Journey into distant land:
Poetics of Mithila painting

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It has been customarily for scholars writing on Mithila painting (see Archer 1949; Archer 1977; Heinz 2003; Jayakar 1989; Mathur 1966; Thakur 1982; Veyquaud 1977) to treat it as an unchanging art form with a fixed subject matter and stable iconography, broadly subsumed under the rubrics of “caste styles.” Most of these scholars, with a few notable exceptions like Jyotindra Jain (1997), have overemphasized on “authentic form” and the underlying symbolic meanings, which at times point towards “transcendental signified.” In this paper, I make a movement away from “significant form” (Bosch 1960) towards what Herbert M. Cole aptly calls, ‘the sense of “verb” in art’ (Cole 1969: 34). Through a painting of Ganga Devi (see fig. 1), probably the most celebrated artist from Mithila, I bring out the processes through which the idea of a “tradition” is formulated in the context of the State’s patronage to the so-called folk art forms on the one hand, and the circulation of painting as commodity in the global market on the other. At a more broad level, this painting helps in addressing a larger issue: how does one constitute newness in the inheritance of a tradition?

Like most of Ganga Devi’s compositions, “Pilgrimage to Badrinath” painting is a paradigmatic example of the so-called “line-drawing” (kachani) style.4 It depicts her tirtha (pilgrimage) to Badrinath in the Himalayas, the abode of Hindu gods and goddesses (see Fig. 1). In 1976 Ganga Devi was conferred the prestigious National Award for Master Craftsmen by the President of India for her contribution to the field of folk painting. The following year she decided to go on a tirtha to Badrinath, one of the most prominent Vaishnava sites. Pilgrimage to sacred sites (tirtha sthana), Diana Eck (1981) informs us, has always been undertaken with wide-
ranging religious aspirations. Ganga Devi’s journey to Badrinath can be seen against the background of her newly acquired identity of a Mithila artist with the national award, an identity that set her apart from other artists. Her journey to Badrinath is one of fulfillment (manorath puri). It signals a completion of a phase in her life, which she shared with most folk artists. But the full implications of the journey, I would like to argue, is not exhausted by attainment of a new identity. It is also the beginning of a spiritual journey of life after, ushering of the next phase. It is alternation between these phases that find most clear articulation in the Pilgrimage to Badrinath painting.

The Badrinath painting, which is accomplished almost a decade after the actual journey in 1988, falls into the broad category of narrative paintings that is usually categorized as “continuous.” In this painting, the river Alakananda – teeming with aquatic creatures – occupies the lower section of the pictorial field. Along the river-bed, a long, meandering road is shown carrying pilgrims on buses from Haridwara and Badrinath. Adjacent to the buses, shown travelling in opposite directions, is the Joshimath Bus Depot. The Joshimath complex, which occupies the left section of the pictorial field, consists of three structures (see Fig. 1). A small stream can be seen cutting across this complex and joining the river Alaknanda.

The sacred complex of Badrinath is shown occupying the right section of the pictorial field (see Fig. 1). The principal shrine, with an appropriate flag (dhvajja), is in the top right corner. In front of the shrine is the priest’s hut, where a pilgrim is shown resting after a torturous journey. On the right, a devotee is shown approaching the shrine with a garland to offer the presiding deity. To the left of the temple, a gardener sells coconut, flowers, copper-rings, and sweets as offering to the deity (see Fig. 1). In the foreground a woman (probably the artist herself) offers a secret donation (guta dana) of money placed inside a hollow coconut to a priest. As part of the complex, Ganga Devi has also drawn the hot water spring (Tapta Kund), in which a couple is shown bathing. In the background, the sacred pipal and ashoka trees are shown proliferating with fruits and birds.

This continuous painting is a meditation of a devout Hindu artist on the very idea of tirtha or what Eck calls ‘the “locative” strand of Hindu piety’ (1981:323). It is a visualization of sacred geography, a sort of sacred map for the journey within – where ‘sins, sickness, and death, and even samsara itself, may be transcended’ (Eck 1981:244). The Badrinath painting, like the Fabuji par or cloth painting from Rajasthan (see Smith 1991), is a sweeping geographical continuum in which no attempt is made to demarcate rigid boundaries, especially those that seek to delimit (not only area of space but also) moments in time. Within such visualization, linear sequence is replaced by ‘overt spatial and geometrical play … whereby meaning is produced outside of the ordinary flow of events’ (Pinney 1992: 35). However, to stop at this would be to overlook those elements in the painting that provides occasions for a more nuanced understanding of art and life.

In the Badrinath painting, Ganga Devi makes subtle use of the resources of graphemes or inscriptions, such as dates and signatures, and a pronouncement, which is dedicatory in nature. The pronouncement inscribed in Devanagari script reads as Jivan Data Shree Jyotindra Jain Sahab ji (literally ‘Life Giver Mr. Jyotindra Jain Sahib’). Within the pictorial field, this inscription occupies the blank surface on the wall constituting the Joshimath complex (see Fig. 1). And yet this inscription does not belong to the wall. To read it one must shift one’s attention to what is visually of another order than the images that constitute the Joshimath complex. However, as it will become evident, these graphemes, to employ Barthes (1986), “quicken” the image, emphasizing for those who can read it (the Devanagari script) the significance of the journey.

Just below this pronouncement, there is another inscription in Devanagari, which reads bikri band (literally “closed for sale”). Her signature, which follows this inscription, converts it into an authoritative statement, a sort of decree, a declaration. What lends this pronouncement its authority is the fact that she has signed as a Padma Shree, a title bestowed on her by the State for contribution to the field of art (see Fig. 1). In the process of making such a declaration she also charts out the future trajectory of this painting. She informs the spectator that the painting is not for sale or closed for sale (bikri band). Thereby making it known that it is a gift and not a commodity. Is this gesture some sort of acknowledgement of a debt or does it simply signal to the fact that this painting is not (cannot be) part of the commodity circuit? This painting can be understood as an occasion for re-enacting or re-living the life of a pilgrim for Ganga Devi and at the same time an opportunity for Jain (and all those who look at it) to become part of that spiritual journey. We are told that Ganga Devi gifted this painting to Jain so that he could get the same religious merit or benefit by looking (darshan) at it as someone who had been on a pilgrimage to Badrinath. Thus placing this painting into the broad domain of images has been referred to as pilgrims’ maps or the “tirtha prints” (see Smith 1997).

The appearance of the Badrinath painting in Jain’s book (1997) – this time not as a painting, but as an image (a photographic reproduction) of that painting – gives the painting a different trajectory. It is no longer an icon for private meditation. In the process of making the
painting available for wider contemplation, the book allows for further re-interpretation of the inscription “Life Saver Mr. Jyotinder Jain Sahib.” As a photographic image, the painting speaks of the emotion that expels the artist to talk of the gratitude to Jain and through him to the Indian State. During such utterance the proper name Jyotinder Jain performs a metonymic function. As the director of the Crafts Museum (New Delhi), he stands for the State (not as a rational-bureaucratic apparatus but a paternalistic entity) and its relationship with the artists.

Ganga Devi owes the present life to the State in more than metaphorical sense. After the fatal illness in 1987, everything seemed over for her (she was diagnosed with breast cancer at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi); it is people like Pupul Jayakar and Jyotinder Jain that provide her hope. Through out this phase the Crafts Museum (New Delhi) becomes home away from home. And finally when the end comes, it is the Museum (and not her family) that prepares her for the final journey to her heavenly abode. The Crafts Museum provides her a space where she meaningfully explores life through her art. Through painting she is able to reflect on herself (lived life) and the inherited tradition. And in the process, Ganga Devi prepares a fertile ground for a host of younger artists to emerge.

The Badrinath painting, as already stated, is tied to the biography of the artist through two other graphemes: date and signature. The sort of date that Ganga Devi employs in this painting is what Jacques Derrida (1992) in his study of Celan’s poetry calls “external” – i.e., the mention of the dates (the day, the month, and the year) according to the lunar calendar (see Fig. 1). Her signature accompanies these “external” dates in the composition.

What makes this signature distinct is that it is preceded by the title of Padma Shree, a title that is bestowed upon her by the Indian State. She makes use of this title strategically in this composition (and elsewhere) shows how the folk artists appropriate State practices. By taking or stressing on the title Ganga Devi shows that the State is not as distant as it is usually made out to be. Rather it is embedded in the pictorial practice of the artists. In contrast, the second signature used in this composition is in tune with what one might call the “conventional” type, one that is often inscribed in the lower sectional of the pictorial surface. In the journey to Badrinath painting this signature occupies the extreme left corner of the pictorial field, merging with the ripples of the flowing river Alaknanda (see Fig. 1). I would like to suggest that the manner in which this signature is camouflaged and blends with the flowing river, a metaphor for life that is moving, a life that is transitory, is not a coincidence. This is the signature that she uses in most of her paintings. As a performative statement this signature stands for the life of Ganga Devi, a folk artist from Mithila. These signatures are repetition, but a repetition that stresses difference between two lives – “lived life” (a life that has passed through different phases) and “after life” (a life of a Padma Shree, a life that will be canonized by the state). Thus the signatures frame this painting twice.

The Badrinath painting is a meditation on two distinct and yet interconnected events. The first has to do with the pilgrimage or tirtha undertaken by Ganga Devi as a devotee on the journey of self-realization. This journey is depicted as a continuous narrative using motifs that are peculiar to religious iconography of Mithila. The imaging of the tirtha, however, does not exhaust the painting. The pictorial field anchors another event in the life of Ganga Devi. This event is narrated not pictorially but graphically. Using resources of Devanagari script, she articulates her debt to Jyotinder Jain and through him the State for, what in a different context the legendary film maker Passolini writes, ‘making a life out of life.’ The graphemes signify the intimacy of the State in the life of the artist. Ganga Devi’s Badrinath painting brings to our notice that tradition is inherited through disruptions rather than unanimity, and the new possibilities that arise from State patronage are not “external” to art but come to constitute its forms.

End notes

1 The most important characteristics that are usually cited by scholars as the defining features of a particular “caste-style” are the use of colour and lines. Thus a distinction is generally made between “line-drawing” (kachani) of the Kayastha and “colour-drawing” (bharua) of the Brahman painters. Like the Kayastha artists, the painters belonging to the so-called Harijan castes are said to utilise the expressive potentiality of line to draw figures (see Rekha 2003). It is not easy to discern the extent to which this distinction is the construction of scholars and art institutions (like the museum), or intrinsic to Mithila painting. Nevertheless, it can be safely stated that over time most Mithila painters have come to internalize it. For a detailed description of the different caste styles see Singh (1999).

2 One of the main reasons for such visualization is the decisive influence, which the South Asian Indological tradition has exerted on folk and domestic-ritual art studies. Bosch’s statement about the image of Ekadashamurti of Shiva is a classic exposition on this tradition of scholarship. He writes: “With this singular image before us, and after taking into account the features falling within the art historian’s purview, such as its origin, style... it would be difficult to deny that there yet remains in the image something unidentified. And we
must ask ourselves whether this “something” might not be
very important, and whether on close investigation it might
not turn out to be the most essential part of the image, viz.
its meaning as a symbol, disclosing something higher than
what is merely perceived by the senses’ (1960: 10).

5 I am indebted to Dr. Jyotindra Jain for allowing me to use
the photographic reproduction of “Pilgrimage to Badrinath”
painting from his book Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression
in Mithila Painting. Jain’s analysis of this painting falls within
a framework of art-historical interpretation. That is, this
painting, and a general shift in Ganga Devi’s compositional
strategy, is most readily seen in terms of the evolution of
her own work. His study, therefore, tends to be curatorial
and art-historical rather than anthropological.

4 Unlike the “colour-drawings” (bharua), in most of her
paintings, Ganga Devi utilizes the potentiality of line as a
pictorial means to rescue the figure from the flatness of the
pictorial surface. As already stated, the term used to refer
to the process of shading done with the help of firm but fine
line is kanchani. This term, which comes close to incising,
says a lot about the nature of the lines utilized in shading as
well as the pictorial instruments used by the artists (see Singh
2000).

Diana Eck (1981:343) places them into three broad categories.
For the majority of them tirtha is associated primarily with
boons and blessings. For others, it is the place where
Brahmanical rites and observances are to be performed. And
for a minority, tirtha is where one leaves behind all worldly
desires and sets out for the far shore of moksha (liberation
from the cycle of birth and death).

In the “continuous” method of narration a story is depicted
by a continuous series of scenes in a composition. The
protagonist can appear repeatedly in this method of
narration. This method differs from the other strategies of
pictorial narration (such as the “complementary method”
and the “cyclic method”) mainly in whether or not a formal
framing device is used to separate different scenes from one
another. In my understanding of these different methods I
have benefited from Smith’s (1991) study of Pabuji par or
cloth paintings from Rajasthan.

Throughout this paper I use “left” and “right” from the
point of view of the spectator. The left and the right can also
be seen from the perspective of the image within the field.
For the difference between the two approaches see Boris
Uspensky (1975).

Although these species of trees do not belong to the upper
Himalayan landscape, as Jain (1997: 118) points out, as
symbols they participate in the construction of what one
could call a “sacred geography.”

Ganga Devi does not seem to be concerned with the fact
that one representation (i.e., the inscription) might mix with
the other (the image) and create confusion. It may be because
the two structures (of which one is linguistic) occupy separate
if contiguous spaces, which are not “homogenised.”

This inscription also derives its authority from the fact that
it occupies the centre of the pictorial field.

The tirtha prints ‘provides a convenient medium through
which the former pilgrim can repeat the original experience.
Thus it is possible to imagine an individual motivated by the
map alone to experience the essence of a pilgrimage without
ever stepping foot outside the home. And, by extension,
this serves as substitute for a repeated pilgrimage for one,
for another might provide a surrogate for physical
pilgrimage in the first place’ (Smith 1997: 45).

11 Such a dating entails reference to charts, and utilization of
systems of notation, and spacio-temporal plotting said to be
“objective”: such as the calendar, the clock, and the naming
of the place (Derrida 1992:393).

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