



Language as Heritage: Maithili-Cultural Connects

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The word heritage implies inheritance, and inheritances acquire an immense connotation whenever we regard it as something beyond parental legacy. Heritage is a cultural construct which embodies in several forms, the existence of a veritable past. It functions as a source, a root which provides ground for a continuous growth of societies, cultures, languages and human values related hitherto in all their hues, in all dimensions. The legacy which we inherit provides the ground on which our existence rests and finds nourishment for growth. Our heritage is what we stand upon, the strength which enables us to take ourselves further in the world, with pride and dignity. This construct, which is an integral part of our psyche engenders a discourse which shapes and models our concerns and issues on which our existence as a social entity is defined. Our heritage provides the foreground on which thrives fresh culture, tradition and dialectics. The necessity and importance of our past is indisputable in contexts which are not confined to any society, cultures or nations. We have inherited lands, buildings and artifacts in forms of tangible heritage. The monuments which lie in sheer neglect are symbols of 'indifference' and apathy which has somehow crept into a whole group of people who no longer care for their roots in their concerns for a future which provides material prosperity, but no peace. The inherited objects may lose sheen and shine with time, but the inner glow which these objects of tangible and intangible heritage emit, surpasses the beauty and serenity of all that one cherishes and loves. Besides, the monuments, artifacts & invisible nuances of cultural strategies, we have also inherited nature which ensures our life, our vitality as human beings. These aspects of inheritances have to be preserved, so that we can exist in peace and prosperity shall follow thereafter.

In the era of the globalized world, there seems to be an overlapping of cultures and social values – especially in the urbanized areas of the human habitats. The so-called rural areas, semi-urban or sub-urban societies still find a growing tension between values and cultures that have been inherited, and those that seem to seep into our everyday lives in a subtle manner from the world of media and globalized ideals and idols of social practice. These have generated, on the one hand, a new set of values where material prosperity becomes the utmost priority and, in the process, can take the toll of all traditional symbols of conduct and performances. On the other hand, the material prosperity is not compromised with the upholding of tradition and a whole society, depending on various socio-political, socio-economic considerations retains legacies of culture and values. Intangible heritage comprises of culture which have brought about an awareness of one's ethnicity as well as the embedded set of values which determine the set of behaviours and reactions that societies articulate.

These tangible attributes of a group or a society that are inherited from past generations, are maintained in the present and are bestowed to the future generations. Thus, culture becomes the shared patterns of behaviour and interactions, cognitive constructs, and an affective understanding which is learnt through socialization processes. These shared patterns identify, on the one hand, the members of a culture group and on the other hand, distinguishes the members of another group. We should also understand culture from the following definition by J. A. Banks:

“Most social scientists today view culture as consisting primarily of the symbolic, ideational and intangible aspects of human societies. The essence of culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use and perceive them. It is the values, symbols interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies; it is not material objects and other tangible objects and other tangible aspects of human societies. People within a culture usually interpret the meaning of symbols, artifacts, and behaviours in the same or in similar ways.” (J. A. Banks & McGee, C. A. 1989, Multicultural Education). The acceptance and transmission of culture through heritage is a primary adaptive mechanism among human beings, and here language becomes the oldest human institution and the most sophisticated medium of expression. Cutting across cultural boundaries, language binds, and enriches the inevitable growth and development of our own set of protocols and negotiations which ultimately leads to the preservation as well as creation of new materials falling into the category of heritage. The inherited culture, therefore, stands as a reality which cannot be looked away from, as it also implies the understanding of one’s quest for self, thus paving way for a spiritual identity as well. Language as a formation of one’s inherited expression not only provides a concrete base for the articulations of ideas and emotions, but also validates them. The language, therefore, becomes important as an object of study in the human history because its preservation demonstrates a recognition of the necessity of the past and of the things that tell its story. The preserved language also validates memories and gives people a literal way of touching the past. Language allows the actuality of the inherited object to survive in forms of manuscripts, oral traditions, folklores while technology provides technical solutions in forms of digital acquisition which is able to acquire the shape and appearance of artifacts with an unprecedented precision in human history. Against such brilliant reproductions, language becomes an artifact that exists in its originality as a legacy as intimate as one’s own self.

We all are aware of Time’s inevitable and inextricable linkages with change. This idea of change applies to all artifacts of heritage – intangible as well as tangible. While all tangible artifacts are in a constant state of chemical transformation, we feel that it is preserved in original form. But actually, it is never as it once was. Similarly values and languages are placed on each generation in a changed form. Thus, the values of past also change with generations and the values that these ongoing generations place on the past may not resemble the values that link it to the past. What is considered as cultural heritage by one generation may be rejected by the next generation, only to be revived by the succeeding generations. It is here that one realizes that intangible cultural heritage is more difficult to preserve than physical objects. Language therefore, becomes an important part of one’s literary and spiritual heritage – and the preservation and transmission of expression becomes a task which each generation performs with utmost responsibility and enthusiasm. To understand any culture in its completeness, it is necessary for language to preserve it. When fluent speakers of language fail to teach it to the younger generation, language faces the danger of being lost. Children who speak a particular language may stop speaking in circumstances which do not provide adaptability. The teachings, customs, oral traditions and other inherited knowledge are no longer transmitted among speakers of native soils. Diversity in data sources are lost to

a great extent whenever language dies. The science inherited in linguistics, anthropology, prehistory and psychology also fade away as any language dies. There are many factors which endanger language but as it stands, our country can boast of numerous languages and corresponding cultures that define India's diversity and ethnicity. Despite being a global force, the languages spoken in the country have survived the onslaught of English. Though it has become a mainstream, almost "The official" language here, the local languages continue to thrive, grow and acquire a momentum which urges them on-getting enriched each day by processes of linguistic transmissions and articulations. Be it the languages from the south, east, west or north – almost every Indian is, in the least, a bilingual, and, as cases may be, speaking several languages other than English and Hindi at the same time. This linguistic advantage gives Indian culture a special status of its own, a richness of cultures and literatures which make it stand in a unique position among other cultures.

Most Indo-European languages have had progressions and branches into different languages; and in India they have developed into the Indo-Aryan family. The Indo-Aryan languages in the early periods (2500 to 500 BC) developed from Vedic Sanskrit to Laukik Sanskrit. The Middle Indo-Aryan languages have developed (500 BC to 1000 AD) from Pali (early Prakrit 500 BC to 100 BC) to Prakrit (100 BC to 500 AD), Apbhraṃśa (neo-Prakrit 500 AD to 1100 AD). From neo-Magadhi Prakrit and its variant Maithili, Avahatta developed the Maithili language (on which my paper shall focus) in 1000 AD. Therefore, according to linguists, Maithili is one of the Indo-Aryan languages and at the same time, its Eastern Indic offshoot.

Maithili is a language spoken in the eastern region of India and the south-eastern region of Nepal. It is the fortieth most spoken language in the world, and the second largest language spoken in Nepal. The native speakers of Maithili reside in Bihar, Jharkhand, parts of West Bengal and South-East Nepal. The linguistic and cultural centres of Maithili in Bihar are the districts of Madhubani, Darbhanga, Sitamarhi, Saharsa, Supaul, Araria, Begusarai, Muzaffarpur, Samastipur, Purnea, Kishanganj and Madhepura. It is also spoken in the Terai region of Nepal, mainly in the Narayani zone, Koshi zone and Sagarmatha zone. In the year 2000, it was observed that there are 35 million native speakers of Maithili in the world. Maithili was included in the eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution, allowing it to be used in education, government, and other official contexts.

Mithila, the area where Maithili is spoken is bound on the North by the Himalaya, on the South, west and east by the Ganges, Gandak and Kaushik (or Kosi) respectively. The boundary of Mithila has been described in "Mithilamahatmya" in the following manner: "Between the Himalayas and the Ganges, intercepted by fifteen rivers, lies the most holy land named Teerbhukti; beginning from the Kosi and running up to the Gandaki, its length is declared to be 24 yojanas, i.e., 192 miles, beginning from the Ganges and extending up to the Himalayan forests, its breadth is sixteen yojanas, that is, 128 miles." (Quoted in A Survey of Maithili Literature by Radhakrishna Chaudhary, 1976).

The land of Teerbhukti is the modern 'Tirhut' or 'Mithila', whose antiquity lies in name Mithila itself – The word derives from 'Muth' which means 'Churning'. According to the Matsyapurana Mithila was also the name of a sage. King Mithi, carried out the Ashwamedha Yagya and rendered the land holy. It was the capital of Videha, the land of Janaka who figures prominently in the Vedic and epic sources. We all know about Janak, the King of Videha who patronized innumerable discussions on spiritualism and philosophy and whose intellectual pursuits formed a pivot around which the path to spiritual well-being was made, and developed into the ethical heritage of Indian culture. It was in Mithila that Raja Janak, the father of Sita (Lord Rama's wife) ruled, Yagyavalkalegisted and Rishi Gautama

meditated. Leaders of Jainism (Lord Mahaveera) and Buddhism (Lord Buddha) are also inextricably linked in their birth, actions and spiritual revelations to this holy land. The kaleidoscopic culture of India contains hues of Maithili contributions in a significant manner. As a centre of philosophy, law and literature, Mithila was also a centre of scholarly pursuits. Maharshi Yagyvalka developed the Madhyandini branch of Yajurveda (universally known as Shukla and accepted by the whole of Northern India). Thus, the Yagyavalkasmriti became the foundation of the Mithila School of Hindu Law – a significant effort towards the development of the ‘Nyaya’ and ‘Mimansa’ branches of Hindu philosophy. Scholars from different parts of the country came for training and excellence to Mithila in the early periods in the field of Neo-logic or Navya-Nyaya. Mithila was the seat of innumerable scholars of Sanskrit literature and philosophy and the lines of Sanskrit literature have been followed very closely even in the modern Maithili – it still contains many features which have preserved links with modern Indo-Aryan philology (which have also been deemed obsolete).

Till recently, the Sanskrit aesthetics and rhetoric were the prototypes on which Maithili literature treated its themes and subjects. Schools of Grammar, schools of music, drama, dance are encoded in the culture of Mithila and treatises on the aforesaid genres are found in abundance in the early Mithila period. Mithila’s long literary tradition, based on Sanskrit, was alive even before Maithili was born. Even after the Muslim conquest, Sanskrit was a living language in Mithila and was being cultivated in all earnestness. It was Sanskrit which provided Maithili with a sound intellectual and spiritual background. The process of writing in the common man’s language was begun by the Buddhists and the Jains who took to Pali and Prakrit. Scholars however continued to write in Sanskrit and initial Maithili drama draws from three languages – Maithili, Prakrit and Sanskrit. The earliest drama ‘Parijatharana’ is in all the above three languages. Gradually, as Sanskrit began to be the chosen medium for the new pundits and the elite, Maithili found room to grow. After the Muslim invasion, the old order became impoverished and the new masters had to recognize the Laukikbhasha or the Apbhransha. The village gods and goddess like Salhesa, Bihula and popular ballads of Lorik and numerous cults associated with local deities integrated the common people thus helping the growth of the people’s language.

Maithili emerged as an independent language somewhere around the 10th – 11th century AD and has maintained a continuity in successive stages of development known as old, middle and modern Maithili. Charya songs and Avahatta compositions mark the early Maithili poetry which go up to the period of Vidyapati. The regular contact between Mithila, Nepal, Assam, Bengal and Orissa in the Middle Ages was responsible for the propagation of this language. It became a vehicle for the mingling of thought and ideas and the emergence of a common culture even in those days. The association of Maithili and Bangla is strong, and ties have been appreciated in both languages. In the later period, Maithili was understood as ‘Brajbauli’ in Bengal, and Rabindranath Tagore chose to write his BhanusinghThakurerPadavali in this language. Mithila and Assam were also culturally bound in close ties that led to close linguistic affinities between the two. It would be pertinent to dwell, in brief, on the personality and influence of one of the greatest seers and literary giants of Maithili literature, Kavi Vidyapati Thakur.

The Karnaat kings came to power in Mithila after the fall of the Pala rule and the disappearance of Buddhism. King Harsimhadeva (1226 – 1324) of this dynasty patronized Maithili, and it was in this period that the earliest specimen of prose available in any Modern Indo-Aryan language was born. The work was called Varna Ratnakara, a unique work in pure Maithili prose, composed by Jyotirishwar Thakur. When Harisinghdev was eventually defeated by Ghiasuddin Tughlaq, the emperor of Delhi, Mithila was entrusted to the family

priest. Under the patronage of King Shiva Singh and his queen Lakhima Devi, the epoch-making poet, and an icon of Mithila, Mahakavi Vidyapati composed his immortal poetry and drama. Over a thousand songs in Maithili on the theme of erotic sports of Radha and Krishna and the domestic life of Shiva and Parvati were composed by him. Besides a number of treatises in Sanskrit on various subjects (like travelogues, treatise on morality, on model letters, method of Shiva worship, property inheritance, annual rituals etc.), Vidyapati also wrote on the suffering of migrant labourers in Morang. His devotional songs, in forms Maheshvanis and Nacharies, and songs on Shakti-puja called Gosawanis spread far and wide, and influenced several saints, poets and the young generation of the times. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu envisaged the deep sincerity and divinity behind these songs, and soon they became the themes of the songs from the Vaishnava sect in Bengal. Vidyapati's Radhakrishna songs can verily be associated with the inspiration of the Vaishnav movement. The Vaishnav literature is essentially of the people and the creators of that heritage had fought successfully against orthodoxy and priestcraft. A revolt against the orthodoxy and clumsiness of religious behaviour, and the singing of Radhakrishna songs or Nacharis in honour of Shiva in vernacular was a conscious revolt against the orthodoxy of these times. The Bhakti movement of the Middle Ages had broken the fetters of social autocracy. The educational institutions of Mithila held the torch of learning immortalized by its association with Chaitanya..." (Chaudhary, Radhakrishna, A Survey of Maithili Literature, 1976, 96)

The biographers of Chaitanya say that it was the songs of Jayadeva, Vidyapati and Chandidas that would engross Chaitanya's attention – he would sing of the relation of the soul to God explained in these songs. The Vaishnava singers of Bengal, Assam and Orissa wrote their songs in Brajaboli in which there is a preponderance of Prakrit words with Maithili. The Vaishnava singers naturally favoured the Braj dialect, but their adoption was to necessarily come through an imitation of Vidyapati. In fact, one can ascribe to Vidyapati the popularization of the Krishna cult in the neighbouring provinces of Bengal, Orissa and Assam. The direct influence of Vraja words is noticeable in Brajagitis of Assam, a dialect developed by Shankardeva. The Assamese Ankiants and Brajagitis are in Brajaboli, where a predominance of Maithili words is apparent.

The Brajaboli literature of Assam is not indistinguishable from that of Bengal in the sense that in the Assamese Brajaboli literature, Radha does not feature as a character. The lyricists of Assam in Brajagits contemplate their state as that of servitude (the *Dasya-bhaav*) while in Bengal it was friendship (*Sakhya-bhav*), even conjugal love (*Patipatnibhav*). Unlike Bengali, authors of this dialect, the Assamese writers took to writing drama in Maithili. The history of Assamese literature gives a significant place to Brajaboli's contribution in laying the foundations of Assamese literature. Jayakant Mishra, in his studies observes,

"The evolution of Brajaboli in Assam is due mainly to the connection of the people of Kamrupa with those of Videha (Mithila)... as also due to the direct contact of Sankara Deva with the speakers of Maithili.... Including the learned men during his first pilgrimage in the fifteenth century A.D. This great religious reformer and his followers have produced a vast Brajbuli literature in Assam, only an insignificant part of which has just been published." (Mishra, Jayakant, History of Maithili Literature, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1976, 105).

The first publication of Brajbuli literature was made by the Department of Historical Antiquities, Government of Assam, Guwahati. Later, the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan also published works in Brajaboli in the Devanagiri script. Assamese Brajaboli lyrics inspired by Vidyapati can be roughly divided into two groups — the Baragits (or the celestial, spiritual songs) and the Ankiants (songs of the drama called Ankiants). Their similarities with the

Maithili songs of Vidyapati lay in the fact that they were also meant to be sung actually. There is Ragas, Bhanitas and Dhruvads and the subject matter is based on the story of Krishna. Musicians and dramatists were warmly welcomed from Mithila and Bengal in Kamrup. A distinct class of drama found emergence in Assam in the fifteenth century A.D., the type which flourished in Mithila and reached Nepal and subsequently to Assam. Unlike Bengal, both in Nepal and Assam, the drama became quite an important literary form of cultural dialogue. A general agreement is found between the styles of prose in the early stages of Maithili and Assamese, and therefore one also notices that the Baragits are not as pure Maithili as that of the original Ankiya Nats. The Baragits have poetic beauty, tenderness of sentiment and loftiness of thought, and triggered a revolution in Medieval Assamese literature and invigorating the native vernacular.

It is said that scholars from Kamrupa visited Mithila and learnt the medium of their drama. It has also been observed that, during his pilgrimage, Shankardeva, the leader of the Assam reform movement, had noticed Vidyapati's handling of his mother tongue. Mr. B. K. Barua observes: "It is difficult to guess why Shankardeva should have chosen this language (Maithili) as a medium of dramatic expression (when he had written many books in pure Assamese verse). His sudden departure into this language seems enigmatic." (Quoted in A Survey of Maithili Literature, Choudhary R. K., 1976, 116).

When the Assamese drama was being written, the absence of the printing press made the sweet chaste Maithili of those plays reach out directly and appeal to the people in a manner simple and spectacular. Maithili added a sanctity to the character of the Kirtaniya genre in Maithili and the Assamese drama of the medieval period. These plays were based on epics and Puranas. Some of existing Maithili plays by Shankardeva are, Kaliyadamana, Ramavijaya or Sitaswayambara, Rukminiharana, Keli-Gopala, Patnaprasada and Parijatharana. There is a belief that when Shankardeva visited Mithila he was influenced by the dramatic art of Umapati, Jyotirishwara and Vidyapati. Though Sanskrit and Prakrit dominated Maithili drama, the drama of Assam made frequent use of Brajbuli, and dispensed completely with Prakrit. The Maithili element is conspicuous in the writings of Shankardeva and Madhavananda. While the Maithili drama has no 'sutradhar' except in the prologue (the Prastavana) and no stage direction, the Assamese drama has speeches and directions in Brajaboli every now and then, throughout the performance. Both are one-act plays and like Jyotirishwar Thakur in Mithila, Shankardeva was one of the earliest dramatists of the vernacular medium of expression. Horowitz observes that despite Muslim influences, the end of the fourteenth century A.D. saw drama in full swing, especially in Nepal and Tirhut (The Indian Theatre, 176-78).

The Ankiyanats of Assam have found place in the realm of Maithili dramas too, thereby informing a discourse on the exchange of language and culture among these Purvottar (North Eastern) provinces. The Ankiyanats are one-act plays and have evolved out of the recital of Kavyas (verses), replete with ragas and taals because the composers themselves were accomplished poets and musicians. In these plays, the spoken prose is dominated by Maithili while the verse contains more of Assamese elements. Though religious in spirit the metaphysical abstruseness is dispensed with, and the plays, though dealing mainly with vaatsalya and dasya-bhav, are direct and forceful. The Ankiyanats moved beyond all social barriers and provided pure entertainment, thus becoming the most powerful agency for the dissemination of knowledge on art, literature, morality, religion and philosophy.

The exotic materials of the Vaishnava propaganda were thus imparted a flavor of nationalism with Shankardeva's subtle and intuitive knowledge of social and spiritual realities. The play

'Rukminiharan' is perhaps the most important specimen of Maithili drama in Assam, along with Kaaliyadaman. Despite the difference in the depiction of characters in 'Parijaatharana' from that of Umapati there remains a marked influence of Vidyapati and Umapati in the plays of Shankardeva and his successor Madhavadeva (1489-1596). Madhavadeva's Rasa-Jhumara is a glorified hymn of Krishna by Radha on the Raslila night. It is noteworthy here that Vidyapati also introduced a raga called Jhumarraga in his songs. It represented the kind of songs sung in chorus by a number of women. Echoes of Maithili kept ringing through the adjoining provinces for a long time, but in its homeland, in the medieval times, Maithili was losing its pristine purity owing to the spread of Brajbhasha or the Brajaboli. Outside Mithila, Chaitanya and a host of other poets from Bengal and Orissa also endeavoured to immortalize the songs of Vidyapati and establish him as a great Vaishnava.

The medieval Maithili poetry is replete with religious songs, drama and poetry, especially those with Vaishnavite leanings. The Raj Tarangini of Lochan is spectacular evidence of the development of poetry after Vidyapati. Maithili, by this time is being influenced by Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Brajbhasha, and here we have the great poets Manbodha and Nandipati paving way for the freedom from Prakrit affectations and simplification of the language. In fact, it was Manbodha who is considered the first representation of the realists or reformists. He can be regarded as the founder of modern Maithili literature, in his straight forward narration and a marked deviation from poetic flight. Grierson says: "Manbodha is a connecting link between the old Maithili of Vidyapati and the modern Maithili of Harshnatha." (quoted in A Survey of Maithili Literature 1976, R. K. Chaudhary, 122). Manbodha was very popular in the early years of the nineteenth century A.D., especially in the eastern Mithila (Purnea of today).

Modern Maithili has a long repository of writers, folklores and literary adaptations. However, one remembers the earliest reference to Maithili or Tirhutiya in the international scenario in Amaduzzi's preface to Beligatti's *Alphabetum Brammhanicum*, published in 1771. This contains a list of Indian languages amongst which is 'Tourutiana' (Tirhutiya). Richard Colbrooke's essay on the Sanskrit and Prakrit languages, written in 1801, was the first to describe Maithili as a distinct dialect. Modern Maithili came into its own after Sir George Abraham Grierson, an Irish linguist and civil servant, tirelessly researched Maithili folklore and transcribed its grammar. Paul R. Brass writes that 'Grierson judged that Maithili and its dialects could fairly be characterized as the language of the entire population of Darbhanga and Madhubani districts, and a vast majority in Muzaffarpur, Monghyr and Santhal Parganas.' Here, one also cannot resist mentioning that an excellent translation of Vidyapati's poems have been published by the UNESCO in French and English by W. R. Archer (the Love Songs of Vidyapati). This rightly accords him the status of an international poet. The Mithila Sanskrit Parishad, Kolkata, has published a wonderful collection of critical essays on Vidyapati called *Vidyapati Vanmaya*.

Modern Maithili has struggled to carve a niche for itself, especially during the last two centuries. It was in the hands of M. M. Parameshwar Mishra, Chanda Jha, Munshi Raghunandas Das and a galaxy of other writers that Maithili language was able to revive itself. In 1908, the first social organization for the development of Maithili and Maithils, called the Maithil Mahasabha was established, but its membership was restrained to people only from Maithil Brahmin and Karn Kayastha castes. This Mahasabha campaigned for the official recognition of Maithili as a regional language. Calcutta University recognized Maithili in 1917, and several other universities followed suit. In 1965, Maithili was officially accepted by Sahitya Academy, the organization dedicated to the promotion of Indian

literature. With the recognition of this language in the VIIth schedule, the constitution has now given it a place among the 22 national languages of India.

The Maithili script, known as the Mithilakshara, or Tirhutiya or the Kaithi script came down from Brahmi, the mother of all Indian scripts. The eastern alphabet of the Gupta script into north-eastern variety was known in the ancient times as the Vaidehi script. This Mithila script eventually became the parent of Assamese, Bangla and Odiya. The Tirhuta script, is recorded in the Mandar Hill stone inscriptions of Aditayasena (in 7th century A.D.), and is now fixed in the Baidyanath temple at Deoghar. Manuscripts in Maithili character have been noticed in Tibet by the Late Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayana. There was hardly any difference between the old Bengali and Maithili alphabets. Inscriptions of Kanakbhanga a scholar-traveller, reveal that upto the fifteenth century A.D. early Odiya and Maithili scripts were very much familiar. Despite the fact that the prevalent scripts of the north-eastern provinces had an enormous similarity of sound and alphabets, the Mithilakshar today is becoming obsolete as it has been replaced by Devanagari. The use of Mithilakshar is now limited to Maithil Brahmins and Karn Kayasthas who use this on religious and ceremonial occasions. It is interesting to note here that the north-eastern alphabet, whose antiquity lies in the Vaidehi script also came to be used, besides Assam, Bengal and Orissa, in Nepal. The Kamrupa dialect was originally a dialect of Eastern Maithili, and the spoken Aryan language throughout the kingdoms which included the Assam Valley, North Bengal and the district of Purnea in Bihar. One also notices that the language of the Buddhist Dohas is an amalgamation of the Maithili and Kamrupi language. Modern Maithili dialects can be described as Central Maithili (spoken in areas around Darbhanga, Madhubani, Saharsa and Purnea), Western or Baajjika Maithili (spoken in Vaishali, Sitamarhi, East and West Champaran) and Southern Maithili or Angika (Bhagalpur, Munger, Deoghar). Out of the three Central Maithili has been hailed as the standard form, in which books are written.

Mithila also has a separate calendar developed by scholars every year called the TirhutaPanchang which is followed by the Maithil community in India and Nepal. It is a sidereal solar Hindu calendar in which the year begins on the first day of the Baisakh month, i.e. the Mesh Sankranti. This day is celebrated as the Poila Boishakh in Bengal and the Rangali Bihu in Assam, Baisakhi in Punjab and Puthandu in Tamil Nadu. These festivals mark the beginning of New Year in their respective regions.

In their social life, the Maithils evolved an elaborate system of keeping genealogies called 'Panjis'. Today these Panjis are prepared only for the Brahmins and Kayasthas, but formerly they were used by other classes too. Detailed genealogies were methodically recorded since way back in 1310 A.D., so that marriages within forbidden degrees were not permitted. It was made obligatory for every person to get a certificate of non-relationship (A Svajana-patra) between the two contracting partners from these genealogists or Panjikaars. This Panji-Prabandha still exists as an important force in the Maithil life, as it embodies in the most authoritative and exhaustive manner the origin and history of Maithil families. The Maithils also have a distinct style of folk art which, in the modern parlance, is popular as the Madhubani art. The folk-art of Mithila is intrinsic to every small or big ceremony of the people of this region. There are specific motifs which are drawn and painted with indigenous, natural colours for religious, or marriage ceremonies. This art has been especially preserved in almost every household by the womenfolk of Mithila. As an important ingredient of the Maithil tradition, this form of art is now internationally acclaimed as the Madhubani art-form, distinct in character and expression from other folk-art forms. Mithila also shares a cultural affinity with the entire north-eastern region and Nepal in matters of rituals, dress, and social customs in a considerable manner.

In making this somewhat brief and sketchy overview of Mithila and her culture, this paper misses out several other facts of its rich literature. However, it is the cultural affinity with the neighbouring areas that needs to be invigorated in new manner. As a new aspect of discovering one's identity, it is an extension which is taken for granted, but needs to be re-focused.

In the sharing of cultures, the language plays a central role, and brings about the burgeoning rediscovery of a shared heritage. The ravages of time may have drawn dividing lines, but in the re-establishment of connections, one finds that the preservation of language and culture plays a significant role. The joy of finding linkages between distinct languages and socio-cultural systems can only be possible when one awakens and is alert about the importance of preservation of heritage in all forms in this fast-evolving cultural constructions. After all, searching and finding one's roots is intrinsic to human nature in his quest for his self-identity.

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