

## **'ABHIKSHNA' REALITY & ILLUSION: A COMPARATIVE CULTURAL STUDY OF BIHAR & UTTAR PRADESH**

**MOHAMMAD SHAHID,**  
RESEARCH SCHOLAR

**UDAYA KUMAR**  
**DHARMALINGAM,**

**MRIGANKA**  
**MADHUKAILYA,**

DEPARTMENT OF DESIGN, INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
GUWAHATI, ASSAM, INDIA

### **Abstract**

*'Abhikshana' is a Sanskrit word synonymous to continuity or life cycle. The world we experience and the life we live are the reflection of our thoughts. The mind creates a world of illusion. By changing our thoughts, we change the illusion and experience a different reality. Culture is a part of this experience. Each society has its own norms and rules to be followed by individuals in order to retain society's harmony. It differs from each other in terms of traditions and expectations which develop by belief, faith, practices and customs. This study explores the socio-cultural and geographical differences between two cultures, one is from Banaras (Varanasi), Uttar Pradesh and another is from Patna, Bihar. The transitional ground where the cultures juxtapose and merge without cultural differences is studied.*

*The study draws on the basis of ethnographic approach to compare two cultures. It is further followed by research insights, ideation and final proposal. The study reveals that despite of all the socio-cultural and geographical differences, there are few common elements between these two cultures which address the same aspirations of people living in two different habitats. As an outcome, one of these aspirations is beautifully crafted in the form of short animation film, which talks about the river 'Ghat culture' of two places and life cycles associated with it by taking kite as a metaphor.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Comparative Study, Ethnography, Illusion & Reality, Animation Film

## **'ABHIKSHNA' REALITY & ILLUSION: A COMPARATIVE CULTURAL STUDY OF BIHAR & UTTAR PRADESH**

**MOHAMMAD SHAHID**

**UDAYA KUMAR  
DHARMALINGAM**

**MRIGANKA  
MADHUKAILYA**

### **Introduction:**

**T**he five senses in our body help us feel about the reality around us. Whatever we experience and give response to it, is the reflection of our thoughts. The mind has great role in creating a world of illusion. Whenever we change our thoughts, we change the illusion and experience a different reality (Sasson). Culture is a part of this experience. Culture is a complex domain. It is concerned with the production and exchange of meaning between groups or individual people in a society. This meaning creation totally depends upon the people who take part in this meaning making (Hall 1-12). It can be referred as knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, symbol, attitude, meaning and motives. It spreads from the expression of human beliefs, emotion and values to the social and material context and talks about social relationships and economic production (Green 2). The definition of culture has different perspective from different scholars.

Across the history, it is very difficult for people to distinguish between reality and illusion. Reality can be referred as what happens, whereas illusion is something which one would like to happen. Relying on our five senses, we cannot deny the validity of what we see. The world exists for us only when these five senses and our conscious mind are directed towards it, and comes to an end when we silence the senses and the mind (Raut). Each society has its own norms and rule to be followed by individuals in order to retain society strong and intact. It differs from each other in terms of traditions and expectations which develop by belief, faith, practices and customs. To have an effective interaction between two cultures, it is very important to have an understanding of individual culture. This study explores two cultures, one is from Banaras (Varanasi), Uttar Pradesh and another is from Patna, Bihar. A comparison was done to find out the transition where both the cultures juxtaposed and remove differences and become one culture. The study was carried out under the sub theme of 'reality & illusion; interdisciplinary in design'. The objective of this study was to come up with a design solution which reflects the aspirations of people belonging to both the places by bringing reality and illusion together.

### **Uttar Pradesh**

Uttar Pradesh is known for multicultural and multiracial society. It has prominent natural wealth in the form of hills, rivers, valley, forest and vast agricultural plains. Being the most populated state of India, this place is regarded as the oldest seat of India's culture and civilization. It is believed that the two epics of Hindu mythology, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were written here. This state has been gifted with one of the most sacred river of the world, Ganga. Varanasi, one of the most sacred sites in Hindu mythology belongs to this state. Uttar Pradesh is also famous for being the home for lord Budhha who gave his first lesson in Sarnath, Varanasi. Uttar Pradesh has been ruled by Mauryans and Mughals and was important site of interest in every dynasty.

### **Bihar**

Soil of Bihar is full of stories, folk art and music. The place is known for giving birth to Hindu mythological character *Sita*, who played an important role in *Ramayana*. She was born in Mithila, a place under district Madhubani (Chaitanya 95)(Brown 717-737). She is a progressive woman and had great significance in Hindu religion. Since the ancient time, Bihar was ruled by many dynasties. Mauryan dynasty was started from Bihar soil under the leadership of Chandragupt Maurya. He was the first emperor of South Asia. Pataliputra was the capital of this kingdom which is now known as Patna. Emperor Ashok was nephew of Chandragupta Maurya. He was a follower of Boudh Religion and founded a world famous non-violence kingdom. He was the first ruler who gives importance to life, both human and animals and laid the foundation of *Dhamma Niti*. This *Niti* brings people united based on social, moral and philosophical parameters.

Bihar is a place where many religion existed and grown together across century. It is evident that this place is equally fertile for Boudh, Jain, Hindu and Muslim religion and all the religion co-existed together. *Buddhism* religion was started by Gautam Budhha from soil of Bihar and gave his first learning in Sarnath, Banaras. Sikh religion is also evident in Bihar. The 10<sup>th</sup> Guru, Guru Govind Singh was born in Patna. He was the last Guru in Sikh culture. Jain religion is also originated on Bihar soil around 6 BC. The purity of life is base of Jain religion and it believe that every living thing has right to live. Non-violence is a core element of this religion (Shrivastava). In old history; Bihar is also famous for Nalanda University, one excellent education center. Soil of Bihar is always ready to accept new thoughts and art since the beginning. This way both the states are interlinked together in terms of social structure and religious belief.

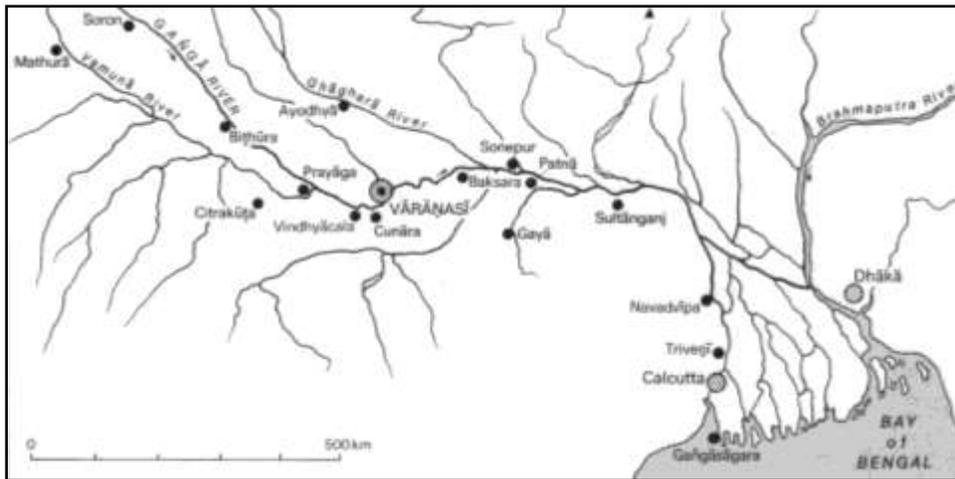


Fig.1: Different sacred sites on the Ganga river bank. Source: (Singh 211).

Varanasi has distinct status among the holy places in India because of sacred blessings of Ganga and its association with Lord Siva (Singh 213). Being one of the most sacred rivers in Hindu mythology, it is also known as 'Mother Ganga'. It is believed that a bath in her water can remove all the sins and lead towards the Moksha (eternal liberation). The Ganga plays an important role in ceremonies and worships. Ghat (river bank) is the place which witnesses the *Jeevan Chakra* (life cycle) since the civilization and still doing the same. Ganga is a witness of many rituals including, the rituals of birth and initiation, marriage and death, purification and eternal liberation. One can experience these while walking through the river bank (see Fig. 2). Beyond her economic value, the Ganga has physical, mental, emotional and spiritual power and described as the soul of India (Singh 211).



Fig. 2: View of Ganga Ghat, Varanasi (Courtesy Ken Wieland) Fig. 3: Madhubani art Source: (Brown 730)

The Ganga riverfront in Varanasi has 84 *Ghats*. It is said that each *Ghat* represent one lakh species, making it total of 84 lakh organic species mentioned in Hindu mythologies. It also include 7 Chakras (sheaths in human body) and it is believed that one can complete the annual cycle of cosmic journey by taking a sacred bath at the 84 *Ghats* (Singh 213).

Along with the visceral association with Ganga, Bihar is also famous for its art & craft. One of them is the Madhubani painting (see Fig. 3). Madhubani is a district in Bihar, set in Terai foot-hills. This region is separated from rest of Bihar by the Himalaya, the Ganga, the Gandak and Son rivers which makes it isolated from rest of the land (Brown 719)(Chaitanya 95). Madhubani painting also known by the name Mithila painting, is a folk art through which artist narrates the epics and legends of India which shows a vast literary and poetic association as religious (Chaitanya 95). It is produced by women of Kayastha and Brahman castes. This art show various religious and folkloric themes and all the key scenes are an adaptation of *Ramayana* and *Krishna* story (Chavda 26-28). The design element ranges from mythological characters to animals, birds and fish, and has border as a unique style. Characterized by vibrant use of colour, painting uses symbolism and traditional geometric patterns to support the main theme (Das 2).

This art has a great social value and helps to brings harmony and togetherness between the community women (Shrivastava). There is no formal teaching and this art has been transfer from generation to generation through family member. In original state, this painting was done on the house wall using mixture of cow dung and mud (Chavda 26-28). In spite huge protest from man in the family, women of this place have done lot to bring this art at world platform. Now Madhubani painting has taken a form of progressive stream of art, which is helping out many women to become economically independent (Shrivastava). Across the timeline this painting has evolved in various forms. It ranges from traditional style to contemporary style in the form of painting on paper and 'patchwork' Madhubani. This painting is a source of inspiration to develop my film characters. It is evident in the form of style, colour, pattern and motif.

## **STORY, STORY BOARDING AND CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**

### **Story**

Film is titled as 'Abhikshna' [Abhi (repeatedly) + Kshana (moment)], meaning perpetual is a Sanskrit word (Williams 74). The word is synonymous to the life at both the Ghats. Film narrates the story of 'life cycle' witnessed by everyone around the Ghat. Kite has been used as a visual metaphor for the life. It is clear bright winter morning. The cool January breeze is making its way through the tiny lanes and cramped roads. The sun seems generous to warm the courtyard and open terraces, making it favorable outside.

### **Scene 1**

A panoramic view of Ganga river bank, showing the skyline of the city and directing the eye rhythmically through the temples, the buildings, the foliage and the petite roads adding an elements of surprise. It is the month of *Makar Sankranti*. It is the time to fly kites. The sky is full of them now, all flying high east wards as if the wind directs them to greet the Sun God and mother Ganga.

*(Camera zooms to one of the roof top of a building)*

Two children are flying kite on the roof top. One of them is handling the string of the kite, trying to direct the motion, while the other child is very carefully unwinding the spindle using both the hand, not once looking away from the kite flying high. Both the kids are pacing from one end to the other end of the roof top, trying hard to make their kite win and defeat the others in this race.

*(Camera sweeps its view from two kids to the sky along the string)*

It is fight between two kites in the air, trying to cut each other by moving up and down and creating suspense as to which one would survive. The situation synonymous to our struggle with the ups and down in life. One of the two breaks.

### **Scene 2**

The falling kite reaches the middle of the river Ganga, flowing restlessly towards her destination.

*(Camera zooms on the surface of the river)*

The clear water gushes through river bed with school of fish swimming underneath the waves. A few fish jumping in and out, as if celebrating and rejoicing the moment of life the river blessed them with.

*(Focusing on a big fish, scene merges with the priest performing prayer).*

A priest is performing *Arati (prayer)* with a huge lamp in his hand. He is accompanied with group devotee. The scene further turned to the group of priest, holding giant lamps. They are praying in synchronized moves, as a singer chant in background and boats are passing by. People are praying to river Ganga to bless them with prosperity, happiness and wash away all their sins. The environment is adorned with the sound of huge drums, bells, and Shankhs (sea shells), adding a divine feeling to it.

### **Scene3**

*(Scene turn into the room of a temple)*

With the enchanted religious sound in the background, devotees are offering flower to the god Shiva inside the temple. The offered flower takes viewer to the Ghat where people cremate the dead. The *Manikarnaka* Ghat in Varanasi is famous for this ritual. One can see many such lit pyres all the time. The beginning now leads to the end and complete its cycle. The floating flower heads towards the flowing water under vast open sky and the kite

which was falling freely is seen in the frame. It continues to fall slowly to the waves. Suddenly a boat with children nears the descending kite. At the end, kite manages to end up landing in a kid's little hands, who is carefully wobbling off its crunched and cramped surface, mending it instantaneously and making it ready for the next flight.

If life let you go high, it also knows to bring you back to the earth. Life treats everyone kind. Just like the broken kite, it gives a second chance to all. A chance to live, a chance to treasure, and a chance to cherish the opportunity that all have got. The spirit of Ganga Ghat is contagious. It instantaneously clings to everyone and runs through their veins. It merges with everyone soul, pushes them away from their trials and directs them to enjoy the most precious and forgotten thing that is their life.

### **Film Synopsis**

*"The vicious cycle of life is clearly witnessed in both places, the City of Moksha: Banaras and Patna. Life never stops. There is always hope hidden in every downfall and in every dark niche. Both the cities display a magnificent spirit of living each moment and accepting the sorrows and joys with even zest. May it be victory or may it be defeat, they knows to rejoice, and celebrates every little bit that comes its way".*

### **Story Board, Background and Characters**

Before making the film, story boarding was done. Story board clearly illustrates the individual scenes in colour format along with the script and production notes. Characters and style are inspired from Madhubani painting, whose theme relates with the faith, belief and culture of two states and directly connect with the people living around the bank of the river Ganga. There are five main characters: children, priests, fishes, kites and people around the Ghat. Each character has significant association with the cultures of both the places. Children represent the passion and excitement of life whereas priests relates with duty and devotion of life. Fishes represents the dream of life and presents another perspective of looking at the life. Kites have been taken as visual metaphor to connect all these elements in single thread to symbolize the life cycle. As both the places are filled with bright colours, black, yellow, blue, red, green and orange has been used to illustrate the characters and background scenes. Individual elements are hand sketched and animated in Adobe After Effect software to make the final animation film.

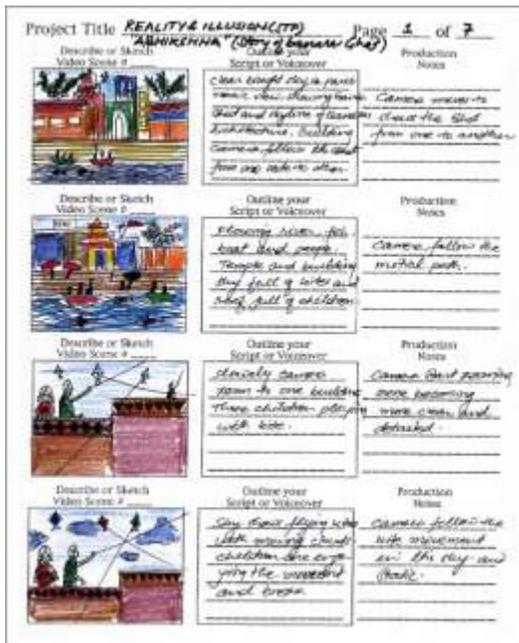


Fig. 4: Story board

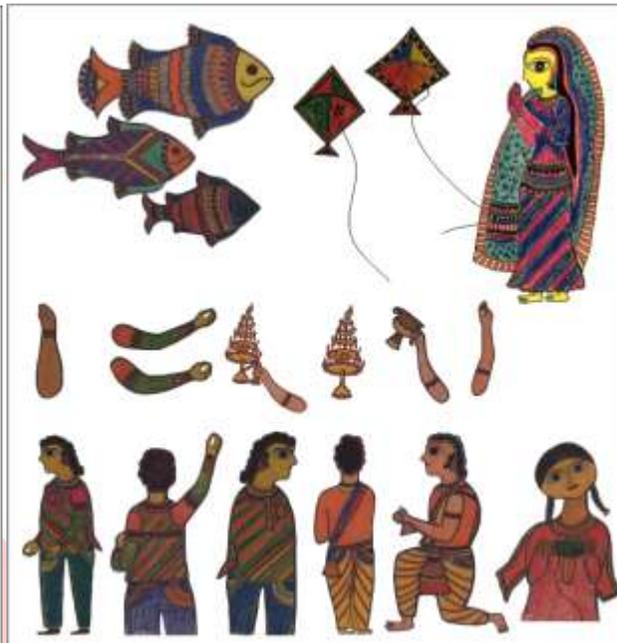


Fig. 5: Characters

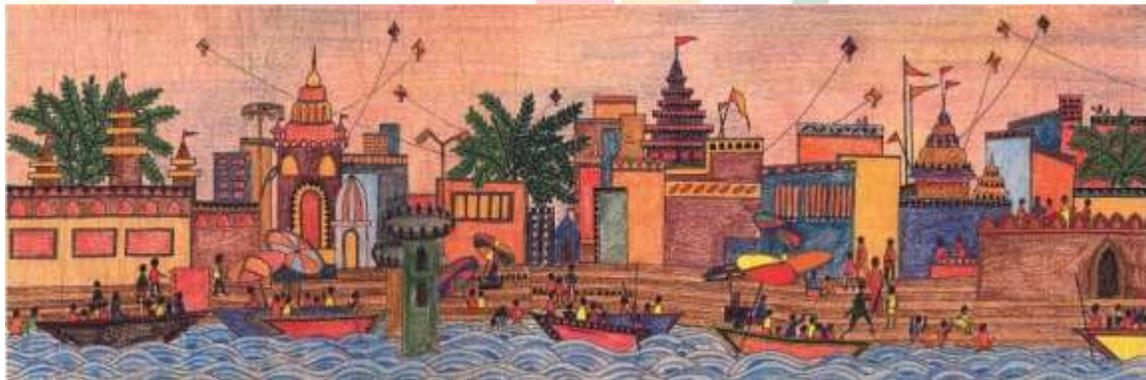


Fig. 6: Background

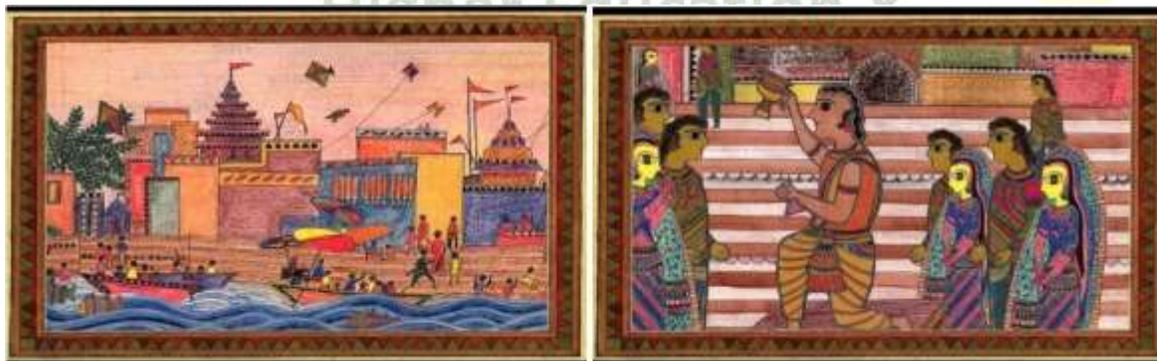


Fig. 7: Screen shots from the film.

## CONCLUSION

The study reveals that despite of all the socio-cultural and geographical differences, there are few common elements between these two cultures. These are faith, devotion, livelihood and daily rituals. These elements address the same aspiration of peoples living in two different habitats. Study illustrates how reality and illusion are interconnected. The events like view of Ghat, fighting of kites, prayers offered by priests and people, and burning of body, all show the reality which can be physically seen and experience. Whereas the dreamed events like fight between kite seen as situation synonymous to our struggle with the ups and down in life is an illusion. Similarly believing in taking bath in Holly River and cremation at Ghat will wash all the sins and leads to *Moksha* (internal liberation) are just an illusion. Through all the events illustrated in story section, reality and illusion has been shown as two side of a coin which cannot be separated. Study shows how the traditional art & craft and practices can interweave using film to establish an effective communication.

## WORKS CITED:

- Brown, Carolyn Henning. "Contested Meanings: Tantra and the Poetics of Mithila Art." *American Ethnologist* 23 (1996): 717-737. Print.
- Chaitanya, Krishna. *A History of Indian Painting: The Modern Period*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1994. Print.
- Chavda, Jagdish J. "The Narrative Paintings of India's Jitwarpuri Women." *Woman's Art Journal* 11.1 (1990): 26-28. Print.
- Das, Nibedita. "Madhubani Paintings: Its Existence and Possibility." *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications* 3.2 (2013): 1-7. Print.
- Green, Anna. *Cultural History*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.
- Hall, Stuart. "Introduction." *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1997. 1-12. Print.
- Raut, Santosh. "Reality and illusion." 25 September 2009. ocean.co.nr. 5 July 2015 <<https://emeditation.wordpress.com/2009/09/25/reality-and-illusion/>>.
- Sasson, Remez. "Reality Versus Imagination and Illusion." 31 October 2013. Look Within You. 3 July 2015 <<http://www.lookwithinyou.com/reality-versus-imagination-and-illusion/>>.
- Singh, Rana P. B. "Water symbolism and sacred landscape in Hinduism: A study of Benares (Varanasi)." *Erdkunde* 48.3 (1994): 210-227. Print.
- Sunehare Dastan: Bihar Ki Bhoomi Se. By Alankrita Shrivastava. Dir. Alankrita Shrivastava. Prod. Prakash Jha. 2012. Movie.
- Williams, M. Monier. *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Private Limited, 2002. Print.