



Special Lecture Series, Chapter 2: Transcript

Imag(in)ing Resistance: *Dalit* Art in Mithila's Visual Canon

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This lecture emerges from a long and deep engagement—intellectual, political, personal, with the domain of Mithila art. The typographic wordplay in the title points towards a simultaneous double act of resistance: of *imagining*, that is to envision, conceptualise; and *imaging*, to give visual form. The “in” within parenthesis indicates the situated, embodied location of resistance. *Imag(in)ing Resistance*, therefore, is a conceptual and aesthetic exploration of Mithila's visual world as both a site of resistance and a mode of resistance. The artists I speak of today, *Dalit* women and men of Mithila, are not merely creating images of protest; they are *imag(in)ing* from within a social order that has long denied them visibility, legitimacy and voice.

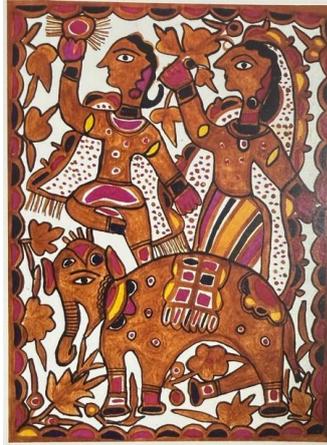
This is a question about the workings of power—about who is seen, who is allowed to create, and who is recognised as a citizen and a subject. It is also a deeply personal question—one that I first began to ask as a young MA student nearly twenty years ago. At the time, I chose to study the social relations among Mithila artists—a journey I have continued ever since. What drew me in was not only the vibrancy of the painting tradition, but the way it revealed unresolved tensions around identity, belongingness and legitimacy that I was quietly grappling with myself.

My identity as a Maithil woman, born into an ‘upper’ caste family, yet positioned uneasily within its patriarchal and caste-marked contours, complicates and motivates this inquiry. I speak both from within and against the structures that have historically shaped Mithila's visual cultures. My discomfort with the canon began not as an art historian, but as a feminist fieldworker walking into homes, speaking with artists and watching art emerge on all possible surfaces. I still remember the ebullient words of Roudi Paswan, the artist-ideator with whom I spent the most time: “We paint on every surface—except water”!

Over the years, engagements with figures such as *Rahu*, *Dom Raja* and *Raja Salhesa*, and with the stylistic innovations of *Godana* and *Gobar*, all of which I discuss today, became my entry point not only into the art being practiced by *Dalit* artists, but into a methodological and epistemic rethinking of what counts as art, whose voice counts in its interpretation and how caste operates, not only as social structure but as visual semiotic. This lecture centres on the *Dalit* iconography and stylistic innovations developed by *Dusadh* and *Chamar* artists of Mithila in the 1970s and beyond, and on the larger question of how resistance is made to appear, or disappear, in the visual canon of Indian art.

The ‘Discovery’ of Mithila Art and the Invention of Tradition

The category of ‘Mithila Art’ denotes a range of styles that form part of the pictorial expression in the Mithila region. The term has primarily been in currency amongst scholars, journalists, art collectors and connoisseurs, as well as art practitioners themselves. It encompasses a multiplicity of styles such as *Geru* (1), *Bharni* (2, 3), *Kachhni* (4), *Tantric* (5), *Gobar* (6), and *Godana* (7, 8), among others.



1. *Geru* style (Indra & Indrani), Sanjul Mandal, 1983

Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 25)



2. *Bharni* style (Durga), Jagdamba Devi, 1977

Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 24)



3. *Bharni* style (Krishna), Sita Devi, 1981

Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 51)



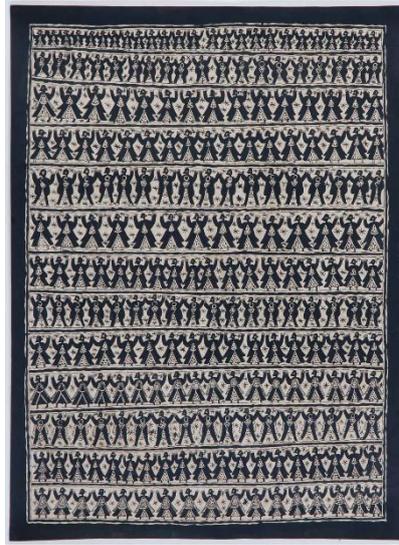
4. *Kachchnistyle* (Kamaldah/ Lotus pond)
Reproduced from Zubaan diary “Caste in Mithila Art” (2008)



5. *Tantric style* (Das Mahavidyas)
Reproduced from Zubaan diary “Caste in Mithila Art” (2008)



6. *Gobar style* (Raja Salhesa and companions), Jamuna Devi, 1981 (Collection of Jai Sen, Delhi)
Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 33)



7. *Godana* style (Raja Salhesa)
Reproduced from Zubaan diary “Caste in Mithila Art” (2008)



8. *Godana* style (Tree of Life with Migrant Workers), Urmila Devi, 2004
Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 64)

Each style embodies its own history within the larger trajectory of the art form, with distinct or overlapping pictorial vocabulary. Historically, *Bharni* was practised primarily by *Brahmin* artists, while *Kachhni* was associated with *Kayastha* artists – the two ‘upper’ castes of the region. Over the years, the art form has continually experimented with techniques, themes and idioms, branching into multiple and diverse directions.

The term *Mithila Art* is considered to be a more encompassing term in that it denotes the art form practised in the entire geo-cultural region of Mithila, comprising several districts of the northern part of the Bihar state in India, as well as those in the eastern Terai region, along the foothills of the Himalayas in Nepal (9).



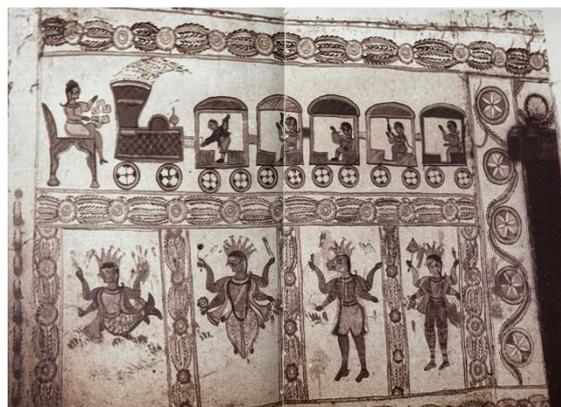
9. Map of Mithila

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Mithila_region#/media/File:Mithila_Region_of_India_and_Nepal.png

In contrast, the state apparatus has consistently used the term *Madhubani Painting*. This preference stems from the fact that the state-sponsored commoditisation of the art began in the villages around Madhubani, which later came to be seen as the epicentre of the commercialised form of the paintings. However, unlike *Mithila Art*, the term *Madhubani Painting* fixes the roots of the tradition narrowly in the district headquarters of Madhubani, thereby peripheralising art practices of the other regions within Mithila.

To understand why these categories developed, and why some practices became central while others were sidelined, I briefly trace the historical trajectory through which Mithila art first came to the attention of the state and the wider world.

Any engagement with the politics of Mithila art must begin with its “discovery” in 1934, following a devastating earthquake in Bihar. The British Indian Civil Service officer William George Archer (then District Magistrate of Darbhanga) discovered the painting practice in the region during rescue and relief work following a devastating earthquake. The earthquake had demolished the mud houses, exposing striking, elaborate murals on the interior walls. Archer went on to publish his findings in the art journal *Marg* in 1949, accompanied by photographs he took during his tours (10, 11).



10. *Vishnu and Three Avatars (Fish, Tortoise, and Boar). Railway Train and Station Master with Tickets Above.* Maithil Brahmin home, Ujan, Darbhanga, 1937.

Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 18)



11. *Purain and Durga on her Tiger*. Maithil Brahmin home, Bhadeshwar, Purnea, 1929.

Reproduced from “Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form” by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 14)

Archer’s exposition was limited to the painting styles associated with the Brahmins and Kayasthas. He does mention the prevalence of art practice amongst the *Ahirs* (a community of pastoralists – lower in the caste hierarchy) but does not dwell on it, considering their art as a derivative of the art of the two ‘upper’ caste communities.

In the late 1960s, another disaster struck the region – a series of famines ravaged its agriculture-based economy. The then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s famine-relief team, led by cultural activist Pupul Jayakar found Mithila’s painting tradition the most appropriate for designing welfare measures. Jayakar was familiar with the painting tradition of the region from Archer’s account. Eventually, the State intervened to reconstruct the livelihoods of people by urging women to transfer their art from walls and floors to paper to be sold in the market.

Dalit iconography in Mithila emerged during the moment of state-sponsored commoditisation of painting, when artists from the *Dusadh* and *Chamar* communities of Jitwarpur village began producing images for the market. Traditionally, both communities were bound to stigmatised, caste-designated occupations within Mithila’s deeply hierarchical social order, long dominated by *Brahmins*, and later, *Kayasthas*. *Dusadh* men historically served as village watchmen (*chowkidars*) and landless agricultural labourers, and *Dusadh* women engaged in low-paid agrarian work alongside them. *Dusadh* men were also later recruited in the British army. *Chamars*, similarly the landless, were tied by caste to leather work – flaying carcasses, curing hides, while also working as agricultural labourers, with women participating in both leather-related work and farm labour. Living on the outskirts of villages and bound to ‘upper’ caste households through relations of service, dependence and humiliation, artists from these communities viewed the state’s famine-relief initiative as a rare opportunity – a possibility of dignified, remunerative work outside the entrenched structure of feudal-caste servitude of Mithila.

And yet, despite the entry of *Dusadh* and *Chamar* artists into the world of painting through the famine-relief program, prevailing accounts of Mithila art have overwhelmingly focused on its association with “women”, especially ‘upper’ caste women, whose creativity and “timeless” traditions have been upheld as the most authentic expression of the form. This narrative has portrayed Mithila art as a singular, unified, ancient women’s tradition. As with most things that become “heritage,” this canon was built through selective inclusion and exclusion. The pictorial styles practised by *Maithil Brahmin* and *Kayastha* women were elevated as the “authentic” representatives of the region. Their imagery – rooted in marriage rituals, auspicious symbols and devotional iconography – came to dominate national and international

understandings of the tradition. Meanwhile, the visual practices developed by Dalit artists were often treated as peripheral, derivative or less valuable. Their distinct motifs, mythologies and style rarely found a place in mainstream discourse.

To make sense of this selective canonisation, it is useful to recall Eric Hobsbawm's influential idea of "invented traditions", which he uses to talk about practices that present themselves as ancient and continuous, but are in fact carefully constructed in the present to convey particular values, identities or hierarchies. What happened with Mithila art was something similar.

A once diverse, caste-stratified and highly localised set of artistic practices, where different communities painted different subjects and drew on distinct cosmologies, was repackaged by state agencies, curatorial gatekeepers and cultural institutions, as a single homogenous tradition. This flattened version was then repeated so often that it began to appear timeless and self-evident. The process froze the tradition into a fixed aesthetic, erasing the long-standing contributions of *Dalit* artists, whose work spoke to very different social worlds – of labour, survival, caste assertion and everyday resistance.

Understanding this history is crucial, as it reminds us that cultural canons do not simply "emerge"; they are produced. And in that production, certain artists, communities and visual languages are privileged, while others are pushed to the margins.

It is what Gramsci calls cultural hegemony – the process by which the worldview of the ruling classes becomes naturalized as common sense. In Mithila, the brahminical caste order has long dominated not just land and language, but also aesthetics and authorship. It may not determine who paints, but it does influence whose paintings are circulated, archived, celebrated and awarded.

The impact of this invention of tradition and of the cultural hegemony of the 'upper' castes, has been profound. Ganga Devi, a *Kayastha* artist, often described as the doyenne of Mithila art, became the symbolic face of this tradition. The Republic Day tableau for Bihar state in 2009, which depicted a Mithila artist painting alongside a young girl to depict intergenerational transmission of tradition, was quite possibly modelled on her (12).



12. Bihar Republic Day tableau, 2009 <http://www.bihartimes.in/Newsbihar/2009/Jan/Newsbihar22Jan9.html>



13. Bihar Republic Day tableau, 2009 <http://www.bihartimes.in/Newsbihar/2009/Jan/Newsbihar22Jan9.html>

In the tableau, the central figure—positioned amid profusely painted Bharni motifs (13), embodies how *Brahmin-Kayastha* art came to stand in for Mithila art as a whole, becoming a metonym for Mithila itself. This metonymy erases the presence and aesthetic contributions of other castes, especially *Dalits*.

The consequences of this sustained invisibilisation were evident almost a decade later in the Bihar government's project to paint the Madhubani railway station, where among hundreds of panels, not a single one featured a *Godana* or *Gobar* painting (14).



14. Paintings on Madhubani Railway Station building https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Madhubani_railway_station

Yet, even as state-led projects continued to erase *Dalit* visual idioms, *Dalit* artists in Mithila have been actively reshaping the field on their own terms. Their sustained artistic resistance to the cultural hegemony of dominant caste groups has pushed Mithila art in unconventional directions. It is this resistance that has expanded the iconographic universe of the form, from the ingenious invention of *Godana* and *Gobar* styles, to the inclusion of powerful motifs such as *Rahu*, *Dom Raja* and *Raja Salhesa*. These interventions constitute not simple departures but critical re-imaginings that challenge who gets to define the tradition and what counts as “authentic” Mithila art. I discuss these in more detail in the next part of my lecture.

***Godana* as a Counter-Canon**

To appreciate why *Godana* developed the way it did, we must begin with making sense of the state's uncertainty about how to classify it. When the Government of India introduced the “Master Craftsperson” awards in the 1960s intended to recognise excellence in traditional crafts, it also created a system of categorising paintings by style, motif and genre. For well-established forms like *Bharni* or *Kachhni*, these categories were relatively stable. But *Godana* did not fit so easily. Over the decades, award classifications

shifted repeatedly – sometimes *Godana* appeared under the broad umbrella of “Mithila Painting,” sometimes as “Madhubani Painting,” and occasionally as a separate genre with caste-inflected labels. The nomenclature kept oscillating between emphasising style, community and theme. This inconsistency reveals more than bureaucratic confusion; it shows the State’s ambivalence toward an art form that did not originate in the dominant-caste aesthetic canon but in the creative labour of *Dusadh* artists. This context helps us understand why *Godana* must be read as a counter-canon rather than a derivative variation of Mithila painting.

Godana iconography was developed by *Dusadh* artists of Jitwarpur in close collaboration with *natins* (itinerant tattoo-makers), belonging to a nomadic Adivasi group. The *natins* were deft at inscribing tattoos on the body and carried with them a vast repertoire of motifs, symbols and cosmologies. *Godana* iconography emerged as a result of the collaboration between the *natins* Jayda and Reshma and the *Dusadh* artist Chano Devi, and Roudi Paswan, in Jitwarpur village in the 1970s. (15)



15. Chano Devi <https://www.folkartopedia.com/folk-painting/chano-devi-artist-godna-painting-bihar-hindi-sk/>

It is important to note that this innovation did not emerge in isolation. Although painting was endemic to the region, the *Dusadh* community was initially excluded from the state’s famine-relief art program that launched Mithila painting onto the national and global stage. Government officials, who moved around in the villages to “recruit” women in the famine-relief project, typically accompanied by ‘upper’ caste intermediaries, rarely entered the hamlets where *Dusadhs* lived. This meant that the economic benefits of the early art market flowed almost entirely to *Brahmin* and *Kayastha* women. The *Dusadhs*, who were hit hardest by famine, observed the new opportunities available to ‘upper’ caste artists and gradually began painting on paper themselves.

Their entry into the field was not welcomed. ‘Upper’ caste villagers reprimanded *Dusadh* artists for painting themes associated with “high” Hindu gods, reinforcing caste hierarchies even within the emerging art economy. This hostility, combined with the initial exclusion from the state’s project, pushed *Dusadh* artists to turn towards their own cultural repertoires and to invent a visual language that would not invite such sanctions. This is the social and political ground from which *Godana* took shape.

The German anthropologist, Erika Moser Schmitt, who spent several months in Jitwarpur during the 1970s writing about and filming the lives of women artists, provided the necessary impetus for these artists to set about their search for the new iconography. Eventually, *Dalit* artists such as Chano Devi, Urmila Devi, Lalita Devi, and others, along with the ideator Roudi Paswan embarked upon their collective and individual journeys of creating a body of work in *Godana*. For these artists, *Godana* was never merely a “style.” It was deeply tied to identity. As pioneers such as Chano Devi and Urmila Devi point out, “Moving away from *Godana* is not easy; *Godana* is rooted in our social identity.” Urmila Devi (16) recalls how she learned the idiom from Chano Devi and gradually developed her own aesthetic oeuvre. Urmila’s son,

Shravan Paswan, though he paints themes demanded by the market like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, still identifies *Godana* as his community's "own" style, and motifs like Raja Salhesa and Rahu as "our own stories."



16. Urmila Devi

Emerged from exclusion—the denial to participate in a state-sponsored famine-relief art program—*Godana* is not a derivative style. It is a rupture. A form of refusal that rejected brahmanical pictorial vocabulary and artistic injunctions against depicting high Hindu deities, and instead turned to a rich and complex subaltern pantheon. It becomes an example of cultural production that emerges not merely as reaction but as an articulation of alternative worldviews under conditions of domination. *Godana* constitutes resistance art, not only because it offers a counter-iconography, but because it reclaims space, labour and authorship for *Dalit* artists in a caste-ordered visual economy. *Godana* thus reorients the very question of what counts as "Mithila art," and who gets to define its canon.

Gobar Art

A second strand of *Dalit* visual resistance emerges through *Gobar* art—paintings created with a wash of cow dung and clay—employing images from the lived experience of the caste-marked worlds of *Dalits* (17).



17. Collecting a dead cow. Binda Devi. Jitwarpur. 2004

Reproduced from "Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form" by David Szanton & Malini Bakshi (pp. 67)

This form was innovated by Jamuna Devi, an artist from the *Chamar* community, whose caste occupation historically involved the disposal of animal carcasses. Jamuna Devi not only transformed these materials into an artistic medium but also rendered scenes of carcass disposal itself. These images were not merely depictions of abjection; they were acts of truth-telling, insisting that *Dalit* labour, however stigmatized, belongs within the visual narrative of Mithila's art history.

Art historian Y. S. Alone, whose work on *Dalit* aesthetics, especially his writings on Savi Savarkar, is foundational, reminds us that *Dalit* art must be interpreted through the grammar of social suffering, labour and resistance, rather than through 'upper' caste paradigms of beauty, purity or decorum. In this sense, *Gobar* art embodies a counter-aesthetic, refusing the sanitised, brahminical iconography in mainstream Mithila painting. Instead, it reclaims the very forms of labour and materiality that caste society seeks to hide, transforming stigma into visibility, and visibility into critique.

Rahu, Dom Raja: The Shadow that Subverts the Social Order

The third strand of *Dalit* iconography emerges through the evocation of figures such as *Rahu* and *Dom Raja*, both central to the ritual life of communities like the *Doms*, *Dusadhs* and *Chamars*. As Ranajit Guha notes, "*Rahu*, who is a demon in the *Samudra Manthan* narrative of *Mahabharata* and an evil *graham* (planet) in astrology, is worshiped by *Dom*, *Dusadh*, and *Mang* castes. This is a defiance of the dominant narrative '*dev gatha*' and the ritual world of the brahminical culture. Dissidence with the classical or the great tradition is thus integral to the religious identity of the subalterns".

What does it mean to choose *Rahu* as a representative icon? As a shadow planet, *Rahu* is both dangerous and indispensable. In the celestial order, he interrupts, eclipses, disrupts—an apt metaphor for the *Dalit* artist in Mithila, whose presence unsettles the established visual field of Mithila painting. Here, resistance is not overt; it works through the shadow, by refusing erasure and making visible what the centre overlooks.

Rahu also performs what Bakhtin terms the carnivalesque—the inversion of hierarchy, the profaning of the sacred, the subversion of order. In *Rahu pujas*, for instance, the *Dusadh* priest is permitted, even ritually authorized, to abuse the Brahmin. This brief suspension of caste hierarchy is not simply symbolic; it is an affective undoing of everyday humiliation. In *Dalit* artistic traditions, this becomes not just representation but performance, the canvas itself becomes a stage of defiance.

Let us now turn to this painting (18) that depicts *Dom Raja*- a legendary hero and deity revered by the *Dom* community.



18. *Dom Raja*, Artist Unknown

The *Doms*, among the lowest in the caste hierarchy of Mithila, work with the most stigmatized forms of labour. In this artwork, *Dom Raja* confronts the sun demanding repayment of a debt, and warning that the sun will otherwise be polluted by his touch. The imagery reflects the social realities of untouchability, but its

use here is unmistakably subversive. The figure of *Dom Raja* challenging the cosmic order, reflects the defiance of a community routinely excluded from the social order on earth.

The cosmologies of these caste-groups are populated by figures like *Rahu* and *Dom Raja*—cosmic dissidents who disrupt the hierarchies of gods, planets and ritual worlds. *Dalit* artists have long drawn on these icons not only to represent their world but to reverse its gaze, making caste visible, narratable and open to contestation.

Salhesa and the Making of a *Dalit* Iconography

The fourth and final strand of *Dalit* visual resistance that I dwell upon today, emerges in the paintings of Raja Salhesa—the *Dusadh* folk hero—whose exploits circulate across Mithila. Unlike Ram or Krishna, Salhesa does not belong to the Sanskritic pantheon. He is a folk sovereign, a king, protector and moral arbiter, remembered for upholding justice and resisting oppression. In contemporary retellings, Salhesa stands not merely as a figure of devotion but as a symbol of pride, dignity and caste assertion. Salhesa paintings show us what counter-worlding is—a visual practice that does not only protest exclusion but proposes alternative ontologies. These works reject inherited iconographies and offer new cosmologies.

But the introduction of Raja Salhesa into the pictorial repertoire of *Dusadh* artists must be understood not only from the social or religious perspectives, but as an overtly political project. Its genealogy traces back to the *Dusadh Mahasabha*, the first caste association formed among the “untouchable” castes in 1891. The late nineteenth century was a moment of intense caste mobilisation, when communities across north India began organising to claim administrative concessions, education and political rights under the colonial state. For the *Dusadhs*, this required the mobilisation of symbols that could crystallise a collective identity. Salhesa, whose stories were already embedded in the collective memory of the community across Mithila and wider Bihar—became precisely that figure.

Resistance, however, is never singular; it travels across registers—symbolic, material, affective and political. *Dalit* iconography, too, moves through these multiple registers. One of the most striking examples of this I encountered was at the Salhesa Mela, held annually at *Rajaji ki Phulwari* in Province 2 of Nepal (19).



19. Entrance of the *Rajaji ki Phulwari*, Nepal, 2010

This is a transborder pilgrimage, drawing thousands of *Dusadhs* and other *Dalit* groups from India and Nepal. Here, devotion is inseparable from political memorialization. It is a gathering around a deity who does not belong to the brahmanical pantheon but resides at the centre of *Dalit* histories and aspirations.

Near Raja Salhesa’s garden, a temple is located that houses Salhesa as a deity (20), surrounded by *Dusadh* soldiers and mythical companions. These figures probably allude to the historical recruitment of

Dusadh men into the British army, culminating in the formation of the *Dusadh* Regiment (21). The iconography here is complex – it seems to map myth onto history, dignity onto labour and sovereignty onto the very bodies that caste society sought to render disposable.



20. *Raja Salhesa's temple, Nepal, 2010*



21. *Dusadh soldiers, Raja Salhesa's temple, Nepal, 2010*

Taken together, these shifts point towards a deliberate political resurrection of Raja Salhesa, from an everyday hero to a divine pivot around which community mobilisation, social reform and political aspiration could be organised. Recognising Salhesa's centrality in *Dusadh* art requires us to see how caste assertion operates in the visual worlds through subversive symbolism, resurrected heroes and the remaking of divine genealogies.

'Canonizing' *Dalit* interventions

Dalit iconography continues to sit uneasily within the broad category of 'Mithila Art' or 'Madhubani Paintings', precisely because it disturbs the cultural hegemony of 'upper' caste aesthetics. Despite initial state apathy and the continued exclusion of *Godana*, it eventually carved out a space in the market. Its repetitive motifs began appearing on paper, canvas and textiles, gradually entering urban homes. Over time, artists from non-*Dalit* communities also began painting *Godana*. Yet even amid newer hybrid and fused styles, caste

boundaries persist. *Kachhni* and *Bharni* have cross-pollinated freely, but *Godana* largely remains in the hands of *Dalit* artists. I once encountered a Brahmin artist who had attempted a *Godana* composition, but had replaced Salhesa with Krishna, stating, “Salhesa is not my god.” (22)



22. Krishna in Godana style, Artist Unknown, Jitwarpur, 2010

A significant moment in the expansion of *Dalit* visual vocabulary occurred in 2007, when Chano Devi and Roudi Paswan met Gujarat-based *Dalit* activist Martin Macwan. Macwan, long engaged in anti-caste activism and children’s literature, invited a group of *Dalit* artists from Mithila to Dalit Shakti Kendra near Ahmedabad for a collaborative project. The task was to create illustrations for a children’s book on anti-caste icons such as Jotiba Phule and Dr Ambedkar. Carrying the *Godana* idiom into a completely different cultural landscape, the artists produced vivid paintings of the Phule-Ambedkar universe—*Mahad Satyagraha*, caste discrimination in schools and access to wells, and collective *Dalit* mobilisations (23–26). For artists like Shanti Devi, this was a transformative encounter, introducing them to histories of *Dalit* assertion beyond Mithila.



23-26. Dalit Shakti Kendra series
Reproduced from Dalit Foundation



Not all such experiments circulate widely in the art market, but they matter. They mark important expansions in the iconographic universe of *Dalit* artists, pushing the boundaries of what Mithila art can depict and refusing the confinement of *Dalit* creativity to folk cosmologies alone. These interventions reveal an ongoing effort to ‘canonize’ *Dalit* histories, heroes and imaginations within a visual field that has long resisted their presence.

Looking forward, looking back

Collaborations like these exemplify how resistance travels and transforms. Paintings created for Macwan’s project were not mere illustrations; they were pedagogies, using pigment and line to teach children histories of discrimination, dignity and dissent. It reminds us that cultural production is not just expressive. It is epistemic. It shapes how we know the world.

So, the question that remains is: Can we re-imagine the visual canon? If *Bharni* and *Kachhni* continue to stand in for ‘Mithila Art’, *Godana* will continue to remain its Other – excluded in state and non-State institutions as well as the artworld comprising scholars, patrons, and the artist community itself. *Godana*’s ghettoisation, which stemmed from the nexus of caste and patriarchy, and reproduced in “modern” institutions, will continue to be delegitimised by the cultural politics of authenticity.

This tension becomes sharper with the Geographical Indications regime. The GI for “Madhubani Paintings” registered in 2006, aims to safeguard Maithil artists and prevent appropriation. Yet by anchoring authenticity to the soil of Madhubani district, it re-invokes older ideas of purity and territorial belonging. It also raises critical questions. Who qualifies as a “Maithil artist”? Are diasporic or Anglophone practitioners included? What happens to art forms like *Godana*, that do not neatly fit into the category of Madhubani Painting itself?

Let me end with some reflections.

To build a *Dalit* visual politics is to treat the margin not as a site of lack but as a site of radical creativity, memory and survival. As Martin Macwan reminds us, *Dalit* resistance works through symbolic inversion, counter-memory and pride. And as Y. S. Alone argues, *Dalit* art must be read not for brahminical standards of technique, but for rupture, defiance and collective affect. The carcass in *Gobar* art, for instance, is not grotesque – it is a caste-marked semiotic, naming the labour that society refuses to see. *Salhesa* is not merely a folk deity – he is an anti-canonical presence invoked on thresholds, symbolizing a cosmology of courage, care and refusal.

To imagine a *Dalit* visual politics, then, is to imagine art as a refusal of invisibilisation, tokenism and brahminical aesthetics.

Centering *Dalit* art in Mithila is not simply about expanding the canon; it is about changing the very terms of what counts as art.

Thank you.