

MASHAN CHITRA KALA মাশান চিত্রকলা



THE RITUAL ART AND TRADITIONS OF NORTH BENGAL

A SOCIO-CULTURAL STUDY
RAJBANSHI COMMUNITY

By Madhusudan Das

*A book by the artist who walked into the villages of North Bengal
to bring a forgotten tradition into the light*

North Bengal, West Bengal, India 2026

*"The farmer who paints gods upon shola is not merely an artist —
he is a guardian of memory, a vessel of the sacred, and a bridge
between the living and the invisible world."*



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Stories Matter

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A Note From the Author

I am not a trained historian, and I did not set out, eight years ago, to write a book. I set out to find paint and paper and brushes for a handful of artists in a village called Rajganj, because I had heard that they were making something extraordinary and that almost no one outside their own lanes had ever seen it. What I found there changed the direction of my work as an artist, and it is the reason this book exists.

Mashan Chitrakala is the art of the Rajbongshi Malakar community of North Bengal — farmers, tea garden labourers, and garland makers who, for generations, have painted the fierce and protective deity Mashan onto shola pith, silk, and paper, not for galleries or collectors but for the sick relatives in their own homes. Almost no books have been written about it. The few sentences that exist are scattered across old census records, regional histories, and the memories of elderly villagers who watched their parents perform a ritual that has now nearly disappeared.

This book is my attempt to put those scattered pieces together — the history of the Rajbongshi people, the strange and powerful deity at the centre of this art, the visual language the Malakar artists have developed over generations, and the real, living people I have had the privilege of working alongside since 2018. I have tried to place Mashan Chitrakala next to the art forms most readers will already know — Madhubani, Warli, Gond, Kalighat — so that its place in the wider story of Indian folk art becomes clear.

Everything in these pages comes from years spent in the villages of Jalpaiguri District, from conversations with Malakar families across three generations, from the workshops I organised with them, and from the libraries and archives I searched for whatever fragments of written history I could find. Where I quote or draw on the work of earlier scholars of Indian folk art, I have credited them at the end of the book.

I have written this book because I believe Mashan Chitrakala deserves to stand alongside the art forms of India that the whole world already knows and loves. I hope that by the time you finish reading, you will agree.

Madhusudan Das

Acknowledgements

This book would not exist without the generosity of the Rajbongshi Malakar artists and their families across the villages of Rajganj, Bodhinath (Malipara), and Gauri Haat in Jalpaiguri District. My deepest gratitude goes to the families of the late Maheshwar Malakar, the late Sokhain Malakar, and the late Kaleshwar Malakar, whose children and grandchildren continue to carry this remarkable tradition forward under conditions of real hardship.

I am profoundly grateful to Sudhir Malakar, Tapan Malakar, Shusanto Malakar, Firen Malakar, Rina Malakar, Gangadhar Malakar, Bishika Malakar, Basanto Malakar, and Pabitra Malakar, who welcomed me into their homes, taught me far more than I taught them, and trusted me with their stories.

Thank you to the libraries that supported my search for written sources — Chalantika Library, Jalpaiguri, and Shri Aurobindo Pathagar, Jalpaiguri — and to the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, for its support of folk and tribal art. Thank you to the newspapers, magazines, and television channels in Bengal that took an interest in these workshops and helped carry word of this hidden art form to a wider audience.

And thank you, finally, to the Ministry of Culture, Government of India, whose schemes for artists and cultural researchers give me hope that institutional support for traditions like this one is possible.

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CHAPTER 1

A Forgotten Art Awakens

In the villages of North Bengal, in the lanes of Rajganj and Bodhinath and the tea-garden settlements around Jalpaiguri, there are families who have spent generations painting a god that almost no one outside their community has ever heard of. They paint on shola pith — the pale, spongy core of a wetland plant — and on silk and paper, using colours they make themselves from turmeric, soot, and crushed flower petals. They paint a fierce, red-grounded deity called Mashan, and they paint with a seriousness that has nothing to do with decoration and everything to do with survival.

This is Mashan Chitrakala — the sacred art of the Rajbongshi Malakar community. For centuries, when sickness struck a household in this part of Bengal, families did not always reach first for a doctor. They reached for an Ojha, a healer-priest, who would arrive carrying a painting of Mashan and perform a ritual believed to draw the illness out of the patient's body. The painting was not a picture of the god. It was understood to be the god — present, watching, and capable of doing harm if it was not treated with the proper respect.

I first encountered this tradition almost by accident, while travelling through Jalpaiguri District in search of folk artists whose work had never been documented. What I found was not a museum piece or a dying curiosity but a living, breathing practice — fragile, yes, and increasingly rare, but still carried forward by a handful of families who refuse to let it disappear. Over the following years I returned to these villages again and again, learning the history behind the brushstrokes and watching as a new generation of Malakar artists tried to find a place for their inherited art in a world that has largely forgotten it exists.

This book is the record of that journey. It tells the story of a deity born from the meeting of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and Bengali folk religion; of a community of farmers and tea-garden labourers who happen to be among the most skilled and least recognised artists in India; and of an art form whose bold red grounds, staring eyes, and fierce, simplified gods deserve a place beside Madhubani, Warli, and Gond painting in the story the world tells about Indian art.

What follows is not a dry catalogue of facts. It is, as much as I can make it, the story of a place, a people, and a tradition — told through history, through comparison with art forms readers may already know, and through the voices of the artists themselves, recorded over nearly a decade of visits to their homes and workshops.



Sushanto Malakar



Shudhir Malakar



Mashan Chitra (Dola Kali)



Mashan Chitra (Dola Kali)



Sola work



*Interior village Market
(Belakoba Jalpaiguri)*



*Artist Madhusudan
Showed Sola work*

CHAPTER 2

Why So Little Has Been Written

One of the first things that struck me, when I began trying to learn more about Mashan Chitrakala, was how little had been written about it. India's great folk and tribal art traditions — Madhubani, Warli, Gond — have been the subject of decades of careful documentation, from William Archer's discovery of Madhubani painting after the 1934 Bihar earthquake to Yashodhara Dalmia's landmark study of Warli art and Jyotindra Jain's writing on Gond painters. These books exist on library shelves across the country. They have made these traditions famous.

For Mashan Chitrakala, almost nothing comparable exists. The most substantial published source I have found is a regional study by Dr. S.K. Sarkar, *Tribal Arts of North Bengal: A Study of Rajbanshi Masan Rituals*, which offers a brief but useful account of the ritual context surrounding Mashan worship. Beyond this, references to the tradition appear only in scattered fragments — a paragraph in an old census report, a passing mention in a regional history of the Koch-Rajbongshi people, a line in an ethnographic survey of North Bengal.

This silence is not an accident. It reflects something larger about how Indian folk art has been written about and celebrated. The traditions that have achieved national recognition are, almost without exception, the ones that found an early champion — a colonial administrator, an art historian, an NGO, a government scheme — willing to document them, exhibit them, and carry them into galleries and textbooks. The Rajbongshi Malakar community, marginal even within the marginalised world of folk art, never had that champion. Their art remained, quite literally, hidden — practised in village homes, used in private rituals, and never carried beyond the boundaries of Jalpaiguri District.

I do not claim that this book fills that gap entirely. But it is, as far as I am aware, the first attempt to gather what is known about Mashan Chitrakala — its history, its rituals, its visual language, its place among India's other folk traditions — into a single connected account, told partly through research and partly through the testimony of the artists who are still keeping it alive.

CHAPTER 3

The Path That Led Me Here

I want to be honest about how this book came together, because I think it matters. I am a practising artist, not an academic, and the knowledge in these pages did not come from a library desk. It came from eight years of returning, again and again, to the same handful of villages — Rajganj, Bodhinath, Malipara — and sitting with the same families, watching them work, asking questions, and slowly earning enough trust that they would tell me things they would not have told a stranger passing through with a notebook.

My approach, from the beginning, was not to stand back and observe from a distance. I brought materials — brushes, paints, canvas — and I organised workshops. I bought paintings, deliberately paying more than the going market rate, because I wanted the artists to feel that their work had value beyond what the local market was willing to offer. I introduced some of them to galleries and journalists in Kolkata and Delhi. In short, I became involved in their lives and their livelihoods, not just their art, and I think that involvement is part of why they eventually opened up to me about the deeper history and meaning of what they were making.

I have tried, throughout this book, to be careful about whose voice is speaking. Where I am describing my own experience, I have written in the first person. Where I am drawing on the words and testimony of the Malakar artists themselves, I have tried to represent what they told me as faithfully as I can. And where I am drawing on published historical sources, I have credited them in the Further Reading section at the end of this book.

I am aware that the act of writing about a community's sacred tradition, as an outsider, carries real responsibility. I have tried to discharge that responsibility honestly — by paying fairly for the artists' work and time, by being transparent about my purpose, and by writing this book in the hope that it brings the Malakar artists recognition and support, not merely academic interest.



Malakar's (Artists) Mali para Village in Jalpaiguri District



Malakars (Artist) Rajganj Village Jalpaiguri



Workshop Rajganj Village Jalpaiguri

CHAPTER 4

The Land and the People: North Bengal and the Rajbongshi

A Landscape of Mountains, Rivers, and Forest

To understand Mashan Chitrakala, you first have to understand the land it grew out of. North Bengal — the territory historically home to the Rajbongshi community — covers what are today five districts: Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, West Dinajpur, and Malda. It is a region defined by dramatic contrasts: the Himalayan foothills rising in the north, broad river plains stretching south, and dense forest filling the spaces in between.

The river Teesta cuts through the western part of this territory, while the river Torsa and the Sinchula hills mark its eastern edge, near the border with Bhutan. The Duars — the great gateway plains between the mountains and the delta — were once thick with Shal, Segun, Shimul, and Palash trees, and home to tigers, elephants, and snakes in numbers that shaped the daily fears and rituals of the people who farmed at the forest's edge. Two ancient texts, the Kalikapurana and the Yoginitantra, describe this same territory as 'Kamrup' — a land they identify as a great centre of Tantric religious practice, stretching some eight hundred miles along the Brahmaputra's tributaries. That identification matters enormously for this book, because Tantric religion is one of the deep roots from which Mashan Chitrakala eventually grew.

Who Are the Rajbongshi?

The origins of the Rajbongshi people have long been debated by historians, and I do not think this book is the place to settle that debate. What is clear is that the Rajbongshi represent a complex blending of Austric, Dravidian, and Mongoloid ancestries, layered over many centuries with influences from Aryan migration and, later, Islamic and Bengali Hindu settlement. According to the 1961 census, Rajbongshi communities were present in every district of West Bengal except Purulia, and before the partition of India in 1947, they were also spread widely across what is now Bangladesh and into Assam, Manipur, and Tripura.

Within the broader Rajbongshi community, the Koch people have their own origin story. According to oral tradition, their ancestors fled into the Himalayan foothills to escape the mythological violence of Parashurama, taking shelter — quite literally, the word 'Koch' is said to mean 'lap' — in the protective embrace of the goddess Bhagabati. The name of the historic kingdom and present-day district of Cooch Behar is believed to come from this same root. From an early centre around Rangpur, Rajbongshi culture spread outward to Cooch Behar, Jalpaiguri, Assam's Goalpara district, and beyond, evolving distinct local characteristics along the way.

A Layered Religious World

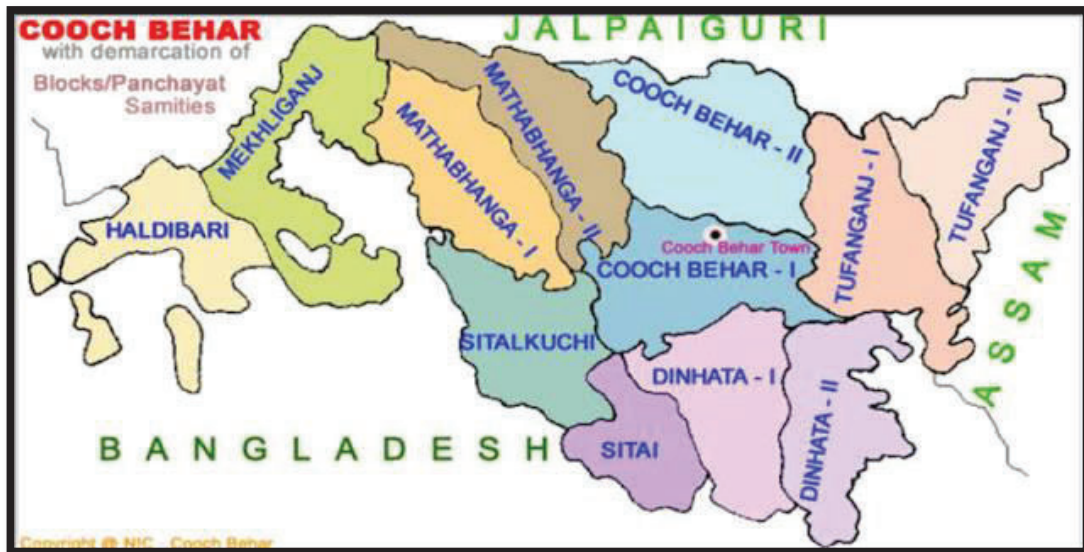
What strikes me most about Rajbongshi religious life is how many different traditions it has absorbed and made its own. Shaivism — devotion to the god Shiva — runs deep here; local tradition holds that the Rajbongshi and Koch people were among Bengal's earliest worshippers of Shiva, who appears in this region under many local names directly tied to the anxieties of

farming life: as Mahakal, a Tiger God protecting against the forests' predators; as the deity propitiated during the spring festival of Bishua to keep snakes at bay; as the unseen force behind rain and harvest.

Layered over this older Shaiva tradition are elements of Shakta worship (particularly devotion to Kali, who here doubles as a goddess of agricultural fertility), strands of Vaishnavism, the deep substrate of Tantric Buddhism that gave rise to Mashan worship, and a thoroughly animistic reverence for trees, rivers, and local spirits — the Tulsi plant in every household courtyard, the ritual 'marriage' of Banyan and Pakur trees, the cloth tied around certain trees to ward off the evil spirits known locally as Jura Banda Thakur. Centuries of coexistence with Muslim neighbours have added further layers still, visible in syncretic figures like Satyapeer and in shared ritual practices such as offering Shirni.

It is out of this dense, layered, often surprising religious world — Shaiva, Shakta, Tantric, animist, and syncretic all at once — that the worship of Mashan, and the art form built around it, eventually emerged.





Rajbongshi people in North Bengal.

CHAPTER 5

Gods of the Soil: Religious Life in Rajbongshi Society

There is an old Bengali saying that there are thirteen festivals in twelve months. Among the Rajbongshi, I sometimes think the true number might be closer to double that. The ritual calendar here is extraordinarily full, and there are good practical reasons for this. Farming leaves long stretches of enforced leisure between planting and harvest, and that leisure has, for generations, been filled with worship, music, dance, and festival. There is also a deeper logic at work: farming is an uncertain business, dependent on rains and seasons no one can control, and ritual has long served as a way of managing that uncertainty — a kind of insurance policy paid in prayer rather than premiums.

Every major puja in Rajbongshi society is conducted by the community's own priests, following lines of ritual knowledge passed down within particular families for generations — a structure that has helped these distinctively local religious forms survive the homogenising pull of mainstream Bengali Hinduism.

The pantheon of deities worshipped is extraordinarily rich and almost entirely local. Teestaburi, goddess of the river Teesta. Satyapeer, the syncretic Hindu-Muslim deity. Gram Thakur, guardian of the village. Gochibuna, protector of cattle. Bishahari, the Rajbongshi counterpart to the snake goddess Manasa, worshipped for protection against the venomous snakes that once filled the region's forests. Amati and Dak Laxmi, goddesses of abundance. Pagalpeer, Saleswari, Gorakhnath, Bhandari, Jiga Thakur — and Mashan, the deity at the centre of this book, whose worship gave rise to one of India's most striking and least-known art forms.



CHAPTER 6

Mashan: The Deity of the Cremation Ground

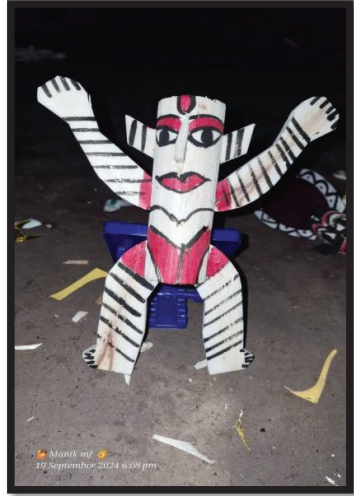
Mashan is not a kind god. Unlike Gram Thakur, the village's gentle guardian, or Amati, the bringer of abundance, Mashan is a deity of danger — associated with the cremation ground (masan, from the Sanskrit smashan), with disease, with misfortune, and with the unsettling boundary between the living and the dead. The Rajbongshi do not worship Mashan out of love. They worship Mashan out of necessity, the way one might be careful around something dangerous rather than affectionate toward something kind.

The belief is straightforward and unsettling: Mashan can fix its gaze on a particular part of the body and cause it harm — a folk version of the evil eye found across cultures from South Asia to the Mediterranean. When illness struck a household, particularly an illness that defied ordinary explanation, the Ojha — the village healer-priest — would diagnose it as Mashan's doing: the deity had been disturbed or neglected, and was taking its revenge.

To understand why Mashan came to occupy this particular role, you have to understand the deeper Tantric tradition that this part of India was famous for. In Tantric belief, the cremation ground is not simply a place of grief — it is a site of concentrated spiritual power, where the boundary between life and death thins and the deities who dwell there are accordingly more potent, capable of greater destruction and, when properly approached, greater healing. Kamrup — the historic name for this stretch of North Bengal and Assam — was one of medieval India's great centres of Tantric practice, and it was this Tantric soil that the worship of Mashan, and eventually the art of Mashan Chitrakala, grew out of.

At the centre of this ritual world stood the Ojha — part healer, part priest, part diagnostician of the supernatural — whose specialised knowledge was passed down through families or through formal initiation. When an Ojha performed a Mashan puja, the painting of the deity was not a backdrop to the ceremony. It was the ceremony's focal point — the visible body Mashan was believed to inhabit for the ritual's duration, the surface through which the Ojha negotiated, on behalf of the suffering family, for the deity's anger to subside.

By the time I began my research, formal Mashan Puja had almost entirely disappeared. Modern medicine offered explanations for illness that no longer required an Ojha's diagnosis. Urban Hindu religious practice, spreading outward from Kolkata and the cities, gradually pushed heterodox local traditions like Mashan worship to the margins. What I know about the ritual itself, I know mostly second-hand — from elderly villagers describing what their parents and grandparents once did, a fragile inheritance of memory rather than living practice. That fragility is, in many ways, the reason this book exists: to put into writing what might otherwise vanish entirely along with the last generation who remember it.



Mashan Deity's and Maa Manosha



Painting(Refarance- Mashan Sola work)

CHAPTER 7

From Tibet to Bengal: The Origins of Mashan Chitrakala

The deepest roots of Mashan Chitrakala lie, surprisingly, far to the north — in the Thangka painting tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Thangkas are the sacred scroll paintings used across Tibet for meditation and ritual: vivid, hierarchically composed images of deities rendered in bold colour and confident line, intended not merely to depict the divine but to make it present and accessible to the viewer. Anyone who places a Mashan painting next to a Thangka will notice the family resemblance immediately — in the strong colour, the bold outline, the central dominant figure surrounded by attendants, and above all in the underlying idea that the image is not a picture of a god but a vessel for one.

How did this Tibetan tradition find its way into the villages of North Bengal? The most plausible route runs along the ancient trade and pilgrimage paths connecting the Himalayan highlands to the Bengal plains — the eastern extensions of what historians often call the Silk Road. These routes carried goods, but they also carried ideas, religious practices, and ritual specialists, and as Tantric Buddhist worship moved south and east, it gradually absorbed and was absorbed by the indigenous folk religion it encountered. The Tibetan demigods of the cremation ground were folded into the existing Rajbongshi spiritual world; the strict iconographic conventions of Buddhist Thangka painting loosened and blended with the bolder, more expressive visual language of Bengali folk art.

Even the deity's name records this journey. 'Masan' is simply the Bengali rendering of the Sanskrit-Hindi *smashan* — cremation ground — the same root that named the Tibetan demigods this tradition descended from. By the time this transformation was complete, Mashan was no longer recognisably Tibetan. It had become entirely Rajbongshi: rooted in the specific landscape, fears, and agricultural rhythms of North Bengal.

The artists who carried this tradition forward were, fittingly, not professional painters but *Malakars* — garland makers, whose traditional occupation of preparing floral offerings for temple deities placed them naturally in the role of creating the painted images required for Mashan worship as well. To this day, when a Malakar artist paints Mashan, they are not engaged in a purely artistic act. They are performing a kind of sacred labour — the same instinct that leads them, even today, to hold the canvas on their knee rather than set it on the ground, in the same gesture of respect a priest might show toward a temple image.

CHAPTER 8

Red, Black, and Gold: The Visual World of Mashan Painting

The first thing anyone notices about a Mashan painting is the colour. The background is almost always a deep, saturated red — a colour that, in Rajbongshi visual language, signals power, danger, and the sacred all at once. Against that red ground, the artist works in a deliberately restricted palette: black for outline and shadow, white for highlight, yellow for divine radiance, green for the occasional naturalistic element. There is nothing accidental about this restraint. It gives the paintings their immediate, almost startling visual force.

The faces are unforgettable. Eyes are enlarged and wide open, staring directly out at the viewer with an expression that mixes supernatural alertness with something close to threat. This is not unskilled drawing — it is a deliberate choice, rooted in the theology of Mashan worship itself. The deity must feel present and watching; its gaze must register on the viewer as a real, potentially dangerous force, not a passive picture to glance at and move past.

The figures themselves are simplified rather than naturalistic — limbs stylised for expressive force rather than anatomical accuracy, hands and feet rendered with bold symbolic emphasis, clothing and ornament suggested through pattern rather than detail. This is the same visual logic found across much of India's folk art: clarity and impact take precedence over illusionistic realism.

As for subject matter, the core of the Mashan repertoire centres on the deity's various forms: Dola Kali, a fierce protective and destructive manifestation of Kali; Bhadra Kali, combining beneficence and terror; Panch Paire Mashan, the 'five-footed Mashan,' considered especially powerful; Nengha Mashan; Crematorium Mashan; and Mansa Devi, the snake goddess, worshipped both for protection and for fertility. Beyond these strictly ritual subjects, Malakar artists also paint weddings, births, and festival scenes, borrowing the same bold visual vocabulary developed for the deities and applying it to the wider life of the community.

All of this is built from entirely natural materials. The traditional surface is shola pith — the spongy core of a wetland plant that the Malakar community, as garland makers, already knew intimately — along with silk cloth and, occasionally, paper. Pigments came from turmeric root for yellow, Aparajita flower petals for blue, lamp soot for black, red earth for the iconic background, and rice paste or ground chalk for white. Brushes, until very recently, were entirely handmade by the artists themselves. And in a final flourish of skill that always astonishes me, many Malakar artists are sculptors as well as painters, carving three-dimensional shola figures from the same material they paint on — sometimes painting one side of a sheet of shola while carving a figure from the other.

CHAPTER 9

The Painting as Living God

It would be a mistake to think of a Mashan painting as art in the sense most readers are used to — something made for aesthetic pleasure, signed by an individual creator expressing a personal vision. For a Malakar artist, making a Mashan painting is a sacred act, governed by inherited convention and a real sense of responsibility. The artist is not depicting Mashan. In the belief of the community, they are calling Mashan into presence — giving the deity a body through which it can act in the world.

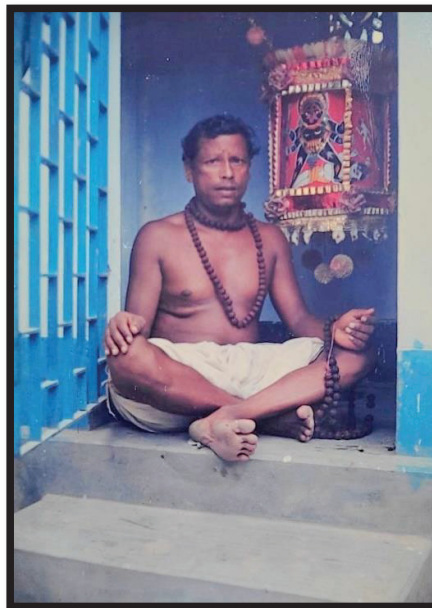
This belief shapes everything about how the paintings are made and handled. They cannot be placed on bare ground, which is considered ritually impure. They must be kept somewhere clean and treated with care. Once finished, they are worshipped, not merely displayed. When a Malakar artist rests the canvas on their knee while painting rather than on the floor, this is not a quirk of working posture — it is an act of reverence, performed instinctively, the same gesture a priest might make before a temple idol.

Historically, the primary purpose of these paintings was healing. When sickness entered a home, the Ojha would bring a Mashan painting and conduct a ritual built around it — offerings of food, flowers, and incense directed at the painting as a way of appeasing the deity believed responsible for the illness. The patient's family took part not as passive bystanders but as active participants in negotiating, through the painting, with the supernatural force at the centre of their suffering. When entire villages faced disease or misfortune, communal versions of this ritual drew the wider community together in shared supplication.

Mashan paintings also marked life's major transitions. Images of Mansa Devi and Dola Kali were honoured throughout the year but given special prominence before weddings and other significant ceremonies — protective presences invoked at exactly the moments of greatest vulnerability and change in a person's life. Birth, marriage, illness, death: in Rajbongshi belief, these are also the moments of greatest supernatural exposure, and it is precisely at these moments that Mashan Chitrakala has historically done its most important work.



Dola Kali Paintings



Mashan Pujari (Ojha)

CHAPTER 10

Beyond Jalpaiguri: Mashan Chitrakala Across India

Although Jalpaiguri remains the undisputed heartland of Mashan Chitrakala, the tradition extends well beyond this single district, following the wider distribution of the Rajbongshi and Koch communities themselves. I have found evidence of related practices in Cooch Behar and Darjeeling, in the Goalpara and Kamrup districts of Assam, in the Purnia and Kishanganj districts of Bihar, and across the border in the Rangpur and Rajshahi regions of Bangladesh.

What is striking is how much regional variation exists within what is, at root, a single shared tradition. The Jalpaiguri style I have focused on throughout this book is bold, expressive, and built around the deep red ground and the central figures of Panch Paire Mashan and Dola Kali. The Cooch Behar tradition tends to be more refined and decorative, likely reflecting the influence of the sophisticated court culture once patronised by the Koch royal family. In Assam, Mashan painting often absorbs elements of the local Bihu festival tradition and mainstream Bengali Shakta iconography, producing a hybrid look distinct from the North Bengal style. Across the border in Bangladesh, the tradition has mixed further still with other regional folk arts, including Pata painting and Nakshi Kantha embroidery.

These are not minor stylistic quirks. They reflect genuinely different histories, ritual practices, and community structures, and each deserves far more documentation than it has so far received. I hope this book is only a starting point — that others, in time, will travel to Cooch Behar, to Goalpara, to Rangpur, and bring back fuller accounts of how Mashan Chitrakala has developed in each of these places.



CHAPTER 11

Mashan Chitrakala and Kalighat Painting

Kalighat painting is probably the closest cousin Mashan Chitrakala has within Bengal's own folk art history, and the comparison is instructive precisely because of how far the two traditions eventually diverged. Kalighat painting grew up around the famous Kali temple in nineteenth-century Kolkata, created by Patuas — scroll painters from rural Bengal who migrated to the city and adapted their traditional craft to a new, urban, paying audience of pilgrims.

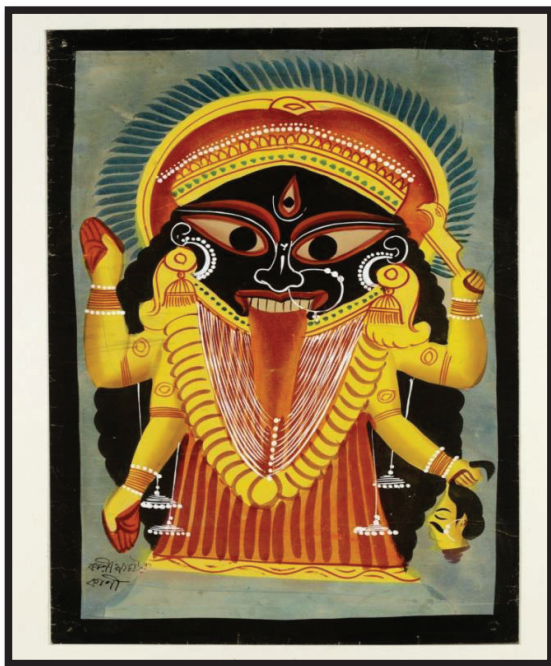
Both traditions share deep roots in the older Bengali scroll-painting tradition of Pata, both favour bold outlines over fine detail, and both relied originally on natural, homemade pigments — Kalighat artists, like Malakar artists, used turmeric for yellow, Aparajita petals for blue, and lamp soot for black. There the similarities largely end.

Kalighat painting was, from its very first documented appearance, a market tradition — made on mill paper for sale to visitors, evolving quickly to include not just gods and epic scenes but social satire responsive to the tastes of an urban audience. Mashan Chitrakala remained, by contrast, rural, ritual, and resolutely non-commercial throughout almost its entire history, made not to be sold but to be worshipped. Where the Kalighat painter had real freedom to experiment and respond to demand, the Malakar artist worked — and largely still works — within iconographic conventions handed down through generations, bound by obligations the Kalighat tradition never had to observe.

Feature	Mashan Chitrakala	Kalighat Painting
Setting	Rural, ritual, community-based	Urban, market-driven
Surface	Shola pith, silk cloth, paper	Mill-made paper
Colours	Natural organic pigments	Natural dyes, later commercial
Purpose	Healing ritual, sacred use	Sale to pilgrims, social commentary
Audience	Village community, worshippers	Urban buyers, pilgrims
Subjects	Tantric folk deities, the Mashan cult	Hindu gods, epic scenes



Masban Chitrakala



Kalighat painting



CHAPTER 12

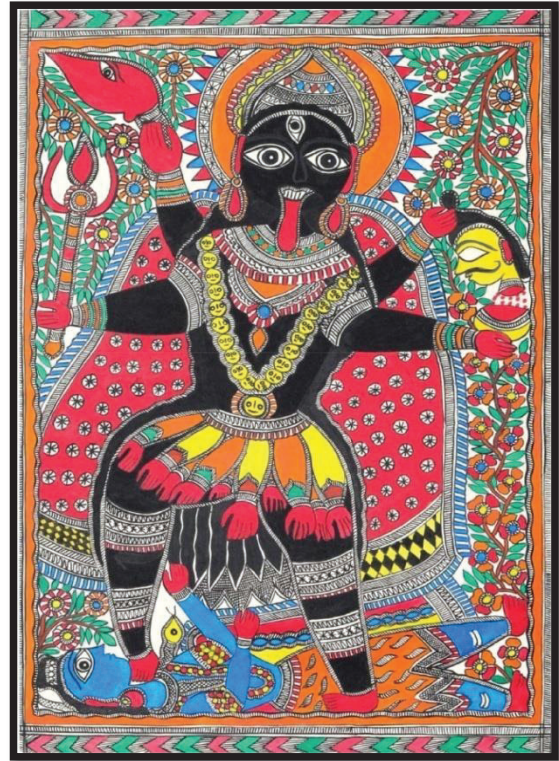
Mashan Chitrakala and Madhubani Painting

Of all India's celebrated folk art forms, Madhubani painting is perhaps the one I find myself thinking about most when I consider what Mashan Chitrakala might one day become. Madhubani, or Mithila art, comes from the Mithila region of Bihar and southern Nepal, traditionally practised by women on the walls and floors of their homes to mark weddings, festivals, and births. It was largely unknown outside its own region until the art historian William Archer documented it after the devastating Bihar earthquake of 1934 — a single moment of attention that eventually carried the tradition to national and international fame.

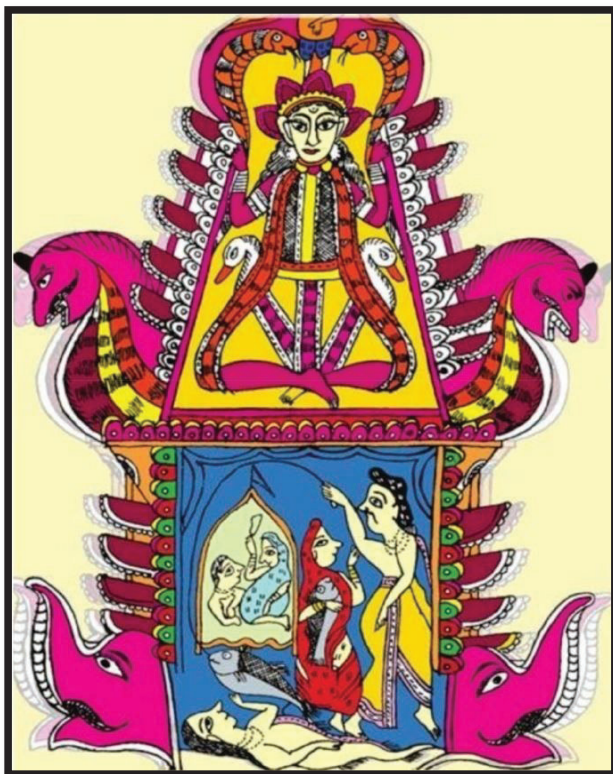
The parallels with Mashan Chitrakala are genuinely striking. Both grew out of ritual rather than commerce. Both rely on natural, homemade pigments. Both were made by people who never thought of themselves as professional artists. Both use bold outline and saturated colour rather than naturalistic shading. And both mark the same kinds of moments — birth, marriage, the boundary points of human life — with sacred imagery meant to protect and bless.

The differences are just as telling. Madhubani is a women's art form, made within the domestic sphere; Mashan Chitrakala has historically been made by men, within a healing-ritual context performed by the Ojha. Madhubani composition fills every available space with pattern, leaving no gap empty; Mashan composition does the opposite, focusing attention on a single dominant deity against an open red ground. And while Madhubani found its champion in 1934 and has never looked back, Mashan Chitrakala is, as I write this, still waiting for its moment of wider recognition.

Feature	Mashan Chitrakala	Madhubani Painting
Region	North Bengal, Assam, Bihar	Mithila, Bihar, Nepal
Made by	Malakar men (garland makers)	Women of Mithila
Surface	Shola, silk cloth, paper	Walls, floors, handmade paper
Composition	Central deity, open ground	Dense, space-filling pattern
Recognition	Still largely unknown	National and international fame
Commercial status	Just emerging, still contested	Established, thriving market



Madhubani painting



Mashan Chitrakala



CHAPTER 13

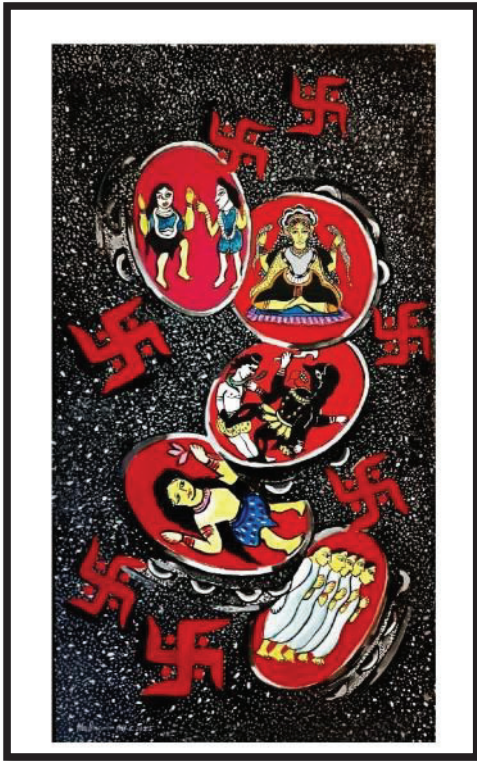
Mashan Chitrakala and Gond Art

Gond painting comes from the Gondi people of central India, mainly Madhya Pradesh, one of the country's largest tribal communities. It is built on an entirely different aesthetic philosophy from Mashan Chitrakala: rather than bold flat colour and a single dominant figure, Gond art fills every surface with intricate, rhythmic patterns of dots and dashes, expressing the community's animistic belief in the interconnectedness of all living things and the conviction that simply viewing a good image brings good fortune.

Placing Mashan Chitrakala next to Gond art highlights, for me, two genuinely different ways that tribal spirituality can express itself visually. Gond art is world-affirming — a celebration of nature's abundance and intricacy. Mashan Chitrakala is world-confronting — an engagement with danger, illness, and the forces that threaten human life. One says: look how beautifully everything connects. The other says: beware, and show respect.

Gond art has also travelled a path that Mashan Chitrakala has not yet had the chance to follow. It achieved national and international commercial success decades ago, in part because its visual style translates so easily into contemporary design. That success has brought real income to Gond artists, even as it has raised its own questions about mass production and the dilution of meaning — questions I will return to later in this book, because I believe Mashan Chitrakala will eventually have to navigate the same terrain.

Feature	Mashan Chitrakala	Gond Tribal Art
Region	North Bengal	Central India (Madhya Pradesh)
Background	Bright red	White or vibrant solid colours
Line work	Bold lines, flat colour	Intricate dots and dashes
Subjects	Tantric deities, fierce forms	Flora, fauna, folklore
Composition	Focused central deity	Space-filling texture
Recognition	Hidden, just emerging	National and international fame



Mashan Chitrakala



Gond painting



CHAPTER 14

Mashan Chitrakala and Warli Art

Warli painting, from the Warli tribe of the North Sahyadri Range in Maharashtra, may be the most instantly recognisable folk art tradition in India — spare white rice-paste figures of circles, triangles, and squares painted onto a red or brown earth ground, traditionally made by women to mark harvests, weddings, and seasonal festivals.

Set beside Warli art, Mashan Chitrakala reveals the full emotional range that Indian folk art is capable of. Warli is the art of cosmic order: geometric, calm, celebrating the harmony between human community and the natural world. Mashan Chitrakala is the art of cosmic disorder: vivid, confrontational, engaging directly with sickness, danger, and the unpredictable forces that threaten that same harmony. Where Warli paintings document the rhythms of harvest and community dance, Mashan paintings document the moments when those rhythms break down and supernatural intervention becomes necessary.

Both traditions, despite their very different visual languages, share an absolute reliance on natural, locally available materials and on knowledge passed down within families and communities rather than taught in any formal school. And both now face the same fundamental question, which Warli has already largely answered through decades of successful commercialisation: how does a sacred, community-rooted art form survive contact with the modern market without losing what made it sacred in the first place?

Feature	Mashan Chitrakala	Warli Tribal Art
Region	North Bengal	Maharashtra, Dadra & Nagar Haveli
Made by	Malakar men	Warli women
Palette	Red, black, white, yellow, green	White on red or brown earth
Forms	Figurative, complex, divine	Geometric, abstract, human
Themes	Healing, fierce Tantric deities	Harvest, weddings, dance, nature
Purpose	Ritual healing, sacred	Seasonal celebration



Mashan Chitrakala



Warli painting



CHAPTER 15

Meeting the Malakars: Voices from the Villages

Rajganj

Rajganj, in Jalpaiguri District, is where this journey began for me, and it remains one of the most important centres of Malakar artistic life today. It was here that I met Sudhir Malakar, son of the late Maheshwar Malakar — an artist who learned his craft from parents and grandparents who still lived inside the world of active Mashan worship, even as he himself now practises the art mainly as a cultural and artistic pursuit rather than an active ritual one. Talking with Sudhir, I came to appreciate just how much historical knowledge he carries: he can describe ritual contexts and iconographic conventions in detail that few outside his family would know, even as he navigates a present in which that ritual world has largely receded.

In the same village I met Tapan Malakar and Shraban Malakar, sons of the late Kaleshwar Malakar, and Tapan's son Shusanto Malakar — a young man who has completed his secondary education, continues to work as a Malakar artist despite real economic hardship, has trained and performed as an Ojha, and is, almost as an aside, a talented footballer who has played in state-level tournaments. Meeting Shusanto, I felt acutely the gap between his evident talent and the unprivileged circumstances he still lives in — a gap I hope this book, in some small way, helps to close.

Bodhinath (Malipara)

In Bodhinath, I found the family of the late Sokhain Malakar: his son Firen Malakar and Firen's wife Rina Malakar, both around sixty years old, both still working as Malakar artists while also labouring in the local tea gardens each morning. Their skill is, in a word, magnificent — the kind of confident, practised line work that only decades of dedication produce. Their son Gangadhar, about thirty, divides his time between tea garden labour and Malakar art just as his father does. Their daughter Bishika, fifteen when I first met her, attends the village school and helps her family with their art in the evenings, already making remarkably beautiful small shola sculptures of her own.

Malipara (Gauri Haat)

In the Gauri Haat area of Malipara, I met Basanto Malakar and his son Pabitro, who combine tea garden work with a wider range of artistic materials than most Malakar families I encountered — sculpting not only in shola but in clay and bamboo, a versatility that reflects the Malakar community's traditional skill at fashioning ritual objects from whatever the natural environment provides.

Across all these villages, what struck me most was a pattern of extraordinary resilience paired with precarious survival. Every artist I met combines Malakar art with some form of physical labour simply to get by. Every family carries deep knowledge that is at real risk of disappearing within a generation or two. And every one of them continues to paint anyway — out of habit, out of pride, out of love for an inheritance that deserves, I believe, far more support than it currently receives.

CHAPTER 16

Brushes, Canvas, and Hope: My Workshops with the Artists

Between 2018 and 2026, I organised eight workshops with Malakar artists across Rajganj, Bodhinath, and Malipara, along with exhibitions and presentations in Kolkata and Delhi. I went into these sessions determined not to teach anyone how to paint — the skill already in these villages far exceeded anything I could have offered — but simply to put new materials into the artists' hands and see what they made of them.

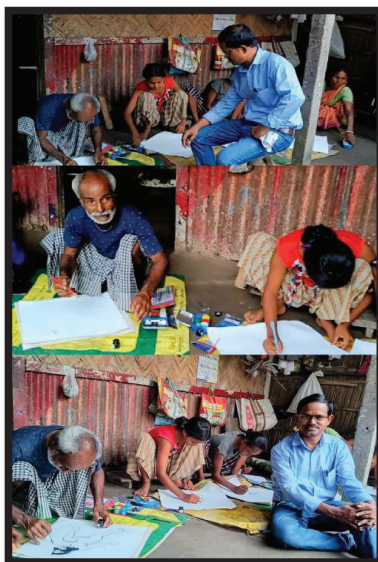
The biggest single change I introduced was acrylic paint on stretched canvas, in place of the traditional shola pith, silk, and natural pigment. For most of the artists, the very first workshop was the first time in their lives they had worked on a full-sized canvas at all. Shusanto told me he had only ever used natural colours on small sheets of white paper before. Bikash and Monu said much the same — that they had never before worked on cloth or canvas of any kind. Sudhir Malakar put it plainly to me: they had never even seen a full-sized canvas before, and learning to manage a brush across that much surface was genuinely difficult at first.

Watching them adapt was one of the most rewarding parts of this entire project. Some artists made the transition almost immediately, carrying their confident line and flat colour straight onto the new surface. Others found the scale and texture disorienting and preferred to keep working on paper even after they had grown more comfortable with canvas. What never changed, regardless of the material, was the artists' instinct for ritual respect — the canvas still resting on the knee rather than the floor, clean water kept nearby, the same seriousness brought to a deity painted in acrylic as to one painted in natural pigment on shola.

Alongside the materials, I made it a point to support the artists economically. At every workshop I donated brushes, paints, and canvas. I purchased finished works at prices above the local market rate, both as a gesture of respect and as a practical contribution to their household income. I helped connect several of the artists to galleries, exhibitions, and journalists in Kolkata and Delhi, and a number of Bengali newspapers, magazines, and television channels have since covered these workshops, bringing a degree of public attention that the artists themselves found both gratifying and genuinely useful. I am now working to place examples of their work in a government museum collection, and to bring Malakar artists into art colleges for further workshops — steps I believe are essential if this tradition is going to survive into the next generation.



Rural Market, West Bengal



Gouri Haat & Mali para Village Malakars (Artist)

CHAPTER 17

Art for Sale: Commercialisation and Its Costs

Mashan Chitrakala is, slowly but unmistakably, entering the market. New-generation artists are painting in the traditional style for sale in street markets and online, and some towns now invite Malakar artists to decorate Durga Puja pandals during festival season — a context entirely removed from the original healing ritual the art form grew out of.

This shift has not gone unquestioned within the community, and I do not think it should. Those in favour of commercialisation make an argument I find hard to dismiss: without income, artists cannot afford to keep painting, and without practising artists, the tradition simply ends. From this view, the market is not a threat to Mashan Chitrakala — it may be the only thing capable of saving it. Those who are more cautious point out that a painting made quickly for a street stall, without ritual preparation or sacred intent, risks becoming little more than a decorative imitation of Mashan Chitrakala — borrowing its look while losing what actually made it meaningful.

My own view, formed over years of watching this play out in real villages with real families who need real income, is that these two positions do not have to be opposites. The goal, as I see it, is to build forms of support that give artists a genuine livelihood without forcing them to strip the sacred content out of their work to satisfy a market that does not understand or value it. Government schemes, museum acquisitions, academic documentation, and partnerships with art institutions can all help create an economic space for Mashan Chitrakala that does not depend entirely on street-market sales and the pressures toward simplification that inevitably come with them.



CHAPTER 18

A Tradition on the Edge: Challenges and the Path Forward

I do not want to end this book without being honest about how fragile this tradition currently is. The ritual ecosystem that originally gave Mashan Chitrakala its purpose — Mashan Puja, performed by Ojhas in homes across North Bengal — has almost entirely disappeared, leaving the art form to find new justifications for its own survival. Every Malakar family I met during my research lives with real economic hardship, supplementing whatever income their art brings with tea garden labour that leaves little time or energy for sustained creative work. And the knowledge itself — pigment preparation, brush-making, iconographic convention, ritual protocol — survives mainly in the memories of older artists, with no guarantee that it will be passed on before it is lost.

None of this is irreversible, but it does require action, and soon. In the near term, I believe the most urgent priorities are simple: systematic documentation of the remaining practitioners and their knowledge, direct economic support through fair purchase and market access, and structured mentorship that connects senior artists with younger family members willing to learn.

Looking further ahead, I would like to see Mashan Chitrakala included under India's Geographical Indication framework, which offers legal recognition and protection to cultural products tied to a specific community and place. I would like to see a dedicated archive and documentation centre established somewhere in North Bengal, and Mashan Chitrakala included in the curriculum of art colleges across West Bengal, so that knowledge of this tradition is no longer confined entirely to the Malakar community itself.

At the national level, the Ministry of Culture already runs schemes — including the Scheme of Financial Assistance for Promotion of Art and Culture — that could be extended explicitly to support Mashan Chitrakala and similarly endangered folk traditions. I would urge the Ministry to consider a dedicated scheme for art forms at genuine risk of disappearing within a single generation, rather than waiting until they have vanished to mourn their loss.

Museums, too, have a role to play. The acquisition of Mashan paintings and sculptures by major collections — the National Museum, the National Gallery of Modern Art, regional institutions across North Bengal — would provide both income to the artists whose work is acquired and a permanent record of the tradition within India's national cultural memory. Securing such acquisitions remains one of my own ongoing goals, and one I hope this book will help advance.

CHAPTER 19

Why This Art Still Matters Today

It would be easy to think of Mashan Chitrakala as a relic — a curiosity from a vanishing rural past with little relevance to contemporary life. I do not believe that, and I want to use this chapter to explain why.

Contemporary art and contemporary thought are, in many ways, deeply preoccupied with exactly the questions Mashan Chitrakala has always engaged with: the nature of the sacred, the relationship between an image and the thing it represents, the connection between art and community rather than art and the isolated individual genius. The Malakar belief that a painting is not a picture of a god but the god's actual living presence speaks directly to debates that contemporary art philosophy is still having about what an artwork really is. The Malakar practice of painting and sculpting simultaneously from the same material speaks directly to contemporary interest in the relationship between two and three dimensions.

There is an environmental dimension here too, one I find myself thinking about more and more. The Malakar tradition of using entirely natural, locally sourced materials — shola pith, organic pigment, handmade brushes — is, in its own quiet way, a model of ecological practice: art that depends on and expresses a real relationship with a specific natural environment, rather than art manufactured from materials shipped in from elsewhere. The Madhubani tradition once used painted images of deities to protect trees from deforestation in Bihar, because people would not cut down a tree adorned with a god. I think there is real potential for something similar with Mashan Chitrakala, given how deeply this tradition is already rooted in the forests and wetlands of North Bengal.

And there is a question of fairness. India's cultural policy formally commits to supporting the country's diverse folk and tribal art traditions, but in practice, recognition and resources have flowed overwhelmingly to the handful of traditions that found early champions — Madhubani, Warli, Gond — while traditions tied to communities with even less visibility, like the Rajbongshi Malakars, have been left almost entirely without support. Giving Mashan Chitrakala the recognition it deserves is not only about preserving a beautiful art form. It is about recognising that the artistic achievements of a marginalised farming community are every bit as worthy of national pride as those of any other community in India.

CHAPTER 20

Gathering Scattered Seeds

I began this book by describing how I came to Mashan Chitrakala almost by accident, looking for folk artists whose work had never been written about. Eight years later, I can say with confidence that what I found in those villages is one of the most powerful and least recognised art traditions in India — a tradition born from the unlikely meeting of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and Bengali folk religion, carried forward for generations by farmers and tea-garden labourers who never thought of themselves as professional artists, and now standing at a genuine crossroads between disappearance and survival.

The history I have traced in this book shows Mashan Chitrakala as an achievement of remarkable cultural synthesis. The comparisons I have drawn with Kalighat, Madhubani, Gond, and Warli painting show that it occupies a place in India's folk art landscape that no other tradition quite fills — defined by its Tantric content, its healing function, and its specific materials in ways that set it apart even from its closest cousins. And the time I have spent with the Malakar artists themselves — Sudhir, Firen, Rina, Gangadhar, Shusanto, Basanto, Pabitra, young Bishika — has shown me a living tradition, sustained against real economic odds by people whose devotion to their inherited art deserves to be called nothing less than heroic.

I do not think the choice between economic survival and spiritual integrity is as stark as it sometimes appears. With the right institutional support — museum acquisitions, education programmes, research, fair market access — I believe Mashan Chitrakala can find a sustainable place in the contemporary world without losing what makes it sacred. But that support has to arrive soon. The artists I have written about in this book are not young. The knowledge they carry is not written down anywhere else. The window during which full documentation and real support remain possible is closing, year by year.

I described my own work, earlier in this book, as picking up scattered seeds — gathering the fragments of a tradition that history has dispersed and diminished, and trying to bring them back together into something that can grow again. I want to end with the same image, because I think it captures something true about the Malakar artists themselves. The people who make this art are not, in any conventional sense, artists by profession. They are farmers, labourers, garland makers, occasionally priests. And yet, in the middle of the ordinary necessities of survival, they have kept alive an extraordinary artistic consciousness, passed from hand to hand, simply because the need to make sense of fear, illness, and the unseen world never went away.

That is what this book has tried to honour. I hope that by writing it, I have done some small part to ensure that Mashan Chitrakala — and the families who have kept it alive against every odd — finally receive the recognition, the support, and the lasting place in India's cultural story that they have always deserved.

About the Author



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Madhusudan Das is a distinguished Indian painter, scholar, and cultural ambassador born on 18th December 1973. He completed his Bachelor of Fine Arts (Hons) and Master of Fine Arts (Hons) from Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan — the legendary institution founded by Rabindranath Tagore in West Bengal.

A National Scholarship holder from the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, he was also awarded the Merit Scholarship from Kala Bhavan in 1992 and the Gold Medal at the All India Art Festival, Andhra Pradesh, in 1995. He holds the Senior Fellowship from the Centre for Cultural Resources and Training (CCRT), Ministry of Culture, Government of India.

Over his distinguished career, Madhusudan Das has presented his work in numerous solo and group exhibitions across India and internationally. His works have been exhibited in Singapore, London, and New York, as well as at the National Museum in Dhaka (organised by the Indian High Commission, 2017), the American Embassy in New Delhi (2017), the Indian High Commission in Malaysia (2019), and the ICCR Nehru Centre, London (2019).

Beyond his practice as an artist, he is a dedicated educator who has conducted art workshops at leading institutions including Banaras Hindu University, OP Jindal Global University, MSU Baroda, the University of Jammu, and numerous schools across Delhi and Uttar Pradesh.

In recent years, he has been honoured with the Rashtriya Gaurav Samman (SKFI NITI Aayog, Delhi), the Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan Memorial National Award (IARDO, Delhi), the Rabindranath Tagore Banga Sahitya Kala Samman (World Book of Star Records, Kolkata, 2025), the Grand Master "MICHELANGELO" Award (Kala Kunj Foundation, Rajasthan, 2025), and the Atal Samman (LTG Auditorium, New Delhi, 2026).

"Parallel to my studio practice, I am an influential educator and independent researcher dedicated to pedagogical outreach and the preservation of indigenous art forms. I have conducted impactful art workshops at numerous recognized central and government universities, as well as various schools and colleges across India. Recently, I have finished writing my first book, which is the result of my dedicated 20-22 years of research on the Masaan art form of the Rajbanshi community from North Bengal. My goal is to connect this unique artistic tradition with Indian contemporary art and present it on the national and international stage, ensuring that this rich cultural heritage receives the global recognition it truly deserves."

Further Reading

This book draws on years of personal fieldwork in the villages of Jalpaiguri District, alongside a handful of published sources that informed its historical and comparative chapters. Readers wishing to explore further may find the following useful.

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