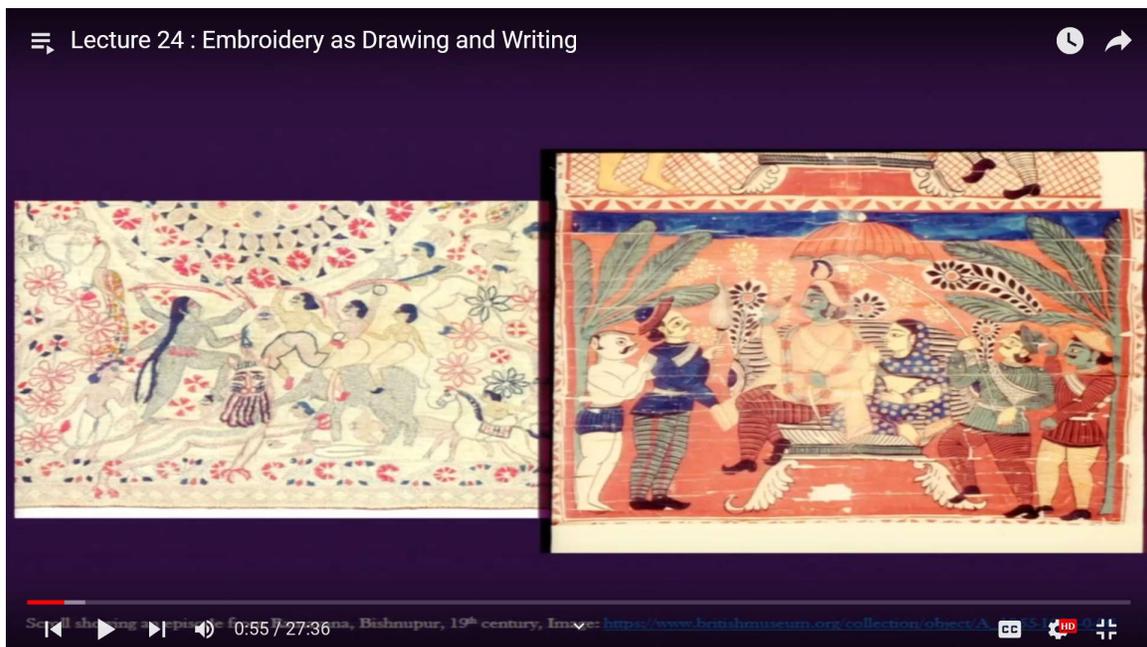


Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices
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Week – 05
Lecture – 24

Hello everyone, we are here in the fourth installment of our week on embroidered narratives and in the last instalment, we are talking about the Kanthas from Bengal, the Kanthak the quilts of Bengal.



So, we will start our discussion continuing what we have already started and here I want



to talk about little bit on the different kind of practices which are related to making Kanthas. So, for example, if we see it here in the left side of the screen we have section of the Kantha that we

have already discussed in which we see this warrior goddess Kali and then of course how she is fighting her enemies. We can see the kind of figuration that is used there, these flowing lines which sort of constitute the contours of the figures (that we have there). ... also the narrative progression of how these profile figures are used. ... how they, sort of like I mean, if they are facing each other or if all of them are going in one direction; how that also guides the viewers eyes to read the narrative or sort of experience this part of the narrative in the Kantha. So, this is a kind of tendency we also find that those are there in the Bengali scroll paintings. So, scrolls are something we find them to be they are made on pieces of paper which are mounted on used fabric and then like I mean those papers are sort of used with glue or gum and then they are pasted on the fabric for stability and on the top of that these images are drawn. ... there are particular ways in which like I mean the brown is prepared and then how the pigment based colors are used on the top of the

scrolls for executing the visuals (something around like that we have see we see in the right side of the screen). In this case is what we find there are those vertical scrolls and those in the vertical



scrolls they are unfolded and folded at times of telling narratives. So, in that case what happens we see that in this vertical scrolls there are usually horizontal registers in which episodes of a particular narrative is depicted. So, that can also be from the Hindu epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata that can also be from Muslim saints so for example a Ghazi's narrative and so on. So, there are many different kinds of narratives we find them to be there in theses painted scrolls. So, in this painted scrolls we also find this particular kind of figuration in which we see that the profile view at the same time like I mean how

the figures are constructed not really like bony structures but then it's almost like I mean showing the flesh in the body, but also at the same time making them much more relatable and following the kind of like the figures or like I mean the following the kind of body types we find predominantly in Bengal and part of eastern India. So, those things we find them to be there also like the dressing style. So, for example in this scroll when we see it we see (... this comes from mid-19th century from Bishnupur this area where we have already studied this Baluchari brocades and then this scroll also comes from the same region) the episode of Ramayana in which we find that I mean Lord Rama and Sita or Janaki Devi both of them are like I mean shown here at the center stage and then we find perhaps this is Lakshmana and then this is Bharata. So, all of them are there in the scene and then of course this is perhaps Hanuman who we see that I mean in the almost in the margin of the scene. So, this is if you think about it that how the narratives are constructed by sort of emphasizing this Bengali types of body, 19th century attire with this particular kind of hat and then I mean this is pyjama and this is Jama and so on. So, all those things we can find them to be there in the Kanthas as well because a lot of Kanthas we find today in the museum collections they come from the 19th century or early and later 20th century. So, we can see there are certain kind of overlapping so it might mean that there are sort of correlation between the scroll making, Kantha making and so on.

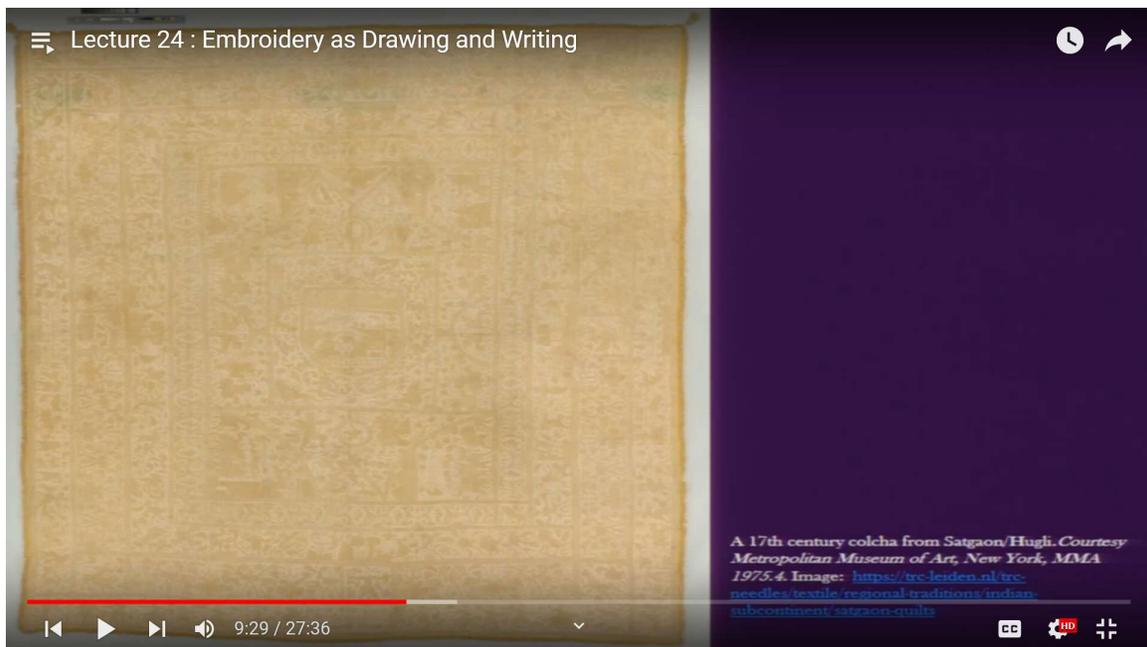
Now the scroll making is something we find them to be there which are made by particular communities of Patuas or the scroll painters who are also involved in making idols. So, now the thing is one can consider that I mean what is the relationship between this specific group of artisans who are called Patuas and then Kantha which are made by women members of families across Bengal. So, one can think about it as a way in which like how the scrolls are something which are sort of like I mean they are rolled and then like I mean brought to the village homes by the storytellers they would unfold the or like I mean they will unroll the scrolls and then they will show it to the audience, they will depict the story and then they will roll it again and then they will take those scrolls with them. So, this kind of practices we can consider that how bringing this particular scrolls to the village homes everywhere that also enables people to see this kind of figuration. At

the same time, we can also consider that how similar kind of figuration are there in the terracotta temple motifs like I mean the terracotta plaques and so on (something we have already studied in context of Baluchari making...). So, in those cases also we find that how the similar kind of visuals like the figuration, the kind of this profile view of the figures, narration and so on those are incorporated in making this scrolls or the terracotta plaques and so on. How those things are then reflected in the Kanthas. So, we are not really talking about one person is copying from the others but it seems that they are also part of a shared visual culture in which they know that what is happening- the scroll painters would know about that what the Kantha makers are doing in the domestic spaces and then like I mean the people in the village homes they would also get to see these scrolls when these performances take place. So, this is how we find that how there is an exchange of knowledge (this visual knowledge (we can consider it) and that sort of makes this similarity between one another.

Now the other kind of practice we also find that has relevance in this case are those Bengali wooden dolls. The wooden dolls are something those are not only just used for votive purpose or for ritualistic use or also ... for playing. The wooden idols ... large size wooden idols are also worshipped in the temples and mostly we find that the Vaishnava idols so for example images of Krishna or images of Chaitanya Dev or Gour Nitai and so on we find them to be made in wood and those wooden idols would also have this kind of figuration. So, these well-rounded figures that we find in the Kanthas, in the scroll paintings are also there in the wooden dolls. So that way we can consider that how this similar visual vocabulary was present for a number of people who belong to different sections of society like ... the women in the domestic spaces or in the community setting and then the patuas and then like of course this wooden doll makers or the wooden toy makers. So, these are the ways in which we can see how this practice of making Kantha even though we consider it as something that is done in the domestic spaces mostly by women (I mean predominantly by women), so it's not something that is again disconnected from how the other forms of practices they evolved over time.

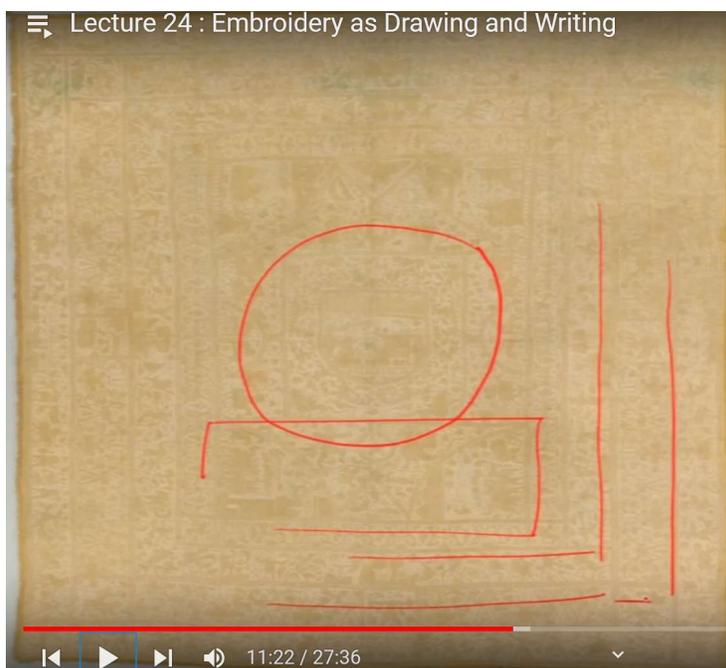
Now the other thing we also need to consider that when we are talking about Kantha we cannot really think that it's just a Hindu practice or it's just a Muslim practice. Then there are also speculations about whether the Hindu practices they preferred figurative narrations than the ones who are the Muslim women. But then we cannot really make a very straightforward or a simplistic distinction like that. Because we find that there are also scroll paintings of Ghazi (I mean the Islamic saints) and so on who are also depicted on the scroll paintings; and similarly we do not really know always that if particular Kanthas are made completely by Hindu women or Muslim women in which we find there is a combination of geometric motifs and then figurative motifs and so on. So, there is not really a clear distinction we can make that these are Hindu imagery, these are Islamic imagery but then there are always like I mean this combination of both. So this kind of practices they also tell us about the exchanges between the religious groups and no stark division between the communities they have inhabited in Bengal and also like I mean other parts of the Indian subcontinent.

Now from there I just wanted to talk a little bit about this particular kind of quilted fabric



which is called colcha or golcha and this is a very specific kind of fabric (quilted fabric) we find them to be there made in Satgaon or Saptagram and that's in the Hugli district of

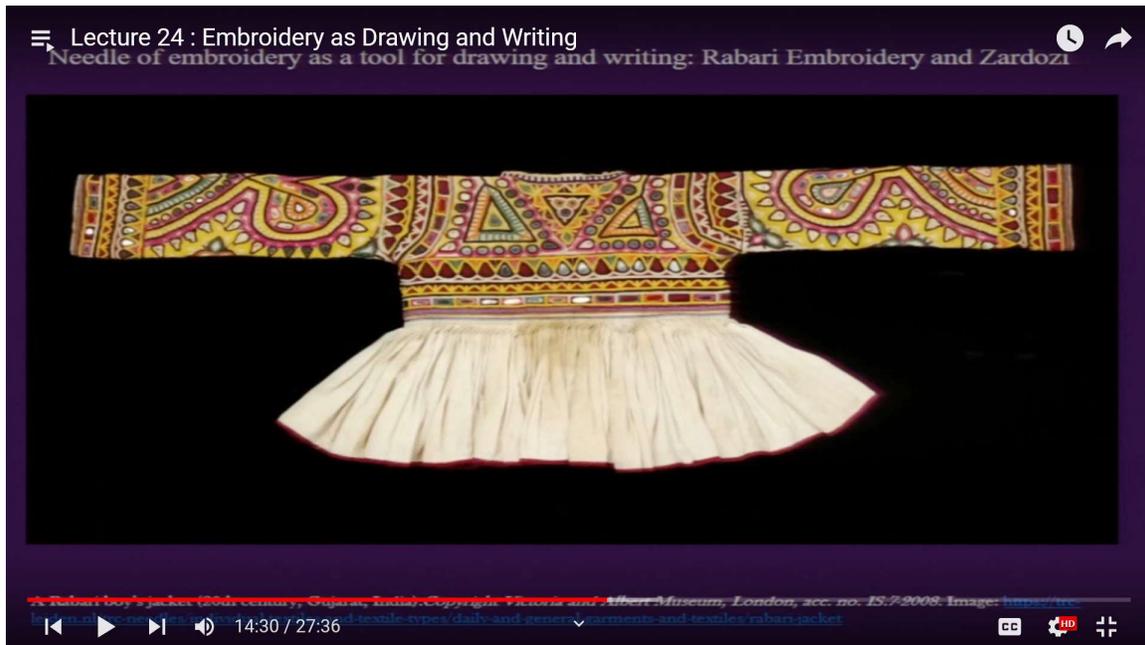
Bengal. It was a port city in the early modern period and we find that a particular kind of this golchas were created in 17th century and in which we find this fine muslin or fine cotton cloth is used (again unbleached) and in this cotton cloth we find that the threads which are used on this cotton cloth are very regulated (that I mean it does not really create a high contrast between like I mean the figure and the ground). Then ... these golchas are then ... very carefully mounted. So for example, here we see the border that is added but the sides of this golcha and this were made for Portuguese consumption, it was not really we do not really find much evidence about whether these were used by the local people in Bengal. In these golchas what we find that I mean since it was made for Portuguese consumption and whatever the golchas [that are] existing today none of them are there in Bengal, but then some of them are there in the Lisbon museum collection or there in the other museum collections, like the metropolitan museum of art in New York and so on. So, in this case, what we see, that it sort of draws on the making of Kantha. So, for example, the divisions we find in terms of like making the borders sort of reaching towards the center. If one can see the center here, there is a clear area which is confined and sort of like I mean it announces that this is the center of this fabric and then all the other narratives what we see around there can be those narrative panels like this or like I mean there are those horizontal or like I mean those long narrative scenes which



sort of like I mean flow through these borders. So all those things we find them there and then it sort of like I mean definitely reminds us of the Kantha and then like in terms of the stitches we find both running stitch and then also chain stitch and all those are used in this colchas. Now the other thing we find that there is a tendency towards standardizing the

compositional format that to make it much more sort of regularized which was not there in the Kanthas. It is rightly so because if it is for overseas consumption or if it is made for a particular trade relation then those kind of regularities come into play. So in terms of that if we see that I mean colchas are something we can consider to be closely connected to the Kanthas then we also find that there are certain kind of similarities in terms of making this kind of quilted fabric; but then there are also dissimilarities. So for example, if these are made for particular kind of consumption and that's the reason the materials are carefully selected it's not really used fabric those are selected for it but new fabric and then new thread and yarn those are used for making the embroidery. ... even though the kind of compositional format certain imagery and also like the figuration and all those things we can find them to be similar to the ones we find in Kantha; but then we also see that how the this the regularized sort of approach towards making the colchas are something that is very different from the making of the community based activities that is prevalent in making Kantha. Now since these are made for Portuguese consumption we find that certain kind of Portuguese heraldic symbols are there featured at the center then like I mean we find it's an eclectic mix of regional imagery of many of the folk motifs and then of course like I mean certain kind of images from the mythology and so on (in the Hindu mythology perhaps) those are there. But then they are also met by images of European cupids and puttos and then like I mean of course then other imagery what we do not really see them to be featured in the Kanthas for regional consumption. So, this sort of also says that I mean if this was made for a particular time and also it was made for a particular market then it evolved in 17th century and at the same time we find that to have died out also in the 17th century. Whereas for Kanthas something that had been relevant for the local communities they have been made for centuries and then like I mean they sustained and then they survived because of the involvement of the people in the households and in the community. So, in those aspects we can find how making Kantha making golcha this comes similar and both are from Bengal; but then like I mean how one kind of fabric had survived and the other kind did not.

So, continuing on this on the discussion on the embroidered narratives, we now then we

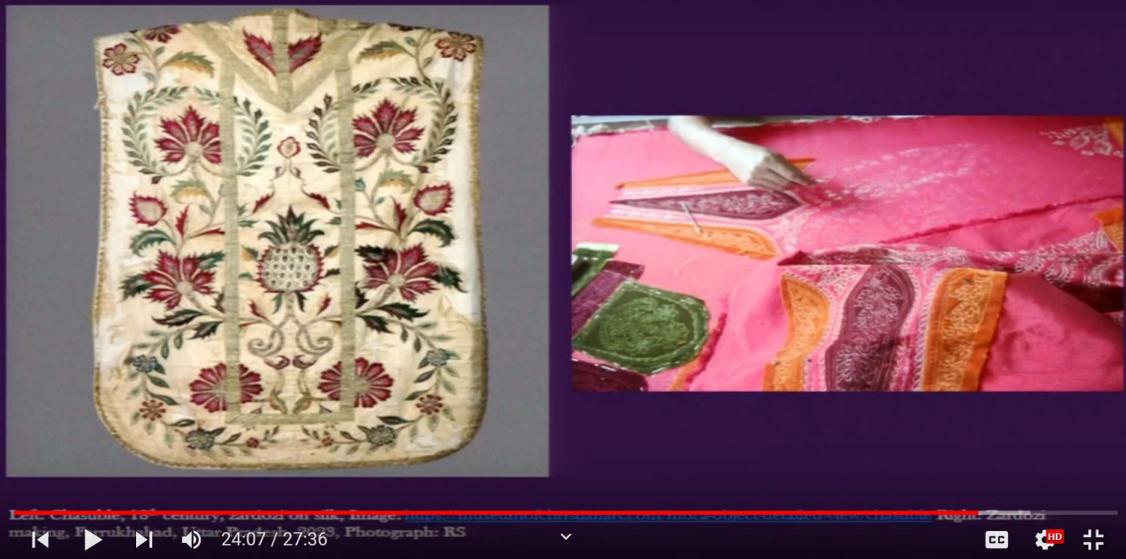


can look at the making of the Rabari embroidery and Zardozi. So in terms of that what we find here, is that this needle embroidery we what we have already seen is a kind of a it is a tool for drawing and at the same time writing and how those kind of ideas they sort of come up on this embroidered fabrics is something we will be discussing now. So, the Rabari embroidery that we find the Rabari communities are the nomadic communities they inhabit in the Kutch region of Gujarat. So, from Bengal that is in the eastern part of the Indian subcontinent now we are sort of moving towards the western frontier and in which we find these nomadic people. They usually sort of inhabit in the areas which are much more barren and very different from the lush green riverine landscape of Bengal. In this case what we see that the nomadic communities, the Rabari communities and within the Rabari communities we also have like I mean different other subgroups and they were perhaps primarily from Rajasthan and then they moved through Sindh region and then they arrived in this area in in Kutch, which is now part of Gujarat. So in this case what we see that they also have rich tradition of making embroidery and on screen we have this one Rabari boys jacket and that comes from 20th century and this is something in which we can see that how this undyed cotton is used for making the jacket or the Jama. On the top of that we find this extensive use of embroidery, the use of this brightly colored threads and with that we also find that mirror works (mirrors are like I mean

frequently used in this kind of embroidery). Also at the same time shells and cowries and things like that they are added like on the top of this embroidered fabrics. So, this kind of like this specific embroidery tradition we find them to be there in the Rabari community. Now textile historian at the same time textile activist Judy Frater has extensively worked on the Rabari embroidery and the textile makers in Gujarat. She argues that how the Rabari communities when they started moving from Rajasthan it was not really that time when this stitching or this embroidery tradition or the practice that came with them; but when they moved from Rajasthan to the Sindh region it seems that I mean that is the kind of time when they started adopting or like I mean became familiar with particular kind of embroidery techniques and the other forms of visual making which are much more geometric and abstracted. So those geometric imagery that stayed with the Rabari communities and when they eventually sort of moved to the Kutch region we find them to have flourished into this making of the embroidery. Now Frater also argues that this kind of embroidery is perhaps been learned from the mochi community in Gujarat and if you remember that we have looked into this hunting coat of Jahangir's reign and which was perhaps made by the mochi community in Gujarat. We have already mentioned that how those mochi community members were predominantly male and they were the professional embroiders. So, when Frater sort of suggest that how the Rabari communities may have learned this kind of embroidery techniques because this chain stitch or the aari stitch that we see both in the mochi embroidery as well as in the Rabari embroidery are very similar. So, in this case one can also draw certain kind of inferences between them, and so if they have learned the Rabari embroiders have learned from the mochi community we can also see how the community structures in those two cases are very different. Because the mochi community members the ones who are who were the embroiders were predominantly men, in terms of the Rabari embroiders we find the women members in the family would be the ones who are involved in doing this embroidery. So, the community structure completely changes but then like the way of doing this embroidery remains very similar. Now for the mochi embroidery we find that a varied range of images were created, so for example those figurative motives in the shikargha compositional format that we have seen in the hunting coat of Jahangir's period so those kind of things we have seen. However what freighter says that during the Rabari

communities move towards the Sindh region this abstracted geometric imagery which is prevalent in the Sindh region had stayed or made a huge impact on the community members (the Rabari community members). That is how this this geometric motives became much more prevalent in the Rabari embroidered fabrics as well. So when I say that there are geometric and abstracted imagery that does not mean that they do not have figurative motives, they do have figurative motives in terms of like certain kind of recognizable animal motifs, objects or humans; but then they are much more simplified on then they are the forms and the shapes and everything they are much more close to the geometric motives which we also see them to be they are featured in this Rabari embroidered fabrics. So this kind of like I mean this embroidered fabrics one can also consider that if there are the geometric and representational imagery those are both present there and we see that I mean there is also this other aspect in the Rabari embroidery that comes up very prominently and that is how the adaptability of different kind of situation is something that also affects the embroidery making. So the embroidery making even though we are talking about the geometric images and then like if there are also representational images they come close to the geometricity, but then we can also see that even within this kind of scheme there are many changes which are registered in making of this kind of embroidery (embroidered fabrics). That is the reason what Judy Frater also considers that why this kind of making of the fabric is also a way of writing their expressions onto the fabric, with the help of needles. So what happens in this case, we see that ... the Rabari communities as Judy Frater argues that they are highly adaptive to different kind of changes that can be environmental changes, that can be socioeconomic changes and so on. One of the instances that she registers is that in around 1995 this subgroup of the Dhebaria within the Rabari community they banned the use and making of embroidery in their community (in the subgroup) and that happened because we find that how this kind of this Rabari embroidered fabrics which are used as like wearables at the same time they are also used as dowry cloth and so on so those things were something those became highly prized and those could delay the marriage of a woman and at a time when the women were increasingly at workspace they could not really find the time to make those highly intricate embroidered clothes. As the reason there was a need for them to sort of like I mean either stop this form of embroidery or add

up new things and that is the reason this kind of drastic change came into being. So like using of embroidery or not using of embroidery in all these cases we find that embroidery becomes a very important part of the community identity which is also sort of like I mean that is flagged in Judy Frater's argument and that's the reason what we find that the presence of the embroidery or like the absence of the embroidery both of these things they become part of understanding that why the written expressions of a community become prevalent through the use of needlework. Now the other thing we also find that in the to keep up with the pace of the time and then like I mean with the societal demands machine embroidery is also frequently added to it and then like a lot of time what happens that I mean machine embroidery is used for making the outlines of the geometric shapes and then the filling is done by the hand embroiders. This is also something instead of like making a stark distinction between machine embroidery and hand embroidery the Rabari community seem to be completely all right with like this kind of changes as Judy Frater also argues that I mean they understand that the entire thing to be made in the hand embroidery is something that is not preferred and not really the most effective way of continuing this kind of tradition and that's the reason if there is a requirement for the intervention of the machine embroidery that is also been welcomed by the community members. So all this kind of complex discussion that we find which concerned the issues of economy, technology, available material and then like the community structure through which we find that this geometric embroidery or this sort of like I mean the this very characteristic embroidery technique that is that is there with the Rabari community they become a very important tool of writing their community history perhaps not in the way we find them to be there in the historical archives but in a much more playful way which are there preserved with the communities.



There is this other way of doing embroidery and that comes into being with the zardozi making. So zardozi is something in which we find that the silk threads which are wrapped with gold wire or like I mean silver wire which are then used for doing the embroidery on the top of this richly brocaded fabric or like silk and so on. So they are also very heavy in that sense and they are not used for day-to-day purpose, but they are used for particular kinds of occasions. So in zardozi, 'zar' means gold and 'dozi' means wire or thread. In this case we can see that I mean the making of this gold-wrapped or metal-wrapped thread something we have already addressed in the earlier modules so it's something that is used here and again with either semi-precious or precious stones or sometimes with pearls and sometimes with like I mean different kind of additions (like sequins) and so on. So these things we find them to be there in zardozi making and again it's a shared practice that is there in parts of Central Asia, parts of middle east and then of course during the early modern period that become prominent in part of northern India and deccan India. So today we find Zardozi is made part of northern India in the areas near Agra and Lucknow, Unnao and so on and then also in Gujrat, parts of Bengal and then in the Deccan around Hyderabad and so on. In zardozi we find that with this particular kind of technique there is a stress on making imagery which would be sometime they are close to like I mean the Indo-Persian imagery we already seen in the in the rugs in the brocades

and so on. But then there are also additions to them. So for example, we have this chasuble and that comes from 18th century and which is made in the Mughal workshop and then this is something in which we see that how in which we find that I mean how this imagery of the Persian flower motifs, creeper motifs they come close to this image of a pineapple which was a foreign fruit. Now this is again it's a way to understand for us that what kind of extent this techniques would go to. So, there are particular kind of techniques in which the embroidery is done. In the right side of the screen there is an image of how this embroidery is done on the fabric and we'll go in detail of that. This also shows that how different kind of cultural influences or like different kind of cultural information are brought together, overlapped and then layered upon this kind of fabrics. So, in other words how like writing and overwriting narratives is something that we have already been talking about is there in the zaradozi making with the help of material, with the help of like this particular way of embroidery. We'll continue on this discussion in the



next lecture, thank you.