

Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices
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Week – 08
Lecture – 40

Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta and we are here in the final installment of our discussion on textile and contemporary arts in India.



So, in this lecture we will be talking about contemporary dyed textiles. So, when I say dyed textile that means, that those are dyed, painted, printed and not usually resist dyed, but also like I mean those aspects which are incorporated in Kalamkari making. So, this is the dyed textile we will be talking about. This contemporary dyed textile by Mallipuddu Kailasham and then Ajit Das. So, these two artists will be looking at or perhaps we can call them artisans, painters. So, we keep this discussion open for all to sort of reflect on these issues. So, these two figures that we will be looking at are Mallipuddu Kailasham and Ajit Das, and we will be seeing their works in terms of how we situate them. Because it is not really always very easy to sort of situate this kind of work when we have so many distinctions. As I have mentioned in the earlier lecture as well, how there are certain kinds of study material, there are certain kinds of approaches

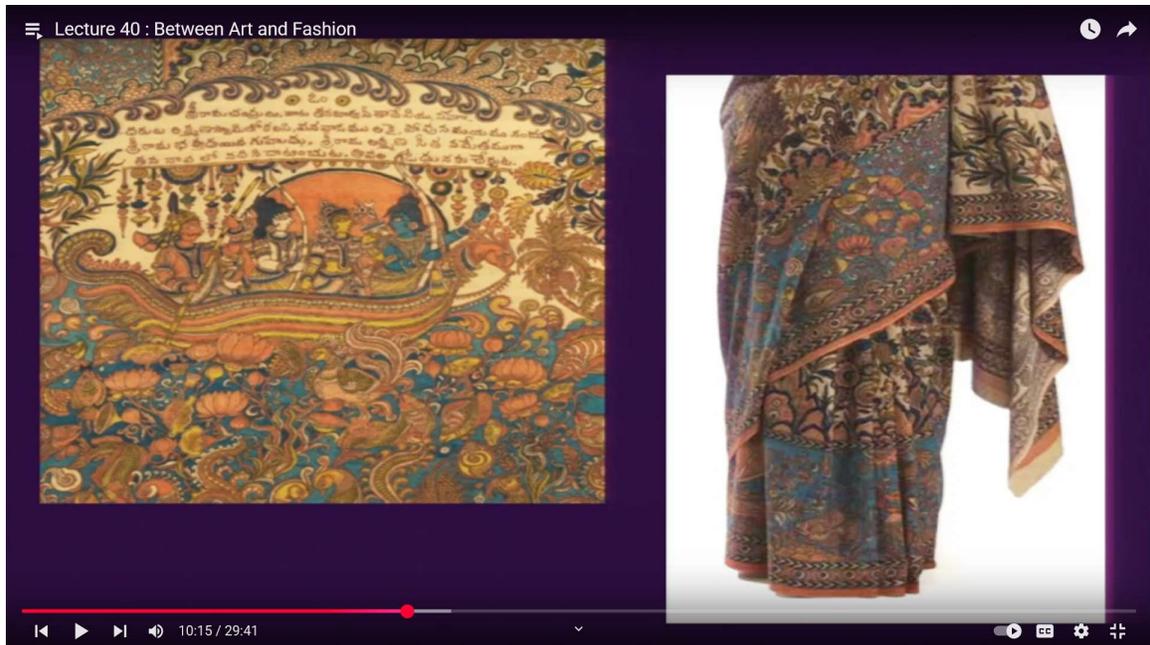
which are prioritised in the fine art institution, and that might be different if the institution is a design institute. We have also looked into how people like Shruti Mahajan have looked into the interrelation between these two sets of studies and tried to incorporate knowledge from both these areas and experiment with them in her own way in her practice.

What happens in Mallipuddu Kailasham's practice? So, Kailasham is a Kalamkari painter who was born in Shrikalahasti. He had his initial training in Shrikalahasti and one of the people from whom he had received the training was Aythur Muni Krishnan. Here what we find that after his initial studies or I should not call it studies but after his initial training in Shrikalahasti, he moved to Hyderabad to work with the weaver service center in Hyderabad and there he started working as a Kalamkari painter, as a Kalamkari artist. During that time it was not really a contractual job or not even a permanent position and he started working in terms of like on the basis of the pieces he would produce. He settled in the southern suburb of Hyderabad, and there it was very close to the river Musi or Muchukunda. The river water, initially in the 1980s and 1990s, was utilised by him for washing the fabric. As I have mentioned that Kalamkari making is highly dependent on the kind of water that we receive in particular areas. Then, after the 1990s, we find the river became highly polluted. I mean it was already polluted, but after the 1990s, it became highly polluted, so that the water could not be used for washing anymore. So, he had made his own arrangement, and he is still now situated in this southern suburb of Hyderabad, and it is very close to the Golconda fort, and he has been continuing his work as a Kalamkari painter. So, we see that he has been making hangings and some of those hangings were commissioned by Suraiya Hassan, the textile entrepreneur and activist we have already spoken about. He had also sent this large scale hanging for the Vishwakarma exhibitions in the 1980s. So, we see that he already had the exposure for working on hangings, and then when he worked at the waiver service centre, we see that he had also started working on utilitarian fabric. So, for example, we find that the saris, scarves and different kind of other textiles he had also incorporated as part of his practice. Here on screen we have a particular sari that we are going to sort of talk about as part of our discussion today and that is called the Sitamma Sari. Sitamma means Sita Janaki, and

Amma is the suffix that is added to Sita to call her mother Sita. This is a kind of sari which Kailasham first observed in one of his colleagues' work, and that is Reddayya in the Weaver Service Centre in Hyderabad. He had this wish of making this sari for a long time, and when he was commissioned by the Royal Ontario Museum in 2017-2018, he decided to make a sari which would be dedicated to the goddess Sita. So, the Sitamma Sari came out of this process. Here in the right side of the screen we find that Kailasham himself is holding this sari and this is still in the process of making and we find that I mean how he is holding the sari to be photographed and to be sent to the funding agent for sort of like I mean to update them about the progress of this work. We will be looking at the different aspects of this sari, the different components, and what is involved in it. Now let's go back to the image on the left side. So, on the left side, we see that the sari has been put on a mannequin, and this is how the sari looks when it is draped on the body. So even though this is a sari, we can also think about the compositional arrangement, and whether this is only meant to be worn in this particular way, or it can also be displayed like a large hanging. In this case, what happens is that we find that the sari, which was Kailasham's, can be related to utilitarian fabric, which can also be related to the Kalamkari hangings. So, for example, when we see that the earlier works on Kalamkari or earlier works on textile that Kailasham had successfully sort of finished or completed for the Vishwakarma exhibitions and later on, we see certain kinds of compositional arrangements that are followed. Do you remember our earlier discussion on the Kalamkari hangings? In that case, we find that there are those rectangular hangings in which there are those horizontal registers, and there will be a central panel in which the deity or the central figure is shown. In this horizontal register, there are many narratives which are sort of continued, usually from left to right, sometimes right to left, as well, and then there are associated text panels which will run simultaneously with the images and the text, and the images will sort of complement each other. So, this is how we find how the text panel, the visual panels all of them they are incorporated in the hanging making. Now what Kailasham did in the Sitamma sari was following partly this hanging making technique and we can see that how that was perhaps like I mean actualized in a slightly different manner in the pallu of this textile where we see this large pallu where there is marine life or like underwater lives there and on the top of that we

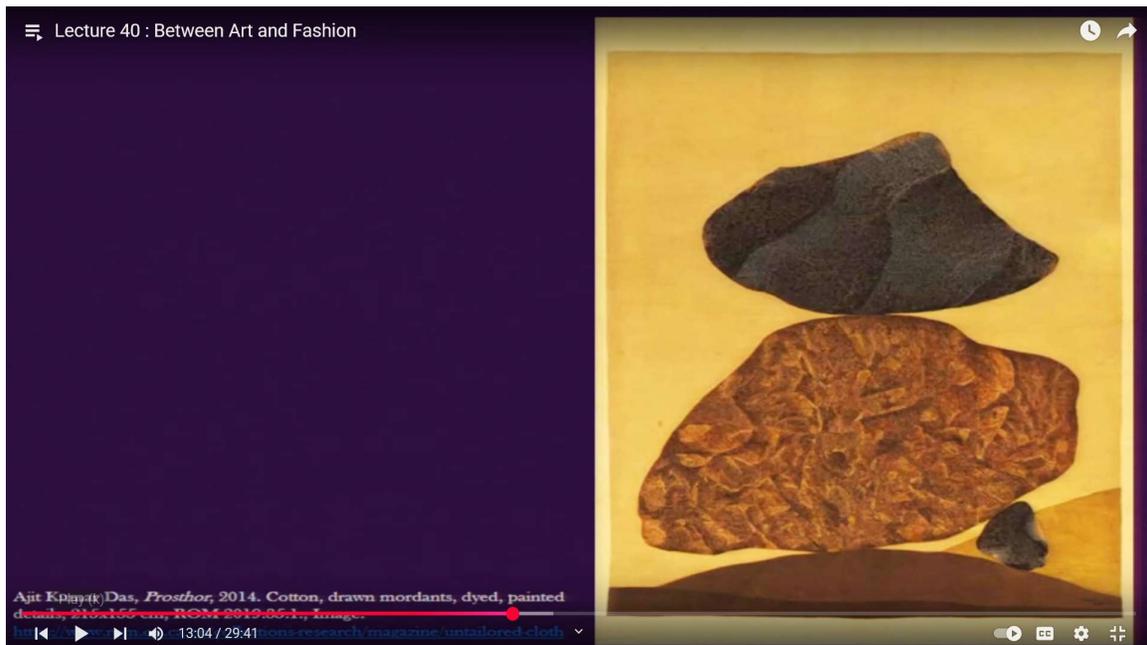
find there is a boat and the boat is carrying Rama, Lakshmana and Sita with the boat man and then there is a suggestion of a forest landscape and in the center there is an inscription and that sort of like I mean sort of attest that this is a scene that is taken from Ramayana. So, these are the kind of elements we find which can be related to the making of a hanging or the traditional Kalamkari hangings in which Kailasham is trained.

Now then, if you look into the other part of the Sari, the entire body of the Sari is also richly painted. Of course, this is the dye painting for which it is washed several times and mordanted and then painted. ... what we find is that there is this broad border in this Sari, and the broad border is actually the river. This river sort of continues from one end to the other end of the Sari, it is almost like the connecting thread which sort of connects the different elements in the Sari together. Then on the top of the river we find there is suggestion of this Deccani rock formation perhaps to show the forest landscape and then there are different kind of animals and birds which would also attest to the forest landscape there. So, in this case and during an interview also Kailasham had spoken about his interest to depict the river and then all the fishes and different kind of creatures in the river. So even though this Sari is called Sitamma Sari and then he also establishes its relationship to Ramayana in the pallu when he sort of incorporates this Telugu inscription and also like I mean the figures of Ramayana here but then his interest also equally was invested in making this Sari and sort of like I mean as a forest landscape in which half of the Sari almost half of the Sari which is dominated by the border like if you think about the width of the Sari half of it is dominated by the border and the border is the river and on the top of that we have the forest. So, it is beyond the understanding of a hanging. So, it also sort of makes us think about his individuality, which is something that he had been practising his craft form with.



If we sort of like I mean again look into the comparison between these two areas in which in one hand we have the pallu in which we have the depiction of this particular event in Ramayana (it was the early phase of Rama's banishment to the forest) and they crosses the river Ganga. So this scene in which we see that the crossing of Ganga was a very significant part, because that would be the start of the Vanaparva. So, this is something we find that how this particular moment from Ramayana was sort of incorporated in this Sari in this narrative. But then it was not just about the sticking to the narrative version of it or sticking to the textual depiction of this scene but it was more about imagining the forest and the forest through which the forest and the river and the kind of the landscape in which Rama, Sita and Lakshmana that they inhabited during this point in time. So for that reason we find that it was not just the idea of making a Sari or a piece of textile to be religious (as the religious undertone or like reference from the Hindu epics is there), but at the same time we find that he had taken the creative liberty in terms of understanding that what he wanted to do in the entire Sari and that is to sort of visualize the river and the forest. For that reason we find that his work is somewhere in between making a hanging and making a utilitarian Sari. He had been also making Sari's for different clients, but then this kind of Sari is perhaps unique for him. Because the kind of Sari's which are usually commissioned ... incorporate floral motifs or geometric motifs or the kind of creeper motifs which would not have any specific kind of a narrative reference. So here

we find that his background of working on the Kalamkari hangings and his experience of working on utilitarian fabrics all those things and then of course that the reference from Reddayya and all those different aspects are brought together in this Sitamma Sari. That's the reason when we look at the Sari either as a form of a hanging or a form of a Sari we find that it cannot be categorized either as an artwork or as a utilitarian Sari but it is somewhere in between. It can be utilized in both ways depending on which context it is in.

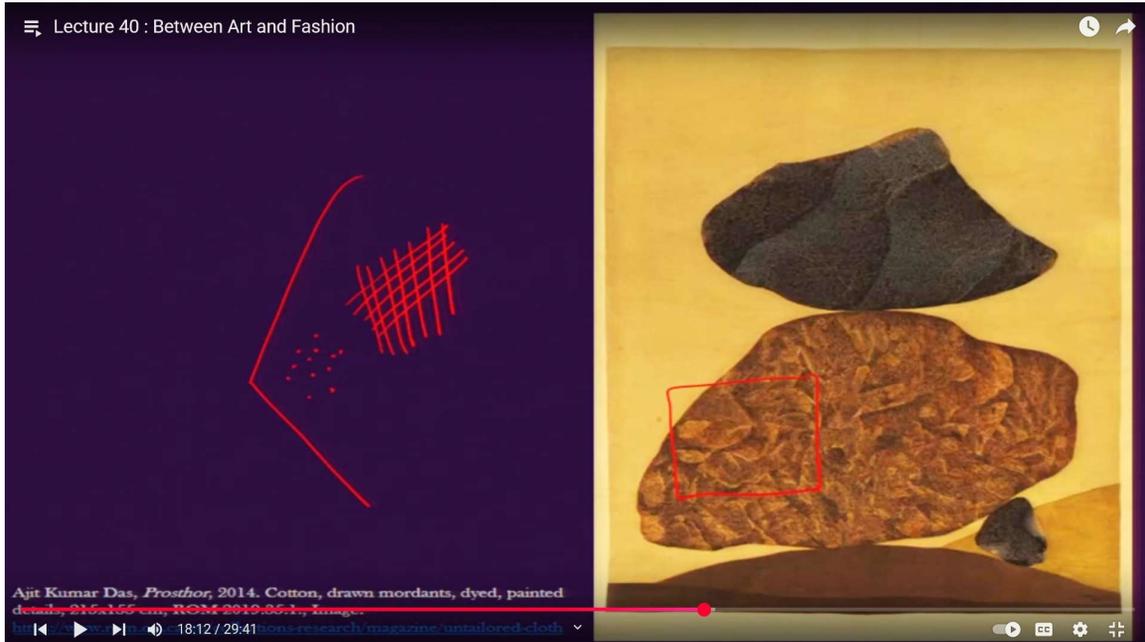


The other form of the other part of our discussion will be looking into Kalamkari artist Ajit Das's work. Ajit Das is an artist who is presently based in the northern suburb of Kolkata, and he came from the northeastern state of Tripura. He had his exposure to work again with the Weaver Service centres. When I say weaver service centers it's not just one center but we see that he started working with the weaver service center in Kolkata and then eventually he moved to Jaipur to Ahmedabad and then he also traveled to south to Srikalahasti, to Hyderabad and so on. For that reason, we find that his deep interest in working with dyes, working with this Kalamkari technique, was something that started from Kolkata, but then the sedimented knowledge that he has today was sort of collected from these different weaver service centres. In this way, we can also see how governmental enterprises like the Weaver Service centre were crucial for shaping this

artist. So it is not just the fine art institutions or the design institutions we can think about that they produce the artist or the designers. But in this case we find that how this organization, I mean this governmental body that is the weaver service center is something that the kind of exposure it gives to the employees (or perhaps the employees who are ready to sort of utilize the kind of exposure those are given to them) that can also effectively benefit the art practice or like any kind of practices that the employees do. So Ajit Das has worked as an employee of the weaver service centre for an extended period of time, and then in the last 20 years, he has refrained from working there, and then he started his own individual practice in his own studio in the northern suburb of Kolkata.

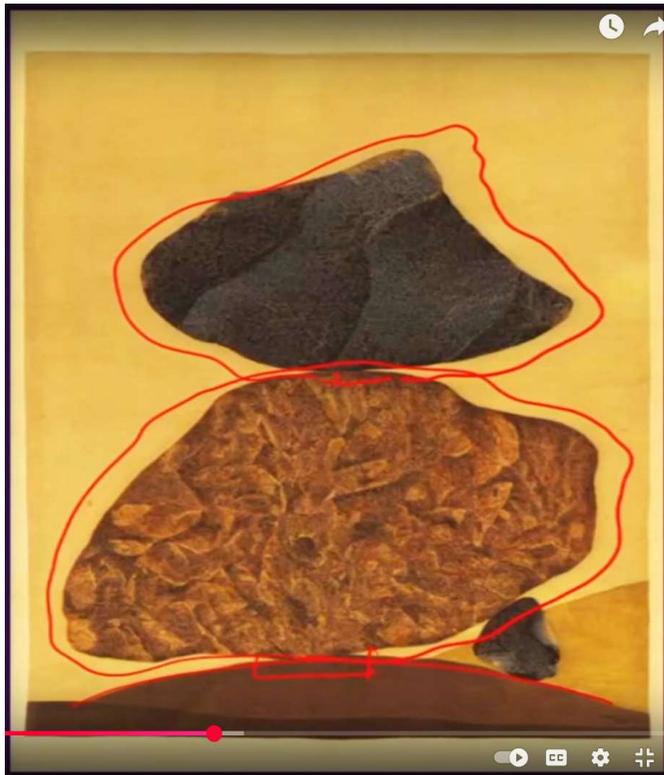
So what we see in Ajit Das's practice, if we start the discussion about this, the hangings that he had produced, so he had also seen the hangings which were made during the Vishwakarma exhibitions. Then he had also interacted with Martand Singh, who is also popularly known as Mapu, and then also some of the other people like Rajeev Sethi, and so on, and they have guided him to make a certain kind of work and then incorporate text or do different kinds of experimentations. So, the spirit of experimentation that I have already mentioned that was there prevalent in the Vishwakarma exhibition is something we find that to be there in Ajit Das's practice as well. So, what we find is that through all these different kinds of exposure, Ajit Das started doing these large-scale Kalamkari hangings. In these large-scale Kalamkari hangings, we find that he had experimented with a lot of different kinds of visual languages. In some of them, we find that he had used the traditional Kalam (this bamboo pen) and then dipped the Kalam in the black solution, drawn with it on the fabric surface, and then mordanted it, dyed it, and the process continued. In some of the other works, we find that he had also used a brush. Brush is something that is not usually used in the Kalamkari technique, and he had used a brush for outlining the forms that are there in his works. But then he had also used different kinds of brushes, for example, his exposure to the art school students, and of course, exposure to the education that is provided in the art schools like Santiniketan and the art schools in Kolkata. We find that he had also used the hog hair brushes, which are usually used in oil painting. Those are the rough kind of brushes we find, and those are definitely not used in Kalamkari making. For those reasons, what happens to the hog

hair brushes if one uses the dry brush technique, in which only a minimal amount of dye is just like I mean, sort of added to the bristles, and then those are ... sort of stippled or painted on the top of the fabric surface, they create different kinds of textures. So, the surface texture is something that we find that Ajit Das's work sort of specialises in. Now, if we think about it that the kind of visual effects in Kalamkari making we can see those



are mostly linear and in ... other cases we can find this stippling or dots that can also come and then in terms of making the modulation we find that the hatch lines are also something that is incorporated. Now in this case what we see in Ajit Das's work that this is not the hatch line that makes this kind of tonal variation but it is the dry brushes which makes this tonal variation much more smoother and they become much more kind of photorealistic. So, these are the different kind of interventions we find that Ajit Das started doing with the spirit of experimentation perhaps which was infused during the Vishwakarma exhibition in 1980s. So, this work that we have on screen it is called *Prosthor* or a stone. So, this work is this gigantic hanging which we find and this is again it shows the Deccan plateau and this Deccan plateau one of the characteristics of this big rock formations we find this strange or surprising balancing act. We find in the plateau like landscape there are rocks which are standing perhaps for thousands of years which

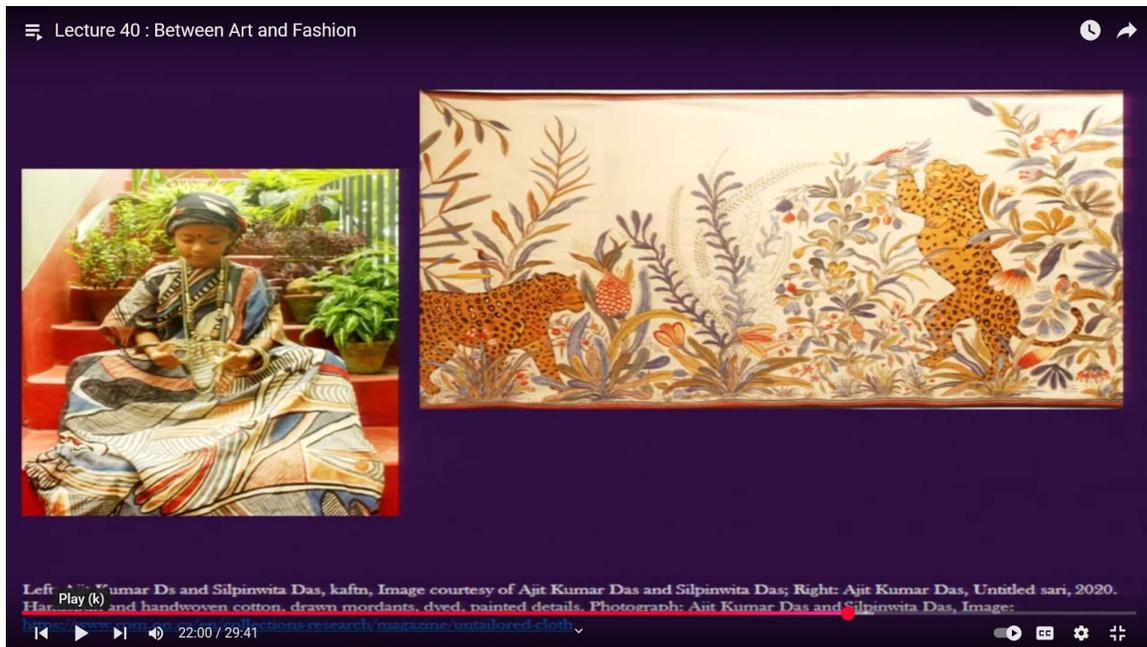
are standing only in a place which almost looks impossible for making a balance. We find that I mean even here that I mean only a small fraction of the stone that touches the plateau landscape and still it somehow like I mean somewhere or other it makes the balance to stand there in the same position for thousands of years. On the top of that we



also have another stone which is slightly inclined towards right but then still it's sort of like stands on the top of this stone. This kind of rock formations and the assemblage of different kind of rocks is something that is fairly commonly found in the Deccan plateau. Here we find there is this another small rock which is almost like I mean supporting this entire rock formation. So this different kind of rock formations we find in this image is something we can understand in terms of that his

amazement of looking at this rock formations and he had recalled during an interview how his travel in the Madhya Pradesh from Bhopal in a small station how he looked at this rock formations and something that reminded him of the balancing act between his responsibility for the family as well as for his career during his early days. So, this is something we can find that how looking at particular landscape motifs and then also thinking about the experiential aspects of the artist and then executing that through different kind of techniques that he had learnt over the years is something that stays somewhere between observation, experience, history, memory and recollection. So, this is how we see that Ajit Das's work especially this work or like I mean these set of works which are all called *Prosthor* or stone. So, these works they sort of talk about the balancing act between remembrance, forgetting, then memory, history and then our personal responsibilities and our ambitions, aspirations and so on. And there is this

strange calmness that we find in these works. There is a sense of stability in this work but also the eeriness that we find because of, like I mean this the gigantic size of these rocks and only how they are balancing they are managing to stay put on this particular area. So, these are the different kind of contrasting as well as like I mean coexisting elements we find in Ajit's practice.



Now, the other set of work that we find by Ajit Das is also a number of commissioned textiles or the kind of utilitarian textile. So Ajit Das also functions in the sphere where we find that he is comfortable, equally comfortable to make this kind of hanging, this large-scale hanging, which are meant to be displayed and not used. But then at the same time, he also engages in making utilitarian kind of textiles because of his long-standing exposure to making utilitarian textiles in the weaver service centre, as well as his own interest in making them. So, in recent years, we find that Ajit Das and his daughter Silpinwita Das. So, both of them started making scarves of different kinds of this untailored piece of fabric, in which they started drawing with brushes, different kinds of brushes. Some are with the thick bristles, and somewhere we also find that the flat areas of colour, in some places we find hatched lines and so on. So, all these different kinds of lines and colour fields and then like I mean, the treatment of the brushes, all those things are then incorporated in making these scarves. And the scarves we find that they are

dominated by geometric shapes, and then like I mean, the balance between different kinds of natural colours. Son, this is something we find to be very different from the hangings that he had done. And for making this kind of textiles the process that goes and what they did was that initially ... both of them like Ajit Das and Silpinwita Das both of them they started their experiments with the scarves, but then they moved on to making kaftans. And for making kaftan what happens is there are two untailed pieces of fabric then they are sort of stitched together for making the kaftan. In this case, what happens is that they are stitched first to see where it would appear in the wearer's body, then they are unstitched, and then the modern painting, dyeing, and everything takes place, and then they are stitched back. So, this is how like I mean this kaftans are produced in Ajit's and Silpinwita Das studio. Then another piece of textile that we have in the right side of the screen and in this case ... it's a commissioned saree. In which we find that there are tigers and it was one of the demands that tiger needs to be incorporated in this commission saree. And in this case what we see that again the language of executing the visual is very different / drastically different from the language that is incorporated in making the stones or executing this kaftan or the scarves. So, this says something that his visual language is something that is not really dependent on a particular style, but perhaps it is dependent on the context. Instead of thinking that there needs to be a uniform visual language that can be carried out in all these works we can think about the kind of brushes, the kind of color scheme, the natural dyes that he uses those to be the connecting thread between all these practices. Perhaps the most importantly we can also think about the spirit of experimentation which did not really restrict him to stick to a particular way of execution but to experiment with all these different ways of visual exploration with the same ease. This is something that we can understand in terms of his aspiration or his role as an artist.

So those are the reasons that make us think about that I mean how we understand the works by the people who are not the metropolitan contemporary artist they are not the designers but they perhaps come from the artisanal background but still we can see that how their practice is something that make us question about this flawed boundaries between the fine art, then design, and then craft. But then they sort of pushes this

boundary and make us think about new ways of looking at the textile and perhaps the flexibility of textile, perhaps the kind of ground for experimentation the textile give for both these artist is something we can also think about that why this two artists are still in the textile field and they are able to execute this works with this high spirit of experimentation.



So, to conclude our session, I would say that I mean in terms of understanding textile and contemporary art in the context of India, we see that there are different kinds of border crossings that take place. We can think in terms of how textile making is incorporated or utilised in certain kinds of artistic projects. For example, the one on the left side of the screen, in which we found that Nalini Malani and Iftikhar Dadi had collaborated, and this work was executed, this sequence or chamki work was executed by the artisans in Karachi. How this particular way of making glittery textiles is something that we see in terms of the South Asian identity is incorporated here. That sort of made us think about the borderline, the bloodline that either separates or connects the different countries in South Asia (that is, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan). From there, the other aspect we have looked into is to think about how textile and some of the knowledges that ... are embedded in textile is also then transferred to other media, for example, on paper. For example, how we looked into Shruti Mahajan's practice in which we see that the architectural elements, the loom mechanism and making of weaving all those things they

come together in form of this integrated way of knowledge production. At the end we have also looked into the idea of tradition and the uniqueness that is embedded in the tradition perhaps and that is the reason how the artisans or the artist or the painters (whatever we call them) that who come from these traditional backgrounds they are also able to sort of practice their unique way of execution. Also, able to practice the kind of exploration they want to sort of execute on these textiles. So, these are the different ways in which we find what textile enables practitioners to carry out. That is perhaps one of the strongest reasons for what we see that textiles cannot be termed only as one particular framework to sort of understand its possibilities and how it affects the life of the wearers, the artists, the painters, as well as the people who study them or appreciate them. Thank you.