

Mithila Painting And Symbolism Of Enclosed Sacred Space: Elements Of The Magical *Mandala* And *Aripana* Drawings

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ABSTRACT

Art and ritual occupy an important place in the socio-religious life of all primitive communities. An attempt has been made here to explore and uncover the symbolic and layered meaning as well as the context of these astonishing magical drawing of *Aripana* and *Mandala*, a vibrant art of Mithila. These sacred cosmogram of the Hindus in India is an immemorial tradition (*Sanātana dharma*) of art form in which the sacred vision of the gods and their world are articulated. These wonderful cosmograms drawn in white, black and sombre red; constitutes the *yantra* (abstract diagram), the *shraddha* (death rites) pictorial icons and the *vrata mandala* a kind of ritual drawing characterized by enclosed sacred space filled with exquisitely rendered figures and objects are not only symbolic but suggestive too. The stylization, the idioms and the themes of Mithila paintings has been handed down from generation to generation and to the Mithila women paintings come as second nature, a cultural heritage. The tradition of wall painting and surface paintings for ritual purposes and adornment of dwellings is believed to have survived from the epic period. As a symbol of mysterious power, the representation of *mandala* drawings in the folk art of Mithila, is unique in nature as it combines a comprehension of Sanskrit learning and a vibrant folk tradition. Foremost among the preserved and practiced forms of folk art of Mithila are the *aripana* or floor-drawings, and the *bhitti-chitras* or wall-paintings. These are not only decorative colourful images but an outstanding pattern of ancestral usage, astonishing in virtuosity and exalted with the theme of cosmic energy, a vital force for life. The circles made inside these drawings are known as *mandalas*. They belong to two main categories: (i) the *mandalas* and hieroglyphs of *tantra* and magical abstractions, and (ii) the *vrata mandalas* or the liturgical drawings, more commonly known as *alepan* or *aripana* in the Mithila tradition. The designs of the *vrata* or *utsava mandalas*, known as *aripana* in Mithila are designed according to different occasion in different shapes like the triangle, circles, squares, hexagon etc. Despite variation in shapes and designs one important aspect worth mentioning as the most essential common feature is the sense of symmetry as a mandatory feature in the *aripana* drawings. This women-centric tradition also obliges the women of Mithila to exercise their inherited talent and intelligence artistically in the form of visual delight.

Keywords: Mithila, *Mandala*, *Aripana*, *vrata mandalas*, *Tantra*

Introduction-

Most of the Indian folk arts have evolved with mystic notions of universe and sacred spaces. This phenomenon is prominent when the art forms get associated with *yoga*, *tantra* and *yantra*, a vehicle through which the mediators concentrate in positioning the Self with the primeval being. This primordial urge for longevity and protection against the evil spirits had demanded from the earliest times creation of ritual diagrams like the *mandalas* and *yantras* as a tool for protection, support for meditation of energy and the inner spaces, or abiding places of the deities. The *yantra* was a distinctive form of the *mantra* and could be used both for

warding off evil spirits and bestowing protection. The magical art forms of *mandala* and *yantra* evolved in this process. *Maṇḍalas*, meaning an orb or circle¹, symbolizes wholeness and represents the cosmic world with enclosed sacred spaces as a mode to meditate and trance induction. Whether drawn on floor, on walls or on paper, as a symbol of mysterious power and psychic representations of the universe, this archetypal image is known in almost every civilization either in the form of a solar disk, a full-blown lotus, concentrated circles, lapping and overlapping squares, angles or triangles. *Mandalas*, were man's earliest attempt to communicate concentrated, non-verbal meaning. The origin of *mandalas* can be traced back to the ancient man's perceptions of the cosmos and of the mysterious processes of life and death, that could only be revealed non-verbally through geometry and the magical abstractions of mathematical form.

Mithila Painting

Mithila painting also known as Madhubani painting, in its originality a folk-art which expresses itself through extraordinary sketches and geometrical motifs filled with vibrant colours as an intrinsic daily ritual of the women of Mithila. Traditionally, Madhubani painting is done on the theme of wedding, childbirth, festivals and other special occasions like *vrata* (popular festas). They are not merely decorative painting but a testament of the rich cultural tradition displaying exquisite simplicity and irresistible attraction. The drawings consist of motifs, geometrical diagrams and symbols which are eternal like *shiva - shakti*, or the sun and moon. Every motif has a purpose, to fill the atmosphere with positivity and to eliminate negative energies. Painting is an intrinsic part of the ecosystem in Mithila and in every household the daughters master this art through inheritance. In other word, Mithila art is a kind of inherited legacy. It is interesting to note that Madhubani (Mithila) art is exclusively a jurisdiction and monopoly of the women of Mithila, there is perhaps no other country in the world where folk-painting is mastered and inherited solely by womenfolk.

Geographical and Cultural factors

Geographical location of Mithila deserves special mention to understand the uniqueness of this art form. Mithila lies in the *Terai* region (the lowland region along the southern foothills of the Himalayas in Nepal and northern India). For centuries Mithila remained isolated due to its geographical location, paradoxically, this isolation helped in retaining its originality and preserving this artistic legacy. Due to its geographical location, the inhabitants of this region remained separated from the sophisticated artistic developments of their time, this in turn helped them in retaining and producing their distinctive styles and objects according to the local needs and tastes. With the progression of sophistication, localism started disintegrating along major trade routes, but the folk arts continued on the periphery, particularly on the geographically isolated regions of Mithila, where they used this opportunity not only to survive but also to elaborate. With little contact with the external world, the folk artists (especially, the women painters) of Mithila could preserve their traditions, art-forms and methods of workmanship over a long period of time and at the same time created new styles and products as need arose. The output of such art embodies a unique blend of primitive impulses and traditional survival skill.

Mithila is a great region where art and scholarship, *laukika* (conventional) and Vedic traditions flourished together in complete harmony. Nurtured on the poems of the great Maithili poet Vidyapati, who composed his sensuous poetry in the fourteenth century, songs of *Krishna* and *Radha* and of the energy-charged worship of goddess *Shakti* as *Bhagwati* or *Gauri*, Mithila has an age-old tradition of rich cross-fertilization. The association of Mithila with epic- myth and legend link it to the earliest memories of this region. Mithila, the ancient Videha, was one of the first established kingdoms in eastern India, and also the birth-place of Sita of the *Ramayana*. The increasing association of a developing esoteric rituals with mother cults also explains the growth of Tantricism in the Mithila region and the principles behind creating the magical drawings. A well-known centre of Hindu pantheon and stronghold of *shiva - shakti* and *Tantric* cults, Mithila has been since time immemorial the centre of *Tantric* traditions which has also provided the necessary impetus behind the survival and uniqueness of this art form.

The Mandala and Magical Drawings

In order to discover the underlying principles, methodology and artistry of the *maṇḍala* drawing, it's important to trace the evolution of the Tantric cult and its association with the concepts behind this complex form of magical drawing. The increasing association of a developing esoteric ritualism with the mother cults explains the growth of Tantricism in the early medieval times. The number of goddesses multiplied and with it developed the Tantric sects. By the close of the tenth century, the Buddhist, the Jainas, the Shaivas, and the Vaishnavas, all developed their Tantric systems. Most of the goddesses belonging to these sects were recruits from semi-Brahmanical and aboriginal groups, Women of tribal and untouchable communities also entered the Tantric pantheon as *Shakti* and were worshipped. In this process the orgic cult of Mother Goddesses became quite popular in the Mithila region, and find substantial representation in literature and visual arts.

¹P.V.Kane, History of Dharma Sastra, vol.V,partII,P.1131.

The early manifestations of the *mandala* diagrams and its evolution can be traced in the *Grhyasūtra* and *Agni Purāṇa* as well as in the seals and amulets of Indus Valley civilization and on several rock paintings of India. Tracing the antiquity of *mandala* art one finds reference of the most powerful diagram known as *Sarvatobhadra* which is regarded as a cosmic symbol of supreme potency. Reference of this powerful *Sarvatobhadra* is also found in Vedic sacrificial literature which later came to be universally known as the auspicious *swastika* symbol.

A distinguished centre of orthodox religion and stronghold of Shaiva and Shakta cults, Mithila has been since time immemorial the centre of Tantric traditions which have provided the necessary inspiration behind the survival of this art which expresses itself through extraordinary shapes and magical drawings on every religious and social ceremonies. The *Shakta Tantras*, which draw heavily on the aboriginal black magic legitimized by invocations in the Sanskrit language, contain the four sections of *Shaiva Agamas*, these four sections reveal the philosophy behind the complex sacred cosmograms. These are *Jñānāpāda* (theology), *Yogapāda* (physical and mental discipline), *kriyāpāda* (construction of temples and consecration of images) and *Cayapāda* (religious practices). The system teaches that within the human body; there are innumerable minute channels (*nāḍi*). The most important of all, the *Susumna*, is in the spinal cord. Connected with these channels, there are six great centres or circles (*cakras*), of occult force situated in the human trunk, one above another. Each of these is described as lotus. In the lowest circle (*mūlādhāra*), the Devi (Goddess) lies coiled three times and a half behind the genitals and is accordingly called Kundalinī. By Shakta Yoga, she may be awakened and induced to ascend to the highest *cakra* (*sahasrāra*). These channels and centres form the basis of all the magic-working power, which the practitioner can achieve. *Shaktas* made large use of *Yantras* and *Mandala* diagrams for invoking goddess.

Interestingly, Mithila's artists made large use of these mysterious diagrams (*Yantras* and *Mandala*) accompanied by *mantras* and ritual gestures made with the fingers (*mudrā*), for bringing the goddess into the body. Many of the *Shakta* Tantra rituals find expression in the superb art work exhibited through *aripana* and *mandala* drawing of Mithila. Also known as the *mantra* diagram, it displays an intimate phase of the highly abstract *Tantric* art. The words associated with these *mantra* bears close relationship with basic (*bija*) *mantra* words used in Puranic and *Tantric* worships. The diagrams and designs are invariably blended with natural as well as supernatural symbols.

The intricate designs of *mandala* and *yantras*, created through *mantra* or meditative chanting also symbolizes the Hindu and Buddhist philosophy of impermanence. It is fascinating to note that the artists spend lots of time and energy in drawing the *mandala*, only to ceremonially remove them after the ritual. This symbolizes life's impermanence and is all about accepting change as law of nature. It is the *mandala*, the enclosed sacred space that holds the surcharged energy of power that is also the pivot of the folk art of Mithila. It functions as revelatory symbol of cosmos through the symbolic diagrams. The outlines of the *yantra* and the *mandala* are determined by the need to visually express the magical spell and to concretize the exploding energy of the ritual gestures. The magical drawings created by the ritual act, when awakened by chanting of *mantras* and ritual gestures is supposed to enclose, shield and destroy energy.

These geometrical shapes of the *yantra* and *mandala* like the circle, the triangle, the square, the hexagon etc. and diagrams that evolved from these geometrical shapes acts as a channel for tapping the positive energy and made functional in rites of transformation. Another common feature of the *mandala* art of Mithila is the drawing of square with four gates, containing a circle with a centre point indicating the sacred abode of a deity along with the presence of its retinue with different forms and features. The process of entry into the heart of the diagram and the sanctity and security of the *mandala* is performed through the incantation and magical gestures, revealed to the initiate with utmost care.

Aripana and the Bhatti-chitras

Many of the Tantric rituals can also probably be explained with the help of the present day *aripanas* and the *bhatti-chitras*. Pre-eminently in Mithila the *aripana* or floor-drawing and *bhatti-chitras* on the wall are timeless artistic cultural tradition. There is not a single house in Mithila in which ceremonies are held without *aripana*, usually drawn by the women of Mithila on the eve of certain rituals or ceremonies such as *puja*, *vrata*, festivals and *śarira-samskara* (purificatory and perfective rite for the human body) e.g., *yajñōpavīta* or sacred thread ceremony, *vivaha* or marriage etc. Wall-paintings in Mithila homes are multi-coloured and the adornment of walls with earth-plaster, paintings of *Puranic* gods, *tantra*, geometric symbols, folk themes and ornamental forms of birds, serpents and flower are usually the domain of the womenfolk. The paintings, however, are transitory and anonymous. They appear on the mud- walls of homes, fade, are plastered with cow dung or whitewashed over and reappear with the cyclic movement of the seasons and the different folk rituals. The tradition of *aripana* drawing on the one hand is associated with the unlettered and obscure women of Mithila, whose drawings executed in rice-paste and with the finger-brush, in connection with domestic and religious rituals represents an art of almost pure form and at the same time represent an art form of great intellectual significance. It also symbolizes the prevalence of the *Shakta* cult in Mithila region of which we have several references in *Purāṇas* and ancient texts like *Harshcharita*. Interestingly, these diagrams are referred to as writing, and never as drawing. In Mithila, the tradition of drawing *aripana* is considered as a sacred ritual

which symbolically represents prosperity, fertility, sexuality, security and longevity. Most of these *aripanas* are closely connected with the *tantric* cult.

The subject-matter of *aripana* broadly falls into five categories- 1. Images of human beings, birds and animals including aquatic animals, peacock and snake 2. Flora and fauna 3. *Tantric* symbols like *yantras*, *bindus* or *dots* etc. 4. icons of gods and goddesses such as *Shiva*, *Parvati*, *Durga*, *Ganesha*, *Vishnu*, trident etc.; and other objects like rivers, mountains, lamp, conch-shell, etc. On close examination of these symbols, objects and designs, one would come across several geometrical shapes in the form of triangles, squares, rectangles and circles, etc. which clearly establishes the influence of *tantric* cult on the art of *aripana* in Mithila. On special occasions like the day of puberty, sacred thread ceremony, marriage, religious sacraments, *vratas* (votive observances/ popular festas) and love-play the related objectives and message are interpreted through these liturgical drawings. Interestingly these drawings, serving rites are drawn exclusively by women and conducted without the participation of any priest. Incantations in a secret, initiatory language accompany the drawings. It is believed that the archetypal diagram is the channel through which the energy of living things can be tapped and made operative in the rites of passage. The creativity and the sense of symmetry of the Mithila women artists are really a miracle to witness especially in the making of *aripana* or floor-drawing and the *bhitti-chitra* or wall-paintings.

The art of *aripana* in Mithila has been handed down from generation to generation and to the women of Mithila it is a *parampara*, cultural heritage. *Aripana* in Mithila is usually drawn on the freshly plastered floor with cow-dung. *Aripana* or line-drawing on floor is made using liquid red and yellow colour and *pithar* made with the paste of rice or corn-starch mixed with water. As the *mandala* drawing is exclusively the domain of women, in Mithila every woman is expected to practice this art as a daily ritual which demands concentration and talent. In Mithila the art of *aripana* is considered as a kind of 'writing', and never as drawing or painting. Perhaps, it is evidence of their archaic hieroglyphic origin. Certain symbols are traditional in form and style and the recreation of those in the *aripana* has been repeated day after day without much variation. The root of *vrata* rituals lies in the belief that desire when envisaged and made concrete through *mandalas* and activated through incantation and ritual gestures generates a kind of positive energy which ensures prosperity and fulfillment of desires. Through the drawings of the *mandalas* and *vrata mandalas* the participant seeks protection from the evil forces of nature. These magical rituals pervade Hinduism. They were prescribed as obligatory ritual for the Hindu householder as mentioned in *Manu Smṛti* and *Grhya Sūtras*.

It is interesting to note that Mithila women are quick to set work tracing out an appropriate design according to the nature of occasions and availability of space which may be as large as five to six feet square

The theme and motifs of *aripanas* are decided according to nature of the occasion. One of the most delightful of Maithil *aripanas* is the *mohaka*, the 'falling- in -love' diagram. This is a kind of liturgical painting, drawn in the bridal chamber or the *kohabarghara*. The *mohaka aripana* is one of the most fascinating forms of written colourful adornment with erotic symbols on the walls of the bridal chamber. This is drawn in the bridal room with the intention to awaken desire between newlywed couple. An essential feature of the *mohaka aripana* is the figures of bamboo which signifies growth and lineage and the diagram of two fully-opened lotus with its leaves known as *purain* facing each other indicating female genitals as lotus has archaic symbolism linking it to the earth and fertility. The pictorial representation of reproductive organs of the bride as open lotus and the groom as bamboo in the *kohabar* drawing has its source in the age-old ritual, and centuries of marriages have sophisticated its expression. The execution of *kohabar* painting and its ornamentation are strictly the domain of women and an integral part of marriage ritual of Mithila since time immemorial. The basic design and composition of *kohabar* painting is heavily charged with tantric symbolism, in the centre of *kohabar* design lingam, symbolizing the phallus is drawn only by *ahibati* or the married women and the drawing of circular *maṇḍala*, *yonī* drawn as a fully bloomed lotus along with the icons of gods and goddesses adorned with the flowering bamboo and the lotus *mandalas* of fertility, motifs of auspicious signs or *manglik chinha*, birds, fragrances and flowers are drawn with precision and under the supervision of experience elder woman. The delight in colour, the overwhelming concern with fecundity, sexuality and a live participation in the loves and adventures of gods is visible in the *kohabar* paintings of Mithila.

Forms of Vrata Mandala –

The *Vrata Mandala* the archetypal diagram can be divided into four broad categories: (i) *Sarvatobhadra* (ii) *Astadala* (iii) *Dasapata* and (iv) *Swastika*. Making of *Vrata mandala* or *aripana* is a kind of community activity in Mithila.

- (i) The *Sarvatobhadra* mandala is one of the earliest and most powerful of the *mandalas*, it symbolizes the energy of goddess and a paradigm of supreme potency. The *Sarvatobhadra mandala* is composed of forty-one *swastikas* interlinked in a comprehensive design. It is also regarded as the source of all *mandalas* and an archetypal symbol of Aryanism. The main arms of the diagram encompass the four cardinal directions; it is considered auspicious in its all the four regions of north, south, east and west. The ritual painting of *sarvatobhadra mandala* is a simple yet follows a well-defined process. While drawing the sacred diagram, the women in Mithila place one, three, five, seven and nine red dots of *sindur* or vermillion on the prepared sacred space which are placed in formal arrangements of two triangles, one with its tip pointing towards the sky and the other towards the earth. These dots or *bindus* are the main basis on which the

sarvatobhadra mandala is drawn. All the main *yantras* emerge from the amalgam of geometric forms that can be designed on the *Sarvatobhadra mandala*. In the *aripana* drawing of Mithila some of the most powerful *yantras* of different angles and shapes like the *trikona*, *shatkona*, *ashtakona* and the *shriyantra* have evolved from the *sarvatobhadra* which is also regarded as the supreme symbol of virgin goddess and the rising sun. The creative expression of these two most powerful energy forms is integral to all *mandala* and *vrata* drawings.

- (ii) The *Astadala*, the eight-petalled lotus, the archaic symbol that first appears in a seal of Indus valley, also symbolizes the virgin goddess and the sun in the *vrata mandalas* of Mithila. The *Astadala* one of the most important forms of *aripana*, drawn on ceremonial occasions in which the image of lord *Vishnu* and Goddess *Durga* are depicted on eight petals of lotus adorned with conch, sword, disc, mace, spear, lotus and half-moon with dot. The eight petals in fact symbolize the eight *siddhis* or paramount power.
- (iii) The *Saddala aripana* - Another important form of *aripana* widely prevalent in Mithila is *Saddala aripana*, the six-petalled, the most sacred form usually drawn on the raised floor symbolizing the *kula-devata* or the family deity, popularly known as *gosain*. The central placement of the six- angled yantra of the six lotus petals is made with utmost precision in accordance with the details given in the Tantric and Puranic texts.
- (iv) The *Swastika aripana* is another popular form and the symbol is drawn on all the auspicious occasions and especially during *Tulsi Puja* and *Durga Puja*.

Mandala as diagrams of cosmos, represent manifestations of specific divinity in the cosmos and as the cosmos. Many of the *Tantric* rituals can be explained and understood with the help of *aripans* and wall-paintings of Mithila. The *mantra* diagrams clearly exhibit an intimate phase of highly abstract *Tantric* art. Through *mandala* the participants not only seek protection from the malignant forces of nature but also ensures fertility of crops, the potency of the bridegroom and the destruction of evil forces. The variety and inventiveness of the ritual art of Mithila, however are unique and exquisite for they combine a comprehension of Sanskrit learning, religious tradition and vibrant culture. The variety and inventiveness perhaps make them most unique displaying all the attributes of culture, emotion, ornamentation, symmetry and a perfect colour-scheme.

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