significance, contemporary evolution, and market potential.

Preservation efforts

The primary objective of preservation efforts is to protect the creative and cultural heritage of *Kohbar* painting against the forces of modernization. Documentation and promotion of these traditional nuptial chamber paintings are also done by NGOs, individual artists (who are privately working on it) or government schemes. Workshops and training programs encourage younger generations to learn the trade, and awareness is raised with exhibitions, like *Kohbar - Root to Roots*. Museum collections as well as digital archives can serve as additional conservation resources (Fig. 8). By incorporating these paintings in educational programs and commercial websites, there is a possibility of

preserving the ceremonial importance of the paintings and encouraging creativity in the Madhubani art.

The analysis of the *Kohbar Ghar* and the paintings attributed to it expose an important interplay of traditions, symbolism, and dynamic practices. An overview of the key findings is as follows:

Sanctity of the room

The *Kohbar Ghar* reminds of cosmic harmony, fertility and unity of marriage, and is a sacred place during the Mithila wedding rituals. The rituals which are conducted in this region unite the world of the earth with the heavenly forces and crown the spiritual and social opportunities of marriage.

Symbolism in Kohbar paintings

The most popular themes in the artwork are the lotus, bamboo, fish, and birds, all of which have elaborate symbolic meanings depicting harmony, fertility, and prosperity. Mythological figures and gods like Shiva and Parvati bless and provide divine approval and sacrifice to the union and its sanctity.

Cultural differences

Kohbar paintings vary depending on regional, social strata and community. Harijan styles are simpler and nature-oriented whereas Brahmin and Kayastha styles are complex and mythological. Regional differences reflect local resources, customs and environment.

Marriage ritual role

Kohbar paintings underline their significant purpose as a part of the wedding by serving as the sacred backdrops of rituals *i.e.*, *Sindoor Daan* (the application of *vermilion*) and *Saptapadi* (the seven steps). They transmit cultural and spiritual

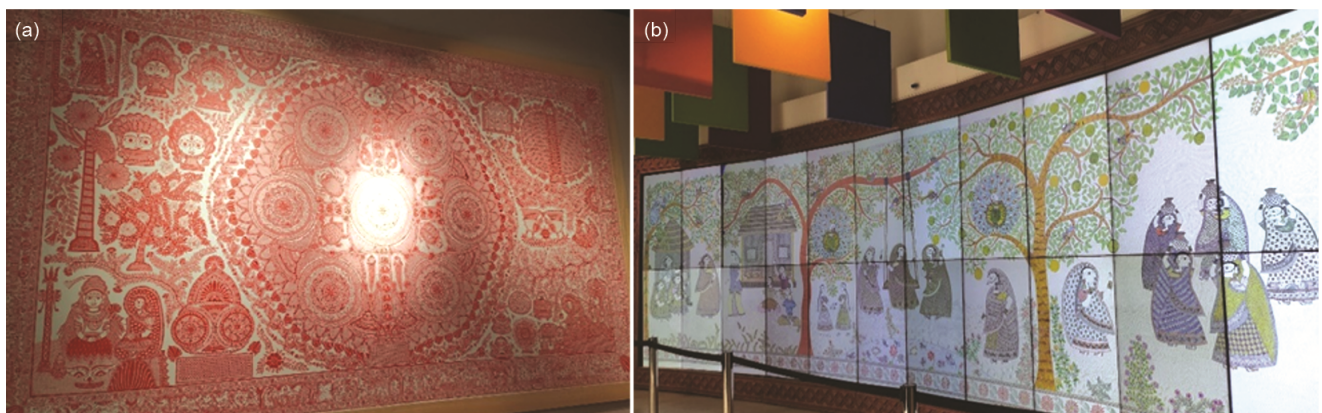


Fig. 8 — Madhubani paintings displayed in traditional and digital form at Bihar Museum, Patna (a) *Kohbar* painting by Artist Godawari Dutta (b) Digital Display

messages to the couple as well as being visual prayers to fertility, wealth and contentment in matrimony.

Development and modern practices

Their portability (as they were previously fixed on walls) has also increased their accessibility and appreciation in most parts of the globe. In addition to the classic patterns, the thematic range has expanded to such social themes as female empowerment or education. Despite the fact that this trend has been beneficial to the artisans, issues of loss of ceremonial and cultural relevance have been raised due to the rise in modern day commercialization.

Colours and patterns

In their conventional kind, *Kohbar* paintings demonstrate the symbolical meaning of red (auspiciousness) and white (purity) using natural pigments in earth tones. Contemporary methods have introduced synthetic colors, and the greater vibrancy they create occasionally takes the work out of the traditional look.

Preservation efforts

The government and non-government organizations have been significant in saving this art form by offering training, financial assistance and opportunities at the international platform. Younger generations have been able to take up this tradition and reinterpret it through art education as well as digital platforms.

Mithila tradition of painting *Kohbar Ghar* have sustained from ancient times by providing cultural, religious, and social foundations and have not only shaped modern Mithila wedding practices but also continue to evolve through transformation in medium and expression. Historically *Kohbar* art decorated mud walls using natural pigments, but modern practice has diversified it to paper, canvas, textiles, and digital prints. Works of celebrated artists are now used for wedding décor, invitation designs, and digital backdrops, connecting ancestral creations to modern ceremonies. In contemporary Mithila weddings, *Kohbar* paintings feature as backgrounds on printed fabrics for rituals, and as souvenirs representing eternal union. This evolution reflects a shift from private ritual space to public and aesthetic expression-allowing the cultural essence to thrive as well as support female artisans economically. The historical tradition of *Kohbar Ghar* painting-deeply intertwined with fertility, love, and divine harmony-continue to shape contemporary Mithila weddings as both cultural memory and living art.

Conclusion

Kohbar paintings are major symbols, which portray values, beliefs and aspirations of Mithila community. The *Kohbar Ghar* is a combination of both physical and spiritual, where rituals can overcome the material world. Despite its ancient roots, this tradition has shown adaptability allowing it to embrace modern themes whilst still keeping its core messages of fertility and peace. *Kohbar* paintings reveal the important use of art in the formation of community identity and resolving issues in preservation. They sit as symbols of the cultural resilience of Mithila, preserving its colours to future generations.

Limitations of the study

The study's scope and interpretation are limited by the lack of documented data and museum collections, regionally focused field observations.

Future research

Future research on *kohbar* painting should explore regional variations, ethnographic experiences, and digital archiving to understand local ecology, caste, gender, and ritual meanings. This will enrich discourse on *Kohbar ghar* as a living art form.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to express sincere gratitude to their peers who offered their time and suggestions, enriching our work.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Author Contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. SS – Conceptualization, data collection, manuscript preparation, FR – original draft preparation, AS – Review, editing and finalization of manuscript.

Ethics Statement

Not applicable

Informed Consent

All the images used in the manuscript were taken by the first author. Due consent has been obtained

from all persons whose images have been used in this publication. The authors declare that all identifiable individuals appearing in the figures /photographs have provided consent for their images to be published.

Data Availability

The data related to this study will be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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