

Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices
Dr. Rajarshi Sengupta
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur (IITK)
Week – 03
Lecture – 11

Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta and we are here in the third week of the course that is Threads of Visual Exploration..... So, what we are doing this week, we will be talking about textiles and Mughal miniature paintings. So, in this week, we will be like focusing on number of different textiles and then their interrelation with a number of other



kind of objects. So, in the last week, we mostly looked at the relationship between textile and architecture. And this week, we will be looking at textile, architecture, as well as miniature paintings, which was one of the predominant means of visual representations that we find during the Mughal period.

Now, some of the themes that we will be touching upon in this week, those will include like Mughal brocade, velvet and woven rugs and their interrelations with the miniature paintings. Now, on this topic, what we find that miniature painting is something that is done meticulously on paper. And then when we talk about Mughal brocade, velvet or woven rugs, in that case, we cannot see that I mean how that meticulous pen work can be

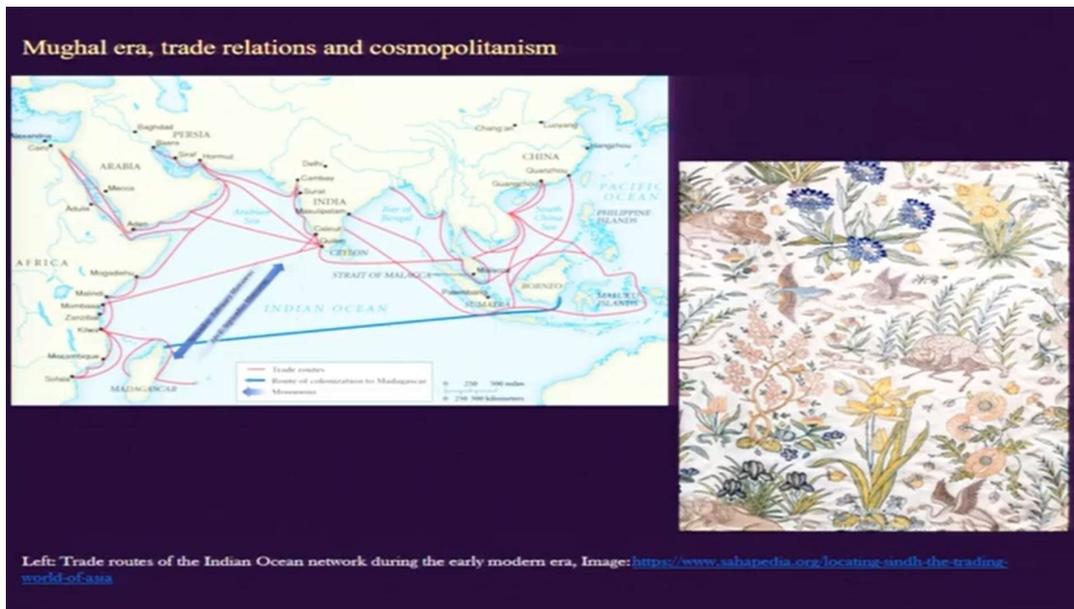
translated into like this, this act of weaving. However, we will be looking into the material aspects of these two practices or like I mean, the weaving practices and drawing and painting practices, and try to understand that what do I mean by like I mean their relationship, are their relationship between them or not. So, with those things will also be sort of like I mean venturing into this idea of the representational spaces in textiles and miniature paintings.

Now, for the representational space by that, what do I mean? So, by representational space, I mean the pictorial space on the textiles. So, as we have looked into a few kinds of textiles, so for example, saris, or it can be a chik, which is hung on the wall, or like in the windows, or like there can also be canopies and different kind of textiles. So, in those textiles, whatever is represented on the image area is something that we will be talking about in this week.

And then of course, when we are talking about the miniatures, the miniature paintings mostly, of course, the miniature paintings are something those are not really made as paintings, but those were mostly made as part of folios or a series of work. If we think about folios, there are many of the folios which were produced during Jehangir's time as well as during Akbar's time period and so on. And in terms of like I mean the other larger works of the miniature paintings or I am not quite sure if I can call it a miniature painting that can be like Hamza Nama or similar sorts. So, in those cases, what we find that in those pictorial spaces, in the representational space, there are tremendous focus on details and then a different kind of elements we can find them there. And those elements we can see that I mean, if there are correlation between what we find that is drawn on those miniature paintings, and something that we find on the textiles. Now, we also need to understand that the miniature paintings if we see them, even though there can be visual similarities, we also need to understand that there were differences in terms of their intended use, because the miniature paintings are definitely not made as something that is utilitarian textiles. So, if there is a rug, there is a carpet, something that needs to be put on the floor, people are supposed to walk on that, sit on that, use it in certain ways. Or then like, I mean, if there are wearable textiles, we are talking about some kind of brocade or velvet, whatever. So,

those things need to be worn in the body or like gifted during special occasions. But then if you think about the miniature paintings, they would probably not serve similar kind of purposes. However, what we also see that I mean, those miniature paintings were also used as sometimes documentation. Sometimes they were also used for conveying certain ideas. And they were also meant for a private viewing experience, that people can hold it very close to them, see them from a close distance, and then appreciate it. So, of course, we are not talking about miniature paintings being distributed to a large audience, but within the royal court itself..... This kind of viewing experience the miniature paintings can invite. And we can also see that I mean, how that is different from the textiles we are talking about. However, in the representational space or the pictorial space for both textiles and miniatures, we can see certain kinds of close resemblances as well as these differences.

Now, the other thing we can also we will be like, I mean, touching upon, and that is the interrelations between courtly art and textile practices beyond visual appearance. And since we are talking about the representational space in the earlier topic, and then we are talking about the pictorial space or something that is depicted visually. So, one can understand that we are getting into the iconographic analysis..... I mean, if there are symbolic meanings, there are metaphors, or like, I mean, how those visuals came into being. So, there is a lot of stress on how the visuals are sort of utilized or sort of employed in this kind of representational spaces. Now, if we think about the interrelation between the courtly art practices and textile practices, we need to also understand that there are more sort of resemblances than just the visual ones. And for those things, we need to also understand their structure, their material, the techniques in which they are built, and so on. And when I say courtly art practices, I do not specifically mean it is just the miniature paintings, but it can also mean that the courtly architecture which was part of it, as well as different kind of object-making exercises, calligraphy, and other kind of material culture, those all of them might be included in that.

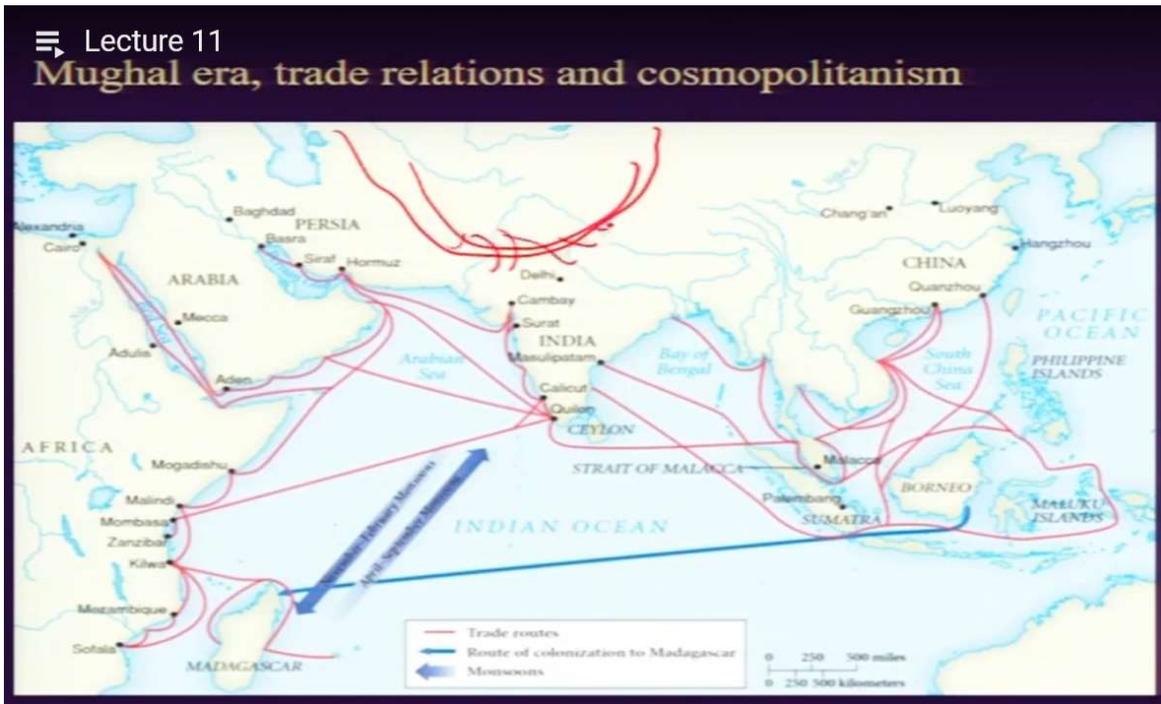


Now, before getting into the details of this particular kind of carpet, rug, or the other textiles which were made during this Mughal era, first thing we need to understand is certain aspects of this module. The first thing is that I mean, we are talking about the Mughal dynasty or we are talking about like, I mean, the Mughal era. And then we have not really sort of considered any other dynasty in that fashion in this course. So, in the first week and the second week, we have sort of, like, I mean, looked into certain kinds of textile making and not really one dynastic focus we have looked at. And it will probably not be the same in the later modules as well. But then, considering that aspect, why do we have to sort of look into the Mughal dynasty as a focus or a theme for this particular week? So, we can see that, I mean, there are particular kinds of textile making and, of course, that I mean, there are various kinds of material culture, as I mean, aspects of various material culture, those became prominent during the Mughal period. And for those reasons, what we have that I mean, there are a number of different, these visual records we have. So, for example, many of the architectural motifs will have architectural structures, and they are still surviving in parts of northern and other parts of India we will have. So, then like, we also have a number of textiles. And one of the major issues with textiles is that for its utilitarian purpose, or for like, I mean, the material quality, we do not really have too many textiles, those will be there more than like, I mean, there before like 1000 years or 1500 years or so on. So, we have a lot of their representations, but not really those textiles in

their physical appearance, I mean, or in their, on their, in the tangible physical way, we can find them. So, those things we can see, but like during the Mughal period, we will have like a number of different kinds of visual records alongside the textiles. So, that makes it kind of a fertile ground for us to sort of make these comparisons and also understand the role of textiles or the interrelation between textiles and other objects much more in an efficient way. And that is one of the reasons why we sort of focus on the Mughal era this week.

Now the other some of the other issues that we find that I mean, that there are certain aspects about this particular rule, which started in the early 16th century and sort of like I mean, continued until 17th century, but then the later Mughals or their offshoots in the different parts of the provincial princely courts of northern India and as well as in Deccan India and so on, they continued. So, they sort of had a long-lasting effect on the visual and material culture of the Indian subcontinent. So, the early modern Indian subcontinent, we will find that the material culture in the early modern period will largely be sort of somewhere other be related to the Mughal dynasty, or like I mean, the kind of material culture the Mughal rulers had propagated. And that is the reason there is a reason for us that we need to sort of focus on the visual culture, material culture and textiles from the Mughal era.

Now, the other thing that we find that I mean, during this time, there was also something that was happening very significantly, that is about the trade relations. On the one hand, we find that the Mughals and this word Mughal is an offshoot of the word Mongol. And we can imagine like, I mean, you know, the Central Asian and Eastern Asian descendants. And of course, I mean, on one hand, the Mughals sort of like, I mean, claim their ancestry

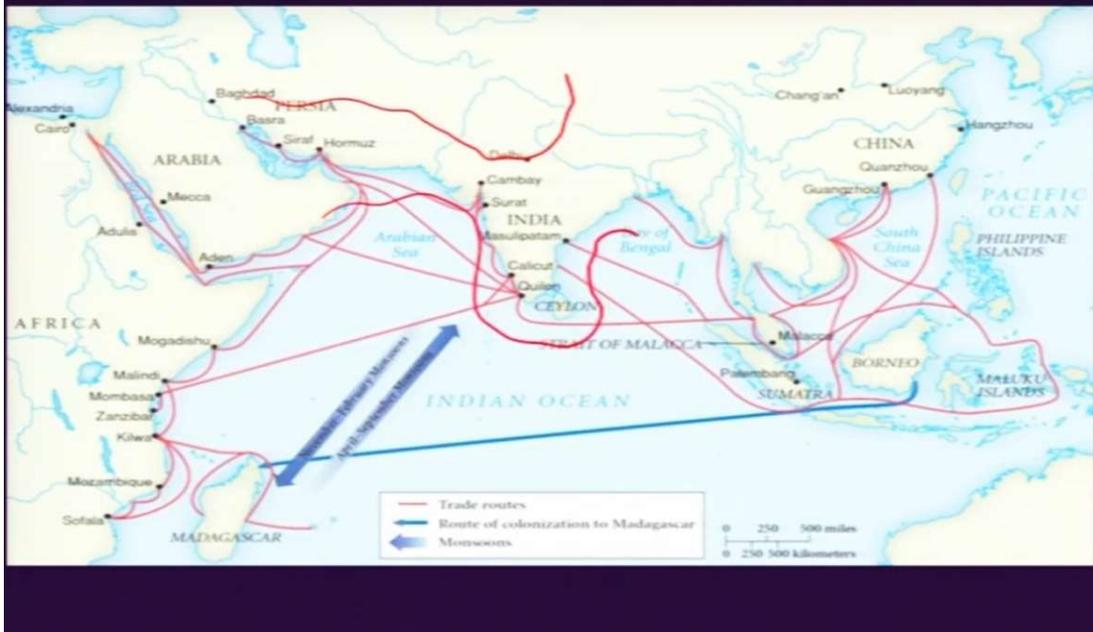


to the Mongols, and like not always in a preferred way, but then mostly they would be sort of like, I mean, claiming their ancestry to the Timurid dynasty. And then the Timurids will also be from like, I mean, Central Asia and Eastern Asia, and then how that sort of like, I mean, spread it all across in the Central Asian plain and then part of like, I mean, the Middle East and so on. So, for those reasons, we find that I mean, for their ancestral sort of connections, and also like, I mean, how the Silk Route also was very much prominent during, I mean, in this region, like, I mean, connecting Central Asia with part of Middle East and part of like, northwestern India, or like the Indian subcontinent. So, those things we see that I mean, for their familial relation for the cultural ties, as well as for the trade relations, like, I mean, this region, (we can see in the map), will be very important in terms of like, I mean, getting different kinds of materials to like northwestern India, as well as like, I mean, getting the different kinds of materials from the Indian subcontinent, and dispersing them to parts of like, I mean, Central Asia, Eastern Asia, and to the Middle East.

So, these are the kind of, like, I mean, these trade routes we will find in these regions, which would make, like, I mean, the material culture really vibrant. During the early modern period, we also find that the oceanic routes, the Indian Ocean Network that we have, and that could become more and more prominent. I'm not saying that the Indian Ocean Network was absent before this time; we have at least, like, I mean, some of the trade relations and records of trade relations from like, I mean, first century BC or so on. And then of course, we have like, I mean, particular kinds of like, I mean, trade exchanges of like, I mean, textiles and Roman coins and different kinds of pottery and things like that, from the coastal parts of India, that would be Malabar coast and Coromandel coast. So, we'll be looking into the Coromandel coast in the next module. But it is all to say that, I mean, when there is also this sea trade or like, I mean, the oceanic trade, those active, so we find that, I mean, how the seafarers or like, I mean, the traders who would be like, I mean, arriving through the sea route, they would arrive parts of like, I mean, in Surat in Cambay, and part of Gujarat, and then like, I mean, also on the Konkan region. So, and from there, we find that I mean, how those materials were either sent to Delhi, Agra or those prominent Mughal cities or like, I mean, things which were sort of accumulated from the other parts of the subcontinent would be sent to this port sites. And of course, like, I mean, later on, when Golconda and part of southern India and central was annexed by the Mughal Kingdom by the Mughal rulers. So, we find that, I mean, during this time, Machilipatnam and other port sites would also serve as those gateways through which like this trade exchanges would take place.

☰ Lecture 11

Mughal era, trade relations and cosmopolitanism



So, for these reasons, what we find that, I mean, there this for all this kind of like, I mean, in one hand, the land route through which like, I mean, materials would arrive, on the other hand, we have the sea routes through which like, I mean, materials would arrive or would be dispersed. For those reasons, during this time in the Mughal era, we find that the trade relations became more and more vibrant. And different kinds of materials were like, I mean, either reaching the Mughal royal courts, or like they were sort of being traded off to faraway lands. And that is how we find that the idea of like, I mean, this, the culture which was set during this time period was very much that thrived on this idea of cosmopolitanism. Now, cosmopolitanism is something that is a much more sort of complex idea, and we will be getting into that perhaps, like, I mean, slightly later in this module. But all that is to say that, I mean, different kinds of elements we will find that, I mean, which sort of like, I mean, existed side by side in the artefacts which were produced by the Mughals. And I should not just say that artefacts only hold the essence of cosmopolitanism. We will find, how the Delhi customs and then the culture of the court, then like, I mean, the languages and then a different kind ... customs and everything else, all of them would reflect this cosmopolitan attitude towards the culture. So, those things we will be seeing like, I mean, side by side. So, when we see that, I mean, there are these very complex, at

the same time intriguing, Mughal landscapes, whether they are represented on the surface of the rug or like the one that we have on the right side of the screen that is in the module. And in all of this, we find that different kinds of elements are present. Some of the like, for example, if we see that the different kind of vegetal and animal motifs there, we can find that, I mean, there are certain motifs which are much more sort of common in the northern Indian plain or in South Asia, but then like, I mean, we will also see particular



kind of motifs. So, for example, this particular motif in which, like, I mean, we find that I mean, there is an antelope or a deer which is then being attacked by a leopard. It's a very typical motif that comes in many of the Persian miniatures as well as in the textiles. So, those kind of aspects we will be finding and then very intricate details of the plants or like the vegetal motifs we will be seeing them there,

which are definitely not from the northern Indian plains, but perhaps from the Himalayas, perhaps from other parts of the of South Asia or Middle East, but then like, I mean, all of them are sort of accumulated and made into this sort of very complex and composite textile forms.

So, then, these are some of the aspects for which, like, I mean, we thought of sort of focusing on the Mughal era or like the clothes which are produced during the Mughal era. Now, the other thing that we also find is that, I mean, when we say that the cloth or textiles of the Mughal era or the Mughal dynasty, I do not necessarily mean that all those textiles plants were produced in those metropolitan cities of the Mughals. So, for example, Agra was one of the most prominent metropolitan centres of the Mughals that we find in the

early modern period. And in the 16th and 17th centuries, Agra was perhaps the most important or like I mean, at least if I should not call it the most, one of the most important, but perhaps one of the most populous and opulent metropolitan centres in entire Asia, if not the world. So, that was there in the 16th and 17th centuries.

So, if we see that, I mean, Agra was one of those very important centres, then we also have Fatehpur Sikri, which is not that far from Agra. Emperor Akbar, he sorts of moved his capital to. And then we also have Delhi, and this city which had been there in the, which had been prominent for many dynasties, starting from the very early period, and then like, I mean, of course, the sultanates, the Mughals, and then later on the British and so on. And now, today, we have Delhi as our capital. So, this is also another city which will find that to be very prominent. Now when I say the Mughal textiles, I am not claiming that all those textiles were made in the metropolitan centres of Delhi, Agra, or perhaps Lahore. But then like, I mean, all those textiles would be produced that I mean, many of the textiles, whichever region is specialised in whatever kind of textiles, they would be making them and the finest quality of them would be sent to the royal courts. As I have already mentioned that, I mean, how muslin from Dhaka was one of the prized possessions. And that is the reason we find in many of the miniature paintings, how those muslins are being shown, being worn by the, by these royals. So, something we can understand is that, I mean, the technology of making muslin, or like, I mean, the kind of favourable conditions for making muslin, was not something that was there in Agra. So, by when I say like, I mean, the textiles of the, you know, of the Mughal period, so we, I am not trying to say that, I mean, all those textiles are made exclusively in those Mughal courts or the surrounding areas, but from the entire subcontinent and then they were sort of brought together in those metropolitan cities like Agra, Fatehpur Sikri or Delhi for the trade relation. So, those trade relations played a very important role in terms of sort of accumulating not only those trade goods but also knowledge and culture.

So, with that, we can also see that, I mean, what all different kinds of contributions, if you can think about that, I mean, what all different kind of contributions the Mughals have made, and some of them would start perhaps from the architecture. And if you think about

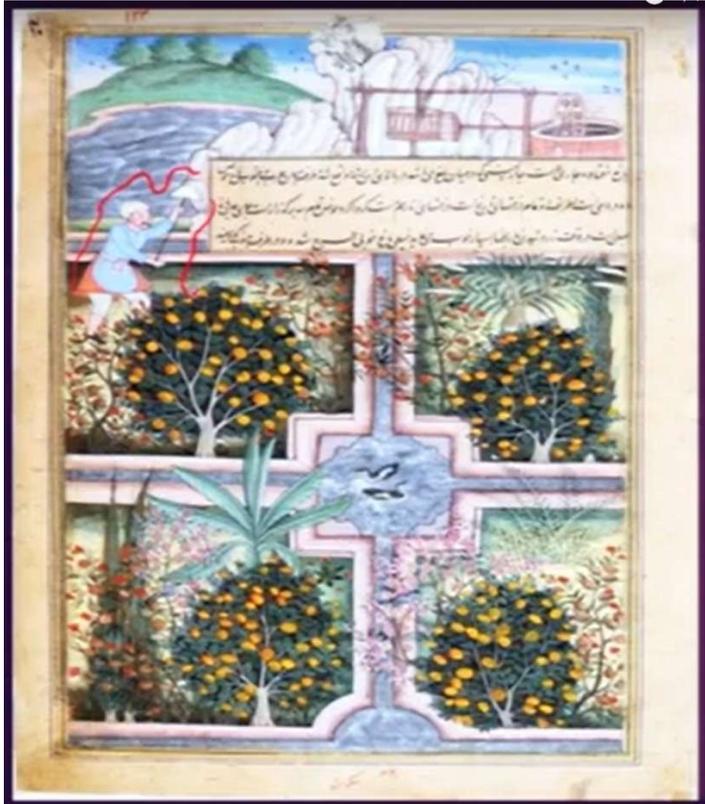
like, I mean, the reach of cosmopolitanism, if you think about it, then some of the early traces of this cosmopolitanism perhaps we can find in the making of these gardens. The garden is something that we find in the Mughal context to be a very important way of transforming the landscape. And this comes up in, like, I mean, art historian Ebba Koch's work, and also like art historian Nuzhat Kazmi's work when she talks about the aspect of



landscape. Now, what happens in this case that we find that I mean, during when the first Mughal Emperor Babur, he arrived in the northern Indian plains, the northern Indian arid landscape that sort of like, I mean, made him think about transforming the landscape into something that would be much more pleasurable. But also like, I mean, his idea of bringing the paradise or like a symbolic paradise to the earth was something that was implemented by making gardens on this arid northern Indian landscapes. Now, the idea of like a garden, we also find that to be closely associated with the idea of river or water channels, that is something very crucial in the Islamic theosophy and philosophy, we find that there that I mean, how there are those four rivers in the paradise that had been mentioned in the Quran, and then all the rivers, they sort of meet at the center of it. So, like the river of milk, river of honey, and then like, I mean, of course, river of wine and so on. So, we find that like, I mean, how those rivers we find and then like, I mean, the meeting point of the river is something that had been considered in Islam to be very significant and auspicious. So, and of course, those rivers then would be like, I mean, surrounded by different kinds of life that I mean, there are different kinds of like, I mean, plants or animals and all of them we find

that to be like, I mean, flourishing by this rivers and then there is also this peaceful coexistence, which has been sort of made as part of the imagination of paradise in the Islamic context.

So, these things we find that I mean, when Babur was bringing his idea of transforming the



landscape in the northern Indian plains, he was aware of this particular way of like, I mean, transforming the landscape by making this kind of paradisiacal gardens, and he borrowed this idea definitely from part of the Middle East, which was already being established by the other Timurid rulers and also part of like, I mean, in Central Asia as well. So, but then in the northern Indian plains, what we find that I mean, it also acquired a different kind of visual vocabulary,

because of like, I mean, the kind of elevation of the ground that is there, it is not really Platue like, it is not really there is no ups and downs or anything, but it is completely flat. And then its proximity to the river, like the river like Yamuna, mostly Yamuna or the river Ganges, we find that I mean, how those aspects also made a huge difference in terms of how these gardens were imagined and how they were finally implemented in the Indian plains. And so, this is on the left side of the screen, we have a garden, this is called Arambagh or Rambagh, and this is one of the earliest gardens which was made by Babur, Emperor Babur in after his arrival in Agra. So, what we find that I mean, this four-part garden or this Charbagh plant, which was already been established in the Persian context is then implemented here, but then the kind of as I have already mentioned, the kind of trees will find, this gigantic trees, those are there very much characteristically there in part

of South Asia, because of like the rainfall or like the other climatic and geographic conditions. So, those will be there in those gardens and alongside, like, I mean, the other plants, we can find them the plants, which bear flowers and fruits and things like that. Then also we will be finding that I mean, how there are particular kinds of those, the local material like sandstone, like the sandstone, this red sandstone of Sikri, which is very close to Agra would be then implemented there for making the gardens. And then those kinds of things will be seeing how those were then represented in the visual representation as well. So, it kind of like, I mean, the image we have on the right side of the screen, it comes from Babur Nama, of course, not the Babur Nama, the earliest one, I mean, it is a later version of it. And in this one, we again see this four-part garden, the use of water and how the water, perhaps like, I mean, also connects to the other canals. And then also like, I mean, what kind of trees we can imagine to be there that is populating the garden. And it is not just trees, but then there are birds, there can also be animals. And also, there is a man we can find that to be there in this left corner, which shows that I mean, garden is something that is not just naturally obtained, but it is cultivated. So, this idea of cultivating something which is not just aesthetically pleasing, but something that gives life or something that sort of like, I mean, transforms the way of life is something that we find that to be very significant. And this idea of cultivating something, we will be finding that in the other visual material as well.

Now, if you think about it, that I mean, how this kind of like, I mean, material or like, I mean, how the Mughals preoccupation with this kind of like, I mean, architecture making



or delving into other kind of artifact making had been significant. So, in those cases, we can start our discussion with like some of the other aspects of miniature painting making. So, we see that during this time, it is not just that I mean, they were the Mughal rulers were borrowing ideas or like, I mean, sort of like, I mean, they were in cultural exchange with different other rulers or empires, but they were also in process of inviting scholars or painters or artisans from other neighbouring dynasties or like, I mean, the neighbouring kingdoms, and for example, the Safavids or like, I mean, from Central Asia from Deccan and so on. So, those kinds of issues we find that to have also tremendously enriched the essence of cosmopolitanism that we find in the Mughal artifacts. We'll continue more on this discussion and then relation to there with the textiles in the next lecture. Thank you.