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ARTICLES

Guest Editors' Introduction: Defining and Contextualizing Mithila Studies

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Our introduction establishes "Mithila Studies" as a new field of academic inquiry focused on the cultures, communities, and histories of Maithili-speaking peoples worldwide. We critique the limitations of previous "Maithili Studies" approaches, which have privileged upper-caste Hindu male perspectives, and which are mired in the problems of colonialist historiography, Orientalist philology and postcolonial communalism. We envision an inclusive, ethical, and critical field of inquiry that empowers marginalized voices and experiences, especially those of women, lower castes, and religious minorities; challenges colonial and nationalist construction of regional identities; explores Mithila's liminal status in global cultures and academies; and posits Mithila subjects as viable bases of multifaceted research projects. By engaging diverse disciplinary approaches, archives, and communities, we seek to develop Mithila Studies as a field that resists parochialism, promotes comparative analysis and collaborative research, and provides new perspectives on key issues in the humanities and social sciences.

On April 12, 2018, eminent American sinologist Victor Mair posted a blog titled "Mighty Maithili, Monstrous Mandarin" on *Language Log*.[1] His post was spurred by the announcement of a recently published book, *Elegy Written in a Royal Courtyard: A Facsimile Edition of Jagatprakāśamalla's Gītapañcaka* (Yadav 2018). Mair wanted to draw the attention of his blog readers to the stark contrasts between Maithili and Chinese languages. According to Mair, most Chinese languages do not have as many speakers as Maithili, but even when some Chinese languages come close to having as many speakers, they lack not only "the great depth of this Indic vernacular language" but also the "serious scholarship" on its history, literature, and culture. Mair's comparison can easily be extended to several other world languages, most notably to European Romance languages and cultures that—unlike Maithili—dominate the fields of humanities and social sciences today. These comparative analyses expose the outsized presence of white, colonialist cultures as well as the unwarranted marginalization of the intellectual contribution and cultural heritage of disenfranchised communities. Furthermore, such comparison brings to the fore a diversity of critical questions and research agendas, which are pivotal in refashioning humanities and social sciences across the globe.

1 *Language Log* is a collaborative blog that Mark Liberman and Geoffrey Pullum started in the summer of 2003. This blog attracts contributions from notable linguists, philologists, and specialists of diverse literary cultures, and is enormously popular on the internet (Denham and Lobeck 2012, 14).

Before we can look forward to the development of a new, critical Mithila Studies, we must scrutinize the past, asking how "serious scholarship" on Mithila Studies unfolded since—if not before—Maithili attracted the attention of European scholars in the late eighteenth century.[2] In what ways has research on Mithila cultures and communities expanded the horizons of critical thinking for the wider academy? It behooves us to reflect on why the peoples, cultures, and traditions of Mithila—despite their long histories of transregional impact and robust academic scholarship—are so sparsely known and assimilated in broader fields of humanities and social sciences. Are there issues inherent in Mithila Studies that have inhibited its ability to make sustained constructive interventions in different disciplines? Conversely, are the dominant disciplines of humanities and social sciences amenable and responsive to the critical insights generated by research on Mithila cultures and communities? These questions prompted the editors of this special issue—all of whom pursue research in Mithila Studies—to convene a symposium at the 50th Annual Conference on South Asia, University of Wisconsin–Madison, on October 19, 2022.

Mithila, Maithili, and Maithils

Our symposium, titled *Critical Contours of Maithili Studies*, at first centered on the cultural identity of Mithila through its autochthonous vernacular language. Maithili is an eastern Indo-Aryan language that has over thirty-four million speakers in South Asia today.[3] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Maithili entered the English language in 1801 when *Asiatic Researches* published an essay titled "On the Sanscrĭt and Prácrĭt Languages" by Orientalist scholar Henry Thomas Colebrooke (1765–1837) (Colebrooke 1837, 199–231). Maithili is an anglicized rendition of *Maithilī* that is pronounced with a long vowel *-ī* at the end. A speaker of the Maithili language is referred to as a Maithil (notice the dropping of the long vowel *-ī* ending). Maithils use the term Mithila (pronounced as *Mithilā* with a long vowel *-ā* ending) to denote their part-imagined, part-historical, and part-mythologized conception of homeland. The geocultural boundaries of Mithila have therefore remained ambiguous throughout history.[4] In light of the distinctions between Maithili, Maithil and Mithila, it may now be

2 The earliest reference to the Maithili language in European sources is found in a book titled *Alphabetum Brammhanicum sev Indostanum Universitatis Kasí* that the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (*Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide*) published in 1771. This publication was overseen by Giovanni Cristofano Amaduzzi (1740–1792), who was a professor of Greek at the University of Rome La Sapienza. In the preface to the book, Amaduzzi wrote about the scripts and languages that were prevalent in the "region of Bihar, Patna and neighboring domains" (*Regno Bear, vel Patnà, & in vicinis ditionibus*). He was informed that the Tourutiana script (a Latinized rendition of Tirhuta, an alternate name of Maithili) was popular in that region (Amaduzzi 1771, vii, viii). Cassianus da Macerata Beligatti (1708–1791), a missionary active in northern India from 1738 to 1756, transcribed the Kaithi script featured in *Alphabetum Brammhanicum*.

3 On the classification of Indo-European languages, see Yadav 2003, 523; Masica 1991, 449. It is very difficult to determine the total number of Maithili speakers in the world today. According to national censuses conducted in 2011, a total of 13,583,464 Indians and 3,092,530 Nepalis identified Maithili as their "mother tongue." The twenty-first edition of the *Ethnologue* database recorded 34,085,000 speakers across the world, whereas its twenty-sixth edition reported a total of 21,785,000 speakers only. Some scholars believe that there are more than fifty million speakers of Maithili (Mair 2018).

4 For a rich and insightful discussion of the complexity of determining the geocultural boundaries of Mithila, see Burghart 1993, 761–804.

apparent that the title of our special issue, *Critical Contours of Mithila Studies*, differs from that of our symposium. This is neither a typographical error nor a cosmetic change but stands at the core of our efforts to expand the field and embed it in broader fields of academic research.

"Mithila Studies" is a neologism that the editors of this special issue have coined as a designation for a field of academic study and research that entails a methodological exploration of any topics, issues, or entities relating to Mithila. Although this field of scholarly inquiry has existed and cohered for more than two centuries on a de facto basis, no attempts were made in the past to designate a proper name for this subfield or to outline the common ethos of its practitioners. Therefore, much of the research in Mithila Studies has been carried out under the auspices of other dominant disciplines, such as "South Asian Studies" or "Art History," or under the prior designations based on language, as was the case with "Maithili Studies." Both strategies are degenerative and counterproductive in the long run. Disciplinary identities not only influence the means and methods of knowledge production but also facilitate the formation and development of global intellectual communities. Conforming to and complying with preexisting structures of thought and disciplinary hegemonies may temporarily resolve the problem of finding an institutional home and support for research in Mithila Studies. For sustainability, for visibility, and for providing its own distinct contributions, it is nevertheless an unfortunate loss of opportunity to think independently and reservedly about Maithil communities, to inaugurate new lines of critical inquiry in Mithila Studies, and above all, to build research communities with a shared vision and ethos. Ultimately, the act of naming is tantamount to exercising the right to self-determination, to empowering an underprivileged community, and to affirming the capacious vision of a marginalized field.

We would like to reiterate that Mithila Studies is constituted of—but not at all limited to—Maithili Studies. The latter focuses on the study of Maithili language and literature, broadly construed, and relies heavily on linguistic, philological, and textual methods both past and contemporary. After all, Maithili Studies was foundational in generating wider academic interest in the study of Mithila cultures and communities during the colonial period. The pioneering publications of George Abraham Grierson (1851–1941) is a case in point, as he laid the groundwork for much of the twentieth-century scholarship in Mithila Studies (Grierson 1880–1882, and Grierson 1884–1887). Remarkably, for a late colonial official and linguist, Grierson's findings and arguments are frequently rehashed in popular media, public discourses, and academic writings in Mithila and further afield to this day. The early history of Maithili Studies, however, is so deeply entrenched in colonialist, Orientalist, casteist, and gender politics that it fails to address a wide range of issues, problems, and challenges that Maithil communities have faced throughout history, and which should therefore form the core preoccupations of Mithila Studies.

Toward Critical Mithila Studies

Among the most pressing issues that Mithila Studies, as we have defined it, grapples with is the documentation of the historical, cultural, and social experiences of women and gender-nonconforming individuals, alongside marginalized communities, especially the so-called lower-caste, Dalit, and Muslim communities. From the heyday of Maithili Studies, Mithila has by default been assumed to be the cultural heritage of twice-born, upper-caste, male Hindus. This assumption is neither historically valid nor ethically tenable. Mithila was never the exclusive home or birthright of upper-caste communities or men; nor should it ever undergo such a transformation in any democratic and inclusive state. Rigorous scholarship on Maithil women, gender-nonconforming individuals, and marginalized communities is therefore a sine qua non for Mithila Studies.

Another long-standing premise in previous scholarship concerns the provincial status of Mithila within South Asia. In both academic discourse and popular understanding, "provincial" is often taken to mean parochial and backward. These derogatory attitudes should, of course, be challenged and called out. The more cautious users of the term "provincial" tend to focus on Mithila's status within the administrative division of the state, and the cultural location of Mithila vis-à-vis the colonial metropoles and postcolonial cosmopolis. Such paradigmatic usages of "provincial" are also fraught with problems. The administrative use of "provincial" is colonialist and marginalizing by intent and design. Materially, this designation underscores how much of the national resources and contingency funds the state chooses to allocate to these hinterlands. Mithila frequently suffers from famines, floods, droughts, unemployment, and similar vicissitudes. But the apathy of the national governments—from the colonialist British government to the Kingdom of Nepal to post-partition India—has continued to this day, and the regional governments are still seeking special aid for rebuilding and developing their communities. Against this backdrop, the designation "provincial" serves to trigger memories of intergenerational trauma and neglect while also exposing the history of their abuse and marginalization by state authorities.

The binaries of provincial versus metropolis and provincial versus cosmopolitan can even belie the status of Maithil communities in their region and outside. Maithils have always been mobile communities, and their traffic has been both centrifugal and centripetal, short- and long-distance, temporary and lasting. Some were sufficiently entitled to speak for the cosmopolis even while others assumed subaltern ranks, and still others were resigned to poorly compensated jobs and manual labor in urban centers. Their dynamic presence simultaneously in the margins and the center enables Mithila Studies to develop a rigorous and robust model of comparative analysis in the humanities and social sciences. Such comparative analyses are necessary for

elaborating cosmopolitan ethics, democratic principles, citizenship and human rights, cross-regional exchanges, and transregional histories, among others.[5]

Our symposium was the first ever attempt in the history of modern universities to evaluate the status, significance, and future of Mithila Studies holistically as a field, rather than as disciplinary and institutionally defined silos. In the past, scholars have attempted to organize international conferences on specific aspects of Mithila culture and history.[6] But these attempts rarely, if ever, sought to explore Mithila Studies as a viable and valuable generalized field of humanities and social sciences. Our symposium enhanced and upgraded our own understanding of how to construct Mithila Studies and has contributed—and can contribute—to contemporary scholarly discourses; it also exposed the need for a disciplinary identity and collaborative platform to bring Mithila Studies into dialogue with other academic communities. Our special issue is a modest first step in that direction.

The Contours of Transitioning to Mithila Studies

A comprehensive history of any aspects of Mithila—whether its emergence as a sociolinguistic area or its ever-changing conceptions of regional identity—is beyond the scope of the present issue. Some aspects of Mithila have indeed been documented and narrated by Maithils themselves in a variety of languages (consider, for instance, Thakur 1956; Choudhary 1970; 1976; Sinha 1979; Mishra 1979; Jhā 1985; and Jha 2005 among others).[7] Instead, we trace some of the contours that have brought us to the current state of what, up to now, has been called "Maithili Studies" within the region itself and in more globalized scholarly discourse. Through this critical reevaluation of the past of "Maithili Studies" and with a vision for a more expansive and ethical field of research, we emerge with a productive and inclusive field of "Mithila Studies"

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5 We find a strong and fortuitous alignment between *Asian Ethnology*'s 2024 (83 [1]) special issue on "Rethinking Regions: Locality and Circulation in South Asia" and our own project. Guest editors Murphy and Zehmisch engage tensions between theoretical attendance to "trans" forces and processes, on the one hand, and regional particularities, on the other. Their special issue explores these important theoretical and analytical questions: "In what ways can a reconfigured regional as well as transregional reading of space, place, and time enhance our understanding of specific regions, adding complexity to how we understand the local and particular, and greater nuance and local specificity to that which is configured as the cosmopolitan? How can we usefully investigate the impact of cross-regional circulation on the making of the vernacular, in order to enhance our understanding of how boundaries of language, tradition, place, and belonging are both maintained and crossed?" (Murphy and Zehmisch 2024, 10). The guest editors maintain that, while attending to the local situatedness of knowledge is fundamental, "these regions themselves need to be interrogated, to see how they are constituted in multiple and sometimes contradictory terms" in a world increasingly self-reflexive in regard to identification (ibid., 7). Our own special issue, whose individual and introductory articles were formulated prior to the publication of "Rethinking Regions," resonates strongly with the approach taken by Murphy and Zehmisch, indeed furthers and exemplifies the argument, taking such a critical regional approach to Mithila, exploring constructions of self and other in history, place, and culture. Our often-deconstructive approach to the region in regard to such matters as language, religion, caste, gender, "sees" not only through the lens of internally marginalized parties but interrogates, as well regional outsiders' methods of constructing Mithila in alignment with their own investments and ideologies.

6 For instance, a scholar of historical and comparative linguistics, William L. Smith (1942–2009), organized the Stockholm Conference on Maithili Language and Literature at the Department of Oriental Studies, University of Stockholm, in August 1996 and published the proceedings of the conference in 2003 (Smith 2003).

7 There is a nearly inexhaustible list of sources written in Maithili, Hindi, and to a lesser extent Bengali. Because of the international readership of this journal and the general "South Asian Studies" field in the last century or so, we have chosen to provide general references to sources on Mithila, Maithils, and Maithili produced in English in internationally accessible publications.

as elaborated in this special issue. We have done so both to draw a distinction between our collective project's basic assumptions and modus operandi for the purpose of expanding the conversation and including more diverse narratives and voices; and to maintain a link with previous scholastic frameworks used by Maithil scholars themselves in order not to erase or negate their work.

The history of Mithila is a conglomeration of the histories of many diverse peoples, languages, religions, and ways of knowing and being. This pluralistic reading of Mithila stands in opposition to the unified narrative proposed by both native Maithil scholars and concurrent streams within the Western academic study of Mithila. In these nation- or state-oriented conceptions of region, the nexus of language, ethnicity, caste, and gender forms a clear unified whole. Because of this, we have access to many "histories" of Mithila and Maithili written in English, Maithili, and other South Asian vernaculars, and we are left with a dearth of details about certain periods, peoples, and perspectives from the regions that fall outside of these tightly controlled and centralized narratives. While many of the essays included in this special issue subvert this trend by using newer disciplinary or critical lenses through which to engage with Mithila and approach marginal subjects directly, any historical or archival research on the region requires reading into those gaping lacunae that are only revealed through a multilingual, diachronic, and intertextual reading of the region. In its place, Mithila Studies must better provide a foundation to wade through a sea of scholarship that has been left disconnected from contemporary discourse.

Periodization and nomenclature provide illustrative examples of the historical trajectory demarcated by the erstwhile field of "Maithili Studies." Because this field is dominated by the same echelon of Maithil Brahmin men that dominate contemporary Maithil society and politics, those periods, names, and boundaries inscribed and re-inscribed in academic histories of Mithila follow remarkably consistent patterns that have built upon each other in sequence. "Mithila" emerged as an undisputed, hegemonic name for the region only recently in relative terms. Mithila was better known as "Videha" in a more ancient period and "Tirhut" in the late medieval and early modern periods. Contemporary teleological pathways by which Videha and Tirhut became Mithila once more follow one's expectations of colonial and postcolonial nationalists who seek to establish connections and ancient pedigrees to invoke the authority of age. This narrative merges the Vedic, Sanskrit, and Brahminical episodes of the region's history and elides its connections to other competing imaginaires that also have deep roots in the region. This imaginaire has been quite successful at ignoring other local non-Brahmanical traditions, no matter how widespread they would become outside of the region. For example, despite Mithila's location in the

historically and intellectually pivotal region of Magadha, home to both Buddhism and Jainism, these periods take up much less of the collective imagination and fewer pages in the recorded historical annals.

After hopping and skipping through centuries of regional history, the narrative of Mithila's distinct regional history is reintroduced in the late medieval period with the Karnata dynasty. It is in this period that modern Mithila, then more commonly called Tirhut, came into focus and found direct intellectual, social, and political antecedents that can be traced with tangible evidence. The Karnata dynasty was the last ruling dynasty of Tirhut-Mithila that was led by a Kshatriya ruling class. The centuries-long span of this dynasty saw the emergence and domination of the Islamicate Delhi-based and regional sultanates. This so-called Islamic Invasion features as an explicitly named bogeyman and perennial chestnut in the narrative history of the region. From this, Mithila-Tirhut becomes defined in opposition and in resistance to a taken-for-granted Muslim "other," despite Maithil communities' regular engagement and deep links with regional sultanates and despite the presence of Central Asian and South Asian Muslim communities in North Bihar.

With the establishment and efflorescence of the subsequent Oinvara dynasty of Brahmin vassal-kings of Tirhut-Mithila, we really see the concrete arrival of an elite Brahmin conception of Maithil identity that survives into the present. Vidyapati (ca. 1360–1420 CE), the most famous scholar-poet of Maithil pre-modernity, found patronage under this dynasty. Vidyapati embodies the complex intertwining of vernacular Maithil identity and the overbearing presence of Brahmin-dominated Sanskritic intellectual discourse. Because of this embodiment and the twinning of vernacular belle-lettres and Sanskritic scholasticism, Vidyapati becomes the primary icon and figurehead for modern Maithil nationalists. It is hard to avoid the study of the historical Tirhut or contemporary Maithil society without running into an ongoing debate on the nature of the poet-scholar, his literary output, or his cultural impact. Some of the articles in this special issue at times find their way back to this poet, his Brahmin and Kshatriya patrons, and this inception of contemporary Mithila. In this way, we follow on from both Maithil and Western scholars of the region who also tackle these issues as some of their first matters of intellectual interest.

A Not-So-Vernacular Vernacular

This early modern era is the same period in which many South Asian regional identities trace their distinct origins based on their vernacular literatures, cultures, and traditions. The defining influence of the "vernacular millennium" is powerful and self-evident; however, this ignores the non-linear and porous linguistic boundaries of an intellectually conservative region like Mithila that favored Sanskrit over vernaculars. Many of the national and sub-national state structures in South Asia have been organized by language.

Mithila and Maithili followed much of the rest of South Asia into the efflorescence of vernacular identity and literary production; however, there was a unique linguistic landscape in the region from this early period onward. This historical pattern of language usage, patronage, and identity has profoundly impacted the modern constructions of the region's identity based around a language hierarchy that privileged Sanskrit (of a certain kind). Nevertheless, there is a concatenation and elision of certain aspects of Maithil heritage. Sanskrit and distinctively Brahmin and *smārta* epistemologies took precedence over other forms of learning. Sanskrit was certainly dominant and privileged across South Asia, including in the north and east of the subcontinent, but the degree to which orthodox learning systems persisted at the center of Maithil-Tirhut power and privilege is extreme in its degree of depth and tenacity. So, even though Mithila's history in the modern era has been framed by its Maithili-ness, that Maithili-ness is not entirely separate from a Sanskritic, Brahminical thought world mediated through Sanskrit (and to a lesser degree highly Sanskritized Modern Standard Hindi in the nationalist era, pre- and post-independence). Instead of repeating this pattern or becoming an unwitting participant, we argue that the provincial/parochial relegation of Mithila provides a crucial opportunity for critical intervention. This intervention seeks to move beyond the counter-narratives of place and identity, which exist in abundance despite the powerful nature of some academic discourses to erase them, and to reflect upon the mutually constitutive and transformative nature of diverse communities and cultures co-existing in South Asia.

Key Concerns of this Special Issue

Collectively, the essays in this special issue open a set of scholarly conversations in several thematic areas that contribute to new research pathways in Mithila Studies. Some of the essays in this issue examine older sources and debates in new critical ways, some explore Mithila as a region from new disciplines and fields—and all undertake their analysis with the ethos of exposing more voices and sources to a globalized scholarly discourse. We have organized this issue thematically to scaffold an understanding of Mithila as a region and Mithila Studies as a field for novice readers. The authors in our first section (Diamond, Paiker, and Kitada) consider the boundaries of Mithila's regional history from the early modern period into the twentieth century to uncover voices hidden in more hegemonic readings of "traditional" sources. These collectively provide a conducive framework for understanding the types of sources that one must begin with and "work through" from past scholarship on the region. They all propose new critical frameworks to excavate these sources, which are not unknown, for new understandings. This provides a foundation for readers to then examine the region from its external boundaries within South Asian geographic and social imaginaries. The authors of our second section (Prakash, Richman, and Fleury) take us in the direction of new sources, archives, and areas of critique as they reveal a

plurality of caste and religious identities at play in Mithila's literature and art and the ways that these fields interplay with transnational scholarship. The final section of this special issue (Pathak and Davis) pushes us forward into the future, examining what is possible if Mithila Studies is taken seriously and given a platform in non-provincialized conversations regarding the nature of affect, emotion, and subjectivity in both the sources of this section's authors' analysis and the methodologies they explore in detail. Even with these thematic variations between our contributors' papers, the unifying thematic area in our collective offerings grapples with the history of casteist and religious marginalizations, as well as their shifting contours in colonialist, nationalist, and contemporary Maithil discourses and representations.

The Essays in this Special Issue

In his essay for this volume, "The 'Indescribable Country': Locating Mithila Between Bengal and the Hindi Heartland in Raghunandana Das's *Mithilānāṭaka*," Christopher L. Diamond examines the shifting place of Maithili and Mithila's regional positionality in the emerging modern (postcolonial) Indian nation. Diamond argues that Das's moralist drama, *Mithilānāṭaka* (The drama of Mithila), renegotiates Maithili/Mithila's marginal status by emphasizing its engagement in multiple elite cultural milieux—the national, the Sanskritic/traditional, and the modern—thereby leveraging the region's credentials as an independent cultural sphere from which others might be influenced.

In contrast to the historical but engineered invisibility of nondominant-caste Hindu and Muslim subjects discussed by Paiker and Prakash, Diamond examines the way multilingualism was employed by Raghunandana Das in his 1923 play, *Mithilānāṭaka*, to negotiate Mithila and Maithili from its historically marginal position in the social geography of the newly emerging Indian nation. Diamond notes that from the late nineteenth century up to the present, Maithil authors and elites, who were engaged in promoting their language and cultural region on a national forum, found themselves disadvantaged and caught between the hegemony of the Hindi heartland and the political and cultural powerhouse of Bengal. In this context, Das's moralistic drama written in Maithili, Hindi, Bengali, and Sanskrit renegotiated Maithili/Mithila's marginal status by emphasizing its engagement in multiple elite cultural milieux. For Das, as Diamond demonstrates, this works to leverage the region's credentials as an independent cultural sphere from which others might take influence. This understanding of Mithila's marginalization from "the outside" is a firm starting place to begin understanding the double marginalization that has pushed Mithila, Maithili, Maithils, and "Mithila Studies" to the periphery in multiple ways into the modern era.

The next three authors (Paiker, Kitada, and Prakash) of this special issue consider how the marginal and liminal status of Mithila within South Asia is compounded and exacerbated by those within Mithila who find themselves marginalized from "the inside"—their voices all but silent from pan-South Asian and international discourses. In the second article of this issue, Ufaque Paiker examines the religious marginalization of Maithil Muslims and their literary and religious output relative to what was recognized as the Maithili language in colonial historiography. In her essay for this volume, "Shadings of Languages: A Study of Maithili *Marṣīya* in Nineteenth-Century Bihar," she draws our attention to the fact that during his expedition to north Bihar in 1882, the famed colonial linguist George Abraham Grierson recorded four Maithili *marṣīya*s (elegies) that were performed by "uneducated" village Hindu and Muslim boys. These findings contradicted his definition of Maithili and Urdu. He and other colonial officers associated Maithili with Maithil Brahmins and Urdu with Muslims. Paiker underlines this and other similar contradictions and inconsistencies in Grierson's definition of Maithili. She argues for widening the scope of Maithili's literary and cultural historiography—requiring historians to go beyond the narrow sampling collated by Grierson—and affirming the lasting contributions made by lower-caste Hindus and Muslims. To that end, she draws our attention to several vernacular histories of Maithili that attends to Muslim communities and their engagement with regional literatures and cultures. She reflects upon what this shared boundary between Maithili and Urdu tells us about association, affiliation, and identification with languages while also considering what kinds of archival sources can be used to recover lost histories of intermixed literary traditions.

In addition to the religious and cultural marginalization of Muslims by colonial and postcolonial sources, the element of gender plays heavily in the themes of many articles in this issue. This gendered element of analysis may appear less overt but is no less significant in the case of Makoto Kitada's appraisal of the intimate and even erotic tone of the songs composed by the Bhaktapur king while grieving for his priestly Brahmin and court-poet friend, a case where the level of grieving dissolves the distinction between erotic and platonic love between men. Kitada notes that the Bhaktapur King Jagatprakasha Malla (r. 1643–1672) composed songs in Maithili and Newari expressing his deep affection and grief for his deceased friend and court-poet, Candrashekhara. Kitada argues that their poetic identities are forged at a linguistic and cultural crossroads infused with such passion as to breach gendered description. The implicit attention to masculinity in Kitada's essay is more overt in Richman's essay, wherein the archetype of a "modern Indian painter" becomes coded as masculine; and in the contrast of masculinities exemplified by Sama's brother and father as portrayed by Maithil community members in the film produced and discussed by Davis (see below).

With regional, religious, and gendered marginalization addressed, the fourth article of this issue grapples with caste marginalization within the literary historiography of Mithila. In his essay, "A Cowherd's Chapbook: An Inquiry into the Ethics of Literary Historiography," Pranav Prakash examines why chapbooks like Bṛj Bihārī Lāl Maṇḍal's play, *Mithilā Nāṭak* (Mithila play), have remained outside the purview of Maithili literary historiography. In the postscript of his play, Maṇḍal identifies himself as a "fallen" (*adham*) person hailing from the *majhrauṭ* branch of the "cowherd caste" (*gvālā jāt*). After the play was published in 1901, neither Maṇḍal nor *Mithilā Nāṭak* was critiqued by any contemporary scholars of Maithili literature. In the subsequent decades, as well, when scholars of Maithili literature reconfigured literary historiography—its critical methods, analytical frameworks, and historical sources—and consolidated the process of literary canonization, Maṇḍal was consistently ignored. Prakash probes whether the exclusion of *Mithilā Nāṭak* was based on an even-handed aesthetic preference or, rather, inattentiveness to or bias against diverse voices and printed ephemerae. In so doing, he appraises how ethically regional literary histories may represent their community and cultural past.

While Prakash considers a case of caste-based marginalization in literary histories, the next two essays of this issue present differing feminist critiques of the ways in which Maithil women's artistic expression was commodified and utilized by Maithil men, broader Indian artistic circles, colonial art critiques, and later postcolonial feminist scholarship outside of South Asia. In "The Cultural Politics of Classifying Mithila Painting," Richman examines the foundational scholarship by art historians about the "Modern Indian Painting" movement circa 1947–1989, noting that such scholarship focused almost exclusively on men working in urban India, to the exclusion of rural, female painters from whose domestic/ritual art tradition Mithila painting derives. Richman notes that aside from appreciation from activists promoting "Mithila identity," these women painters have rarely received the same formal analysis, documentation, and exhibitions as works by "modern" Indian painters. Richman examines the initial historical, representational, and aesthetic factors that contributed to such incommensurate treatment, as well as key similarities between the two forms of painting, demonstrating thereby that the contradictory goals of colonial art schools, nationalist representations of "Indian culture," the linguistic reorganization of India's states in the 1950s, and factors that limited female access to art schools all contribute to unequal scholarly (as well as commercial) treatment.

Whereas feminist scholarly orientations frame Richman's and Davis's essays, Hélène Fleury focuses our attention on feminist *appropriations* of Maithil women's expressive forms into external cultural debates in her essay, "Mithila Painting and Feminism in the 1970s: Constructing Women Painters as Heroines of Western Vanguard Journals." Fleury discusses how, within the global counterculture of the 1970s, Mithila art came to be connected with the

rising field of feminism and its vanguard periodicals. Fleury provides contrastive examples of such availing and recontextualization of Maithil women's painting in relation to feminist discourses in Europe, raising questions of "authenticity," subalternity, and appropriation.

The cultural and social politics of gender constitute a crucial thematic focus of Mithila Studies as construed in our special issue. As Pathak's essay aptly illustrates, the scholarly constructions of manhood and masculinity are important complements to the more widespread focus on women's gendered lives and arts alongside their treatment in patriarchal contexts such as that of Mithila. In the case of Pathak's essay, it is the work of the author as an interpreter to draw out the gendered implications of a literary figure's work. A fully modern Maithil literary figure, Nagarjun, is the subject of Dev Nath Pathak's essay, "A *Ghumakkaṛ* of Modern Mithila: An Interpretative Reading of Baba Nagarjun's Personhood." Pathak argues that the life and works of Nagarjun (1911–1998), a modern poet and author with "a wanderer's personality and fluid identity," warrant discussion regarding modern conceptions of manhood (*puruṣa*), including his focus on this world rather than an ambition to arrive at the otherworld. In Pathak's view, the literary oeuvre of Nagarjun mirrors his headlong participation in sociopolitical movements as well as his awareness of social and structural anomalies. Pathak's essay stitches together the many identifications of Nagarjun to decipher the meaning of Nagarjun's *ghumakkaṛpan* (wanderlust). Pathak argues that the manhood of a *ghumakkaṛ* (wanderer) obtains such "utmost flexibility that there is room for creative ambivalence, rather than a rigidity of a unilinear, singular, monochromatic masculinity," deemed "toxic" in contemporary feminist discourses.

Regarding caste formations and their potential challenges, in her contemporary engagement with Maithil community members in the Madhubani area, Coralynn V. Davis notes in her essay for this issue, "Collaborative Scholarship and the Politics of Participation: Linking Expressive Arts and Social Change in Mithila," that community members were prepared to "play" with caste-based identifications in the dramatic roles they took on when enacting the festival tale of Sama Chakeva, a kind of boundary blurring also evident in what historically was seen as caste-based differences in painterly styles of what came to be known as Mithila art (or Madhubani painting), a challenge to casteist frameworks presented by Richman's essay as well. Davis brings us into present-day Mithila and contemporary issues of identity and representation in the transnational context. Davis critically analyzes how power has been navigated in her own multi-modal, collaborative, participatory research project in Mithila, thereby reflecting on her efforts as a feminist (anthropologist) scholar to create greater public access to and interest in Mithila art, story, and culture while contributing to local knowledge and capacity-building, strengthening intergenerational exchanges and continuities among women, and engaging

local people in the expression of, reflection upon, and potential transformation of social and cultural values and practices. Davis examines the conception of the project, as well as aspects of its execution on the ground and in the aftermath, reflecting on the development of collaborative and participatory relationships, with a focus on how these relationships have both challenged and reinforced power relations on a range of scales.

Compared to the appropriative approaches practiced by the periodical writers of the 1970s, Davis's own archival and filmic projects are themselves aimed at revaluation and instatement, but with what she hopes is a more indigenously resonant and participatory methodology, even as its audience is national and international, as well as specifically Maithil. The story archive she has developed at once preserves and extends globally both access and accessibility (through digital form and translation) of Maithil women's oral tales. At the same time, the documentary film she produced demonstrates the value of Maithil women's creative expressions for reflecting on and advancing social change, without overdetermining their meanings. As exemplified by Fleury's, Richman's, and Davis's essays, a sub-theme among gendered concerns of this special issue is that of the exclusions—and potential (re)instatement—of Maithil women's creative expressions into the canons of Indian art and culture.

While the above essays address in some manner the development of modernist sensibilities and genres in Mithila literature and the arts in regional, national and/or transnational contexts, another (overlapping) set of essays in this volume take on the oft-neglected field of affect as a site for negotiating regional identities, social relations, and ethical norms. This theme is woven throughout all of this issue's essays and provides a useful touchstone for us to consider what an interdisciplinary and intermodal "Mithila Studies" might look like in the future. As noted above, Kitada examines a case of passionate friendship and depths of grief at its loss, even as he extends our understanding of the reach of Maithil culture and language with his focus on the royal court of Nepal in the 1600s. In line with this fourth theme of affect, Paiker considers another emotionally expressive form, namely the lament (*marṣīya*), in the markedly rural contexts of north Bihar. She focuses primarily on historically fuzzy bounds of the Maithili language in an interreligious context; it is perhaps no accident that such boundaries are found to be porous particularly in the arena of human emotion. In yet another context, a playwright of the cow herding caste, Brij Bihari Lal Mandal, grapples with the history of emotions and affect in Mithila. As Prakash argues, Mandal's literary experiments not only challenge and subvert the upper-caste control of traditional poetic forms and genres but also set a precedent for marginalized communities to engage creatively and critically with the literary and oral cultures of Mithila in mapping their unique emotional landscape. Powerful emotion is indeed a regular quality of characters and plot movers in Maithil women's oral storytelling, as is evident in the tale at the center of the film

Davis has produced and discussed in her essay. The story of Sama is rife with such affective states as love (in multiple forms), jealousy, embarrassment, fear, and anger. While the contexts for such emotions are demonstrated to be culturally specific, the feelings themselves are universal, which is part of what enables Maithil tales to be received on a cross-cultural filmic stage.

An Inaugural Special Issue for Mithila Studies

Taken together, the essays in this special issue have challenged existing historical and literary canons, reexamining previously visited archives and scholarships, asking fresh questions, and employing novel methodologies. The authors have also brought existing but previously inadequately examined archives to the light, even in one case literally creating an archive that never existed before. Yet these accomplishments are but a modest start for a more ambitious and expansive collaborative project of delineating Mithila Studies as a humanistic and social scientific field of study rich in insights for a variety of contemporary concerns and future research.

Mithila Studies as we envision it grapples with transitions from the colonial to the postcolonial and transnational; with religious, casteist, and communal formations in historical contexts; with the evolution of gendered categories and discourses, along with the developments and politics of feminist movement and thought in local, transregional, and global settings; with the politics and recontextualization of literary, oral, and folk cultures; and with the *ethoi* of modernity, cosmopolitanism, and subalternity. Mithila Studies concerns itself further with critiquing and crafting the methods, approaches, and theories in humanities and social sciences. As such, Mithila Studies is not just area studies. Mithila Studies is not just language studies. Mithila Studies is not just ethnography. Mithila Studies is not just (art) history. Rather, it is a field that brings multiple regions and disciplines into conversation; resists provincial and parochial characterization of understudied regions and communities; and provides a space to practice humanities and social sciences from the margins as much as from the many diffused and constantly changing urban or cosmopolitan centers.

We have offered this special issue of essays in Mithila Studies as an opening gesture toward these possibilities as well as those yet to be envisioned; we look forward to attending to other voices and engaging with additional archives as the field of Mithila Studies evolves in the future.

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