Poetry, Piety, and Power: Maithili Vernacular Culture in Medieval Mithila

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Abstract
This paper examines how the Maithili vernacular literary and cultural traditions reflected the socio-cultural, religious, and political life of medieval Mithila. By analyzing texts, poetic forms, and folk expressions from the region, especially between the 14th and 18th centuries, this study uncovers the dynamics of caste, gender, religious piety, scholarly traditions, and everyday life as expressed in Maithili. The paper draws upon both literary sources and historical methodologies to interpret the vernacular as a site of both resistance and accommodation to dominant cultural narratives.

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Introduction

The region of Mithila, encompassing parts of present-day northern Bihar and eastern Nepal, has long held a distinct place in the cultural and intellectual history of the Indian subcontinent. While classical Sanskrit traditions flourished in Mithila through theological, philosophical, and scholastic lineages most notably the Mithila school of Nyāya philosophy, the vernacular articulation of Maithili during the medieval period (c.14th-18th centuries) brought forth a unique social and cultural consciousness rooted in the everyday lives, emotions, and devotional practices of the people. This paper argues that Maithili vernacular literature and oral traditions offer critical insights into the social structure, gender dynamics, caste relations, and religious expressions of medieval Mithila, thereby serving as a vital historical source for understanding subaltern voices, regional aesthetics, and local modes of knowledge production.

The emergence of Maithili as a literary language was part of a larger historical process of vernacularization, a term extensively discussed by Sheldon Pollock in his path-breaking work The Language of the Gods in the World of Men, where he describes how regional languages began to acquire literary status alongside or in place of classical Sanskrit from the second millennium CE onwards. [1] In Mithila, this process coincided with the rise of regional dynasties, such as the Karnatas and the Oinwars, who patronized local poets and scholars. The most notable among them was Vidyapati, whose compositions in Maithili from devotional *padāvalīs* to political and historical narratives, such as Kīrtilatā, stand as landmarks in Indian vernacular literature. [2]

However, Vidyapati was not alone. The rich texture of Maithili culture during the medieval period was also preserved through an expansive oral tradition, which included folk songs, marriage rituals, hymns to goddess worship, and local performance arts. These vernacular genres served not just as artistic expression but as repositories of collective memory, reflecting the realities of caste-based social order, agrarian life, and gender roles in pre-modern society. Women's voices, often missing from elite Sanskrit literature, found space in Maithili folk expressions, whether through sama songs or devotional jati sari hymns.

The Panjis, the genealogical records of Maithil Brahmins, offer yet another vernacular form of societal documentation. Though controlled by elite groups, these records encoded not just lineage but also norms of marriage, caste interaction, and the Brahmanical reordering of space and identity. [3] The use of the Maithili language in these records, along with in courtly and performative settings, reveals how vernacular traditions were both reflective and constitutive of Mithila's complex social fabric.

Thus, this paper seeks to interrogate how Maithili vernacular traditions, textual, oral, and performative, mirrored, contested, and occasionally reinforced the societal patterns of medieval Mithila. It does so by drawing from a range of sources, including classical poetry, oral songs, genealogical records, and folk performances, read alongside theoretical insights from vernacular historiography and social history.

1. Contextualizing Vernacularization in Mithila

The process of vernacularization in medieval Mithila was not merely a linguistic phenomenon, but a complex and layered cultural transformation. It reoriented the literary and social landscapes of the region by integrating local idioms, customs, and socio-political concerns into what had hitherto been a largely Sanskritic intellectual tradition. This transformation brought the Maithili language, rooted in the lived experiences of the people, into prominence and carved out a unique space in India's vernacular literary history.

As Sheldon Pollock has argued, the emergence of vernaculars across South Asia during the second millennium CE marked a shift wherein regional languages, once considered peripheral to high culture, began to assume literary and political authority. [4] Mithila fits squarely within this larger process, but with its own peculiarities. While it was a seat of Sanskrit learning, particularly for Nyāya and Mimāṃsā schools, it simultaneously witnessed the gradual rise of Maithili as a literary language, especially under local dynastic patronage. [5] Historians like Radhakrishna Choudhary have emphasized that the socio-political backdrop of medieval Mithila, under the Karnata and Oiniwar dynasties (c. 11th–16th centuries), created conditions conducive to the development of regional cultural expression. [6] Choudhary meticulously documents how rulers like Harisimhadeva of the Karnata dynasty not only restructured landholding and administrative systems but also encouraged the formalization of caste-based hierarchies through written records, such as the *Panjis* (genealogical registers). [7] While primarily designed to enforce Brahminical control over kinship and marriage alliances, these records, composed in a Sanskritized Maithili, also served to document the society's structural norms, providing a window into caste and social organization.

Upendra Thakur, another eminent historian of the region, draws attention to the hybrid character of Maithili's emergence, shaped by both oral traditions and courtly needs. He observes that the shift to vernacular expression was not abrupt but negotiated: Sanskrit continued to dominate scholastic pursuits, while Maithili found its niche in poetry, folklore, temple songs, and administrative records. [8] In his view, the growth of Maithili literature during this period reflects a synthesis between elite and popular cultures. Even as elite Brahmins like Vidyapati wrote for royal courts and aristocratic patrons, they adopted themes from folk life, bhakti devotion, and emotional intimacy elements that resonated with common people. [9]

The royal patronage of the Oinwar dynasty, particularly under King Shiva Singh and Queen Lakhima Devi in the 14th–15th

centuries, was instrumental in encouraging Maithili literary production. Vidyapati, the greatest literary figure of medieval Mithila, composed works in both Sanskrit and Maithili. His Maithili *padāvalīs* devotional love poems to Krishna-epitomize the vernacular shift: passionate, emotional, and intimate, they are stylistically distinct from the formalism of Sanskrit religious poetry. [10] Moreover, Vidyapati's *Kīrtilatā*, a historical narrative poem, exemplifies how Maithili could be used for recording dynastic history and political allegory in a language accessible to broader audiences. [11]

It is important to stress, as both Thakur and Choudhary have noted, that the rise of Maithili was not merely about linguistic substitution; it was about expressing a different worldview. The language enabled the articulation of local forms of devotion, domestic rituals, women's voices, agrarian rhythms, and social critique. In village settings, Maithili found expression in *sama* and *jatsari* songs, women's oral narratives, folk plays, and seasonal festival genres largely excluded from classical Sanskrit traditions. [12]

The vernacularization of Mithila was a gradual but profound process, facilitated by political changes, court patronage, social stratification, and cultural syncretism. While elite Sanskrit culture remained resilient, the growing literary and performative functions of Maithili created a parallel discursive domain-one that reflected and shaped the society of medieval Mithila in powerful ways.

2. Vidyapati and the Poetic Vernacularization of Mithila

The zenith of Maithili literary culture in medieval Mithila is undeniably marked by the life and works of Vidyapati (c.1352–1448), often revered as the most important figure of Maithili literature. His compositions not only shaped the linguistic, literary, and devotional contours of the region but also became the cornerstone of Maithili's vernacular canon. Through Vidyapati and other poets, both courtly and popular, the Maithili language evolved from a medium of common speech to one of refined literary and devotional expression.

Vidyapati's Life and Historical Context

Vidyapati flourished under the patronage of the Oiniwar dynasty, particularly under King Shiva Singh and Queen Lakhima Devi. The Oiniwar rule, though marked by internal conflict, was a time of relative cultural efflorescence in Mithila. [13] Vidyapati served as a court poet, diplomat, and scholar, writing in both Sanskrit and Maithili, thus acting as a bridge between classical scholastic traditions and emerging vernacular cultures.

Radhakrishna Choudhary notes that Vidyapati's historical awareness, especially in works like *Kīrtilatā* and *Kīrtipataka*, reflects a rare blend of dynastic loyalty, political realism, and poetic sensitivity. [14] These compositions, although shaped by patronage, also offer glimpses into the administrative, social, and martial life of 14th–15th century Mithila.

Bhakti, Śṛṅgāra, and the Feminine Voice

Vidyapati's enduring legacy lies in his Maithili padāvalī poetry, especially his *Krishna Bhakti* songs, which seamlessly blend themes of divine love, longing, and sensuality. Unlike the metaphysical abstraction of Sanskrit devotionalism, Vidyapati's verses are grounded in human emotion and domestic imagery. [15] These poems, often voiced from Radha's perspective, employ a deeply feminine voice to convey spiritual devotion through romantic yearning, a feature that resonated strongly with the Vaishnav Bhakti movement of eastern India.

Vidyapati devotional lyrics introduced a new literary idiom in which the emotional essence (bhāva) of love took precedence over doctrinal content. His Maithili language was intimate, lyrical, and rich with metaphors drawn from rural life rainfall, cattle, weaving, cooking, and festivals making the poetry both relatable and profound. [16]

His influence extended far beyond Mithila. While he may have been inspired by Jayadeva's Sanskrit *Gītagovinda*, Vidyapati's poems had a profound influence on Bengali Vaishnavism, particularly on Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and his followers, who adopted his songs into the kirtan traditions. [17]

Other Maithili Poets and Vernacular Contributions

While Vidyapati remains the most celebrated, he was part of a broader tradition of vernacular creativity. Notably, Jyotirishwar Thakur (13th century) authored the *Varṇa Ratnākara*, a proto-encyclopedic prose work in early Maithili mixed with Sanskrit. This text, rich in descriptions of social life, occupations, rituals, and nature, serves as an invaluable source on medieval Mithila and is among the earliest known Maithili prose compositions.

Other poets, such as Govinda Das and several anonymous composers, contributed to local devotional songs, which were often performed during rituals and festivals. These songs, usually preserved through oral traditions, reflect folk religiosity, community norms, and collective emotions, particularly of rural and subaltern groups.

Thematic Concerns and Social Imagination

The poetry of Vidyapati and his contemporaries spanned a broad thematic spectrum, encompassing love and separation (viraha), devotion, political ethics, and the female experience. Many compositions offer implicit critiques of social expectations and religious orthodoxy. The poetic portrayal of Radha as a yearning and desiring woman, for example, challenged classical literary norms of feminine restraint and elevated a more sensual and embodied spirituality.

Upendra Thakur observes that Vidyapati's Krishna is not a remote, philosophical god, but a lover of human form, a mischievous, tender companion drawn from the psychology of local belief and not scholastic abstraction. [18] This domestication of divinity made his poetry deeply accessible and enduring among common people.

Performance, Transmission, and Vernacular Memory

The musical quality of Vidyapati's poetry facilitated its transmission through oral traditions, including *bhajan*, *kirtan*, and folk drama. Manuscripts of his works have been found not only in Mithila but also in Bengal and Nepal, showing the regional spread of his influence. [19] Even today, his songs are sung during weddings, Vaishnavite gatherings, and seasonal festivals, marking a rare example of literary continuity and cultural memory.

Thus, Vidyapati and other poets of medieval Mithila were not just literary figures but cultural architects who shaped the aesthetic, emotional, and devotional imagination of the region.

3. Voices from the Margins: Caste, Gender, and Everyday Life in Maithili Vernacular Traditions

While courtly literature and elite patronage were crucial to the rise of Maithili as a literary language, the deeper pulse of Mithila's vernacular culture beats in its oral traditions, folk songs, and ritual practices. These expressive forms, many of them dominated by non-elite voices, serve as critical archives of the social structure, gender roles, and cultural norms of medieval Mithila. They reflect not only the values of the dominant castes but also the tensions, aspirations, and inner worlds of those relegated to the margins, particularly women and lower-caste communities.

Gendered Expression and Women's Agency

One of the most vibrant arenas of Maithili vernacular culture is the women's oral tradition, which has historically included songs such as Lagni, Nachari, Jhijhiya, Sohar, Samdaun, and Paraati. These songs, typically performed during marriage, childbirth, and seasonal rituals, reveal an emotional landscape often absent from elite male-authored texts. Maithili folk songs offer a counter-discourse to patriarchal structures, providing women with a symbolic space to critique the conditions of marriage, dowry, and domestic labor. [20]

The *sama-chakeva* festival, for example, centers around a brother-sister relationship but also serves as a ritual forum for women to express grief, solidarity, and social critique. In these songs, women subtly question the injustices of marital hierarchy and caste restrictions, often using metaphor, irony, and coded language. Such cultural performances enabled women, who were largely excluded from Sanskritic learning, to become agents of memory and cultural transmission. [21]

Moreover, the depiction of female deities, especially in goddess-centric songs and rituals, underscores a dual aspect of womanhood in Mithila's vernacular imagination: both submissive and powerful. The worship of Chhath Maiya, a local solar goddess, is an excellent example of how folk religiosity enshrined female piety while also offering women moments of ritual autonomy. [22]

Caste Hierarchies and Vernacular Performances

Caste was an omnipresent structuring force in medieval Mithila, and its imprint is clearly visible in vernacular traditions. While elite Maithil Brahmins maintained their genealogies in the *Panjis* to control marriage and caste purity, the oral traditions often exposed the fragility of such dominance. [23] In the Maithil cultural sphere, vernacular theatre forms such as *panchaali* (narrative ballads), *kathghoda naach*, and seasonal performance traditions linked to festivals like Holi and Sama-Chakeva provided platforms for both entertainment and social critique. These dramatized rituals and songs often used humor, irony, and parody to subtly question Brahminical dominance, gender norms, and social injustice. Performed predominantly by lower and middle castes, and sometimes women, these performances critiqued the moral failures of priests, caste rigidity, and the contradictions of domestic life. In doing so, they offered a counter-voice to Sanskritic authority and enabled marginalized communities to express dissent and shared cultural memory through accessible, performative media. [24]

Such performances acted as moments of social inversion, where caste rules were temporarily suspended or reversed during festivals. Folk traditions like these, transmitted orally and communally, offered a critique of social hierarchies while affirming collective identities among marginal communities.

At the same time, certain oral genres reinforced caste boundaries. *Bidesia* songs, popular across Bihar and eastern Uttar Pradesh, often portrayed the emotional turmoil of lower-caste or working-class women whose husbands migrated for labor. These songs reflect not only gendered sorrow but also caste-coded anxieties about honor, loyalty, and status. [25] In this way, the vernacular tradition contains both subversive and conservative elements, simultaneously reproducing and challenging dominant social values.

Ritual, Agrarian Life, and Vernacular Memory

The agrarian basis of Mithila's economy found rich representation in seasonal songs, agricultural festivals, and local myths. The *Kajari Barahmasa, Chahomasa, Chanmasa* and *Phaguwa* songs celebrated during different seasons are not only tied to ecological cycles but also encode labor relations, land ownership tensions, and rural rhythms of life. [26] These songs are full of references to ploughs, fields, rivers, and harvests, reflecting the embeddedness of Maithili culture in the agrarian environment.

Oral traditions have long served as repositories of collective memory, often preserving what the archives omit. As Jan Vansina observes, oral traditions "embody the social memory of a group," retaining layers of experience often left out of written records. While elite records, such as the Panjis, detailed Brahmin lineages, it was folk memory, preserved by women, peasants, and artisans, that chronicled the unrecorded history of labor, suffering, and devotion. In this regard, the vernacular tradition functioned as a counter-archive, balancing the elite-controlled written past with a performative, affective, and often resistant present. [27]

4. Caste, Hierarchy, and Scholarly Traditions
Reflections of Brahmanical Dominance in Maithili Texts

Medieval Mithila, though home to a flourishing vernacular literary tradition, was deeply structured by Brahmanical norms and hierarchies. The Maithil Brahmin community, particularly the elite sub-categories such as the Shrotriya Brahmins, dominated not just the ritual and intellectual life of the region but also its literary production and social imagination. This section examines the caste-inflected dimensions of Maithili texts and the supporting institutions, especially the Panjis (genealogical records) and the Panjikar system, that reinforced Brahmanical supremacy and lineage consciousness.

Brahmanical Control of Vernacular Space

The use of Maithili as a literary and administrative language coincided with the growing institutional control of Brahmins over education, marriage, and ritual life. While vernacularization is often understood as a democratizing force, in Mithila, it was simultaneously a Brahmanical project. The early texts in Maithili such as *Varṇa Ratnākara* by Jyotirishwar Thakur were composed by Brahmins for Brahmin audiences, often excluding non-elite voices or referencing them only in hierarchical terms. [28]

Makhan Jha notes that even as the regional language flourished, it remained within the tightly defined boundaries of varna-based discipline and gotra-based ritualism. [29] This reflects how the vernacular literary canon in Mithila was both a product of, and a contributor to, the consolidation of upper-caste cultural dominance.

The Role of the Panjis and the Panjikar System

The Panjis, or genealogical chronicles of Maithil Brahmins, represent one of the most distinctive features of social organization in Mithila. These extensive family records, maintained by hereditary Panjikars (genealogists), were essential for regulating marriages and preserving endogamous and exogamous rules based on gotra, pravara, and family history.

Panji system acted as both a social database and a ritual text, giving scriptural authority to caste boundaries and ancestral pride. The Brahminical monopoly over knowledge and memory was thereby institutionalized through the Panjikar network, whose role was not merely archival but performative and regulatory. The annual gatherings at places like Saurath Sabha near Madhubani, where marriage negotiations were conducted using Panji records, illustrate the public and political significance of this system. [30]

The structure and tone of many Maithili literary texts subtly reinforce these hierarchies. Characters are identified not only by name but by caste, village, and ritual status. Scribes and poets, often Brahmins themselves, embedded ritual lexicons and caste norms into their narratives, celebrating the role of Brahmins as custodians of dharma and learning.

Intellectual and Religious Identity of Maithil Brahmins

The Maithil Brahmin identity in the medieval period was built around a triad of learning (śāstra), ritual purity (śuddhācāra), and lineage (vaṃśa). This identity was sustained through the establishment of Tols (Brahmanical schools), Sanskrit education, and an exclusive hold on religious appointments across Mithila, Nepal, and even parts of Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. [31]

Texts produced in this context, be they panegyrics, genealogies, or Maithili didactic poetry, often assume the Brahminical worldview as normative. Non-Brahmin voices were rarely allowed literary legitimacy unless filtered through devotional tropes. Even within the Bhakti tradition, many Maithili poets invoked Brahminical authority to validate their emotional and spiritual insights. [32]

The idea of ritual geography, with Mithila as a holy land of Brahmin orthodoxy, was reinforced through texts that placed Janakpur, Darbhanga, and Katyayani-sthalas as sacred sites accessible primarily through correct Brahmanical mediation. The intertwining of spiritual power, caste hierarchy, and vernacular prestige reveals the multiple layers of dominance encoded in the cultural life of Mithila.

5. Cultural Memory and Everyday Life
Vernacular Expressions as Repositories of Collective Memory

The vernacular tradition of Mithila is not confined to the world of manuscripts, elite poetry, or scholarly texts. It also thrives in the everyday rhythms of life, found in fields, courtyards, temples, and village squares. In this section, we explore how cultural memory in Mithila has been preserved and transmitted through agricultural rituals, seasonal festivals, folklore, and performative traditions. These forms of expression serve as vital repositories of collective experience, reinforcing communal identity and continuity across generations.

Agricultural Rhythms and Ritual Life

The agrarian calendar of Mithila plays a defining role in shaping the seasonal consciousness of its people. The cycles of sowing, transplanting, and harvesting are not merely economic activities but ritualized moments, marked by specific songs, customs, and observances. The folk expressions associated with agriculture, such as roparī geet (sowing songs) and katnī geet (harvest songs), are imbued with cosmic symbolism, invoking deities of nature and ancestral blessings. [33]

These ritual songs are mostly composed and performed by women, who act as the custodians of seasonal memory. Their verses are transgenerational archives, preserving not just agricultural knowledge but emotional histories, caste relations, and local mythologies. The woman's voice in these songs is both lyrical and historical it carries within it a sense of place, cycle, and sacred continuity. [34]

Festivals as Performative Memory: Chhath, Jitiya, Sama-Chakeva

Festivals in Mithila are vibrant embodiments of cultural memory, where myth and ritual converge in collective performance. Chhath Puja, perhaps the most iconic of these, centers on sun worship and water-based rituals performed mostly by women. The songs of Chhath, many of which are in archaic Maithili, evoke episodes from oral epics and ancestral mythologies, linking the living with the past. [35]

Similarly, Jitiya, a fast observed by mothers for their children's well-being, and Sama-Chakeva, celebrated by young girls, contain strong elements of gendered storytelling, where women not only perform religious duties but recreate folk narratives through songs, clay idols, and symbolic gestures. These festivals provide performative contexts where history, belief, and identity are dramatized in public rituals.

The Performative Vernacular: Jhijhiya, Naach and Kirtan

Jhijhiya stands as one of Mithila's most vital performative traditions, especially during the festival of Dashain/Dussehra (Ashwin month), where women and girls carry earthen pots with flickering lamps atop their heads for ten consecutive evenings. This ritual dance honors Goddess Durga Bhairavi and serves as a protective act against witches and evil forces. The rhythmic movement, collective singing, and pottery symbolism were believed to even a witch may 'count the holes ', making the dance a dramatic, communal prayer ritual rooted in myth and seasonal renewal. [36]

Alongside Jhijhiya, Mithila nurtures naach (folk dance-dramas), kirtan (devotional singing), and panchaali (narrative recitation), forming a rich public vernacular tradition that blurs entertainment, devotion, and education. In Naach, local performers dramatize episodes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, and local legends with improvised dialogue, music, and satire, sometimes gently critiquing greedy landlords or self-important priests while reaffirming social ideals.

Kirtan in Mithila remains a devotional and communal genre, rooted in Vaishnava bhakti and local folk forms; through collective singing, communities reinforce spiritual memory and moral unity. [37]

Cultural Memory as Resistance and Continuity

What emerges from these vernacular traditions is a layered cultural memory that is not only preservative but also resilient and adaptive. Even under pressures of Sanskritic dominance, colonial disruption, and modern secularization, the folk traditions of Mithila have persisted as living archives of communal knowledge and identity.

These traditions have also allowed subaltern and gendered voices to find expression, often outside the formal textual canon. The lok sanskriti of Mithila is not simply a reflection of its society-it is the conscious memory of that society, alive in song, performance, and everyday ritual.

Conclusion

The vernacular tradition of medieval Mithila, expressed in Maithili language poetry, folk narratives, ritual performances, and everyday customs, serves as a multifaceted mirror reflecting the complexities of Mithila's historical society. Through the literary contributions of court poets like Vidyapati, as well as the intellectual insights of Jyotirishwar Thakur, and the widespread oral and performative practices sustained by non-elite groups, we gain insight into a deeply stratified yet culturally vibrant world.

This tradition reveals a society where Brahmanical hegemony coexisted with folk vitality; where caste and hierarchy were both naturalized and subtly contested through ritual and art; and where women, though often marginalized in texts, played crucial roles as performers, preservers, and transmitters of cultural memory. The presence of detailed genealogical records (Panjis) and the Panjikar system reflects an obsession with social order and purity, particularly among Maithil Brahmins, yet the emotional universes of women in domestic and ritual contexts present a parallel narrative of affect, resilience, and agency.

Moreover, the Maithili vernacular tradition challenges narrow definitions of medievality as strictly feudal or monolithic. It offers a pluralistic lens, where Sanskritic, regional, oral, and performative traditions intersect to form a distinctive civilizational ethos. These cultural forms were not static; they were constantly reinterpreted, blending myth with memory, devotion with desire, and social norms with subtle resistance.

In recovering and analyzing this tradition, scholars such as Upendra Thakur, Radhakrishna Choudhary and Makhan Jha, have shed light on the ways in which vernacular culture encodes historical consciousness. They urge us to treat Maithili texts and practices not just as literary or folkloric relics, but as archives of lived experience, as windows into the workings of power, identity, belief, and belonging in medieval Mithila.

In sum, the vernacular tradition of Maithili offers more than aesthetic delight or ethnographic interest; it is a rich historical source. It teaches us that to understand a region's past, one must listen not only to the voices of kings and priests but also to the songs of women, the chants of farmers, and the laughter of street performers.

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