



Brushstrokes and Trade-offs: The Hidden Economy of Madhubani

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ABSTRACT

Madhubani painting, also called Mithila painting, has gone from being a household practice to an economic activity that supports many women in Bihar, India. Although the literature on the subject focuses on empowerment, culture, and income, this qualitative secondary analysis aims to highlight the economic costs of the activity. The paper is based on peer-reviewed literature, institutional reports, and historical artist testimonials published between 2019 and 2025. The concept of opportunity cost is applied to artistic labour in the analysis. It identifies four components of hidden costs of Madhubani art: low profitability in comparison to other rural professions, sacrifice of human capital, intergenerational occupational exit, and exploitation by intermediaries. The authors argue that accounting for opportunity costs of Madhubani art is crucial for a complete evaluation of the art as an economic activity and for the formulation of effective support policies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Madhubani painting is also referred to as Mithila painting. It started as a ritualistic practice by women in the Mithila region of northern Bihar and parts of Nepal, where this art was drawn on the walls and floors. The practice remained temporary and was practised within certain rituals on mud walls, using natural pigments. The commercialisation of this painting practice began in the 1960s when women began painting on cloth and paper for sale. From a domestic activity, a new commodification took place that made it circulate in national and international markets where it has been given Geographical Indication and where artists have received Padma awards.

Scholars have studied the phenomenon in many ways, including by looking at women's empowerment and poverty alleviation. Recent studies showed that women coming from rural areas in Bihar managed to increase their income and gain recognition through their art. It is reported that many women are now able to participate in the production process of Madhubani painting.

However, supporting information proves that precariousness exists. Artists claim that they receive insufficient amounts of final sale prices, processes of production are too time-consuming, pay cannot exceed that of local daily workers, and demand among the youth keeps decreasing [1, 2]. These findings imply a list of economic costs that have not been sufficiently studied in existing literature. The article reconsiders the topic by means of the opportunity-cost theory, i.e., the value of the next best alternative sacrificed in the process of using limited resources, namely time, labour, skills, and human resources for Madhubani painting.

The idea put forward is that the many positive sides of the referred artistic form coexist with many hidden costs that affect its viability as a means of supporting livelihood and transferring traditions from one generation to another. This research is based entirely on secondary sources comprising articles that appeared between 2019 and 2025, official reports issued by institutions, and artist statements quoted in this kind of literature.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing scholarship on Madhubani (Mithila) painting has predominantly emphasised its cultural significance, gender-empowerment potential, and role in rural livelihood diversification. Early commercialisation narratives document the shift from ritual wall painting to marketable paper and cloth works in the 1960s, followed by Geographical Indication recognition and state awards that elevated the art's visibility [3]. Subsequent studies have framed the practice as a pathway to women's economic independence, social recognition, and reduced dependence on seasonal migration [4, 5].

Choudhary provides a socio-economic assessment of Mithila painting's impact on artists and communities, noting improved household incomes and changing gender norms in villages such as Jitwarpur [1]. Singh and colleagues examine empowerment through the lenses of human, social, and economic capital, while also identifying digital-access barriers and market challenges faced by women artisans [5, 6]. Prasad et al. situate Madhubani painting within broader economic-space transformation and Sustainable Development Goals, arguing that commercialisation has expanded participation beyond traditional caste boundaries [4].

Parallel streams of cultural-economics literature supply the conceptual tools for analysing creative labour. Caves outlines the distinctive contractual and uncertainty features of creative industries, while Towse synthesises the economics of artistic labour markets, including non-pecuniary rewards and low average earnings [7, 8]. These frameworks highlight that positive cultural externalities and intrinsic motivation often coexist with structural disadvantages for producers.

Despite these contributions, systematic attention to the opportunity costs borne by Madhubani artists remains limited. Media reports and artist testimonies repeatedly signal low net returns relative to casual labour, intermediary extraction, and youth disengagement, yet these observations have rarely been synthesised under a coherent economic-cost framework [2, 9]. The present paper addresses this gap by applying opportunity-cost analysis to secondary evidence and identifying four interrelated hidden costs that condition the long-term viability of the art form as a livelihood strategy.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research paper is a qualitative secondary analysis and conceptual synthesis. The authors have not collected primary data, conducted interviews or surveys. The research draws on scholarly articles, book chapters, institutional documents and credible news articles mainly published between 2019 and 2025 on the socio-economic aspects of Madhubani painting or Mithila painting.

3.1 Conceptual Framework: Opportunity Cost in Artistic Labour

In microeconomic theory, opportunity cost refers to the value of the most preferred alternative of a resource used for one purpose. In relation to the labour market, it includes lost salary, alternative skill investments, and leisure and non-economic labour value associated with art creation. The non-wage benefits and the uncertainty connected to how much one will earn complicate the calculation in the case of informal and creative sectors of the economy. All these factors make calculating opportunity cost very difficult.

In the case of Madhubani artists, the opportunities that people turn to instead of making art usually include agricultural work, daily wage work, seasonal work, trade and education. In this context, it is necessary to remember that the process of making art is carried out mostly by women, which implies opportunity costs related to performing other domestic tasks, such as child care and household work. The decision whether to teach children how to make art depends on the parents' assessment of benefits provided by the occupation in comparison with the benefits obtained through education and other jobs.

According to the structure of the value chain, it still affects the opportunity cost of the artist. When the channel members take a large portion of the final price, the artist's return decreases and the choice of exit pathways becomes more rational. Commercialisation creates additional costs because the pressure for faster production and simplification of artistic plots damages the specific aesthetic and cultural nature of this art. This model does not deny the benefits resulting from Madhubani art creation; however, it claims that any socio-economic analysis must take into account losses that can happen when households spend their limited resources on this kind of art.

3.2 Source Selection and Analytical Approach

The sources came from careful investigation of academic databases and open repositories using combinations of the terms Madhubani, Mithila painting, livelihood, socio-economic impact, empowerment, value chain, and synonyms. The inclusion criteria emphasised peer-reviewed papers and governmental reports providing either figures in terms of money and time spent or qualitative descriptions of artists' attitudes towards the lifestyles of their descendants. Grey literature was taken into account only when it contained verbatim quotes from the artists or government figures not published in any other academic paper.

The analytical strategy is based on iterative thematic synthesis. Information is coded according to the categories of opportunity cost from the theoretical framework presented above: the amount of money earned as compared with its alternatives, the allocation of time and skills, ancestral vocational choice, and the way surplus is shared in the value chain. The categories obtained were refined through continued comparison of evidence across the sources. Since different studies employed different methods of data gathering and processing, the synthesis remains qualitative and does not aim at statistical meta-analysis. Limitations related to the secondary nature of evidence are emphasised in the final section of the research.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The secondary evidence converges on four interrelated hidden costs. Each is discussed in turn, drawing on the most consistent findings across recent studies while noting variations in magnitude and context.

4.1 Low Net Returns Relative to Alternative Occupations

According to multiple independent sources, the income gained from painting is often less than that obtained through casual labour in general. In fact, the artists of Jitwarpur claim that they receive between 2,000 and 2,500 rupees for a painting that takes seven to ten days to finish, whereas casual labour in these same villages earn over 500 rupees each day [2]. When taking into account the costs of materials and the unpaid labour of family helpers, the income is often below the reservation wage.

According to Choudhary, many artists would rather take a job with a fourth-class government post than be full-time painters, indicating that the common belief is that artistic activity is not a viable option for a primary occupation [1]. Value-chain studies show that village-level artists only receive about five to ten percent of the final price, leaving the remainder for middlemen, retailers and export agents [2, 9]. This means that opportunity cost is really high.

Although non-monetary benefits and the flexibility that painting brings to women fulfilling both income-generating work and domestic roles partly make up for the financial gap, the structural gap remains salient in this sector and has implications for the labour-supply choices of women as well as for their households' survival strategies.

These continually low net returns alter how households make decisions. If painting produces less money than other rural jobs considering input costs and unpaid family labour, artists will attempt to diversify or stop painting. This will lead to underinvestment in artistic skills, reinforcing structural disadvantage and making it impossible for practitioners to escape economic precarity even as the process of cultural valorisation continues. Household socio-economic standing in India is commonly assessed with standardised status scales that weigh such income sources [10].

4.2 Time Allocation and Human-Capital Trade-Offs

The practice of Madhubani painting requires a great deal of effort and hard work. In order to produce a Madhubani painting using traditional methods and techniques, prolonged concentration is required. It is reported that many women have to manage both household chores and painting, which complicates the entire process [6]. This dual burden generates the following costs.

Having to paint extensively could mean that children take up painting instead of education. Some research reveals that art income enabled children to study, even if other studies suggest that artists' children might neglect painting due to low returns from this profession. The human-capital cost is two-fold: an artist is sacrificing possible skill-acquisition opportunities while the family can invest less into formal education of children. Singh et al. describe how women painters have been turning their art skills into economic, social, and even human capital [6]. Yet the same research shows that difficulties regarding market access persist.

Women face a hefty opportunity cost due to their combined obligations of housework and artistic work. Time spent painting takes away from leisure and other forms of education, and the passing of the

tradition of artistic work from one generation to the next can interfere with education. In the end, such choices contribute to a lack of resilience in households and limit the prospects of the next generation of artisans.

4.3 Intergenerational Occupational Exit

One of the most significant hidden costs is that the younger generation is increasingly exiting the profession. Various reports show artists saying that their children are more interested in becoming engineers, working for the government, or seeking urban employment than remaining painters [1, 11]. In some cases, the parents themselves facilitate the exit by regarding artistic work as more unstable than regular office jobs. Such departure creates an opportunity cost for the whole community and culture. The artistic expertise that includes the usage of symbols, natural-pigment preparation, and stylistic features constitutes a form of intangible cultural capital. The ending of transmission results not only in the loss of an individual's income but also in the potential loss of a distinctive art form that has proven its commercial value globally.

While commercialisation has widened the field of practitioners and diminished prior class boundaries, a simultaneous drop in youth involvement raises concerns over a steady supply of high calibre work. This development matches trends in creative labour markets where an elastic supply of aspiring artists and unpredictable demand result in comparatively low incomes, thus encouraging parents to push children towards safer professions. In Madhubani, this trend is particularly visible because most of the main manufacturing villages are located in areas with relatively low education levels.

Intergenerational exit is a subtle yet significant form of cultural and economic decay. As younger generations leave the profession, there is a danger of losing specialised knowledge relating to pigments, patterns and processes. This loss is not confined to the household but also reduces community intangible capital; hence, it affects cultural identity as well as the prospects of authentic Madhubani art in international markets.

4.4 Value-Chain Extraction and Market Structure

The market structure itself creates an opportunity cost by gradually lowering the value that goes to the artist. The extent of intermediary mark-ups can be seen from the price ranges of paintings produced by a village artist that cost a few hundred rupees, to paintings sold in big cities or abroad, which can reach tens of thousands of rupees. The issue is that artists lack access to the market, bargaining power, and the skills needed for direct sale. Some government programs, such as craft villages, exhibitions, artisan credit cards and lower GST for handicrafts, have improved this situation to an extent, but literature indicates that artists still rely on external agents and receive payments late from official sources [2, 9].

Additionally, printed reproductions diminish the premium on hand-made products even further, increasing the relative costs of traditional and labour-intensive production. Artists working under such conditions can deliver only a limited volume of products while engaging in a labour-intensive process of production. The opportunity cost is thus systemic and refers to the way resources allocated under the extractive model bring less value than they would bring in the case of more directly organised marketing.

The extractive nature of value chains transforms the hard work and artistic skills of artists into profits that are accumulated further along the chain. Creative artists lack direct means of engaging in the market or bargaining; therefore, they bear the entire opportunity cost of their slow and laborious craft. This inequity will persist until artists capture a larger share of final value or new modes of distribution enable creative workers to market independently.

4.5 Balancing Benefits and Hidden Costs

The secondary evidence indicates that one cannot simply characterise the situation as one of exploitation or success without qualification. The Madhubani tradition has led to increased household incomes, greater public involvement of women, and cultural visibility that were impossible in the days of purely ritual production. Even in certain villages, the Madhubani tradition has been able to reduce dependence on seasonal migration and to help diversify the local economy. However, the unforeseen costs have complicated the claims of empowerment. Instead of providing returns comparable to alternatives, constraints on time, intergenerational exit from the art form, and unequal sharing of economic benefits along the supply chain make it less likely that practitioners will achieve significant long-term economic security.

From an economic standpoint, the industry demonstrates the characteristics of a low-equilibrium trap: high cultural importance and worldwide demand coexist with low earnings of producers, which motivates

exit and puts the quality and continuity of supply in jeopardy. Cultural economics offers an illuminating perspective. Creative work always carries non-pecuniary advantages that reduce the minimum wage that workers will accept, but such rewards do not solve many problems of rural families. Being unable to cover high opportunity costs, economically rational people leave the sector; precisely the pattern observed among young Madhubani painters.

It is necessary, therefore, to recognise both empowerment gains and structural costs in any proper assessment. Although non-monetary opportunities in the form of identity, versatility, and pride somewhat mitigate limited cash earnings, these factors cannot indefinitely compensate for the losses incurred. Sustainable policies must help achieve the financial security of the artists as well as the preservation of the unique cultural character of Madhubani art. Who captures the value of this work, and on what terms, is also a question of justice in the changing world of work [12].

5. CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the hidden economic costs of Madhubani art through the lens of opportunity-cost theory. While the tradition enjoys high cultural significance and expanding commercial visibility, it simultaneously imposes substantial and under-recognised economic burdens on its practitioners. Four interrelated costs emerge consistently from the secondary evidence: (i) low net returns relative to alternative rural occupations, (ii) intensive time commitments that generate human-capital trade-offs for both artists and their children, (iii) intergenerational occupational exit that erodes intangible cultural capital, and (iv) value-chain extraction that systematically reduces the share of final price captured by the artists themselves.

These opportunity costs are not incidental; they are structurally embedded in the current organisation of production and marketing. Addressing them is therefore not merely a matter of fairness but a prerequisite for the long-term sustainability of Madhubani painting both as a livelihood strategy and as a living cultural practice. Policy priority should be given to increasing the artists' share of final value through improved direct-market access, stronger cooperatives, and effective enforcement of fair-trade and Geographical Indication labelling. Complementary training in digital literacy, basic financial management, and design innovation would raise the returns that accrue to artists and thereby lower the relative opportunity cost of remaining in the sector. Integrating Madhubani art into formal educational curricula and expanding well-regulated travelling exhibitions may further support intergenerational transmission while opening more remunerative outlets.

The principal limitation of the present study is its exclusive reliance on secondary sources. Existing studies employ heterogeneous methods and sampling frames, so precise quantification of opportunity costs remains beyond the reach of current data. Future research should deploy primary time-use diaries, earnings surveys, and stated-preference experiments to generate more accurate estimates of reservation wages and intergenerational transmission decisions. Even with these limitations, the secondary evidence is sufficient to demonstrate that a complete economic evaluation of Madhubani art must incorporate the hidden costs borne by its practitioners rather than focusing solely on the benefits of cultural empowerment and market expansion.

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