

Original Research Article

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Challenges in Preserving and Promoting Mithila Art: An Empirical Study of Madhubani Painting Artisans in Darbhanga District, Bihar, India

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ABSTRACT

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Madhubani painting, one of India's most distinguished folk-art traditions, faces mounting pressure from commercialization even after receiving Geographical Indication (GI) protection in 2007. This paper empirically examines the major challenges confronting the preservation and promotion of Mithila art among artisans in Darbhanga district, Bihar. Primary data were collected from 60 respondents across three artisan clusters — Jitwarpur, Rahika, and Bahadurpur — using a pre-tested structured schedule and focus group discussions. Garrett Ranking Technique was applied to prioritize the challenges perceived by artisans. Results show that market preference for simplified commercial designs is the most critical challenge (Garrett Score: 68.4), followed by the rising cost of natural colour materials (63.7) and difficulty in transmitting traditional motifs to younger generations (58.2). Style-wise analysis reveals that Contemporary designs are now practiced by 75% of artisans, while the technically demanding Tantrik style survives among only 13.3%, indicating systematic displacement of skill-intensive traditional forms by commercially viable alternatives. The paper concludes that GI tagging alone is insufficient to preserve traditional artistic diversity and recommends targeted interventions including premium pricing for authenticated traditional work, master-apprentice training programmes, and natural pigment subsidies.

Introduction

Madhubani painting, also known as Mithila art, originates from the Mithila region of North Bihar and has been practiced for centuries, traditionally on mud walls and floors during festivals and ceremonial occasions. Following the Bihar drought of 1966–67, the All India Handicrafts Board introduced a scheme to commercialize the art on paper and cloth, transforming it into a

livelihood activity for thousands of artisans, a majority of them women.

The art form encompasses six major styles — Bharni, Kachni, Godna, Tantrik, Kohbar, and Contemporary — each carrying distinct technique and cultural significance. Darbhanga district, one of the principal clusters of Madhubani painting alongside Madhubani and Sitamarhi, received the benefit of GI registration for the craft in

2007. Despite this legal recognition, the art form continues to face serious threats to its traditional character, as market forces increasingly favour speed and simplicity over technical and cultural depth. This paper investigates these preservation challenges empirically, using Darbhanga district as the study context.

The primary objective of this study is to examine the major challenges associated with the preservation and promotion of Mithila art, with particular emphasis on identifying the cultural, social, economic, and institutional factors that influence its sustainability and continued development in the contemporary era.

Raj (2025), in a working paper from IIM Bangalore, examines the impact of GI protection on Madhubani artists and documents that counterfeit products and machine-made imitations continue to flood the market despite legal recognition. The study identifies weak enforcement, low artisan awareness, and limited international legal support as major barriers, proposing blockchain and QR-code certification as potential remedies.

Bhawana (2025) argues that commercialization has posed a significant threat to the originality of Madhubani art, noting that the global market's buyer-centric approach has compromised traditional colours, designs, and motifs, and that commercial interest has drawn participants who paint without understanding the traditional cultural significance of the practice.

Singh (2022) explores the paradoxical threat that commercialization poses to the very traditional aesthetic that gives Madhubani art its market value, documenting that market preference for simplified commercial designs is displacing technically demanding traditional styles such as Kachni and Tantrik, and cautioning that without institutional intervention, commercialization may erode the cultural capital underpinning the art's economic worth. Devi (2019) similarly finds that technically demanding traditional styles face the greatest commercial viability challenges as market forces favour simpler, faster-to-produce work.

These studies collectively establish those enforcement gaps, buyer-driven design simplification, and generational transmission difficulties as the central threats to Mithila art's traditional character — themes empirically tested in this paper.

Research Methodology

Darbhangha district was purposively selected as the study area due to its status as a major cultural hub of Mithila art. A multi-stage sampling design was used: Stage 1 involved purposive selection of Darbhanga district; Stage 2 involved cluster sampling of three artisan clusters — Jitwarpur (Kachni and Bharni styles), Rahika (Contemporary and Godna styles), and Bahadurpur (mixed, SHG-linked); and Stage 3 involved random selection of 20 respondents from each cluster, for a total sample of 60 artisans.

Data were collected using a pre-tested structured schedule, pre-tested with 10 respondents before finalization, supplemented with focus group discussions among women painters to capture qualitative insights on preservation challenges.

The Garrett Ranking Technique was employed to prioritize challenges, using the percent position formula: $\text{Percent Position} = 100 \times (R_{ij} - 0.50) / N_j$, where R_{ij} is the rank given to the i -th factor by the j -th respondent and N_j is the number of factors ranked. Simple percentage analysis was used to profile the distribution of traditional styles currently practiced by respondents. Fieldwork was carried out during the academic year 2024–2025.

Results and Discussion

Garrett Ranking of Preservation Challenges

The Garrett Ranking analysis identifies market preference for simplified commercial designs as the foremost challenge, followed by the rising cost of natural colour materials and the difficulty of teaching traditional motifs to younger artisans.

These findings corroborate Singh's (2022) observation of commercialization's paradoxical threat to the traditional aesthetic that underlies Madhubani art's market value: the very styles that are most culturally significant are being economically penalized because they are slower and costlier to produce.

Traditional Styles Currently Practiced

Contemporary style dominates practice (75%), while Tantrik — widely regarded as the most skill-intensive traditional style — is practiced by only 13.3% of artisans.

Table.1 Garrett Ranking of Preservation Challenges

Challenge	Garrett Score	Rank
Market preference for simplified commercial designs	68.4	I
Rising cost of natural color materials	63.7	II
Difficulty teaching traditional motifs to youth	58.2	III
Competition from machine-made imitations	54.9	IV
Lack of institutional support for preservation	51.3	V
Low price realization for traditional styles	48.7	VI
Time required for traditional detailed paintings	44.2	VII
Limited market for authentic traditional works	41.8	VIII

Table.2 Traditional Styles Currently Practiced

Style	Respondents Practicing	Percentage (%)
Contemporary	45	75.0
Bharni	38	63.3
Kachni	22	36.7
Godna	18	30.0
Kohbar	14	23.3
Tantrik	8	13.3

This distribution reflects [Devi's \(2019\)](#) finding that technically demanding traditional styles face the greatest commercial viability challenges, and signals a gradual displacement of high-skill traditional forms by commercially expedient alternatives.

Generational Continuity

The aging profile of the artisan workforce compounds these preservation challenges: only 11.7% of respondents were below 25 years of age, while the largest cohort (36.7%) fell within the 36–45 age bracket. Combined with the low economic returns associated with traditional, detail-intensive styles, this raises concerns regarding intergenerational knowledge transfer and the long-term survival of technically demanding styles such as Kachni and Tantrik.

Findings

1. Market preference for simplified commercial designs is the most critical challenge to preservation (Garrett Score: 68.4).
2. Rising costs of natural colour materials (63.7) are pushing artisans toward chemical substitutes, altering the authentic character of the art.

3. Intergenerational transmission of traditional motifs is increasingly difficult (58.2), linked to the low profitability of complex traditional styles.

4. Competition from machine-made imitations (54.9) undercuts the price realization of genuine handmade work.

5. Contemporary style is now practiced by 75% of artisans, while the technically demanding Tantrik style survives among only 13.3%, evidencing systematic displacement of traditional complexity.

6. An aging artisan base (only 11.7% below 25 years) combined with low returns for traditional styles threatens long-term generational continuity of the craft.

In conclusion, Commercialization pressures pose an existential threat to the traditional aesthetic and technical diversity of Madhubani art in Darbhanga district. The market's systematic preference for simplified, quickly executed designs is displacing skill-intensive styles such as Kachni, Tantrik, and Kohbar, while rising natural pigment costs and weak institutional support accelerate the shift toward chemical colours and generic motifs. The study confirms that GI tagging alone cannot preserve traditional styles; without targeted preservation

incentives, the cultural capital underpinning Madhubani art's authenticity and market distinction will continue to erode.

Recommendations

1. Introduce premium pricing certification for authenticated traditional styles (Kachni, Tantrik, Kohbar) to offset their lower production speed.
2. Provide subsidies for natural pigment sourcing to reduce the cost pressure driving the shift to chemical colours.
3. Establish master-apprentice training programmes specifically targeting youth engagement with high-skill traditional styles.
4. Strengthen GI enforcement mechanisms, including QR-code or blockchain-based authentication, to curb competition from machine-made imitations.
5. Create institutional recognition and market-linkage programmes exclusively for endangered traditional styles to prevent their commercial extinction.

Author Contributions

Pallavi Priyanshi: Investigation, formal analysis, writing—original draft.

Data Availability

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Ethical Approval Not applicable.

Consent to Participate Not applicable.

Consent to Publish Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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