Mithila Paintings: 
Women’s Creativity Under Changing Perspectives

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Abstracts: The article deals with the history and different styles of Mithila Paintings in the context of the role of women in it. It draws attention to the differences between the traditional wall and floor paintings and the canvas paintings, of modern day. It underlines the contribution of women to the development and popularity of Mithila paintings over many generations, and how they were brought into the painting tradition. It also shows how this painting tradition provided an opportunity to women in the Mithila region to garner additional income for the family when they were challenged by natural calamities such as drought. While describing the present status of the art form, the article calls for an adoption of appropriate measures to retain the tradition in its original form and vigour.

From time immemorial, women in India have actively participated in various forms of creativity, which explicate the relationship between nature, culture and the human psyche. In fact, their arts of creativity can be treated as a style of writing by which their emotions, expectations, freedom of thoughts, social and cultural limitations, worldviews, etc., find expression. Moreover, their significant role in some of the art forms present in many parts of the country is noteworthy: Phulkari in Punjab; Warli in Gujarat; Chikan in Lucknow; Weaving in the North-East; Kantha in Bengal; Miniature Paintings in Rajasthan; and, of course, Mithila Paintings in Bihar. The aim of this article is to focus on Mithila Painting to show how it is a parallel literacy by which women communicate aesthetic experience and expression.

The Mithila Paintings, also known as Madhubani Paintings, are a living creative tradition mainly practised by village women of the Mithila region in Bihar, irrespective of caste and religion. The paintings are made on paper, cloth, readymade garments, movable objects, etc., using natural and vegetable dyes. Though these paintings were originally done on walls and floors of houses, the women artists were slowly encouraged to translate the art from the walls and floors to canvas, which helped the art get a new identity in the art world as well as in the market.
Mithila paintings have maintained their distinct identity, cultural background and regional character. Far away from Indian big cities and the modern world, there lies a beautiful region once known as Mithila, which was one of the first kingdoms to be established in eastern India. It is a vast plain area stretching north towards Nepal, south towards the holy river Ganga and west towards Bengal. Mithila covers the present districts of Champaran, Saharsa, Muzaffarpur, Vaishali, Darbhanga, Madhubani, Supaul, Samastipur etc., and parts of Munger, Begusarai, Bhagalpur and Purnea in Bihar. The area is completely flat and free from rocks and stones; its soil is the alluvial silt deposited by the river Ganges, a rich, smooth clay dotted with thousands of pools replenished by the monsoon.

Madhubani is the heartland where the paintings are more profuse than elsewhere. Impressed by the region’s rich vegetation, the ancient visitors called it Madhubani — the ‘forest of honey.’ (Venquaud, 1977: 9). In this mythical region, Lord Rama, the handsome prince of Ayodhya and incarnation of Vishnu, married princess Sita, born of a furrow her father King Janaka had tilled. Mithila is the land of the founders of Buddhism and Jainism; the birthplace of the scholars of all six orthodox branches of Sanskrit learning such as Yajnavalkya, Brihda Vachaspati, Ayachi Mishra, Shankar Mishra, Gautam, Kapil, Sachal Mishra, Kumaril Bhatt and Mandan Mishra. Vidya, the greatest Vaisnav poet of the 14th century, was born in Mithila and immortalised a new form of love songs illuminating the relationship between Radha and Krishna in the region through his Padavalis. The people rightly remember him as the reincarnation of Jaideva (Abhinavajaideva). Karnpure, a classical Sanskrit poet of Bengal, in his famous devotional epic, Parijataharanamahakavya, gives an interesting account confirming the scholarship of Mithila people. Lord Krishna, while flying over this land on the way to Dwarka from Amravati, tells his beloved Satyabhama, “O lotus-eyed one behold! Yonder this is Mithila, the birthplace of Sita. Here in every house Saraswati dances with pride on the tip of the tongue of the learned.” (Mishra, 2000). It is a wonderful land where art and scholarship, laukika and Vedic traditions flourished together in complete harmony with no opposition.

Background

Like the diversity of India, the Mithila painting tradition also presents a huge canvas and depicts the cultural mosaics of this country in a very colourful style. This art can rightly be likened to an ocean of art (Kalasaritasagara), which, since earliest times, has been fed by the rivers of popular artistic creativity – rivers that have flown into it from all cultural-geographical pockets of the Indian subcontinent. The well-known grammarian, Panini, drew a distinction between artists — the rajashilpi or craftsman employed by the court and the grashilpi or village craftsman. (Mookerjee, 1962: 16). Originally, the shilpin would seem to have been a
term generally applied to the technically trained craftsman; later, however, it came to denote the artisan. (Puri, 1960: 217) Thus, the writing concerning the theory of art is collectively referred to as the *shilpashastras*.¹

Being for the most part of a highly schematic character, these manuals of artistic instruction could not, of course, be expected to include a description of folk art or of amateur art practised by women at home. By and large, they form a part of orthodox ecclesiastical literature with art as the handmaiden of the courts of Brahminic orthodoxy.² But that did not stop women and commoners from practising various forms of creativity through various mediums on the occasion of rituals and festivals and also during leisure periods. In fact, their fellow villagers and locals always appreciated their creativity and innovation. As a result, an artist was treated in Sanskrit as well as in the folk tradition, as a person with a magnetic ability to create a world of imagination. Metaphorically, an artist was always compared with the Gods. The Sanskrit word *kala* (art) means the divine attributes which direct human acts and thoughts. Man, God and art are inseparable. Art is not removed from everyday life; it reflects a worldview. (Baidyanath, 1999: 10) No distinction is made between fine and decorative, free or servile art. There is no difference between a painter and sculptor; both are known as *silpi* or *karigar*. The term *silpa* designates ceremonial act in the *Asvalayana Srautasutra*, and in this sense it is close to *karu*, which, in the Vedic context, stands for a maker or an artist, a singer of hymns, or a poet. In a reference in the Rgveda, Visvakarma, a god of creation, is mentioned as *dhatu-karmara*, while *karmara* alone refers to artisans and artificers.³ Visvakarma is supposed to create things out of *dhatu*, “raw material”, an act known as *sanghamana*.⁴ The process of cutting, shaping and painting has been often explained in the text by the *taks*.⁵

In Mithila, women make paintings on walls, surfaces of movable objects, and on canvas; they make images of gods, goddesses, animals and mythological characters from lumps of clay; create baskets, small containers and toys from *sikki* grass; do embroidery on quilt – popularly known as *kethari* and *sujani*; and sing varieties of ritual and work songs.⁶ These artistic activities are done as routine works that make them have a complete creative personality. Without knowing these primary details one may not understand the aesthetic wonder of Mithila paintings.

For generations, Mithila women have produced vigorous distinctive paintings. The art form has survived the innumerable vicissitudes of history because of the social organisation and community life in which the women have clearly understood their roles. It is within this framework that the women continue to reproduce the age-old forms and, indeed, countless recapitulations have resulted in their attitude. As such, they can produce most abstract designs without conscious effort. The village community life is strengthened and sustained by the universal prevalence of social gatherings, traditional storytelling, dancing and singing festivities and ceremonies, processions and rituals. The possibility of any radical assertion of individuality in the modern sense is extremely limited.⁷
Discussion

Mithila paintings are normally done in three forms: paintings on floor, paintings on wall, and paintings on movable objects. Aripan, the first category, is made on the floor with pithar, the paste of arva (crude) rice. Apart from the floor, it is also made on banana and Maina leaves and on pidhi (wooden seats). An aripan is made with dry rice powder in white, yellow and red colours during the Tusari Puja, a festival celebrated by unmarried girls in order to please Gauri and Shiva and obtain a suitable husband. There are different varieties in Aripan; Astadala, Sarvatobhadra, Dasapata and Swastika. The wall paintings are multicoloured; three to four colours are usually used. They generally depict pictures of trees, animals, birds, and attractive floral motifs. The third category of paintings on movable objects include those on pots, clay elephants, birds like sama and chakeba; Raja Salhesa, bamboo structures, mats, fans and objects made of sikki, an indigenous grass. Many of these paintings have great tantrik significance, for instance, certain non-Vedic rites during the marriage ceremony, practised exclusively by women, like thakka-bakka, nayana-jogini etc., are directly related to the Mithila tantra.

The use of wall and surface paintings for beautification of dwellings and in rituals in Mithila is believed to have survived from the epic period. Tulsidas, in his magnum opus Ramcharitmanasas, gives a vivid account of Mithila paintings made for the marriage of Sita and Rama. Influenced by the wonderful pair – Rama and Sita – Gauri, the consort of Shiva, desired to participate in the actual marriage ritual and wanted to paint the kohabar. Women, according to this age-old tradition, are the sole custodians of this folk painting tradition, passed down for generations from mother to daughter. They have retained this great art form in the region from time immemorial.

The present form of Mithila paintings, also called Madhubani paintings, is the translation of the wall paintings, floor paintings and terracotta idols onto paper or canvas. This experiment is not very old. In the late sixties, in order to create job opportunities for women who faced the cruel challenge of terrible droughts, some women were encouraged to translate their art from walls and floors to paper or canvas for commercial sale. At first, this art had a small audience but it opened up a new world of art appreciators and potential buyers, and soon became a great commercial success.

The painting medium has since diversified hugely. Wall paintings were transferred to hand-made paper and gradually it paved the way for other media like greeting cards, dress materials, sun-mica etc. The stylised figures, fierce lions with electrified manes, the human profiles reminiscent of ancient Cretan pottery, the bright naive colours and other indigenous experiments appealed to the audience.

In the beginning, only a few Brahmin women were given the opportunity to practise this art, but after some ten years, women from the Kayastha community came forward with a new style. Till recently, the women of the Harijans were not given an opportunity to experiment with this art. There is an interesting story behind it. The women of
higher castes were not allowed to cross the boundary of their houses but wanted to do some work to generate income for their family, mainly during natural calamities. However, the women of lower castes helped their husbands or male counterparts by working in agricultural fields and as maids in the houses of the higher castes. At this time, some people thought of involving the women of higher castes in some creative work. Gandhi’s experiment with charkha (spinning wheel) came as a wonder to the women of Maithili Brahmins. They found it far easier than their earlier method of preparing cotton thread on teknuli for preparing the janeu or jagyopaveeta (sacred thread). The khadi workers gave raw cotton to every house and collected the prepared yarn. Very delicate and costly khadi clothes are woven from these yarns today and they are in great demand everywhere in the country. The Khadi centres gave money and clothes for their labour, and this was a respectable job for destitutes, widows and poor women of higher castes.

The second experiment was with the Mithila paintings. As a result, some women from the Brahmin caste contributed to promote the Brahmin style of Mithila paintings. This art, characterised by bright colours and an absence of shade, is mainly concerned with khobars (symbolic marriage paintings) and gods and goddesses.

The Kayastha women were also facing similar problems. The Kayasthas were a landless community and their women were also attracted towards this art form as a way of earning some income. They worked hard on the art and also in entrepreneurship and finally got recognition in the seventies. The Kayastha women earned a name for their elaborate line paintings, and most of them do outline paintings only. These two forms of Mithila expression, both from women of the higher castes, embody traditional Mithila art.

The third group from the Harijan community came forward in the 1980s. The women of the Dusahdhs and the Chamars were doing all forms of traditional paintings for ritual purposes as well as for decorating their dwellings. Influenced by the entrepreneurship and experiment of the Brahmins and Kayasthas, they experimented with godna (tattooing) and other bright colours in their paintings. Their pictorial alphabet began to include lines, waves, circles, sticks and snails, opening the way to stylisation and more abstraction. It also worked well. Now, women of all castes practise this art as an income-earning profession.

The artists rely on nature for colours. It provides them with a wonderful range of natural hues derived from clay, bark, flowers and berries. The colours are usually deep red, green, blue, black, light yellow, pink and lemon. As the deep colours create mood, they have an important role to play. For instance, energy and passion find expression through the use of red and yellow, as monochromes crash over large surfaces of the painting. Concentration of energy is best reflected in red, while green governs natural
leaves and vegetation. The Brahmins prefer very bright hues while the Kayasthas opt for muted ones. In the Harijan style of paintings, the hand-made paper is washed in cow-dung. And, once the paints are ready, two kinds of brushes are used: one made out of bamboo twigs for tiny details and the other prepared from a small piece of cloth attached to a twig for filling the space. In the beginning, homemade natural colours were obtained from plant extracts like henna and leaves, flowers like bougainvillea, etc. These natural juices were mixed with resin from banana leaves and ordinary gum to get the paint to stick to the painting medium. Homemade paints, though cheap, were time consuming and could not be produced in large quantities. Therefore, they switched to synthetic colours available in the market. Now, the colours come in powdered form, which are then mixed with goat’s milk.

The kohbar is replete with paintings based on mythological, folk themes, and tantric symbolism. The paintings in this chamber are designed to bless the couple. The central theme of all paintings is love and fertility, though the approach may vary. It can commence with the story of Sita’s marriage or the Krishna-Radha episode with the ecstatic circle in which he leads the Gopis. The Mithilis are Sakti worshippers under the influence of tantric rituals and so Siva-Sakti, Kali, Durga, Ravna and Hanuman also appear in their murals. Symbols of fertility and prosperity like fish, parrot, elephant, turtle, sun, moon, bamboo tree, lotus, etc are prominent. The divine beings are positioned centrally in the frame while their consorts or mounts or simply their symbols and floral motifs form the background. The human figures are mostly abstract and linear in form; the animals are usually naturalistic and invariably depicted in profile. It begins with the flow of the brush without any preliminary sketching. As natural colours and twigs have given way to brushes and artificial paints, the subject of Mithila paintings has also changed enormously.

The commercialisation has caused serious harm to this art. The women and men are learning this art from the markets in towns and cities. The trainers themselves do not know the essence and aesthetic beauty of this art and teach their students in utter ignorance. Some of them do not know the colour combinations, how to obtain the colours from nature, preparing the background, the relationship between rhythm, colour, songs, rituals, dance and painting. The themes and designs of the paintings are now, in most cases, decided by the buyers. The buyer-centric approach is a serious threat to the originality of colour, design, motif, and sensitivity of this art form. Commercialisation of this art has attracted several males also. For them, it is an industry that can easily provide a job opportunity. They are willing to paint anything for buyers in the name of Mithila painting.

In Mithila Paintings as folk paintings painted on ritual occasions or as ritual paintings of India, we find a combination of many activities. This combination, in fact, gives a special significance to the art. “Viewed at the
level of perception and experience, all these local, regional, macro, pan–
Indian, and beyond Indian expression of art emerge and are held together
by an integral vision that makes life an art, part and parcel of a single totality
where life functions and creative art are inseparably intertwined. Painting,
music, dance, poetry, and other functional objects are inseparable from
myths, rituals, festivals and ceremonies. There is no dichotomy between
the sacred and profane, life and art. The human and the divine are in a
continuum, in a constant movement of interpretation and transformation.”

When an artist paints a wall or floor, she is supported by other women by
way of songs and tunes. The lessons drawn from folk stories and narratives
also help her in painting the themes of various requirements. The tantric
paintings, for instance, are influenced by the famous narratives of the
Madhushravani katha. This story is narrated before a newly married bride on
the occasion of Madhushravani for 13-15 continuous days by an elderly and
experienced lady who is usually well versed in the art of narrative. She
dramatises the stories in a very lively manner and narrates the origin of
earth and various tantric stories. One such complete folk-cum-tantric story
of Manasa Debi is given below:

Manasa Debi was a mind-born daughter (manasaputri) of Shiva. She was
born of Shiva’s semen left on a chikanipata (a leaf of lotus). She is known as
Bisahari (snake goddess) and is said to have extraordinary supernatural
power to bless her devotees. She can also ruin and kill those who do not
believe in her existence or offer prayers to her. There was a very rich ship
merchant named Chanrakar. He was also known to the people as Chandu
Saudagar (merchant). He was a great devotee of Shiva. He had six sons and
a happy family. He did not consider Manasa as a Goddess. Manasa Debi
did not like this attitude of Chandu Saudagar and killed all his six sons by
sending black snakes. However, Chandu Saudagar did not relent. One day,
Lord Shiva appeared to him in a dream and asked him what he wanted.
Chandu Saudagar requested him to bless him with a son. Lord Shiva agreed
to bless him with a son but put a condition before him. “If you want to have
a son who will have a long life, he will be a fool, lethargic and an idiot. But
if you want to have an ideal, intelligent and handsome son, he will die at
the early age of 20.” “Now you tell me what exactly you want.” After serious
thought, Chandu Saudagar opted for an intelligent son who would have a
short life. Later, Chandu’s wife gave birth to a male child whose name was
Bala Lakshendra or Lakhinder. Lakhinder was bright, intelligent and a very
cultured child. Everybody was happy with his behaviour. When he reached
a marriageable age, his father wanted to solemnise his marriage ceremony
with an equally qualified and highly cultured girl. After a great search,
Chandu Saudagar saw Bihula. She was very beautiful, meritorious, a highly
cultured and homely girl. Chandu also came to know that according to her
family tradition, every woman dies a sumangali and none of them would
become a widow at any point of time. In this family tradition of Bihula,
Chandu Saudagar saw a ray of hope for his dear and affectionate son, Lakhinder and as a result, he immediately decided to choose her as his daughter-in-law.

The marriage was solemnised in a happy atmosphere. Lakhinder was bitten by a dangerous cobra at the behest of Manasa Debi on his first night on the bridal-bed in the bridal chamber itself. Lakhinder cried in helplessness and breathed his last. The innocent but firm Bihula decided to remain with his dead body on a raft in the river Ganga. Chandu and all the neighbouring people made futile attempts to dissuade her. But she was determined. Finding no other alternative, Chandu gave permission to Bihula. She started her voyage on a raft along with her Lakhinder’s dead body. The current slowly carried the raft. She had to face various difficulties in her journey, but she overcame them all. Ultimately, she found a washerwoman washing the clothes by the side of the river Ganga. Her small child was disturbing her. Getting irritated with the behaviour of her girl child, the washerwoman killed her baby and started washing her clothes. Once she had washed all her clothes, she sprinkled some drops of water on the face of her baby and the dead baby became alive. Bihula understood the supernatural powers of this lady and took shelter at her feet and narrated her sad story.

In accordance with the advice of the washerwoman, Bihula reached the Mahadeoloka with her. On the instruction of the washerwoman, Bihula performed a wonderful dance to please the Lord. The Lord was very impressed by her graceful performance and was moved by the story of her tragic life on earth and heaven. He called Manasa and asked her to give the reasons for this tragedy. Manasa Debi vehemently denied that she was responsible for the tragedy of Bihula. However, Bihula succeeded in producing definite evidence. But Manasa insisted that she was not responsible for the sad plight of Bihula, and it was Chandu Saudagar, her father-in-law, who was solely responsible, because he always abused and disrespected Manasa Debi and did not consider her a goddess worthy of worship. Manasa then told Bihula that if Chandu Saudagar were to worship her, she would bring Lakhinder back to life. Bihula, hopeful for the life of her husband, agreed to her proposal. Manasa then brought Lakhinder and the other six sons of Chandu Saudagar back to life by chanting spells. At the humble request of Bihula, Manasa Debi recovered all the boats of Chandu Saudagar along with the cargo and crew that had been submerged by the wrath of Manasa Devi. She thus fulfilled the desire of Bihula. With all the seven sons and the lost property of Chandu Saudagar, Bihula came down to the city on earth where the old eyes of Chandu Saudagar and his wife were counting the days to breathe their last. All of a sudden, they saw all their lost sons along with their cargo and crew.

Now, Chandu Saudagar realised the power of Bihula and gave his consent to worship the deity – Manasa Debi. The goddess blessed him. He realised that there was none except Manasa Debi in these three worlds. Finally, he worshiped Manasa with offerings of various fruits and animals.

Thus, Chandu Saudagar, a devout follower of Shiva, changed his religious ideas and became one of the staunch followers of the Manasa-cult, which was originally a tantric-cum-folk cult.
The other stories narrated during the Madhusravani are Satik Katha; Pativrata Sunaynak Katha; Bala-Basantak Katha; Gosaunik Katha; Chanai Bairsi Katha and Raja Srikarak Katha. The Madhusravani is celebrated in the rainy month of the Savan. Everywhere snakes and other poisonous insects are found in abundance. People try to please the deities and these serpent deities by way of offering puja, singing songs, celebrating rituals, invocating mantras etc. The place where the Madhusravani story is narrated is decorated with ritual paintings. Some women sing some tantric songs. One such song called bini (prayer) is mentioned below: deep-deep hara jathu ghara; Motik manik bharathu ghara during the decoration in a falsetto tone. Through the song, the snake deity is being worshipped in order to bless the people, mainly the groom of the newly married bride.

The purpose of giving the summary of one folk narrative, narrated on the occasion of the Madhusravani, is to explain the interconnectivity amongst various activities in the creation of a ritual art. This interconnectivity is lost when the art is experimented as a commodity and sold in the market in huge numbers. A woman painting her wall does not expect any monetary returns from anywhere, but when she paints in order to sell her painting as a commercial production, she becomes a sales girl. Her entire attention shifts from culture to consumerism and she puts herself at the mercy of her buyers. She paints not to retain tradition, but to earn a better livelihood.

In the last 20 years, in order to get job opportunities, a very huge population of Mithila has migrated to the cities and mega-cities of India and abroad. This is a continuous trend. Many of them have settled in those cities. They are emotionally attached to their rituals and traditions. Marriages are solemnised in these cities in banquet halls and hotels. And no traditional marriage can take place without a kohbara painting. These paper and cloth paintings, therefore, solve their purpose. Now, they decorate the new wedding venues with Mithila paintings and feel rooted to their tradition. Such a development has given a new and potential group of buyers to the painters.

Some individual painters such as Karpoori Devi, Ganga Devi and Jamuna Devi have innovated gracefully as per the requirements of their potential buyers. Ganga Devi has wonderfully depicted the Ramayana episode in her paintings. She has also depicted her journey from Madhubani to the All India Medical Sciences, New Delhi, which she made for her cancer. The train, doctors, hospital, syringe, medical ward everything she drew delicately. Her brother Mitar Ram, but to a greater extent, Jamuna Devi has developed a brightly coloured style that has no equivalent in Mithila art. Jamuna Devi, a septuagenarian, is self-taught and no rules apply to her work, which evokes children’s play and raw art. She delights in portraying animals — cows, for example. Her representations of the sacred animal range from a parody of anteaters to a hybrid combination of dancing angels and juggling balls. Many of her paintings can be viewed upside down, showing her total freedom from conventions.

In the village of Jitwarpur and Ratni, Mithila paintings have emerged as a commercial activity where children can be seen engaged in arranging the hand-crafted paper or fetching the colours. In my recent visit to Jitwarpur,
I saw Jamuna Devi teaching more than 15 students ranging from Brahmins to Harijan girls. On my enquiry she said, “I teach them as their mother. They feel they are at their home. I do not charge any money from the trainees. If I charge, my art will be polluted. The best reward I get is when a Brahmin girl after successful completion of her training touches my feet to get my blessings. I then bless her from the innermost core of my heart and also issue a perfection certificate.”

Mithila painting is more than an art. Through this creative art, a group of women express their desires, dreams, expectations, hopes and aspirations to the people. If you ask them what they are doing they will respond, “We are writing this kohabar or gahwar.”

**Hamralokani kohbara yaa gahavara likhait chee.**

For them, their style of art is a kind of script through which they communicate with the male folk or with the people of the rest of the world. They are the creative writers who write their feelings through the medium of painting. They are creators and are close to god in perfection. Because of money, some men too have jumped into this creativity, but in its essence and nature, even today, it is women’s creativity.

**Notes**

3. Rgveda, X.72.2; Atharveda, III, 5-6; Manu, IV. 215.
4. Rgveda, X.72.2
5. Rgveda: Rathakas who used wood for joining and making chariots are called Taksaka in the Maitrayani Samhita, IV. 3.8.
8. Bridal chamber where the union between the groom and the bride takes place and several rites are solemnised.
10. Realm of gods in the Kingdom of Shiva, Mahadeo.
11. One such song called bini (prayer) is mentioned below:
   
   Deep-deep hara jathu ghara; Motik manik bharathu ghara
   Nag badathu, nagin badathu; Panch bahin bishara badathu
   Bal basant bhaia badathu; Dadhi- khondhi mausi badathu
   Ashavari pisi badathu; Basuki raja nag badathu
   Basukini maie badathu; Khona-mona mama badathu
   Rahi shabda lai suti; kansa shabda lai uthi
   Hoiet prat sona katora men dudh-bhat khai
   Sanjh suti prat uthi; pator pahiri, kachor odhi
Bramhak del kodari, vishnuk chanchal bat.
Bhag-bhag re kida-makoda; tahi bate aotah ishvar mahadev, padal gadud ker dhath.
Astik, astik, gadud, gadud.

12. Hamralokani kohbara yaa gahavara likhait chee.

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