

Echoes of Mithili: The Origin and Evolution of Maithili Literature

Dr. Dharmendra Jha

*HoD, Department of Political Science, Government College Doimukh, Midpu, Papumpare,
Arunachal Pradesh*

Maithili literature, with its origin traced back to the 7th Century CE, represents a vital cultural and linguistic tradition that has evolved through centuries of socio-political and cultural transformations. Maithili literature originated from Magadhan Prakrits and features a rich legacy spanning early folk traditions, the golden age of Vidyapati, and its modern renaissance. Evolving through oral folklore, it was institutionalized in the Mithila region and later achieved modern official status. Its historical evolution is typically divided into three primary eras:

1. Early Era: The linguistic roots trace back to the Magadhan Apabhramsha. The earliest foundational texts emerged in the 14th Century under the patronage of the Karnata and Oiniwar dynasties. Varnaratnakara (1320 CE), written by Jyotirishwara Thakur, this text is considered the earliest prose in any Indian language, establishing Maithili as a distinct literary medium separate from Magahi and Bengali. Alongside early literature, rich oral traditions- such as the Lorik Katha Geet- flourished among the common folk.
2. Medieval and Post-classical Era: The Medieval period was marked by an explosion of devotional poetry, drama, and philosophical treatises. Also known as the Era of Vidyapati, who was the most famous literary figure in Maithili. Vidyapati defied the Sanskrit- only norm of his time by writing lyrical, erotic poetry and Pandavalis in the language of the people. He established the cultural and lyrical benchmark for the language. During the 17th and 18th Centuries, under the Malla kings of Nepal and the Khandavala dynasty of Mithila, the Kirtaniya drama tradition and works like the Ramayana by Chandra Jha gained massive popularity.

3. Modern Era: The 19th and 20th Centuries witnessed a literary renaissance aimed at social realism, romanticism, and the standardization of the language. Scholars like M.M. Parameshvar Mishra and Chanda Jha revitalized the language through pioneering writings and the establishment of the Maithil Mahasabha in 1910. A robust literary corpus laid the ground for academic recognition, leading to the language being formally acknowledged by the Sahitya Akademi in 1965. Today, it is recognized as one of the major scheduled languages of India.

The Maithili script also known as Mithilakshar or Tirhuta, evolved from the Gaudi or Proto-Bengali lineage, which branched from the Kutila Script in the 10th Century. Its earliest roots are traced to the 7th – Century CE inscriptions of Adityasena on Mandar Hills in Banka, Bihar. The development and history of the script span several key stages:

- Medieval Flourishing (10th -14th Century): The Script became highly distinct from other eastern scripts by the 14th Century, used extensively to write Sanskrit and later the Maithili Language. The Karnata dynasty significantly promoted it, and it was the primary script used by famous poets like Vidyapati.
- Scholarly and Cultural Peak: For Centuries, it was exclusively utilized by traditional scholars (Pandits) and texts, and literary works on palm-leaf manuscripts.
- Decline: During the 20th Century, the Script saw a decline as educational and standardization efforts largely replaced it with the Devanagari Script for mainstream publishing.
- Digital Era Revival: Following the official constitutional recognition of Maithili in 2003,

efforts to preserve Mithilakshar gained massive traction. The script was added to the Unicode standard in 2014, making it accessible in digital spaces. Today, numerous revival projects and traditional schools are actively using it on signages, in civil service examinations, and in contemporary publications.

The history of Maithili literature spans over seven centuries, pioneering by early medieval court poets and consolidated by 20th Century scholars. Maithili has a rich linguistic and literary heritage deeply connected to its culture and traditions. This aspect of Mithila tradition highlights the Maithili language and its contribution to Indian literature and history are deeply intertwined with the foundational contributions of Gangesha Upadhyaya from the 13th Century. Rather than a modern literary author, he was a philosopher and logician who revolutionized Indian epistemology and provided the critical frameworks used by scholars in the Mithila region. In the 13th Century, he revolutionized the classical Nyaya School of Philosophy by establishing the Navya-Nyaya (Neo-Logical) School in Mithila. His magnum opus, the *Tattvacintamani* (The Thought-Jewel of Truth) is considered one of the most important texts in the history of Indian Philosophy and epistemology. His precise definitions and analytical methodologies for distinguishing valid cognition (*prama*) from invalid cognition (*aprama*) provide foundational tools used to interpret and critique ancient and medieval texts.

Jyotirishwar Thakur (1290-1350 CE) is universally recognized as the pioneering father of Maithili prose. As a court poet in the Karnat dynasty of Mithila (under king Harisimhadeva), his magnum opus, the *Varnarathakara* (1324 CE), is the oldest Indian language. Before Jyotirishwar, literary works were predominantly composed in verse. Varna Ratnakara broke this trend, setting a benchmark for early Maithili prose and proving the vernacular's capability to express complex encyclopedic knowledge alongside Sanskrit. The encyclopedic text is structured into *Kallolas* (waves). It documents exhaustive details on medieval Indian life, describing cities, royal courts, social customs, flora and fauna, and various professional and artistic classes of 14th Century Mithili. He authored the *Dhurta Sanagama* (1320 CE), the first notable comedy (*Prahasana*) in the Maithili-Sanskrit-Prakrit theatrical tradition. This work laid the

foundation for the region famous Kirtaniya plays, paving the way for later literary Luminaries like Vidyapati. His writings meticulously cataloged the cultural fabric of Mithila. For example, *Varna Ratnakara* contains one of the earliest and most vital historical records and descriptions of the 84 Siddhas, which remains a crucial source for religious and historical studies today.

Vidyapati (1352-1448) is universally revered as the Father of Maithili Literature. Born in the village of Bisphi in Madhubani, he elevated Maithili from a regional dialect into a powerful literary language by breaking the traditional monopoly of Sanskrit. He is best remembered for his romantic and devotional songs (*pads*) dedicated to Radha and Krishna. Vidyapati was the first major writer to employ Maithili as a medium for sophisticated, court-level literary works. His *pads* gave formal voice to the language of his people, creating a lasting legacy for the region. He revolutionized literary themes by combining earthly, sensuous human love with divine devotion (*Bhakti*). His portrayal of Radha as an eager, hesitant young Maithili girl waiting by the riverbank brought the divine down to the familiar landscapes of Mithila. His use of Maithili in Vaishnava poetry became the foundation for Brajabuli. This hybrid literary language spread into Bengal, Assam, and Orissa. His works were famously adopted by legends such as Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and directly inspired Rabindranath Tagore's *Bhanusingha Thakurer Padavali*. By seamlessly introducing Maithili dramas, Vidyapati set the stage for later playwrights in Assam and Nepal to write complete regional language plays. Beyond love poetry, he composed *Sohar* (childbirth) and *Samduan* (farewell) songs, which remain foundational pillars of Mithila's folk literature and oral traditions. Because of his profound mastery and melodic verses, the king of Tirhut, Shiv Singh, honoured him with the title 'Abhinav Jayadeva' (the new Jayadeva), while the populace fondly remembers him as 'Maithili Kavi Kokil' (the cuckoo poet of Mithila).

Like Vidyapati, Jagadhhara was also a distinguished medieval Mithila scholar and poet. He primarily enriched literature during the Kameshvara dynasty. His work profoundly preserved and influenced the linguistic and cultural legacy of Mithila. His notable commentaries include: *Saradipika* *Gitagovinda*,

Malatimadhava, Vasavadatta, Venisamhara, etc. Jagaddhara frequently employed typical, everyday Maithili vernacular words in his Sanskrit verses. By doing so, he helped legitimize local vocabulary and bridge the gap between classical Sanskrit literature and the spoken language (Apabhramsha/ early Maithili) of the common people in the Mithila and Terai regions.

Another important name in the evolution of Maithili literature is Chanda Jha (1831-1907), who is widely celebrated as the “Architect of the Maithili Renaissance”. His monumental Mithila Bhasha Ramayana (published in 1892) introduced Ram Poetry to Maithili literature. Serving as a court poet in the Darbhanga Raj, he wrote Maithili Vyakaran, establishing grammatical rules that helped standardized the language during a time of decline and heavy outside influence. Irish linguistic authored- An introduction to the Maithili language of North Bihar (1881), which was the very first grammar of the language. He is often regarded as a founding father of modern Maithili scholarship. Parmeshwar Jha was another pioneering scholar, historian and grammarian who laid the foundational stones for modern prose and historiography in Maithili. His magnum opus, Mithila Tattva Vimarsha (1949) is the first book on the history, dynasties and culture of Mithila written in Maithili vernacular. Similarly, Ramchandra Jha, significantly contributed to enrich Maithili literature through his mastery of classical texts, grammar, and critical translations. He is highly regarded for translating classical Sanskrit works into Maithili, making ancient treatises accessible to the regional populace.

Among the 20th Century Maithili writer, Jayakanta Mishra was a towering scholar who legitimized Maithili on the global stage. His book “A History of Maithili Literature” established the language’s independent identity. His lifelong activism directly secured Maithili’s recognition in the Eight Schedule of the constitution and the Sahitya Akademi. He documented oral traditions, folk songs, and tales, categorized in his Introduction to the Folk Literature of Mithila, preserving the rural cultural heritage of the region. He edited and researched traditional performances in his book Kirtania Natak, helping Preserve classical dramatic traditions from Mithila. He undertook the massive compilation of the Multi-Volume Brihat Maithila Sabdakosa, a comprehensive

dictionary that cataloged the vocabulary alongside phonetic pronunciations. As an English Professor, he served on the Sahitya Akademi boards, edited the Maithili Samachar bulletin for over 50 years, and continuously petitioned the Government of Bihar to introduce Maithili in primary education.

Dr. Prafulla Kumar Singh is another towering figure in Maithili literature, celebrated for his exceptional work as a poet, historian, critic, and translator. His lifelong dedication to documenting the rich literary history and cultural heritage of the Mithila region- particularly in Nepal-has solidified his legacy as a vital pillar of the language. He authored the History of Maithili Literature in Nepal, 1972 and Modern Maithili Literature in Nepal, 1998. These texts are crucial for understanding the transnational evolution of the Maithili language and diaspora in Nepal. He was awarded the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Translation prize in 2004 for his Maithili translation of the Hindi classical Premchand Ki Kahani. He enriched regional folklore and children’s literature with his work Maithili Nenagit (Children’s Songs, 1988). He significantly boosted the reach of the language by editing the Maithili quarterly magazine in Nepal from 1970 to 1973.

Another important figure in the evolution of Maithili Literature was Pandit Govind Jha. He was a towering linguist, lexicographer, and literary figure whose most significant contribution to Maithili in English is his book, Kalyani Kosh: A Maithili- English Dictionary. Published in 1999, this monumental 649-page bilingual dictionary bridges a critical gap for researchers, historians, and scholars studying the culture of Mithila. He compiled and edited this landmark dictionary, providing English equivalents for over 40,000 Maithili words. It notably incorporates the traditional Tirhuta Script along with Devanagari and Roman transliterations. He wrote pioneering analytical texts such as The Origin and Growth of Maithili (1986), helping to formally document the development of the language on the global stage. For his extensive contributions to lexicography, translation, and grammar across various Indian languages, he was awarded both the Sahitya Akademi Award and the Sahitya Akademi Translation Award in 1993.

Harinath Jha (1980-1984), often described “Vidyapati of Modern Maithili Prose”, revolutionized Maithili literature by shifting its focus from romanticism to social realism. His iconic works are now accessible to global audiences through the English translation of his magnum opus, *Kanyadam* (translated as *The Bride*), and academic critiques of his legacy. Jha was the first to extensively write about early 20th Century Mithila, critiquing traditional practices such as hypergamy, the dowry system, and rigid caste hierarchies. His novel *Kanyadan* and its sequel *Dwiragman* advocated for female education and empowerment. Jha used razor-sharp humor to mock social hypocrisies and rigid religious rituals. In *Khattar Kakak Tarang* (Brain waves of uncle Khattar), he masterfully reconciled the conflicts between western education, tradition and modernity. His magnum opus *Kanyadan* was translated into English by Dr. Lalit Kumar. English language scholars and platforms like Harper Collins recognize the text as a pivotal cultural record of colonial India. Jha’s accessible prose dramatically expanded the readership of Maithili literature. He won the Sahitya Akademi Award posthumously for his 1984 autobiography, *Jeevanyatra* (The journey of my life).

Dr. Zakir Hussain, the third president of India, was not exaggerating when he observed that one could find in the village alleys Maithili scholars who were more learned than one could find in the streets of Cambridge and Oxford. Dr. Ramanath Jha was one such scholar. Born in village Loha, near Madhubani, the heart of Mithila on 4th of March, 1925, he contributed significantly to the evolution of Maithili literature. In the history of Maithili literature, he is considered as the pioneer in experimentalism in Maithili poetry. In fact, he was the first poet to use experimentalism in Maithili poetry.

Like Ramnath Jha, Dr. Amarnath Jha was also a pioneering academic who championed Maithili language forewords to foundational texts and literary advocacy. He elevated Maithili literature by contextualizing its rich history for English speaking audiences. In his academic writings in English, Jha strongly defended Maithili literary icons (like Vidyapati and Govindadas) against cultural appropriation, clarifying their roots in Mithili against claims from neighboring linguistic regions. He

championed the tradition of classical regional and Sanskrit poetics into accessible English, exposing wider global audiences to the cultural ethos of Maithili region.

As far as formal academic teaching of Maithili is concerned, it first began in 1917 when the University of Calcutta established a chair for Maithili. By 1919, it was formally recognized as an independent subject for examinations. The Post Graduate (MA) program in Maithili at Patna University started in 1950s. L.N Maithili University, Darbhanga, began teaching Post Graduate classes in Maithili in 1979. At present, there are six primary universities and distance education institutes in India that offer Master of Arts (MA) in Maithili. Most of these programs are concentrated in Bihar, which is the heartland of the language. Outside India, Tribhuvan University (Nepal) and Stockholm University (Sweden) have a dedicated department or course of study for the Maithili language. IGNOU and SWAYAM also provide a structured basic course in Maithili.

It is pertinent to mention that Dr. Sudhakar Jha Shastri was the first head of the Department of Maithili at Patna University. The University Department was established in 1952, and he took over its headship to help preserve and promote Maithili language and literature. Dr. Shastri was a renowned linguistic scholar and critic who significantly advanced Maithili literature through his expertise in linguistics, lexicography, and ancient manuscript editing. His foundational work preserved classical texts and bridged the gap between Sanskrit and modern Maithili vernacular studies. Dr. Jha edited the authoritative version of the ancient musical treatise *Rag Tarangini* by Mahakavi Lochana, a crucial text in preserving the musical and poetic heritage of the Maithili region. He was known for his mastery of both classical and vernacular traditions, publishing highly regarded Maithili translations and renditions of classical Sanskrit plays, including *Mudrarakshasa*. Trained under renowned linguistic Sir Ralph Turner, his work on phonetics and vocabulary helped formalize the historical grammar of the Maithili language. He was a key figure on the editorial advisory board of the Bihar Research Society, promoting research on Mithila’s history and language, and inaugurated the Mithila

Sahitya Sansthan's prominent quarterly Maithili research journal.

The study of Maithili as a discipline is essential for understanding the rich linguistic and cultural evolution of Eastern India and Nepal. It preserves an ancient, 1300-year literary heritage, anchors the distinct identity of the Mithili region, and offers insights into Indo-Aryan linguistics. The discipline provides vital historical records of medieval Indian society and ethics. Because Maithili possesses ancient roots and an extensive original literary legacy, scholars and regional leaders continuously advocate for it to be granted official classical language status by the Government of India.

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