

**Brushstrokes of Tradition: Continuity, Change, and Caste in the
Production of Madhubani Art**

Pallavi

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Centre for the Study of Social Systems

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

26th JUNE 2026

E-mail Address: iipallavii2021@gmail.com

Abstract

Madhubani painting is a living artistic tradition rooted in Bihar's Mithila region, historically embedded in ritual practice and domestic life, sustained overwhelmingly through female labour and transmitted across generations through embodied, informal apprenticeship. The post-1960s shift from mud walls to paper and from household ritual to commercial market changed not merely the medium but the meaning of the art itself - and not equally for everyone. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with 30 purposively selected artists in Jitwarpur and Ranti, this study asks how artistic knowledge moves between generations

under commercialisation; how caste and gender structure access to markets and recognition; and how artists navigate, negotiate, and in some cases subvert the structures that constrain them.

The theoretical framework combines Bourdieu's sociology of cultural production with an intersectional analytical lens calibrated to the South Asian context, drawing on Appadurai's account of the capacity to aspire to illuminate how artists imagine and pursue futures beyond inherited constraint, and supplemented by the Dalit epistemological tradition - particularly Guru's (2000, 2012) question of who defines what counts as knowledge and Rao's (2009) account of cultural assertion from below - to theorise forms of exclusion and contestation that Bourdieu's framework alone cannot adequately address.

The central argument is that commercialisation has reorganised rather than dissolved caste-gender hierarchies: it has created new opportunities while reproducing old exclusions in new forms. The study documents the individual and collective strategies through which lower-caste and Dalit artists contest these hierarchies - including an informal artist collective in Ranti whose price-setting practices and documentation of Godna motif histories constitute the study's most original empirical contribution - and identifies the structural conditions that enable or foreclose such agency.

Keywords: Madhubani painting, caste, gender, commercialisation, knowledge transmission, intersectionality, agency