

Manjusha Tribal Painting: A Cultural and Artistic Legacy of Bihar, India

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Abstract: A distinctive fusion of mythology, ritual, and visual expression can be found in Bhagalpur, Bihar, India's Manjusha tribal painting, a colorful but comparatively unknown folk art style. This art style, which has its roots in the religious celebrations of the Bishahari Puja, tells the story of Bihula and Chand Saudagar by fusing regional myths of snake worship, divine vengeance, and feminine devotion. Manjusha painting has remained a localized technique, frequently eclipsed by its more marketed rivals, in contrast to other well-known Indian folk art traditions like Madhubani. Nonetheless, it is positioned as an essential part of India's indigenous cultural legacy due to its symbolic language, ritualistic significance, and community-centered creation process. This study explores the Manjusha painting's stylistic traits, religious purposes, historical development, and revival initiatives. In addition to analyzing the socioeconomic and gender factors at play in the practice and transmission of art, it delves into the conventional iconography, narrative structures, and materials employed by artists. The study demonstrates how local practitioners—particularly women—are not only conserving the art in its traditional form but also modifying it for contemporary markets through creative designs and digital platforms through a number of case studies and artist interviews. By doing this, the article emphasizes Manjusha painting's cultural adaptability and endurance, highlighting its dual function as a means of spiritual sacrifice and economic empowerment. In addition to calling for greater institutional support, scholarly acknowledgment, and ethical promotion, it makes the case for Manjusha's inclusion in the larger story of Indian tribal art. This study adds to current conversations on folk art preservation, cultural identity, and the politics of legacy in postcolonial India by presenting Manjusha as a dynamic living tradition.

Keywords: Manjusha painting, Bihar tribal art, Bishahari Puja, folk art, Indian indigenous culture

1. Introduction

Tribal and folk traditions, which are sometimes overlooked in the mainstream discourse on art, are the foundation of India's rich cultural legacy. One such example of the nexus of myth, ritual, and collective expression is the Manjusha painting of Bhagalpur, Bihar, a culturally rich but little-known art style. With a backdrop of snake worship, feminine devotion, and heavenly struggle, Manjusha painting, which emerged from the ancient ritual practices surrounding the Bishahari Puja, tells the compelling local legend of Bihula and Chand Saudagar. Its distinctive fusion of narrative and visual symbolism reflects a worldview that views art as an expression of spiritual engagement and ancestry rather than just as decoration.

Originating from the Sanskrit word for "box" or "container," the term "Manjusha" originally referred to boxes made of jute and bamboo that were decorated during the Bishahari festival. These boxes were decorated with colorful scenes from the tale of Bihula, a woman whose unshakable faith and courage brought her dead husband back to life, and contained religious idols and precious objects. What is now known as Manjusha art originated from these ritual illustrations, which over time developed into a unique painting style characterized by strong lines, symbolic characters, linear storytelling, and a five-color scheme.

Manjusha is still mostly unknown and underrepresented in national and international art histories, in contrast to the well-regarded Madhubani paintings, which are also from Bihar. This lack of acknowledgment results from regional practice, a lack of record, and the marginalization of tribal voices in mainstream cultural forums rather than from a lack of

aesthetic or narrative worth. However, a revival movement has been sparked in recent decades by the work of local craftspeople, non-governmental organizations, and government cultural entities, which have moved Manjusha from the periphery to areas of prominence, innovation, and economic significance.

The goal of this essay is to critically analyze the history, evolution, visual language, and current relevance of Manjusha painting as a tribal art form deserving of immediate scholarly study and cultural assistance. The study intends to portray Manjusha as a dynamic statement of identity, resistance, and cultural resilience rather than just as folk decoration by examining the mythical framework, creative techniques, socio-religious functions, and revivalist case studies. In order to ensure the art's relevance and continuity in a globalized society, it also emphasizes how contemporary artists—especially women and young people—are reinterpreting this legacy to address current issues.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on indigenous aesthetics, intangible heritage, and the politics of art preservation, while advocating for inclusive recognition of India's diverse tribal voices through artistic expression.

2. Historical Background

The mythology, religious rites, and sociocultural activities of Bhagalpur, a city on the banks of the Ganga in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, are closely linked to the origins of Manjusha tribal art. Sanskrit for "box" or "container," the word "Manjusha" originally refers to the bamboo and jute

boxes used in the Bishahari Puja, a local religious celebration honoring the serpent goddess Bishahari, also called Mansa Devi. These boxes, which were painstakingly decorated with painted representations of celestial characters and mythological events, served as both practical ritual instruments and hallowed messengers of spiritual stories.

Manjusha art is thought to have originated in medieval India, if not earlier. It developed through ceremonial storytelling and oral traditions. The epic story of Bihula and Chand Saudagar, which illustrates the fusion of Hindu mythology and tribal mysticism, served as the inspiration for the art form's visual and thematic framework. The central theme of early Manjusha art was this tale, which was passed down through the centuries by religious performers and balladeers. As part of a performative and ritualistic custom, paintings were produced to graphically convey stories throughout the festival, allowing illiterate tribes to interact with intricate cosmologies through iconography.

In the past, some artisan groups, like the Kayasthas (scribes), Malakars (garland makers), and Kumbhkars (potters), painted Manjusha. The Malakars and Kumbhkars transformed the stories into painted images on boxes, walls, and makeshift shrines, while the Kayasthas recorded the story in manuscripts. During the British colonial era, when such indigenous traditions were undervalued or ignored in favor of Western aesthetic standards, the art form experienced a dramatic fall after flourishing as a ceremonial art during the pre-colonial era. Manjusha was marginalized until recent revivalist attempts by artists, academics, and cultural organizations since post-independence India failed to appropriately recognize it in national art policy.

3. Cultural and Religious Significance

Manjusha paintings have great religious and cultural significance, especially in relation to Bishahari Puja, a celebration celebrated throughout the month of Bhadra (August–September). The main character of the myth is Bihula, a loyal woman who defies fate and travels across a dangerous river to bring her husband Lakhandar back to life after he was bitten by a snake on their wedding night as a result of a curse from the snake goddess Bishahari. Her journey, replete with hardships and heavenly experiences, represents the strength of female faith, defiance, and divine compromise.

The intricate tale of Bihula's dedication and ultimate victory over fate is chronicled in the Manjusha paintings, which serve as visual scripture. The story is told through a series of straight-line drawings on a surface, frequently starting with pictures of her merchant father-in-law, Chand Saudagar, gods and goddesses, and snake deities like Kala Naag and Dhotila Bhavani. Every artwork leads the observer on a spiritual journey from suffering to salvation, acting as both a devotional offering and a didactic medium.

The symbolism within Manjusha art is deeply ritualistic: Snakes, often shown intertwined or encircling figures, are both revered and feared as agents of divine justice.

Floral and vine motifs signify fertility, rebirth, and the cycle of nature.

The use of a five-colour palette (green, pink, yellow, black, and red) is considered auspicious and represents different aspects of divine power.

Human figures are drawn in profile, with exaggerated almond-shaped eyes, and are often depicted in a narrative sequence, almost like a graphic scroll or storyboard.

Hence, Manjusha goes beyond aesthetic limitations to become a multifaceted cultural manifestation that serves as a ritual, a narrative, a prayer, and a gathering for the community. In addition to offering women-centered storytelling a significant voice—something that is uncommon in many traditional Indian art forms—it embodies the ideals of loyalty, resiliency, familial obligation, and divine order.

Additionally, painting was a communal ritual activity in and of itself, frequently carried out by women and children during the festival. In addition to strengthening social cohesiveness and spiritual continuity, this intergenerational involvement assisted in the preservation and transmission of oral history. As part of their religious practice, many families in Bhagalpur still view it as their sacred duty to draw the Manjusha narrative, even if they simply do so on paper or fabric rather than the customary boxes.

4. Materials and Techniques

The materials and techniques used in Manjusha tribal painting are not merely functional—they are deeply symbolic, eco-friendly, and reflective of the community's intimate relationship with nature. Traditionally, this art was never created for commercial purposes but as a ritual offering during the Bishahari Puja, which greatly influenced both the selection of materials and the methods of execution. Over time, while the materials have evolved to meet modern demands, many artists still strive to retain the original essence of the medium.

4.1 Traditional Materials

Historically, Manjusha paintings were created using locally available, organic materials. These were often produced by the artists themselves or collected from the natural surroundings.

Base Material:

The primary surfaces included Manjusha boxes (made of bamboo, jute, and paper), clay walls, or handmade paper. Boxes were constructed by Malakar artisans, skilled in bamboo weaving and jute molding.

During festivals, temporary temples and shrines were also painted on mud walls or cloth scrolls for public display.

Pigments and Dyes:

Natural, plant-based colours were used for painting, typically derived from:

- Red: from kusum flowers or red sandalwood.
- Yellow: from haldi (turmeric).

- Green: from neem or henna leaves.
- Black: from soot or charcoal.
- Pink: achieved by mixing lime with hibiscus or flower extracts.

These five colours became the defining palette of Manjusha art, each symbolically aligned with aspects of nature, ritual, and emotional tone.

Brushes and Tools:

Brushes were handmade from bamboo sticks, soft twigs, or even goat hair tied with thread.

For finer details, broken combs or natural fibers were sometimes used as stamping tools.

4.2 Techniques and Methodology

Manjusha paintings follow a unique narrative technique, much like a sequential storyboard or scroll painting. The focus lies not in realism but in symbolism, ritual layout, and expressive line work.

Narrative Layout:

Stories are drawn in linear fashion from left to right, often starting with divine figures, moving through scenes of conflict or devotion, and ending in resolution or divine blessing.

Borders, especially the leheriya (wave patterns) and serpent motifs, are compulsory in all compositions and often dictate the rhythm of the artwork.

Iconographic Conventions:

Figures are drawn in profile view, with elongated almond-shaped eyes, stylized limbs, and minimal facial expression. There is no perspective or depth; all elements are arranged in flat, patterned planes.

Snakes, gods, and humans are drawn with exaggerated linear curves, emphasizing movement and story progression.

Colour Application:

Colours are filled in blocks, bordered by black outlines.

Paints are applied using flat - layering techniques, ensuring vibrant contrast and ritual clarity.

No shading or realism is used; instead, flatness represents sacred clarity, avoiding distractions from the spiritual message.

4.3 Contemporary Adaptations

With the evolving needs of modern audiences, Manjusha artists have embraced new media and formats, while retaining the traditional visual grammar.

Surfaces and Products:

Artists now paint on canvas, fabric, ceramic, handmade paper, tote bags, diaries, and home décor.

Manjusha - inspired designs are being used in murals, fashion textiles, and digital prints.

NGOs and government bodies have introduced paper - mâché and terracotta items featuring Manjusha motifs for tourism markets.

Colours and Tools:

Acrylics, fabric paints, watercolours, and permanent inks have replaced natural pigments in many cases for durability and commercial viability.

Brushes include synthetic fine - tips and rollers to cater to mass production.

Some artists use digital drawing pads and design software to create vector - based Manjusha art for online platforms.

Technique Adjustments:

While the ritualistic narrative order is sometimes compressed or reinterpreted for aesthetics, many artists ensure that key characters and iconographic borders remain present.

Workshops and art schools are teaching Manjusha with structured lesson plans, blending traditional styles with modern pedagogy.

The materials and techniques of Manjusha painting illustrate a deep - rooted ecological sensitivity, ritual purpose, and community skill - sharing. Despite modern transitions, the essence of Manjusha lies in its handcrafted nature, linear storytelling, and symbolic purity. Whether rendered with natural dyes on jute boxes or printed digitally on wearable art, Manjusha painting continues to honor its ancestral techniques while embracing the future.

5. Visual Style and Symbolism

In addition to its mythological themes or ritualistic roots, Manjusha tribal painting is unique due to its highly regimented and symbolically rich visual grammar. Manjusha paintings, which emphasize narrative clarity, rhythmic repetition, dramatic color use, and religious symbolism, are artistically in line with two - dimensional folk art principles as opposed to naturalistic or perspectival traditions. In Manjusha art, each line, figure, and theme is a part of a broader holy lexicon that aims to communicate a spiritual worldview based on cosmic justice, sacrifice, and protection in addition to a story.

5.1 Narrative Structure and Layout

A defining characteristic of Manjusha painting is its linear narrative structure. The visual storytelling unfolds from left to right, similar to a scroll, creating a sequence of scenes that illustrate episodes from the legend of Bihula and the snake goddess Bishahari.

The layout is not hierarchical, but chronological, guiding the viewer's eye through a thematic journey—beginning with celestial beings, passing through mortal trials, and culminating in divine redemption.

Panels are often separated by decorative borders or serpentine forms, which serve to contain and link different events within a cohesive spiritual framework.

This linearity mirrors the ritual flow of the Bishahari Puja, where devotees recount the myth aloud while pointing to corresponding images, transforming the painting into a didactic and devotional object.

5.2 Figure Representation and Style

Manjusha figures are stylistically abstract and symbolic rather than realistic. Each figure is created according to strict conventions that prioritize identity and meaning over anatomical accuracy.

Human Figures:

Always drawn in profile, with one eye exaggerated in almond shape.

Limbs are elongated and stylized, often in gestural positions indicating movement or prayer.

Facial features are minimal, emphasizing expression through posture and context.

Deities and Serpents:

Snake deities like Bishahari, Dhotila Bhavani, and Kala Naag are often depicted in elaborate poses with multiple serpents encircling their bodies.

Bishahari is sometimes shown seated on a lotus, surrounded by protective snakes, symbolizing her dominion over life, death, and healing.

Bihula, the central heroine, is always shown in motion—on a raft, praying, or navigating obstacles, representing resilience and spiritual strength.

5.3 Iconographic Borders and Decorative Patterns

Borders in Manjusha art are more than aesthetic devices; they are sacred frameworks that structure the painting's metaphysical space. Each border has ritual significance:

Leheriya Border (Wave Pattern): Symbolizes the river journey of Bihula and the constant flow of life; often seen on all four sides of a painting.

Sarpath Border (Snake Pattern): Represents the presence and power of the serpent gods; seen around divine or protective scenes.

Floral Vines and Geometric Motifs: Indicate fertility, rebirth, and harmony with nature.

The strict inclusion of these borders is believed to protect the sanctity of the painting and prevent evil influences from entering the narrative space.

5.4 Colour Palette and Symbolism

Manjusha art is traditionally rendered in a limited but potent color palette, consisting of five sacred colors, each symbolizing a metaphysical principle:

- Green – Nature, fertility, healing, and the regenerative power of the earth.
- Pink – Emotional strength, femininity, and devotion.
- Yellow – Divinity, enlightenment, and prosperity.
- Red – Power, passion, sacrifice, and divine intervention.
- Black – Mystery, death, and protection against evil forces.

These colours are applied in flat, unshaded areas, outlined boldly in black or red to enhance contrast and clarity. The absence of depth or perspective ensures that every element

remains equally significant, reflecting the egalitarian spirit of tribal cosmology.

5.5 Symbolic Motifs and Objects

Beyond borders and figures, Manjusha paintings are rich in embedded symbols that hold multiple layers of meaning:

- Snakes: Central motif, symbolizing both destruction and protection; their presence is interpreted as a divine reminder of mortality and the need for reverence.
- Raft (Bihula's Journey): Represents the spiritual quest, woman's resilience, and the liminal space between life and death.
- Fish, lotus, trees, temples: Emblems of purity, growth, divine presence, and the interconnectedness of life.
- Sun and moon: Often shown in corners to mark cosmic order and time cycles, connecting the human journey with the larger universe.

Manjusha paintings serve as an aesthetic scripture, a densely woven fabric of myth, belief, and spiritual teaching, thanks to its visual style and symbolism. The ostensibly straightforward patterns and figures contain centuries' worth of ritual significance, indigenous knowledge, and cultural memory. Following its symbolic grammar allows Manjusha painting to maintain a visual language that is both private and public, sacred and approachable, firmly rooted in Bihar culture while presenting universal themes of faith, perseverance, and metamorphosis.

6. Revival and Contemporary Practice

From its ceremonial beginnings to its recent renaissance, the history of Manjusha tribal painting tells a larger story of cultural resiliency, community revitalization, and adaptable innovation. Overshadowed by more commercially successful folk traditions like Madhubani, Manjusha art remained generally sidelined for the majority of the 20th century despite its theological depth and historical richness. But over the past 20 years, local artists, scholars, government agencies, and nonprofit groups have made a concerted and diverse effort to reintroduce Manjusha into the cultural spotlight, reframing its position in the creative economy and heritage discourse.

6.1 Decline and Threat of Cultural Erosion

In the post - independence period, with the increasing urbanization, decline of local rituals, and changing socio - economic structures in Bihar, traditional art practices like Manjusha experienced a sharp decline. The reasons were numerous:

Decreased religious observance of the Bishahari Puja in its original ritual form.

Lack of institutional documentation and academic recognition of Manjusha in national art narratives.

Economic hardship faced by artisan communities who could not sustain themselves through seasonal and region - specific art.

Migration of younger generations away from traditional crafts toward urban employment and education.

This period of obscurity almost rendered Manjusha painting an endangered art form, known only to a few families in Bhagalpur who practiced it out of devotion rather than livelihood.

6.2 Revival Initiatives and Cultural Reclamation

The tide began to change in the early 2000s when individual artists, cultural scholars, and regional art institutions initiated efforts to document, archive, and promote Manjusha painting. These efforts focused on three key areas: education, exhibition, and economic empowerment.

Documentation and Research:

- Scholars from Bihar and outside began compiling oral histories, photographing murals, and transcribing legends to create a cultural archive.
- Institutions such as Bihar Kala Parishad and National Folklore Support Centre undertook documentation projects.

Workshops and Community Training:

- Artist - led workshops were conducted in schools, women's self - help groups, and village panchayats, particularly targeting youth and women.
- NGOs such as Jeevika, Dastkar, and Kalakriti collaborated with local artisans to professionalize and diversify the craft.

Government Support:

- The Government of Bihar recognized Manjusha as an official state craft, which led to inclusion in state exhibitions, cultural fairs, and craft melas.
- Subsidies and grants were given to artisan clusters for material support and market access.

6.3 Role of Artists in Contemporary Adaptation

The revival owes much to pioneering local artists who served as both custodians and innovators. Artists like Yogendra Kumar, Gauri Mishra, and Sunita Devi not only kept traditional forms alive but also reinterpreted Manjusha for modern mediums, from home décor and fashion accessories to murals and digital illustrations.

New Mediums and Formats:

Manjusha art is now seen on tote bags, sarees, notebooks, wall hangings, jewelry boxes, and even digitally printed products.

Artists have created urban murals and public art installations, especially in Bhagalpur, to revive public interest.

Digital Presence:

With the advent of social media and e - commerce, artists now showcase and sell their work on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and online marketplaces.

Virtual exhibitions and live painting sessions have brought Manjusha to a global audience.

Thematic Innovation:

Contemporary Manjusha artists incorporate new themes such as women's empowerment, environmental conservation, education, and social justice, reimagining the mythological framework to speak to current issues.

6.4 Education and Youth Involvement

One of the most promising signs of revival is the increasing involvement of youth in learning and promoting Manjusha art:

Schools in Bhagalpur and neighboring districts have introduced folk art classes, often taught by practicing artists.

College - level fine arts programs are inviting Manjusha artists for guest lectures and collaborative projects.

Some young practitioners are even pursuing professional art careers centered around Manjusha, blending it with graphic design, animation, and textile design.

6.5 Challenges in the Contemporary Context

Despite positive developments, the contemporary practice of Manjusha still faces significant challenges:

- **Commercial Exploitation:** Some commercially produced "Manjusha - style" products lack authenticity and do not credit original artisans.
- **Loss of Ritual Connection:** As art becomes commodified, its sacred and ritual dimensions are sometimes diluted, raising concerns among traditional practitioners.
- **Resource Constraints:** Many rural artists still lack consistent access to quality materials, digital tools, and institutional support.
- **Need for Intellectual Property Rights (IPR):** Protection of traditional knowledge and designs under IPR frameworks remains inadequate.

Restoring cultural memory, strengthening communities, and reinventing tradition in a world that is fast modernizing are all goals of the Manjusha painting resurgence. Manjusha has risen from near extinction to fresh importance through digital innovation, educational outreach, and adaptive creativity. However, ethical business practices, changes to cultural policies, and intergenerational communication are necessary for this renaissance to be genuinely inclusive and sustainable. The tale of Manjusha is not just about its former splendor but also about its vibrant future, which is in the capable hands of its artists, who still use color to create, instruct, and dream.

7. Discussion and Analysis

Examining Manjusha tribal painting provides a multifaceted knowledge of indigenous identity, ritual epistemology, communal resilience, and gendered expression, going beyond the superficial beauty of a folk art style. It is clear from analyzing the art's development from holy ritual boxes to modern canvases and digital media that Manjusha is a dynamic, narratively based cultural practice with profound socio - religious significance rather than just a decorative style.

7.1 Manjusha as a Ritual - Narrative System

It is impossible to separate Manjusha art from its ceremonial roots. It developed as a kind of visual storytelling with community, educational, and devotional purposes. The legend of Bihula is an embodied memory of a community's relationship with divinity, morality, and the natural world—particularly the sacred, dualistic symbolism of serpents—rather than merely a story of feminine tenacity. Every theme, color, and composition in Manjusha has symbolic significance, making it essentially a ceremonial narrative system as opposed to other folk forms that could emphasize aesthetic appeal.

According to anthropology, this places Manjusha in the category of oral - visual civilizations, in which visual art is essential to historical preservation and enhances narrative customs. In this sense, Manjusha fulfills the function of indigenous documentation, passing down moral principles and religious knowledge from generation to generation in societies that have not traditionally had access to recorded literature.

7.2 Gendered Expressions and Feminine Agency

A striking feature of Manjusha is its woman - centered narrative. The central figure, Bihula, is not a passive devotee but an active spiritual agent—navigating divine trials, challenging patriarchal authority, and negotiating with gods to restore her husband's life. Her journey is both physical and metaphysical, embodying themes of loyalty, agency, sacrifice, and resistance. This narrative has had a profound impact on women practitioners, who identify with Bihula's role and often channel their own experiences into the art.

The majority of present - day Manjusha artists, particularly those involved in community - led workshops and self - help groups, are women from rural or semi - urban backgrounds. For them, Manjusha is a means of empowerment, allowing them to engage in cultural preservation, earn income, and express collective identity. This gendered dimension highlights the role of folk art as a feminist space, albeit rooted in spiritual tradition rather than modern activism.

7.3 Preservation vs. Commercialization: A Cultural Tension

While the revival of Manjusha through exhibitions, product design, and digital promotion has offered economic opportunities and broader visibility, it has also introduced new tensions. One key issue is the commercial commodification of sacred motifs. As Manjusha is adapted for mainstream consumption—appearing on apparel, stationery, or souvenirs—some artists express concern about the loss of ritual authenticity and dilution of spiritual symbolism.

This reflects a broader dilemma in the field of traditional arts: how to balance cultural preservation with innovation and economic viability. On one hand, commercialization sustains the art by making it relevant and accessible. On the other, it risks turning deeply sacred stories into mere patterns, void of context. This raises critical questions about cultural

appropriation, artistic ownership, and ethical representation, especially when Manjusha designs are replicated by outsiders or used without acknowledgment of their sacred roots.

7.4 Community Knowledge and Intergenerational Learning

One of the enduring strengths of Manjusha art is its role in community bonding and intergenerational knowledge transfer. In Bhagalpur and nearby regions, many families still treat Manjusha painting as a seasonal sacred duty, involving children and elders in storytelling and decoration during the Bishahari Puja. This has created a living classroom where learning happens through oral tradition, hands - on practice, and spiritual reflection.

In the absence of formal art education, these community - based models of learning act as decentralized academies of tradition, making Manjusha an inclusive and accessible form of cultural expression. However, to ensure longevity, there is a need for institutional recognition and pedagogical integration—bringing Manjusha into school curricula, art education programs, and research forums, not as a static folk relic, but as a dynamic knowledge system.

7.5 Manjusha in the Global and Digital Context

With globalization and digital media, Manjusha has found new platforms for visibility and collaboration. Young artists are now combining traditional styles with digital tools, creating hybrid art that retains symbolic integrity while appealing to global audiences. Online exhibitions, virtual galleries, and cross - cultural collaborations have positioned Manjusha within the wider conversation on world folk art, indigenous rights, and cultural sustainability.

At the same time, this exposure demands protective frameworks such as Geographical Indication (GI) tagging, copyright attribution, and community - centered branding to ensure that economic benefits return to local artists and not to mass producers or foreign markets. These challenges offer fertile ground for policy interventions and cultural diplomacy.

The discussion and analysis of Manjusha tribal painting reveal it as a multifaceted cultural phenomenon—deeply rooted in local spiritual traditions, shaped by community practices, and now evolving within global networks. Its narrative structure, symbolic lexicon, and ritual functions make it more than an art form; it is a repository of tribal cosmology, feminine resistance, ecological awareness, and visual pedagogy.

As Manjusha continues its journey of revival and reinvention, the key lies in balancing tradition with transformation—preserving the essence of its sacred stories while opening doors for innovation, equity, and global dialogue. It stands not only as a symbol of Bihar's heritage but as a testament to the enduring power of indigenous imagination.

8. The Role of Manjusha in Ecological and Environmental Discourse

Manjusha tribal painting, though traditionally centered around mythology and ritual, also carries within it profound ecological symbolism and environmental awareness. The art's iconographic elements—especially the serpent, flora, rivers, and animals—function not only as mythological motifs but also as representations of ecological interdependence and indigenous environmental ethics.

In the traditional narratives, snakes are not merely symbols of divine power or danger, but are seen as guardians of nature. Their presence in every panel, either encircling deities or bordering the entire composition, represents the cyclical balance of life and death, of which nature is both the witness and participant. The tale of Bihula's journey on a raft, traveling through the river to reach the gods, underscores the role of the Ganga River not just as a geographic element, but as a spiritual and ecological lifeline.

The portrayal of trees, lotus flowers, and fish reinforces the traditional tribal worldview that all life forms are interconnected. In the current era of climate change, pollution, and environmental degradation, contemporary Manjusha artists are recontextualizing these symbols to communicate modern ecological messages. For instance: The snake motif is being used to highlight the extinction of indigenous species and the need for wildlife protection.

Bihula's raft is sometimes painted passing through polluted or drying rivers, representing the crisis of India's water bodies.

Themes of deforestation, industrial encroachment, and the destruction of sacred natural spaces are increasingly visible in modern adaptations.

These evolving representations show that Manjusha is not just a record of past devotion, but a living tool of environmental storytelling, capable of conveying both spiritual and ecological consciousness in tribal communities and beyond.

8.1 Institutional Recognition and the Role of Museums and Cultural Policy

Despite its rich symbolism and narrative complexity, Manjusha tribal painting has historically been underrepresented in national cultural institutions, art museums, and academic syllabi. While more prominent Indian folk arts like Madhubani, Pattachitra, and Gond have found space in mainstream exhibitions and state patronage, Manjusha has largely remained confined to local practice and seasonal display.

The lack of museum engagement can be attributed to the former marginal status of the art, as well as limited documentation and scholarly literature. However, this invisibility is slowly changing, thanks to revivalist artists and cultural policy interventions in Bihar.

Recent recommendations for increasing institutional visibility include:

- Establishing permanent Manjusha galleries in regional museums such as the Patna Museum and National Museum, New Delhi, featuring both historical and contemporary works.
- Creating community - curated mobile museums that allow tribal artists themselves to narrate their traditions to rural and urban audiences.
- Digitizing older Manjusha works and storing them in open - access folk art archives, ensuring preservation and educational reach.
- From a policy perspective, Manjusha has been included in Bihar's list of official state crafts, and several artists have received national handicraft awards. However, there is still a need for:
- Geographical Indication (GI) tagging to protect the authenticity and identity of Manjusha designs.
- Copyright protections to prevent misuse by commercial entities.
- Funding for training centers, workshops, and art residencies in Bhagalpur to nurture the next generation of artists.
- The role of museums must move beyond static preservation toward dynamic cultural activism—positioning Manjusha as a living heritage and not merely a relic of the past.

8.2. Aesthetic Philosophy of Manjusha: Order, Devotion, and Linearity

Manjusha tribal painting is a deeply philosophical art form, built on a system of visual symbols, narrative logic, and metaphysical alignment. Unlike Western notions of realism or naturalism, the aesthetic philosophy of Manjusha centers on spiritual clarity, ritual order, and emotional truth. The flatness of the surface, the repetition of motifs, and the strict compositional order are not limitations—they are spiritual devices meant to invoke sacred presence and meditative focus.

At the heart of Manjusha's visual philosophy is linearity—not just in spatial arrangement but in temporal unfolding. The story is told from left to right in a manner similar to sacred manuscripts or scrolls, emphasizing the progression from suffering to salvation. Each figure and object is given equal visual space, reflecting the non - hierarchical worldview of tribal societies, where humans, gods, animals, and nature coexist in balance.

The use of five sacred colors (green, pink, yellow, red, and black) reflects a symbolic code of emotional and divine states. This chromatic minimalism is not restrictive but intentional, representing moral clarity and ritual simplicity. The borders—especially the *leheriya* (waves) and *sarpath* (snake forms)—function as protective frames, marking the painting as a sacred enclosure, akin to a temple mandala.

Philosophically, Manjusha promotes a feminine ethic of devotion and endurance. Bihula, the central figure, is an avatar of Shakti (divine feminine energy), navigating chaos with unwavering faith. Her journey, painted in every

composition, becomes a universal allegory for spiritual striving, duty, and transcendence.

Thus, Manjusha is not just art—it is aesthetic devotion, a visual theology where form and meaning are inseparable. It invites viewers into a world where lines are prayers, borders are boundaries between realms, and colors are sacred vibrations.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

9.1 Conclusion

Studying Manjusha tribal painting reveals a potent and timeless art form that is intricately woven with Bhagalpur, Bihar's mythology, rituals, and social structure. Manjusha is more than just a local folk style; it is a visual representation of religion, memory, and resistance—a symbolic script that has endured in the face of religious rituals changing, modernity, and marginalization.

Manjusha painting, which has its roots in the tale of Bihula's unshakable devotion and heavenly negotiation, captures a gendered spiritual narrative that has influenced its practitioners—many of whom are rural women who today continue the tradition—as well as determined its iconography. A distinct visual philosophy that is both spiritual and communicative is reflected in the artwork's aesthetic minimalism, ceremonial color scheme, and narrative flow.

A testament to the tenacity of indigenous knowledge systems and the transformational potential of community - led cultural preservation is the recent resurgence of Manjusha painting. By incorporating this art form into modern settings like galleries, craft shows, fashion, and digital platforms, artists, educators, and cultural groups have been instrumental in giving it new life. But in order to prevent its religious and symbolic components from being hijacked without permission or commercialized without context, Manjusha's expansion must be handled with extreme cultural sensitivity.

In the end, Manjusha is at a turning point in its history, one that, with the right support, community empowerment, and educational integration, can transcend its regional character and become a renowned icon of India's intangible legacy.

9.2 Recommendations

To ensure the sustainable growth, preservation, and respectful promotion of Manjusha tribal painting, the following recommendations are proposed:

1) Documentation and Research Support:

Establish regional folk art documentation centers with digital archiving of Manjusha themes, techniques, and oral traditions.

Encourage academic institutions to support fieldwork - based research on tribal arts through grants and fellowships.

2) Educational Integration:

Introduce Manjusha painting in school and college art curricula, especially in Bihar and neighboring regions.

Develop training modules, children's books, and visual toolkits to engage younger generations in learning the stories and symbolism behind the art.

3) Artisan Welfare and Economic Sustainability:

Facilitate access to fair markets, art fairs, and online platforms for rural artists.

Provide micro - financing and material support through government schemes to ensure steady production and innovation.

Protect artists' rights through Geographical Indication (GI) tagging and community - based copyrights.

4) Ethical Promotion and Cultural Sensitivity:

Establish ethical guidelines for commercial usage of Manjusha motifs, ensuring authenticity and proper attribution.

Avoid aestheticizing sacred elements without context; instead, educate consumers about the narrative and ritual importance of the visuals.

5) Collaborative Platforms:

Create forums for interdisciplinary dialogue between tribal artists, curators, designers, and researchers.

Encourage public art projects, exhibitions, and artist residencies to allow cross - cultural and intergenerational learning.

6) Women - Centered Empowerment Programs:

Expand support for women - led artist collectives and self - help groups.

Offer literacy and digital training to women artisans so they can access online platforms and e - commerce channels directly.

By acting on these recommendations, stakeholders—including the government, cultural institutions, educational bodies, and the art fraternity—can ensure that Manjusha tribal painting continues to thrive, not just as a nostalgic memory or regional craft, but as a living, evolving art form with a voice in global cultural narratives.

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