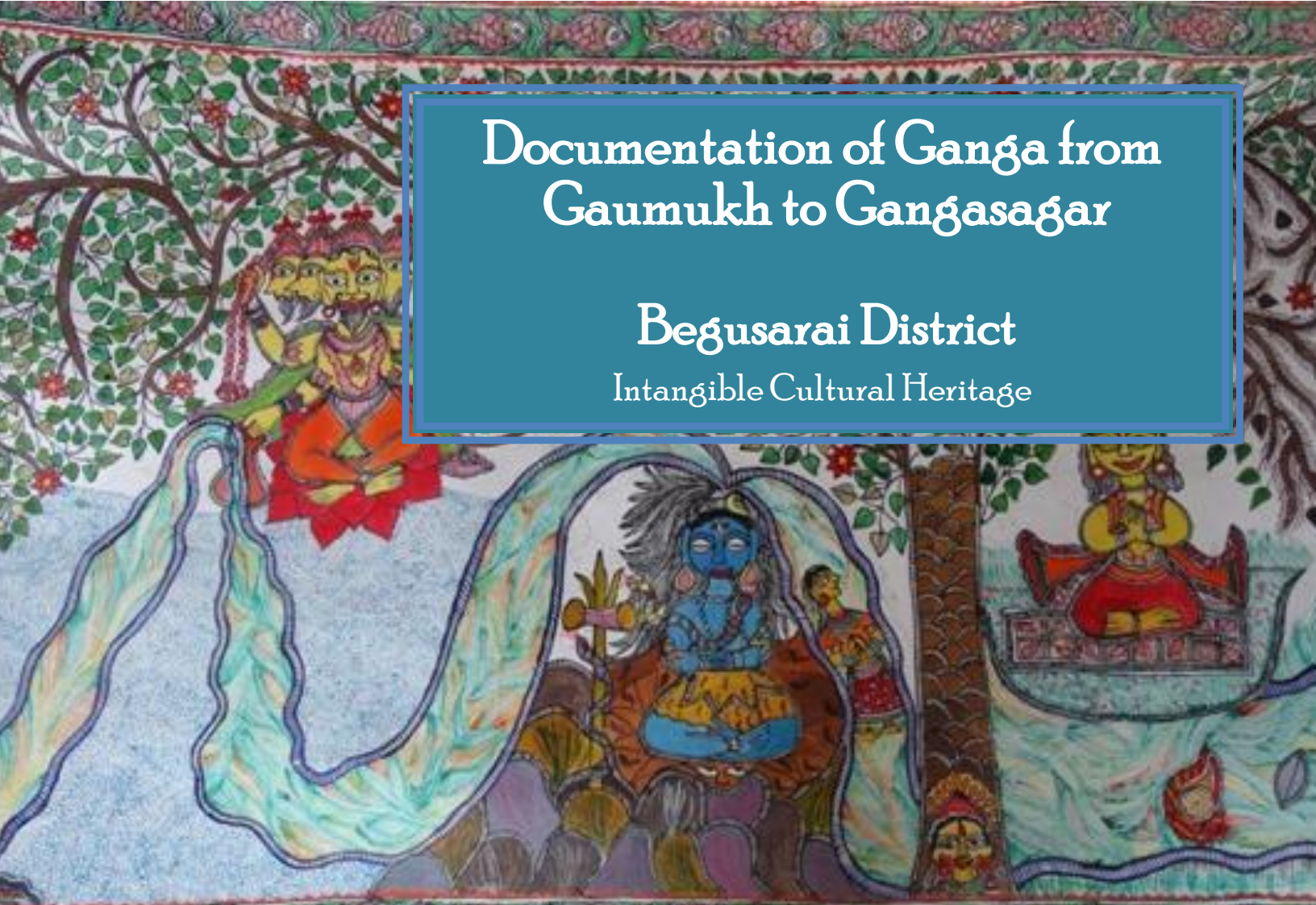


Documentation of Ganga from Gaumukh to Gangasagar

Begusarai District
Intangible Cultural Heritage



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January - March 2020

Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage

National Mission for Clean Ganga

(Reg. Society)
Ministry of Jal Shakti
Department of Water Resources, River Development & Ganga Rejuvenation
Government of India




INTACH Indian
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Cultural Heritage

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Introduction



Fig.1. Ganga Ghat, Begusarai

भागीरथिसुखदायिनि मातस्तव जलमहिमा निगमे ख्यातः ।

नाहं जाने तव महिमानं पाहि कृपामयि मामज्ञानम् ॥ २ ॥¹

From time immemorial the river Ganga has displayed an extraordinary capacity to sustain human life, define social organization and facilitate state formation. As the river nurtured the material life of the people who lived along its banks, these riparian communities reciprocated by vividly imagining and portraying the river in scripture, art and architecture as early as the first millennium BC, if not

¹ Ganga Stotram, *O Devi Bhagirathi Gange! You are the one who bestow us with joy and happiness. The highest significance of your pious and holy waters is glorified in the Vedas, I therefore plead you for your divine knowledge, who should always guide me to choose the righteous and the truth. O dear Gange! I bow my head in your lotus feet and beseech you for your kind guidance, to always protect me from the worthlessness of maya. Protect me always.* Nupur Choudhary (Translation).

before. Through the process of representation in art and letters the Ganga came to forge a common bond among diverse people who found themselves members of a community based not merely on the exploitation of its material bounty but on shared cultural perceptions generated by their veneration of the river. A host of economic, political and cultural factors contributed to the emergence of the Ganga as the river *par excellence*, and the word Ganga became a generic term for a river in the Indian subcontinent. In myths and legends, the Ganga was perceived as a manifestation of the celestial body on earth and as one which could transport one's soul to heaven. The notion of the Ganga as purifier who washes away all sins became deeply rooted among Hindus of all classes. Its sanctity was beyond question for most Hindus and gradually a pilgrimage to the river for the purposes of ritual ablution became one of the most common ways to purify oneself from accumulated sins.

A description follows on how the pilgrimage to the river evolved and became more popular over the course of time. That the Ganga was a holy river for a majority of their subjects was not unknown to the Muslim rulers who came to dominate a large part of the Indian subcontinent in the thirteenth century. As a result, many of these Muslim rulers also connected themselves with the river and its water in various ways. Some made it a habit to drink water from the Ganga alone, even though they were stationed far away from its banks. Others used its waters during the coronation ceremony. These attachments on the part of these Muslim rulers with the river might not have sprung from religious sentiments but they were certainly aware of the political meanings of such acts of association with the river.²

The association with the Ganga exceeds its narrative quality from time to time and from location to location. Begusarai is a district which stretches further east of Patna and was initially a sub-divisional part of Munger; this also involves the geographical inclusion of places like Darbhanga, Samastipur and Saharsa which were a part of its collective historicity. In this part of mapping the Ganga in Begusarai we are also going to discuss the many tangents which emerge along the ancient past of Begusarai. In **Chapter 1** we will look at how historicity of Begusarai was created over a period of

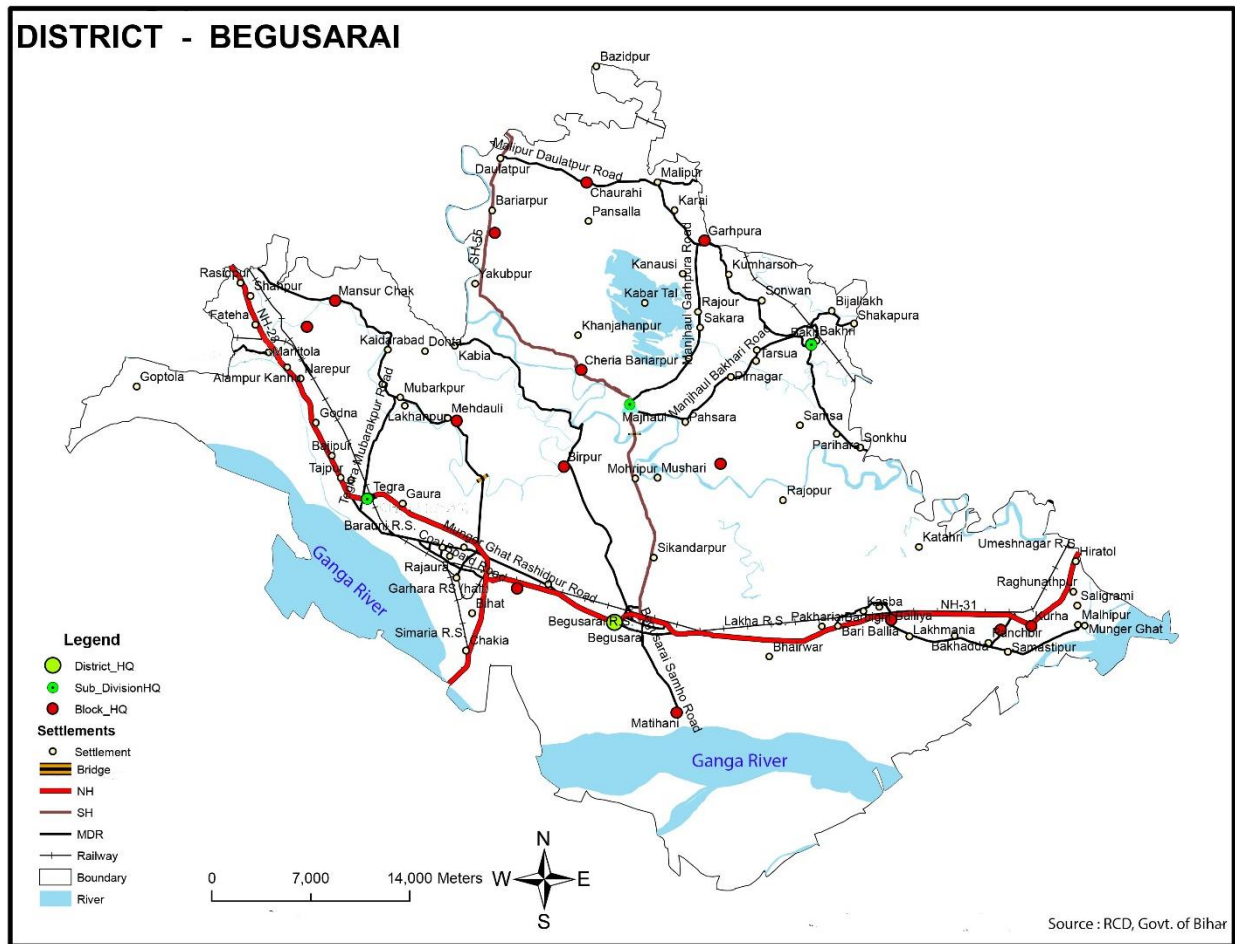
² Richard M Eaton, "Temple Desecration and Indo-Muslim States," in *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking religious identities in Islamicate South Asia*, ed. David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 246–81.

time, both through archaeological and oral specifications. Here we are going to discuss the role of river Ganga in the formulation of the historicity of the space and its making. Historically, Begusarai includes in its ambit a wider part of the Mithila region of Bihar which makes the language of the region Maithili. It's location on the banks of river Ganga makes the place both culturally and historically enriching. The district of Begusarai, which till the 1971 Census was a part of Munger district as one of its sub-divisions, was elevated to the status of a district on 2nd October, 1972. Earlier it was the north-western subdivision of Munger district lying on the left bank of the Ganga. Begusarai is the chief town and the headquarters of the district. In earlier times, situated half way through the Bazaar of this town was an inn (sarai) from which the town presumably derives its name. The district is situated in the central Bihar region and is surrounded on the north by Samastipur district, on the south by Munger and Lakhisarai districts, on the east again by the districts of Munger and Khagaria and on the west by the districts of Samastipur and Patna. **Chapter 2** discusses the various aspects of ritual performance in Simariya including the Kalpavas mela, Ardha Kumbha, Ganga snana and the Kartik Purnima fair. Ritual performance is a very important aspect of this research and hence we talk about the importance of Mithila, and Begusarai as an important land of Tantra traditions. **Chapter 3** outlines the art and cultural life of Bihar which owes greatly to the contribution of the Ganga and the traditional mornings centred around the river. The cultural and artistic space of Bihar has played a highly influential role in the making of the Indian cultural milieu. Traditions and their observance play a major part in the making of Bihar's cultural scene, followed by the many contributions of local folk music, theatre, performances and artistic abilities. In this section we are going to look at the various traditions revolving around the Mithila praxis of Begusarai. The cultural history of Begusarai draws its history from current Darbhanga (a major Mithila hub), Samastipur and Munger.

Chapter 4 deals with the saktah traditions of Ugratara Temple at Mahishi, situated 15 km away from the district headquarters of Saharsa, which is famous for its ancient temple dedicated to Goddess Ugra Tara. Locals worship the deity as Bashishtharadhita Tara, who was worshipped by the saint Bashishtha, thereby associating the place with the Ramayana period. Ugra Tara Sthan is also believed to be a Shakti Peetha as, according to legends, the right eye of Goddess Sati had fallen here. The language and literary traditions of the region are also discussed here.

Chapter 1

Riverine Historicity of Begusarai



(Begusarai District Map. Source: RCD, Govt. of Bihar)

In the Ganga plain the bounty that the river bestowed upon the people made it an object of worship and its water became the symbol of holiness. As a result the river attracted an increasingly large number of pilgrims who sought spiritual, moral and material salvation.

Begusarai district lies on the left bank of river Ganga and is located at latitudes 25.15N & 25.45N and longitudes 85.45E & 86.36E. It was established formally in 1870. Begusarai town is located at 25.42°N

86.13°E. It has an average elevation of 41 metres (134 feet). Begusarai lies in the middle of the mid Ganga plain and generally has low lying terrain with South to South Easterly slope. Begusarai is basically divided into three flood plains namely 1) Ganga Flood Plain 2) Burhi Gandak Flood plain 3) Kareha-Bagmati Flood Plain.

The **etymology** of the place comes from two words ‘begum’ plus ‘sarai’ which makes it Begusarai. It is believed that the queen/ begum would often visit the banks of river Ganga in Simariya to participate in ritualistic traditions which were (and still are) popular in Begusarai. The location of the town on the banks of river Ganga is testimony to this historic connect with the river. The wider Mithila region around Begusarai gave rise to the popular usage of the Maithili language.

The district of Begusarai, which till the 1971 Census was a part of Munger district as one of its subdivisions, was elevated to the status of a district on 2nd October, 1972. Earlier it was the north-western subdivision of Munger district lying on the left of the Ganga. Begusarai is the chief town and the headquarters of the district. Earlier, there was said to be an inn (sarai) half way through the Bazaar in this town, from which the town presumably derived its name. The district is situated in the central Bihar region and is surrounded on the north by Samastipur district, on the south by Munger and Lakhisarai districts, on the east again by the districts of Munger and Khagaria and on the west by the districts of Samastipur and Patna.

There was practically no historical knowledge of the remote past of Begusarai district until recently. The two newly discovered Pala inscriptions at Nawlagarh (discovered by Prof. R.K. Chaudhary of G.D. College, Begusarai, according to the District Gazetteer of Munger) and some rare images of the Pala period at Jaimangalgarh point to the existence of Pala rule in Begusarai district also.

The **Nawlagarh inscription no. 1** throws considerable light on **Pala history in North Bihar**. Nawlagarh inscription no. 1 also throws light on the Krmila Visaya of Begusarai. The forgotten city of Krmila is located in the district of Lakhisarai, Bihar State. Lakhisarai is surrounded by the modern districts of Bihar, i.e. Munger, Jamui, Sheikhpura, Begusarai and Patna. The area around 72 square kilometres of the city has a large number of historical monuments, particularly Buddhist Stupas and Brahmanical temples. Beglar and Cunningham explored the area and reported the antiquity of the region in the 19th century. They identified the existence of Buddhist Stupas and Brahmanical temples in the area.

In the 1950s and 1960s, D.C. Sircar and subsequently R.K Choudhary visited the region and reported a few inscriptions of the early medieval period. An extensive exploration conducted by Dr. Anil Kumar revealed many interesting facts hitherto undisclosed about the early medieval historiography. There are more than sixty big mounds of various sizes which are lying unexcavated between Valgudar and Daitabandh in Lakhisarai district of Bihar. During the Gupta period, the present state of Bihar was divided into two administrative centres, known as Shrinagara-bhukti and Tira-bhukti. The former, Shrinagara-bhukti, comprised of three visayas, Gaya, Rajagriha and Krmila respectively. The name Krmila among these visayas got its origin from the nearby river Krmikala which is no other than the river Kiul of present day Bihar. The early reference to this river is mentioned in Buddhist texts, Anguttara Nikaya and Moghyevagga in which this river is called Krmikala. Kiul is one of the most important rivers of southern Bihar.

Recent exploration has yielded six image inscriptions and more than a 100 Buddhist as well as Brahmanical sculptures. Stylistic analysis of these sculptures suggests early medieval dates, and different phases of construction activities. The whole area falls in approximately 72 square kilometres, which has more than sixty mounds, around fifty ponds and three lakes. A few brick structures over the mounds are exposed as a result of natural calamities or due to encroachments by local people. An overall survey of the area, and deciphering of the discovered inscriptions, suggests the existence here of a large religious and administrative centre of early medieval eastern India.

Previous research had also revealed **many archaeological sites** in this region. The following are some of the important sites in this region: Nongarh, Rampur, Garhi, Brindavan, Ghosi-Kundi, Bichwe, Neri, Kiul, Hasanpur, Jainagar, Jalappa Sthan, Ramsir, Arma, Pokhrama, Uren, Balgudar, Chowki, Rajaouna etc. The sources are vast and varied in nature. The bulk of the source material in this mapping is mainly drawn from the archaeological and literary sources. Reports from the Archaeological Survey of India, excavation reports and research papers, journals and other archaeological reports, and the Gazetteer were studied thoroughly. In addition to archaeological evidences and Indian and foreign literary sources, geographical, geological and other information have also been used for understanding the various facets of the subject under review.

The study of literary sources sometimes raised doubts about the chronological sequence whereas the archaeological evidences by themselves are insufficient. Hence, more intensive and extensive research had to be carried out, largely by corroborating the archaeological sources with the literary sources.

Ancient literature throws interesting light on social and economic factors of the region. It traces out the commercial knowledge of the people of those days. Archaeological sources include seals, ceramics, and other remains, materials of art and culture, besides architectural findings. It has the durability which, under certain favourable conditions, can be preserved remarkably well. The works of early scholars are also taken into consideration. The material and data collected from the direct sources and the information gathered from the previous scholars were studied with care and their results summarized in this report.

The Krimila and surrounding mound is one of the key but less explored regions of Bihar State. Nevertheless, one can visualize the importance of this region based on the available material brought to light in the pre-independence era by explorers. The **antiquarian remains of Lakhisarai** region had drawn attention of British scholars like Beglar, Buchanan and Cunningham in the late nineteenth century. They conducted preliminary survey of the area and identified stupa and temples at Valgudar, Rajaona, Chowki and Jaynagar. These are the names of modern villages and are within the municipal area of the town, and fall within a radius of 15 square kilometres. A. Cunningham surveyed the area first in 1871 and again visited it in 1879–80. Beglar surveyed the whole area in 1871–72. According to Cunningham's report, a large town or city existed here at the confluence of river Kiul, old Ganges and Haruhar. It extended from Rajaona southwards up to Jaynagar along the western bank of river Kiul, a distance of nearly 6 kilometres and had a width of 1.5 kilometres. Cunningham identified 'Lo-inni-lo' as Rajaona mentioned by 'Huan-t-sang'. 'Huan-t-sang' in his travel account mentions that he visited this place, where he saw a Buddhist monastery and stupa erected by Ashoka in third century BC and a large lake, 5 miles in circuit, to the north of the stupa. Cunningham identified this stupa and monastery. In the recent course of exploration by various scholars, efforts are ongoing to identify the limits of this significant lost or forgotten city of early medieval eastern India.

The **Nawlagarh inscription no. 2** shows that there was a Buddhist Vihara at Nawlagarh. The Nawlagarh inscriptions belong to the reign of Vighrapala II or Vighrapala III. By the time of Rampala, the empire of the Palas had definitely broken into pieces. Up to the end of Vighrapala III's reign, Mithila and consequently Begusarai District was included in the Pala dominion. It is difficult to say how long the Palas continued to rule in this region. Nanyadeva of the Karnata dynasty began his rule in 1094 A.D. and his dynasty ruled over that area for a long period. There has been a certain amount of research

regarding the antiquities at Nawlagarh and Jaimangalgarh which shows that this area played a very important part particularly in the early Pala period.

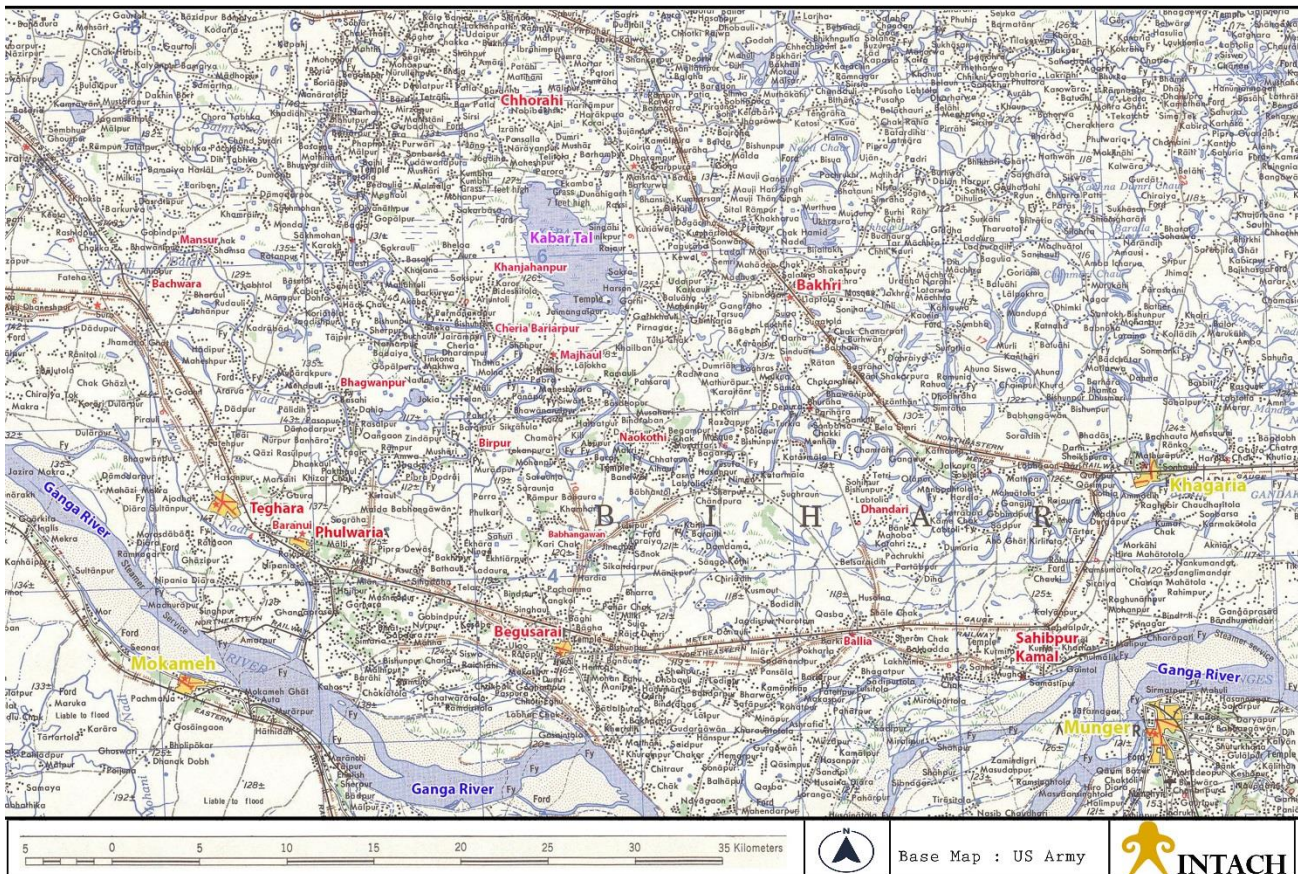
Nawlagarh, 25 kms. north-west of Begusarai, is surrounded from all sides by fortification with gates and a canal on the western side. There are a number of mounds. Some excavations were carried out and some fine sculptural remains in black stone, big earthen jars, broken pieces of ancient pots, small beads and earthen seals, one silver coin and a broken Vishnu image with an inscription on the pedestal and other terracotta have been found. The date of the Vishnu image has been determined sometime in the latter half of the eleventh century A.D.

Jaimangalgarh, 20 kms. north of Begusarai town, is still an important religious centre and on every Tuesday and Saturday hundreds of people assemble here to worship the goddess Jaimangala. Surrounded on all sides by a moat and then by a lake known as Kabar Tal, the area with high mounds presents a picturesque site. There was a patch of jungle which has been cleared and the Kabar lake drained out for reclaiming the submerged lands. Many mounds have been levelled and the area is being used for agricultural purposes. Ordinary agricultural ploughing has led to the discovery of ancient bricks, clay balls, remains of old structures and a brick wall. An inscribed gold plaque was said to have been found but it is now missing. On the north-eastern side there are distinct mounds called Daitaha Dih. These mounds are still preserved.



Fig.2. Jaimangalgarh Temple, Begusarai

BEGUSARAI - DISTRICT



(Begusarai District Map- Kabar Tal and relevant areas marked)

The origin of the temple of goddess Jaimangala is believed to be very ancient. Some very fine black stone images of Varaha, Badrinarain, Ganga, Shiva Parvati, and an artistic column in black stone have also been found. All these indicate that Jaimangalgarh, like Nawlagarh, was also an important centre during the Pala period. The theory that Jaimangalgarh was the centre of Sakticult during the Pala period has also been advanced. The Pandas of Jaimangalgarh had been granted rent-free land which they held during the Hindu and Muslim periods. The Pandas are in possession of three sanads dated 1794 A.D.³ Not only was Jaimangalgarh allowed to remain revenue free but the government gave an annual grant for the purpose of feeding monkeys and keeping alight a lamp which was to be kept burning day and

³ Shailesh Kumar Sinha. *Dharohar*. Bihar State Government (2007). 16

night in the temple. In 1852, on the discovery that the obligations were not being fulfilled, the grant was stopped.



Fig.3. An evening on the Ghats of Begusarai

Not much is known separately about Begusarai district besides the latest discoveries mentioned above and the history of this district is almost merged with the history of its parent district Munger. During the Mutiny of 1857, the tranquillity of the district was not broken, largely owing to the prompt measures taken by the administration. The role of Begusarai in the freedom movement has been very important and deserves much more than a passing reference. The people of the district did not carry on an isolated stir, but as part of the general movement in India. The people of the district faithfully followed the different phases of the national independence movement with great enthusiasm and determination.

Chapter 2

The Living Ritualistic Tradition(s) of Simariya

*“Ritual is a type of critical juncture wherein some pair of opposing social or cultural forces comes together. Examples include the ritual integration of belief and behaviour, tradition and change, order and chaos, the individual and the group, subjectivity and objectivity, nature and culture, the real and the imaginative ideal”.*⁴

Rituals can be loosely regarded as a deep web of structuralized, albeit not necessarily religious, components. Theories on rituals are embedded in experiential avenues and the methodologies that one uses to study ritual(s) offer a critical purview of understanding historical traditions and mythical accounts. Ethnography and participant observation with theoretical underpinnings offers a gamut of interesting case studies and ideas about ritual traditions and its usage in both secular and religious terms. Inquiry into a larger discourse of social sciences and other fields enable scholars of different fields to provide important impetus to the understanding of rituals based on differing context(s) though rituals in any situation are largely seen as a practical element which necessitates the oral and/or written into praxis. It is this praxis or the opportunity of physical expression that has made scholars of religious studies write about rituals' association with religion, and philosophers to take an existential oeuvre on phenomenology and existential trajectories.⁵ Anthropology tries to substantiate its work on field-based case scenarios and use participant methodology to provide raw accounts of experiences rather than theoretical meanderings.

⁴ Catherine M. bell, 1992. *Ritual theory, ritual practice*, 16

⁵ Gaurav Shrestha. *Rituals and Mediating Space/s An eclectic approach: An anecdotal (re)search for festivals in Kathmandu Valley*. The Annual Kathmandu Conference on Nepal and Himalayas (Social Science Baha, Kathmandu).

Simariya (which lies along the banks of river Ganga) comes within the Begusarai district of Bihar and is almost 40 minutes away from Begusarai town. Simariya becomes an integral part of the intangible heritage in regards to ritualistic performance and the living traditions of the place. The recognised *Simariya mela* or the **Kalpavas Mela** is celebrated in the month of *Kartik Purnima* (October- November) and has an interwoven narrative with the Ganga. The religious Kumbha Mela is seen as the biggest event of faith in the world. If we look at Vedic literature, Kumbha is organized at four places in the country: Prayagraj (Allahabad), Haridwar, Ujjain and Nashik. Everyone knows that Kumbha is organized at these places at regular intervals. However, another argument given is that Kumbha was held at 12 places in the country during the Vedic period, but now Kumbha is organized in only 4 of these places. Thus, the **Ardha Kumbha** held at Simariya in Begusarai district of Bihar is said to be the beginning of the restoration of the 8 Kumbha festivals which have disappeared. It is believed that the Kalpavas fair started on the banks of the Ganga in Simariya **since the time of King Videha (Janak)**. During Kalpavas, devotees stay on the river bank for a month by making a foliage cottage and bathing in the Ganga every morning.

The border of Mithila encompasses Simariya and hence the place shares an intertwined narrative with the tales of Mithila. The Ganga is still central to religious faith for the people of Mithila. Even today, the Kalpasthali and Moksha Dham of Mithila residents is Simariya. King Janak (Videha) is said to have done Kalpavas here in the last stages of his life and given up his life here. Mundila scholar Mandana Mishra and his scholar wife Bharti, who was said to have trounced Shankaracharya in debate, got salvation here. Kavivar Vidyapati also attained Kalpavas and salvation here. Following the example of such religious beliefs, a large number of people come to Simariya Dham to undertake Kalpavas for one month.

A lot has been written since the **notion of ritual** first emerged as a formal term in the 19th century⁶. What seems to be enterprising is the growing intersections of the field's dynamic progression in which they operate and the innumerable contributions made by people to this discursive domain. Mircea Eliade, perhaps the most pivotal figure on religion and the study of myth, has offered incipient insights on the primacy of understanding religious mythology and symbolic activities. For Eliade, the human expression and the idea of sacred is furthered

⁶Ibid, 14

through rituals where ‘myth attempts to narrate sacred history’⁷ and sacred history for Eliade is elucidated via rituals that re-enacts mythic tales of primordial ages, gods, heroes or ancestors creating cosmos. Therefore, the idea of performing rituals is that of acknowledging the traditional and telling a story which undoubtedly requires rituals.

While Victor Turner in his first book *Schism and Continuity in an African Society* (1957) attempts at understanding the daily rituals as a form of ‘social drama’ through which we get an understanding of the **role of rituals** and its mechanism for perpetually generating a sense of unity regardless of what religion offers or has to offer. According to Turner, ritual action helps one envision social structures as dynamic entities that are not static. Rituals according to his studies offer a process that provide *social equilibrium* and further offers society opportunities to redefine and reinvent itself.

Understanding ritual actions and theory in retrospect provides an impetus for social scientists to understand and study the social dimension of society, and in many instances rituals more often are associated in concomitance with religion in some way. The priority of ritual practices has also pushed many scholars to offer a comparative articulation of ambiguous methodologies used in Sociology, Anthropology, History and so on. Rituals in isolation are void and historiographies of mythical accounts have provided us crucial information about ritual integrity and its value to the realm of social relationships. Therefore, one is left in a critical intersection of trying to visualize a plethora of facets as to how rituals function in a society, their symbolic significance and their mediation in contemporary times, which possess both archaic ramifications and modern approaches to use, understand and continue their importance for festivals and traditions alike.

⁷Mircea Eliade, and Willard R. Trask. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959, 99

2.1. Kalpavas Mela



Fig.4. The entrance and view of the Kartik Kalpavas Mela, Simariya

The fair or **festival of Kalpavas** is supposedly one of the biggest religious fairs of Asia Minor.⁸ Lying in the ambit of Mithila province, the festival is auspicious for its inhabitants and hence the month is referred to as ‘masa’ and the devotee as ‘masi’.⁹ The place Mokama where Simariya is located lies on the northern banks of the Ganga and most of the devotees live there for a month in make-shift huts and other kinds of tents. According to Hindu oral narratives and

⁸ Subodh Kumar Nandan. *Bihar Ke Mele*. Prabhat Publications, Bihar 2012. 93

⁹ Ibid. 93

beliefs, during the month of kartik (October), if someone decides to live on the banks of the river Ganga for a month and takes a daily bath in it for 30 days (specifically when the sun is in the northern hemisphere or utarayan), they might attain moksha in this lifetime.



Fig.4a. View of Simariya Ghat

It is also believed that **Raja Parikshit** had to visit and stay here on the banks of the Ganga for a month to get rid of his snake-imposed sin, the precise reason why mostly people from Nepal and other provinces of Mithila come here to follow the rituals. Parikshit was a Kuru king who reigned during the Middle Vedic period (12th-9th centuries BCE).¹⁰ Along with his son and successor Janamejaya, he played a decisive role in the consolidation of the Kuru state, the arrangement of Vedic hymns into

¹⁰ Michael Witzel (1989), *Tracing the Vedic dialects in Dialectes dans les litteratures Indo-Aryennes* ed. Caillat, Paris, 97–265.

collections, and the development of the orthodox sravata ritual, transforming the Kuru realm into the dominant political and cultural centre of northern Iron Age India.¹¹

He also appears as a prominent figure in later legends and traditions. According to the *Mahabharata* and the Purana, he succeeded his great uncle Yudhishtira to the throne of Hastinapur. The Bhagavata Purana (1.8.9) states that the son of Drona, Ashwatthama had prepared a Brahmastra (a powerful weapon created by Brahma) to kill King Parikshit while he was in the womb of his mother, Uttara, as a revenge against the Pandavas for killing his relatives (especially his father) in the Kurukshetra war. Uttara was terrified by the powerful rays of the weapon and, worried about her child, she prayed to her uncle-in-law, Krishna, for help. Krishna pacified her and protected the child in the womb from the deadly weapon and thus saved his life. Parikshit was thus born to Uttara and later was enthroned as the heir to the Pandavas at Hastinapura.

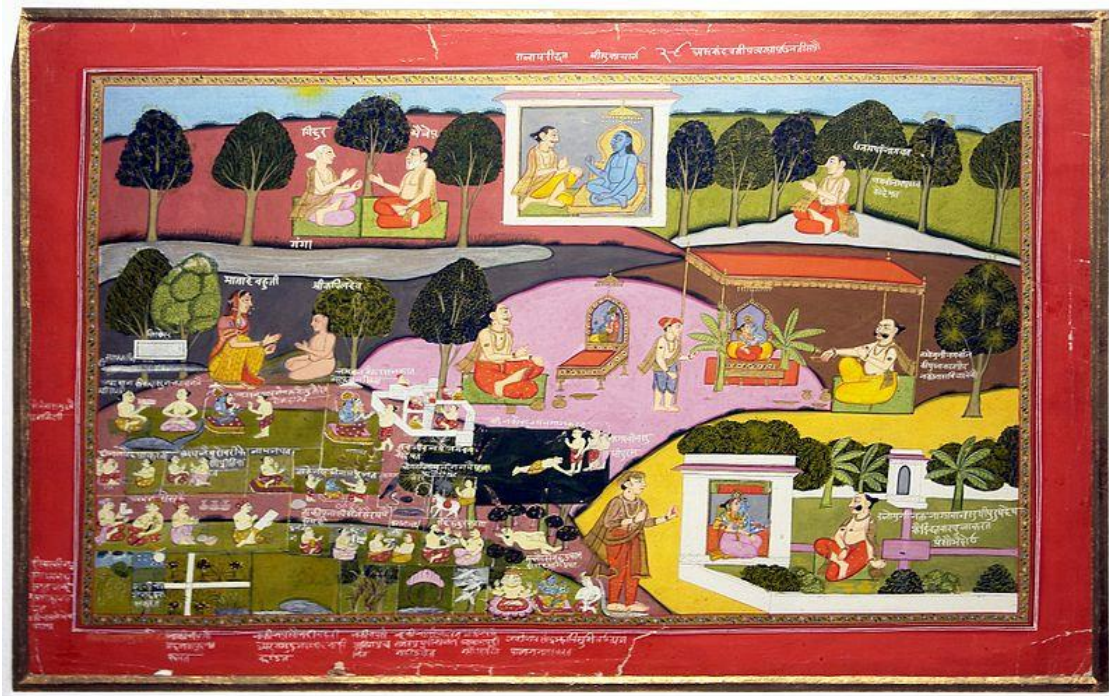


Fig.5. Sage Sukhdeva narrating the story of Krishna to Raja Parikshit, National Museum, New Delhi

¹¹ Michael Witzel, "Early Sanskritization. Origins and development of the Kuru State". B. Kölver (ed.), *Recht, Staat und Verwaltung im klassischen Indien. The state, the Law, and Administration in Classical India*. München : R. Oldenbourg 1997, 27-52



Fig.6. Swami Chitadamanji narrating the tales of Kalpavas to devotees

One of the most interesting aspects of the Kalpavasi's stay is that they plant a tulsi in front of their tent, sowing it with khada or the manure of cows' waste. They worship the plant before each meal. This is an important part of their ritualistic performance. It is also observed that some devotees stay for a month without eating anything but just imbibing Gangajal or water.

According to the old legends and tales, the name Simariya came into being due to two stories. One is that the place is related to the *Mahabharata* period and is associated with the death site of Karna and also where many important rishis or saints performed various ritualistic processions. The other tale, according to the *Ramayana*, is that Rishi Shringi spent the last days of his life on the ghats of Simariya and hence the name came into being.

In Hindu mythology, **Rishyasringa** was a boy born with the horns of a deer. His father was Vibhandak Rishi, and his mother was a celestial paramour. According to another legend, from the slight protrusion of his forehead, he was believed to have been born of a doe. According to legend, his father was seduced

by the celestial danseuse Urvashi by order of Indra, the king of gods, who feared that the yogic powers gained from penance by the rishi could prove fatal to the very existence of the heavenly world. The father was seduced and out of his relation with the danseuse was born Rishyasringa. However, immediately after the child was born, Urvashi, after completing the duty she was sent for, left the young child and her lover and made her way back to the heavens. The incident left the father with extreme hatred towards women folk, and he raised the boy in a forest, isolated from society. The boy never saw any girls or women, and was not told of their existence. The tradition states that he was endowed with magical and miraculous powers. In the usual version of the story, at the time that the boy becomes a young man, the kingdom of Anga suffers from drought and famine. The king, Romapada, is told that this can only be alleviated by a Brahmin with the powers that come from observance of perfect chastity. The only person with such powers is Rishyasringa. He has to be brought to the city, and be persuaded to carry out the necessary ceremonies. Despite his fear of the power and anger of the boy's father, the king sends young women to introduce the boy into normal society. This was successfully done by Vaishali, Rishyasringa uses his powers, the kingdom receives bountiful rains and Rishyasringa marries Shanta. Much of the story is taken up by accounts of the feelings of the young man as he becomes aware of women for the first time. In another version of the story, the forest in which the boy is brought up is part of Anga. The boy's upbringing without knowledge of women is in itself the cause of the troubles of the kingdom. The story can be found in both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. According to the *Ramayana*, Ekashringa was the chief priest when king Dasharatha performed a yajna to beget progeny, and Rama, Bharata and the twins Lakshmana and Shatrughana were born.



Fig.7. Devotees listening to the Katha (narration)

Another associated tale is that once, on her way to Ayodhya, Janaki (Sita) stopped at this Mithila border of Simariya to drink water and hence the name ritiya, followed by Simariya, came about.



Fig.8. Shradhalus (devotees) cooking their meal for the day in the tent



Figure. 9. The cremation grounds of Simariya



Fig.10. Devotees chanting the songs and tales of the festival

2.2. Ardha-Kumbha Festival

The Kumbha Mela's popularity as a devotional congregation is currently limited to the main enshrinements of Allahabad (Prayag) Ujjain, Nasik and Haridwar. However in recent times (as claimed by Swami Chitadamanji Maharaj of Siddhashram), there is a revival in the organisation of Kumbha Mela in this region. Recently, the **Ardha Kumbha** was held here in 2011 in an attempt to re-establish the lost importance of the other 8 places where Kumbha was held according to the scriptures. Not only Ardha Kumbha but recently a *Maha-Kumbha* was also held here in November, 2017.

Speaking about the **origin of the Kumbha Mela**, Swami Chitadamanji says, "Droplets of the Amrit Kalash (holy nectar) which was derived from samudra manthan fell at 12 different places in the country and since then Kumbha Mela was held at these 12 places."¹² The 12 places, apart from the four mentioned above, where Kumbha used to be organised, included **Simariya Ghat** in Begusarai district of Bihar, Kumbhakonam in Tamil Nadu, Jagannath Puri in Orissa, Gangasagar in Bengal, Guwahati in Assam, Dwarka in Gujarat and Kurukshetra in Haryana. Gradually the practice of organising Kumbha in these places was stopped.

Simariya Ghat is believed to be the place where the 'Amrit Kalash' obtained during the samudra manthan was placed. The iconic Mandrananchal Mountain, that was used to churn the ocean, is supposed to be located about 100 kms from Simariya Ghat. The belief goes that the mountain even has 'traces' of the scars of the churning rope (Vasuki, the king of the serpents became the churning rope) used during the samudra manthan.

¹² Swami Chitadamanji, Simariya Ardha Kumbha Mela Patha. 2019. Audio recording of the talk. Nupur Choudhary.

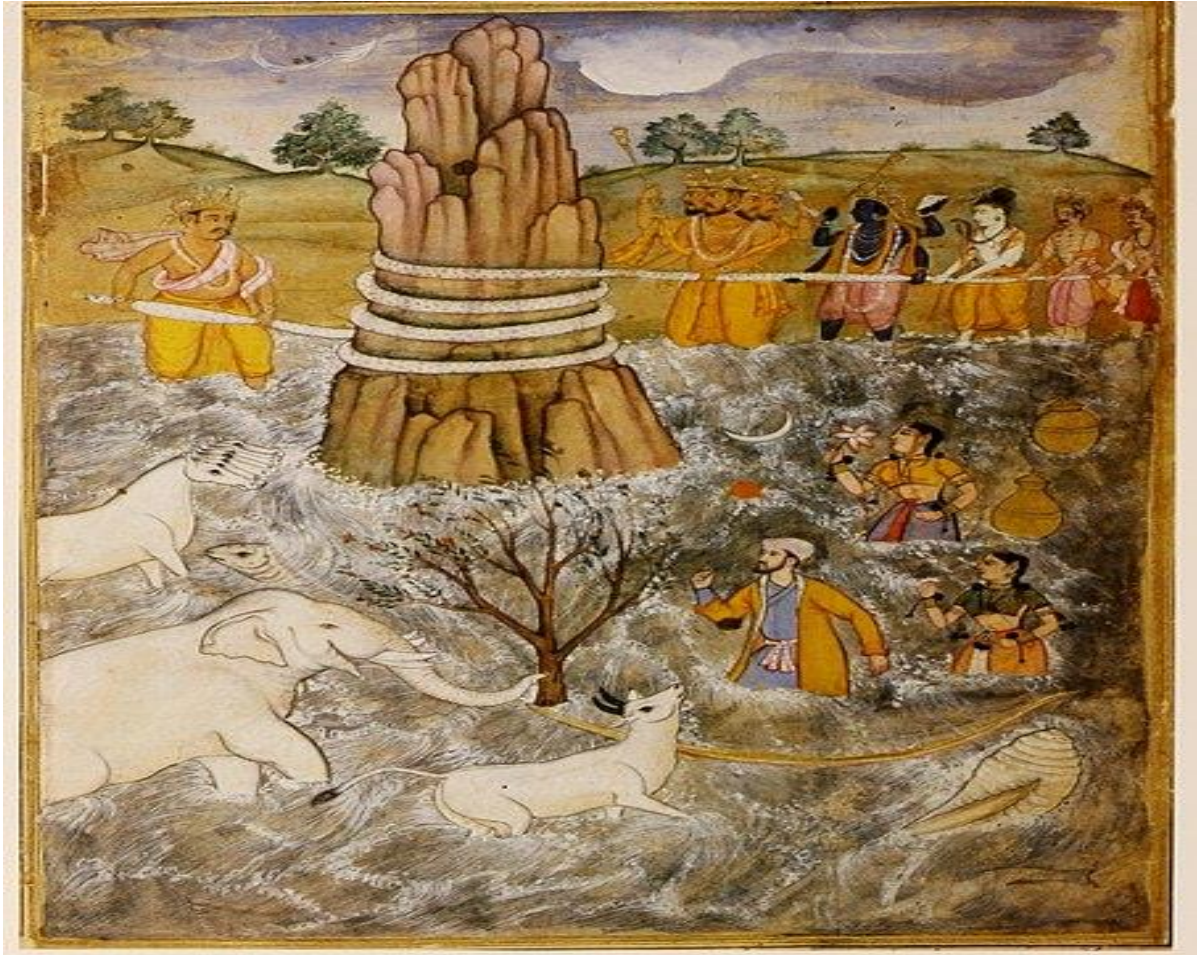


Fig.11. The Gods and Asuras churn the Ocean of Milk, page from a dispersed Razmnama, c.1598-99. Fattu.16th Century

Swami Maharaj further said that the Kumbha provides a platform to the seers to hold discussions and introspect on worldly problems. He has suggested that the government should try to revive the organisation of the Kumbha Mela at the other 8 places. The narrative of the Ardhha Kumbha is believed to be contemporary but the legend is very old. It is interesting to note that mount Mandara is believed to be in Banka District of Bhagalpur (which we will talk about in the Munger division) and also the site for Jaina Tirthankar Vasupujya's place of enlightenment.



Fig.12. The Ghats of Simariya, during Ardha Kumbha

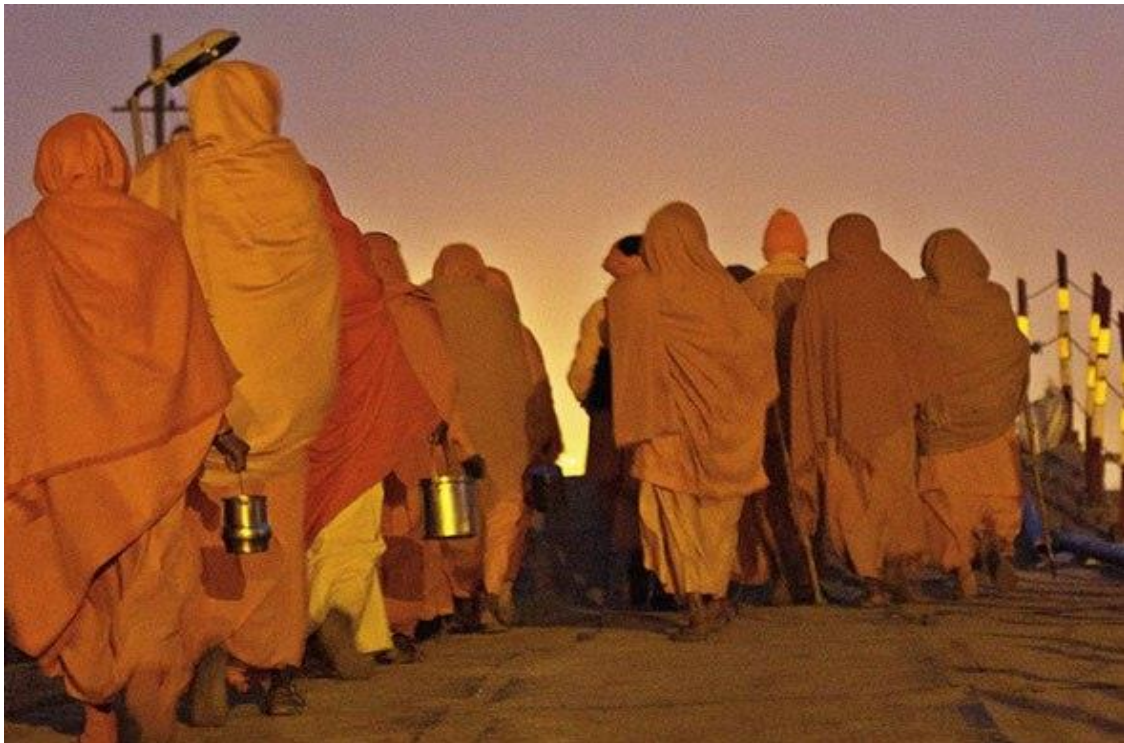


Fig.13. Rishis and saints going for evening prayer on the banks of the Ganga



Fig.14. Early morning snana by a devotee on the banks of the Ganga



Fig.15. An overhead shot of the Ardha Kumbha fair at Simariya

2.3. Kartik Purnima Snana



Fig.16. Early Morning Snana by devotees, Simariya

The **festival of Kartik Purnima** is celebrated with great enthusiasm throughout the country. The full moon of Kartik month is also known as Kartik Purnima, Tripuri Purnima or Ganga Snana. Karthik Purnima has religious and spiritual significance in Indian culture as bathing in the Ganga on this occasion is of great significance and is believed to free one from all sins. It is also known as Deepan Poornima. Kartik Purnima is celebrated as the Diwali of the gods. On this day, there are many religious events, bathing in the holy river, worship and rituals. In the twelve months of the year, Kartik month is considered to be the best for spiritual and physical energy accumulation. **Ganga snana** brings the fruits of the whole year, and Kartik Purnima gives people an opportunity to join the ‘Deepawali of the Gods’, whose light destroys the vengeful forms hidden within all creatures. The dates of Trayodashi, Chaturdashi and Poornima of this month have been labelled highly Pushkarni by the Puranas. According to the *Skanda Purana*, a person who bathes daily in the river during the Kartik month, and only bathes before sunrise on the above three dates, becomes a part of the ‘full fruit’. In the scriptures, the

importance of bathing in the Ganga on the day of Kartik Purnima is very important. It is believed that bathing in the Ganga on this day gives the fruits of bathing in the Ganga throughout the year. On this day, bathing in holy rivers and undertaking pilgrimages brings special merit, eliminating sins.



Fig.17. Procession by the Shakt followers of Shiva, also known as Aghoris, Simariya

Brahma Sarovar, born in Pushkar, is also said to have descended on this day. On the occasion of Kartik Purnima, lakhs of pilgrims visit Pushkar, bathe in the holy Pushkar lake and worship at the temple of Lord Brahma and offer lamps. There is also a legend that on this day Lord Shiva killed the demon Tripurasura. Tripurasura had established his authority over Swarga Lok. Having meditated for a long time in Prayag, when Brahma appeared before him, Tripurasura asked him for the boon that he should not be killed by gods, women, men, creatures, animals, birds, or nocturnal creatures. With this boon, Tripurasura became immortal and started torturing the gods. All the gods together asked Brahma the

remedy for the end of this monster, which Brahma told them. The deities approached Lord Shankar and prayed to him to kill Tripurasura. Mahadev then decided to slay Tripurasura. He found the monster in all the three worlds. On the day of Kartik Purnima, Mahadev slaughtered Tripurasura as Ardhanarishvara during the Pradosh period. The gods were very happy with this and Lord Vishnu gave the name Tripurari to Shiva, which is one of the many names of Shiva. The same day the gods came to Shivlok, i.e. Kashi, and celebrated Diwali. On this day, the gods are said to celebrate Dev Deepavali in Kashi, which is a tradition that is special in Kashi. It is believed that by donating a lamp in Kashi on this day of the Kartik month, one's ancestors get freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

According to the Puranas, on this day, Lord Vishnu wore the Matsya avatar to protect the religion, and the Vedas. After Ashadh Shukla Ekadashi, Lord Vishnu awakened on Kartik Shukla Ekadashi from four months of his Yoganidra. Pleased with the awakening of Lord Vishnu's yogic sleep, all the Gods and Goddesses lit lamps on the full moon day by performing Maha arati of Lakshmi and Narayan. This day is the 'Deepawali of the Gods', so by donating lamps and fasting on this day, people also join the festival of the Gods, so that they may imbibe the divinity within them, that is, incorporate the virtues within, from Narayan to Narayan. This deepawali of the Gods inspires people to renounce devilish tendencies, and to assimilate virtues.

The Kartik month is also considered to be the month of sadhana performed by Lord Kartikeya. That is why it was named Karthik month. According to *Narada Purana*, on Kartik Purnima, there is a law to set eyes on Kartikeya, to attain complete virtues and win over one's enemies. With Snana, Arghya, Tarpan, Japa-Tapa, Pujan, Kirtan and Donation performed on the full moon day, Lord Vishnu himself is said to cleanse such believers from sin.

After bathing on the full moon day, listening to the story of Sri Satyanarayana, reciting the Gita, reciting Vishnu *Sahasranam* and chanting 'Om Namoh Bhagavate Vasudevaya', the faithful get the blessings of Vishnu by becoming sin-free. In order to please Lord Vishnu, on this day, under the sky, people light lamps near houses, temples, peepal trees and tulsi plants, and offer lamps to holy rivers like the Ganga.



Fig. 18. The ghats during Kartik Purnima



Fig. 19. Religious heads during the festival

Chapter 3

Art and Cultural Heritage

The creative and cultural life of Bihar owes greatly to the imagining of the Ganga, a strong belief in its sacredness, and faith expressed through the traditional rituals at its banks. The cultural and artistic space of Bihar plays a very important role in the moorings of Indian culture. Traditions play a major role in the cultural climate of Bihar, with many contributions of local folk music, theatre, performances and artistic talent. In this section we look at the various traditions revolving around the Mithila praxis of Begusarai. The cultural history of Begusarai draws its history from current Darbhanga (a major Mithila hub), Samastipur and Munger.

3.1. Art Traditions

There are several traditional styles of painting practiced in Bihar. One is **Mithila painting**, a style of Indian painting popular in the Mithila region of Bihar. Conventionally, painting was one of the skills that was passed down from generation to generation in the families of the Mithila region, mainly by women. Painting was usually done on walls during festivals, religious events, and other milestones of the life cycle, like birth, Upanayanam (the sacred thread ceremony), and marriage.¹³ Mithila painting was traditionally done on the freshly plastered mud walls of the hut. Today it is also done on cloth, handmade paper, and canvas. Famous Mithila painters have included Bharti Dayal, Mahasundari Devi, the late Ganga Devi, and Sita Devi.

¹³ Carolyn Brown Heinz, 2006, "*Documenting the Image in Mithila Art*", *Visual Anthropology Review*, Vol. 22, Issue 2, pp. 5-33

Mithila painting is also known as **Madhubani** art. It mostly depicts human beings and their association and interaction with the natural world. The most common scenes illustrate deities like Krishna, Ram, Shiva, Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati from ancient epics. Natural objects like the sun, moon, and religious plants like tulsi are also widely painted, along with scenes from the royal court and social events like weddings. Generally no space is left empty.¹⁴



Fig. 20. A wall representation of Mithila painting of Sita and Ram. Barheta Laheriyasarai, Darbhanga

The perception of Ganga among the local communities, such as from Mithila, is also manifested in their paintings. Mithila paintings originated sometime during the early modern times in the mid-Ganga

¹⁴ Carolyn Brown Heinz, 2006, "Documenting the Image in Mithila Art", Visual Anthropology Review, Vol. 22, Issue 2, pp. 5-33

basin.¹⁵ One of the well-known themes is that of **Panihari**, wherein a group of women is shown carrying water from the river in earthen pots. In popular perception, Mithila was the birthplace of Sita of the epic *Ramayana*. Over centuries, the people of Mithila have retained their old traditions of art. Traditionally, Madhubani paintings are made on the eve of certain rituals and marriage ceremonies. Vidyapati refers to this art form (his contributions are referred to in the section on language) in his *Purusa-Pariksha*, where he mentions two artists, Sasi and Muladeva, who specialized in images with two deer on one side and portraits of a princess and a prince on the other. Possibly, the love of Krishna and Radha also influenced the Madhubani painting style after the sixteenth century.



Fig. 21

¹⁵ Vipul Singh, *Speaking Rivers: Environmental History of Mid-Ganga Flood Country, 1540-1885*. Primus Books: New Delhi, 71.



Fig. 22



Fig. 23

Figs. 21, 22 & 23. (joined together below) We see a clear depiction of Gangavataran and the current situation of the Ganga in the modern world. The painting is a metaphor for the world to realise that if we prayed so hard to get the Ganga on this earth, why are we now destroying it? The artist of this painting is Shiva Kashyap, the first woman who brought the Mithila painting to textiles. Barheta Laheriasarai, Darbhanga

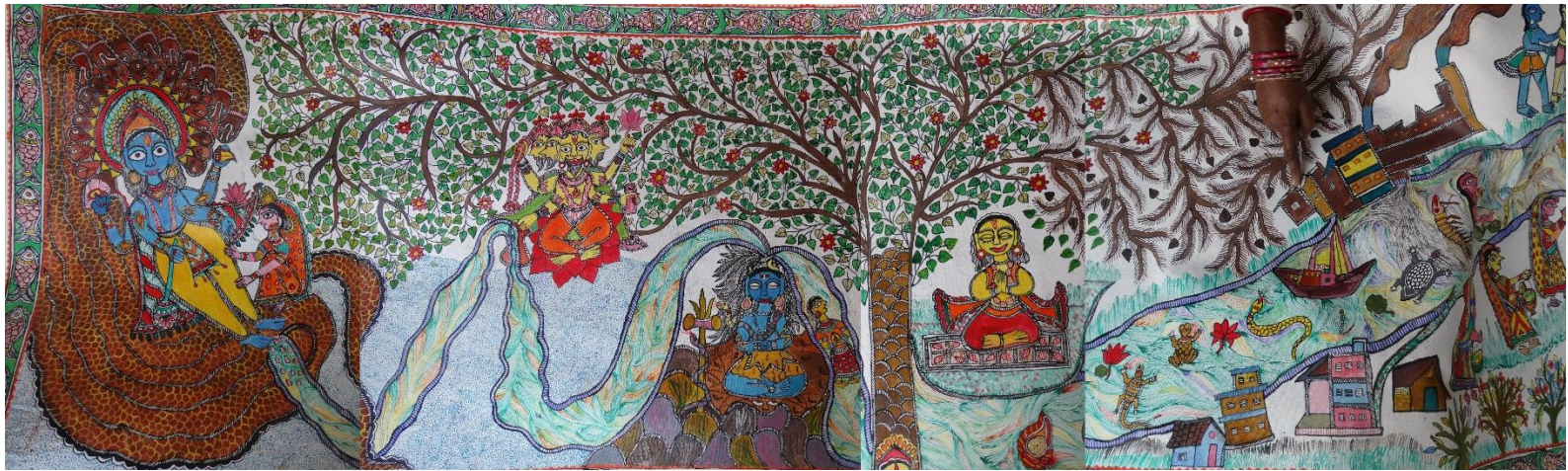


Fig. 24. Artist Shiva Kashyap. Barheta Laheriasarai, Darbhanga



Fig. 25



Fig. 26

Figs. 25 & 26. Mithila artists at work with nibs and colour, the use of which has been approved by many traditional artists

The Madhubani style of painting has remained confined to a compact geographical area and the skills have been passed down through generations, such that the content and style have remained largely the same. Thus, it has received GI (Geographical Indication) status. These paintings use two-dimensional imagery. They are made with the paste of powdered rice, and the colours used are derived from plants. Ochre and lampblack are used for reddish-brown and black, respectively.

Madhubani paintings mostly depict people and their association with nature and scenes and deities from the ancient epics. As mentioned earlier, no space is left empty; the gaps are filled by drawings of flowers, animals, birds, and geometric designs. Traditionally, painting was one of the skills that was passed down from generation to generation in the families of the Mithila region, mainly by women. It is still practiced and kept alive in institutions spread across the Mithila belt. Kalakriti in Darbhanga, Vaidehi in Madhubani, Benipatti in Madhubani district and Gram Vikas Parishad in Ranti are some of the major centres of Madhubani painting which have kept this ancient art form alive.

Madhubani art has **five distinctive styles**: Bharni, Kachni, Tantrik, Godna and Kohbar. In the 1960s Bharni, Kachni and Tantrik styles were mainly done by Brahman and Kayastha women, who would be considered 'upper caste' in India and Nepal. Their themes were mainly religious and they depicted Gods and Goddesses, plants and animals in their paintings. People of the so-called 'lower castes' included aspects of their daily life and symbols, the story of Raja Shailesh (guardian of the village) and much more, in their paintings. Today, when Madhubani painting is recognised globally, there is no difference in the work on the basis of the caste system.



Fig. 27. A Madhubani artist at work

In the following image we also see the sexual symbolization of Mithila art through Tantra. Exotic, intricate and exuberant paintings are painted inside '**Kohbar**', **the bridal chamber** at the bride's home, where the newly married couple resides for at least one week. The couple celebrates their honeymoon in this tastefully and beautifully painted room. There are many symbolic images like the lotus plant, bamboo grove, fish, birds and snakes in union. They represent fertility, sexual ability and proliferation of life. They are drawn collectively in the nuptial chamber by the ladies of the bride's family and those of the locality on the special occasion of marriage. In the entire Mithila region, there exists an age-old tradition of wall-paintings in the nuptial chamber of the bride. Every girl of marriageable age in Mithila is supposed to be expert in this art as a sort of prerequisite. She learns it from her mother and other

elderly women of the family. Sometimes her art would be sent as a marriage proposal to the would-be groom. After marriage, it is sent as a valuable gift to her husband's home.



Fig. 28. A typical example of 'Kohbar' art

The symbols used in Maithali folk art have their own significance. The elephant, horse, and palanquin are symbols of royalty and richness. The sun and moon represent longevity. The goose and peacock signify welfare and calmness. Paan (betel leaves) and the lotus symbolize good luck while bans (bamboo) is the symbol of future progeny. According to Mildred Archer, "The outer walls of the 'kohbar' are full of paintings of rural life such as Palki with Kahar (palanquin and its carriers), shady fruit trees like mango and banana, and dancing peacocks. They also depict love-scenes of Lord Krishna with the Gopies and his constant companion Radha."

Mithila art is original in nature. It is an **indigenous and traditional art form** which is getting modernized day by day. So its market value and appeal is increasing gradually. This modern aspect of Mithila art is beautifully and tastefully depicted on t-shirts, tea mats, ashtrays, paper stands, bags and baskets of different sizes and shapes. It is also painted on pillow covers, bed sheets or covers, table cloths and on many household items. It is thus becoming a suitable source of income for local communities. The credit for this goes to the women of the Mithila region because they are the patrons, promoters and also protectors of this ageless art tradition. They have kept alive this tradition.

This unique and highly traditional art can be divided into three main categories:

Kohbar art: Kohbar is a very typical Maithili word which means Suhag raat (honeymoon). Newly married couples start their conjugal life in a magnificently decorated room. This occasion is considered extremely significant in their life. Lydia Aran writes about this art, "The Kohbar, painted on paper by a girl, is sent by her to the boy of her choice as a marriage proposal; it is painted on the walls of the bedroom to ensure fertility; on the paper used for wrapping gifts during courtship as a proof of a girl's accomplishment in the traditional art, and on the walls of the house for magic protection."

The second type of Mithila art is called Aripān. Aripān is like Alpana in Bengali culture, Kolam in Kerala, Chowk Purna in Bhojpuri, Punjabi and Haryanvi tradition and Sathia in Maharashtrian customs. It can also be compared to Likhnu of Himachal Pradesh, Rangoli from Uttar Pradesh and Mandana in Rajasthan. It is a magical and mysterious circle which is drawn on the floor to purify and sanctify that particular area for worship. It is a ritualistic and ceremonial art which is suitable for auspicious occasions like Batsatri (worshipping of Bat tree which is a symbol of long life), Nag Panchami (worshipping of the snake), and Satyanarayan Bhagwan Puja (worshipping of Lord Satya Narayan). It is also painted on the floor on the occasion of the sacred thread ceremony and marriage service. It has been compared to the Tibetan Mandala art and it is deeply influenced by tantric cult. It is supposed to be the outcome of the meditative and yogic experience of the Mithila women artists. Lydia Aran has also thrown light on this kind of art, "The Aripāns are drawn on ritually prescribed occasions, on the clean swept ground of the courtyards or inside the house. Ideally, the design of an Aripān should be revealed to the lady artist as a result of meditation and general yogic experience. In practice, the details of the various Aripāns are learned by girls from matching the work of their mothers, grandmothers and other female relatives and neighbours."

The third category of Mithila art is religious in nature as it depicts mythological lore and legends; Krishna, Rama and various gods and goddesses are depicted on canvas and paper. On occasion, Kali and Shakti, along with Lord Shiva, are drawn. The Sakta cult is very strong in the Mithila region and its art is deeply influenced by the Hindu religion. The *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagvada Gita* are a perennial source for Mithila art. Maithil artists dedicate their talent and skills to God and traditionally meditate for a long period before creating a sculpture or painting, in order to transfer their spiritual and aesthetic vision to their work.

The use of colours in Mithila Art: The women artists of Mithila use different local colours for their paintings. They use bright red, yellow and black; black from soot, red from the local clay and yellow from the petals of flowers. They prepare vegetable colours from different flowers, fruit and barks. Roots of gum prepared naturally from the Babul tree is mixed in the colours for durability. Black is generally obtained from lamp soot and is easily dissolved in gum water. A light brown colour is obtained by mixing cow dung and gum in fresh water. The bark of the Peepal tree is dried in the sunshine and then boiled in water till it yields a pink hue. Blue is obtained by crushing the berries of a wild herb called sikkar in the local language. The juice of the herb is collected in a cup, dissolved in gum arabicum and thereafter filtered through cloth. Dark green is made from the leaves of the Siam creeper and parrot green from the sepals of the Gulmohar. Other organic and mineral colours are increasingly coming into use today; indigo for blue, arsenic for yellow, red sandalwood and iron oxide for red and their various mixtures. They also sometimes use water colour mixed with rice powder. These colours are used according to the artist's imagination and vision.

The artists use bamboo splint or their fingers to draw. Generally, they do not use modern brushes, but apply the colour with a piece of raw cotton or lint attached to the end of the bamboo splint. They prepare their 'brushes' by wrapping cotton around the end of a twig or match stick.



Fig. 29



Fig. 30

Figs. 29 & 30. Erotica in Mithila art, depicting Maithili Gitagovindam, by Krishna Kumar Kashyap, Barheta village, Darbhanga

Another important painting tradition which emerged in the late sixteenth century was the **Patna School of Painting** also recognised as the **Company painting or The Patna Kalam**. The paintings of this genre reveal interesting information on the socio-cultural and economic history of the entire region, not just Patna as it is delineated today.

Patna Kalam is an off-shoot of Mughal painting. The Mughal style of painting matured during the regime of Jahangir, and his period was considered the golden era of Mughal paintings,¹⁶ but during the rule of Aurangzeb in the late 17th and early 18th century, artists faced mass prosecution and an abhorrence towards art and painting. These artists migrated from Delhi, looking for shelter in different places. One such group moved eastwards and located themselves in Murshidabad under the patronage of the Nawab of Bengal and other local aristocrats.

In the mid 18th century, after the fall of the Nawab of Bengal and subsequent decline of Murshidabad, the artists started moving to the next biggest city in the east, Patna. In Patna, they came under the patronage of local aristocracy and Indophile scions of the early East India Company and started a unique form of painting which came to be known as the Company painting style, or Patna Kalam.

Patna Kalam is regarded as an off-shoot of Mughal painting with influences from both Persian and Company (British) styles. The portraits can be clearly seen to have colours and lines of the Mughal style, and the shading can be seen to be adopted from the British style. Diverging from the Mughal and Persian style of wide and exquisitely decorated borders, Patna Kalam primarily focused on the subject of the painting.

Unlike Mughal painting, which focused on royalty and court scenes, **flag bearers of Patna Kalam were deeply influenced by daily life of the common man.** Their main subjects were local festivals, ceremonies, bazaar scenes, local rulers, and domestic activities. The paintings were done on diverse surfaces such as paper, mica, and even ivory diskettes that were used as brooches. A distinguishing characteristic of Patna Kalam is lack of any landscape, foreground or background. Another characteristic was the development in the shading of solid forms.

Patna Kalam paintings are painted straightaway with the brush without marking with pencil to delineate the contours of the picture and the procedure of painting is popularly known as ‘Kajli Seahi’. Some well-known painters of Patna Kalam were Sewak Ram, Hulas Lall, Shiv Lal, Shiva Dayal, Mahadeo Lal, and

¹⁶ <https://www.deccanherald.com/content/56522/return-patna-kalam.html>

Ishwari Prasad Verma. There is currently no one to carry on the tradition. Only three collections of Patna Kalam paintings exist in Bihar, one at the Patna Museum and others at Khuda Baksh library, Patna, and Patna University's College of Arts and Crafts. The Patna Kalam flourished only as long as its western patrons existed.



Fig. 31

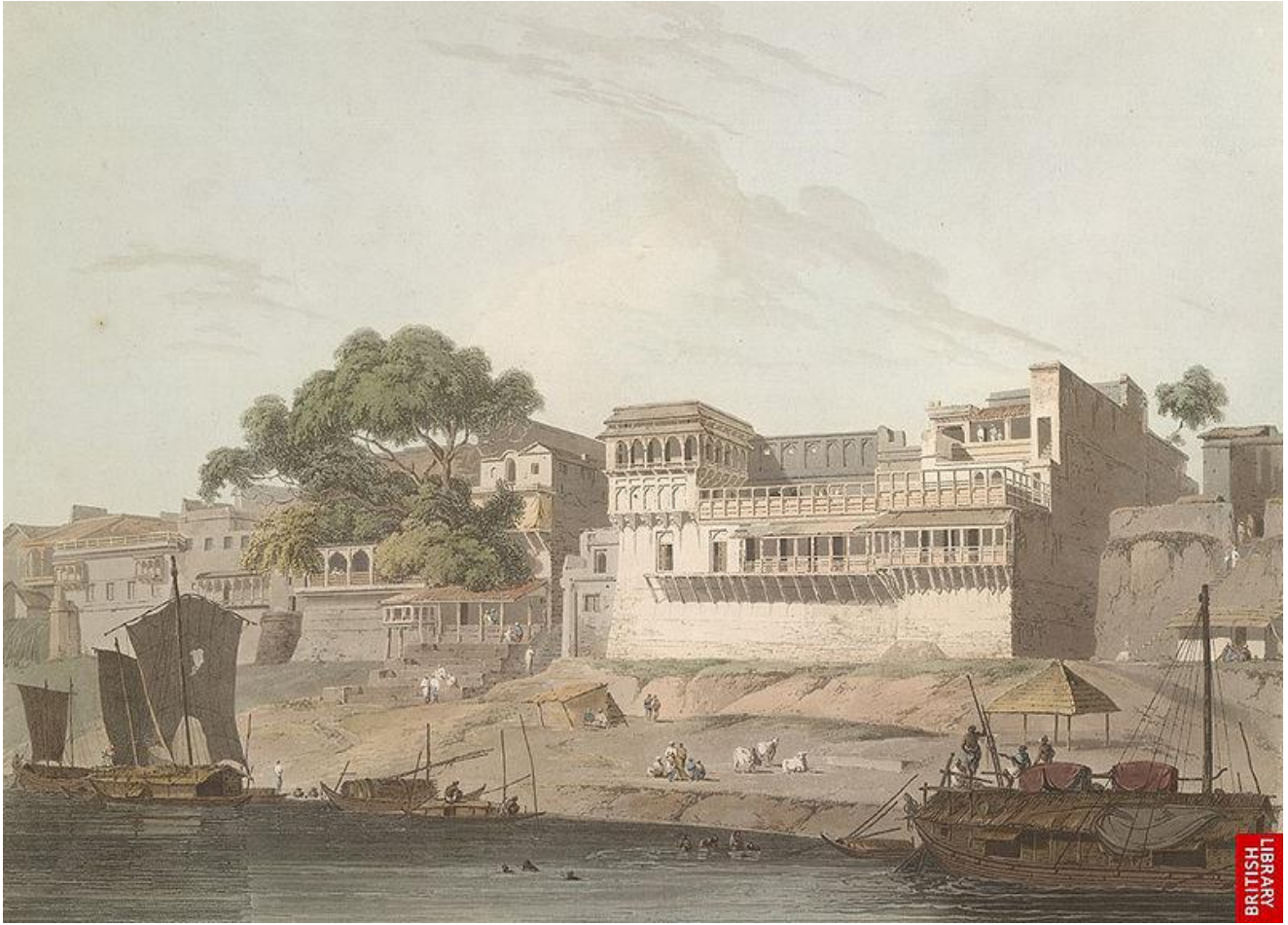


Fig. 32

Figs. 31 & 32. Depiction of Patna Gol Ghar and the Ganges along the city of Patna in 19th Century British India. Source: British Library and Victoria and Albert Museum

3.2. Crafts

The craft communities of Bihar and this region specifically date back to the Mauryan civilization in terms of sculpture. In contemporary times, the craft traditions are still living with an exemplary past to inspire and inform them. **Basketry** here traces its origins to India's colonial past and if traced, even older. All the basket makers are here sometimes recognised as one kind of Dom Bangsphor; they make mats out of strips of bamboo neatly interwoven. This is only done on commission and their chief product for the ordinary market is Dalis (baskets), Sups (winnowing fans), and Pangkha (hand fans), sometimes used also for ritualistic purposes.¹⁷



Fig. 33. Basket Makers of Samastipur

¹⁷ Francis Buchanan. District Gazetteer of Bhagalpur. 587.

Another craft tradition seen in this region is that of Sujni making. The **Sujni embroidery** work of Bihar, is an expressive art in textile, given protection under the GI registration act. It is usually a quilt or bed spread, which would earlier be made from old recycled clothes. It is now generally made from easily available fabric with embroidery in simple stitches, and motifs narrating stories. It is almost exclusively made by women in the village of Bhusra in the Gaighat block of Muzaffarpur and a few villages of Madhubani in Bihar.



Fig. 34. An example of Sujni making tradition from Samastipur

The earliest known traditional practice of making the embroidered Sujni quilt is traced to the 18th century.¹⁸ Its basic purpose was to provide a soft cover for newly born babies. It was made with pieces of cloth in different colours derived from used saris and dhotis by sewing them together by adopting a simple running stitch. This process involved use of three or four patches of old saris or dhotis, fitted one over the other and then quilting them together using the thread that was also drawn from the discarded garments. Motifs expressing the hopes of the mother for her new-born child were sewn onto the quilt, generally done with a chain stitch in a dark shade.

The Sujni technique is based on two ancient beliefs. In one ritualistic tradition, it represented the presence of a deity known as ‘Chitiriya Ma, the Lady of the Tatters’. It symbolized the concept of unifying incongruous elements holistically. The second objective was to make a soft coverlet to wrap the newly born child in as if the child was still within the soft embrace of its mother. The word Sujni is a compound word of ‘su’ meaning "easy and facilitating" and ‘jani’ meaning "birth". The motifs sewn on the quilt represent the sun and clouds, indicative of life-giving forces, fertility symbols, sacred animals, and mythical animals to protect against evil forces, and to attract blessings from the gods. Use of different shades of threads symbolizes life's forces, such as red being symbolic of blood and yellow denoting the sun.

The above pattern of making the Sujni product had almost become extinct till it was revived in 1988 at the initiative of Nirmal Devi of the Mahila Vikas Sahyog Samiti (MVSS), an autonomous society, located in the village of Bhusra near Muzaffarpur. Now, there are about 600 women from 22 villages around Bhusra who actively pursue this craft. The quilt that is made with this embroidery work represents the aspirations of women in a man's world. She makes the craft work in the form of specific motifs embroidered on both sides of the product. On one face of the quilt the motifs express women's anguish at the violent behaviour of drunken husbands, the act of giving dowry to ensure a groom for marriage, and village men gathered at a village meeting place where the women sit covered with a veil. The other face of the product depicts a woman's ambition of earning a living by selling her product in a marketplace, a woman lecturing to an assembly of people, or a woman holding court and showing her mental prowess.

The materials used in making this product nowadays are expensive pieces of cotton such as ‘Salita’ or a cheaper variety of white or coloured markin, Tussar silk, casement cloth, and embroidery threads such

¹⁸ <https://web.archive.org/web/20160418004555/http://www.nift.ac.in/patna/craft%20cluster.pdf>

as moon thread or rangoli or anchor thread. The motifs are designed by the women sewing the quilt, and are usually of their choice. The embroidery is done as a fine running stitch with the thread of the same colour as the background cloth. For the main outline of the proposed pattern, chain stitch using black, brown and red thread is used. The popular products made these days are quilts or bed sheets. They designs depict rural scenes, episodes from Hindu epics, current social themes such as female infanticide, violence during elections, women's education, and domestic abuse. Other notable designs are related to health aspects, the environment, and expression of women's rights.

Cane reeds (or strips) craft items painted in vivid colours are commonly found in Bihari homes. A special container called a 'pauti', woven out of Sikki grass in the north, is a sentimental gift that accompanies a bride when she leaves her home after her wedding.

Bhagalpur is known for its sericulture, manufacture of silk yarn, and silk-weaving. Silk produced here is called tussah or tussar silk. Appliqué work in Bihar is known as 'Khatwa'.

Bihar is also well-known for the traditional games played here, such as Kabaddi.

Sama Chakeva or **Sama Chakeba** is a Hindu festival, originating from the Mithila region. It is a festival for brothers and sisters. It is celebrated in November and commences when birds begin their migration from the Himalayas down towards the plains of India. It tells the story of Sama, a daughter of Krishna who had been falsely accused of wrongdoing. Her father punished her by turning her into a bird, but the love and sacrifice of her brother Chakeva eventually allowed her to regain human form. The celebration starts from the night of Chhath puja. This is the 7th day of the month of Kartik. Young, mostly unmarried, girls assemble at night near the ghats of chhath with a basket containing small idols of Sama and Chakeva, candles, kohl, and clay made daily use appliances. They sing traditional songs, perform rituals like making kohl or exchanging baskets. This celebration continues till Kartik Purnima. On the auspicious occasion of Kartik Purnima, girls take a dip in the river and the idols of Sama and Chakeva are immersed in the river.¹⁹

¹⁹ Sunita Pant Bansal. *Encyclopaedia of India*, Smriti Books. 74.



Fig. 35. Clay models of Sama and Chakeva, Bargama, Samastipur



Fig. 36. Depiction of Palki which is a part of the traditional game of Sama Chakeva, Bargama, Samastipur



Fig.37. Women worshipping the clay idols in the ritualistic game, Bargama, Samastipur

3.3. Music and Folk Culture

Bihar has its **distinctive folk music**; old traditions that continue to this day. The **Sohar** is performed during childbirth, **Sumangali** is associated with weddings, **ropnigeet** is performed during the season of sowing paddy and **Katnigeet** is performed during the paddy harvesting season. The other forms of Bihari folk music include purbi, chaita, hori, bidesia, ghato, birha, kajari, irni/ birni, pachra, jhumar, jatsari, aalah, nirgun and samdaun. The tradition of war songs is called **Beer Kunwar**. Wandering folk singers in Bihar include the Kathaks, who traditionally travelled in groups and performed to the sounds of the dholak, sarangi, tamburu and majira. Many of these are played and sung during important family occasions such as birth ceremonies, marriage, and festivals. The folk songs are sung mainly in a group, using dholak, and sometimes tabla and harmonium as well.

Sohar-Kilauna Dance: The birth of a child is celebrated all over India with different traditional rituals. The ladies compare the child with gods like Lord Rama and Lord Krishna. In Bihar, ladies always sing Sohar at the birth of a child. The ladies bless the baby by singing, acting and dancing by the words of Sohar. This is a regionally important function where women gather and celebrate.

Jhumeri is a folk dance from Mithilanchal. This folk dance is performed by married women in the month of Kartik when the sky is clear and the full moon spreads its rays all over. On this full moon night of Kartik, young maidens of the village sing and dance to celebrate the turning of the season. The words of the Jhumeri song ‘Kartikmaas naakashey badri’ and the graceful movements of the dance cast a spell on the audience.

Jat-Jatin is a popular dance of the women of the Mithila region of Bihar and is supposed to be performed on moonlit nights during the monsoons. Grown-up girls and young housewives assemble in the courtyard and, accompanied by a drum, dance from midnight till dawn. This is also popular in the Koshi region of North Bihar. This dance form relates the story of the man going out of the village to earn a living and thus getting separated from his wife. After his return, the wife performs this dance. The original theme of the Jat-Jatin dance explains the story of the lovers Jat and Jatin, who were separated and living in difficult circumstances. Today, through ‘Jat Jatin’ many social issues and natural calamities

like droughts and floods are also discussed. Topics of social concern like poverty, sorrow, love, arguments between lovers or husband and wife—all find expression in this dance. In some versions, the performers wear masks.

The **Jhijian** dance is also well-known and is performed by village women. It is sung when there has been no rain for a long period of time and the rains are awaited eagerly. Through Jhijian the villagers portray the drought when there is not a single drop of rain anywhere, the lands are cracked and parched, the sky is lifeless without clouds and the people are awaiting rains. The village women pray to Lord Indra for a heavy downpour and dance and sing to please him, as he is considered the Lord of Rain. The words of the song go— "Haali-Huli Barshun Inder Devta".²⁰

²⁰ <http://prudenttravelsholidays.co.in/bihar-art-culture.php>

3.4. Architecture and Culture

The first significant architectural structures in Bihar date back to the Vedic period. While the Mauryan period marked a transition to the use of brick and stone, wood remained the material of choice. Contemporary writers like Chanakya in the Arthashastra, advised the use of brick and stone for their durability. However, in his writings, Megasthenes described a wooden palisade encircling the capital city of Pataliputra. Evidence of ancient structures have been found in recent excavations in Kumrahar, in modern-day Patna. Remains of an 80-pillared hall have also been unearthed.

The Buddhist stupa, a dome-shaped monument, was used in India as a commemorative monument used to enshrine sacred relics. The stupa architecture was adopted in Southeast and East Asia, where it became prominent. Many stupas, like those at Nalanda and Vikramshila, were originally built as brick and masonry mounds during the reign of Ashoka (273 BCE - 232 BCE). Fortified cities with stupas, viharas, and temples were constructed during the Mauryan empire (c. 321–185 BCE). Wooden architecture remained popular, while rock-cut architecture became solidified. Guard rails—consisting of posts, crossbars, and a coping—became a safety feature surrounding a stupa. Upon its discovery by Westerners, the stupa became known as *pagoda* in the West.

Temples—built on elliptical, circular, quadrilateral, or apsidal plans—were constructed using brick and timber. The Indian gateway arches, the torana, reached East Asia with the spread of Buddhism. Some scholars hold that *torii* derives from the torana gates at the Buddhist historic site of Sanchi (3rd century BCE – 11th century CE).

Important features of the architecture of this period included walled and moated cities with large gates and multi-storied buildings, which consistently used arched windows and doors. The Indian emperor Ashoka, who ruled from 273 BCE to 232 BCE, established a chain of hospitals throughout the Mauryan Empire by 230 BCE. One of the edicts of Ashoka reads: "Everywhere King Piyadasi (Ashoka) erected

two kinds of hospitals, hospitals for people and hospitals for animals. Where there were no healing herbs for people and animals, he ordered that they be bought and planted.”²¹

Buddhist architecture blended with Roman and Hellenistic architecture to give rise to unique new styles, such as the Greco-Buddhist style.²² Rock-cut stepwells in India date from 200–400 CE. Subsequently, the wells at Dhank (550–625 CE) and the stepped ponds at Bhinmal (850–950 CE) were constructed. Bihar was largely in ruins when visited by Xuan Zang, and suffered further damage at the hands of Mughal raiders in the 12th century.²³ Though parts of Bihar have been excavated, much of its ancient architecture still lies buried beneath the modern city.

Persian influence can be seen in surviving Mughal tombs made of sandstone and marble. Surviving Mughal architecture includes the Sher Shah Suri Tomb, built by Sher Shah Suri and his successor. Ibrahim Khan, Governor of Bihar and a disciple of Makhdoom Daulat, oversaw the completion of the Makhdoom Daulat mausoleum in 1616. Another example of Mughal architecture is the building at Maner Sharif. The domed building features walls adorned with intricate designs and a ceiling full of inscriptions from the Quran. Patna High Court, Bihar Vidhan Sabha, Bihar Vidhan Parishad, Transport Bhawan, Patna, Golghar, St. Mary's Church and Patna Museum are some example of Indo-Saracenic Architecture.

Naulakha Temple adds a contemporary architectural dimension to the city. It was constructed in 1953 by Shri Mahavir Das. The entrance to the temple is marked by a huge garden, and the plentiful use of glass in the building is another distinguishing feature. The interior is decorated with glass pieces and is painted with many depictions of Ram and Sita. Many spaces in the temple are very ornate with gold and silver embellishment. On the occasion of Durga Puja and Ramnavami, the temple is filled with thousands of devotees and is an important sacred space for many people in Begusarai. The grounds of the temple have many remnants of colonial structures, some of which are almost reminiscent of the entrance to a fort.

²¹ Finger, Stanley (2001). *Origins of Neuroscience: A History of Explorations into Brain Function*. US: Oxford University Press. 12.

²² Moffett, M.; Fazio, M.; and Lawrence Wodehouse (2003). *A World History of Architecture*. McGraw-Hill Professional. 75.

²³ Scott, David (May 1995). "Buddhism and Islam: Past to Present Encounters and Interfaith Lessons". *Numen*. **42** (2): 141–155.



Fig. 38. Naulakha Temple, Begusarai. Bihar. Source: Google Photos



Fig. 39. Mauryan Architecture in Barabar Mounts 3rd century BCE. Cunningham. Archaeological survey of India

Chapter 4

The Saktah tradition of Ugratara Temple

The Ganga and its tributaries were used not only for communication and transport, but also as a means to develop pride of place in the region. This is reflected through numerous mythologies, collective memories, folk songs and visual images of the past. The representation of Ganga was the outcome of daily experiences of the people living in the riverine plain. Songs bound together the people of the mid-Ganga basin.²⁴ **This cultural-religious enshrinement which mostly happens around the river is a significant example of the intangible heritage of the Ganga which flows across the entire state of Bihar.** Such documentation of ritualistic and temple traditions adds meaning to the study. On these lines, we discuss here one of the oldest temples of the area, the Ugratara Temple, located in Mahishi (Saharsa).

Shri Ugratara Mandir is situated at a distance of about 17 Kms west of Saharsa station in Mahishi village. In this ancient temple, the idol of Bhagwati Tara is said to be very old and draws devotees from far and wide. On either side of the main deity, there are two smaller female deities who are worshipped by the people as Ekjata and Nil Saraswati.

Baba Udayananda Swami has dedicated 20 years of his life in the sadhna (practice) of the shakti traditions and holds impeccable knowledge about the Mithilanchal Tantra. He explained about the Sthan and the associated folktales.

²⁴ Vipul Singh, *Speaking Rivers: Environmental History of Mid-Ganga Flood Country, 1540-1885*. Primus Books: New Delhi, 59.



Fig.40. Swami Udayananda from Darbhanga

Mahishi is famous for its ancient temple dedicated to Goddess Ugratara. Locals worship the deity as Bashishtharadhita Tara, who was worshipped by saint Bashishtha, thereby associating the place with the Ramayana period. **Ugratara Sthan is also believed to be a Shakti Peetha** as, according to legends, the right eye of Goddess Sati had fallen here. Some historians, however, claim that the image is that of a Buddhist deity dating back to the Pala period. There are a large number of Lord Buddha statues lying scattered around the temple premises and are worshipped by locals as various Hindu gods and goddesses. The temple, having the main entrance point on the western side and a small opening on the eastern side of the sanctum sanctorum, was built by Rani Padmavati, the spouse of Madhubani King Narendra Deo Singh some 500 years ago.

Some ancient walls are still visible near the temple site. Statues of Buddha, recovered from this place on different occasions, are preserved in the Patna Museum. The village is a pre-eminently Buddhist site which, historians say, was known as Aapan Nigam during the Buddha period. A rare image of Lord Buddha's Mahaparinirvana is also seen in the temple. The Tara temple, famous for the Tantrik cult of worshipping, draws devotees from different parts of the country and from Nepal. A ten-day festival here during the Shardiya Navratra draws an estimated ten lakh devotees.



Fig. 41. Main Deity of Ugratara Temple, Mahishi, Saharsa

Interview of Baba Udayananda Swami²⁵: “*Jai Mai! Jai Mithila (hailing the greatest of all Shakti). My name is Baba Udayanand Swami and I am from Darbhanga. Mithila is considered to be land of tantra and is birthplace of Maa Sita and virtuous space for the worshipers of Shiva. Bhagwati Ugratara is in Saharsa district of Bihar and is almost around 200 km away from Patna and is located in Mahesi gram. Mandan Mishr, apparently the most important personage of this area, was also located in Kashi (Mandana Misra was a Maithil philosopher who wrote on the Mimamsa and Advaita systems of*

²⁵ The interview was transcribed from Maithili to English by Nupur Choudhary. The date of interview is 16th of February, 2020. Camera operator was Kshtij Choudhary.

thought) and was a devotee of Sankaracharya. Hearing Madan Mishr's popularity Sankaracharya decided to meet him by paying a visit to Mahesi to have a sastrathik (Sanskrit academic space) discussion with Madan Mishr.

Tara Ugra is a small idol made completely out of neelam stone and is considered to be Sidhidayanai Tara and is called Tarini (one who gets moksha). The story begins from the time when Maharshi Vashishta prayed for a very long time to attain diksha (highest form of knowledge) and decided to travel south towards Kosi River. He met Bhagwati (a small girl aged 14: an illusion of the divine) and started walking along with her and started doing his sadhna. Bhagwati had a condition for the saint that he would not disclose her identity to anyone. One day he felt compelled to expose her identity because people were accusing him for not following the virtuous path of a true Brahman. Due to this when Shakti was exposed as the divine Bhagwati she immediately turned herself into the form of a neelam stone statue and till date this lies in this spot, which ultimately became the Ugr Tara temple.

Now to attain the Bhagwati again Rishi Vashistha took another birth as Sage Bamakhepa and undertook sadhana in the most appropriate manner and finally attained the diksha in Tarapeetha (Birbhum, Bengal). However since the Neelam stone of Ugratara remains intact in its position there was heavy and dense forest which formed around the place and there was this very particular tree which enshrined the stone-idol of Bhagwati.

Interestingly Maa Tara is also an important deity in Buddhism and the story narrative takes place before Buddhism was established as a religion. In contemporary times, the story has another interesting angle which leads us to Darbhanga Maharaj's sister. She paid a visit to the place and the night she came there it was raining heavily and there was lightening which struck the same tree which covered the Tara's idol and the tree was separated into two halves. In the aftermath of this, Darbhanga Maharaj constructed this small temple and hence the idol lies within it. The neelam idol looks so realistic it is as if it has a life of its own. When Darbhanga Maharaj asked his workers to do the digging, he realised that the stone shaped idol was located on a 10 feet neelam pillar which was astounding for everyone. All the workers who were involved in the digging lost their eye-sight and Darbhanga Maharaj never went back to the place again. Later his wife decided to reconstruct the temple because her home was in Mahesi.

It is believed that the place is blessed with knowledge and this flows in every family of the gram, the precise reason this is one of the most educated and well-read regions of Bihar.”



Fig. 42. Ugratara Temple, Mahishi, Saharsa

4.1. Mandana Misra

The **narrative of Mandana Misra** becomes an integral aspect of understanding the oral traditions of the region. He was a Maithil philosopher who wrote on the Mimamsa and Advaita systems of thought. He was a follower of the Karma Mimamsa school of philosophy and a staunch defender of the holistic sphota doctrine of language. He was a **contemporary of Adi Shankara**, and is said to have become a disciple of Adi Shankara. Mandana Misra's wife was Ubhaya Bharati. He is often identified with Suresvara.

Mandana Misra was born to a Maithil Brahmin family in Mithila (present day Bihar), and lived in the ancient village of Mahishi located in Mithila during the time of Adi Shankara. The location of this is in the present district of Saharsa in Bihar. Mandana Misra reportedly lived in the present day Mandleshwar and debated with Shankaracharya at the Gupteshwar Mahadev Temple. The town supposedly derives its name from him.

Mandana Misra is known to have been a student of a Mimamsa scholar Kumarila Bhatta, who also wrote a work on Advaita, the *Brahma-siddhi*.²⁶ Mandana Misra is best known as the author of the *Brahmasiddhi*.²⁷ Being a follower of the Karma Mimamsa school, he was a ritualist and performed all of the ritualistic duties prescribed by the Vedas. In certain Hindu traditions, Mandana Misra is considered to be an incarnation of Brahma.

Suresvara has also been credited as the founder of a pre-Shankara branch of Advaita Vedanta.

Mandana Misra, who was a contemporary of Shankara, may have been more influential in the Advaita Vedanta tradition than is usually acknowledged. According to Richard E. King, although it is common to find western scholars and Hindus arguing that Shankaracharya was the most influential and important

²⁶ Roodurmun, Pulasth Soobah (2002), *Bhāmatī and Vivaraṇa Schools of Advaita Vedānta: A Critical Approach*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers. 31.

²⁷ Kuppaswami Sastri, S. (1984), *Brahmasiddhi, by Maṇḍanamiśra, with commentary by Śaṅkhaṇḍī. 2nd ed.*, Delhi, India: Sri Satguru Publications, 36.

figure in the history of Hindu intellectual thought, this does not seem to be justified by the historical evidence.²⁸

According to King and Roodurmun, until the 10th century Shankara was overshadowed by his older contemporary Mandana Misra. In the centuries after Shankara it was Mandana Misra who was considered to be the most important representative of Vedanta. His influence was such that some regard his work to have set forth a “non-Sankaran brand of Advaita.” The “theory of error” set forth in the *Brahma-siddhi* became the normative Advaita Vedanta theory of error. Vachaspati Misra Bhamati provides the link between Mandana Misra and Shankara, attempting to harmonise Shankara's thought with that of Mandana Misra. According to Advaita tradition, Shankara reincarnated as Vachaspati Misra “to popularise the Advaita System through his Bhamati.”

A legend describes how Mandana Misra is said to have first met Adi Shankara.²⁹ It was customary in the time of Shankara and Mandana for learned people to debate the relative merits and demerits of the different systems of Hindu philosophy. Shankara, an exponent of Advaita philosophy sought out Kumarila Bhatta, who was the leading exponent of the Purva Mimamsa philosophy. However, at that time, Kumarila Bhatta was slowly immolating himself as a penance for his sins. After reading some of Shankara's work and realising the depth of his knowledge, he directed Shankara to his greatest disciple, Mandana Misra, who was leading a householder's life (Grihastha), to debate the merits of their respective schools of thought. While trying to find the house of Mandana, Shankara asked for directions and was told the following:

“You will find a home at whose gates there are a number of caged parrots discussing abstract topics like—'Do the Vedas have self-validity or do they depend on some external authority for their validity? Are karmas capable of yielding their fruits directly, or do they require the intervention of God to do so? Is the world eternal, or is it a mere appearance?' Where you find the caged parrots discussing such abstruse philosophical problems, you will know that you have reached Mandana's place.”

Shankara found Mandana, but the first meeting between them was not pleasant. According to Vedic ritualistic rules it is inauspicious to see an ascetic on certain days and Mandana was angered to see Shankara, an ascetic, on the death anniversary of his father. Mandana initially hurled insults at Shankara,

²⁸ King, Richard (2002), *Orientalism and Religion: Post-Colonial Theory, India and "The Mystic East"*, Routledge. 33.

²⁹ Vidyananya, Madhava (1996), *Sankara Digvijaya: The Traditional Life of Sri Sankaracharya: Translated by Swami Tapasyananda*, Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Matha

who calmly replied to every insult with wordplay. The people in Mandana's house soon realised Shankara's brilliance and advised Mandana to offer his respects. Finally, after a verbal duel, Mandana agreed to debate with Shankara.

Mandana and Shankara agreed that Mandana's wife, Ubhaya Bharati, who is considered to be an incarnation of the goddess Saraswati in the folklore of Mithila, would be the arbiter for the debate, and that the vanquished would become a disciple of the victor and accept his school of thought. The debate spanned many days and ranged across many different subjects within the Vedas, and the arguments of both competitors were compelling and forceful. Shankara finally emerged victorious. But Mandana's wife, who was the judge, would not accept an ascetic as having complete knowledge since he did not have any knowledge about Kama shastras (rules about marital life). Shankara was then given six months to research certain aspects of sex-love sciences and then resume the debate. According to legend, he entered into the body of a king who had just died to learn these sciences. Later, after obtaining the necessary knowledge, the debate resumed. After a long debate, Mandana accepted defeat. According to legend, the place of debate between Shankaracharya and Mandana Misra was the Gupteshwar Mahadev Temple in Mandleshwar near Maheshwar. The ancient temple Chhapan Deo of this town is considered to be this location.

As agreed, Mandana became a disciple of Shankara and assumed the name Suresvaracharya. Along with Hastamalaka, Padmapada, and Totakacharya, he was one of the four main disciples of Shankara and was the first head of the Sringeri Mutt, one of the four mathas that Shankara later established.

4.2. Language and Literary Traditions of Begusarai

We all experience some relationship between language and society in our daily lives, and Sociolinguistics studies all aspects of this relationship. An interdisciplinary area covering Linguistics and Sociology, it also involves Ethnology, Anthropology and other related fields. It studies the correlations between linguistic variables and social variables in a scientific manner. Man is a social animal and uses language in relation to his society or the society in which communication is being made. We are in the habit of putting our social, cultural and religious feelings into the language we use. The sociolinguistic study of a language (or a dialect) is needed for many reasons. It investigates the relation between linguistic variables and social variables at different levels. This unique relationship is studied deeply by the sociolinguists to form different linguistic as well as sociolinguistic laws. The studies done by Labov, Gumperz, Bloom et al are the ideal examples of such kind of study.

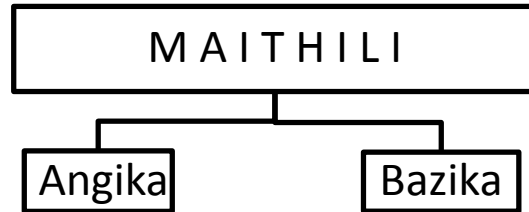
Begusarai was established in 1870 as a subdivision of Munger district and was given the status of a district in 1972. This district is the birthplace of the famous Hindi poet Rashtrakavi Ramdhari Singh Dinkar.

Maithili language belongs to Indo-Aryan language family which is known globally for its sweetness. The addition of Maithili in the eighth schedule of the Indian constitution has given it special status. The Standard Maithili is spoken in Madhubani and Darbhanga districts of Bihar (India) and parts of Nepal. It is mostly written in the Devanagri script. The most famous literary figure of this language was the **poet Vidyapati**. There are many languages/dialects (Angika, Bazika, Khari Boli, Magahi, Bhojpuri) spoken in and around Begusarai district which have a deep socio-cultural background. Such a multilingual setting provides a wide scope for the sociolinguistic study of this area.

The review of related literatures suggests that the sociolinguistic study of this particular dialect has not been taken up extensively in the past. The works done by Dr. G. A. Grierson (1903/1968): *Linguistic Survey of India*, and Dr. Abdes K. Singh (1976): *Begusarai ki Boli: Bhasa Shastriya Adhyan* provide a good understanding of this dialect but further work is required.

Grierson (1903, 1968) has specified six dialects of Maithili in the Linguistic Survey of India as

Standard Maithili, Southern Standard Maithili, Western Maithili, Eastern Maithili, Chikachiki and Jolha Boli. Today, the two major dialects of Maithili which are spoken widely are Angika and Bazika. In Samastipur district of Bihar, both the dialects are spoken. Maithili is now one of the major languages of India. It finds a place in the VIIIth schedule of the Indian constitution.



Maithili was traditionally written in Tirhuta (Mithilakshar) and Kaithi script but these scripts are now no longer in use. It is now written in the Devanagri script.

Begusarai Maithili is a variation of Maithili. It is one of the most popular dialects of Bihar and is understood not only in Bihar but also in East UP, some parts of West Bengal and in Nepal. It is unique due to many reasons.

The native speakers report that this variety of Maithili has linguistic features of not only Maithili but Khari Boli, Angika, Magahi and even Nepali. It is this feature that makes it interesting not only for linguistic study but for sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic and other related fields.

Begusarai Maithili is spoken as the mother tongue (L1) on a wide scale by its native speakers but people generally shift to Hindi (Khari Boli) while writing. This is not true with Standard Maithili which is written widely in the Devanagri script. This is one of the differences between Standard Maithili and Begusarai Maithili. There is very little literature in Begusarai Maithili, but Standard Maithili is rich in literary works.

Variations in the spoken language in terms of the caste system is one of the important characteristics of this dialect. The caste system is psychologically deep-rooted in this area. It is given more importance than religion. This socio-cultural connection provides an ideal platform for the sociolinguistic study of this dialect.

Vidyapati and his contributions

Vidyapati, known by the sobriquet *Maithil Kavi Kokil* (the poet cuckoo of Maithili), was a Maithili and Sanskrit poet, writer and polyglot. Vidyapati's influence was not just restricted to Maithili and Sanskrit literature but also extended to other Eastern literary traditions. The language at the time of Vidyapati, the prakrit-derived late abahatta, had just begun to transition into early versions of the Eastern languages such as Maithili, Bhojpuri etc. Thus, Vidyapati's influence on these languages has been described as "analogous to that of Dante in Italy and Chaucer in England".³⁰

Vidyapati was born to a Shaivite Brahmin family in the village of Bisfi in present-day Madhubani district of Mithila region. He was the son of Ganapati Thakur who was a Maithil Brahmin. The name *Vidyapati* is derived from two Sanskrit words, *vidya* (knowledge) and *pati* (master), connoting thereby "a man of knowledge".

There is confusion as to his exact date of birth due to conflicting information from his own works and those of his patrons.³¹ His father was a priest in the court of Raya Ganesvara, the reigning chief of Tirhut. A number of his ancestors were notable in their own right including his great-grandfather, Devaditya Thakkura who was a Minister of War and Peace in the court of Harisimhadeva. Vidyapati himself worked in the courts of various chiefs in North Bihar.

The *Kirttilata* makes reference to an incident where the Oiniwar King, Raja Ganesvara, was killed by the Turkish commander Malik Arsalan in 1371. By 1401, Vidyapati requested the help of the Jaunpur Sultan in overthrowing Arsalan and installing Ganesvara's sons, Virasimha and Kirttisimha, on the throne. With the Sultan's assistance, Arsalan was deposed and Kirttisimha, the oldest son, became the ruler of Mithila.

Over the last six centuries, Vidyapati's life has been mythologised in different ways. Many of his admirers ascribe miracles to him and detail his interaction with the Gods. Among these stories is one which details that Lord Shiva came down to earth to speak with Vidyapati after being impressed with his piety. Other stories detail his interaction with the Goddess Ganga.

³⁰ Coomaswamy, Anand, ed. (1915), *VIDYĀPATI: BANGĪYA PADĀBALI* (PDF), London: The Old Bourne Press

³¹ Pankaj Jha (20 November 2018). *A Political History of Literature: Vidyapati and the Fifteenth Century*. OUP India. p. 4-7

बड सुख सार पाओल तुअ तीरे .
छोड़इत निकट नयन बह नीरे .
कर जोरि बिनमओ विमल तरंगे .
पुन दरसन होए पुनमति गंगे .
एक अपराध छेमव मोर जानी .
परसल माय पाय तुअ पानी .
कि करब जप तप जोग धेआने
जनम कृतारथ एकहि सनाने .
भनइ विद्यापति समदओं तोंही .
अंत काल जनु बिसरह मोही .

This is one of the most popular poems which Vidyapati wrote on the River Ganga. Here he expresses the beauty of the river Ganga in its various meanderings. He is mournful about leaving the land and going beyond to see the world outside; he is going to miss Ganga from the depths of his heart. He wishes and desires see her again, with all the tranquillity she holds for the world. He asks her to forgive him if he has committed any sins. He also prays at her mighty feet and asks the river Ganga to transcend him from all his sorrows and miseries, and wishes that in every birth he lives on the very shores of the Ganga, with her. He says, “Hey Parvati Gange! I bow my head in your ultimate greatness, in your blissfulness.”³²

³² Ganga Stuti. Translation from Maithili to English. Nupur Choudhary

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