

Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices

Dr. Rajarshi Sengupta

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur (IITK)

Week – 07

Lecture – 33

Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta and we are here in the third installment of our week on fashion in the post-independence India. So, in this installment we will be talking about indigenous textiles and designers interventions. So as you already know that I mean in the last installment we have already started talking about people like Riten Mozumdar and so on who have not only just Riten Mozumdar but then there are also other people. The designers who would come up in 1950s and with their education either in India or abroad and then try to redefine certain aspects of textile making and craft making in the Indian subcontinent especially in India. We know that I mean how those were instrumental in terms of understanding how the later designers also made conscious attempt to sort of redefine certain kind of indigenous textiles which have been existing in the Indian subcontinent and in India for the longest period of time. So today our

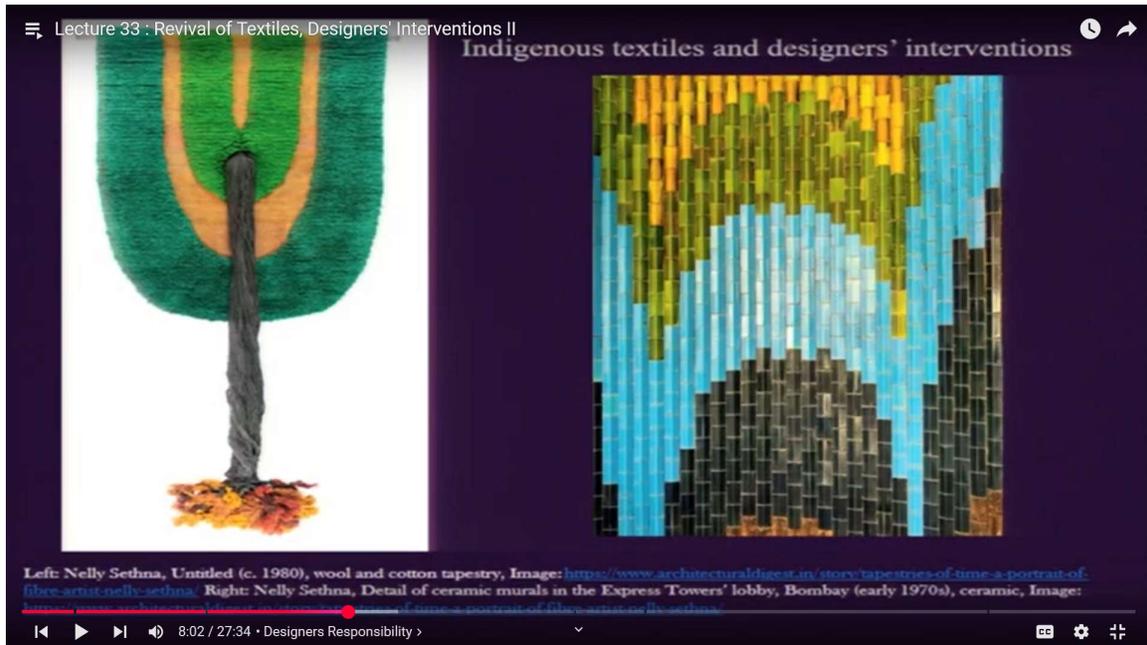


discussion will start with designer Nelly Sethna. So, Nelly Sethna was someone who we

find that in the 1950s she went to London and then studied there, and then of course we find that, I mean during her stay in the UK she also not only just studied her interest but also sort of documented a large group of blocks and textiles from the Victoria and Albert Museum collection. As I have mentioned earlier, how the Victoria and Albert Museum came into being? That is the South Kensington Museum was established in 1857 and then later on how it was ... consolidated into this art and craft museum in the early 20th century and eventually became the Victoria and Albert Museum. If this is the history of this museum we know that I mean this is a museum which holds a lot of artifacts and then design samples and everything else from the colonial period, which were collected during this the great exhibition in 1851 and the later ones. For that reason when Nelly Sethna goes back to this museum collection she knows that this is the museum collection which will hold a large group of these samples and which might help the designers and the artisans in the post-independence India to kind of like reclaim certain parts of their cultural legacy. And that is the reason why we find that Nelly Sethna had minutely documented a number of those textile samples, the designs on the blocks and everything else and a lot of those designs were definitely not in practice anymore in the artisanal sectors in India. And when Nelly Sethna documented all of them she brought them back to India (when she travelled back). She not only just sort of documented them and made them available for the scholar community or like the communities of the textile connoisseurs, but then she also published books with like all those detailed drawings so that those can be made available to the artisans. She shared this knowledge with the artisans, the block maker communities mostly in Andhra Pradesh (that time Andhra Pradesh and today how the Andhra Pradesh has been bifurcated). So, this is something we find that, she was someone who did this archival work and then she also had her own interest in weaving and then she thought of disseminating the knowledge that she had gained from studying the archives in London which was definitely not made possible in the artisanal sectors in India. So, for that reason, what we find that during this time that for those aspects we see that Nelly Sethna was someone who sort of made this kind of overlapping between research, the designer's intervention and how that can go back to the communities for betterment in their livelihood and so on. So, this kind of like this new role of the designer that we find who were not just designing for their own brand or not

designing for their own benefit but was already sort of invested in the betterment of the livelihood of the craftspeople in the Indian continent. So this is one of the examples that we find of how the designers when I say that the designer's interventions, I [just] do not mean that this is about redefining textiles in terms of how the textiles were used, how the textiles gained its meaning, or how those were sort of like redefined in according to the designer's taste, choice and preference (which are all connected to this idea of fashion). But I am also connecting this idea to how the designer's responsibility was something that made a huge intervention in terms of how the craft sectors managed to sustain. At a time there were different kinds of motivations for people to sort of pursue. So, for example like the drive towards technology is something we can understand that was certainly driving more and more people and especially the people who were aspiring to work in the urban sectors would certainly not be interested in the craft sectors. So, when a large group of people from the villages were aspiring to become workers in the urban sectors, [thus] that is the time we see that a lot of people who were sort of involved in the artisanal sectors or agricultural sectors in villages would try to move to the urban centres in search of better livelihood. So instead of sort of feeding to this idea we find that there were certain kind of attempts by Nelly Sethna and many other designers who were invested in this social cause and of course people like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Pupul Jayakar who would try to bring the artisans back to their community practices so that these practices can continue and then the artisans can also thrive. So, this is the background in which we find that not only Nelly Sethna but a number of other people they also came forward and then they also contributed immensely to this sector of craft making in India.

Now, apart from those issues, we find in Nelly Sethna's work, her.... training as a designer and then her interest in weaving and ... her studies of different kinds of textiles. So, when she studies textiles from the museum collection, she is not just sticking to the ones which are there from the 19th century or 18th century, but she is equally aware of the different kinds of interventions that took place in the 20th century. And for that reason, we find that she moved effortlessly between the ... scheme or like the requirement in a traditional practice and ... what an individual designer can do in their



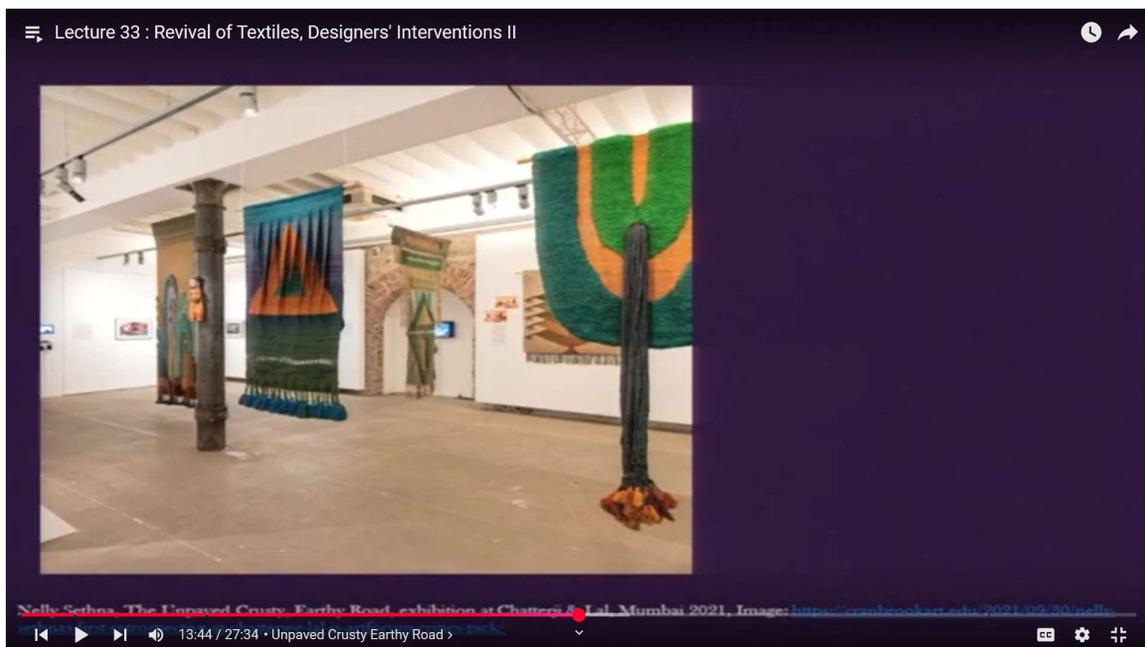
own practice. So, an example of that we can see on the left side of the screen, and here we find there is this untitled hanging. This is a cotton and wool tapestry that is there on screen and in which we see that I mean there is this shape which is like I mean this semi-circular shape which is hanging and then from the middle of it there is this rose of this yarn that is hanging. It's almost making it feel like I mean some kind of ritualistic object but then we do not really know that I mean if this is something that has a fixed meaning or Nelly Sethna wanted to make use of it to convey something else. To me it seems that I mean there is a conscious effort in terms of using certain kind of material which have been long used in the history not only in the Indian subcontinent but also part of Middle East and in Europe and so on. This tapestry technique in which we see that how does this material which was used and then the technique of making tapestry is something that is again incorporated. But then the object that comes out as a result of it in which we see that there is woven yarn (which is there to make the tapestry) and then there is a yarn that is not really woven but then like I mean this is hang here just as fiber. So, this kind of this column like this column of fiber that we find here is something it's a reminder of the materiality that goes into the making. So it's again it's a reminder of like what all different kind of material that goes into making this kind of tapestry and a lot of times since we stress on the final product that comes out of a weaving technique or any kind of technique

we tend to forget that what kind of materials or what kind of techniques might have been used in making certain kind of objects. So, when we see there is a conscious overlapping of woven yarn and then just fibre, then, we try to understand (what is) the relationship between them. If the fibre is something that is the primary stage of making this yarn, or it is something that I mean after the yarn that has been woven into this fabric, and if it is torn and if it gets dilapidated, then all that remains is those fibres. So, it can be something to do with the making, but we cannot really have a conclusive idea that this is exactly what it means. This is something we also find that how this sensibility towards, like, I mean, making things which are not really clearly defined and something we can see in the field of textile making, which was considered as strictly utilitarian, this kind of intervention by the designers that could push the perimeters of understanding textiles. So, this is not something we can understand as utilitarian, but it's in between utilitarian and non-utilitarian items such as paintings or other objects that we appreciate in the field of fine arts. I am not saying that this kind of experiment is new in terms of how the material is used or that the crossover between utility and non-utility is explored in this textile. It is something we can understand has had its roots perhaps in the Bauhaus experiments and some of the other experiments we have seen in Western Europe and the USA in the early 20th century. So, Nelly Sethna is someone who had minutely studied some of those developments in Western Europe and the North Atlantic world, but at the same time stayed close to the ground reality in India. That's how we find that her sensitivity towards material, towards making and at the same time her engagement with the artisanal communities in India all those things made her position unique.

We also find that the knowledge that she acquired from weaving and perhaps from tapestry weaving, as well as in terms of using weft threads and the extra weft threads in weaving, is something that is also reflected in the other work she had done. So, on the right side of the screen, we have a mural from the Empress Towers lobby in Bombay that was made in the early 1970s. In this, we find that it is a ceramic mural (in which, like ceramic tiles - the small tiles are sort of arranged in a particular way to make this pattern) [which] is strictly geometric pattern. In this, we find that the kind of colour used and then the balance between the colour, the compositional format, and everything else have a lot

to do with the way we understand weaving. So, in a way, the kind of themes that we address in this course, for example, the crossover between textile making and architecture, is something that is again seen in Nelly Sethna's intervention here because of how her knowledge in textile making then gets translated into making this mosaic mural in the Empress Towers lobby in Bombay.

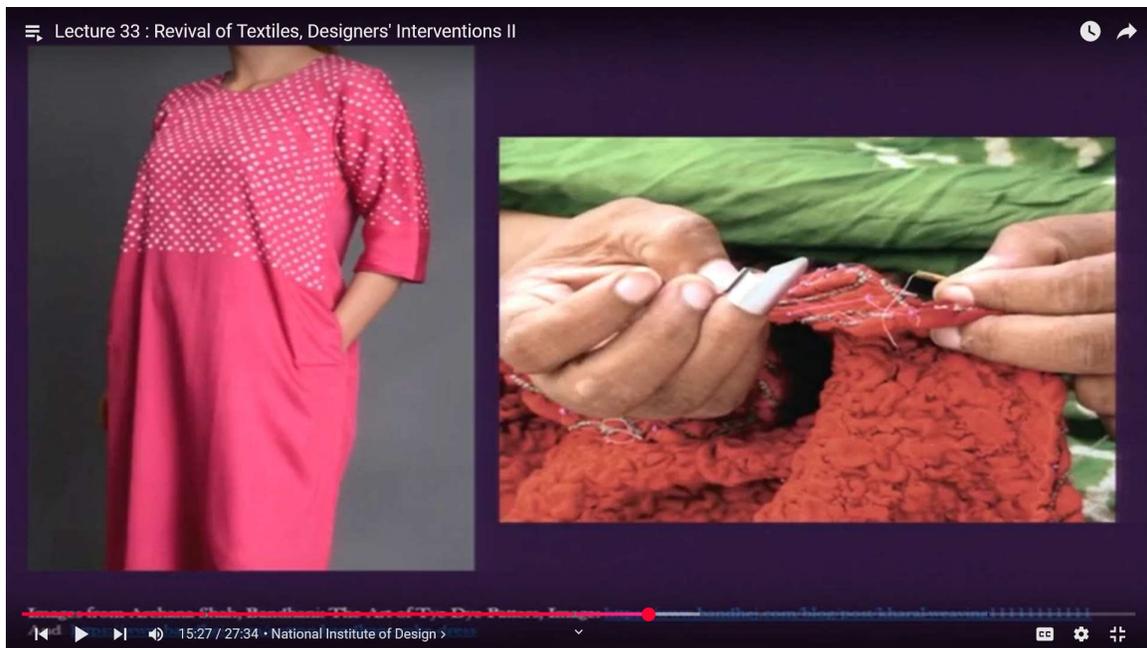
We also find that during this time, Nelly Sethna's lower portion of the body was paralyzed. Even with those difficulties, she never really stopped working and continued her individual practice to empower the artisanal communities in India. And this is a display shot from this exhibition that is titled *The Unpaved Crusty Earthy Road*, and



which was an exhibition of Nelly Sethna's woven works and also some of the things that she had collected. The exhibition took place in the Chatterjee and Lal Gallery in Bombay or Mumbai in 2021. In this exhibition, again, we see the kinds of tapestries or the woven textiles that she had made. A lot of those textiles we find them to be made (perhaps as hangings), are very consciously made as a way in which we can understand them to be connected to utilitarian textiles (for example, carpets, rugs, and other textiles that are used are from home furnishing), but then the way asymmetry works out in them and how this overlapping between fiber and woven yarn are played out in these textiles [are interesting]. So, we cannot really sort of categorize them either as utilitarian or non-

utilitarian items, but they are kind of in between. That is something we also find in designers or textile artists when they work with textiles. We find that this kind of duality (that is, somewhere in between utility and non-utility) is practiced and sort of emphasized in this kind of work. So, of course, Nelly Sethna's sensitivity towards textiles has also enabled her to respond to these kinds of ideas and successfully execute them in the work she had completed.

Now, regarding the other kinds of practices, we also find ... that during Nelly Sethna's time, that is her contemporaries. Some of her contemporaries also took measures, and



they have attempted to sort of work with the artisanal communities in a much more respectful way so that not only the designers but also the artisans benefit from this kind of collaboration. That would be Archana Shah, and she was a graduate of the National Institute of Design. So National Institute of Design is another institute that we see ... came into existence after India's independence in the late 1950s and in the early 1960s. During this time, we find that the Indian government had taken measures to establish a number of institutes, for example, the IITs (the Indian Institute of Technologies), which came up in the late 1950s to early 1960s in several locations in India. Then, there was also a National Institute of Design, and of course, the IIMs (the management institutes) would also come up. But then, in the National Institute of Design, we find that there was

a conscious attempt to produce things and objects that would benefit the people living in India, both in the urban and rural sectors. Then, there was also a conscious effort for the designers to be aware of the rich cultural heritage and, at the same time, the craft traditions in India. This is how the artisans and designers can come forward and work together to make certain kinds of products. So we find that some of the graduates from the National Institute of Design during this time (and, of course, in later times as well) ... pushed this boundary of how to sort of work with artisans. Then again, this idea of how to treat people respectfully, how to work with the artisans, not as someone who was subordinate to the designer but as someone who is collaborating with those designers for making objects or, like I mean, textiles. This is an issue which we still find to be really problematic because this fine line between how we understand and how we treat people with respect but also sort of as work colleagues is something that we fail to understand in many different ways, and that causes a lot of problem in terms of this kind of collaborations. So, some of the people who have successfully collaborated with the artisans have been respectful to them and not only just worked with them but also did extensive documentation for the betterment of their livelihood and also making people aware of these kinds of practices as some of those whom we are discussing as part of this module or the week.

So, Archana Shah is someone who, after graduating from the National Institute of Design, travelled extensively and worked with the artisans primarily in Gujarat. Then, she extended her fieldwork to other parts of the country as well. In 1981, she came up with her designer label Bandhej. Of course, Bandhej also means Bandhani technique of resist dyeing in which threads are used to tie small, small knots in the fabric, and then it [fabric] is dip dyed. That is how we find that the area which was wrapped with the thread has remained undyed, and the patterns are created. So, this is something that is called bandhni, in which tying or bandhna remains at the centre of it. Archana Shah's designer label Bandhej is something that was perhaps one of a kind when it was established in 1981. As a designer label in this, we see that the designer was working with artisans as collaborators. Some of the ways in which we see how her extensive documentation and then the prolonged conversation and association with the artisans

have figured into the making of these textiles. What gives the unique sort of identity to these textiles is perhaps the way in which the textiles were redefined. One of the examples will perhaps be in the image we have on the left side of the screen where we find this tunic (that is, a woman's tunic). It is made of silk and ... how the bandhani patterns are used. We can see how these patterns are there in the body and how these patterns are different (orientation) in the sleeves. Then, in [general], the bandhani textiles are mostly used like untailed pieces of fabric. So something we see in terms of like odhni (the shoulder cloth) and perhaps also with the skirt and things like that. But then, when we think about making them into tunics (that is an untailed fabric into tunics) then different kinds of arrangements need to be made. For the designer, it becomes crucial to understand what kind of pattern will go where or like what kind of flow pattern might be useful for particular areas in the body. That is why the sleeves in this particular textile [specifically] arrangement of the bandhani patterns in the sleeves ... to be different from the arrangement of the bandhani patterns in the body. So, these kinds of calculations and also like these decisions need to be made prior to the making of these textiles and then, like, the production also sort of continues or responds to these design decisions. So that is how we find the designers' experience and exposure and then how it comes to contact with the artisanal understanding of making these fabrics. All of them sort of come into play in textiles like this. So, these are some of the ways in which we can understand how the designer's interventions were crucial in terms of redefining these textiles and also sort of like, I mean, using certain indigenous techniques and making them available to the audience who were perhaps like, I mean mostly living in the urban sectors.

This is also something we find that it also reflects that Archana Shah's idea about how we can sort of like I mean take craft forms to the future and it is about that I mean there needs to be an understanding about what the contemporary society wants and how to make use of particular kind of traditional techniques or the techniques which have been practiced by artisans for generations and how to make a bridge between them. This is something that Archana Shah has sort of practiced over and over and that is how we find that I mean she had not abandoned any of these techniques that she started studying from 1970s but then always with each and every intervention she had tried to redefine these

practices and she is not just the only designer who would be doing this but then this is one example among many in which we find that how the traditional textiles, the textiles which are been practiced generationally by artisans are also sort of are always sort of like I mean given new context and meaning with this new interventions. With each and every of these new interventions if there is a successful collaboration between the artisans and the designers then new meaning, refreshing take on understanding tradition is always introduced.



Now, the other example in this case would be looking at the Ajrakh textiles. Ajrakh textile is a highly laborious printing technique that utilizes resist printing and block printing. This is a printing technique on cotton fabric and is practiced in the Sindh region.' The Sindh region is now in the nation-state of Pakistan, parts of Barmer in Rajasthan, and then very much in the Kutch region of India in Gujarat. So, what we see that I mean Ajrakh textiles, which are again, as I have mentioned that they are laboriously created, and a lot of those textiles originally were made for the Maldhari communities (the animal herders) and the other people ... who resided in this region. We see that the Ajrakh textiles were also made as the untailed pieces of fabric in which these patterns are there, but then these fabrics were used as either shoulder cloth or head covering or

turban by the Maldhari community (as we see in the left side of the image). Eiluned Edwards, textile historian and textile scholar has extensively worked on this transition between how Ajrakh was then utilized by a number of designers to make them into wearable clothes. From a cast dress, it transitioned into this new kind of textile, which was then used and displayed on a ramp (as we see on the right side of the screen). This is by Aneeth Arora for the brand Péro, and in which we see how the Ajrakh textiles that is there again in this tunic (that the model is wearing) and is paired with jackets and scarves which would ... perhaps not really be made in the same locality. But then ... with the colour balance and everything, how they are sort of mixed and matched and to kind of like respond to each other, and by that, it gives a new meaning. So, with this kind of intervention, we find that certain aesthetics and certain techniques of production and their engagement with the communities of block printers and dyers are kept intact by these conscious designers. But then also certain ideas were changed with this kind of intervention. So, for example, the Maldhari communities or the people in Sindh still considered that the Ajrakh shoulder cloth or the turbans should be worn in the upper part of the body, whereas in this new intervention, we see that Ajrakh printed saree or skirt and all those things they go beyond the waistline. This kind of change also simultaneously takes place with these interventions. We'll continue this discussion in the next lecture. Thank you.