Salhesa Iconography In Madhubani paintings: A Case of Harijan Assertion
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Abstract
The present paper deals with assertion of identity by the Harijans of Mithila through the iconography of Salhesa in Madhubani paintings, a predominantly feminine folk art form of northern Bihar. Having remained the exclusive preserve of higher caste for centuries, commercialization and external influences facilitated the entry of depressed caste groups in this field. The past few decades have seen the emergence of distinctive Harijan styles in the form of Gobar and Godana paintings.

The paper looks at the history of evolution of the Gobar and Godana styles to explain how Harijans have used this medium to gain recognition as artists. In this process, they have projected Salhesa, the God of the Dusadhs as the central character of their paintings. Rather than using the traditional motifs, the choice of Salhesa appears to be a conscious attempt on their part to differentiate their art. The motivation for this is not only to make their paintings commercially attractive but also to improve their social standing in a caste-obsessed hierarchical society. The various versions of the Salhesa story and evidences from oral traditions of Mithila and regional literature are utilised to explain the symbolic importance of Salhesa in the socio-cultural life of Mithila. The relative success of dusadhs as compared to other castes has also been discussed.

The acceptance of the Harijan style and Salhesa themes by the market as well as upper caste painters can be interpreted as a measure of success achieved by the Harijan painters. There have been attempts to consolidate these gains by formation of painters’ co-operatives and closer association with NGOs. This paper is based on my own fieldwork and interviews with the painters in Jitwarpur village near Madhubani during the period 1999 to 2004.
Introduction
The region of Mithila in the state of Bihar famous as the birthplace of Sita, Gautama Buddha and Mahavira has acquired fame in recent times for producing vibrant paintings in handmade paper Madhubani paintings. Scenes from *Ramayana*, various manifestations of Mother Goddess such as Kali, Durga, Mahisasurmardini, God Shiva with his consort Parvati, *Ardhanarishvara* representing a half male and half female figure, Krishna playing a flute or seen playing with Gopis or Radha, the *Dasa Avatars* (ten incarnations) of Vishnu, Manasa the Snake Goddess - some of these popular representations from Hindu mythology have been the favourite themes made by the artists of Mithila, famed now for Madhubani paintings, a predominantly feminine folk art form of northern Bihar. In the past few decades, these popular representations of Hindu deities have been overshadowed by secular images inspired from scenes of nature, day to day rural folk life, tattoo designs and some lesser known local deities. Of greater significance has been the emergence of an imagery never recorded to have traditionally made in the history of Madhubani paintings. These images inspired from a very popular oral tradition of Mithila portray the life stories of Salhesa, the God of an untouchable caste in Bihar. In most of the paintings, the God is portrayed seated on an elephant accompanied by three bodyguards and a flower girl in the garden. (See Figure 1)

![Salhesa seated on an elephant accompanied by three bodyguards and a flower girl in the garden, Courtesy Santosh Kumar Paswan, Jitwarpur](image)

Earlier drawn on the floors and walls of the houses on ritualistic occasions throughout the region of Mithila, the paintings were transferred from wall to paper as part of relief programme by the Indian Government. These commercial paper reproductions broadly categorised under two styles *Bharni and Kachni*, evolved by a few upper caste Brahmana and Kayastha women in the villages Jitwarpur, Ranti, Rashidpur near Madhubani town of Bihar have acquired immense popularity. Despite the historical origins of the Madhubani paintings, the changing social milieu affected its subsequent nature. Emerging as an
exclusive preserve of the upper caste women, it proliferated amongst the lowest segments of the Maithil society. This development has been due to the shifting equations of caste relations as well as the changing demands of the market. It has to be noted that the erstwhile standardised format of this art form gradually became individualistic and, in the process, also encouraged those segments of the society which were hitherto ignored to become an active participant in the field. The past few decades have seen the emergence of distinctive Harijan styles in the form of Gobar and Godana paintings in Madhubani. The present paper deals with assertion of identity by the Harijans of Mithila through the iconography of Salhesa in Madhubani paintings. This paper looks at the history of evolution of Gobar and Godana styles of Madhubani Paintings to demonstrate the conditions in which Salhesa was chosen as the symbol of Harijan assertion.

The paper draws upon my fieldwork between 1999 to 2004 in village Jitwarpur. In my constant interaction with the painters in village Jitwarpur from 1999 to 2004, I have found them making increasing use of Salhesa themes in Harijan paintings. The other secular themes inspired from nature and their local gods such as Rahu, Govinda popularly represented earlier in the Harijan Mithila paintings have slowly disappeared in the process of its evolution. While Salhesa stories in various versions have been current in different parts of Mithila in different forms from a historical period, the Harijan artists have given the story a new face by reinterpreting the old narratives and presenting them in a novel way through the innovative iconography of Salhesa in Madhubani paintings. Since written literature on Salhesa is still not available, the paper has utilised a number of sources including the oral accounts of the painters, and interviews with regional scholars in search of an interpretation of current assertion. Though the current phenomenon is only partially understood because of its recent emergence, it opens up new dimensions of enquiry in the study of Madhubani paintings. The use of Salhesa as a medium of assertion acquires significance especially in the context of the recent reuse of the oral sources in the construction of history.

In the first part, I examine the history of evolution of Harijan paintings to explain the conditions which favoured the emergence of Harijans as painters. Through an indepth

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1 I have used the term ‘Harijan’ in this paper instead of the more current term ‘Dalit’ as this was popularly used in Madhubani by the artists during my surveys. The initial surveys between 1999 and 2001 were published in the form of an article in Marg titled ‘Harijan paintings of Mithila’. In this paper, I have attempted to incorporate the evidences from other oral accounts, videos, paintings preserved in books and interviews with local scholars to attempt a fuller history of the art. Scattered sources on Salhesa in regional languages has been extensively used for the analysis and reconstruction of Salhesa’ importance in current social setup.

2 I myself had no idea of the existence of any Harijan style in Madhubani as the earlier scholarly accounts failed to make any mention of their existence. It was in the evolving phase in the 70s and 80s when earlier works on Madhubani Paintings were published. The harijan paintings has taken its present shape only in the 90s.

3 For a detailed history on the history of evolution, see Rekha 2003. Stories of Salhesa and a number of regional accounts are still in the process of getting recorded.
history and survey of various accounts, it demonstrates how eventually Salhesa gained centrality among other themes as an identity symbol of the Harijans. The second part of the paper explains the socio economic background of the Dusadhs and various versions of the Salhesa story current in Mithila with a focus on the version of the painters since it explains the current phenomenon of Harijan assertion. The third part forms the most significant portion of the paper and is crucial to the understanding of the whole phenomenon as it makes an attempt to analyse why the Harijans have projected Salhesa as their central character both in the contemporary as well as historical context. It looks at the projection of Salhesa both in terms of its use for creating a parallel tradition for commercial reasons and as a medium for improving the social standing of the painters in a caste conscious society. In the last portion, I discuss the current status of Harijans especially in terms of their recognition as artists in Jitwarpur which again acquires significance as a pointer to changes occurring in terms social status and recognition.

History of Evolution of Harijan Paintings and Emergence of Harijan Identity

Mithila, also known as Videha and Tirabhukti or Tirhut boasted of a very ancient origin. Presently it comprises the modern districts of Madhubani, Darbhanga, Samastipur, Vaisali, Muzaffarpur, Champaran, Monghyr, Saharsa and Purnea in the state of Bihar and about 10,000 sq. miles in the kingdom of Nepal. The whole of the region of Mithila had a unique tradition of making paintings on the floors and walls of their houses on festivals and ceremonies and in that sense, Madhubani painting seems to represent a restricted area of the painting tradition.  

In the late 60s, these wall and floor paintings were brought on paper as part of the relief programme started by the Government of India after the region suffered a series of droughts. The idea of the Government was to provide the drought stricken people especially women an alternative source of employment. Pupul Jayakar, the then Chairperson of Handloom Handicrafts Export Corporation (HHEC), Bhaskar Kulkarni, the officer in charge of the drought relief programme of Madhubani and Upendra Maharathi, an artist and designer - were the key persons responsible for the evolution of Madhubani paintings. Within a very short period of time, a number of outstanding painters were discovered.

The villages of Jitwarpur, Ranti, Rashidpur, Laheriganganj and Harinagar, all very close to Madhubani town in the present times have become famous for the reproductions of these paintings. Two prominent styles emerged from the traditional Brahmana and Kayastha paintings - Kachni and Bharni. Along with these two other styles - the Geru style and Tantric styles were also discovered and brought on paper. Celebrated artists hailing from

4 For a detailed account of earlier painting tradition, see Archer 1949.

5 For a detailed study of history of commercialisation, see Jain 1980, Jayakar 1971 1975

6 Paintings are still categorized are as Brahmana, Kayastha and Dusadh paintings. In my field surveys, I have found six different styles in Madhubani. see Rekha 2004, A discussion on different styles See Frontline 2005.
these villages gradually evolved their individualistic styles. Contrary to academic writings which lay emphasis on the conservative character of Madhubani paintings, these artists of Madhubani expanded rapidly in terms of themes and styles. A significant factor contributing towards making the current painting vibrant and individualistic was the entry of Harijan artists and their innovative themes. It was in Jitwarpur, a stronghold of Mahapatra Brahmana artists, that a group of scheduled caste artists worked together to introduce new stylistic techniques and themes in Madhubani Painting which came to be popularly called as the Harijan Paintings of Mithila.

Figure 2: Gobar Style of Painting evolved by Jamuna Devi, Jitwarpur, Personal Collection

Since these paintings were primarily evolved by a group of people belonging to the scheduled caste communities, it was categorised broadly as the Harijan Mithila school of painting by Upendra Maharathi. The Harijan paintings of the present times can be broadly divided into two styles - Gobar painting or Cowdung painting primarily attributed to the Chamars and Godana painting or Tattoo painting attributed to the

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8 For a detailed discussion on the evolution of Madhubani Painting from folk art to fine art, See Szanton 2004.
9 One of the sub castes of brahmanas in Mithila whose traditional occupation has been conducting death rites. Hence they are considered inferior to other brahmanas in the caste hierarchy.
10 My interviews with the harijan painters revealed that this nomenclature was given by Upendra Maharathi, an artist to distinguish them from the earlier prevalent styles. The Upendra Maharathi Institute at Digha, still houses a number of earlier collection of Madhubani Paintings. For a detailed discussion on the nomenclature, See Jyotindra Jain, 'The Bridge of Vermilion: Narrative Rhythm in the Dusadh Legends of Mithila', in B.N. Goswamy and Usha Bhatia ed., Indian Painting: Essays in Honour of Karl J. Khandalvala", New Delhi, 1995, pp. 208-209.
Dusadhs\textsuperscript{11} (See Figures 2 and 3). Unlike the other scheduled castes residing in Jitwarpur village like the Malis, Doms, Hajams, Pasis and Dhobis\textsuperscript{12} who have stuck to their traditional occupation, the Chamars and the Dusadhs have ventured into the area as full time painters. In households where women are the main artists, men do the work of marketing the products.

![Godana Painting](image)

\textit{Figure 3 : Godana Painting, Chano Devi, Jitwarpur, Personal Collection}

Before I move on to the history of evolution, a background of the social status of the two castes is essential to understand the changes brought about in their lives after these people established themselves as commercial painters. This is especially significant since even today, the Chamars and the Dusadhs are considered inferior in the caste hierarchy and discriminated in matters of social intercourse. Mithila was basically an agricultural economy. The feudalistic pattern of society and economy which originated in the pre-medieval Mithila continued till the present century.\textsuperscript{13} Only a small section of Maithil population was economically well off on account of either education or through landed property. The majority of them, especially the people belonging to the scheduled caste groups, were living in a miserable state. The chief sources of income were either following their traditional caste based occupations or working in the fields as part time labourers. With the region witnessing a series of droughts in the 50’s and 60’s, the meagre income derived from agriculture also came to an end. It resulted in large scale exodus of men and women belonging to the lower caste communities to the cities. Many

\textsuperscript{11} I have made this classification on the basis of the interviews conducted with the painters. The use of Gobar and Godana gives their styles an identity of their own distinct from the upper caste styles.

\textsuperscript{12} All these castes were under the jajmani system and had assigned roles to perform.

\textsuperscript{13} See Thakur 1988.
painters from the Dusadh caste of Jitwarpur revealed that they were earning their living by pulling rickshaws in Madhubani.14

The Chamars, also known as Rabidas, were by occupation makers of footwear, cultivators or labourers. Their traditional occupation was the disposal of dead animals and to prepare different objects out of the skin of dead animals. Their caste occupation also included dealing in other objects obtained from the body of dead animals such as horns, bones and flesh.15 However their main work was the processing of skin and making of footwear. Even today in some villages, they still have the right to the hides of the dead livestock. In the past, they were often suspected of poisoning the cattle.16 The Chamar community was very important in Maithil society since ancient times. During Shardiya Navaratra (autumnal Durga Puja Festival), the Chamars used to beat the ceremonial drums or give Dogar which is considered to have some Tantric significance.17 The services of their womenfolk known popularly as Dagarini were frequently requisitioned as midwives.

The Dusadhs were one of the useful castes in the area owing to their value as agricultural labourers. They reared cattle, pigs etc. and supported themselves mostly by labour and cultivation. They also monopolised the post of village chowkidars or watchmen in the district. One of the titles among the Dusadhs was Paswan which means a watchman or a guard.18 Their women supplemented the income of the family by working as labourers. The Dusadhs were enlisted among the criminal castes of the district. Poverty and social incompatibility seemed to be the immediate environmental factors responsible for leading to criminal acts.19

The scheduled castes, too had the practice of decorating their houses and kothis or food storage pits with the figures of animals like horses and elephants but these used to be very simple devoid of any ornamentation, a primary characteristic of Brahmana and Kayastha paintings. The purpose of doing these wall murals was simply decorative and served no religious or ritualistic purpose. Making mud wall frescoes was more popular with them.20 Even today, these mud wall frescoes can be seen on the walls of the huts. But the practice was not as widely prevalent as it was among the upper castes. Pupul Jayakar writes, "A few specimens of this school had been discovered earlier, elongated horses and elephants in black, stark paintings on mud walls, with no symbols or figurative drawing surrounding the main form."21

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14 Interviews with the artists Jitwarpur, 1999.
16 Roychoudary, P.C.1964, p.152.
17 Thakur, J. 1962.
18 Mishra 1975, p.15.
19 Ibid., p.10.
20 Interview with Chano devi, Jitwarpur, June 1999.
Seeing the success of the Mahapatra Brahmanas of Jitwarpur in the area of paintings, the Harijans attempted to imitate the themes and styles of the Brahmanas and Kayasthas. However, they were not successful in trying to adopt the themes and motifs of an age old tradition. The feeling of caste superiority among the Brahmanas and Kayasthas, according to Roudi Paswan, was an important factor. But the most important reason, as pointed out by the Harijan artists, which ultimately decided against them were their futile attempts at representing the scenes and deities of a culture which was completely unknown to them. The Mahapatra Brahmanas had an elaborate vocabulary of mythological themes. As against them, the Harijan women didn’t have any such tradition. These women being involved in the productive functions never had the time to develop elaborate rituals or paintings revolving around their folk deities.

The entry of Harijans in the area of painting was facilitated by Bhaskar Kulkarni who gave Jamuna Devi, the first Harijan woman to enter the area of commercialised painting, the idea to experiment with cow-dung. Receiving encouragement from Kulkarni, she initially started making mud frescoes. Kulkarni, on discovering her keen interest in making paper paintings, inspired her to experiment with cow dung since an imitation of the Brahmana artists could never bring her recognition. Jamuna recalled that she experimented with this new technique, the results of which were surprisingly very fresh and original. The use of Holi colours on cow-dung paper imparted an unusual brightness to her paintings (See Figure 4). Jamuna Devi suddenly shot into prominence when her mud-frescoes and paintings displayed in Japan during Expo-70 were widely appreciated. She was frequently commissioned for on-site mural paintings at exhibitions and locations in New Delhi, Patna and Varanasi. The appreciation that she received from the outside world brought recognition also in her village especially from the Mahaptara Brahmana women painters. During the first few years of her entry, she was the only distinguished Harijan artist making paintings.

22 Interview with Roudi Paswan, Jitwarpur, June 1999. Roudi is the husband of artist Chano and has played a significant role in the evolution of Godana paintings.

23 Rekha 2003, pp.73-76.

24 Bhaskar Kulkarni had great understanding of the folk art traditions of the area. Bhaskar is also credited with discovering Worli paintings made by the tribals in Maharashtra. These paintings find place along with Maithil paintings in the Mithila museum, Japan.

The coming of scholar activists to Madhubani promoted the evolution of distinct Harijan styles. Raymond Lee Owens, an American anthropologist and Erika Moser, a German folklorist, played a key role in this. The introduction of the natural colours, stories of local deities such as Rahu Govinda and Salhesa in the pictorial vocabulary of Harijan paintings, tattoo motifs and contemporary themes by the Dusadhys in the late 70's which gave a unique character to Harijan paintings owe a lot to their encouragement. The women artists were also inspired by the men of their community to produce the legends. Ramvilas Paswan of village Laheriaganj and Roudi Paswan of village Jitwarpur were instrumental in giving the Harijan women artists the idea of introducing the local legend of Govinda, Rahu and Salhesa in their paintings. Their occupation as the local priests of the Dusadhys made them well versed with the Salhesa and Rahu legends.

The pioneer artists credited with popularising of these community legends in Harijan paintings was Shanti Devi. Receiving inspiration from her mother-in-law Kushuma Devi, who was by that time an established artist in the field of mud wall frescoes. Shanti started working with her husband Seewan to evolve a distinctive style. They were inspired in their efforts by Raymond Lee Owens who urged them to make paintings mostly on the stories depicting legends connected with their communities. From 1978-82,

Raymond Lee Owens, did a 15 month cultural study of Jitwarpur conducting research on the ritual and folklore associated with Maithil Paintings. Erika Moser carried out an eight month cultural study along with a documentary film record on the floor and wall paintings.

Laheriaganj is a village situated in the proximity of Jitwarpur.

Like Jamuna, Kushuma Devi used to make mud frescoes. Later on she too was inspired by Kulkarni to make gobar paintings on paper. She was given a state award in 1984-85.
they were encouraged by Raymond in evolving their art. Deviating a little bit from Jamuna Devi's style, Shanti used cow-dung water to make outlines and the background was the white hand made paper (Figure 5). Her distinctiveness lay in making large panels and using natural colours in *Gobar* outlines. The recognition she received through state and national awards for her novel themes started inspiring the other Harijan painters. In 1982, her inclusion in a movie by him brought great recognition to her art among contemporary artists.29

The evolution of *Godana* paintings by Roudi Paswan's wife Chano Devi strengthened the roots of already emerging Harijan paintings. Erika Moser-Schmitt30 played a significant role in helping Chano Devi evolve this unique style of painting. The idea of experimenting with painting tattoos on paper was provided by her after she saw tattoos on Chano's body. The co-partner in evolving this style was Palti Devi - a *natin*31 who belonged to Chano Devi's native village and had performed tattoos on Chano's body. The two of them worked in the seclusion of a mango grove for two months and gradually evolved this new tattoo painting style.

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29 The film titled ‘Five Village Painters From Mithila’ was a documentary feature based on the lives, works, and inspirations of six Madhubani folk painters: Sita Devi, Baua Devi, Lalita Devi, Ganga Devi, Krishnanand Jha, and Shanti Devi. This was part of two films shot by Raymond in 1983 under the funding provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities (USA) and the South Asian Film University of Wincosin. The first of these was titled "Munni" based on the life of a ten year old girl growing up in a community of folk painters. Shanti Devi’s paintings can be viewed at EAF website in the EAF album.

30 Erika’s video was prepared between 1973-78.

31 Natins are professional tattooers in Mithila.
The basic motifs of the Godana paintings can be traced to the primitive tattoo designs used by the nat community whose women folk or natins were the professional tattooers in the Mithila region. An exhibition of Tattoo Paintings was organised by Erika in New Delhi, which proved to be a great success. The small size of the Godana motifs made it very popular with the Textile designers. Godana paintings started dominating the marketing field. The initial tattoo paintings were simple figures, done in black and white, exactly in the same fashion as they are made on people's bodies. Originally in the form of line drawings, they were divided into several horizontal margins. These simple tattoo designs got great acceptance in the market.

Tattoo paintings although being unique, did not have any meaning of its own. The attempt made by Chano under her husband's guidance to add meanings to the tattoo paintings by representing pictorially the life histories of Salhesa gave originality to the paintings apart from attempting by them to create space for themselves. (Figure 6)

Shanti and Chano also experimented with natural colours as a part of the effort to create more individualistic style. These colours henceforth became the main characteristics of Harijan Godana paintings. The popularity of natural colours inspired other Harijan painters to abandon the use of Holi colours in favour of natural colours. Preparation of cow-dung base and obtaining natural colours was a tough and bothersome task. But for Shanti and Chano this work did not seem to be difficult as the group to which they belonged had the habit of doing different kinds of jobs to support their family. The women too went and worked outside in the fields. Easy accessibility of leaves and flowers in the proximity of Jitwarpur and a habit of working hard inspired them to chose

Figure 5 : Motiram with tigers, Shanti Devi, Courtesy EAF Records

Figure 6 : Coloured Godana paintings by Chano Devi, Personal Collection
this medium as the paintings were offering them with a better and respectable source of livelihood. Almost all the Harijan painters started preparing vegetable colours from the flowers, fruits, barks and roots adopting the same methods that were used centuries ago. The gradual development of Harijan paintings from the *Gobar* style to the *Godana* style and the introduction of the stories of Salhesa in the pictorial vocabulary of these paintings finally established the Harijan artists in the field of folk art.

**Dusadhs and Projection of Salhesa In Harijan Madhubani Paintings**

The history of the evolution of *Gobar* and *Godana* shows that the Harijans experimented with different themes mostly inspired from traditional Maithil paintings, themes from nature, day to day life and their own popular songs and legends. However in the process, they finally decided to highlight Salhesa. The earliest themes used by the Harijans after their entry were based on the stories of Sita, Krishna and other Hindu legends under the category of "Harijan-Mithila Paintings". The painters using those themes were Jamuna Devi, Swaroop Lal Paswan, Ram Pari Devi and Uttam Lal Paswan. Themes inspired by Jamuna such as Chamar disposing a dead cow, a snake moving speedily rapidly through the paddy fields and village women were some of their

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32 See Rekha 2003, p. 71. These paintings can be viewed in the EAF album.
33 Harijan Mithila paintings happens to be the earliest effort by the painters.
34 Interviews with artists 2001. For a description of rahu see Jain, 1995 p. 216. Some of these paintings preserved in the Crafts Museum, New Delhi.
favourite pictorial representations in the early years. The ritual worship of Rahu, their principal God, was another of their favourite themes.\(^{35}\) (See Figure 7) A review of Shanti Devi’s work reveals that apart from Salhesa, Govinda, a God of the Halwais also remained her favourite subject.\(^{36}\)

My field interviews and records available through videos, catalogues and books suggest that the three prominent practitioners of the art gradually Jamuna, Shanti and Chano gradually chose to project Salhesa stories more in their paintings (See Figures 8, 9,10). Also the number of Dusadh painters outnumbered other scheduled castes especially the Chamars who had entered before the Dusadhs. Thus, in the process of evolution of Harijan paintings, Salhesa was chosen to represent all the scheduled castes. It was perhaps due to the increasing importance of Salhesa that scholars writing on Madhubani art began to categorise these paintings under three broad groups - the Brahmin, Kayastha and Dusadh paintings despite the fact that six dominant styles had existed from the time of commercialisation. This situation stands true even today when many writings talk about the existence of only three styles in Mithila.\(^{37}\)

\(^{35}\) The dusadhs worship Rahu occasionally as this worship involves a lot of money. This puja is observed place in the Hindu month of Magh (January-February) by those who have taken a vow in his honour. The bhagats or the masters of the ceremony are invited along with friends and relatives. For a detailed description of Rahu worship in Harijan paintings, see Jain pp.217-218.; Rekha 2003.

\(^{36}\) Govinda is a God of the Halwai caste. For these paintings by Shanti Devi, see the album of EAF at the EAF website.

Figure 8: A popular Salhesa painting made between 1999 and 2004, Courtesy Nirala, Madhubani

Figure 9: Salhesa by Jamuna Devi, Jitwarpur, Personal Collection
Figure 10: Salhesa in Shanti devi’s style by Uttam Paswan, Jitwarpur, Personal collection

The Dusadhs unlike other scheduled castes were not taken in the Jajmani system thereby denying them with a minimum level of subsistence.³⁸ Their earlier history of survival for existence gave them the strength to survive in their attempts in evolving a new style. The struggle and their consequent success, national recognition in the form of state awards³⁹ for Salhesa themes are apparently the main factors but the reasons for choosing Salhesa can perhaps be answered by looking at the history of Mithila. These developments point to a situation where Dusadhs and Salhesa already had a position of importance in the socio-historical context of Mithila. Before I move on to analyse the various reasons for the projection of Salhesa, a description of the socio-economic background of Dusadhs and the various versions of Salhesa story would provide a background for analysing the assertion through Salhesa.

As described earlier, the Dusadhs supported themselves mostly by labour and cultivation or watchmen. However, it was their importance as agricultural labourers that brought them in close interaction with the land owning groups who happened to be the upper castes and helped them retain their importance despite the practice of untouchability. Regional sources suggest cultural superiority of Dusadhs as a significant factor. According to Jha, the community produced great talented artists well versed in the traditional dance traditions. Mithila had a distinct Shastric dance tradition as well as the famous dance tradition known as the Kirtaniya Natya Parampara.⁴⁰ The dancers performing these types of dances belonged mostly to the dusadh community. Jha on the basis of oral records suggests that Dusadhs like Nevat Das and Darbari Das were given patronage by the Pandits of Mithila and trained in the art of singing and dancing on the padas of Vidyapati and Jayadeva.⁴¹ It was perhaps this expertise in the art of singing and dancing which provided them a not only respectable place in society but also explains why they could succeed as artists.

This brings me to the central argument of Salhesa, his legends and how his stories are being projected to gain their goals. In the most fundamental manifestation, Salhesa Maharaj or Rajaji is the supreme deity of the Dusadhs. Salhesa is believed to be of divine strength and is considered capable of granting good health and sufficient strength to his

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³⁸ Even Chamars and Doms had the support of the system.
³⁹ My interviews with Jamuna revealed that she was always desperate for a national award which she could receive in 1987 when she painted on Salhesa themes.
⁴⁰ Their participation in cultural activities might have motivated them to perform even Salhesa puja, in the form of a dance drama. The enactment of the story of Salhesa known as Salhesa naach was very popular in Mithila and witnessed by the upper castes too.
⁴¹ Jha 2002, p.29.
devotees. The landless agricultural labourers count upon their health alone, and hence the Dusadhs’ veneration to their deity is but natural.\(^{42}\)

The temples dedicated to Salhesa known as *gahbars* are generally located in the Dusadh *tolas* (small village settlements of individual castes) under a *peepal, pakadi* or banyan tree. There are four terracotta images of males and one of female in the temple.\(^{43}\) Salhesa is seated on an elephant known as Bhouranand which is his vehicle. The other three images are of Chuharmal, his military secretary, the other two images are of Motiram, his brother and Budhesar, his nephew supposed to be his body guards. The solitary female image with a flower basket is of Dauna -Malin who loved Salhesa Maharaj( See Figure 11 and 12). On the top of the terracotta images are hung *chanwas, jhap and mour* (coverings for the deity). It is usually these images of deities with their respective vehicles that are depicted in the Harijan paintings. The priest who performs the worship of Salhesa is known as *bhagat* and *ghora* with the special *puja* reserved for *bhagats*.\(^{44}\)

*Figure 11: Gahabar of Salhesa in Nepal, Courtesy Maun and Singh, 2000*

\(^{42}\) Mishra, p.2.
\(^{43}\) Ibid., p.20.
An important dimension of the Salhesa figure which further adds to the importance of his character and explains his current projection was the fact that he was accepted by all the classes of Maithil society including the upper castes. I shall now briefly deal with various versions of the Salhesa story prevalent in Mithila. These versions of Salhesa gatha have remained alive till the present times, in the form of singing and oral traditions in Mithila in a style known as laharak shaili. Since the areas in which Salhesa is worshipped is quite extensive covering almost all the areas of Mithila including areas of Nepal too, we have different versions of the story by different authors. The credit for bringing this folk epic in the form of a written tradition goes to Sir George Abraham Grierson.

After Grierson, it is said that Jayagovinda Mishra of Bisanpur in Darbhanga district had collected a version of Salhesa story. It is not known what happened to his collection. Another version of the story is kept in Bihar Rashtra Bhasha Parishad. In the sixties, Purnanand Das had collected a version from a Dusadh folk singer known as Phulchand Das while preparing his research dissertation on the subject of Maithil lokkavya. The third compilation of Salhesa gatha was done by Moti Lal Yadav in his research

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46 Oral tradition on Salhesa has been given place in literature too. See Maun, 2002.
47 Grierson 1881. The version preserved in An Introduction to the Maithili language of North Bihar was published in 1881 in the form of a journal of Bengal Asiatic Society. Later on in the famous book Maithili Chrestomathy, the entire story of Salhesa was included along with other valuable literary source material. Grierson had obtained the story from a Dom. The book has the English translation of the Gatha and a brief introduction of the Dusadh caste and of Salhesa story.
48 Das 1962.
There has been no attempt on part of the painters to record the story of Salhesa. There has been just one exception to this in form of an account by Uttam Paswan recorded by Jyotindra Jain.

The main story of Salhesa runs like this. Salhesa Dusadh of Mahisautha Gadh in Nepal serves the ruler of Pakadiagadh as the chief of seven hundred watchmen. Dauna Malin of Morang loves him. One day, Mokama’s Chuharmal steals the ornaments of the queen by entering into the palace. The chief watchman, Salhesa is put into prison. Dauna is able to release Salhesa on a promise to bring back the thief within eight days. Salhesa and Dauna Malin impersonate themselves as nat and natin and go to Mokama. With the help of force and witchcraft, they are able to entrap Chuharmal and present him before the king. Happy with them, the king rewards them besides giving them the right to become guard of his palace through out his life. Salhesa and Dauna Malin live happily thereafter. Grierson’s version is similar to this version.

Jyotindra Jain has presented a slightly different version of the story based on the oral account of painter Uttam Paswan. Raja Salhesa had incarnated in the village of Phulbari, in Biratnagar district of eastern Nepal. Salhesa lived with his two brothers Budhesar and Moti Ram, and sister Bansapti. Infatuated by him were three flower girls, Reshma, Kushma and Dauna. Raja Salhesa under a vow of celibacy refuses to marry them. Not far from Phulbari was the fortified town of Pakadiagadh, ruled by its king, Raja Kulheshvar. His daughter Chandravati getting enamoured by Salhesa's handsome looks, got Salhesa employed as a night-guard in place of Chuharmal. Feeling humiliated by this insult, Chuharmal kidnapped Princess Chandravati with her golden bed and golden spinning wheel and brought her to Mukamagadh, his kingdom on the bank of Ganga, where he kept her prisoner. Salhesa was held responsible and put into prison.

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49 Yadav 1981. This version is different from Grierson’s version. There are many interpolations which give the character a godly and heavenly character. This story is more elaborate than the other two gathas.
50 Jain1995.
51 Rekha 2003.
52 Jain 1995.
Salhesa’s sister Bansapti (forest born) who possessed extraordinary magical powers took the guise of a *natni* or a juggler woman, finally succeeded in releasing Chandravati and in
return got her brother freed from prison (See Figure 13). She again rescued him from three sisters Reshma, Kushma and Dauna who had kidnapped him and took them to their native kingdom Morang Raj- a kingdom of mohini vidya or the powers of magic, in Nepal (See Figure 14). The characters discussed in this version are usually depicted in Harijan Paintings.

Projection of Salhesa and Identity Assertion through his Iconography

The projection of Salhesa as their God and his iconographic representation in Madhubani paintings needs to be analysed deeply in terms of attempts at distinctive identity by the Harijan artists of Madhubani. Analysing in the context of art as means of assertion, the most obvious reason for choosing Salhesa has been to make the paintings commercially attractive for the market. Madhubani Paintings, caught the imagination of people in India and abroad for its novelty and vibrant themes. By using Salhesa themes in Gobar and Godana styles, the Harijans were able to impart a unique and distinctive character to their paintings which could be easily distinguished from upper castes Kachni and Bharni styles.

Another reason for this recent projection, which has often been revealed in the accounts given by artists, suggests that Salhesa stories have been used as a parallel to the Ramayana legend of Mithila used by the upper caste painters of Jitwarpur. The various versions of Salhesa stories and the extent of its popularity in Mithila provided an alternative to the Harijan painters which could be compared with the frequent use of the Ram- Sita legends by the upper caste painters. Sita is considered to be the daughter of Mithila and there are various places in Mithila where fairs and pilgrimages are held. The Brahmana artists of Jitwarpur have always referred to Sita as their favourite theme and referred to places in Mithila to explain her importance. While other folk Gods such as Rahu and Govinda had a small caste base and local influence, Salhesa had a wide caste base spread over a larger geographical area. The legend of Salhesa too has a wide geographical extent and fairs and festivals are held every year. The potentiality of the Salhesa story to provide an interesting parallel to the Ramayana legend thus appears to be the plausible reason for the choice of Salhesa. (See Figure 15)

53 Phulher, Ahalyasthan Janakpur are some places in Mithila mentioned in Ramayana legend.
54 In my interviews with K.K. Jha, a Mahaptra Brahmana painter in 2001, 2002 and 2005, he has constantly pointed to its importance.
55 Rahu is worshipped only by Dusadhs and Govinda by the Halwais. See Maun, 2000.
56 For details on geographical location, see Yadav 2046 (Nepali)
Analysed from the point of view of making paintings attractive for the market, clearly the projection of Salhesa serves the dual purpose of associating mythologies to Harijan Madhubani paintings as well as in conveying an impression that they have not appropriated in any way the styles and themes frequently used by Mahapatra Brahmanas. Considering the fact that Salhesa’s elevation to a God is a recent phenomenon, temples or gahbars dedicated to him in the villages of Mithila, sometimes portray him seated both on an elephant and sometimes on a horse. Maun, a local scholar who has extensively researched on folk deities of Mithila points out that his portrayal on an elephant is an attempt to compare him with God Indra and impart divine attributes to Salhesa. He suggested that in his field surveys, he himself had found Salhesa seated on a horse in many gahbars of Mithila. However, in Harijan paintings, he is always portrayed sitting on an elephant thereby signifying that the artists want to impart a divine attribute to this hero. His attendants are depicted sitting on a horse. The legends of Salhesa as described by the painters impart him Godly attributes, suggestive of their attempts to give a mythological appearance to Harijan paintings.

Apart from the use of Salhesa in imparting a mythological character, the image of Salhesa also serves the purpose of projecting an independent identity to Harijan Madhubani paintings. The Harijans, as explained earlier did not have any elaborate and ornamental tradition of painting. The earlier records preserved in oral accounts and

57 Buchanan, 1882. He refers to two heroes Sales and Sahal.
58 Interview with Maun, Feb 2006.
59 See Archer 1947 and Maun
films suggest that in the effort to paint the Dusadh artists especially Shanti had to experiment a lot. Her earlier attempts to evolve Salhesa depict that Salhesa was having the iconographic attributes of Shiva. Later on Shanti followed by other artists settled for the iconography of Salhesa which resembled very closely to Indra. There seem to be two reasons for this choice. First Indra was not popularly represented in upper caste Brahmana and Kayastha paintings. However, the more obvious reason which can be suggested is the fact that when Salhesa achieved his elevation to the status of a God, he was given the attributes of Indra. His legends depicting Salhesa drinking bear similarity with Indra who is a drinker of Soma. Also through Salhesa they want to prove the fact that they always had a developed painting tradition like the upper castes and conceal the reality that in developing their own styles, they had to learn a lot from the developed stylistic iconographic and ornamental representations of upper caste deities.

The projection of Salhesa stories, I suggest, also has some association with the role of women in Salhesa stories. Gender discourse in Madhubani art could be used in the case Harijan Madhubani paintings with Salhesa stories. The projection of Madhubani paintings to the outside world as an exclusively feminine folk art form caught the imagination of people in India and abroad in the initial years of commercialisation and contributed to its immense popularity. My continuous interaction with the Harijan artists, their related accounts and different versions of the story, have revealed that the predominant role played by women in the oral legends of Salhesa, has been a deciding factor in choosing Salhesa over Rahu and Govinda. The Dusadhs were very conscious of the surrounding developments following commercialisation and could grasp the fact that many artists such as Baua devi gained recognition due to the novelty of Bisahara (Snake Goddess) themes. In Salhesa’s story, women have a predominant role to play. Though the legend revolves around Salhesa, the main exploits are performed by Dauna or Bansapti.

Apart from acceptibility, Salhesa stories appear to be used for constructing theories of respectable origins. In my continuous interactions with local scholars who have researched on Salhesa, the current politicisation of Dalit heroes in Bihar has been cited as a significant reason for the projection of Salhesa. The myth of Chuharmal, who has a negative character in the Salhesa story, is linked to a struggle between the Bhumihars and the Dusadhs. In recent times, he has been politicised in Bihar and leaders are trying to use him as a symbol of assertion. Badrinarayan Tiwari in his studies has shown that from as early as 1935, Chuharmal melas have been organised in Bihar. From 1976 onwards there has been increased participation of the Dusadhs which reached from eight to nine thousand to three lakh attendants in 1998. Even local politicians have struggled to inaugurate the Chuharmal festival in Mokama. In Madhubani such a politicisation of Salhesa mela has not been brought to light. However, these developments in Bihar might have inspired the Harijans in Madhubani to use Salhesa story as a better choice for projection of their identity.

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60 Video 1982
61 Interview with Maun, Feb.2006.
Nirala, a local historian who has worked very closely with Madhubani artists, suggests that local politicians have been increasingly using Salhesa for their political campaigns and speeches. Roudi Paswan, according to him too has been politically active in village politics having contested village elections. Other distinguished artists have also been politically conscious, which is amply illustrated by the frequent use of election scenes by Shanti Devi in her paintings from as early as 1982. All these facts strengthen the argument that the choice of Salhesa is being inspired by current politics as a symbol of assertion in Madhubani too.

Linking it with the politicisation discussed earlier, it is significant to note that the use of Salhesa legends has taken a new dimension in Madhubani as a space for rewriting their caste histories in a novel way. The Dusadhs have traditionally been guards but in the British accounts, they have been described as highway robbers. By projecting Salhesa as the chief of seven hundred watchmen who catches a thief Chuharmal, they are trying to project an image of Dusadh castes as not of criminals but as protectors thereby suggesting an attempt to claim an honourable place in a caste dominated society.

By further using these themes and stories, they have tried to project their caste histories, the role they had in the history of Mithila and their upper caste origins. By bringing Tattooing as an inseparable thread of the story, they are not only claiming Tattoo style as their own and thus seek an independent identity but also relating their own origins to an honourable past. Although tattooing was a very important sanskara in the lives of the females of the lower classes, the history and the oral tradition among the Dusadhs place special importance to tattoos. The Dusadhs believe that they are the descendents of Gehlot Rajputs—which according to them explains the fair complexion of the Dusadh girls as compared to those of the other Harijan communities. Linking Tattoos with some other theories which endow Dusadhs with aristocratic origins, Dusadhs have attached great importance to tattoo in their lives.

Being conscious of their vulnerable position when they are still struggling to gain recognition in a caste obsessed hierarchical society, they sometimes use textual evidences and local pamphlets to strengthen their arguments. I encountered this fact while interviewing an artist in village Ranti, when her family members gave articles published

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63 Interview with Nirala, 2004. He points out the use of Salhesa by two local MPs in Madhubani.
64 Szanton 2004.
65 Rekha 2003. p.38. Oral accounts state that during the Mughal period, the dusadhs were tortured and their young women were raped and kidnapped by the Muslims. To protect the chastity of their women they adopted some protective measures which included the practice of marrying their daughters at early age even before the age of five and rearing pigs and eating pork. The practice of tattooing on most exposed parts of the body was started as another protective measure to make their beautiful girls ugly in appearance.
in local newspapers which connected the origins of Dusadhs with kshatriyas claiming their descent from solar and lunar dynasties.\(^{66}\)

The recent projection of Salhesa while serving the immediate concerns of providing Harijans as social recognition as artists and a parallel tradition similar to that of the upper castes has a symbolic significance for the Dusadhs. Salhesa as an icon has become symbolic of a protest of the lower classes against caste subjugation. Changing versions of the Salhesa story combined with the evidence of worship of Rahu reveal that Salhesa was a historical figure who lived at a point of time and was later on raised to the level of divinity.\(^{67}\) The emergence of a popular parallel folk tradition similar to the Salhesa story is generally representative of the movement of the lower or the suppressed classes against the ruling elite. Since the revolt is suppressed by the dominant class, it does not find mention in the elite or written tradition. The suppressed group thereafter creates a story whose thematic content caters to the aspirations of the group. Generally, the leader who leads the revolt is deified as a divine personality. The different versions of the Salhesa story are suggestive of a similar situation.

The authenticity of actual places linked with the legend of Salhesa has been cited as a reason to prove the historicity of Salhesa by local scholars. Local scholars who have extensively worked on Salhesa point out to different periods of his origins basing their evidences on different versions. However, there is no dispute about his historicity. The geographical location of the places mentioned in Salhesa gatha can still be traced and fairs and gatherings are held every year to commemorate his exploits and assert their status to the caste society. Though the historicity of Salhesa is not tested but the cultural assumptions, the location of places all point out to the fact that he was a historical figure. The Dusadh castes having a rich cultural tradition have kept his legend alive in their oral traditions. These events call for a need to investigate the oral histories of Salhesa in the historical context of Mithila. The connections between Chuharmal of Mokama and Salhesa of Pakadiagadh need to be established.

**Current Status in Jitwarpur**

Now, a review of the current situation would complete my discussion on Harijan assertion through art. The most important measure of success of Harijan artists has been the disappearance of white coloured paper paintings from Jitwarpur. The village which was known earlier for paintings made on white paper by holi colours has adopted Jamuna Devi’s Gobar painting style to colour the base. Also there has been increase in the trend of using natural colours. The Mahapatra Brahmana painters have been forced to revert back to the earlier tradition of preparing natural colours. In many of the homes I could find Brahmana painters experimenting on Salhesa themes (See figure 16). Bhagvati Devi

\(^{66}\) Interview with artists in Ranti village, Jan 2001.

\(^{67}\) Maun.p.56. Regional sources refer to two heroes Sales and Sahal being worshipped in Purnea in the 19th century. The sources reveal that at that time Rahu was principally worshipped by the Dusadhs.

\(^{68}\) Maun and Neeraj, 2002.
makes a different style of Gobar painting where she colours the figures with cowdung. They are also making paintings on Rahu themes.

Variations in other steps have also been taken by them to strengthen their foothold in the area. They have established their own co-operative society known as the Salhesa Harijan Hastkala Udyog Samiti which is attached to well-known societies like Oxfam, Dastkar and Spandana. These societies give them direct orders which have reduced the chances of the painters getting exploited by the middlemen. They are independently invited to exhibitions by these societies. In my visits to Dastkar exhibitions in Kolkata, I have found them sharing exhibition spaces with upper caste artists.

The appointments of Harijan women artists as instructors and office bearers of different organisations has paved the way for the assertion of their identity. Jamuna Devi held different posts, such as the post of President of Sewa Mithila, a non-voluntary organisation. As Secretary of Mahila Vikas Samity, Laheriaganj, she imparted training to about sixty artisans. Jamuna travelled with them to Japan. Shanti Devi too got attached

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69 Bhagvati Devi is a Mahapatra Brahmana artist from Jitwarpur known for her Geru Painting style.
70 My continuous interactions with them between 1999-2004, I have found them actively participating in the exhibitions organized by these societies.
71 Visit to Dastkar exhibitions, Kolkata, 2002 and 2003.
72 Interview with Jamuna Devi, Jitwarpur, June 1999.
to the Mahila Vikas Samity, Laheriaganj and regularly imparted training to students. For Chano Devi, her appointment as an instructor of Godana painting contributed greatly in boosting her confidence. She would impart training to ten students in a year from different castes including even the Brahmanas and Kayasthas.

Conclusion

Dalit assertion in the state of Bihar, like other parts of India, is traced to the current caste politics where politicians have looked for symbolic means to arouse the erstwhile untouchable castes to be conscious of their past history. The mechanism of assertion of identity stands unique in the case of Mithila paintings as art has been used as a means to gain social recognition. In their attempts to establish themselves as artists, the Harijans looked for various themes and stylistic techniques to evolve a unique iconography of their own. Their failure initially made them realise the futility of imitating upper castes themes. It was perhaps the symbolic importance of Salhesa coupled by the acceptance and popularity among folk art lovers, which finally led them project Salhesa as their central character who became symbolic of protest, self respect and identity. It is now the need of oral historians to record the various versions of the Salhesa story popular in Mithila and look for connections which could bring forth voices of past history. It is for the future researchers to judge the extent of success the Harijan artists of Mithila have attained in the process. Nevertheless, there is no doubt about the fact that Salhesa has succeeded in establishing a place of his own in the pictorial vocabulary of Mithila painters.

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**Videos**

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Five Painters (video 55 minutes, color, sound) on the lives of five Mithila painters (Ganga Devi, Sita Devi, Krishnanad Jha, Shanti Devi and Baua Devi) (1982). Co-directed by Raymond Owens, Ron Hess, and Cheryl Groff. Available from South Asia Film Program, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 53706. tel: (608) 255-0533

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