

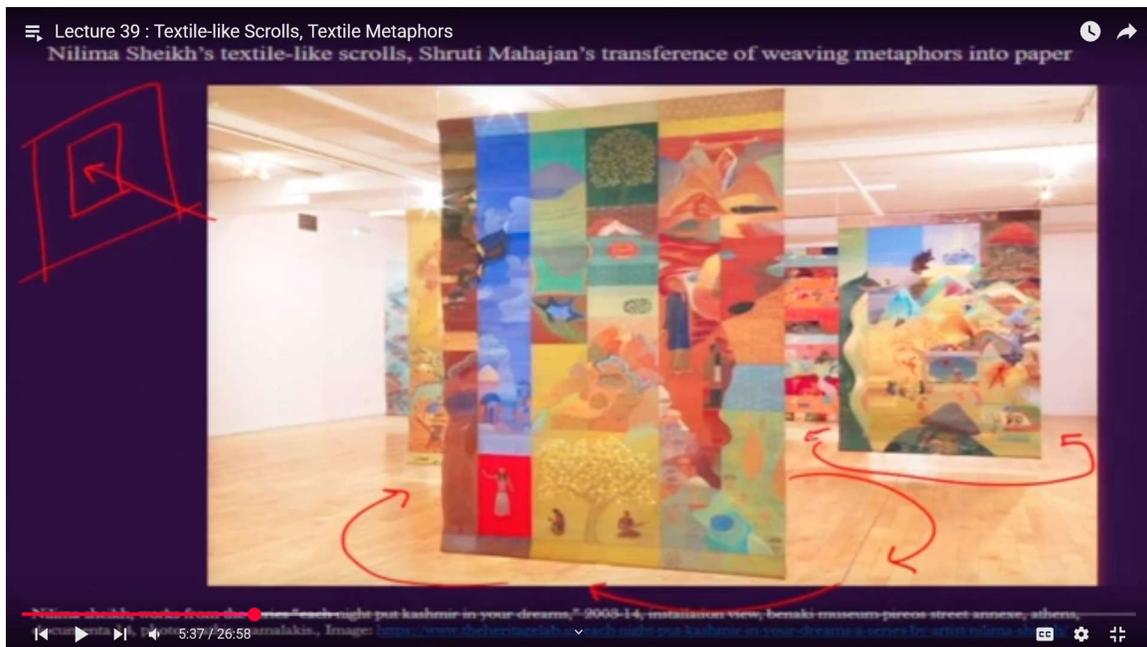
Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices
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Week – 08
Lecture – 39

Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta and we are here in the fourth installment of our discussion in this week and that is on Textiles and Contemporary Arts in India. So, we have already covered some of the areas that we were supposed to sort of go through in this week and that is to do with like the various approaches through which we see textile is either incorporated in the contemporary art practices or how textile becomes part of the artistic expression by the contemporary Indian artist today. Also, we have looked into the role of textile in performance art and being performance art as this one particular area of contemporary art that we see has developed in the late 20th century, and still now it has been sort of experimented with. So today we will be talking more about Nilima Sheikh and Shruti Mahajan, these two artists who have been using the language of textile, also like I mean different kinds of textile metaphors and perhaps like I mean different references from textile into their practice. Sometimes they are actually made into textiles, but mostly we see that I mean the works are done either on paper or canvas and with pigments and everything else, but then that would reflect how textile is incorporated. So perhaps like I mean some of the ideas around textile, but then it is sort of like I mean stretched beyond the materiality of textile and textile making in this context.



We will start the discussion with Nilima Sheikh's textile-like scrolls. So, on screen we have certain displays (I mean certain scrolls on display), which come from this particular set called *Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams*. This entire set, the set of these nine panels, was made by Nilima Sheikh from 2003 to 2014. During this time, we find that Nilima Sheikh had engaged with different kinds of narratives. So, for example, we find the different kind of folktales, journalistic stories, at the same time mythical stories and then also like experiential aspect, memories, historical narratives, all these different kinds of stories are put together in these panels and these works are also shaped by or informed by Agha Shahid Ali's poetry. This is something we find that this idea about displacement, how this idea about land and the people who are displaced from the land and how they reclaim certain parts of their history, memory, or how those parts of memories are kind of recollected or perhaps like I mean relieved. So, we find those ideas to be in this set of works by Nilima Sheikh. If we look at the kind of display Nilima Sheikh opted for, this is where we find the textile-like form that came into prevalence. So, we see these large panels which are made sometimes they are done on canvas, sometimes they are done on this wasli paper, and then, of course, in the tempera process, in which pigment colours are used, the colours are processed and then they are used on these panels. So in this case we see that the kind of hanging that she opted for it is not really on the wall (like the

paintings would be usually displayed), but they are usually suspended from the ceiling to the floor almost like the way in which we see the carpets are hung or sometimes we can also compare it to the painted scrolls the way they are displayed. Now the one issue we can find in terms of the painted scrolls that the painted scrolls if we think about its traditional way of displaying that way it will be the painted scrolls are rolled and unrolled when the narrative is spoken about or a narrative is depicted. Then, like I mean, it's not really always that the entire scroll will be displayed all at once. So, in that case, we see that this kind of display strategy might not always seem like a painted scroll, even though we find that Nilima Sheikh had spoken about how she had taken references from painted scrolls, not only from India, but also from eastern Asia, from China, from Japan and so on. So, in those respect we can find that the textile-like hanging, this idea of the hanging is very much ingrained in the way she wanted the works to interact with the viewers. So,



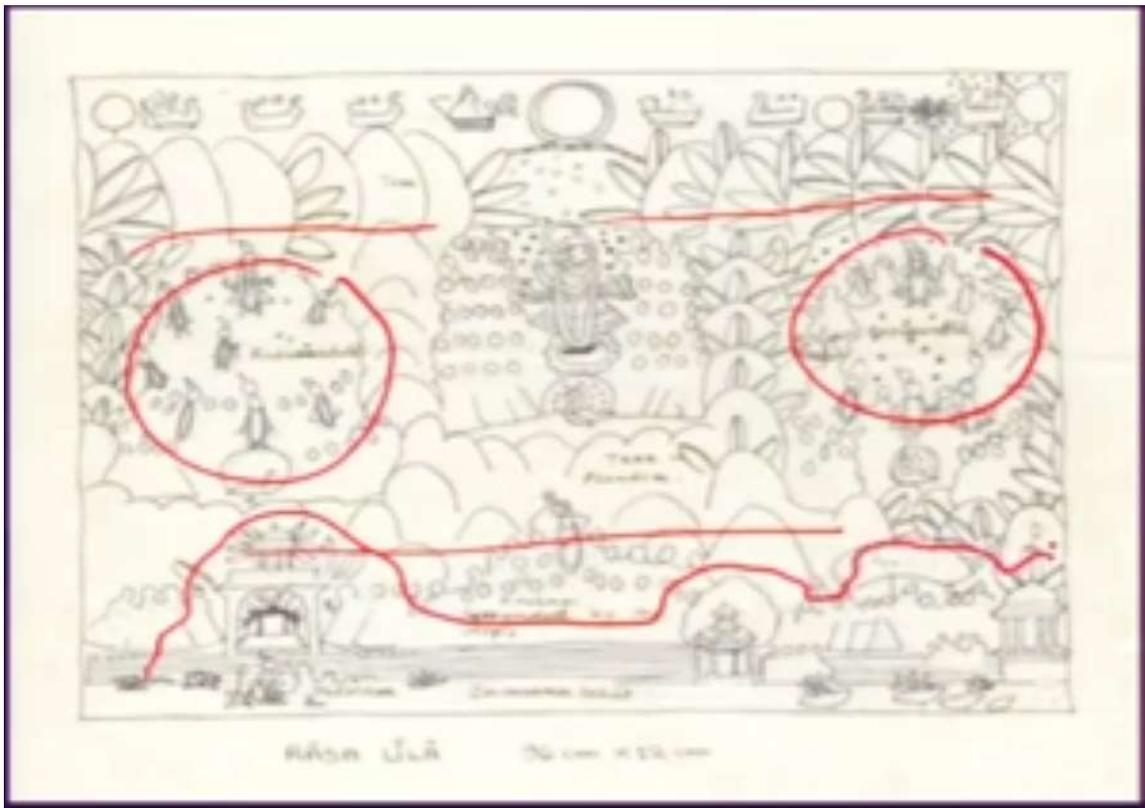
if the works are stuck to the wall, if we think about it, then there is a way of viewership that is sort of like I mean restricted, that if someone stands at one particular point, they can only see the work on the wall from one particular way of looking through that. And when it comes [to] this kind of display in which the work is displayed in the centre or not really close to the walls then it gives the flexibility to the viewers to walk around the walls, and that is how the interaction between the viewers and the work is also heightened. There are new ways of seeing or new ways of experiencing the work that are

also introduced. So, something we can find is that the flexibility that this works also sort of embeds into them is something we can also relate to the way, like curtains or ... the textile hangings are displayed. So that is how we find that there are many ways in which Nillima Sheikh's works actually sort of go back to the textile-like forms in its practice.



Now if we relate it back to Nillima Sheikh's background that she had studied in the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda. As I have already mentioned that school has been prolific in terms of producing a number of successful Indian contemporary artists and Nillima Sheikh did her studies there. Then in the 1980s that we find that she was involved in a few different kind of activities which also allowed her to shape her practice in a particular manner. So, in the right side of the screen, so if we see that how Nillima Sheikh's practice sort of when we see this textile-like scrolls those are hanging on the on the from the ceiling to the floor and if we see this kind of practices then what are the roots for them. So, if we sort of go back in time and see how Nillima Sheikh's practice had developed over time perhaps some of the traces we can find in the 1980s. So Nillima Sheikh had studied in this Maharaja Sayajirao University in Baroda at the school which I have already mentioned to be highly significant in terms of producing a number of contemporary Indian artists. So Nillima Sheikh had studied there and later on we find that

I mean she had her interest in pigment making, miniature paintings and many other forms of traditional Indian paintings. From there we find that in the 1980s she received a fellowship from the government of India and for her own interest she went out to a Nathdwara and parts of Rajasthan to study a certain kind of practices, and one of them was definitely the pichwai making practice. So pichwai we see that here Nillima Sheikh had done this drawing. This comes from 1980s after her studies (I mean after her research on the pichwais). We see that she had captured the essential compositional elements in a pichwai. The pichwais are mostly are the clothes which are hung in the back of the deities or sometimes when the deities are not present in form of an idol or an icon then the pichwais are displayed for the devotees to appreciate or continue the veneration of the deities. So, the pichwais in Nathdwara we find them to be specifically made for Srinathji or the Vaishnavite deities.



In this case, we see that here there is this place that is reserved for this form of Krishna who is playing the flute, and then the other forms of, like, landscape we find it to be there. Here we see a depiction of Raslila, here as well and then there is this forest landscape that is situated here, and in the foreground, we find this suggestion of buildings

and architecture that sort of marks this area differently from this forest landscape. Now, on top of this panel, we find this prominent moon, which also marks the full moon night of Ras. Then we also have, like, the deities who are represented in this on the vimanas who are floating in the sky, and perhaps, like, I mean, evidencing this divine act of Lord Krishna. So, when we see this, we see that Nillima Sheikh was interested in this kind of textile hanging. So, pitchwais are made on cotton fabric, and then on top of that, pigment colour is used on the textile for drawing them. Since they are used as hanging and not really something that would be stuck to the wall, that is the reason the flow of this kind of textiles and the utility of this kind of textiles are something that we find that Nillima Sheikh had studied from very early times. In the 1980s, in the left image that we have, it is a photograph by Nillima Sheikh, and in this one, we find that she had photographed a theatre production at the Kasauli Art Centre in 1989. Kasauli Art Centre was also a very significant art centre where we find a number of artists from India involved, like Vivan Sundaram and Geeta Kapur (art historian). Then, many of the artists today we find, including Alex Mathew and many other people all of them they have all been at the Kasauli Art Centre for residency programs and so on. Nillima Sheikh is also someone we find at the Kasauli Art Centre, and as part of these art activities, we find that she was also someone who was invested in the theatrical productions. So, the theatricality, the use of costume, the use of textile and everything else is also something we find that to be sort of incorporated when she does her own paintings.

Now this idea about the hanging, about the pitchwai hanging, is something significant because when we see this kind of hanging here, we find that from the 1980s, as she started studying the pitchwai hangings in Rajasthan. The study was perhaps not limited to only this area, but then the idea was also expanded. We also find that this kind of hanging can also be related to a particular kind of thangkas, which are displayed in the Himalayan region. Since this work is about the memories and histories of Kashmir we find that some of the Buddhist thangkas which are found in the Himalayan monasteries, the Buddhist monasteries are something that is almost like brought back into the gallery sphere and how the thangkas are displayed during particular occasions as part of a performance or part of carrying out a particular activity is also sort of enlivened when these narratives by

Nilima Sheikh are sort of brought to life through her paintings. So this way we find that it's not just the textile hanging that she sort of studied and incorporated in her works. Still, it is also the performance aspect of it, or the theatricality of it and that is the reason we find that how her works are something that needs to be seen from different viewpoints and it's not just from one strict viewpoint that the works need to be seen and appreciated. So in all those ways we find that her research on the textiles and pigments and of course like I mean how this kind of theatrical performance her interest in them all of them they are amalgamated in the complex work she does. Her works we find that it also responds to the minute characters of materials. So, she had spoken in depth about the different kind of pigments she uses, the places from which she collects the pigments. Still, then she has also spoken about paper in depth that from 1980s when she started her work she had explored different kind of handmade papers and also the Khadi papers that we find that how she had sort of brought in. The Khadi is something we have already discussed in the earlier modules how Khadi has been significant in terms of the production of this anti-colonial fabric in India, and then how the rugs and the waste of the fabric and everything else, and then also like I mean using of the indigenous method of making paper is something all of those activities are brought together in the Khadi production units. So Nilima Sheikh had looked minutely into the characters of this Khadi papers as well and then also like I mean the different kind of husk papers like rice husk paper, bamboo husk paper and so on making of the Wasli paper which was prevalent in making the miniature paintings but then ultimately displaying them as those textile hangings.



Now if we see that there is another reference to textile that also comes up strongly in Nillima Sheikh's work and that is to encompass an entire space. So if we see this area and this is a display that comes from this exhibition that is called *Terrain: carrying a cross living behind* and that took place in 2017 at the Chemould Art Gallery, Mumbai. Here we find this octagonal space is created by arranging these panels again this hanging like panels in a particular manner. In this case we find that they operate almost as screens. The screens we see that that becomes almost part of an interior architectural form and then it sorts of encompasses the viewer but it also sorts of like shelters someone or guards someone. So we see that the screens either they are made from textile or bamboo or something else. The way they are used in the interior settings we see that I mean this is about perhaps guarding a particular space from the other sides. This is this idea we find that to be also incorporated in Nillima Sheikh's exploration in which we see in this particular set of work (in this eight panels) Nillima Sheikh had looked into certain kind of narratives around again folk tales and issues around gender and then of course that I mean the kind of atrocities that happen against women and then of course that I mean there are many shared narratives that we find they are also made part of these panels. So Nillima Sheikh not only paints on these panels but also uses text extensively. So it kind of reminds us of those manuscript paintings or the miniature paintings in which text and images come together simultaneously. But then the way they are displayed, that goes

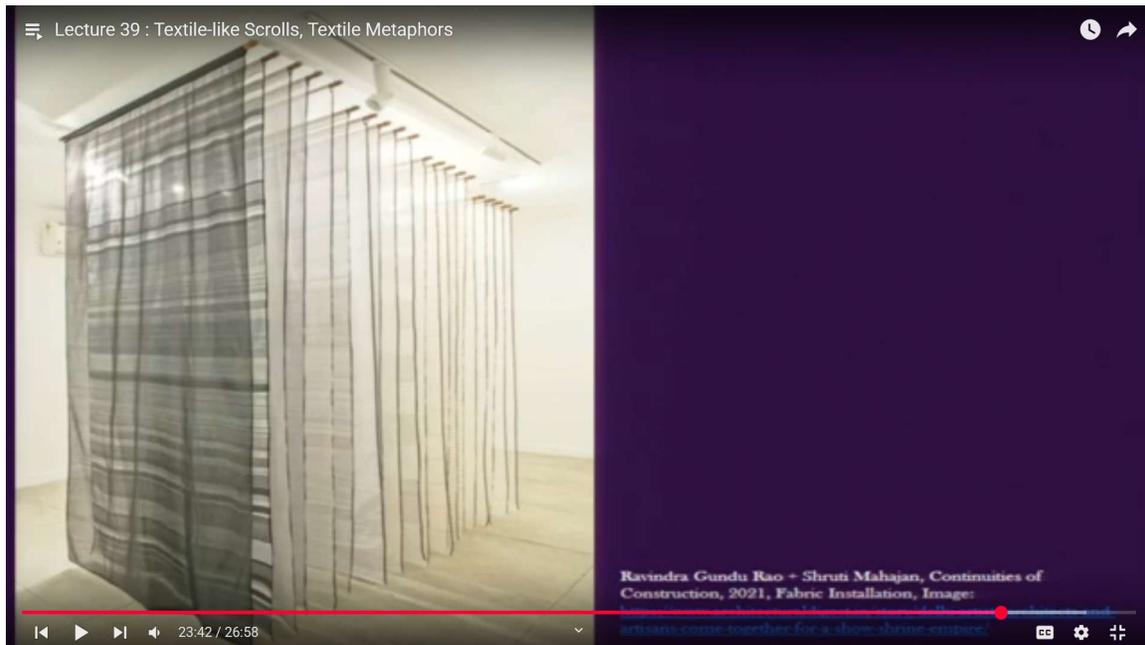
back to either furnishing or the textile panels that we use. So, this is the kind of overlapping or this is the kind of in-betweenness that we find in Nillima Sheikh's practice. In there, we also see how the colours, or perhaps also like I mean, this idea of the tent as something that encompasses us, is something that has its root in her exposure to the theatrical productions. In the 1990s, we also find that she had experimented with her display strategy in which tent-like forms were erected, and then her works were displayed in that premise. So here we find that even though there is nothing that covers the top of this particular work, the way it takes the viewer into its fold is a way again that reminds us about the presence of tents, a strong presence of tents. So, this is how we find that the textile metaphors are brought in different kinds of references about textiles in Nillima Sheikh's work, not only for the thematic exploration but also for the interactivity of these works.



For Shruti Mahajan, what we find is that the textile, architecture and ... the way textiles are made, all those ideas come together. Shruti Mahajan is a contemporary artist who has studied both at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda and at the National School of Design. So, for that reason what we see that she had observed the knowledge of both these areas. On one hand, we find this fine so-called fine art institution, and on the other

hand, we find this design institution. And as I have mentioned earlier, this distinction, at least in the field of academic experience, is pronounced by the kind of curriculum that is propagated and continued in these institutions. Also, the kind of training which is provided to the students in these institutions. But then for Shruti Mahajan, what happens is that she had studied in both these institutions, and thus the reason we find that her approach towards utilising textile, her approach towards looking at architecture, or looking at art making, all these things are kind of again in between. Of course, she produces works which are meant to be displayed in the gallery space in this sphere of contemporary art. But then we cannot really consider it, as it does not acknowledge the utilitarian aspects of textile making or the architectural forms that we study. So, we find both these aspects to be much more synchronised in Shruti Mahajan's practice. Now, among the many different sets of work that she has been producing for years, I wanted to discuss these two particular works here. One is called *Bracket*, and these are a very recent set of her drawings. We find that it is her revisit of the Ahilya fort in Maheshwar in Madhya Pradesh. So, during her studies, she stayed in the Ahilya Vaada in Maheshwar in the fort during her internship. She had closely observed this interrelation between the architecture of the Vaada and the brackets that ... support the roof. But at the same time, how these wooden bracket structures are related to the loom structures, and Maheshwar is also known for fine centre of silk weaving. So, for that reason, we find that this structure of the bracket is something that comes between the bar and the column, so the bracket sort of connects this two elements one is horizontal and one is vertical. The bracket is something that is diagonal and that sort of makes the connection between these two aspects. So that is the reason we find that when she focuses on bracket it is not just an architectural element that she looks at but she also closely thinks about that how this is a joinery and that can be related to the loom structures which are very much prevalent there in the Ahilya fort in the same premise where weavers also function and the silk weaving continues there. So, on one hand, we find that the architecture, weaving all those things, is connected there through these brackets. Then on the other hand, we find that her exposure to the steps of the ghat, which goes to the river Narmada, is also something that is reflected in her exploration of this interrelation between architecture and loom structure and everything else. Now this discussion also brings us back to our initial discussion on

the relationship between architecture and textile which came up in Zemper's theorisation and perhaps this is a concluding part for our discussion here when we find that how in the artistic interventions this kind of interrelation between architecture, textile and loom structure is something that is coming up again and again.



In this work, which was again displayed in 2021, it was part of this exhibition project, which is called *Spatial Dialogues*. We find that it was a collaborative project between Shruti Mahajan and Ravindra Gundurao, who is an architectural conservation architect. We find that certain kinds of architectural patterns that we see, certain kinds of lines or stripes that we observe when the steps of the Vaada are sort of observed, then certain kinds of waves that one observes in the river. So, all those lines and stripes are then closely studied and communicated to the weavers on the site. This is how this set of textiles was developed. We see this set of diaphanous textiles now here (these are on display in the Shrine Empire Gallery of New Delhi). Here [in these textiles] we find how the stripe lines, instead of being made in a regular interval, we find that the interval between different kinds of stripes is being experimented with. Everything where we find that the distance between the lines, the density between different kinds of lines, the depth and everything that changes perhaps it's a way of passing of time or also like we see how

the waves they change, also we see that how the steps are there and then there is a landing again there are steps. So in this way in which we see how the collaboration actually took place that the conservation architect their knowledge about architecture and then Shruti Mahajan's long standing study of this particular site and being rooted in Maheshwar and then of course her communication and collaboration with the weavers on site all of those issues they come up closely in this exploration of this textile, this set of textiles which were produced and they were displayed. So, this is how we find that architecture, loom mechanism, making of a woven textile, all those things come together in Shruti Mahajan's work. Whereas in Nilima Sheikh's work we find how the textile metaphors make different kinds of references to the textile that come together. By this, we find in both cases how the idea of textile is something that has been expanded beyond its material limitation. The idea of textile and its relationship to text, architecture and our experiences is something that is celebrated in these two artists' work. Thank you.