

Tantric Influence in 'Aripana' of Mithila

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Abstract

This paper examines the influence of tantra in the aripana, a floor painting, of Mithila Region. The ancient tradition of floor painting expresses the philosophy of tantra, which lays a focus on the balance between the spiritual and material aspects of the world. The use of the tantric symbols, celebration of the bodily desires, recognition of the material aspects, and glorification of feminine power as a primal source in aripana shows the influence of Tantra in Maithili society, art, and culture. Mithila, a Hindu society, has the influence of patriarchal Vedantic civilization. The society observes Hindu religious practices and rituals, on the one hand, and develops its own faith, beliefs and value systems on the other hand that at times tend to contrast with the religious practices of the Indian subcontinent. However, Mithila has advanced a good balance between the religious and secular practices so as to seek meanings in their lives, that is, a good equilibrium between the spiritual and material realities of the world. The link of aripana in Mithila, solely a Hindu community, demonstrates the tantric tradition of worshipping 'shakti'. Thus, Mithila Women through aripana highlights on the equal status of both the spirit and matter, initiating Human kind to attend their spiritual and material strength to its fullest. Despite the multi-facets of aripana in Mithila, it lacks proper study and research. The researcher aspects minimal bridging of research gaps and problem from this article entitled "Tantric Influence in 'Aripana' of Mithila".

Key words: aripana, feminine subjectivity, materialism, spirituality, tantra, yantra

Introduction

The article demonstrates and examines the significance of 'aripana,' its usefulness, and connection to tantra. Aripana seems to have been portrayed to educate Women about the deeper understanding of the meanings of

Human life through the union between the spirit and matter in Mithila Region. Aripana has been Traditionally drawn in different occasion of life from birth to death in the Maithili culture to show dominant Women agency by worshipping 'sakti' -a spirit or the enlivening energy inevitable for the functioning of the world. The drawings on the floor portray the symbolic images such as lotus flower, yantras, temples, dots, lines, etc. These images represent fertility and propagation of life. Each object of the painting has its own significance since they carry the plenty of the meanings at the context of Mithila society. Aripana, which has been passed down since time immemorial from one generation to another, carries the principal theme of fertility and prosperity. This art, being influenced by the philosophy of tantra, gives equal value to the physical and inner realities. Varieties of forms, colors, graphic patterns, and symbols used in the paintings bridges the gap between the material and spiritual world, and enables both the artists and the viewers to realize the cosmic consciousness. Consequently, the paper exhibits the floor drawing tradition influenced with tantra, purely a Vedic culture.

Research Problem

The aripana, a flower drawing, drawn everyday as well as on any occasion in Mithila Region has been a cultural continuum from generation to generation since time immemorial. It has become way of life for the Women of Mithila. Knowing aripana turns to be knowing of feminine subjectivity as 'sakti'- a spirit or the enlivening energy inevitable for the functioning of the world. Studying the floor drawing culture of Mithila Region, researcher wonders why 'aripana' is important and how aripana and tantra is associated with Mithila culture.

Objectives

This article studies Mithila drawing 'aripana' and aims to make connection of 'Aripana' with tantra. Therefore, it has following objectives:

- To explore appropriate meaning and significance of tantra and aripana,
- To examine vivid reflection of tantra in aripana, and To aware other Nepalese researchers and the researchers abroad about the vastness of 'aripana'.

Methodology

The article extensively analyzes 'aripana', a floor painting tradition in Mithila Region and uses descriptive research design. The research has been pinpointed to explore its objectives and connection to tantra. The use of secondary sources like books; *Ritual Art of the Kingdom of Mithila* of Kailash Kumar Mishra, *The Tantric Way: Arts, Science, Ritual* of Ajit Mukherjee and Madhu Khanna, *Tantric Visual Culture: A Cognitive Approach* of Sthaneshwar Timilsina, and *Tantra: Discover the Path from Sex to Spirit* of Shashi Solluna and articles related to Mithila art 'aripana' and tantra as well as library use adequate this paper. Further, the paper completely bases on qualitative research analysis.

Practices of 'Aripana' in Mithila

Painting as the oldest form of all arts, Aripana has become the way of life of people of Mithila Region. It operates from the birth to death rituals of people for various purposes from time immemorial. In this respect, Lok Nath Dulal in his article "Dasa Mahavidhyas Painted Scroll of National Museum: an Illustrative Art Heritage of Nepal" mentions painting as "the mother of all other arts, the history of creation of painting is older than other forms of art" (Dulal, 554). As Dulal states foregrounds the practice of painting since the Human came into existence. Similarly, Sthaneshwar Timilsina, in his book *Tantric Visual Culture: A Cognitive Approach* mentions art as, "the ingenuity of the Human mind has been expressed in art since the beginning of civilization of Paleolithic cave paintings or the pyramid sphinx depicting a man-lion" (Timilsina, 31). Hence, paintings seem to hold the center stage of Human civilization.

Aripana is an act of floor painting practiced in the Mithila Region. According to K.K. Mishra, in his article "Mithila Paintings: Women's Creativity Under Changing Perspective," mentions that the word 'aripana' means 'to smear' derived from Sanskrit. The formation of aripana is to smear and decorate the ground. *Pithar*, moistened white rice paste, made with the help of water and *sindur*, red vermilion are used to make aripana. *Aripanas* are drawn on the floor using one or two fingers of the right hand dipping into *pithar* and with the dot or dots of *sindhur* along with white, red, green, yellow and black colors. It has combinations and elaborations of symmetrical, floral, and geometrical designs measuring from six or

eight feet across. Aripana patterns are a part of each and every auspicious ceremony in Mithila, be it a puja, a vrata (fast) or a samskara (mundan, vivah, yajnopavita, etc). On the eve of a ceremony, Aripana designs are prepared in the courtyard, in front of the door and a number of other places. Any ceremony or ritual is considered incomplete without this traditional art form adorning the ground. Initially, Aripana designs were drawn in order to make the cultivated land fertile and fruitful by magical performances. However, today it has become a part of numerous ceremonies and rituals. While drawing Aripana, brushes are not used. It is drawn for worshipping purpose. Aripana-drawing begins from a simple, geometric point of the most complex drawing of the eighteen hands of the Goddess Durga, the Goddess of Power. The geometrical lines are linked to the Hindu religious tradition of tantra.

The designs or the motifs used in Aripana fall into different categories like; images of Human beings, birds and animals; Images of flower (lotus), leaves, trees and fruits; Tantric symbols, like yantras, bindu (dots), etc. ; images of Gods and Goddesses; and other objects like lamp, swastika, mountain, rivers, etc. reflecting the artist's originality and imagination. The land and people North of the river Ganges, in the state of Bihar lies a land called Mithila, shaded by old mango groves and watered by the rivers from the Himalayas of Nepal. The art of aripana or floor-painting, handed down from generation to generation, is the way of life in Mithila. There is not a single house in Mithila in which ceremonies are held without aripana. The Women of Mithila specialize in drawing circular patterns of designs too. Even now, most of their work remains anonymous. The Women, most of them illiterate, are reluctant to consider themselves individual producers of works of art and only a few of them mark the paintings with their own name. Among the first modern outsiders to document the tradition of Madhubani painting were William and Mildred Archer. Mr. Archer was a British civil servant assigned to the district during the colonial era. The Archers obtained some drawings on paper that the Women painters were using as aids to memory.

Moreover, R. N. Pandey says, "the so-called 'Aripana' i. e. a magic circle representing a magically purified space for rituals and domestic religious ceremonies" (Pandey, 178). This indicates the tantric concept of life concentrating to unself-conscious sexuality, marriage, fertility, and the

tantric concept of *Bhoga*, the sensual pleasure portrayed through aripanas.

Philosophy of Tantra

The philosophy of tantra deals with the creative mystery that inspires us to drive our actions towards inner consciousness. Tantra believes that an individual attains higher consciousness, not through renunciation and detachment, but through the acceptance and attachment with the physical world as well. Tantra blends both the spirit and matter, and thereby enabling Humans to realize their material and spiritual potentials. Ajit and Madhu assert, "Tantra has healed the dichotomy that exists between the physical world and its inner reality, for the spiritual, to a tantrika, is not in conflict with the organic but rather its fulfillment"(Ajit and Madhu, 9). Thus, tantra does not see the outer and inner world as two different realities, but two inseparable parts of the one world. Tantra, a Sanskrit word, is formed from the root *tan-* that means to expand. Tantra lays emphasis on the expansion of one's inner consciousness through the understanding of the functioning of the world, and thereby realizing his or her inherent spiritual powers.

In addition, Shashi Solluna in his book *Tantra: Discover the Path from Sex to Spirit* says, "The term 'Tantra' itself belong to a set of spiritual writings, known as the *Agamas*. These often take the form of a conversation between Shiva and Shakti, the divine masculine and feminine" (Solluna, 12) and "'Shiva means consciousness and awareness' and 'Shakti refers to energy or power'" (Solluna, 70). According to him, tantra leads from material world of family life to spiritual which can be possible with its connection rather than detachment to each other. Ajit and Madhu, likewise, assert, "Tantra is neither religion nor mysticism but an empirical – experimental method which has been absorbed as a cultural pattern valid for everyone and not limited to any exclusive group or sect" (Ajit and Madhu, 13). It indicates that tantra is empirical and experimental not religious or mystical. It is a cultural pattern which is a socio-economic way of life practised by any social animal. Further, SthaneshwarTimalsina in his book *Tantric Visual Culture: A Cognitive Approach* points forth:

the most salient features of Tantric discourse include the concept that the world is directly linked with the Human body and that both are composed of the same cosmic energy. If this connection is recognized, so the texts claim the Human body and mind can

interact with and affect the course of cosmic events” (Timalsina, 2).

Timilsina indicates the connection of Human body and mind with cosmic energy in tantric discourse which hints to the path from materiality to spirituality.

Furthermore, different yantras depicted during the floor painting; further provide the evidential connection to tantra. The portraits of 'Maha Kali' yantra and 'Shri' yantra present one of the varieties of aripanas.

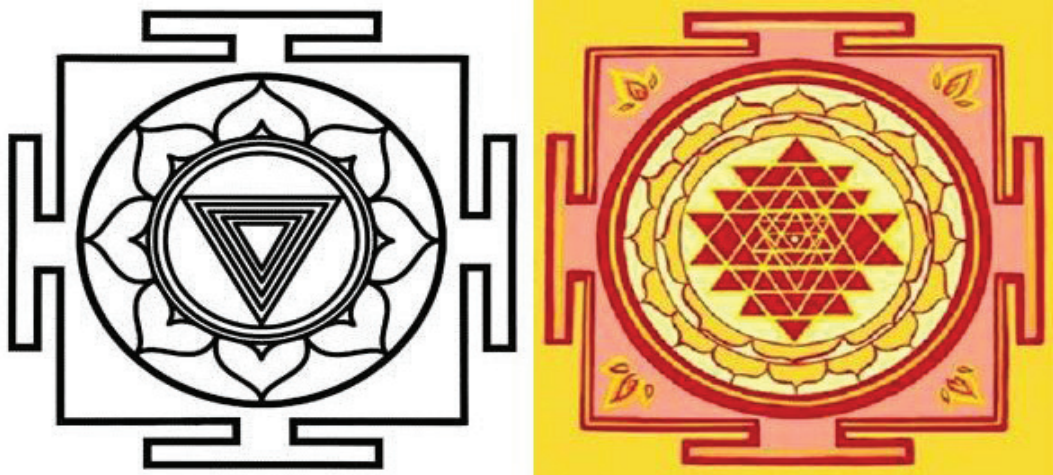


Figure 3. From left – *Maha Kali Yantra & Shri Yantra*, Source: Google Photo

These sorts of yantras also used in aripanas relate to shakti worship. This establishes Women agency relating to tantra. Thus, aripanas are drawn for ritual, security, and fertility motifs as the trademark of Hindu culture.

Thus, tantrism, giving equal footing to phenomenal world as well, speaks up for the perfect or complete experience of the whole - the individual's realization and union with what Madhu and Ajit call the "cosmic consciousness as Purusha, a male principle" and "cosmic force of nature as Prakriti, a female principle" (Ajit and Madhu, 15). Moreover, tantra advocates spirituality through materiality vividly reflected in aripana in Mithila.

Tantric Impact in 'Aripana'

The "Aripana" is filled with a detailed description of natural life forms and

their connection with the religious and spiritual belief systems inherent in the Mithila Region, and each image contributes significance to the meaning of the whole. The images drawn in aripana are life affirming and symbolize the underlying philosophy of the society. Mithila floor drawings are filled with the tantric images, Hindu gods and goddesses, and folk themes, and mythological characters and symbols. The Hindu religious practices tantric tradition in the Region, and other local myths and themes are reflected in aripanas.

Problems arise when interpretation of Mithila arts are done beyond the social semiotics of the Region. Most of the interpretations rely on the western perspectives which have nothing to do with Mithila culture, tradition and way of life. The reading of Maithili arts through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis misses the original and true meanings. In this context, Neel Rekha views, "It has also shown how western scholars interpreted Maithil art from alien paradigms and created a romanticized history. Women's voices got silenced in the process Interpretations internalized and articulated by the artists themselves complicate our understanding of Maithil art" (Rekha, 19). Thus, meanings are required to be drawn not based on any western theoretical criticisms, and the subjective perspectives of the local artists or scholars, but on the socio- cultural context of the Mithila society.

Though Mithila is a patriarchal society, Women have a lot of space to exercise their glorious presence in the social realm. It's true that male enjoy the freedom of movement and other socio-economic privileges, but it does not mean that Women are inferior, and taken only as the object of patriarchal pattern. As tantrism has a considerable influence over the Mithila way of living, Women have equal status, at times even higher than that of men. Regarding the tantric view of feminine subjectivity, LoriliaiBiernacki states:

One finds everywhere the Tantric saying that the god Siva- who usually is conceived as supreme spirit- is actually a mere corpse (sava), a dead body, mere matter, without the feminine principle (shakti). The male god is the "dead body" while the female is the enlivening "spirit". Ichnographically, this appears in the well-known image of the goddess Kali astride the corpse Siva. (Biernacki, 62)

This shows that Women, who the patriarchy has been viewing as objects, are in fact spirits. Women are the life giving energy, without which even the supreme Hindu god, Shiva, also remains a non-entity that is corpse. This

establishes the subjectivity of Women, and thereby recognizing the great presence of Women in a patriarchal society.

Young unmarried Maithil girls paint aripans on the auspicious occasion of Tusari Puja in order to get good husbands. In this occasion they draw a temple, the moon, the sun, Navagrah (nine planets) as shown in the pictures below:



Figure 1. Tusari Puja Aripan (Source & Photo Courtesy: S. C. Suman)

In the above aripana, three figures of temples are in three colours using rice, vermillion, and turmeric powders. These are gunas (basic attributes), *tamas* (inertia), and *sattva* (transcendence). The Gauri yantra is drawn at the centre of the temples. It is supposed to ward-off negative energy and evoke the positive wave in the conjugal life. The use of yantra in the figure is the worshipping of "*sakti*" which indicates the influence of tantra in aripana.

The aripana is basically about the rituals, security, and fertility theme carrying the tantric philosophy of *bhoga* – the sensual pleasure which leads a person to achieve oneness with the divine. The sexual symbols painted in aripana represent the Mithila belief on material world that becomes a vehicle for spiritual fulfillment. Ajit and Madhu opine, "Sex is regarded as physical basis of creation and evolution. It is the cosmic union of opposites; of male and female principles. This joy of union is equated with supreme bliss (*ananda*), obliterating differences between male and female in a state of complete union. In this state all impulse and function become Siva-Sakti" (Ajit and Madhu, 26). Women express their subjectivity in aripana, and

liberate themselves having given emphasis on the pleasure principle. Thus, their drawings reveal the tantric emphasis on the synthesis of *bhoga* and *yoga*, or matter and spirit.

The Women making aripana without any training dominated art perpetuating the shakti cult – the female principle is dominant and lords like Bishnu or Shiva remain subordinate. Aripana links with tantra, the triangle of which represents three things – desire, knowledge, and action – brings forth the play of female powers of desire (symbolized by goddess Laxmi), knowledge (represented by goddess Saraswoti), and action (dramatized by the audacities of goddess Durga). Parbati as Durga, in particular, epitomizes the affirmation of the powers of nature, fertility, and sexuality as in the following figure of aripana shows:



Figure 2. Sasthi Puja Aripan,

Source: S. C. Suman

Most of the Maithilaripanas foreground the feminine, material side of life as does the above painting through celebration of the Productivity of young Maithil girls symbolized by the lotus. Aripanas symbolize a life style distinguished by a deliberate enjoyment of sensual and sexual experiences as appropriate vehicles for the realization of the primal reality or power, thereby embodying resistance to patriarchal, Brahmanical culture. Hence, it is ritual as well.

Gray Areas for Aripana

The researcher views various areas to be researched regarding ‘aripana’ of Mithila Region in Nepal. The socio-economic, cultural, academic as well as religious aspects of aripana are yet unexplored for home and abroad in the arenas of knowledge. Therefore, a great deal of investments and different researches are to be conducted in aripana would enlighten the Human civilization about Human art and life.

Conclusion

Aripanas, aimed at rituals, security, and fertility motifs of the material world which functions as a means of achieving the spiritual fulfillment. All the life affirming symbols portrayed in the art works representing the theme of fertility and regeneration highlight the significance of material reality, and through the consumption of the physical pleasure, Human can attain their oneness with the cosmic consciousness. Tantrism, that regards man and woman as two sides of the same coin, has greatly inspired Women's drawings, and so Women through their drawings establish their equal space in the patriarchal Mithila society by presenting themselves as *Sakti*- a spirit or the enlivening energy inevitable for the functioning of the world. Hence, 'aripanas' in Mithila reflect the understanding of Women 'sakti' as in tantra becoming inseparable in day to day activity of people in Mithila Region in the form of floor painting drawn all the year round on any occasional almost every day.

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