
Mandana and the Transformation of Folk Aesthetics: Rethinking Continuity in Rural Rajasthan

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Abstract:

Folk art traditions in India have historically functioned as embedded cultural expressions, closely tied to ritual practice and everyday life. Mandana, a traditional painting practice from Rajasthan, exemplifies this integration. This paper examines Mandana within the context of cultural transformation, focusing on how changing socio-economic conditions are reshaping its practice and meaning. While the visual presence of Mandana persists, its ritual significance and social function are undergoing gradual reconfiguration. Drawing on cultural theory and field observations, the study argues that Mandana should be understood not as a declining tradition but as a practice negotiating continuity within modernity.

KEYWORDS: Mandana, Folk Aesthetics, Cultural Change, Tradition, Rural India

Introduction:

Folk traditions are often positioned within discourses of preservation; however, such perspectives risk overlooking their dynamic and adaptive nature. In the Indian context, practices like Mandana exist at the intersection of aesthetics, ritual, and domestic life (Jain, 2000).

Mandana, practiced primarily by women in Rajasthan, transforms everyday surfaces into culturally meaningful spaces. Historically associated with auspicious occasions, it operates as a visual articulation of belief systems and social values. Yet, in contemporary contexts, the conditions sustaining such practices are shifting.

Scholars have argued that tradition is not static but continuously reconstructed in response to social change (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). This study adopts this perspective to examine Mandana as a living, evolving practice.

Mandana within Folk Aesthetic Traditions

Mandana shares structural and conceptual similarities with other Indian practices such as Alpana, Rangoli, and Kolam. These forms are characterized by:

- ephemerality,
- site-specificity,
- and ritual association (Vatsyayan, 1983).

Such practices function as both aesthetic expressions and symbolic acts, reinforcing cultural continuity within domestic spaces.



Figure 1. Mandana executed on a domestic courtyard wall during a festive occasion, illustrating its integration within everyday architectural space (Rajasthan, Ramsingh Pura, 2014). Photograph by Author.

Cultural Change and Shifting Contexts

Rural India has undergone significant transformation due to:

- migration,
- economic restructuring,
- and increased exposure to mass media.

These changes have altered the contexts in which Mandana is practiced. As Bourdieu (1977) suggests, practices are shaped by habitus—when social conditions shift, practices adapt accordingly.



Figure 2. Comparison between traditional Mandana on earthen surface (left), Khilchi Pura, Rajasthan, India, 2014 and contemporary adaptation on cement Surface (right) Khilchi Pura, Rajasthan, India, 2017, indicating material and contextual shifts. Photograph by Author.

Reconfiguration of Practice

Field observations indicate:

- reduced frequency of practice,
- simplified motifs,
- and use of alternative materials.

These shifts do not necessarily indicate decline but reflect adaptation to new circumstances. The symbolic depth of Mandana may be less explicitly articulated, yet its presence persists in modified forms.

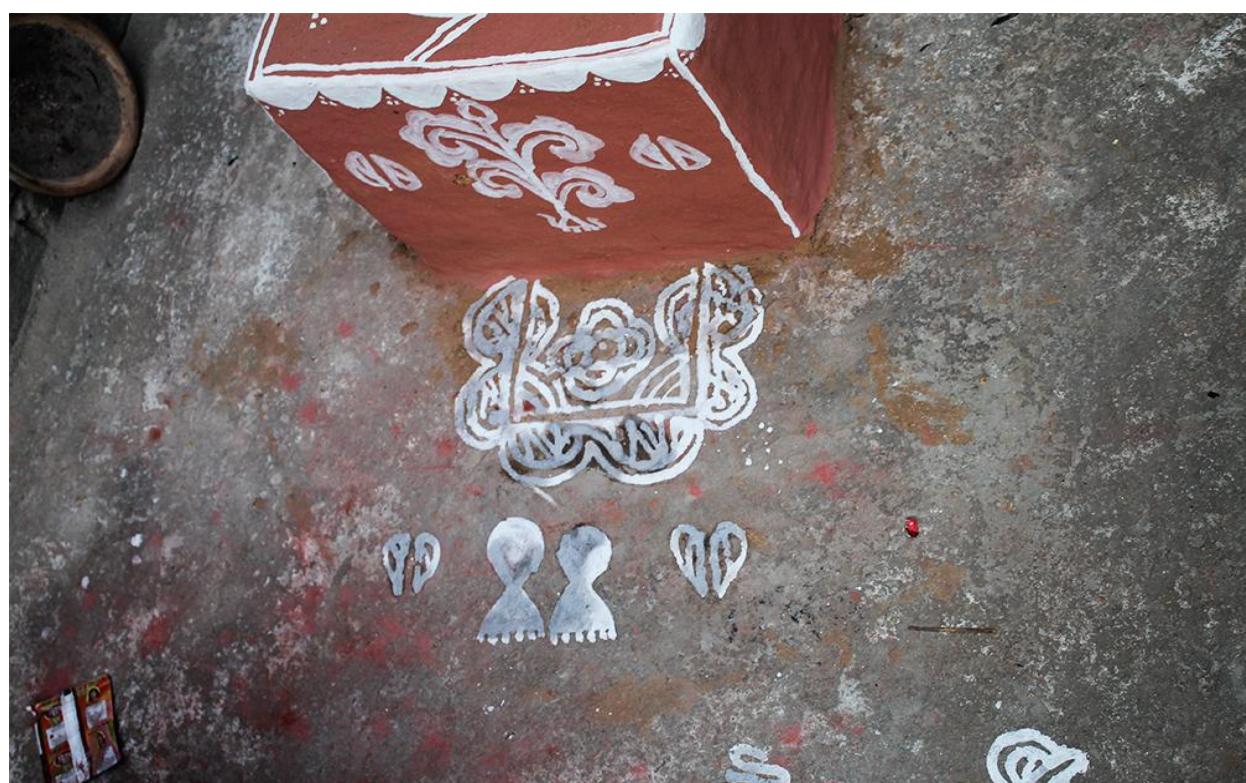


Figure 3. Variations in Mandana motifs showing transition from intricate traditional forms to simplified contemporary patterns. Khilchi Pura Rajasthan, 2017. Photograph by Author

Tradition as Negotiation

Rather than viewing Mandana only as a tradition that is either preserved or disappearing, it is more appropriate to understand it as a practice that is adapting to changing social and cultural conditions. Younger generations continue to participate in Mandana, although mainly during festivals and special occasions, indicating a shift in its role and significance. This supports the view that traditions are not static but continue to evolve over time (Appadurai, 1996).



Figure 4. Mandana practice during a festive occasion involving a younger practitioner, indicating continuity alongside changing engagement patterns. Ramsingh Pura Village, Rajasthan, 2017. Photograph by Author.

Conclusion

Mandana is still practiced in several rural communities of Rajasthan, but its practice has gradually declined over time. Changes in lifestyle, migration, and modernization have influenced both the frequency of its practice and its traditional forms. Rather than indicating the end of the tradition, these changes reflect its adaptation to changing social and cultural conditions. Recognizing this process helps us better understand the evolving nature of folk traditions.

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