

TRANSFORMING THE BRIDE:
GAURI PUJA IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY MITHILA PAINTING

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ABSTRACT

TAMMI M. OWENS: Transforming the Bride: Gauri Puja in Early Twentieth-Century Mithila Painting (Under the direction of Dr. Pika Ghosh)

This project investigates depictions of Gauri Puja, an offering of gratitude to the goddess Gauri (Parvati) in *kohbar ghar* (marriage house) wedding murals designed and executed by women during the four-day Hindu marriage ceremony in the Mithila region of Bihar, India. Drawing upon William G. Archer's 1940 photographs of these murals in Darbhanga district, some of the earliest images of painted interiors from the region, I analyze the depicted narratives. I investigate the relationship between the iconography of the depicted figures and the wedding ceremony for which this space is painted and prepared.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	vi
Chapter	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. HISTORIOGRAPHY	4
III. APPROACH	10
IV. THE WEDDING MURALS	14
The Gauri Puja mural in the household of Mohan Lal Das	14
The marriage of Shiva and Parvati.....	20
The processional mural in the household of Ram Adin Das	23
Young Krishna on a swing.....	25
V. CONCLUSION.....	32
FIGURES	34
REFERENCES	45

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1.	<i>Kamalban</i> (lotus circle).....	34
2.	Bridal Party with Shiva and Parvati.....	35
3.	Clay elephant used in wedding ritual.....	36
4.	Bridegroom with bride and attendants.	37
5.	<i>Vidkari</i> and attendants.....	38
6.	Attendants with young Krishna on a swing	39
7.	Hand fan.....	40
8.	Two attendants with plate and elephant.....	41
9.	Krishna in a wooden cradle in Puttupattu, Tamilnadu, July 1981	42
10.	Baby Krishna on a swing	43
11.	Hindola Raga. Folio from a <i>ragamala</i> series.....	44

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The wife of the bride's brother
Comes to paint the bridal chamber
Red paint in her hand
Betel juice in her mouth.
"O wife of the bride's brother,
Paint the chamber
So that it charms the eyes,
O wife of the bride's brother
On the walls of the chamber
Paint the ideal marriage
Between the bamboo and the lotuses,
In this room the bridegroom
Will sleep with his queen."¹

This song, one of many sung by women as the bridegroom and bride enter the *kohbar ghar* (marriage house), calls attention to the mural paintings created for weddings in the cultural region of Mithila in Bihar, India.² In the paintings, narrative scenes of the impending earthly wedding share wall space with Hindu gods and goddesses. Parrots, cobras, turtles, and fish are paired off on every wall, while women with voluminous veils billowing over their bowed heads are painted in scene after scene. Images of profuse lotus blossoms paired with leafy tendrils wind around doorjambs and creep up corners

¹ William G. Archer, *Songs for the Bride: Wedding Rites of Rural India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 113.

² The cultural region of Mithila is typically located by scholars in the Terai region at the foothills of the Himalayas, between India and Nepal, demarcated by the Ganga, Gandak, and Kosi rivers. See, for example, Pupil Jayakar, *The Earth Mother: Legends, Goddesses, and Ritual Arts of India* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 103. Mithila painting is also known as Madhubani painting, which links the practice to the district in Bihar, the state in north India where most of the commercialized artistic production continues today.

long after weddings are over. For generations, women have handed down such complex sets of narrative and decorative motifs to adorn the home for ritual events such as weddings, births, tonsures, or sacred thread ceremonies.³ In Maithil households to this day, human practice coalesces with divine blessing as the rich designs emerge on the walls of the interior courtyard, the *gosaun ghar* (shrine house), and the *kohbar ghar* during family celebrations.

This project investigates the depiction of wedding rituals painted by women in the *kohbar ghar* during the four-day Hindu marriage ceremony. Drawing upon William G. Archer's 1940 photographs of these murals in Darbhanga district, some of the earliest images of painted interiors from the region, I analyze the depicted narratives. I investigate the relationship between the iconography of the depicted figures and the wedding ceremony for which this space is painted and prepared. Few scholars have closely examined narrative scenes like Gauri Puja, an offering of gratitude to the goddess Gauri, an aspect of Parvati, in the *kohbar ghar*. Scholars have focused instead on other issues including: the artistic merit of a village-based craft; the codification of caste styles; the identification of decorative forms, particularly the tantric symbolism of the vegetal motifs; the modernization of Mithila and its art; and the improvement of the lives of the artists through their art.

In Mithila painting, the female painters act as transformative figures in a liminal space. They paint themselves, or their roles, into narrative scenes that are previews of the wedding to come. These narrative scenes appear on the walls of the *kohbar ghar* along with representations of gods and goddesses. Through a careful examination of two

³ The murals are executed in conjunction with floor paintings called *aripan*.

depictions of Gauri Puja, I argue that the paintings designed by the women of the households present the bride in a transitional state between daughter and wife. I further suggest that representations of the wedding party combined with gods and goddesses on the walls of the *kohbar ghar* sanctify and legitimize the ritual events that take place in this space. Finally, I propose that the gods and goddesses, combined with the vegetal and animal motifs, represent an ideal marriage and bless the bride and groom with fertility and male children.

CHAPTER TWO

HISTORIOGRAPHY

In the corpus of scholarly work on Mithila painting, art-historical analyses have not explicitly addressed depictions of the bridegroom and bride in the *kohbar ghar* in the context of the wedding ceremony. The studies have debated the tantric symbolism of the vegetal forms in the *kohbar ghar*, discussed the artistic merits of a village-based craft, and focused on the improvement of the lives of the artists through the commercialization of their art.⁴ Although four key scholars, William Archer, Yves Véquaud, Carolyn Brown Heinz, and Jyotindra Jain, advanced the argument that the murals in the *kohbar ghar* are

⁴ For a summary of the scholarship on the tantric symbolism of Mithila painting, see Carolyn Henning Brown, "Folk Art and the Art Books: Who Speaks for the Traditional Artists?," *Modern Asian Studies* 16 (1982): 519-22; idem, "Contested Meanings: Tantra and the Poetics of Mithila Art," *American Ethnologist* 23 (1996): 717-37; Yves Véquaud, *Women Painters of Mithila* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977). Carolyn Brown Heinz has also published under the names Carolyn Henning, Carolyn Henning Brown, and Carolyn Heinz. For the discussion of the paintings' artistic merit, see Richard H. Davis, "From the Wedding Chamber to the Museum: Relocating the Ritual Arts of Madhubani," in *What's the Use of Art? Asian Visual and Material Culture in Context*, ed. Morgan Pitelka Jan Mrázek (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); Pupul Jayakar, *Festival of India in the United States, 1985-1986* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1985); idem, *The Earthen Drum: An Introduction to the Ritual Arts of Rural India* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1980); Stella Kramrisch, *Unknown India: Ritual Art in Tribe and Village* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1968); Smithsonian Institution, *Aditi: The Living Arts of India* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1985); Upendra Thakur, *Madhubani Painting* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1981). For the commercialization of Mithila painting, what Mani Shekhar Singh calls the "commodity phase," see Katharine Helen Bevington, "Madhubani Painting: Women, Art and Modernization in the Fourth World." M.A. Thesis. (University of California, Berkeley, 1989); Nabakumar Duary, "Creativity and Excellence of Rural Female Folk in Madhubani Painting," *The Journal of the Anthropological Survey of India* 51 (2002): 35-76; Lynn M. Hart, "Three Walls: Regional Aesthetics and the International Art World," in *The Traffic in Culture: Refiguring Art and Anthropology*, ed. George E. Marcus and Fred R. Myers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995): 127-50; Ratnadhara Jha, "Mithila Paintings," in *Lesser Known Forms of Performing Arts in India*, ed. Mukhopadhyay Durgadas (New Delhi: Sterling, 1978): 38-44; Mani Shekhar Singh, "A Journey into Pictorial Space: Poetics of Frame and Field in Maithil Painting," *Contributions to Indian Sociology* 34, no. 3 (2000): 409-42; David Szanton and Malini Bakshi, *Mithila Painting: The Evolution of an Art Form* (San Francisco: Ethnic Arts Foundation: Pink Mango, 2007).

a vital part of the performed ritual, they chose to analyze the vegetal and animal forms rather than the narratives featuring the bridegroom and bride.⁵

William G. Archer is the museum curator and art historian often credited with the European “discovery” of the murals in 1934.⁶ While he was an officer with the India Civil Service, and later, Keeper of the Indian Section at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Archer researched and documented painting, poetry, and song in villages throughout Bihar.⁷ Archer sought to define Mithila painting as an art form using profuse description and rigorous classificatory systems.⁸ Archer created two subject categories: “heavenly forms” and “strictly selected vegetable and animal forms,” which he perceived as distinct

⁵ Pupul Jayakar was also a strong force in the history of Mithila painting. Many scholars know Pupul Jayakar as an author, activist, and official with a critical role in the transformation of Mithila art into a commercial endeavor. Jayakar was head of the All India Handicrafts Board in 1968 when a drought reached its peak in Bihar, driving the poor communities around Madhubani district deeper into poverty. To spur economic growth, Jayakar created a government assistance program for the women painters of Mithila by urging them to paint on government-issued paper. The government then purchased these new “handiworks” for export, thus giving women who would not normally work outside the home a way to increase their household income. See Jayakar, *The Earthen Drum*, 96.

⁶ Archer was stationed in Madhubani district as a subdivisional officer of the Indian Civil Service in north central Bihar when an earthquake cracked open the mud homes in villages throughout the district. Archer noted in his memoirs that he was “entranced” by the Madhubani murals during his first tour of the district in 1934. Contrasting his “modern” self with the “medieval attitude” of the paintings, Archer described his first meeting with Mithila painting in terms befitting a long-lost love: “What they took for granted, I considered superb. They were unconscious, I was conscious. But whether deliberate or accidental, the art was there and it made us one. I had never felt myself so much a Maithil as on that day when faced with shattered walls, I saw the beauty on the mud.” Archer, who was uncomfortable with the life of a typical ICS officer, found in Mithila painting a connection to the everyday lives of the residents of rural Bihar. In 1940, Archer, then the Provincial Census Superintendent, returned to the villages, photographed the murals, and acquired a collection of what he termed aides-memoire, or paper sketches, of the designs women used to recreate the ritual images from their natal homes. W. G. Archer and Mildred Archer, *India Served and Observed* (London: BACSA, 1994), 53-58.

⁷ For his work on Mithila painting, see W. G. Archer, “Maithil Painting,” *Marg* 3 (1949): 24-33; idem, *India and Modern Art* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1959); idem, *Songs for the Bride*; Archer and Archer, *India Served*. Also see Mildred Archer, “Painting,” *Marg* 20 (1966): 47-52; and idem, *Indian Popular Painting in the India Office Library* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1977).

⁸ Archer’s classificatory systems also included an emphasis on caste as a marker of style. He wrote: “Brahmins were priestly, Kayasths were clerkly, but nowhere were these differences plainer than in these secret murals, fondly produced from generation to generation by the women of each family and now suddenly exposed to alien British eyes by the calamity which had struck us all.” (Archer and Archer, *India Served*, 56.) This classification of style by caste has persisted in the scholarly literature to the present.

from each other.⁹ Archer's heavenly forms included the gods and goddesses, who created auspiciousness and blessed the house. The bride and bridegroom with their attendants, wrote Archer, were painted among the gods and goddesses in the *kohbar ghar* "as if participating in the celestial assembly."¹⁰ However, in this thesis I argue that the vegetal, animal, and human forms are inextricably intertwined. Contrary to Archer, I read the bride and bridegroom as the central figures in the *kohbar ghar* narratives. The proximity of the vegetal and animal forms to the bride and bridegroom allows us to explore the contiguities and analogousness between them.

As examples of vegetal and animal forms, Archer listed the sun, the moon, the bamboo tree, a circle of lotuses, parrots, turtles, and fish.¹¹ All symbolized fertility, but none more so than the *kamalban* (bamboo tree) and *kohbar* or *purain* (lotus) (Fig. 1). These two forms were, according to Archer, not only paintings of the bamboo and lotus but also "diagrams of the sexual organs."¹² He thus associated these elements with the concern for fertility.¹³ This thesis develops his analysis, extending it further to the figural forms and other vegetal and animal motifs. Aside from the blessings of the vegetal forms, the existence of the gods and goddesses in panels near the couple and the women's songs sung throughout the ceremony suggest wishes for fertility and happiness in the marriage. Fertility is thus referenced in multiple ways in the depiction of the ceremony.

⁹ Archer, "Maithil Painting," 27.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 29.

In the 1970s, French journalist, novelist, and filmmaker Yves Véquaud became an ardent collector of Mithila paintings on paper. Véquaud's collection was shown in a French exhibition, accompanied by an essay about his experiences in Bihar.¹⁴ In 1976, he published *L'Art du Mithila*, a catalogue of his collection that emphasized the history of tantric practice in the region, which he related to the visual imagery on the walls.¹⁵ Véquaud concentrated his formal analysis on the *kohbar* motif, calling it "pictorial intercourse" and linking it to "five thousand years of [tantric] ritual."¹⁶ In so doing he failed to recognize that the vegetal forms are part of a complex visual and performative program driven by women's popular rituals to imagine the ideal marriage, only one part of which is the consummation of the union and the conception of a child. This invocation of sexuality and the wish for a male child are evident in many narrative murals, as I will elaborate.

Anthropologist Carolyn Brown Heinz documented life cycle events and researched genealogies of Maithil Brahmins as she worked with ideas of rank and caste in North India. Heinz focused on reframing the work of Yves Véquaud as she contextualized the murals in light of her research in Bihar.¹⁷ She also supplemented

¹⁴ Yves Véquaud and Musée des Arts Décoratifs, *Mithila: Les Femmes, Leurs Peintures Et La Faveur Des Dieux* (Paris: Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 1975). For other essays on Véquaud's time in India, see Henri Cartier-Bresson, Satyajit Ray, and Yves Véquaud, *Henri Cartier-Bresson in India* (New York, N.Y.: Thames and Hudson, 1987); Yves Véquaud, *Bénarès, Des Villes*, (Seyssel: Champ Vallon, 1985).

¹⁵ Yves Véquaud, *L'Art Du Mithila* (Paris: Presses de la Connaissance, 1976). *L'Art Du Mithila* was subsequently translated into German as *Die Kunst Von Mithila* (Brüssels: Weber Genf, 1977); and simultaneously into English as both *The Art of Mithila: Ceremonial Paintings from an Ancient Kingdom* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977); and *Women Painters of Mithila*.

¹⁶ Véquaud, *Women Painters*, 17.

¹⁷ Brown, "Folk Art"; idem, "The Women Painters of Mithila," in *Festival of India in the United States, 1985-1986*, ed. Pupul Jayakar (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1985): 155-61; idem, "Contested Meanings"; Carolyn Brown Heinz, "Mithila Painting," in *South Asian Folklore: An Encyclopedia: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka*, ed. Peter J. Claus, Sarah Diamond, and Margaret Ann Mills

Archer's visual archive with photographic documentation of domestic murals from her fieldwork. Heinz identified the elements comprising *kohbar ghar* murals, in which she included vegetal and figural forms such as the bride and bridegroom as well as the gods and goddesses.¹⁸ However, she did not present an extended visual analysis of the murals she encountered while in Bihar; in fact, she explicitly abstained from what she considered "artwriting."¹⁹ My project picks up from Heinz's meticulous fieldwork by carefully examining the visual properties of two narrative panels, situating representations of the bridal couple as part of the entire wall program and in relation to the wedding performance for which such murals were created.

Jyotindra Jain, an art historian, ethnographer, and cultural anthropologist, was Senior Director of the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum in Delhi, the institutional patron of and main repository for traditional or village arts in India. In his scholarship on traditional arts, Jain elevated several artists to internationally celebrated status, including Mithila painter Ganga Devi.²⁰ In his monograph on Ganga Devi, Jain

(New York: Routledge, 2003), 404-06; idem. "Documenting the Image in Mithila Art," *Visual Anthropology Review* 22, no. 2 (2007), 5-33.

¹⁸ Heinz, "Documenting the Image," 17.

¹⁹ Ibid., 28. Heinz makes this distinction to separate her efforts from those who, according to her, "... adopted strategies from the art world to gain its approval." Scholars such as David Carrier have elaborated on the concept of "artwriting" in *Artwriting* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987).

²⁰ Jyotindra Jain, *Master Craftsmen: An Introduction to Crafts of India* (New Delhi: Published by HHEC for Festival of India, 1985); idem, "The Bridge of Vermilion: Narrative Rhythm in the Dusadh Legends of Mithila," in *Indian Painting: Essays in Honour of Karl J. Khandalavala*, ed. B. N. Goswamy and Usha Bhatia (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1995), 207-22; idem, *Ganga Devi: Tradition and Expression in Mithila Painting* (Middletown, NJ: Mapin Pub, 1997); idem, "Ganga Devi," in *Other Masters: Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India*, ed. Jyotindra Jain (New Delhi: Crafts Museum and the Handicrafts and Handlooms Exports Corporation of India, 1998), 71-86; idem, *Picture Showmen: Insights into the Narrative Tradition in Indian Art* (Mumbai: Marg Publications on behalf of National Centre for the Performing Arts, 1998); Jyotindra Jain, Aarti Aggarwala, and Pankaj Shah, *National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum, New Delhi*, Museums of India series (Ahmedabad: Mapin Pub., 1989); Pupul Jayakar and Jyotindra Jain, *Indo Buzoku Geijutsu-Ten: Ikiteiru Tsuchi No Kodo = the Art of the Adivasi (Indian Tribal Art)* (Yomiuri Shimbun: Japan Association of Art Museums, 1988).

recounted a typical late twentieth-century wedding ceremony and interpreted the relationship between the wedding ceremony and the contemporary murals painted by the artist. In this context, he discussed many vegetal and animal motifs in the *kohbar ghar*.²¹ However, Jain's discussion of visual motifs did not include the significance of human forms or gods and goddesses other than the *naina jogin* (eye goddess). Building on Jain's interpretation, I analyze the earlier representations of the bridegroom and bride doing Gauri Puja from Archer's archive in relation to the depiction of the deities, paying close attention to the interplay between the human figures and their surrounding elements.

The painters who designed and executed the murals I analyze in this project were, as one song sung during the ceremony suggests, “[p]aint[ing] the ideal marriage” on the walls of the *kohbar ghar*.²² This theme of the ideal marriage does not reside in any one motif, but rather is articulated in multiple ways through a range of visual motifs. The narrative panel of the bride and bridegroom enacting important parts of the ceremony is integrated with a depiction of the ideal marriage of the gods and goddesses and infused with ideal qualities associated with gods, animals, and lush vegetation.

²¹ Jain, *Tradition and Expression*, 55-63.

²² Archer, *Songs for the Bride*, 113.

CHAPTER THREE

APPROACH

In order to understand the depicted Gauri Puja narratives, it is vital to consider the relationship between the visual renditions and the ritual practices undertaken in the space framed by the imagery. Descriptions of Gauri Puja as performed in weddings in the 1930s and 1940s, however, do not appear to have survived in the historical record. To contextualize the murals, I juxtapose Archer's photographs and songs collected in the early twentieth century with contemporary ethnographies of wedding practices in Bihar.

Due to the paucity of material and information, this thesis is limited to the discussion of a select number of visual motifs and their proximity to each other. Because I cannot engage the entire iconographic scheme of any of the *kohbar* spaces, my argument is admittedly fragmentary and precarious. The analysis is equally partial because of my inability to engage with the colors employed and the ways in which these nuanced the composition. My lack of firsthand access to these architectural interiors necessarily constrains my interpretations in myriad ways.

This study is based on the black-and-white photographs of color murals taken by William Archer, the largest surviving body of evidence of Mithila wedding murals from the 1930s and 1940s.²³ While Archer's photographs are critical archival materials, they

²³ Carolyn Brown Heinz has recently published photographs of murals painted for the 1919 marriage of the daughter of Maharajadhiraj Maheshwar Singh, the Maharaja of Darbhanga: see Heinz, "Documenting the Image." These photographs assist in expanding the body of visual evidence for marriage painting in Mithila; however, they still present the limited viewpoint of royal marriage paintings.

are also limiting in several ways. Archer photographed and categorized murals of only two castes, Kayastha and Brahmin, although he notes that other castes were practicing mural painting at this time. In Archer's estimation, the output of other communities such as the Rajputs, Sonars, Ahirs, and Dusadhs was "fragmentary," suggesting that he took photographs of what he thought to be the most complete forms.²⁴ Yet Archer's assessment of fragmentariness may have been swayed by several factors. It is possible that Archer did not have access to a primary informant in those homes and thus could not obtain entry to a great many interiors. It is also possible that Archer was looking to document a multi-generational tradition, which may have been clearly evident to him through the presence of the *aides-memoire* he collected from Kayastha and Brahmin homes.²⁵ Finally, Archer may simply have recorded the murals to which he personally responded. For example, in his memoirs he notes that the Kayastha and Brahmin interiors, with their distinct combination of forms, resonated with European Modernism, with which he was familiar.²⁶

Further, Archer did not photograph entire interiors, which limits my understanding of the pictorial scheme in any given household to no more than five or six photographs, and sometimes as few as one. There are no photographs or plans of entire domestic compounds. The specific location of a mural on the *kohbar ghar* or *gosain ghar* in the compound is thus not documented. Moreover, Archer tracked very little information about the murals, noting the names of the male heads of the household, caste,

²⁴ Archer noted that "isolated households" of other castes seemed to follow the lead of the Kayastha and Brahmin castes: Archer, "Maithil Painting," 25.

²⁵ It is possible that Archer collected *aides-memoire* from other communities; however, such materials have not been highlighted in scholarly research to date.

²⁶ Archer and Archer, *India Served*, 53-58.

geographic location, year of photograph, year of wedding, subject of mural, and color. He did not name, for instance, the family subcaste, the females in the household who performed the work, the couple who were married, or the home village of the groom.²⁷

These gaps in the ethnographic record make it difficult to match the fragmented descriptions of early twentieth-century weddings to the imagery in the *kohbar ghar*. In *Songs for the Bride*, a collection of Bhojpuri songs performed at Kayasth weddings, Archer included a lengthy synopsis of Srivastav marriages occurring in the early 1940s in the Sadr subdivision in Shahabad, Bihar.²⁸ According to Archer, the Srivastav wedding songs and poetry “could be claimed as defining ... Kayasth village culture” across the region.²⁹ However, Archer made plain the limitations of his research as he noted then that “the ritual of one caste is never the same as that of another and within the caste, no two subcastes marry in quite the same way.”³⁰ With this awareness, and lacking the subcastes of the families in this study, I focus specifically on Gauri Puja, rather than attempt to recreate the entire wedding ritual in Darbhanga.³¹

²⁷ Carolyn Brown Heinz describes the limitations of Archer’s notes in a 2007 article (Heinz, “Documenting the Image,” 13-16). In it she writes that, because of the paucity of material in his notes, Archer was unable to include any additional ethnographic details regarding the murals in his 1949 *Mārg* article.

²⁸ Archer, *Songs for the Bride*, 15-51. Bhojpuri is a dialect of Maithili, one of the main languages spoken in Bihar, and Srivastav is a subcaste of the Kayastha caste (see *Songs for the Bride*, 172n.7-8). According to Barbara Stoler Miller (*Songs for the Bride*, xvi-xvii), Archer chose this community, southwest of Mithila, because this was the area in which he first served as a civil servant in 1931.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, xxxviii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

³¹ In his synopsis of weddings in Shahabad, Archer does not describe Gauri Puja. He states that Gauri and Ganesh are worshiped after the bride is given away, but does not describe the other contexts in which Gauri Puja is performed. *Ibid.*, 43. Further complicating the interpretation is the fact that painters in Shahabad most likely did not paint narratives or figural forms, choosing instead to decorate the *kohbar ghar* with what Barbara Stoler Miller describes as “simple diagrams and designs.” (*Ibid.*, xvi).

The contemporary ethnographic fieldwork carried out by Heinz and Jain also offer additional glimpses of weddings in North Bihar.³² Inevitably, Heinz's and Jain's ethnographies have their limitations. Heinz was based in Darbhanga district during her fieldwork, but she centered her studies exclusively on Brahmin households. Jain's information was gleaned from one Kayastha artist, Ganga Devi. However, for the purposes of this thesis, both scholars offer similar descriptions of Gauri Puja that allow me to relate their material in a general way to the visual imagery of the ritual and to explore the depiction of the bride in the *kohbar ghar*.

³² Brown, "Folk Art"; idem, "Contested Meanings"; Heinz, "Documenting the Image"; and Jain, *Tradition and Expression*.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE WEDDING MURALS

The Gauri Puja mural in the household of Mohan Lal Das

In 1940, William Archer identified a mural from the household of Mohan Lal Das in Darema village, Darbhanga, as *Bridal Party with Shiva and Parvati* (Fig. 2).³³ In this mural, I argue that the figures are a preview of a ritual about to be performed in the actual wedding ceremony. The image depicts the bridal party in the *kohbar ghar* at the commencement of the Gauri Puja, during which the bride gives thanks to Gauri, an aspect of the goddess Parvati, for blessing her with a bridegroom like the god Shiva, her husband. To the far left, the bridegroom reaches out to pick the trifoliate leaves from a *bel* (wood apple) tree. Behind the bridegroom, the bride is a picture of demure grace, her veil pulled close as she grasps the bridegroom's wrist. The *vidkari* (the primary bridal attendant, a married relative of the bride) follows, shielding the bride's head with leaves from a betel creeper. Above the betel leaves, a prominent peacock hovers over the bride. In addition to anticipating a ritual event, I argue that the female painters in this household designed the mural to present the bride in her transition to becoming a married woman and to highlight her dual nature as both a wife and daughter throughout the wedding ceremony.

³³ In this section, I will discuss only the left side of the mural as pictured in Archer's photograph. The right side will be discussed in a later section.

Many Bihari women conduct Gauri Puja repeatedly throughout their lives from early age. It is a daily affair for young unmarried girls to petition Gauri for suitable husbands through offerings of *sindur* (vermilion powder) to Gauri embodied in a betel (areca) nut placed atop a clay elephant (Fig. 3).³⁴ The clay elephant is used again in the wedding, as Gauri Puja is performed daily during the four-day ceremony. Women continue to worship Gauri after the wedding, to thank her for a good husband and the perpetual well being of the home.³⁵ Hence Gauri Puja takes on many meanings over the course of a woman's lifetime, despite the continuities of the ritual implements and actions.

For the Gauri Puja performed during the wedding, the bridegroom first plucks bel leaves from a branch hanging in the *kohbar ghar* for the bride to use in her Puja. Following this preparation, the bride begins her part of the Puja. As one ceremony has been described,

[o]n the head of the elephant a silver ring, a piece of wood, and an areca nut are placed, one over the other, and in that order from bottom to top. The bride, wearing an ivory ring around the little finger [*sic*] of her left hand, squats in front of the elephant, and while pressing *gerli*, a ring made of jute fibre, under her right foot, she takes vermilion powder, pinch by pinch, from a plate and sprinkles it thrice over the installation on the elephant's head. Finally she puts some vermilion in the central parting of her own hair. As she performs this ritual, the bridegroom, standing behind her, holds the hand with which she makes the offering.³⁶

³⁴ Brown, "Contested Meanings," 726. William Archer discusses the objects used in the wedding ceremony as "'disguised' fertility objects." In particular, the vermilion powder is associated with blood because of its color, and nuts are "almost universally associated with pregnancy." This gives a certain sense of duality to these items, because they are both "sanctifying" and "fertilizing." See Archer, *Songs for the Bride*, 8-9.

³⁵ Brown, "Contested Meanings," 727. Gauri Puja has other associations elsewhere in South Asia. In Karnataka, for example, Gauri Puja is an occasion to celebrate the goddess's return to her natal home, reminding married women of their connections to their ancestral home, as described by Leela Dube, "On the Construction of Gender: Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 30, 1988: WS12.

³⁶ As told to Jyotindra Jain by his informant, Mithila artist Ganga Devi: Jain, *Tradition and Expression*, 46. The bride and bridegroom also apply daily *sindur* to the mural paintings of the *bans* (bamboo grove) and

In the Darema mural, the bridegroom, resplendent in his marriage headdress, reaches forward to pull the first leaf from the bel tree, which is associated with Shiva.³⁷ However, neither he nor his new bride yet holds the leaves; the ritual has just begun. The multiple nuances of the centrality of the bel are suggested by women's *biwah* (wedding) songs sung during the ceremony. The tree is a metaphor for the bride and a flower girl a metaphor for the bridegroom, as the women sing:

In the night the *bel* opens
 In the night the *bel* blossoms,
 The flower-girl puts out her hand.
 “And now I will pick you,”
 “Wait a little, O flower-girl,
 The buds are green
 In the night my blooms will open
 And then you may pick them.”³⁸

The prominence given to the bridegroom in the mural indicates that the depicted Gauri Puja is part of the wedding ceremony. It takes place after the Sanskritic rites of *saptapadi* (seven steps around the fire altar), *sindurdan* (marking the bride's hair with vermilion), and *kanya dan* (the gift of the bride), which are traditional markers of Hindu marriage.³⁹ In Bihar, they typically occur in the courtyard before the bridal party

the *purain* (lotus plant), two designs painted in the *kohbar ghar* evoking associations with the bounty of the natural world: *ibid.*, 47.

³⁷ Other ritual objects painted on the walls and included in the ceremonies conducted in the *kohbar ghar* include the *purhar* (painted terracotta pitcher) and *patil* (lamp). See *ibid.*, 51.

³⁸ Archer, *Songs for the Bride*, 95.

³⁹ *Kanya dan*, the gift of the virgin bride, is a concept laden with notions of auspiciousness and inauspiciousness specifically located in the person of the young woman who is to be married. Lina Fruzzetti [*The Gift of a Virgin : Women, Marriage, and Ritual in a Bengali Society* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1982), 31] writes that for the bride's family, an unmarried woman in the household is both a burden and a duty. The father of the young woman must fulfill his *dharma* by selecting a good husband for his daughter, but until he does she remains a site of fear, given her matured sexuality and unattached state. However, when these same women are married into a different family, they become auspicious bearers of the family line. Women can be creators and destroyers of the family, depending on

proceeds into the *kohbar ghar* for the last of the *laukika* rituals (those performed by the women of the family).⁴⁰ Depicting this specific moment of Gauri Puja in the *kohbar ghar* thus anticipates the *laukika* rituals that make up the remainder of the wedding ceremony, including the consummation, the bride's departure from her natal home, and her integration into her new household.

Behind the bridegroom stands the bride, poised in a moment of transition. Anticipating the bride's shift in status, attire and gesture present her in her future role as a married woman. The jewelry, given to the bride by both families at the time of her wedding, indicates her new status as a married woman and associates her with the *vidkari*, with whom she shares this ornamentation.⁴¹ Both wear delicate circular *nath* (nose rings) and ornate *jhumka* (bell-shaped metal earrings), traditional elements of a

her perceived purity and willingness to enter into a good marriage. This fear is reflected in a *biwah* song which begins: "The pepper leaves are this/There's talk in the town/With an unmarried girl in his house/How can a father sleep?" Archer, *Songs for the Bride*, 77.

⁴⁰ Fruzzetti (*Gift of a Virgin*, 68-69) notes that, owing to their married status, women performing *stri acars* (married women's rituals) in West Bengal have functionally the same amount of ritual purity and power as a Brahmin priest. In Mithila, according to Ramashray Roy [*Samaskaras in Indian Tradition and Culture* (Delhi: Shipra Publications, 2003), 176-77], *laukika* practices, often performed in concert with the Sanskritic acts, can be considered as important as the Sanskritic rituals. In some cases, the Sanskritic rituals cannot occur without a *laukika* ritual, such as a cleansing or a blessing as preparation.

⁴¹ The bride's jewelry has many signifiers. Jewelry is worn to ward off inauspiciousness and to insure good health for her husband: see Oppi Untracht, *Traditional Jewelry of India* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2008), 156. In South India, the bride's *thali* (marriage necklace) is indicative of her chosen path, just as her husband wears his sacred thread to show his. See Anthony Good, "The Structure and Meaning of Daily Worship in a South Indian Temple," *Anthropos* 96 (2001), 491-507, as quoted in Molly Emma Aitken, *When Gold Blossoms: Indian Jewelry from the Susan L. Beningson Collection* (London: Asia Society and Philip Wilson Publishers, 2004), 27. Jewelry also has economic connotations, as well. Jewelry given to the bride on her wedding by her family is considered to be her property; her husband and his family have no claim to the bride's jewels once she is married. Doranne Jacobson ["Women and Jewelry in Rural India," in *Family and Social Change in Modern India: Main Currents in Indian Sociology*, ed. Giri Raj Gupta (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1971): 160-67] notes that this is theoretically also supposed to be the case with jewelry given by the bridegroom's family, but in practice does not always occur. For some brides, their jewelry is protection against destitution in the event the marriage should end. See Aitken, *When Gold Blossoms*, 28-29.

bride's trousseau.⁴² Both women are also adorned with armbands ornamented with floral decoration and wear cuffs that fasten tightly at their wrists and ankles.⁴³ The women's well-defined jewelry has an inherent meaning that is more than just decoration or an auspicious gift.⁴⁴ The jewelry speaks to the bride's fundamental identity from this point forward: that of wife and daughter-in-law. Wearing the *nath* and *jhumka*, in combination with *sindur* in her hair and *bindi* (dot of vermilion) on her forehead, publicly marks her as a young married woman. In addition to the jewelry, the bride's clothing may be a cue regarding her status. Specifically, the bride's attire creates associations with the married *vidkari* to the right. The bride wears a tight *choli* (short blouse) with a *ghaghra* (flared skirt). The *ghaghra* is vertically striped, with a banded waistline matching the material of her overskirt. The bride and *vidkari* both have skirts trailing behind them and veils encircling their heads. Their short *cholis*, bare midriffs, and full skirts almost twin them, as do their gestures.

The bride's pose and gestures, along with her physical location between the *vidkari* and the bridegroom, reinforce her transitional state as bride. The bride is physically linked to the *vidkari*, who supports and guides her through the lengthy

⁴² For examples of *nath* both large and small, see Untracht, *Traditional Jewelry*, 188-91. Nick Barnard and Ian Thomas, *Indian Jewellery: The V&A Collection* (London: V&A Publ., 2008), 76, fig. 3.35, provide an exquisite example of the floral pendant *jhumka* found on the women in the Darema mural.

⁴³ For some women, the metal arm and ankle cuffs can be so large as to impede movement or even cause injury: Untracht, *Traditional Jewelry*, 273-74. For examples of large ankle cuffs from Bihar, see *Traditional Jewelry*, 270, and Barnard and Thomas, *Indian Jewellery*, 40-41. According to the Bihar District Gazetteer, heavy gold jewelry was out of style by 1964: P. C. Roy Chaudhury, *Darbhanga, Bihar District Gazetteers* (Patna: Superintendent Secretariat Press, 1964), 113.

⁴⁴ In his classic article on the essential nature of ornament, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy writes that a Hindu woman's jewelry is more than just aesthetic decoration. It is "inauspicious, indecorous, and disrespectful" to appear in public without "her gear." Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Ornament," *The Art Bulletin* 21, no. 4 (1939), 380.

wedding ceremony.⁴⁵ Here the *vidkari* holds the betel leaves over the bride. Reaching behind the bride's sari, the *vidkari*'s arm creates a visual line through the bride to the bridegroom, highlighting the bride's dual status and allegiances. She is still attached to her natal family, especially her female relatives, while reaching for her new husband. Her head turned to the groom and her hand grasping his wrist link the couple, thereby asserting the bride's position in relation to him and his family. The physical contact with her husband also suggests the ritualized consummation of the marriage, which will take place later in the ceremony.

Two elements in the *kohbar ghar* mural highlight another aspect of the bride's transition; namely, the activation of the bride's sexuality and fertility, and her potential for motherhood. First, the peacock above the bride's head, typically associated with fertility, love, and sexual desire, echoes the pronounced curves of her veiled head.⁴⁶ The peacock looks down on the bride, its beak pointing the viewer toward her, who in turn looks down at the union between herself and her new bridegroom, represented by their joined hands. Second, the large, heart-shaped leaves of the betel creeper held over the bride's head have long been reputed to have aphrodisiac and Ayurvedic heating properties.⁴⁷ The leaves, when chewed alone or taken together with the prepared areca

⁴⁵ The *vidkari* physically supports the bride during the ceremony because of the weight of the jewelry, and also because the bride at many points is veiled from head to toe. This is frequently the case in many parts of India; for a description of a Thakur bride, see Jacobson, "Women and Jewelry," 157.

⁴⁶ Gloria Goodwin Raheja, "'Crying When She's Born, and Crying When She Goes Away': Marriage and the Idiom of the Gift in Pahansu Song Performance," in *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion, and Culture*, ed. Lindsey Harlan and Paul B. Courtright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 48, fig. 2.4n. See also P. Thankappan Nair, "The Peacock Cult in Asia," *Asian Folklore Studies* 33, no. 2 (1974), 65.

⁴⁷ David L. Curley, "'Voluntary' Relationships and Royal Gifts of Pan in Mughal Bengal," in *Robes of Honour: Khil'at in Pre-Colonial and Colonial India*, ed. Stewart Gordon (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 54-55.

nut filling in *pan*, have a stimulating effect and are thought to increase mental and physical wellness.⁴⁸ Betel is associated with the ripening bride, and a palm tree with the bridegroom, in one *biwah* song:

Where grows the palm tree
And where do the betel leaves grow ripe?
The handsome bridegroom feels sleepy.
At his father-in-law's house
The palm tree grows,
In his father's house
The betel leaves grow ripe,
The handsome bridegroom feels sleepy.
He chews betel
And goes to the canopy smiling
The handsome bridegroom feels sleepy.
The bride smiles as she speaks,
"O my lord, show me your dazzling teeth."
The handsome bridegroom feels sleepy.
"Oh bride,
How can I show you my dazzling teeth?
Mothers-in-law crowd the wedding canopy."
"O my lord, with the edge of my sari
I'll screen the crowd under the canopy
And I will join you in love."
The handsome bridegroom feels sleepy.
"You and I will go to our room."
The handsome bridegroom feels sleepy.⁴⁹

The marriage of Shiva and Parvati

The next panel, to the right, depicts Shiva and Parvati, the gods who are the object of Gauri Puja, engaged in their own wedding. The placement of Parvati to the left of Shiva has long been deployed to indicate their wedding (*kalyanasundara*).⁵⁰ Between the

⁴⁸ P. Guha, "Betel Leaf: The Neglected Green Gold of India," *Journal of Human Ecology* 19, no. 2 (2006), 90.

⁴⁹ Archer, *Songs for the Bride*, 94-95.

⁵⁰ See, for example, the large high relief in the sixth-century Cave Temple at Elephanta, located near Mumbai, and two small relief sculptures from Bihar dated to the eighth and tenth centuries. For a discussion of this imagery at Elephanta, see Stella Kramrisch, *The Presence of Siva* (Princeton, N.J.:

two columns and flowing arch of a *mandap* (covered wedding platform), Shiva sits cross-legged on his bull, Nandi. Parvati, to his left, turns towards Shiva, gesturing to him. Two small peacocks rest above the arch. The gods here act as a model for marriage and bless and sanction the wedding occurring in the room. The divine couple, through the elements shared with their depicted human counterparts, reminds viewers of the deification of the bride and groom and the sanctity of the ceremony performed in the *kohbar ghar*.

Shiva is depicted here in his role as bridegroom, mirroring the figure of the groom in the previous panel. He appears in traditional wedding clothing, much like the bridegroom depicted to the left. Shiva is dressed in a *dhoti* (unstitched length of cloth, draped and folded around the legs and waist) and *angoccha* (stole) that flares out from the waist. Striped serpents frame his face, undulating down his matted locks, which are echoed in the bridegroom's *sehal* (hand-embroidered headdress). Shiva holds a leaf in his lower left hand, paralleling the bridegroom, who reaches for the bel leaves with which to start Gauri Puja.

Yet Shiva is more than a bridegroom. He is the absolute divine and the ultimate ascetic. His attributes remind us of his meditative and procreative power. In two hands Shiva holds *rudraksha malas* (meditation beads made of dried berries). The *damaru* (drum) in his upper right hand signifies his power of creation. The *damaru* creates sound, which is associated with divine speech. Sound is also associated with ether, the first of the five elements. Together, sound and ether manifest all other elements.⁵¹ With this

Princeton University Press, 1981), 353-363 and plates 16-18. For the Bihar reliefs, see Thomas E. Donaldson, *Siva-Parvati and Allied Images: Their Iconography and Body Language*, 2 vols. (New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 2007), pl. 49 and pl. 50.

⁵¹ Heinrich Robert Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), 152.

ultimate procreative power, Shiva sanctifies the *kohbar ghar*, a space intended for the consummation of the marriage. Shiva also conveys his approval of the marriage through his frontality, directly engaging with the participants in the wedding performed in this space. With large eyes he surveys the room and imparts his blessings to the bride and groom when they gaze upon his form.⁵²

Parvati, on the other hand, displays the marks of married womanhood, associating her with the bride and *vidkari* to the left. Parvati wears a *ghaghra choli* similar to the bride at left: her skirt is full, with a banded waistline and vertical patterning that echoes the bride. Parvati displays a veil in an identical pattern to that of the *vidkari*, and that, along with Parvati's bridal jewelry of the *nath*, *jhumka*, and wrist and ankle cuffs, gives the bride and *vidkari* a visual equivalence to the goddess. Parvati also extends her left hand towards Shiva, in a motion that mirrors the extended arms of the *vidkari* and the bride. As the bride reaches out to her bridegroom, so too does Parvati.

Two additional elements reinforce the correspondences between these two panels. Natural elements are underfoot and overhead in both scenes, giving continuity to the segments of the murals even though a heavy column separates them. A creeping vine above Parvati's head effloresces from the column, draping over her much like the betel creeper held over the bride. As with the large peacock over the bride to the left, two small peacocks perch above the arches over Shiva and Parvati.

⁵² *Darsan* is the act of seeing and being seen by the deity. For more on this important aspect of Hindu worship see Diana Eck's quintessential book *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*, 3rd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). Carolyn Brown Heinz ("Documenting the Image," 5) writes that the gods are "social actors" in this act of *darsan*, used for the social purpose of, in the case of Heinz's research, Brahmin marriage in Mithila.

By juxtaposing the wedding of Shiva and Parvati with that of the mortal couple, this mural reiterates the power of the wedding ritual, as it emphasizes both mortality and divinity in the sacred couple. It also marks the human couple at this time and their actions in this life cycle ritual as divine. Additionally, the stories and songs associated with Shiva and Parvati provide a blueprint from which the mortal couple may build their newly blessed life together. One song sung during the wedding narrates Gauri (Parvati) and her mother Mena's discussion of Gauri's marriage to Shiva. After Mena threatens to remove Gauri from the wedding, Gauri replies

For me his matted hair
Will be sandalwood
For me, his ashes
Will be my vermilion
For me, his other wife
Will be a companion –
So I'll take
To his kingdom...
Mahadeo is in my fate
And can't be altered.
Don your red silk
And do the blessing rite –
Lord of the three worlds
Mahadeo I must marry.⁵³

In taking Shiva's ashes as her vermilion, Gauri is identifying the emblems of her married self with Shiva's continuing asceticism, thereby proclaiming her married state will continue as long as Shiva is alive.⁵⁴

The processional mural in the household of Ram Adin Das

Another example of *kohbar ghar* painting in the archive of William Archer helps us discern some of the artistic conventions among the mural painters in Darbhanga

⁵³ Archer, *Songs for the Bride*, 64-65.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 65.

district regarding depictions of the beginning of Gauri Puja (Fig. 4). Like the Darema mural, this painting shows the convention of the bride in transition from daughter to wife. It also elaborates upon the Darema mural's version by adding three additional attendants and further elements of Gauri Puja. This extends the wedding procession pictorially into the space of the *kohbar ghar*.

As in the Darema mural, the one in the household of Ram Adin Das in Keoti village depicts the bridegroom leading the wedding procession. He wears a tall and extravagant *sehalā* with a veil, a visual reminder of the bridegroom's likeness to Shiva in the ritual events. The flowing beads of the bridegroom's *sehalā* connect him to two essential elements of Gauri Puja as they touch the bel tree and the bride.⁵⁵ He plucks a bel leaf with his right hand, perhaps to put in the basket he holds with his bride. The bride gazes down at their interlinked hands. The bride, head inclined, is attired in a brilliantly patterned sari and ornamented similarly to the Darema bride. The *vidkari* is again visually linked to the bride as her arm extends to cover the bride with a fan, her hand touching the bride's sari.⁵⁶

Three women follow after the *vidkari*, carrying what appear to be articles for Gauri Puja into the *kohbar ghar* (Fig. 5).⁵⁷ The first woman carries a decorated pot or

⁵⁵ The bridegroom and his *sehalā* are celebrated in a song at the bridegroom's house after he dresses for the wedding: "Bridegroom with the red beads/The red beads/Wearer of a red fringe/Bridegroom/Bridegroom with the red beads/The red beads." (ibid., 72.)

⁵⁶ There are multiple connotations of the usage of the fan. Depending on the context, the fan can mark status, to attend upon a person, to give pleasure in its cooling, or to symbolize sexual heat and longing. See Raheja, "Crying When She's Born," 47-49. One example (Fig. 6) of a woven bamboo fan used in Bengal was on view at the Newark Museum's 1995-96 exhibition *Cooking for the Gods: The Art of Home Ritual in Bengal*: see Pika Ghosh, Edward C. Dimock, and Michael W. Meister, *Cooking for the Gods: The Art of Home Ritual in Bengal* (Newark: The Newark Museum, 1995), 77.

⁵⁷ Although I argue here that the ritual implements carried by the women are used for Gauri Puja, there may be other *laukika* rituals that also employ these implements while in the space of the *kohbar ghar*. The first woman carries a decorated pot, which in this instance may contain mustard oil that the new wife will

pitcher that most likely contains water to purify the space or the performers of Gauri Puja.⁵⁸ The second holds the clay elephant, the most distinctive element of Gauri Puja. It receives the areca nut, the embodiment of Gauri. The third woman follows bearing either a *chumaonak dala* (bamboo platter) or a painted clay bowl with a scalloped edge. This platter may hold the vermilion powder that is used in the last segment of Gauri Puja, when the bride sprinkles vermilion over the areca nut on the elephant's head and applies a line of the red powder to the part in her hair.⁵⁹ In adding these three attendants and displaying these additional items that will be used in the ritual, the painters place a reference to each step of Gauri Puja in one mural and thereby extend the scope of the depicted scene from that pictured in the Darema mural.

Young Krishna on a swing

Like the Darema mural, the processional mural in the house of Ram Adin Das is in close proximity to a deity. A thin flowering creeper is all that separates the wedding procession from a young boy on a swing suspended from a tree (Fig. 7). He is flanked by women who appear to be pushing the swing. To the right, a man holds a lantern. The

use for *tel laggi*, the ritual of massaging her husband's legs. See Roy, *Samaskaras*, 189. The *chumaonak dala* may also hold paddy seeds, curd, and banana. This platter is moved in a circular motion over the heads of the bride and bridegroom during *humaon*, a ritual that blesses and wards off evil from the couple. Ibid., 183.

⁵⁸ According to Archer, the decorated pot is "the most important of all the 'scenic' objects" in the wedding. Archer writes that it symbolizes the womb, and anything dropped into the pitcher indicates fertilization. Archer, *Songs for the Bride*, 10.

⁵⁹ Other photographs in Archer's archive show attendants bearing the elephant and platter. In one example, from the house of the widow of Ram Krishna Nid, village Samaila, Darbhanga, two attendants are placed within their own painted frame (Fig. 8). They both stand with their right arms raised, as if to steady the ritual objects on their heads. These objects are painted in the remaining space in a different hand but are recognizable as the plate and the elephant. Another mural in this household in Samaila also depicts Shiva and Parvati in the *kalyandarasundara* pose. This organization of motifs suggests that the individual elements of the murals found in Darema and Keoti may have been painted in many households in Darbhanga, but the ways in which the elements were combined varied from household to household.

child on the swing is most likely Krishna.⁶⁰ Krishna's devotees worship him through *bhakti yoga* (the state of devotion to God). In the art and poetry extolling his life, Krishna appears as a baby, a young cowherd and lover, and a prince. Devotees are able to approach the god's divine nature to worship him in the guise most suitable to them. In this mural, Krishna's first two life phases are referenced in order to bless the wedding and evoke the wishes and intentions for the consummation of the marriage and the ultimate product of the union of the bridegroom and the bride: a child who will continue the family line.

Many worship the baby Krishna, also known as Balakrishna. Some women, in particular, respond to Krishna in a motherly fashion, clothing, feeding, and cradling him like a living baby.⁶¹ This recalls the indulgent treatment of Krishna by his foster parents, Yashoda and Nanda. In the *Bhagavata Purana*, Krishna is an impish child who has a

⁶⁰ Archer (*Songs for the Bride*, xxxiv, Fig. 6) describes this image as "Bridesmaids carrying the elephant and the plate. Behind them, part of a kadam tree with Krishna partly visible at the top; peacocks in the tree and a swing suspended from its branches; on the swing, a child, perhaps the infant Krishna being swung by two girls; on the right a figure with a lantern."

⁶¹ In "Domesticating Krishna: Friendship, Marriage, and Women's Experience in a Hindu Women's Ritual Tradition," in *Alternative Krishnas: Regional and Vernacular Variations on a Hindu Deity*, ed. Guy L. Beck (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 47, Tracy Pintchman describes how women in Benaras gather together on the banks of the Ganges for early morning Kartik Pujas in the month of Kartik. During these pujas, the women symbolically raise *murtis* of Krishna from infancy to adulthood, the culmination of which is Krishna's marriage to Tulsi. For the first two-thirds of the month, when Krishna is a baby and then a youth, the women "... swing the baby Krishna, along with all the other deities involved in the puja, offering Krishna milk and singing a lullaby to pacify him. After this, the clay icons, cloth, and all items offered during the puja are immersed in the Ganges, marking the end of the puja, and participants disperse." Many of these women's natal homes, according to Pintchman, are in Bihar. *Ibid.*, 48. For an extended treatment of Kartik Puja, see Pintchman, *Guests at God's Wedding: Celebrating Kartik among the Women of Benares* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005). Hélène Stork [Hélène Stork, "Mothering Rituals in Tamilnadu: Some Magico-Religious Beliefs," in *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, ed. Julia Leslie (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991), 96] observes that women in Tamil Nadu also use small representations of baby Krishna as votive offerings in fecundity rituals. Women place small terracotta figures of Krishna in wooden cradles that hang from the ceiling in the temple in order to wish for or thank the gods for a child. See Fig. 9.

penchant for playing tricks and stealing butter, as discussed by the *gopis* (cowherdresses) of Vraj, the village in which he is raised:

Sometimes, he releases the calves at the wrong time, and laughs when cries [of protest] are raised. Moreover, he eats the tasty milk and whey that he steals by means of his thieving devices. He divides [the curds and whey] and feeds the monkeys. If he does not eat, he breaks the pot. When there is nothing available, and he leaves angry with the household, he blames the children.⁶²

Hearing these tales of Krishna's behavior, Yashoda responds with a smile.⁶³ Despite his actions, Krishna is loved by all in his village, and by none more so than Yashoda.

Yashoda knows Krishna as a mortal child, and often attempts to discipline him as such, but is thwarted by his charm and his divine nature.⁶⁴ Krishna's mother Yashoda may be one of the women in the mural swinging Krishna; the other may be Rohini, Nanda's second wife and the mother of Krishna's brother Balarama.⁶⁵ The presence of Krishna with his loving mother, then, links the wedding procession with motherhood and the promise of a hale and witty son like Krishna.

Yet motherhood is suggested by more than Krishna and Yashoda's proximity on the swing. The tree, peacocks, and the swing itself, all representations of fertility, allude

⁶² Edwin Bryant, trans., *Krishna: the beautiful legend of God: Śrīmad Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Book X: with chapters 1, 6 and 29-31 from Book XI* (London: Penguin, 2003), Sk. 10, 8.28.

⁶³ Ibid., Sk. 10, 8.31.

⁶⁴ See *ibid.*, Sk. 10, 8.33-45; 9.1-18, *ibid.* According to David Kinsley [*The Sword and the Flute: Kali and Krishna, Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 15], Krishna as a child plays pranks that are the essence of a mortal child's behavior, and in doing so displays the essential divine nature of God.

⁶⁵ At the far right, the man who stands next to the trunk of the tree shrouded with lines, setting him apart from the figures to the left, may be Krishna's father Vasudeva. The lines veiling this figure could be indicative of darkness, which the man dispels with his lantern. By some accounts, Krishna was placed into the care of Yashoda and Nanda in the dark of night by his real father, Vasudeva, because the evil lord Kamsa was intent on killing Krishna, who was prophesied to kill Kamsa. See *Krishna: the beautiful legend of God*, Sk. 10, 1.

to passionate love and motherhood. The *kadamba* tree is symbolic of Krishna, as the dark bark covered by yellow blossoms is evocative of the dark-skinned Krishna wearing his silken yellow robes.⁶⁶ Globes of fruit and flower blossoms hang from every branch, leaves tucked among their bounty. The fruit and blossoms, evoking the blooming of the bride, may also remind the viewer of the power of Krishna's flute to make trees and flowers bloom and propagate.⁶⁷ In the *Venu Gita* (Song of the Flute) of the *Bhagavata Purana*, the *gopis* describe the hold Krishna has over the forest as he plays:

In this forest, O mother, the birds
Are most certainly great sages.
Beholding Krishna playing
The melodious song of his flute,
They rise to branches of trees
Covered with beautiful foliage.
With unblinking eyes they listen,
While all other sounds cease.⁶⁸

In the *Srikrishnakirtana*, a medieval Bengali poem written by Baru Candidasa, the sound of Krishna's flute makes his lover, Radha, pine for him as she remembers their lovemaking under the *kadamba* tree in the forests outside Brindavan. To her great aunt, Barai Buri (Granny), Radha laments:

Under the *kadamba* tree on the shores of the Yamuna [River], Krishna
embraced me.
Thinking of that, I grow anxious, but due to his carelessness, Krishna [has]
lost interest.
Trees all about are ablossom with flowers; the breezes of springtime are
blowing.
Venomous shafts seem to strike from the mango tree branches as cuckoos
sit chanting.

⁶⁶ Donna M. Wulff, "Radha: Consort and Conqueror of Krishna," in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna M. Wulff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 134n.34.

⁶⁷ Graham M. Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love: The Rasa Lila of Krishna from the Bhagavata Purana, India's Classic Sacred Love Story* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 119.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

I can't distinguish the moon from the sun. Even sandalpaste withers my
body.

Each instant is an eternity, Granny, for me, in the absence of Krishna.⁶⁹

The *Gita Govinda*, a twelfth-century poem composed by the eastern Indian poet Jayadeva, also celebrates the explicitly sensual divine love of Krishna and Radha as they come together under the bursting blossoms in the springtime, reflecting the joy and heat that can be generated from one's devotion to Krishna.⁷⁰ The abundance of the *kadamba* tree depicted in the *kohbar ghar* mural reflects the sensual love of Krishna and Radha to the bridegroom and bride, and reminds all of what is to come in the *kohbar ghar*.

In the Keoti mural, peacocks perch on every limb above the swing in the *kadamba* tree. One peacock, suggestively placed directly above the child Krishna, marks him as the lover he will become. Krishna also wears a head ornament made from three peacock feathers. The *gopis* of the *Venu Gita* passionately remember Krishna to their friends, describing him as he plays his flute:

Adorned with a crown
of peacock feathers
and blue *karnikara* [lotus] flowers
ornamenting his ears,
He, most excellent of dancers,
wearing the *Vaijayanti* [five-colored] garland
and yellow garments brilliant as gold,
Filled the holes of his flute
with the nectar of his lips
while his praises were

⁶⁹ Baru Candidasa, *Singing the glory of Lord Krishna: the Srikrishnakirtana*, M.H. Klaiman, trans. (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), 239.

⁷⁰ Jayadeva, *Love Song of the Dark Lord: Jayadeva's Gitagovinda*, Barbara Stoler Miller, ed. and trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 15, 17. The Maithil poet Vidyapati was known in the early fifteenth-century court of Siva Simha as "the new Jayadeva." Jayadeva wrote in the traditional Sanskrit while Vidyapati wrote in Maithili. See W.G. Archer and Deben Bhattacharya, *Love Songs of Vidyapati* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1963), 32. A few of Vidyapati's poems are also translated in Edward C. Dimock and Denise Levertov, ed. and trans., *In Praise of Krishna: Songs from the Bengali* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967).

being sung by cowherd friends.⁷¹

The swing is perhaps the most explicit evocation of fertility. During his life, Krishna swings in two contexts: as the baby cradled by his mother, and as the lover embracing his beloved, in this case suggesting the erotic loveplay of the bridegroom and the bride. In the Keoti mural, the swing is the playground of the baby Krishna. In a Punjabi painting from the Guler School, for example, a bejeweled Krishna is swung by Yashoda and his brother, Balarama, while his foster father, Nanda, and other villagers watch his play (Fig. 10). Krishna is the focal point; all eyes are directed towards him as he looks back to engage with Yashoda.⁷² Swings are also a site of palpable sensuality for adults, and this association is impossible to ignore in the wedding context of the mural. The Jhulan (swing) festival recreates Radha and Krishna's swinging in the month of Shravan (July/August).⁷³ People of all ages swing on swings erected outside their homes and enjoy the pleasure of the rhythmic movement.⁷⁴ In a depiction of the *Hindola Raga* from a Rajasthani Ragamala series, for example, the blue-skinned Krishna and the fair

⁷¹ Schweig, *Dance of Divine Love*, 79.

⁷² Roda Ahluwalia, *Rajput Painting: Romantic, Divine and Courtly Art from India* (London: British Museum, 2008), 29-30.

⁷³ Ibid., 35.

⁷⁴ John Stratton Hawley [*At Play with Krishna: Pilgrimage Dramas from Brindavan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 24-28] remarks that this lends an air of freedom, delight, as well as rhythm and balance to the festivities. Other scholars have also referenced the playfulness of swinging during festivals, including Frédérique Apffel-Marglin, [*Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri* (Delhi; New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 234-35] who writes about Raja Samkrānti Jyesta, an Orissan women's celebration of the menstrual cycle of the earth and goddesses in May and June; and Pika Ghosh [*Temple to Love: Architecture and Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Bengal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 47, 50], who includes a discussion of swinging gods and goddesses during Jhulan in her text about Gaudiya Vaishnava temples in Bengal. Tryna Lyons ["The Simla "Devī Māhātmya" Illustrations: A Reappraisal of Content," *Archives of Asian Art* 45 (1992), 36] also reminds us that images of women swinging can be seen as early as the first century CE, at Sanchi.

Radha have their arms entwined as they gaze into one another's eyes (Fig. 11).⁷⁵ Like in the Keoti mural, peacocks appear in the miniature perched over the head of Krishna, their plumage carrying the aura of Krishna and Radha's love.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ahluwalia, *Rajput Painting*, 34.

⁷⁶ William G. Archer, *The Loves of Krishna in Indian Painting and Poetry* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2004), pl. 33. An additional nineteenth-century Battala woodcut shows the height of emotion to which Krishna takes the *gopis*, as the women make a swing from their own bodies, on which Krishna sits to play his flute. The peacock here hides among the vegetation below Krishna. Ashit Paul, *Woodcut Prints of Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1983), 53.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The two case studies from Darema and Keoti suggest that Gauri Puja murals in the *kohbar ghar* emphasize the bride's transition from daughter to wife, bless the new marriage, and celebrate the union of two families. Located between her female relatives and her new bridegroom, the bride displays all the marks of a newly married woman. In the Darema *kohbar ghar*, the bride is nothing less than a mirror to the divine Parvati. The bridegroom is no longer simply a man, as his *sehala* evokes comparisons to Shiva. In Keoti, both bride and bridegroom stand in proximity to the beloved lover, Krishna, a god who here indicates both motherhood and passion. At both households, additional motifs surrounding the murals, such as betel leaves, peacocks, and gods and goddesses, foretell and bless the consummation of the marriage and, in the ideal marriage, the child to come.

The women of the households crafted the wedding murals as one part of a complex sensory experience. Along with the visual elements of the detailed murals and lustrous textiles, the women at the event delighted the ears as they sang and teased the bride and groom. In concert with the women, the priests uttered Sanskritic mantras. Smoke from the sacred fire, spices from offerings and dishes of the wedding feast, and even the scent of the turmeric rubbed onto the bodies of the bride and bridegroom filled the noses of all involved. In this wider context, it is clear that the visual motifs thus have vast shades of meaning. In interpreting these motifs, however, it is important to give the

bride and groom pride of place, without overstating the inherent sexuality of the wedding. Rather, the motifs are best interpreted in light of traditional depictions of gods and goddesses, the romantic poetry of Jayadeva and Vidyapati, a number of Puranic stories, and the playfully bawdy songs of the women.

One contemporary song, probably composed for women to sing as the bride departs from her natal home, likens the bride to the goddess Sita, the epitome of the devoted wife. It describes the young woman swinging in her father's courtyard, perhaps to indicate her availability for marriage:

In the sandalwood grove in my father's courtyard
there hangs a swing
In it the graceful Sita is swinging
Ten friends are pushing
Oh that Sita is being taken away by Raghubar as she weeps
Seeing the swing the mother cries
The courtyard is not pleasing to her
Nowhere does she hear the sweet voice of Sita
Without my daughter I will go crazy
Kalindi makes this request of Raghunadan:
Hold her as dear as your life.⁷⁷

Songs such as these also suggest the dual nature of the bride as a virgin daughter and a fertile, married woman. The cries of the mother signifies her grief at the loss of a daughter who has now moved to a new home, as much as it does her awareness that her daughter is no longer in a pure state and under her protection. As the bride's family gazes on the paintings left to fade from the walls of the *kohbar ghar*, these murals, like the swing in the wedding song above, may serve as bittersweet reminder of the bride in her last moment as a daughter and her first as a wife.

⁷⁷ Kalindi is the poet and Raghubar/Raghunadan the bridegroom. Edward O. Henry, "Maithil Women's Song: Distinctive and Endangered Species," *Ethnomusicology* 42, no. 3 (1998): 425-26.

FIGURES

Fig. 1. Kamalban (*lotus circle*). Maithil Kayastha woman from the household of Markanda Jha, village Basauli, Darbhanga district. *Aide-memoire* presented to William Archer in 1940. Source: William G. Archer, *Songs for the Bride: Wedding Rites of Rural India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), xix. Figure 1.

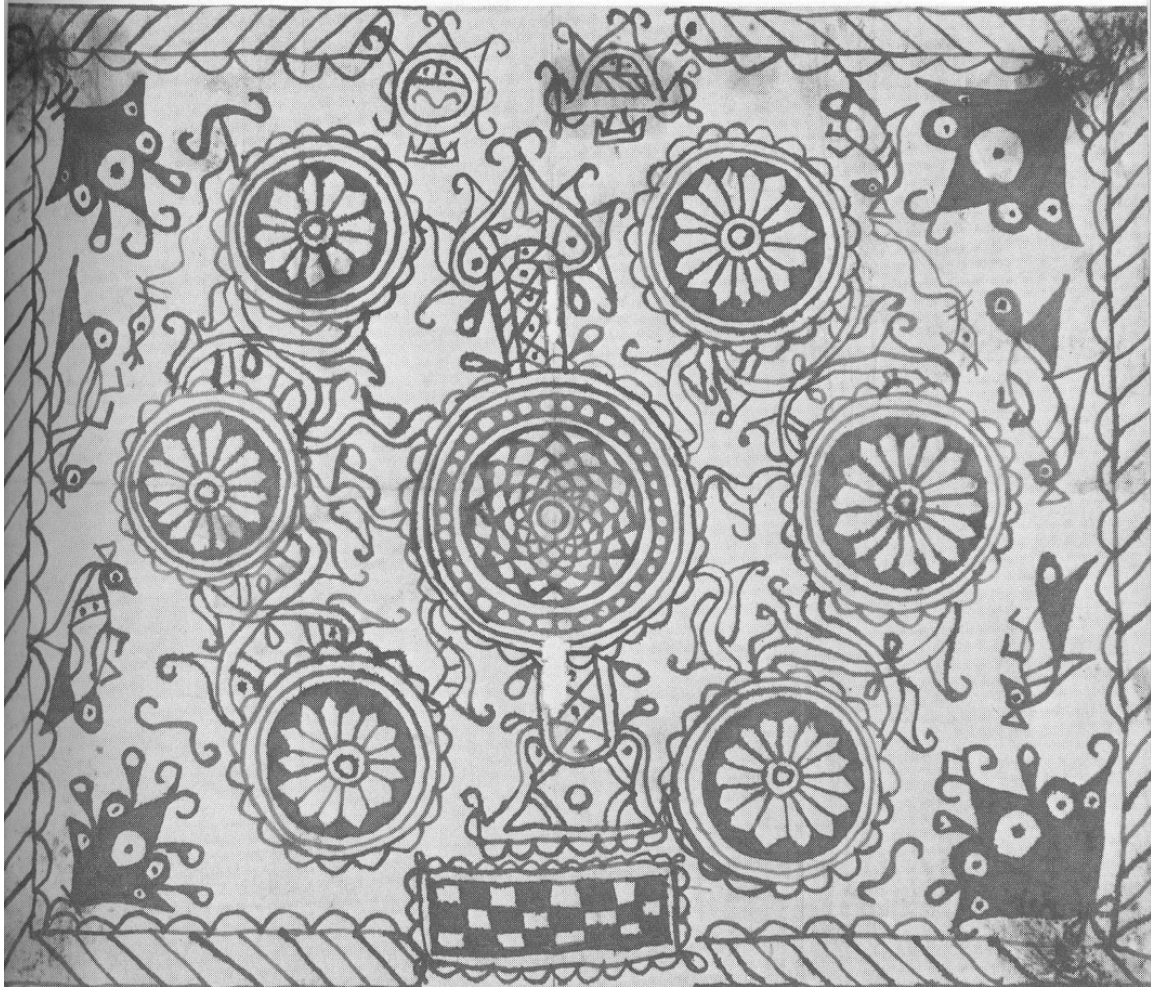


Fig. 2. Bridal Party with Shiva and Parvati. Mural from the household of Mohan Lal Das. Darema village, Darbhanga district, Bihar, 1940. Courtesy of the British Library.



Fig. 3. Clay elephant used in wedding ritual. Courtesy of the British Library.

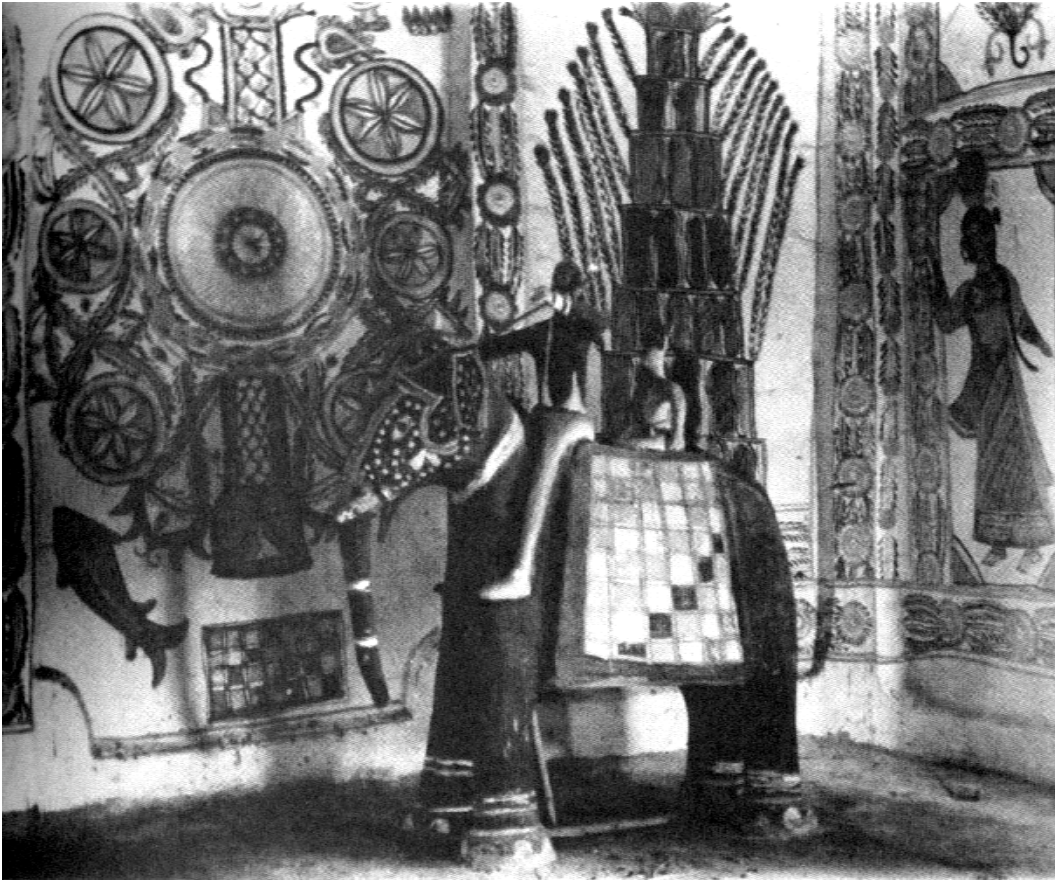


Fig. 4. Bridegroom with bride and attendants. Mural from the household of Ram Adin Das. Keoti village, Darbhanga district, Bihar, 1935. Courtesy of the British Library.



Fig. 5. *Vidkari* and attendants. Mural from the household of Ram Adin Das. Keoti village, Darbhanga district, Bihar, 1935. Courtesy of the British Library.



Fig. 6. Hand fan. Twentieth century. Bamboo strips, 17.75 inches. Newark Museum, Gift of Dr. David R. Nalin. Source: Pika Ghosh, Edward C. Dimock, and Michael W. Meister, *Cooking for the Gods: The Art of Home Ritual in Bengal* (Newark: The Newark Museum, 1995), 77. Figure 47.

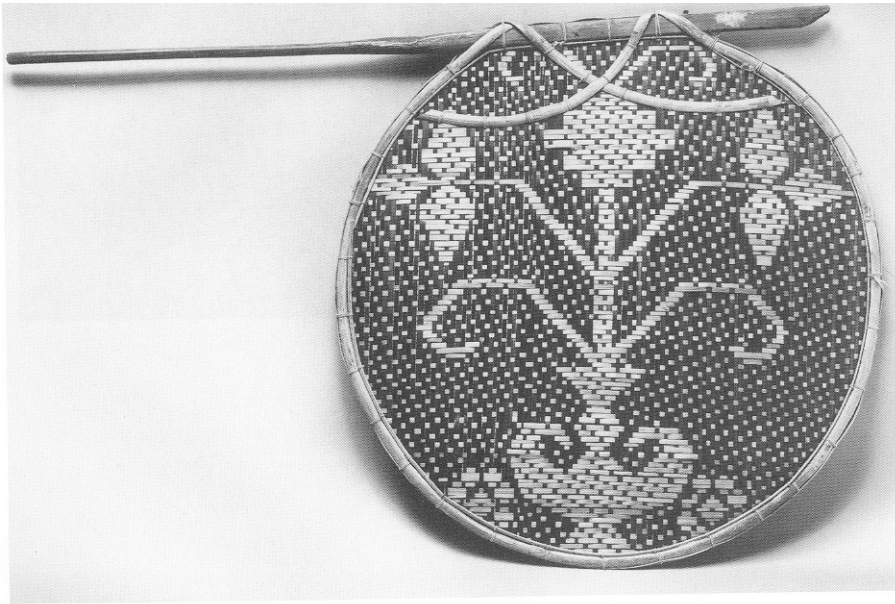


Fig. 7. Attendants with young Krishna on a swing. Mural from the household of Ram Adin Das. Keoti village, Darbhanga district, Bihar, 1935. Courtesy of the British Library.

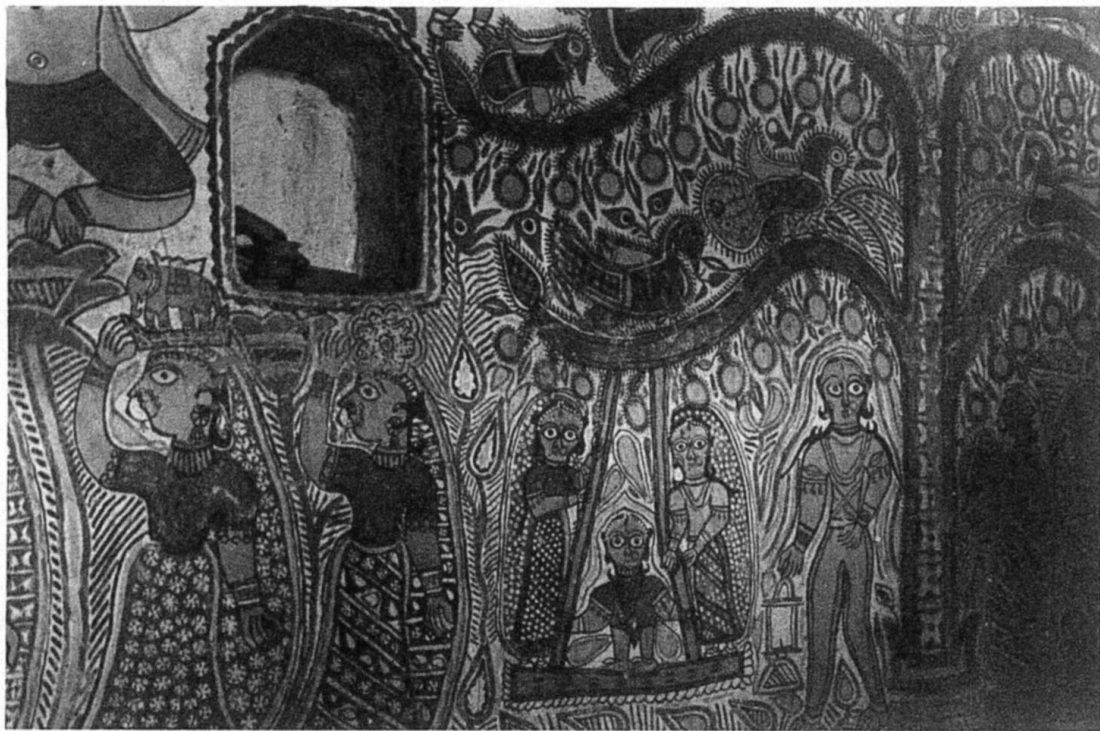


Fig. 8. Two attendants with plate and elephant. Mural from the household of the widow of Ram Krishna Nid. Samaila village, Darbhanga district, Bihar, 1935 or 1936. Courtesy of the British Library.

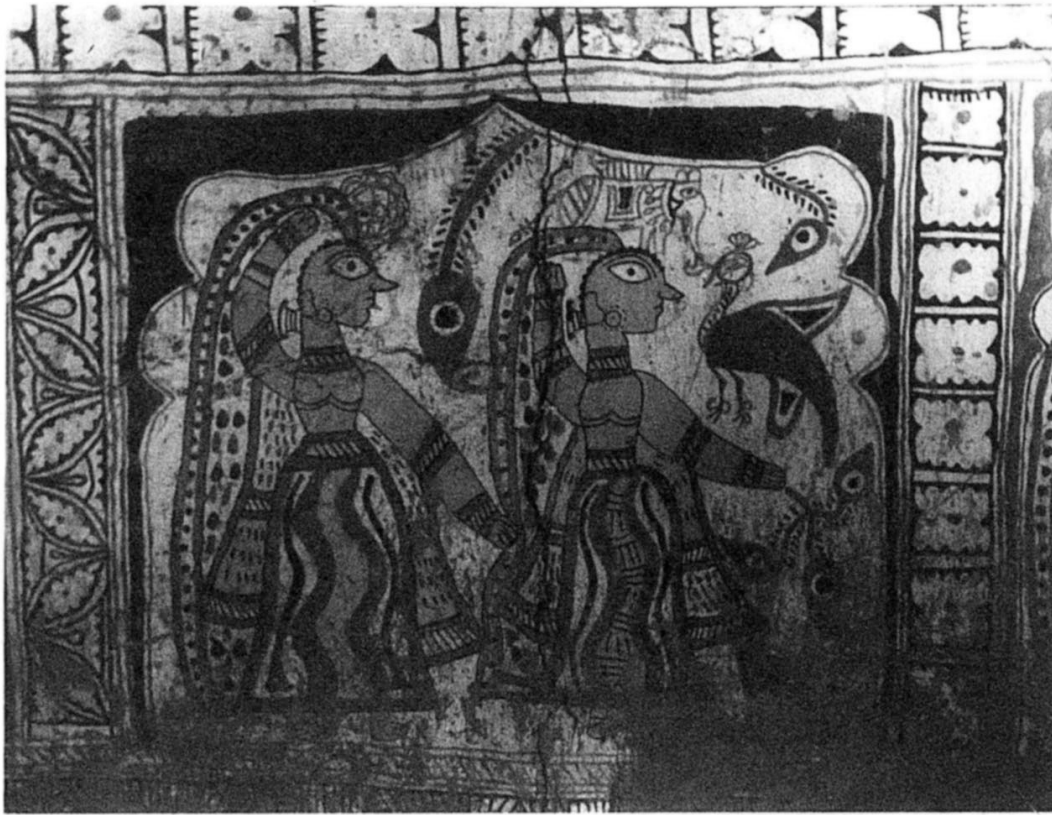


Fig. 9. Krishna in a wooden cradle in Puttupattu, Tamilnadu, July 1981. Photograph by H  l  ne Stork. Source: H  l  ne Stork, "Mothering Rituals in Tamilnadu: Some Magico-Religious Beliefs," in *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, ed. Julia Leslie (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991), 96. Plate 7.



Fig. 10. Baby Krishna on a swing. Guler, Punjab Hills, 1755-60. Opaque watercolor on paper, 28.7 x 20.1 cm. British Museum. Source: Roda Ahluwalia, *Rajput Painting: Romantic, Divine and Courtly Art from India* (London: British Museum, 2008), 29.



Fig. 11. Hindola Raga. Folio from a *ragamala* series. Jaipur, Rajasthan, 1800. Opaque watercolor and gold on paper, 24.7 x 19.5 cm. British Museum. Source: Roda Ahluwalia, *Rajput Painting: Romantic, Divine and Courtly Art from India* (London: British Museum, 2008), 34.



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