

Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices
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Week - 01
Lecture – 01

Hello, everyone; this is Rajarshi Sengupta. I teach at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kanpur, and I specialize in art history and, at the same time, material studies and I also do work on textiles. So, textile is something that I study, at the same time I also do my hands-on practice - on dyeing, at the same time on drawing, and printing.



So, with that I mean we will be having this course that is on textiles and not just textiles, but I mean also an interface

of art history, textiles, and other crafts in the Indian subcontinent. So, for that reason what we will do is we will first go through some of the key terms that we will have in this study and then we will also look into that how some of these terms would relate to some of the other areas of interest but also at the same time like I mean how some of the terms which we will be studying today, how some of the concepts we will be studying today will be relating to the study material in the coming weeks as well. So I will start by explaining the title of this course that is Threads of Visual Explorations, Textiles and Allied Practices. So by threads of visual exploration what do I mean? So by threads of visual exploration I kind of try to understand that how visual exploration, this idea of looking through the, I mean idea of looking at the visual and then trying to understand it, interpret it, culminate the knowledge and then use it in different ways of studying material culture, how those kind of art historical lenses can help us understanding what is there in textiles and also that I mean how the material qualities of textiles, so that also sort of like I mean feeds into understanding what is visual exploration.

So by threads and visual exploration together in this title I try to combine the material qualities of textiles, at the same time the art historical lenses of understanding, interpreting

and analysing them. Now the second part of the title that is Textiles and Allied Practices by that what do I mean? So by that I try to understand that how textile is something that is also related to a number of different craft practices, and with the examples, with focused areas of study, we will be looking into that I mean how this allied practices, the so called allied practices are the ones in which we would try to understand that the textiles relationships. So with those things, what we will try to do is we will see that how the textiles, visual studies, art historical analysis, and at the same time the different kind of craft practices in the Indian subcontinent, how their relationship can enrich our understanding of material culture studies. So, in terms of the recent scholarship that we find in the field of textiles, we find that there are a number of different avenues in which textiles have been studied.

So one of the key terms, or like I mean the key themes that had emerged out of this recent scholarship, would be trade history, and in trade history, we find that a number of recent scholarly work at the same time, curatorial work, exhibitions and so on they have focused on the travels of textiles. So, for example, if we see Amelia Peck's edited volume on the 'Interwoven Globe' and kind of like I mean how the textiles and networks were all interconnected across the globe before this recent phenomenon of globalization. So, in Amelia Peck's work, we find that how this idea of the interconnectedness through textiles and other associated material that can be craft objects and so on, all those things were able to bring the globe virtually together during the early modern period. So apart from Amelia Peck's work, we also find Sarah Fee's work, and so Sarah Fee, we will see that I mean how the Indian Ocean world is the area in which like Sarah Fee specializes. Also, then I mean how the Indian cotton, both the plain cotton at the same time the painted, printed, resist dyed cotton they have also been this major tool for sort of like, I mean bringing the world together, and it's not just about trading relation, but then we also see that I mean how this trade relations have also made a huge impact on the societal transactions, the cultural aspects of the human lives and so on.

So apart from the Amelia Peck and Sarah Fee's, we also find the works of prolific textile scholar Ruth Barnes and some of the key studies of Ruth Barnes had focused on the significance of the Indus valley textiles and how those were found and of course,, like I mean and then some of the early printed and resist dyed textiles which were found from Egypt and how that sort of like I mean shapes the idea of Indian textile that we study today. So with those things, we find that how the trade history kind of makes us understand that what was the reach of textile if there are producers, if there are consumers and of course, like I mean the traders who would be like I mean bridging the gap between the traders and the consumers how all those things were interconnected and apart from that we also find the works of Rosemary Crill who had worked on the Indian textiles for the west and so on and then Sylvia Houghteling and so on. So, if one of the areas for us to understand the recent studies on textile is the trade history, then the other areas would also be, for example,

visual analysis and visual analysis is an area in which we find that the kind of iconographical study of textiles and craft objects are being....delineated.

So, for example, in Ruth Barnes work when she meticulously looks into the study of the textile fragments those were found in Egypt and tries to understand that I mean what are the salient features of them and how do we understand them whether they came from South Asia, they came from somewhere else and then how those visual characteristics they make us think about the kind of material that had been employed there, the kind of techniques which were also involved in making this kind of works. So those are the different parameters in which we find the visual analysis can help the art historian or the historian or any researcher to understand that how do we approach textiles. Then apart from that we also find textile historian Stephen Cohen's work in which we also see that I mean this the visual analysis at the same time like the comparison between different textiles which look similar but also at the same time whether the similarities do they talk about a geographical proximity or the similarity talk about, talks about transference of knowledge between two communities. So different kind of questions, different kind of avenues were sort of explored through this kind of works which are focused on the visual analysis.

Then at the same time we also find that there are certain works in which like the theoretical understanding of the structure of textiles those are also being explored not necessarily in the Indian context but in a broader sense. If I call it that I mean if you look into the works of Anni Albers at the same time, art historian T'ai Smith's work So we find that I mean it's not just about the visual appearance of a textile but also understanding how the grid, the warp and the weft of textiles they are also intertwined and with like I mean producing knowledge it's not just about how it appears on the surface but to get into the details of the structure and try to understand that how the structure is not just something that is exclusively relevant for making textiles but also perhapsrelevant for us to understand many other facets of material culture, visual culture and our lives So those are some of the areas in which we find that how the textiles have been employed in art historical analysis At the same time we also see that I mean there are other aspects of textiles which are studied. So for example this the colonial history and the colonial history is especially significant for studying South Asian textiles because colonialism in short it was something that started with trade in textiles and spices and so we see that the interest of the European traders to in the Indian subcontinent that sort of like I mean which extended into the colonial rule in the later times. All of them have close relation to making textiles, transporting textiles, and doing trade with either textile or the raw material which are involved in making textiles. So this the colonial history and the aspect of making textiles we find them to be explored in some of the works so for example by Bessie Cecil in which Bessie Cecil talks about the use of certain dye stuff like chaya roots and so on which is known for producing this blood brilliant red in the Koramandal textiles and then it is not just about how the dye stuff is important there but also about the labor which was employed

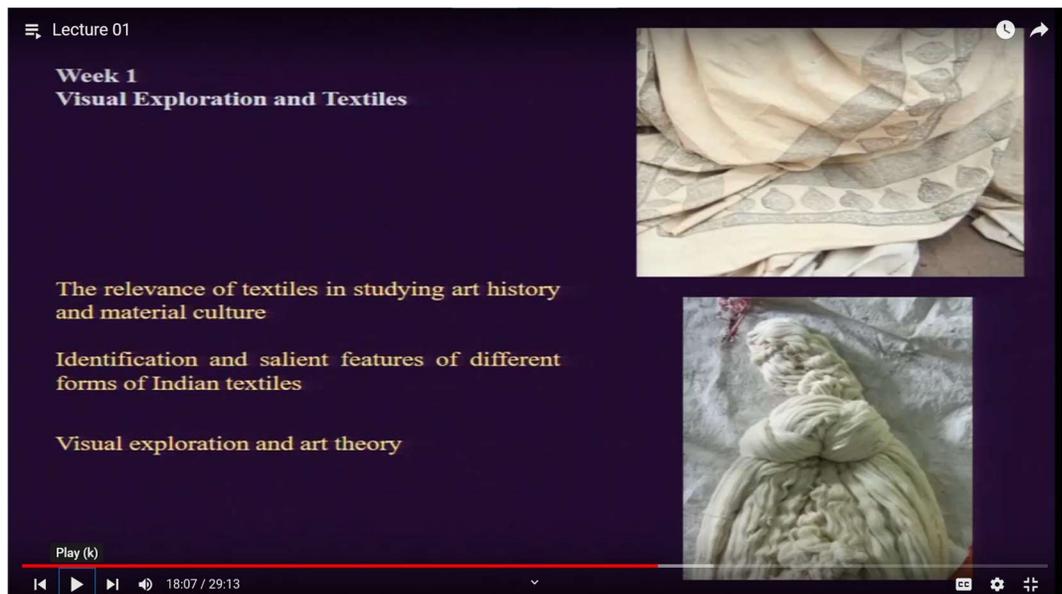
for extracting the dye at the same time also all the other aspects of employing the dye stuff for making textiles. Then we also find works by..... the work of Susan Bean and Susan Bean has spoken about the implication of Gandhiji'sGandhiji's activism around making Khadi textiles and so on and how those aspects also relate to the anti-colonial resistance. We will touch upon this issue and some of the other issues that I just have introduced here in much detail in the later phases of this course but these are some of the larger perimeters in which we find the textiles are studied. Then another or perhaps the most important part of studying textiles we find is something to do with the community history or if we think about it that how the community the producer communities they have been involved in making textiles and in terms of that what we see there is that there are scholars such as Eiluned Edwards who had extensively studied and she has been studying the fabrics and textiles from western India mostly from Gujarat and so on So we find that how the community the makers of these textiles they have been prioritized in these studies more than some of the other aspects I mean of course the trade history, the visual analysis, and there are other implications on material culture they have been there but these humans who have been working on this textile making so they have been prioritized in studies like that. Then we also find some of the textile activists and scholars, such as Ritu Sethi and then Archana Shah, so they have been working in the field of textile and also community empowerment for last several decades, and they have also contributed to prioritizing the idea of community in studying textiles So these are many different ways in which we find that how textiles can be part of this larger discussion of understanding material culture, visual culture. So, I will just sum it up again that I mean what are the different aspects we have seen so far.

So, with studying textiles we find that trade history, visual analysis, then the theoretical underpinnings of the structure of textiles, then of course the colonial history, and the community history These are some of the prime aspects of studying textiles we have found so far in the recent scholarship. Now with those things with this multifaceted studies we also see that there are also requirement for closely integrating the art historical theories or for example like the art historical analysis of other art objects and then try to bring them together with studying textiles. And so for example, if we think about it that I mean how these umbrella terms as like decorative arts or minor arts this kind of terms have been used in the museum collections and many different documentation purposes in which we find that textiles and many other craft objects are sort of clubbed together under this term. And it had also been prioritized in the colonial nomenclature however those kinds of terms still persist in a number of museums and other organizations So in these kinds of areas what we find that there are many objects which are primarily utilitarian they have been kept together but then the relationship between them are not really explored further So for example, I have during my fieldwork I have found out that how there are certain kind of tools which are used for making engraving on the wood blocks and then similar and which wood blocks

would be eventually been used for block printing on textiles. So then like I mean the similar kind of tools will see that I mean how those are used in making bidri or other metal craft.

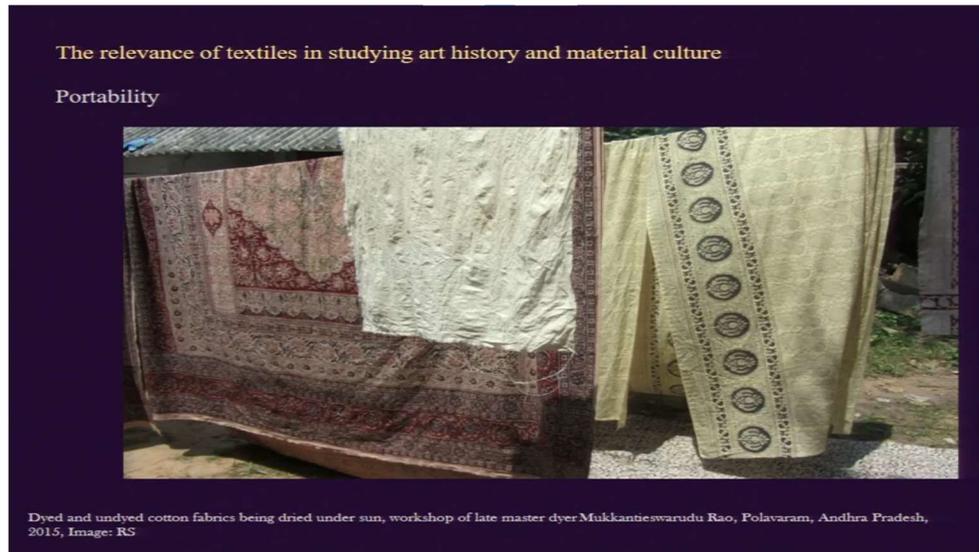
So, this kind of, like I mean similarities that we find. Of course, we will be looking into these issues in much detail but this is just to introduce that even the kind of objects we find them to be termed under decorative arts or minor arts or so on. So, even in those you know objects there needs to be the sense of togetherness or like I mean, the sense of connectedness needs to be explored further. And then we also have other art objects so for example the manuscripts, the miniature paintings and so on and then there can also be stone sculptures, aspects of architecture so all those things can come in understanding textiles. So these different kinds of objects, if we study alongside textiles what happens with that is that we sort of open up newer avenues or newer paths of exploration of how textiles can be studied, textiles can be appreciated, but also textiles how these textiles can be part of understanding the material and visual culture around us. So, with that... with understanding this entire concept or how I'm planning to sort of put forward this course. Here I hope I made it clear that I mean we are not going to look in too much into the the making of textiles So, for example this course is not about training someone to make textiles, this course is not about giving instructions or dye recipes for making textiles But, perhaps this course is more about finding these connections and also situating textiles in the larger perimeters of the visual culture studies, material culture studies and so on.

So, in the week one, we will be looking into mostly the visual explorations and textiles, and in week one we what we will do is we'll try to understand that how visual



exploration and understanding that I mean what are the visual characteristics of the textiles that we study and then their relationship to the materials, the making, the makers and so on all the communities who are also involved in making these textiles. So, the key ideas that we will be studying as part of this week will be the relevance of textiles in studying art history and material culture, then also identification and salient features of different forms

of Indian textiles and visual exploration and art theory. So, in the first segment, we will be looking into the relevance of textiles in studying art history and material culture.



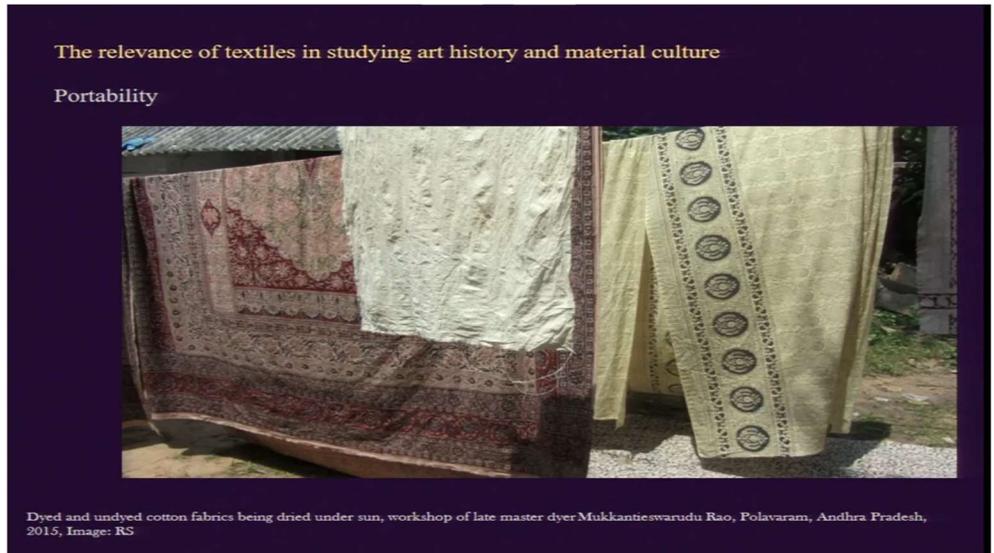
So, in this case, there are some of the aspects of textiles that we find those are significant, but also they are the ones though

perhaps, which hold the key towards understanding that why studying textiles can actually enhance our knowledge in art history, why studying textiles can enhance and enrich our knowledge in understanding various aspects of material culture. So, for example we find that I mean the first aspect at least to me is the portability and portability is a very crucial at the same time and an essential aspect of any textile that we study. The textiles are something that is made in one place; perhaps I mean the raw materials are brought from one place, they are made in one place, and then they never stay in the same place they travel, and portability is something that ensures this part that I mean this is made in one place and then sort of like I mean taken to different places and that is how it becomes part of different community history and then the different kind of intercultural exchanges. Now, with portability what I mean is that I mean most of textiles if it is not too heavy or not too stiff they are meant to be folded, and it is something that I mean we can fold that I mean textiles we fold them, we put them in our bags and then like I mean we travel with them if we are traveling to one place if you are like I mean whether that is a travel during the weekend or like I mean we are doing a long distance travel whatever it is but some of the essential things that we need are perhaps yes textiles and some of the basic requirements for our daily needs.

So the textile is something we find that to be one of the essential part is that I mean it can be folded it can be carried with us, and that is one of the most important parts which cannot be ignored, and it is not just about how textiles are folded that is just part of the utilitarian purpose, but it also informs the aesthetics or like I mean the entire work that that that sort of like I mean shapes a particular form of textile. So with those things, we also find that when we are folding textiles and carrying it with us then there are also aspects of memory,

then there are also aspects of associations that get attached to them and memories that can be I mean, since portability is one of the aspects of textiles we find that a lot of times that people receive textiles as heirloom textiles as heirloom that I mean some of the textiles those will probably be passed on from one generation to another there can be a familial relationship there can be gift giving there can be many different forms of this kind of exchanges or passing them on. So, with those we find that I mean how textile also becomes part of storing memory or like reviving memory. So, this is one of the aspects we find that I mean how portability becomes a very important part of the textiles.

Now, on screen, we have an image and that comes from the workshop of the late master dyer Mukkantieswarudu Rao in Polavaram in Andhra Pradesh and this is a workshop for making Kalamkari, Block Printed Kalamkari textile and in this image we will be



looking into making Kalamkari in one of later modules but why I wanted to show this image here is to understand that there are many phases of making textiles that we find them here.

So, for example, if we see this is the in the front, there is this unbleached, undyed piece of fabric that is hanging, and then there is this another piece of fabric which has been printed with black or Kasim and then also with mordant Just the first step of mordant printing. So for that reason, what we find that I mean there are the steps in which we see that I mean this is slowly being prepared and then at the end, this is the final product we find that in which the mordant has been applied and then it is boiled in dye solution multiple times and then the final product is there Now when we find that I mean they are being made so they are constantly like I mean sort of like I mean put in the boiling devices and then also like I mean they are washed, they are cleaned, they are sun-dried and then they are folded then they are put back in the workshop, and this cycle of you know folding or unfolding the textiles that is enabled because of the portability and then once the textiles are prepared then they are again folded, very carefully kept and then they are sent to the places where they are meant to be. So, this is how we find that, I mean, even during the production is something that the portability makes a huge deal of difference if something like a wooden

craft is not, the foldability, portability, all those things, if those do not work out the same way as if we think about textiles, then its use, its aesthetics, all those other things will be different. So, these aspects, we need to understand that, how portability is, you know, ingrained in these textiles and how this is not just a utilitarian aspect but also something that also sort of like, I mean, informs the larger idea of textile in this case.



The second aspect I will be talking about here is about utility. So for utility what we find that I mean utility is a very important part of

textile production because textiles are meant to be used primarily. So it can be used either as wearables something that we wear on our skin or it can also be used for covering something, it can also be used as furnishing it can also be used for ritualistic purpose but, all the textiles that we find they have the purpose that is the utilitarian purpose in this. So in this case, what we see that I mean how textiles when they are made so in on screen we have two images in which we find that one image on the left side that sort of like I mean shows how textiles are used and then this is folded or sort of like I mean during the making of it, we know that I mean for making it usable there are particular ways in which the patterns are drawn or like I mean the particular ways in which like I mean the fabrics are prepared. And then if we think about this long untailed piece of fabric such as saree or dhoti, we find that I mean how those fabrics then they are when they are worn then perhaps like I mean how they also sort of like I mean address this idea of utility in a different way.

So, in the right side of the screen, we have this Sitamma saree by Mallipuddu Kailasham and in this saree that was made in 2018. In this one we find that I mean how this particular saree when it was produced it was made as this one big scroll-like format because saree is this untailed piece of fabric and in which we find that the river Ganges with forest landscape was displayed. But then, when this is sort of draped as a saree then we find that it's not the entire forest one can see in one go. But then like, I mean, there is this hiding and sort of, like I mean unfolding as part of like, I mean this the narratives that that that goes on because there are many folds and pleats and everything else that sort of is involved when the saree is draped in the body. So, in this ways in which we find that and many aesthetics,

and then like I mean the visual conventions, and the techniques of making textiles, all of these things are closely connected to how these textiles are meant to be used, utilized by individuals or community members.

And those are the things they also for that reason, we find that utilitarian aspect is something It's not just about after the textile is made then that comes into play. But this utilitarian aspect also goes back to the making of the textile, and that is how the making is affected by its utilitarian component. We will continue with this discussion more in the next class. Thank you.