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Dr. Neel Rekha
Assistant Professor,
Department of History,
MDDM College, Muzaffarpur,
B.R.A. Bihar University,
Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India

The geru style of maithil painting: A brief history (1966-2023)

Dr. Neel Rekha

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Abstract

The paper presents a brief history of the *Geru* style of Madhubani Paintings for the period 1966-2023. This style of Maithil paintings became popular in the late 1960s and 1970s but gradually disappeared from Jitwarpur, the village of its origin. Based on ethnographic survey of Jitwarpur and records of paintings from secondary sources, this paper discusses how government patronage and support led to the evolution of six distinctive styles in the villages Jitwarpur and Ranti, of which Geru was one. The paper focuses on the *Geru* style and describes its themes and characteristics. Drawing mainly from the writings of Pupul Jayakar, the paper shows how this style was one of the earliest surviving traditions of Mithila. It also describes how arrival of western scholars, emergence of celebrity artists and dictates of the market created conditions which caused the extinction of this style. Some developments related to *Geru* style and my personal efforts in preserving this style are also discussed.

Keywords: Geru, jitwarpur, madhubani, maithil painting

Introduction

This paper presents my research on the *Geru* style of Maithil painting which became popular in the late 1960s and 1970s but gradually disappeared from Jitwarpur, the village of its origin. Jitwarpur, located to the north of Madhubani town, is one of the two key villages where commercialisation of Maithil painting was initiated through the initiatives of the Government of India, the other village being Ranti, situated to the east of Madhubani. Today these two villages are on the international map and are frequently visited by tourists, art lovers and designers. The Bihar Government has opened a school for teaching Maithil painting at nearby Saurath village. However, visitors prefer to visit these two villages to get a first-hand insight on the evolution of this unique art form. It is worth noting that these two villages have produced many styles of Maithil Paintings which are now variously known as Mithila Painting or Madhubani Painting. The names of Sita devi, Baua Devi, Jamuna Devi, Chano Devi, Godavari Dutt, Mahasundari Devi and Ganga Devi from Madhubani have become part of history of this art form. Many celebrity artists from Madhubani have defined how tradition and expression go together. It is now being claimed that Maithil Painting is no longer a folk-art form ^[1]. Though my paper talks about these styles and artists, the focus is on a silent page in the history of Madhubani paintings i.e. the evolution, popularisation and extinction of *Geru* style of Maithil Painting. As a scholar and historian, I have been interested in exploring the origins of Maithil Paintings and also locating the lost heritage of Mithila and Madhubani in particular. Therefore *Geru* style has been a favourite topic of research as it embodies within it traces of the evolution of the Maithil Paintings for at least six hundred years ^[2].

This style was brought to my notice by Krishnakant Jha, son of Bhagvati Devi, an eminent *Geru* artist, when I was conducting field work for my doctoral dissertation in Madhubani and its neighbouring villages ^[3]. He referred to *Geru* paintings as a style very popular during the early years of commercialisation of this art form. These paintings, according to him, were liked mainly by art lovers, western tourists and residents of metropolitan cities. The initial interest shown by art connoisseurs brought attention to the *Geru* style. However, lack of patronage, appreciation from art lovers and consequent decline in demand for these paintings slowly caused the disappearance of this style from Jitwarpur.

This paper draws on my ethnographic fieldwork in the village Jitwarpur. I have written this

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Neel Rekha
Assistant Professor,
Department of History,
MDDM College, Muzaffarpur,
B.R.A. Bihar University,
Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India

paper drawing inferences from the art works of the famous Geru artists from the village, Ookha Devi and Bhagvati Devi. Interviews with Bhagvati Devi, members of her family and memoirs of some celebrity artists in Jitwarpur from 1999 to 2004 have helped in defining the main characteristics of the style and themes of these paintings. I have also used primary and secondary sources from the region to understand the evolution of different stylistic traditions in Madhubani and situate *Geru* within that framework.

References to the *Geru* painting style can be found chiefly in the writings of Pupul Jayakar^[4] who drew academic attention to this style along with other popular styles of Madhubani, the *Kachni* and the *Bharni* styles. She writes about the existence of a distinct school of paintings characterised by earthen palette of ochres and umber browns, dust pinks, dull turmeric and earth reds. The collection of some rare specimen of early *Geru* paintings in Mulkraj Anand's book *Madhubani Paintings*^[5] provides us with some glimpses of the prominent themes and styles used by Geru artists. I have also made use of a few recent *Geru* paintings in the collection of local scholars, my personal collection and the archival collection EAF, USA^[6] by Sanjul Mandal to reflect upon this stylistic tradition. A school run by the Foundation in Madhubani town, has defined the ways in which Maithil painting is understood today. The next section elaborates on the different styles that evolved in Madhubani between 1960 and 1990.

Mithila and Madhubani: The Evolution of Styles (1960-1990)

Mithila, the famed ancient Indian kingdom and the birth place of Sita, the central character of the famous Hindu epic *Ramayana*, is historically applicable to a somewhat fluid cultural region rather than a definite political or geographical unit. Bounded on the north by the Himalayas and on the east, south and west by the rivers Kosi, Ganga and Gandaki respectively, it comprised the present districts of Champaran (East and West), Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Sitamarhi, Samastipur, Madhubani, Katihar, Saharsa, Purnea and Begusari and the Terai under Nepal lying between these districts and the lower ranges of the Himalayas.

From times immemorial, the women of Mithila had the tradition of making floor drawings known as *Aripana* or *Aipana* and wall paintings on festive occasions and domestic ceremonies, the most significant being made on marriage ceremonies known as *Kohabar*^[7]. Maithil paintings continued to be practiced inside the four walls of Maithil homes and remained unknown to the outside world till 1934 when W. G. Archer, a British I. C. S. officer discovered the art form when an earthquake broke open the murals in the inner walls of the houses^[8].

For another twenty years, the art remained known only in academic circles and was accessible to art-lovers such as Pupul Jayakar, J.C.Mathur and Upendra Maharathi^[9]. But a drought relief programme started in Madhubani in 1966-67 by a joint programme of the All India Handicrafts Board, Handloom Handicrafts Export Corporation of India and Bihar State Cottage Industries Emporium created a popular worldwide interest in the ritualistic paintings. The project of bringing the paintings from floors and walls to paper proved to be a great success and provided the women of the area an opportunity to transform themselves from dependent

partners to vital contributors of family income. Jitwarpur and Ranti, the two villages situated very close to Madhubani town emerged as important centres of this commercial activity^[10].

Three distinct styles became very popular in the initial years of commercialization - known popularly in the region as *Bharni*, *Kachni* and *Geru*. The *Bharni* style, or the colour painting style was marked by the use of vivid colours and minimal use of lines. Considered to be the finest of all painting styles, the *Kachni* or line painting style was marked by the less use of colours. The patterns were very intricate and ornately patterned and the details filled with the intricate use of line strokes.

Scholarly writings on Maithil paintings reveal that *Bharni* was traditionally more popular among the Brahmanas and *Kachni* was more popular among the Kayasthas. It was W.G Archer who had first drawn attention to these styles and categorised them under the Brahmana and Kayastha caste styles. Practising these three styles were some of the eminent artists like Jagdamba Devi, Sita Devi, Mahasundari Devi, Ganga Devi and Baua Devi who eventually succeeded in evolving their distinctive styles. The freedom provided by paper and unprecedented recognition perhaps encouraged these artists to deviate from the traditional Maithil iconography to evolve their unique individual schools of painting^[11].

There were three more styles which evolved in the process: The Tantric, The *Gobar* and *Godana*^[12]. Further details of these art forms can be obtained from my doctoral dissertation. The *Geru* style and its characteristics are elaborated in the section below.

***Geru* Style of Painting: Themes and Characteristics**

Geru style of painting was practiced by some upper caste Mahapatra Brahmana women artists in Jitwarpur in the 60's and 70's. As the name suggests, these paintings were marked by the predominant use of *Gairika* colour or earth red colour and emphasis remained more on volume and depth. The two prominent practitioners of this style in Jitwarpur were Ookha Devi and Bhagvati Devi. It was Bhaskar Kulkarni^[13], the officer in charge of the drought relief programme in Madhubani, who first noticed this style on the walls in Jitwarpur and encouraged Ookha Devi and Bhagvati Devi, to reproduce this style on paper. Bhagvati Devi recalls that Bhaskar happened to see some of her wall paintings she had prepared on the occasion of her house on her daughter's marriage. The uniqueness of her paintings impressed him greatly^[14].

Hailing from a village which had artists known for their intricate and ornate paintings like Jagdamba Devi, Sita Devi and Baua Devi, Bhagwati was initially hesitant to prepare paintings for Bhaskar. But Bhaskar encouraged her to prepare paintings in her own unique style and asked her to consciously retain her originality while reproducing this particular style on paper for sale in commercial markets.

A distinguishing feature of the *Geru* paintings, was the emphasis on maintaining traditional Maithil iconography. These paintings were made commercially in exactly the same manner as they were made on the walls. While in the case of *Kachni* and *Bharni*, Bhaskar always encouraged experimentation and promoted the growth of individual expressions, but in the case of *Geru* he urged the artists to reproduce the paintings exactly in the same manner as they were traditionally made in Mithila.

Even the prominent themes of *Geru* paintings remained only those which were seen on the mud walls and appreciated by Bhaskar. Bhagvati Devi remembers that Bhaskar's favourite subjects were the pictures of animals most notably *Hurar* (a local animal), Lion, and those of gods and goddesses like Durga, Saraswati and Indra. This is the significance of the commercialized version of the *Geru* paintings. While the artists of the other styles were encouraged to deviate from the tradition Maithil iconography, *Geru* even after the onset of commercialisation was representative of the earliest traditions of paintings in Mithila.

The commercialised *Geru* paintings were usually made on white handmade paper. The usual paintings were predominantly *Geru* with little touches of other colours such as dust pinks, dull turmeric and umber brown. Sometimes the artists deviated from the traditional colour scheme and used instead other colours, if they served to convey the meaning envisioned by them. The five headed Kali with eight arms and six legs by Bhagvati Devi and Ookha Devi made use of other colours like deep blue, light yellow, skulls in orange. The outlines were in black. The use of blue colours served to create a feeling of horror.

Preparation of colours was not difficult since all colours except black were readymade. *Geru*, the primary colour was bought from the market in the form of a pigment and dissolved in the water of gum. Other colours such as pink, blue, yellow were all *holi* (cheap colours used in the festival of colours) colours. Black was obtained from lamp soot or prepared by collecting the carbon from lamp soot of a cooking vessel. The brushes were homemade. A bamboo stick was used to make the outlines. For filling in the larger washes, a *pihua* (a local brush) was made by covering the bamboo stick with a piece of cloth.

Contrasted to other styles where the outlines were made first with black colour and the details filled later on with other colours, this style was characterised by the dual use of *Geru* colour both in making of outlines and also for filling in the details. It was only after details were filled that the outlines were drawn again with black colour. This technique, according to Bhagvati Devi, was followed to give prominence to the black outline since making the outlines with black before filling in the details would make the black outline appear dull.

The two prominent artists Ookha devi and Bhagvati Devi were greatly inspired by one another and had almost a similar style of painting. Studying their paintings in combination gives a fair idea of the primary characteristics of this painting style. Pupul Jayakar has analysed the chief characteristics of the painting style on the basis of paintings made by Bhagvati and Ookha.

The artists used to paint a mysterious triangle at the waist of figures, a custom popular with the Shaktism. Almost all the paintings were marked by this triangle. Sensing some connection of *Geru* paintings with the popularity of Tantricism in the area, Pupul Jayakar wrote, "There is a stark austerity in the paintings, an unfolding energy and a sense of magic that possibly has its source in Tantric ritual and worship^[15]." Even a painting of Shiva in *Geru* style had a triangle at the waist of God. The mysterious triangle at the waist of the mythological deities is perhaps suggestive of the making of *yantra* (magical diagrams) of the Goddess. This style of making *yantra* perhaps was an earlier development of the later Tantric style of painting in Madhubani.

Contrasted to the styles of Sita devi and Jagdamba Devi, this style did not lay emphasis on ornamentation. To quote Pupul Jayakar, "Ornaments on cloth or background are discarded, there is an absence of alankara as tree, bird or foliage" The goddess always had a heavy plaited hair. Her heavy swinging plaited hair ornamented with pompoms, has a sinuous snake-like movement. This is in total contrast to the styles of Sita Devi, Ganga Devi and Mahasundari Devi whose paintings were marked by intricate patterns, heavy ornaments and decoration. The emphasis remained more on volume and depth. Colours are laid on in broad sweeps of brush. The bodies of the gods and goddesses were foreshortened and at times distorted. The hands and fingers were often left unfinished. The nose remained pointed and merged into the forehead. The eyes were open. Even though most of the faces were in profile, the eyes were drawn in a frontal presentation.

The emphasis on colour and depth, use of black line and lack of ornamentation suggests these paintings were made by women not as part of their leisure activity but in the process of performing religious rites and rituals. It also suggests that these paintings originated when Tantric ritual and worship acquired prominence in Mithila. That these paintings had a strong ritualistic context, was revealed in the manner in which these were made. Even when the paintings were made for commercial purposes, the painter would never put the eyes before the completion of picture. Pupul Jayakar explained, "Eyes are put after the picture is complete. Like all rural art forms the eyes are the source of Shakti, they are the central point of power. The pupil within the eye are placed therein after the picture is complete. It is the placing of this bindu within the eye that generates communication with the beholder. To the Maithil woman placing the mark of light without the completion of the picture would be destructive." Most of the above-mentioned facts, drawn from my doctoral research revealed to me many important facts about this unique painting tradition. Using these facts about *Geru* as a base to understand certain important facets of the evolution of the painting traditions in the region of Mithila, I corroborated information from many regional sources and attempted to situate the evolution of the painting tradition when Tantricism was popular in the area i.e. from the 12th century to 14-15th century.

Geru Painting (2004-2023): Some Recent Trends in Madhubani and Jitwarpur.

The above discussion has attempted to narrate the story of the evolution of *Geru* style of painting and its contribution in understanding the evolution of wall painting tradition in Mithila. The period under review has been the 1960s, 70s, 80s and 90s. The style though popular in the 60s and 70s had almost disappeared in the 1990s when I was conducting fieldwork. Krishnakant Jha, my field informant, who introduced me to *Geru* style pointed out that market pressures, departure of Bhaskar from Madhubani for other projects and the emergence of Jitwarpur in the international art sphere were some reasons for the said disappearance of this art form. He felt that experimentations, individual expressions and ornamentation had become essential to thrive as artists. Middlemen had entered the field and they would often reject paintings which did not show these characteristics. Government patronage too had come to an end. There had emerged a system of grading of paintings led by artist designer Upendra Maharathi^[16]. The coming of

western scholars such as Vequaud, Erika Moser, Raymond Lee Owens and Tokio Hasegawa to Madhubani influenced the choice of themes and individuality in artists ^[17].

Following the emergence of many NGOs in the region, official patronage was gradually withdrawn. However, these NGOs neglected the *Geru* style. This led to the sidelining of the style, which was further accentuated by the lack of foreign tourists in Jitwarpur in the 1990s, a group which traditionally appreciated these paintings the most, for their novelty. Another possible reason for the disappearance of this style from Jitwarpur could be the construction of pucca houses, as they replaced mud houses, which were traditionally the most appropriate for these paintings.

Bhagvati Devi considered the death of Bhaskar Kulkarni a major reason for the decline of demand of *Geru* paintings. Bhaskar was well reputed in Mithila region for his clear understanding of folk-art traditions of India. The respect he commanded in the art community solely promoted the *Geru* paintings, but following his postings to other projects and subsequent death, no one was ready to provide support to this style. The reference about Bhaskar is symbolic of the feeling among the women artists that art needs encouragement and support from those who have an understanding of folk art to boost their confidence.

Ironically, the practitioners of the *Geru* style themselves are not very confident of the uniqueness or specialty of their style. Whereas in 1999, the artist's son had referred to the style as already extinct. Just after two years, it was noticed by me that some of the paintings were being prepared for sale for commercial markets although in small quantities. Krishnakant Jha told me that the interest shown in the art by me had encouraged him and his family members to try making these paintings again for the commercial markets. Their paintings were fortunately well received and thus had begun the process of making these paintings again for the markets. This is a significant point as it showed me that even a little interest shown towards these painters can go a long way in reviving them.

Over hundreds of years, the women artists developed and gained expertise in *Geru* art. They gradually developed the *Kachni* and *Bharni* style of Mithila out of the simple *Geru* paintings. This is very clear from the beautiful specimen of paintings collected and photographed by Archer ^[18]. Although the *Kachni* and *Bharni* paintings were very well received in the market, the significance of an ancient folk-art form such as *Geru* is no less important. Even in the case of Jitwarpur and Ranti, although Bhaskar discovered and provided patronage to the paintings or we may say revived the ancient remnants of this art form through his sheer hard work and determination, his absence from Jitwarpur and a host of other factors contributed finally to its extinction. Unless these art styles are given recognition in the form of national awards or official patronage, there is every possibility that the earliest remnants of the art form might disappear from the popular eyes of people.

It was with this purpose that I attempted to revive the style through exhibitions and conference presentations ^[19]. The first effort to showcase this style was made through an exhibition in Kolkata in the year 2005. The event was covered by the leading magazine *Frontline* and also received positive response from art lovers ^[20]. Two artists Krishnakant Jha and Dulari Devi featured in the show. The exhibition was dedicated to Bhaskar Kulkarni. Extensive coverage on the exhibition focused on the different styles of

Madhubani art. Another effort was made in the year 2008 in Leeds, UK. This exhibition too was well received in the international academic community and was also covered by University of Leeds magazine Reporter ^[21].

As an art historian, I have personally collected many specimens of *Geru* paintings and consulted a few people who have their own collection. Nirala, my field collaborator and local historian has *Geru* paintings in his collection. Some rare examples of *Geru* paintings are with the collection of EAF. These were acquired by Raymond Lee Owens during his stay in Jitwarpur and have signatures of Sanjul Mandal. The collection while having many traditional themes found in Jayakar and Anand also brings many more themes to the forefront such as local rituals, local folktales and folk gods and goddesses.



Jogins



Goddess



Bhagvati Devi



Hurar

Fig 1: Examples of Geru Paintings (Photographs by Dileep Bannerjee)

Conclusion

The paper has attempted to write a brief history of *Geru* style of Maithil Paintings covering the period 1966 -2023, a period of around 50 years. This period has been very significant in the history of Maithil paintings as it saw the transformation of the art form from floors and walls to paper. It also saw the emergence of Madhubani as the centre of artistic production in terms of paper art. The story of recognition, popularity and slow extinction of *Geru* has revealed the role of Bhaskar and Pupul Jayakar in the initial days of commercialization of Maithil paintings. While Bhaskar was responsible for recognizing the antiquity of this style and transition to paper, Pupul Jayakar through her writings brought out the historical significance of this particular style – portions of which were utilized by me in my doctoral work.

My ethnographic field work also suggested that practitioners were themselves not very confident of their style. The departure of Bhaskar from Madhubani appeared to be the main reason for the extinction of this style. Moreover, the coming of scholar activists to Madhubani and focus on individual expressions and experimentations gradually caused the extinction of this style.

Geru now remains within book pictures, chapters, museum collections and private art galleries. More research and attempts to revive the style need to be made. My future plans are to publish a monograph on *Geru* paintings, conduct workshops, organize local exhibitions and sensitize art lovers towards the significance of this style. Some rare

Geru paintings in the collection of Ethnic Arts Foundation, USA bring to us many silent pages in the history of evolution of Madhubani art. According to Krishnakant Jha, these paintings were made by his mother Bhagvati Devi but signed with the signatures of Sanjul Mandal. Further research is needed to provide confirmation of these claims. Given my past experience of using *Geru* to recover hidden voices of the past Maithil history in these paintings, future research on these collections could become a repository for recovering the history of subaltern beliefs and practices in Mithila.

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6. The Ethnic Arts Foundation (EAF) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1980 dedicated to the continuing development of Mithila Painting. The EAF supports several different activities. It purchases paintings directly from scores of painters, then organizes or co-sponsors exhibitions and sales to individuals, collectors, and museums. Profits from sales are then returned to the artists, in effect providing a double payment for their work. The exhibitions also works for expanding national and international appreciation of the painting tradition by promoting research and publications. In January 2003, the EAF established a free Mithila Art Institute in Madhubani to further the training and opportunities of talented young Maithil painters.
7. Kohabar is an elaborate painting done on the walls of the Kohabar ghar (wedding chamber) where the newlyweds spend their first four nights after the wedding ceremony. The central motif comprising mainly of Purain (lotus plant) is surrounded by different painted images: two parrots making love in the air, fish, tortoise, the sun, the moon, palanquins, grass mats, bamboo grove, and a scene of worship of Gauri.
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12. For a detailed analysis of a Maithil artist, see Jain, Jyotindra, *Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting*, Ahmedabad; c1997.
13. Rekha, Neel, op. cit.
14. Bhaskar Kulkarni was the field officer in charge of the drought relief programme in Madhubani. In my interviews with artists in Jitwarpur and Ranti, the artists recalled Bhaskar Kulkarni's contributions in the evolution of their individualistic styles. Bhaskar, according to them, had great understanding of the folk art traditions of Mithila. Thus under his guidance women artists gathered confidence to express their individuality and bring out distinctive styles such as Geru, Tantric, Gobar and Godana. Bhaskar is also credited with discovering Worli paintings made by the tribals in Maharashtra. These paintings find place along with Maithil paintings in the Mithila Museum, Japan and Crafts Museum, New Delhi.
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21. An exhibition titled, "Traditional Images in Mithila Paintings" showcased all the styles in Kolkata, 2005. For more on this see Suhrid Shankar Chattopadhyaya, *Mithila's Pride*, *Frontline*; c2005 Feb 11. p. 65-72.
22. An exhibition showcasing all traditional styles was organized on the 10th of April, 2008 in the University of Leeds. For more on this see, <http://reporter.leeds.ac.uk/532/s9.htm>