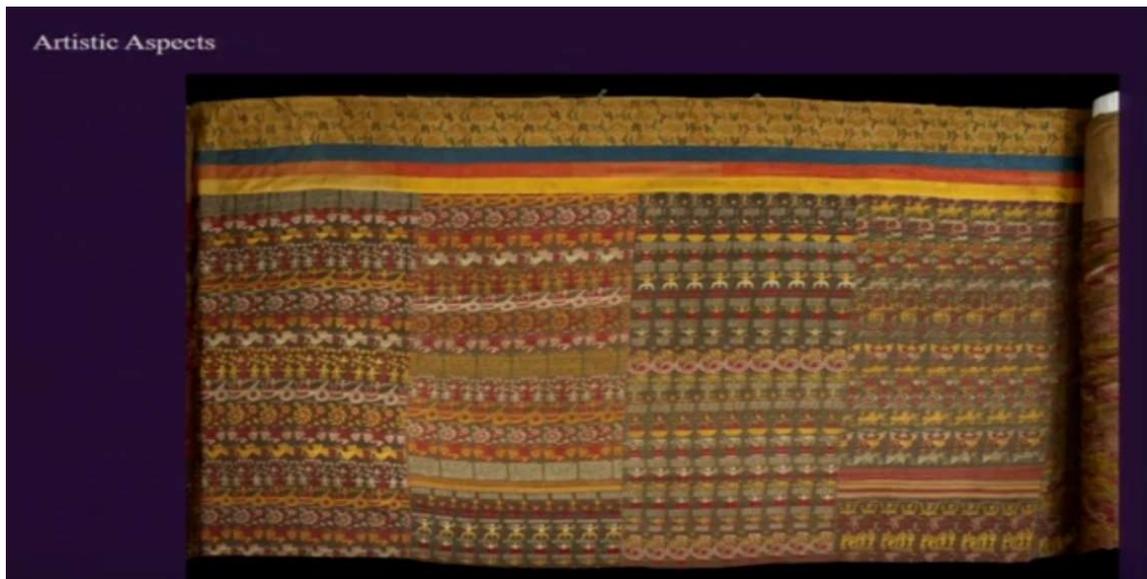


Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices
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Week - 01
Lecture – 02

Hello, everyone. This is Rajarshi Sengupta, and we are talking about threads of visual exploration, textiles and allied practices. We are in the module 1, and this is the lecture 2. So, we have already started talking about some of the salient features of textiles, and we have looked into some of the ideas. So, for example, portability of textiles, how that affects the making of textile, the community history, but also, at the same time, the aesthetics of it. Then we have also looked into the utilitarian parts of textiles and how the utility is something that does not really appear after the textiles are made but something that also can affect the making of the textile itself. Now, the third aspect which we will be talking about today will be the artistic aspects of textiles.

So, for example, if we are talking about the visual exploration, then what are the different ways in which we can see that the visual exploration and textile they can sort of like, I mean, go hand in hand.



So, in this case, what we see that I mean on screen we have this very rare form of textile that is called Vrindavani vastra, and that was made in the state of Assam in northeastern India. And what we see here, this is a late 17th-century Vrindavani vastra, and now in the

collection of the British Museum, and in this one, we find that, I mean, there are some 12 fragments of these vertical strips which were put together and made into this one particular fabric. So, perhaps this textile that we see here, it was not really meant to be in this particular way, but then this textile was collected from a monastery in Tibet and perhaps, like I mean the border that we see on the top of it and then like I mean also the assemblage, all those things were done when this textile was collected from Assam.

And then later on, it was, of course, it was collected by the British Museum. Now, what happens in this case that I mean when we look into something like this spectacular textile that we have on screen. So, we see that I mean these vertical panels and Vrindavani vastra is a particular kind of textile, it is a Muga Silk woven textile and the weave that is used here, the technique that is used here that is called Lampas or Lampa-weave and in which we find that there are two warps and two wefts and so in this case what happens is like I mean the warp sort of like the, it gives the base at the same time it also helps in making it stable and then between two warps like I mean the weft thread sort of like I mean passes through and this is one of the ways in which we see that I mean similar kind of techniques like the Brocade making and so on they also work out and in all these cases we find that they give tremendous opportunity for working with different colors. So, the polychromatic way of making these textiles is something that we also see that to be part of the technique. So, the artistic aspect, when we talk about it, it is not just about visual appreciation of these textiles that all different kinds of motifs that we have on there, but it is also about understanding that how this visual characteristic features are ingrained in the way in which this textile is produced, the technique of it.

And in Vrindavani vastra, what happens that I mean there is a particular history of Vaishnavism in Assam and how this particular kind of cloth that also responds to it. So, Vrindavani vastra, as we see that, I mean this vertical strips of fabric, this meticulously woven fabric, the silk fabric and with the celebrated Muga Silk from Assam that we have here. So, Vrindavani vastra is something that was used for wrapping manuscripts at the same time, it was also put on the top of the seat or, like, I mean the throne, which is reserved for the Vaishnavite gods. Now, one of the prime figures of Vaishnavism in Assam is

Shankara Deva, and in the 15th-16th century, we find that I mean there was a rise of the Bhakti movement in Assam in which we find that during this time, the Bhakti or like devotion for the Vaishnavite gods especially the Hindu god Krishna would reach its zenith and during this time we find that Shankara Deva was someone who was not much in favour of idol worship. However, many narratives of from the life of Krishna was prioritised, and that is how we find that the mask dance and then, like Kshatriya and so many kind of performances they, will also come to prominence under the influence of Shankara Deva.

And then the Vrindavani vastra is also something we find that how this existing knowledge of making this intricately woven silk in Assam had contributed to making this different form of aesthetics that is... that is prevalent in this textile we have on screen. And in this ones what we have, there are the registers in this vertical fabric we have this horizontal registers in which we have like I mean particular narrative freezes which sort of like I mean run and then we have the repetitive motifs which would be there. So, for example, here we have this the demon Bakasur and then, like I mean, there are also some of the other motifs we will find in which there are some of the other demons we have the cart demon or like I mean the snake and so on. All of these stories which were been delineated in the Bhagavata Purana. So, all those stories and those recognised motifs from these stories, all narrative motifs, figurative motifs, we will find them to be utilised here in the Vrindavani vastra.

So, by using these motifs from the Bhagavata Purana, what we find here is that I mean they sort of attest their close alliance with Vaishnavism, but also it is not just any form of Vaishnavism but after the Bhakti movement in which, like the life stories of Krishna and all these performative aspects the miraculous activities of Krishna they are prioritised and that is the reason there was a need for this kind of narrative motifs that we have on these textiles because not too many woven fabrics we will find that would have figurative, narrative motifs and Vrindavani vastra for that reason remains one of the many.... one of the few kinds of textiles in the Indian subcontinent which would have extensive narrative and figurative motifs featured on them. So, while looking at the visual exploration, what we have here it kind of like, I mean looking starting with the visuals like, I mean what kind of visual are we looking at what kind of motif they are if they are geometric motif if they

are floral motif if they are motif which are found in the nature or if there are motifs which are much more figural and then what kind of figural motifs that we are talking about here. So, all these different questions or like the layers of iconographic analysis that can lead us towards understanding that I mean, in what context these textiles are madewere made because they are not being made anymore, and then we can also, like I mean, through this particular like I mean this visual peculiarities we can also trace them back to like I mean the contribution of Shankar Deva then like I mean the rise of Vaishnavism in Assam and then of course like I mean its impact on the visual and material culture. So, these are how we find that the artistic aspects like I mean in which we see that I mean there is skill, there is bodily engagement of the makers of the textiles, but also at the same time the intelligence like all these things come together in making these textiles and showing a figurative textile in this regard is significant because we can also think that I mean how making this particular ways of the narrative the figurative motifs but not as a complete narrative but in repetitive format it requires particular kind of skill particular kind of decision making. So, all those things we find that I mean certainly that some of the ideas that we usually connect to the so-called artistic works like how decision making is part of that, how innovation, and how a particular kind of like I mean skill and also like I mean you know what is the pre-existing knowledge what kind of new knowledge is being contributed to this production technique.

So, all those different aspects we definitely see them to be featured in these textiles. So, this kind of examples also make us think about, like I mean, what is this idea about whether textile can be just considered as so-called decorative art minor art or there need to be much more expansive ideas about understanding? what are its relevances in studying visual and material culture and whether understanding this aspects would not just make us appreciate textile more but also whether this can help us to understand that what is art history? and also, like I mean, how textile art history, all those different aspects can be interconnected much more closely just the way we have spoken about interconnected globe in which like trade history and visual analysis come together, and then we can more sort of like I mean think about integrating art historical theories and then like I mean the process of making and visual and the community histories together.

Identification and salient features of different forms of Indian textiles



So, then we come to talk about the identification and salient features of different forms of Indian textiles. So, in this form, what we will do is that I mean we, there are many different kinds of textile that we have as part of our study and what we will do is we will try to understand it from, like I mean, the geographical point of view but also the point of view from like I mean what kind of climatic condition and everything else that also contributes to making particular kind of fibre, particular kind of textile and so on. Now, the map that we have on screen in which we find that India is depicted in this one we see that I mean India is shown as this post-1947 nation state.

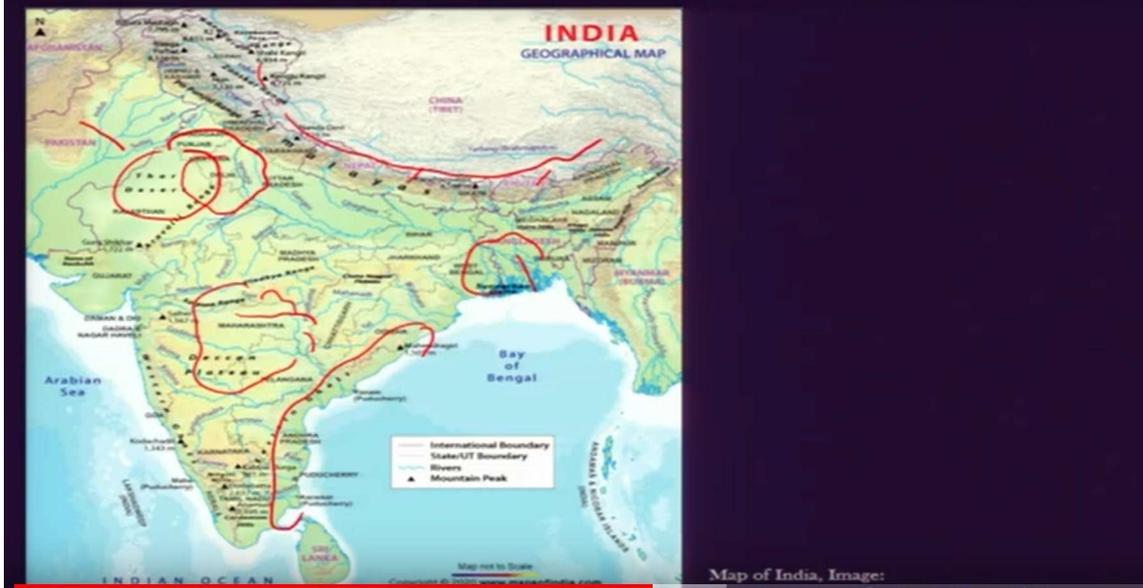
However, we also see that I mean how the... this geographical, you know, the borders that sort of like, I mean, separate India from the other South Asian countries. So, for example, here Bangladesh, we have Nepal, part of here will be Pakistan and then so on and Bhutan and so on. So, when we see them, we do not really think that, I mean, in terms of Indian textile, how those geographical areas can also be, you know, part of them. However, if we look into the history of Indian textiles and, many of the textiles that we will study as part of this course will predate 1947, and that is the reason when we still talk about Indian textiles in that regard, we do not talk about Indian textiles as like this geographical, you know.... in terms of like the geographical borders which were drawn in 1947. But we talk about Indian textiles as the textiles which were made in South Asia. So, like, I mean, the

Indian subcontinent will have to have in mind when we are looking into the history of Indian textiles.

Now, in this land that we find here, there are many geographical peculiarities we find I mean, of course, in the...in the northern region, we have the Karakoram and the Himalayan range, and then, of course, we also have the Vindhya range, here and then like I mean of course the Deccan plateau and then of course the Nilgiri the Western Ghats and so on. So, all those different, like I mean the rock formation, the plateaus and places like that, they contribute to diversity in terms of the geography and with that, we also find that there are many rivers which would be, of course, flowing in different directions. So, if there are some of the rivers which would be flowing towards east for the elevation of the land and so on then there are also a few rivers which will find them to be going towards west and with the..... with this the path or like I mean the course of this rivers then location of the mountains and then the plateau land and so on..... we find this diversity had also affected a lot of the agricultural patterns at the same time like I mean of course how the environment is you know affected by that. Then we also find this tropical climate and the places which are much more closer to the ocean or the sea will have much more humid... the humid climate throughout the year whereas, like I mean the places which are much more closer to desert.

So, for example, in the Western India, we have the Thar desert and so on. So, in those places, we will find that how this drier climate also makes a huge deal of difference in terms of understanding the geography, environment, climate and so on. So, this aspects do not just limit to geography or just like I mean the course of the river or like I mean the tropical climate, but as I have already mentioned that I mean they have a huge impact on the agricultural patterns.

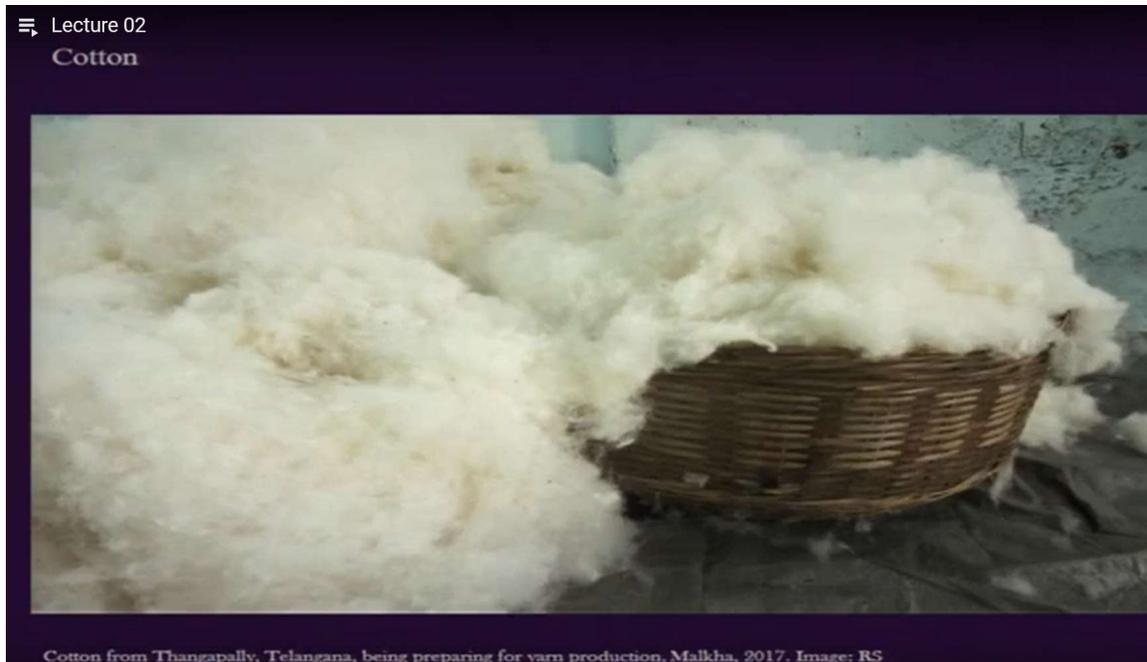
Identification and salient features of different forms of Indian textiles



So, for example, a particular kind of fiber which can be produced in central India, like in this places in the Deccan plateau, will probably not be easily produced in a place in Bengal and for like, of course, for the kind of soil condition, for its proximity to the sea, and of course like I mean you know the humidity and everything else. The similar thing that we can talk about, like, I mean something that can be made in this Coromandel region, whether northern or southern Coromandel, cannot be made similarly in part of, like, I mean the drier and the arid regions of northwestern India. The same goes for the Himalayan ranges and so on.

So, this kind of, like I mean peculiarities or the specificities that we see in the in terms of like geography, in terms of like agricultural pattern, and so on, we will find them to be also ingrained in how the community members have incorporated all these characteristics in making textiles. And that's the reason the kind of decisions we will find it... the decisions can vary from the length or the breadth of textiles from, like, I mean, what kind of patterns are incorporated, what kind of materials are incorporated and like I mean, the intricacy in skill technique and so on. All these different kind of things we will find them to be, you know, varying when this geographical. Climatic. and all these other components are

different. So, keeping these things in mind, we will probably like I mean start with looking into some of the primary fibers in our study.



So, in terms of, like, I mean fibers, so as we know that I mean all textiles are made from fibers, and then when we talk about like, I mean this textiles..... so, let me just make it very clear that in this course we will be primarily talking about handmade textiles and when I say handmade textiles I do not try to promote a romantic understanding of going back to the pre-industrial time period. However, by handmade textiles, I mean that the fabric of the textiles, which are mostly hand-spun not entirely but also at the same time which are hand-woven and then also like I mean hand-dyed and printed and so on. Like I mean by that this sort of, like I mean, you know, comes with this commitment towards sustainability, commitments towards, like, I mean the people or the communities who are involved in making textiles, at the same time our commitment to local knowledge. Now, what is this idea about sustainability? Now, in terms of sustainability, what we see that I mean in the last 15 years or so, we find that there has been a push, the global push towards going to slow fashion and by slow fashion, what we see there, this term was coined around 2006-2007 and by slow fashion a kind of production of textiles which were sort of prioritized which is not mechanized and in the mechanized way of production we find that textiles are produced much faster than how the handmade textiles are produced. However, in this

factory setup, we do not really see that I mean different kind of explorations, different kind of engagement between the makers of the textiles and the textile production is explored or prioritized.

In this one, only in many cases, we find that I mean, in the mechanized way of production, that there is a separation between the producer communities and then, like, I mean, how the production is made and ultimately does not really contribute to knowledge generation for the people who are involved in it. Also, at the same time, we find that in the faster mean of production, there are many different kind of hazardous materials which are used, and when these residues go back to the nature or like I mean residues go back to the water channels and so on they do not really do much benefit to any of us. So, for those reasons what, we find that if we are talking about sustainability and by prioritizing this handmade textiles if we are prioritizing sustainable practices so, this is a need of the time it is not a romantic decision to look back at the pre-industrial mode of production.

Now, let us look a little more into this idea of how people are involved or how the communities are involved in making textiles. So, in this case what, we see that there are many groups who would be involved in making different parts of textiles. So, for example, we have people who would be working in the agricultural field for fetching the raw material, then there are also people who would be collecting dye stuff and so on and then there are also people who would perhaps be involved in making spindles, making looms and things like that. Then once, like, I mean, the fibers are collected, then there are spinners who would be spinning the fibers and then making them into yarn and then when the yarns are woven into fabric from making of the yarn to like, I mean the entire process of making fabric we find that there are also subsequent stages of washing, cleaning and so on. So, with these things, we find that even though we talk about textile producer as an umbrella term, we find that there are people who would be from the agricultural field to sectors of carpentry and different kind of like tool making they are all involved in making textile then like the washer people and also like I mean then of course we will find the weavers, the dyers, printers and so on a lot of different people who are involved in making textiles. So if all this kind of community interaction we find them to be there in the handmade textiles,

we do not see the same thing to be appearing in the textiles which are made very fast in a factory setup, then like I mean, if that is what is happening we are not just losing out on the community interactions but this extensive knowledge which is sort of accumulated by different community members for ages they are also they also remain unacknowledged if we prioritize the mechanized way of textile production. So, this is the second reason for me to go, I mean, look specifically into the handmade textiles and not the ones which are produced in a factory setup.

Then the other aspect is also something that is integrally connected to this second aspect and that is the local knowledge. So, what we see there is that, I mean, there are knowledge systems which have developed by the community members when they have worked closely in a particular with, like, I mean, the locally available resources or the resources which are brought to them from different sources from elsewhere but also with the ecological conditions and so on. So, if there are many different aspects of them that were in a place where water is in scarcity, so there the kind of textile production we see them those are not water intensive. The places where we find that, I mean extensive amount of dyeing and so on, those things carry out, we find that there are... there is a requirement for you know abundance of water. So, this different issues we find that I mean the local knowledge systems have already acknowledged the environmental and the geographical peculiarities, and that is how those kind of knowledges are employed in making particular forms of textiles.

So, those things we definitely see them to be acknowledged if we do not talk about the local knowledge systems. So, some of the aspects we have spoken about already is that I mean how sustainability, the people who are involved in making textiles, and at the same time, like I mean the local knowledge systems are something that those are, you know they sort of like I mean prompt me to look into the handmade textiles.

Now the handmade handwoven textiles we also find them to be appreciated much more and that is because some of the recent concerns we find them to be there in the handloom sectors and of course like I mean in the artisanal sectors that we find them and especially

that is relevant for making textile is that after the implementation of GST that is good service tax we find that there are many material which are used separately in making textiles as also textile activist and scholar Archana Shah she has put out this that her and of course like I mean many other textile scholars have also pointed this out that how different textile, I mean different raw materials which are employed in making textiles they are sort of like I mean if the good service taxes like I mean employed in different materials instead of like I mean one textile then like there are subsequent stages in which taxes implemented on this materials and that sort of exponentially increases the value... the economic value of the textiles which are then like I mean sent to the market. Now already, like the handloom sectors, we do find that it has been in much of contestation from the factory made the mechanized textiles I mean the factory made textiles which sort of like I mean come out of this mechanized mean of production then if there are also concerns about like I mean taxation and all those things we find that I mean this issues are not addressed properly and then there are also like I mean much chances of how the local knowledge system or the community involvement and all those things can be implemented. Now, GST is something that was much needed in Indian economy there is no denial of that and for that reason like, I mean perhaps much awareness about how textiles are produced the handmade textiles especially how these are produced, much understanding much clearer understanding of this nuances can make us think about implementation of this taxes and everything else on the material, as well as on the finished product. So this kind of understanding, I believe that I mean that, can not only just help us appreciating the textile visually or part of like the art historical analysis but also it can bring greater awareness about how textiles should be treated and how textile in this case can be treated differently from many other craft objects that we have around us.

Now with that, I mean, we will go back to understanding some of the basic fibers which we have, you know, part of like I suggest making the textiles, and in this case, what we have here is that there are some of the natural fibers as I have already pointed this out that I mean we are talking about handmade textiles in this course. So, we will be looking at only natural fibers which are used for making textiles.

So, in the Indian subcontinent, we have several kinds of natural fibers which are used for making textiles for example, perhaps I mean the most important one would be cotton, and then like I mean for this tropical climate and then like I mean also the soil condition and all cotton is something that we find that to be cultivated in various parts of the Indian subcontinent.

Now apart from cotton, we also have some of the other fibers, and cotton is a fiber that comes from plants very similar to linen or something that comes from flax, and then also hemp and nettle fiber. So, these are some of the fibers we find them to be from plant, and all of them are cellulose fibers. The cellulose fibers we will find them to be much harder to dye than, like, I mean, the ones which are protein based. Now talking about protein-based the, other fibers, which we also have much in use in the Indian subcontinent those, would be the silk fiber and then the wool fiber. So, silk is something that is silk and wool, both of them they come from animal sources, and so silk would be extracted from silkworms, and then, like I mean, the wool would be extracted from sheep or various and few other animals. So, these are the kind of the fibers that the natural fibers we would find them to be incorporated in making textiles, and then, as I have already mentioned that I mean for the geographical specificity, wool is not really something that is found in all different parts of the subcontinent but in specific areas. The same thing applies for silk cultivation. So, those like I mean this peculiarities we will find that I mean how either like I mean procurement of the local fibers or getting fiber from different from faraway lands or other places all of those things they make a huge deal of difference in how textiles are produced.

We will get into the details of cotton and its complicated history in the Indian subcontinent in the next lecture. Thank you.