

# KARNATAS OF MITHILA (PART-2)

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# PANJI SYSTEM

## **‘Re-organization’ of Maithil Society through Panji Prabandh and Kulinism :**

In around the fourteenth century, during the reign of Harisimhadev, the societal structure of Mithila was “re-organized” through the introduction of the system of *Panji-Prabandh* and *Kulinism*. These were unique social systems, perhaps borrowed later by the adjoining areas of Bengal and Assam, and continue to have an effect on contemporary Mithila society. *Panji Prabandh* refers to the systematic enlisting of genealogical records known as *Panjis* (Sanskrit for „log book“). The two caste-groups which have followed Panji Prabandha most stringently over centuries are the *Brahmins and Karna Kayasthas of Mithila*. The practice came into existence in around 1326 A.D. by the orders of the last ruler of the Karnata dynasty- Harisimhadev.

# PANJI SYSTEM

It was introduced with the aim of maintaining the purity of blood by recording the exact ancestry of the people of Mithila, and by avoiding forbidden degrees of relationship in marriages.

It is important to note that even earlier, marriages of “upper” caste Maithils used to be solemnized according to the scripts of Manu, Yajnavalkya, Gautama, and so on. And therefore, unlike popular perceptions, Harisimhadev did not quite invent this system; it was already in practice in less organized ways since the ancient time. For instance, in the 7th century A.D., scholar Kumarila Bhatt in his book *Tantravartika* (his famous work on Mimamsa) had talked about a similar custom known as *Samuha-Lekhyani*- the ancient tradition of keeping genealogical records by the “upper” echelons of the society in order

# PANJI SYSTEM

to maintain caste and blood purity- which was later re-organized as Panji-Prabandh. The distinction between the two is that *Samuha-Lekhyani* used to be prepared individually; while Panji was commissioned by the royal order and a set of trained persons known as Panjikars (genealogists) were assigned to maintain the genealogical records. Harisimhadev was instrumental in making the custom more systematic and, thereby, more stringent. But what made him bring back this age-old custom in such a vigorous manner to Mithila?

One of the recurrent fears was to maintain purity of lineage, more specifically to avoid mixing of castes in marriage alliance. There was an understanding that human society is not equal, that there are distinctions and these distinctions have to be made and maintained in order to protect the sanctity of social institutions of

# PANJI SYSTEM

this region. Kumarila and other scholars such as Yajñavalkya, had emphasized on the protection of dharma for preserving the purity of caste-distinctions.

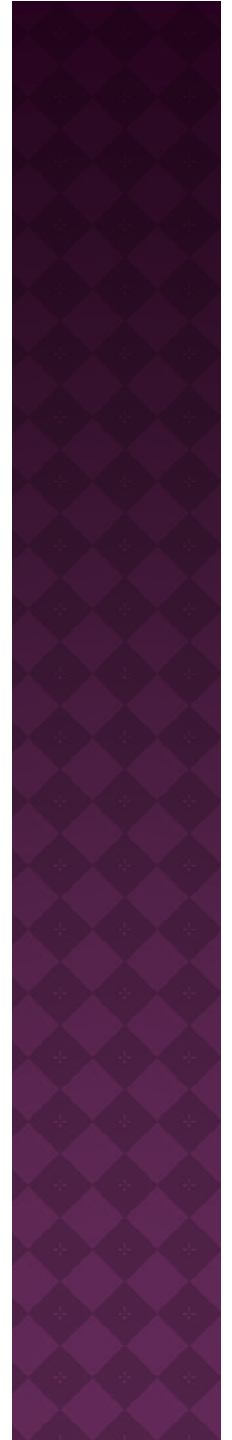
The origin of the Panji system is traced to a mythical event, which is believed to have taken place in the village Satghara of Mithila. The story goes that one Pandit Harinath Sharma was a respectable person in the court of Harisimhadev. His wife was considered to be a pious woman, who used to visit the temple of Muktinath on a daily basis. Once when her husband was away, a Dusadh (a Dalit caste) man attempted to molest her inside the temple, though he could not harm her. Rather he lost his life before touching the woman, as she was a *pativrataa* (devoted to husband). The news spread that an “outcaste” had molested her.

## PANJI SYSTEM

Consequently she was barred from taking part in social and religious functions, as her „chastity“ was considered to be „defiled“. The community members asked her to go through an ordeal to prove her innocence in this matter, the fact that she was not complicit to the act. In the first round, she uttered “Naham chandaal gamini” (I have not co-habited with a chandaal (a lower caste))” and touched the iron rod. Her hand got burnt and her supposed guilt was confirmed. The woman requested for one more chance and after repeated pleadings, the religious minister of Harisimhadev granted her appeal.

## PANJI SYSTEM

This time she recited “Naham swapatibyatikta chandaal gamini” (I have not cohabited with any chandaal other than my husband). This time, she passed the test. However, this brought misery to her husband, as his caste identity was held into question. The investigation unearthed the fact that the pandit had entered into a marriage that was within the prohibited lines, as it was found out that the his wife was the grand-daughter of his first cousin, and an alliance of this nature was supposed to amount to incest.



# PANJI SYSTEM

As a result of not complying with the marriage codes, he became akin to a “chandaal”. This incident made Harisimhadev ponder over the question of caste purity among the “upper” castes. He appointed specific pandits to keep a complete genealogy of each individual of the community. The practice of assigning people to do this task gave birth to two professions: *panjikers* (record-keeper) and *ghataks* (the match-maker). The *swasti patra* (permit of the marriage) had to be obtained before any marriage could take place. The injunctions were as follows:

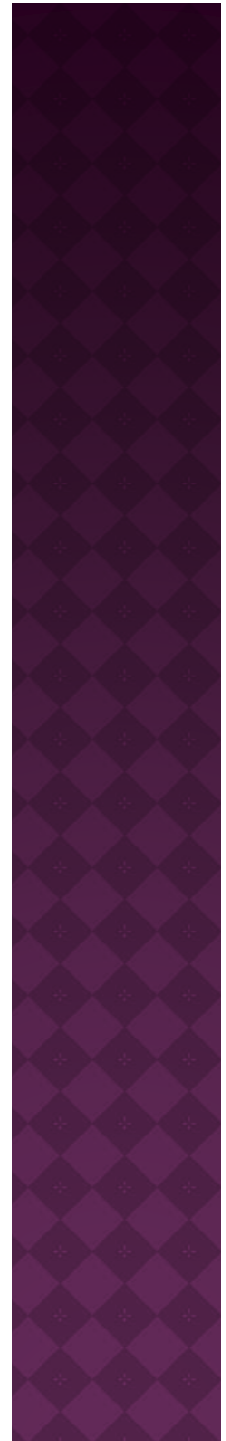
A man cannot marry a girl:

- (a) who is of the same *gotra* as himself
- (b) who is of the same *pravara* as himself



# PANJI SYSTEM

- (c) who is the *sapinda* of his mother
- (d) who falls within six generations from an ancestor on his father's side
- (e) who falls within five generations from an ancestor on his mother's side
- (f) who is the descendent of his paternal or maternal grandfather
- (g) who is an off-spring of his step-mother's brother



# PANJI SYSTEM

To give Panji an institutional form, a commission was formed to verify *mulas and gotras*. At the end of the exercise, 168 *mulas* and 19 *gotras* of the Brahmins of Mithila were recorded in the Panji. Each stock or *mula* were recorded to have several branches. Its encyclopedic nature has been a source of information about the two “upper” castes of this region- Brahmins and Kayasthas. Further, Harisimhadev divided the Brahmins into three sub-castes based on their degree of adherence to the Sastras. They were called the *Shrotriyas, Yogyas and Jaybaras*. Like the Brahmins, the Kayasthas were also divided into four main groups.

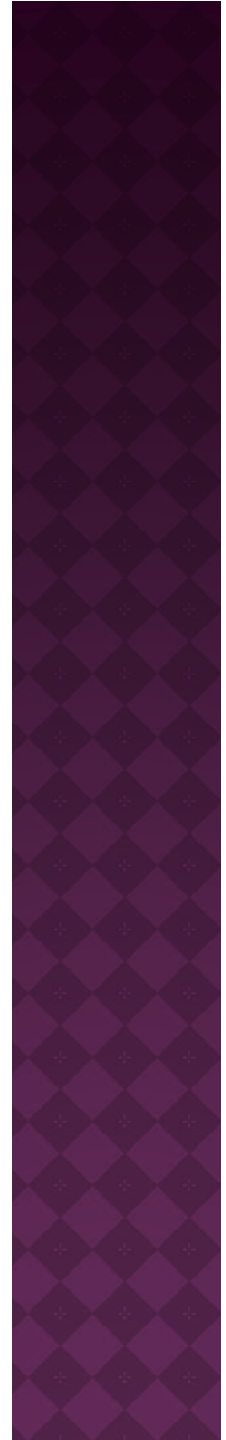
# PANJI SYSTEM

## Effects of this System on Mithila Society :

The practice of “Kulinism” sprang from the Panji system. As Maithil historian Upendra Thakur has commented, “a close scrutiny of the relevant records bearing on Kulinism would leave no doubt that the birth of Kulinism in Mithila was a natural corollary of the introduction of the Panji.” This *Kulina* class boasted of purity of their blood/ line/ descent and the distinction between *kulina and akulina* started playing a huge role in the social life of Mithila. Venerated poets such as Vidyapati expressed their staunch support for this system and advocated that marriage should be done in accordance with Sastric injunctions. *Akulina*,

# PANJI SYSTEM

for him, deserved no sympathy and “even beauty was the preserve of the rich and the privileged class.” The social evils accrued from this institution were manifold. It created factions within the same caste, thus giving birth to several “warring groups”. The rigid nature of the norm to accomplish marriage within the same caste put a huge pressure on “upper” caste communities, since failing to do so invited excommunication, disinheritance etc. Taking advantage of this situation, some sections of the “upper” caste community took to marriage as profession. They came to be called *Bikauas*. Families belonging to a “low-grade” section of the same caste would get their daughter married to these *kulina (bikaua)* men, in order to raise their own social status.



# PANJI SYSTEM

The practice became so rampant that the family of the girls would not be concerned about the qualifications of the *kulina* suitors. Girl children were subjected to marriage at a very tender age, involving a heavy amount of dowry. As there was imbalance between the ages of the bride and groom, widowhood became rampant.

According to historians of the region, Panji came into being at a time when Mithila society was threatened by Muslim invasion. Therefore, the society had to be reconstructed and social relations and institutions had to be made rigid in a way to “save” Mithila’s culture, particularly women, from the “foreigners”. It was also a way to create an identity of “Maithil”, a sense of

# PANJI SYSTEM

“unity and Maithilhood” amongst the “upper” castes.

A significant aspect of the Panji system is that it does not record the names of women. However, in some Brahmin Panjis, names of women have been recorded, albeit not in their natal family's records but in marital families. So, in a sense, single or un-married women were denied their existence in the family, as they were not eligible for getting recorded in the Panji. The stress on the maintenance of “pure” race and culture, therefore, glaringly brought forth the political insipidity of that period. But it is of no doubt that this system came out naturally from the feudal society, the foundation of which rests on the strangled mobility of the members of the community to retain the supremacy of the patron classes.

# PANJI SYSTEM

The evolution and perpetuation of the painting tradition by the women of Mithila has to be seen in the context of the feudal, brahminical and patriarchal social fabric that came to characterize Mithila. The excessive pre-occupation with the ideology of caste exclusiveness, and control over women's sexuality in order to maintain caste "purity" severely restricted "upper" caste women's mobility. Restricted within the domestic sphere, these women took to ritual and ritual-related art in a huge way.

