

**Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices**  
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**Week - 04**  
**Lecture – 20**

Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta and we are here in the last installment of our discussion on Kalamkari and allied practices. Now here we are at the last topic that we are supposed to discuss as part of this module and that is the artisanal perspectives into art history.



Now this is an aspect that I mean we all sort of have been talking about and then why there is this need of that, perhaps. So, what do I mean by artisanal perspectives into art history? We see that the artisanal perspectives that means that the aspects of making, aspects of production of these textiles, and also like I mean the intertwining of the artisanal lives with these textiles and the other materials which are associated with them, all those things, why those things are important is, because it is not just to know about how these textiles are made, but by perspectives we are also sort of trying to understand that if the artisans speak about their own practices, what do they prioritize, what do they speak about? So, acknowledging those things, recognizing those aspects of making. Also through recognition we can also see that I mean how we can understand that the artisanal merit

and intellect, those are there as part of like I mean this kind of making. So, all those different things they can come into art historical narratives; and why those kind of narratives are important in art history is because for a longest period of time until very recently we find that the artisanal voices are usually suppressed in the narrative of the art history. Then (also like I mean) what we see in specifically in the field of the Kalamkari making and the study of textiles, ... that textile making in which the techniques like the flex technique, ... textile making starting with weaving, then brocade making, or like I mean extra weft weaving, or then dyeing and so on, in all those cases we find that there is a considerable stress on the technique. Now, in a lot of narratives that we see and they sort of like I mean talk about technique as just as technique which is not really associated with the knowledge production. Or like I mean how the technique also works hand in hand with the perhaps with the artisanal understanding of the world. Or like I mean how the artisanal sensibility is something that is also incorporated with the technique. How the artisanal process of thinking through this aspects is something that is related to technique. So, technique is not really divorced from the intellectual process of image making. So, those are the reminders we need to be sort of aware of and in a lot of narratives, ... in the lot of art historical work, in the work of the textile studies, for a longest period of time this kind of aspects were ignored. So, with those what we see that I mean the artisans are the lifeline of making these textiles, but then when we study them (the completed textiles) we mostly ... tend to (sort of like I mean) look into the narratives of the motifs and then ... of course like the use of color, compositional arrangement, tonality and everything else. Now by that I do not try to refute the importance of visual analysis or understanding an object through its iconography. But then this iconography definitely needs to be sort of connected to this process of making these images. And the process which we find that I mean this is the time in which the artisans, the real human beings they come in contact with the material, with the fabric and everything else and that is how those fabrics are sort of like I mean the images we find them to find new life through the engagement of the artisans and the materials on those fabrics. That is how the fabrics are also enlivened. So, this is something we need to understand that when we are appreciating these textiles or studying these textiles without understanding the artisanal perspectives we cannot really proceed further with that. ... that is the reason in this slide I also wanted to sort of like I mean look into

certain images. [These are] ... the images that we have already introduced as part of like I mean the week's lectures- the act of doing block printing. This [image of] block printing in which we see that I mean this man is putting all his attention. This is Srinivas Rao, we find that I mean how he is putting all his attention into ... printing this block. And then like I mean in the other image when we see that I mean this fabric is then dipped in this Myrobalan solution and that is how it gets this characteristic pale-yellow tone, and then like it is washed, then it is dried under the sun. So, this kind of activity is something in which we find that the artisans are engrossed in this process, but if we see them as a third person who have no idea about the making or I mean how the entire process is done we might find them to be much mundane. So, the thing is that we cannot really here the images can be deceiving in that sense that even though they look very mundane but once we understand that how important they are as part of like I mean this image making then we tend to understand the importance of each and every of these steps.

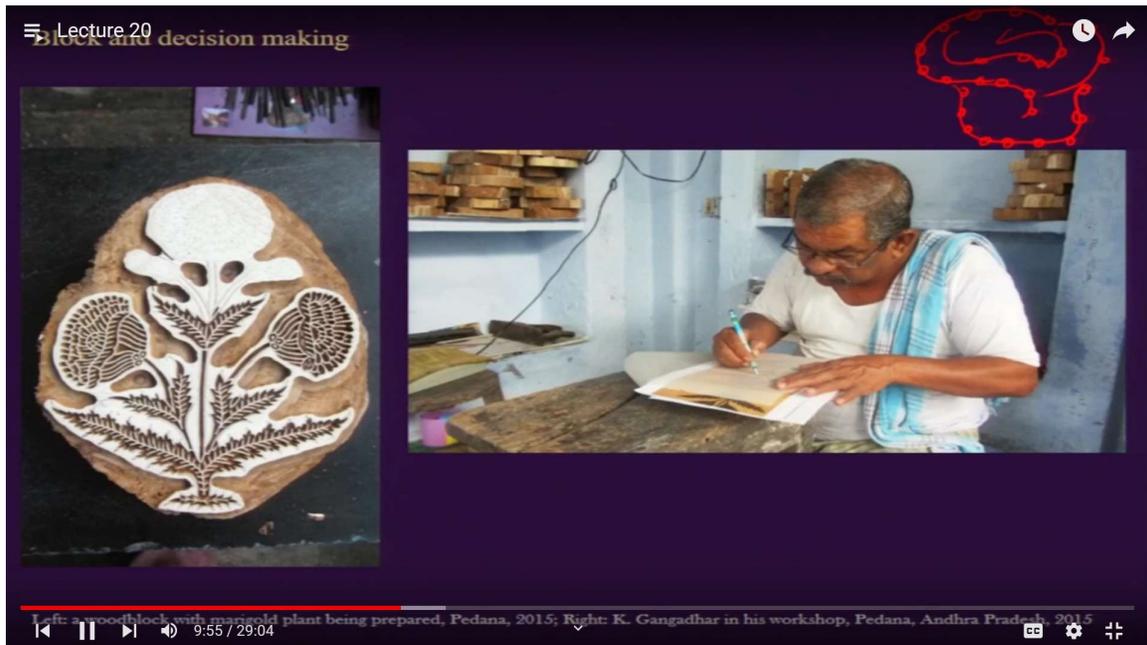
This is also something that relates to the idea of like, the relevance of the artisanal narratives in the finished textiles that we study. So, studying of these textiles like it also requires this step by step growth, and textiles are never really made in one day or like in one go. But many of these trial and error experiments, many of the failed attempts, and then, ... concentration on this process and everything else, and patience, all those things are required for, like, I mean, building those textiles bit by bit. So, if we ignore these parts which are seemingly mundane we cannot really fully appreciate the finished textiles. So, those are the reasons why we need the artisanal perspectives in understanding these textiles and if I sort of expand this same observation to the other fields of visual studies we can see that I mean why artisanal perspectives are important in visual culture studies as well as in art history.



So, for here, I will probably like I mean touch upon small few examples that I mean why I think that not only me I mean there are many scholars have argued about like I mean the relevance of the artisanal processes. For example, Soumhya Venkatesan and then also Sarah Fee and many other textile scholars we have seen that I mean how they have argued for the relevance of this kind of like I mean the juxtaposition of artisanal history or artisanal perspectives and then scholarly studies.

So, this is one of the case studies I wanted to talk about here and this is about wood block making and then how that also relates to decision making. So, wood block making in this case what we see here this is this very characteristic marigold motif that is being carved on this piece of thick wood and that comes from the workshop of Gangadhar Kondra and Narsaiah Kondra in this hamlet of Pedana, which is there very close to the town of Machilipatnam. So, in this case what happens and I wanted to show this image of the block which is not fully prepared but we can see that I mean this is almost prepared but still it's not there yet. ... it says something about the process that I mean how the step by step process that sort of leads us towards the finished block. In this process what happens we see that the block makers the master block makers for example, here in the right side of the screen we have an image of Gangadhar Garu or Gangadhar Kondra and so what we see here that I mean he is focusing on tracing an image on a tracing paper and eventually on a

block surface. So, what happens with this one that first we see that I mean when an image is given to them then they trace the outlines of this image. So, now we have this trace paper (that is the tracing paper which is used for like I mean tracing the outline of the images) but before that we also have like I mean paper which were a sort of like I mean covered with oil and that is how like transparency of the paper was increased and those papers were also used for making those trace drawings. Sometimes we also find that I mean how for copying those images were also perforated on the contour.



So, for example, if there is a flower motif (like this - a rose) and then like I mean the contour lines will be marked like this, with perforations. ... when through these perforations some dust color or pigment color ((without any glue or anything) ... are passed through it then like the dotted image of the contour will be created on a different surface. So, if there is a paper underneath this perforated paper and then, the dust color or pigment is applied on the top of it and smeared, then ... only through these perforations the dust color will penetrate through the lower layer of the paper and that is how the images would be drawn. So, this is how like we see that how some of the copying technique or like I mean this technique of transferring this one image to another surface is done. And then since like for any kind of printmaking technique we do not have like the print that we have,

the image that we have on the block it will have its mirror image on the fabric and that is



the reason one needs to be very careful about what kind of image they are making. So, for example, if we carve this image on the block (this arrow motif) so then we would not have the motif like this on the block but it will have its opposite, the reverse. So, those things one needs to understand, the block maker needs to understand this kind of differences. What they do is like, I mean they sort of like I mean then after tracing the image the backside of the tracing is used for transferring this image on the wood block. But then before transferring this image on the wood block we see that I mean there is also a bit of decision making that takes place in this stage and that is to see the workability of these images. That [means], when the block makers have these images they do not just readily jump into copying this image, making it a reverse image and then transferring it onto the block surface; but what they do is they first go back to their own references. So, for example, for the Kondra brothers what we see that they have stored those trace drawings for at least for like last 25-30 years. So, when they see images they try to find some of the similar images from their own archive and bring it up and then see that I mean whether that image is similar to this one or not if that image had worked out so far then this image might also work. If there are certain aspects in this image (like the image which is given to them) .... [that] they find it not to be suited because as all those ... blocks will not be displayed

as an individual art piece or a piece for display, but [are] will be used for printing them repeatedly on the textile surface. So, for example, if there is a break in the symmetry, if there are certain elements which will disrupt this flow of repetition then that is not suited for this purpose. So, this kind of things the block makers need to be aware of and it requires a lot of decision making that takes place before transferring this image onto woodblock surface. So, this kind of issues when we see them there we understand that the woodblock makers they always sort of like I mean make these decisions when they are transferring this image onto the woodblock. And then what happens? Once these block images are then transferred onto the wood surface, the wood surface is usually like covered with zinc oxide or some kind of this white tint so that the marks of the carbon paper or like any other forms of like I mean doing this trace drawings are visible for the block carvers. And then those block, those outlines, are then like marked with the chisel (like I mean those small engraving tools) and then the block carving starts. Now even for this block carving, even



when we see that there are meticulous lines and everything else the carving starts usually from the areas which are broad. So, for example, this area would be like I mean carved out first, they scoop out the matrix the wooden matrix from the area which will not be used at all and then like I mean after carving the broad areas then we see that I mean how a thin area around the image is left and then like I mean the rest of the area that being

carved. So, this thin area is left and then in the middle like I

mean all those lines are then being executed and once all those lines are executed the outlines are then carved. This is usually done for the stability of the outlines. Because if the outlines are entirely carved then like I mean carving in the middle and during this time the wood might break or like those minute lines might not really stay intact. Those are the reasons we



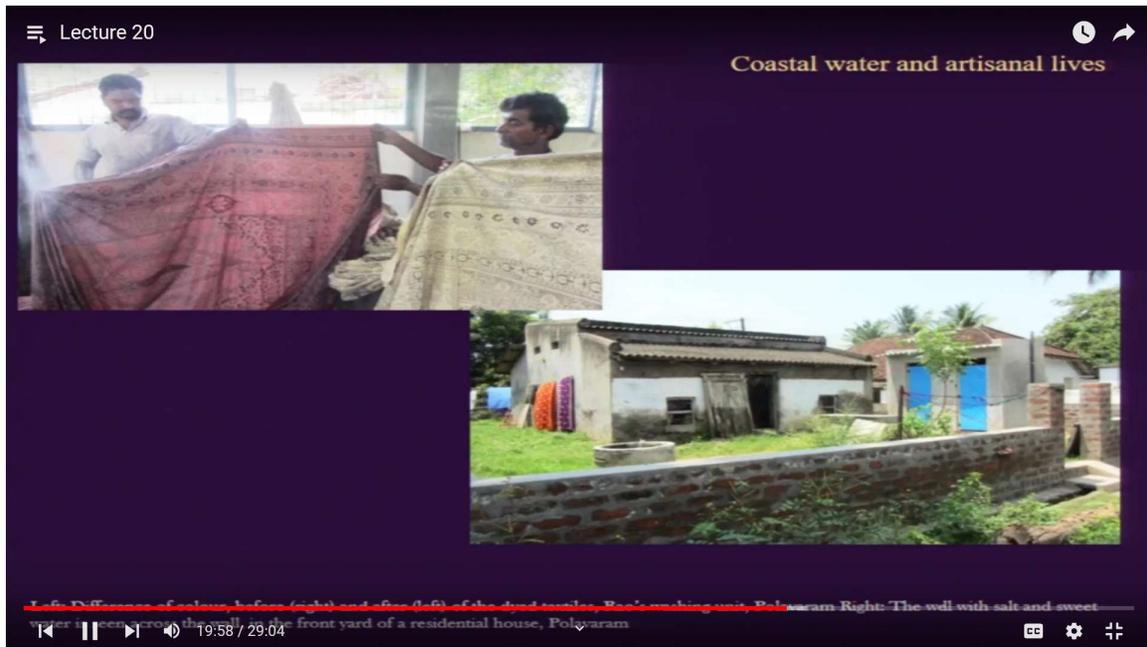
find that I mean there is this step by step process through which like these blocks are carved. Even though when we see the imprint of those blocks on the textiles, we might not really be aware of all those different details and why those you know these aspects are required in the process of production. But once we pay close attention to them we understand that all those things are interrelated. So, making these decisions at those crucial points in time that which area to carve, what kind of engraving tools need to be used, or which area to carve first and then which need to be like I mean left for the end all those things are there which are very well calculated or thought about before making those decisions on the block.

So, this is something we find that I mean block making is something that is in which we see that block making and decision making that happens simultaneously in the artisanal workshops. So, this is something we cannot really consider that to be strictly just technique based and of course there is nothing called like strictly technique based but the way it is usually [treated]. As I have mentioned that for a longest period of time the way it has been usually depicted in the scholarly works that technique remains different from [or] distinct from the intellectual process or like I mean perhaps like I mean the amount of like visual analysis and everything that remains distinct from the technique. However, what we need to do is to sort of understand that how this technique leads to the visual that is there and which we analyse as part of like the visual studies and visual exploration. So, technique and visual exploration these two things are integrally connected.

So, these are some of the aspects [that] we see and the other thing that we also find this process of repetition, even though a lot of times we find that repetition is something we sort of understand that as a tedious process in which no brain work is required, repetition is something in which like people do not really learn something but they just sheepishly copy. So, those things are something that is challenged in this process (this repetitive process of block making) that we see here. Because in this case what happens that the block makers would perhaps follow the repetitive process of carving this block but then we find that I mean how this repetition is something that does not really make them do these things without using their brain but each and every new motif that poses a new challenge for them

and at the same time like I mean even for the known motifs with the use of like I mean different material or perhaps when the same thing is done in different point of the day or a season and everything the challenges become different. So, even through this repetition the artisan come to the terms with like I mean embracing these differences and the new challenges. So, repetition is not something in this context, in the context of craft making we can see as to be something as tedious or without any brain work; but perhaps something that requires a lot of attention.

Now repetition in this aspect is also something we find that is very important for transferring knowledge or continuing or sustaining knowledge. So, by this repetitive process we find that in a lot of cases this artisanal instructions, like they will probably have very less verbal instructions but then many of the gestural instructions. The instructions are conveyed through the way the hand holds the tool or how the tool is then used on the surface of the wood for like carving the block. But it is not always explained or conveyed through words and because word or like the verbal way of communication has its own sort of limitations and possibilities and for craft making this limitations can become an important aspect. So, for those reasons what we see that this kind of repetition is something that one artisan needs to do in order to learn something, in order to sustain this practice, in order to transform this practice over time. So, considering all these aspects we find that block making which is also considered as this repetitive process, which is a generational process (a lot of times these kinds of words are used) we do not really find that to be something that can make the artisans think less about their work or we do not really find this kind of work being something in which the artisans do not use their brain. But perhaps this kind of work requires a lot of attention and that needs to be recognized when we pay close attention to those so-called mundane details (something we already have started talking about).



Now the other aspect we find that is also related to Kalamkari making and that is the use of water. The coastal water is something we find that to be also very important in Kalamkari making. Something that I have already started talking about when we were introduced to this region (the Coromandel region) which is dotted with the canals and everything else. So since the canals we find that I mean if I think about the Machilipatnam area or like I mean in parts of Godavari in which like I mean those larger rivers, the rivers like Godavari and Krishna they will have a lot of canals which would connect the sea (this the way of Bengal) with those with the rivers. So in those canals we find during the particular points in the day, also during like I mean the full moon night or the no moon night in those times we find the saline water from the sea sort of like I mean comes into the canal and sometimes like I mean this river water that also dominates the canals so it depends. In a place like Machilipatnam or in the places like in the Godavari delta like Palakollu and so on. Also, this will be seen in the southern Coromandel as well in the Pulicut the area around Pulicut Lake which is also the salt water lake and also in the bank of river Kaveri, mostly in the coastal areas. But the rest of the areas like Palakollu, Pulicut, Machilipatnam, Nizampatnam and so on in all those areas we find that the canals would carry both saline water and sweet water and the dyers, for example, the late master dyer Mukkantieswarudu Rao had spoken a lot about the use of this kind of water in their dyeing processes that what

kind of water they require. So sometimes like the saline water is required for making particular kind of dyes so the waters [with] the [high] salt content ... becomes hard water and it's not really soft or mild water. So, for hard water like developing certain kind of dyes is better. So, for example, like ... when the red dye is developed this kind of saline water is much more preferred than like the regular water. Then during the dying processes or during the monsoon and so on when we see the salinity of the water is decreased because of the rainfall then the dyers also sort of add salt (extra salt) in the water for sort of achieving that level of salinity, so that the dying process can go seamlessly. With those kind of things we also find that Mukkantieswarudu Rao he mentioned about this one particular well and that well was there in Polavaram (and here is an image of this particular well) again once we see this image in the right side of the screen we see it a very mundane



image in which there is this residential house, there is shrubs and bushes, and everything else; there doesn't seem to be anything significant. But this particular well that we have here, it has saline water there. Even though it's a groundwater well ... it is very close to the coast, [so] we find that the saline water is there in this well. So, since there is saline water it is [of] no use [to] the household members of this particular this area and that's the reason the residents of this house they have allowed Mukkantieswarudu Rao and his son and the other members of the workshop to use this water from this well and utilizing it in the dying process. So something that we find that this is very contextual, that the dyers have recognized that what kind of water is suited for what purpose and those things are then incorporated in their process of dying. So it is not just about like following certain recipes, but it is about being cognizant about what we are surrounded by. The same thing happens

with like the use of agricultural waste, so for example, for paddy production in this area as I have already mentioned that this lush green fields (by the way Polavaram also means like Polalu that means like fields). So Polavaram is the place like a place which is full of those paddy fields or like I mean this fields with like agricultural activities. So, in this region what we also find that I mean how the rice husk is used for fuel like for boiling the fabric when they are boiled in dyestuff. So something we find that I mean how this kind of aspects are very much incorporated, that being cognizant about like I mean the region people live in, and then what all different kind of natural resources they are surrounded by, how to make use of them, but also in a respectful way not really over exploiting them but trying to sort of incorporate them in the process in a much more respectful way. So these things make us think about like I mean why the artisanal perspectives on water perhaps like they're this very mindful and thoughtful use of water is something that makes us think about being much more aware of the environment ecology and so on, which are some of the concerns that we all share today. So this kind of examples or this kind of like I mean narratives can make us think that I mean the extent of the art historical studies which does not really just stay in the realm of understanding a visual iconography and then like I mean its significance, its meaning, its cultural context but also how that is very much related to all our lives today. Finding these aspects in, or like I mean when we sort of ... bring them back to like the art historical studies then what happens? like I mean, why the artisanal perspectives in the visual explorations are something that is that needs to be acknowledged.

The first thing we see that I mean the dyeing process for Kalamkari making there is this extensive process of dyeing (as I have mentioned in the first lecture) that there is painting, printing, resist dyeing, mordent printing. All those different kind of activities they come together so when we see that there are different kind of imagery and when we see that different kind of like coexistence of images or like composite form of images we understand that this kind of images they did not really just come by someone's abstract thinking and then they are just drawn on the textiles; but it came with the step by step process of dyeing. The way like, the layers that happens in the dyeing process by like I mean using dyes then like boiling, washing, again using dyes or mordent and so on there is a lot of return of the same process. So this is something we find that to be there in the

thematics as well, that it is not really just single dimensional; but there are like I mean many different layers which sort of come together and all those things are enlivened through the process of dyeing. So again, the artisanal perspectives make us think about this experiential aspects of dyeing which can be then brought into the exploration of the visual forms.



Now the other aspect of the bringing the artisanal perspective in this study is something we can think about in terms of that how the workings of the brain sensibility, sensuality and then like the visual all those things they come together. So, in this case we can understand the visual processes or the visuals that we see here are not something that as an end process or like the end result of a process but it is part of a process. The way like Gillian Rose and Divya Tolia Kelly they have also sort of like I mean exemplify I mean they have sort of stressed on these issues as we have mentioned in the first lecture. So, these are the ways in which we can see that how Kalamkari making allied practices all of them they can enrich our knowledge about the artisanal perspectives as well as then bringing them back to the study of art history. Thank you.