

Threads of Visual Exploration: Textiles and Allied Practices

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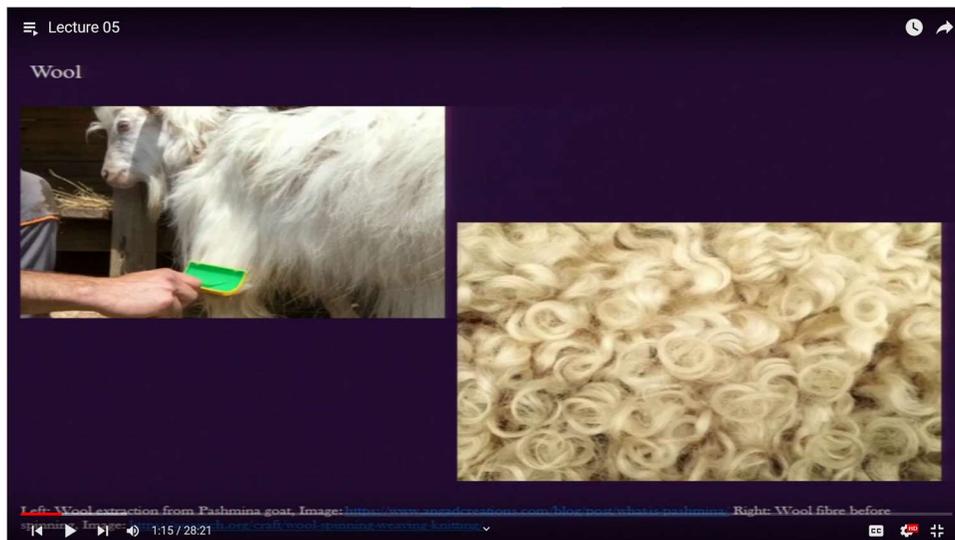
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Week - 01

Lecture – 05

Hello everyone, this is Rajarshi Sengupta, and we are at the last instalment of our Week one. So, in this lecture, we will be talking first about the wool, and that is like one of the fibres that we have discussed or, like I mean, addressed in as part of this week's lecture. And then, we will get into the details of the visual exploration and, why our theory and this kind of studies can go hand in hand? What is the importance of it? So, let's look at the characteristics of wool first and then we will move on to the next segment of this lecture.

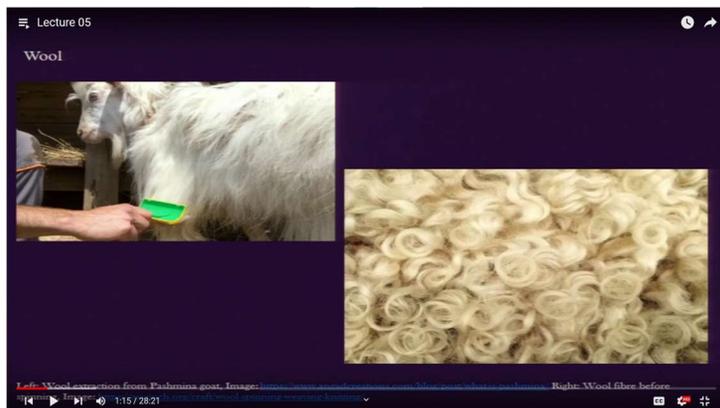


So, wool is something that we find that it's another fibre that is another protein-based fibre that is extracted from animals and in this case, what do we find? I mean wool is usually we find it very soft, very supple and then like I mean it also has a natural crimp in it. So, like I mean kind of like I mean how we find that the fibres are not really always uniform, but it kind of like I mean for the crimp it's sort of like I mean also we find that the fibres they sort of cling with each other together and that sort of I mean gives it a stability or like I mean it also adds to its strength. So, that is one of the characteristics we find to be present in wool fibre which was perhaps not the same way possible in cotton or in silk.

Now what all we also find that how for this kind of characteristics we find that I mean the wool fibre is usually much more resilient. And that's the reason we find thatI mean it is not really very prone to wrinkles, and it's sort of like I mean even after washing or like I mean getting drenched in rain and so on. It's sort of like I mean comes back to its initial form after it is dried. So, it has this kind of like I mean resistance power that is inbuilt in its fibres. So, this is one of the things we find, but we also find that I mean wool has insulating properties in it and that's the reason it is also useful for keeping the body temperature sort of in a stable condition. And that is one of the reasons we find that I mean when there are chances of temperature fluctuations like I mean if the temperature drops or the temperature suddenly rises..... So, for those times we find that wool is something that is preferred for protecting ourselves.

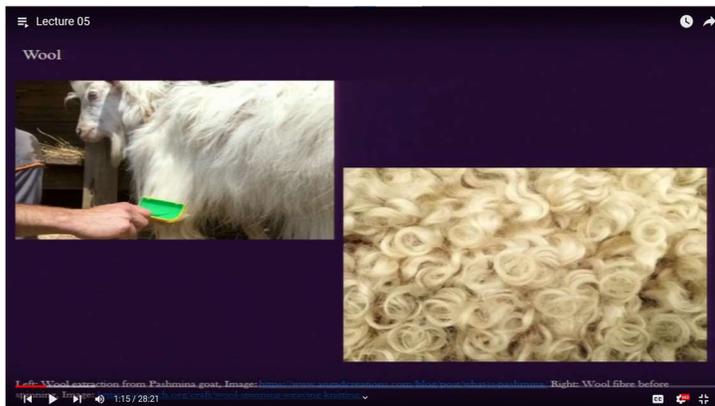
So, wool is also something we find that is made from various you know from the fibres, the body hair from like I mean various different animals that can be goat, can be sheep, can be alpaca and so on. Like I mean alpaca is not something that is found in the Indian subcontinent. However, like I mean we can see that I mean how goat, sheep and then like I mean there are varieties and then of course like rabbits and so on, all of their hair, the body hair is used for making wool.

So, on the left side of the screen, we have an image of the Pashmina goat and that is found in the Kashmir region in the Himalayan and Karakoram ranges. And there we find that how this Pashmina goats are then sort of like I mean, allowed to grow their body hair and during one season of the year we find that how these body hairs are then extracted. And this is actually in the process of extracting the body hair by sort of combing it. And that is how like I mean most of these fibres they are sort of like I mean taken out and then made into yarn and then of course woven into this



very expensive Pashmina shawls. Now the story does not end there like even during like I mean the extraction of the fibre we find that there are different kinds of fibre. The way we think about like, I mean the cocoon of the silkworms, in which we have the outer layer of the cocoon which would go for the raw silk and then the inner layer would produce like much more finer silk. So, similarly, we also find that I mean there are different kinds of fibre which are there in the body of the Pashmina goat. And only the most supple, the soft, the most softest of the fibres are then sort of like I mean sorted from the other fibres. And then they are used for making the yarn for Pashmina. So, usually, like I mean, the body hair that we find in the neck around this area is highly receptive to being made into this Pashmina yarn. So, these are some of the characteristics we also can see. I mean how even for fibre extraction, there are many different factors that need to be taken care of or that need to be considered. When we go through one of these processes and that is how like I mean the end product becomes super fine or else like I mean it cannot have that kind of quality. So, the stress on the material, the stress on this extracting technique and then the spinning technique cleaning technique and all these different things are very much required for us to have a holistic understanding of how wool is made into a fabric and textile.

So, and of course in the right side of the image we have like I mean the wool fibre which



is before made into the wool yarn and this one we also see like I mean the natural colour crimp is something that is not of like exemplified here in this image as well that makes us understand that I mean some of the characteristics we have

already spoken about that I mean how one fibre kind of like I mean clean with the other much more sort of like I mean as its inherent quality and that is how it kind of like I mean give strength to the woolen fibre also at the same time like I mean how it becomes resilient to wrinkling all those things we can sort of like I mean start connecting to this image that we have on screen here.

So, when we talk about wool we talk about a lot of different things and then perhaps like I mean one of the issues would be there in terms of that I mean what are the regions in which wool is extracted and then made use of. And we find definitely in the Himalayan regions we have like I mean wool from the sheep and goat but also at the same time we have regions in Rajasthan, in Gujarat, in Kutch and then also in part of the Deccan, we have a lot of places where herds would be making use of the sheep wool for making different kinds of like I mean woollen fabrics.

So, one of I means just like cotton we also have different kinds of woollen fabric that is that we find it there something would be used by communities by like, I mean for day-to-day activities but then like I mean some of the other things which we will find that to be much more reserved for the royals or like I mean for very specific kind of uses.

So, on the left side of the screen, we have this Gongiri or like Nalla gorre Gongiri blanket



that is found in Telangana and that is made from sheep wool and Nalla gorre which means the black sheep and so the color that we see on this fabric. I mean in this Gongiri or this

blanket the black is not really dyed black but this is just the natural wool fibre that is extracted from the black goats. And so this is something that we find that this very simple kind of blanket which are then like I mean in the villages of Telangana and then like I mean this kind of blankets we will find that to be usually on the shoulders of the shepherds. I mean if the shepherds go out in the field and then like I mean for the entire day they will have this blanket with them; that they can sort of like I mean spread the blanket and sleep

on the top of it. But, also like I mean if they get caught in the rain this blanket can also be used for protecting them in this kind of condition. So, like a blanket can be used for different kind of purposes. My stress on this particular shepherd community and then like I mean their use of this Gongiri is to sort of remind us that not all woollen fabric is just made for not for the places which we usually associate with like I mean mountains and like the winter climate but it can also be used in much more harsher summer climates as well and they're equally useful. The other thing we also need to understand that how this kind of fabric or something that is that is this kind of wool since these are extracted locally and then like I mean of course there is no other dyeing or any other thing is involved in making this kind of fabric and that's the reason this can be used by people in the in the in the community setup. It is not expensive. I mean it is it can be sort of like I mean used and it is it is not just used but it is also incorporated in many different facets of the community life that we find. That there are certain kind of Gongiri which which we find that to be given to a family after their childbirth and then there are also certain kind of Gongiri which would be like I mean associated with different kind of important occasions in life. So, those different things we will find that to be integrally connected to this this particular you know blanket. Ao this these things are also reminders for us to see that how the local production and then like I mean this locally available knowledge and then like this means of making all of them they get connected to like this this community livelihood and so on. So, this is this is something that we find that how wool or any kind of fiber is not something that is just there for very specialized kind of textile making but but they're very much like I mean even if the they're made into very simple kind of cloth they still hold a lot of significance in the community in the community lives. If we go with the iconographic analysis of this kind of textiles that I mean we see that I mean the simplicity that is there the coarse nature of this kind of blanket and we might not find too much of like I mean visual information in it. However, when we sort of like I mean set it against the background of the community life, how like I mean what kind of material that is sourced for making this kind of blanket and then like I mean how it is produced? how it is used and all? then we can understand that why this kind of blanket might hold much significance for the people in Telangana also in part of Maharashtra and so on.

Now if this is one of the ways in which we spoke about wool and then like the locally produced woolen textiles then the other kind of the extreme end of it would be the very specialized means of woolen shawls and one of the shawl that we have here that is called the map shawl of Srinagar and this kind of pashmina shawl we find that to be produced quite a few or maybe not quite a few but several of them were produced in the 18th and 19th century and this one comes from the collection of Victoria and Albert Museum and in this one we find that the entire shawl is first woven and then like woolen threads are then used for making this meticulous embroidery on the top of it. We have the Jhelum river here we also have a view of the Dal lake here and then like all this crisscrossing interconnected canals and waterways that sort of connect the lake with the river and then also like I mean how all those things connect the other part, like the different sections of the city together and then of course they come in apart from the this waterways we also have like I mean the details of the houses, the different quarters, the architectural details, and everything else all being embroidered on the top of this shawl.

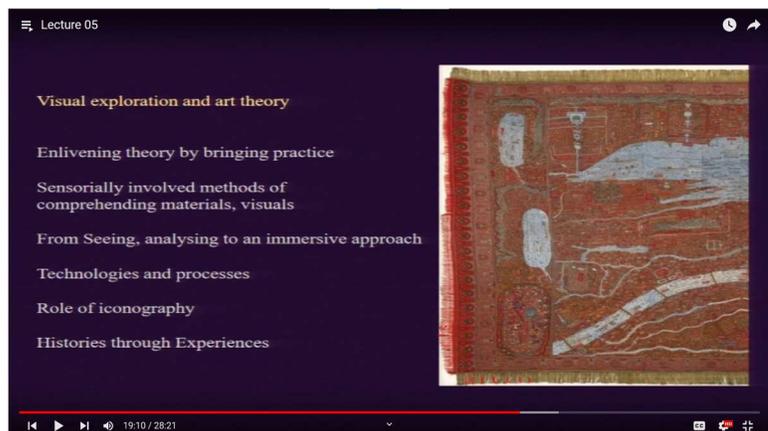
So, when this kind of shawls are produced we kind of like I mean have the confusion that whether this kind of shawls are actually meant to be worn or like I mean they are sort of they are part of like I mean, gift-giving. In which we see that I mean how even though they are primarily of utilitarian use but when they are gifted then to someone then like I mean they are meant to be sort of displayed or like I mean kept for special occasions. So, we see that I mean in this case definitely that this kind of a map shawl would not have much significance for the community who are perhaps like residing in the city of Srinagar or like part of Kashmir. Even though like I mean it visually shows the map of Srinagar but the thing is that I mean it does not really hold any kind of like I mean the significance... the cultural significance for the people who are there in perhaps like in the same locality. But, so this is one of the difference or like I mean perhaps in when we compare this two woolen blanket and shawl side by side then we see that I mean even when like I mean some of the visual descriptions or like I mean the visual information is absent still how the community can have like I mean much significant I mean how it can have much significance for the communities who are making them and who are using them. And with all the visual details the meticulous detail then we find that I mean it might not have much relevance for the

local communities but then it might become part of like I mean much more complex gift-giving traditions or like I mean how this kind of objects can be treasured by people not necessarily from the same locality but perhaps for much more larger political alliances.

So, with that we kind of like I mean conclude this session on the materials that I mean what all different kinds of material that we have looked at so we sort of looked into the geographical specificities of the Indian subcontinent and then also like the agricultural patterns and then like I mean how they affect the making of different kind of this natural fibers if we think about cotton, silk, wool and then like I mean starting from the technique of making this kind of fibers if we get in the details about like I mean what kind of significance they hold for the community or like what all different kind of varieties are produced from this fibers that sort of gives us a hint about the this incredible diversity of Indian textiles. We will get into the details of this cotton textiles then silk and then of course like woolen textiles and so on in the later modules but this was to sort of like I mean initiate the dialogue on what all we can expect from the Indian textiles as well as like I mean when I talk about appreciating Indian textiles and sort of like I mean seeing it side by side with the art historical studies then like I mean what is the direction that I want to take with it.

So, with that we will sort of like I mean arrive at the last segment of this lecture and that is to do with the visual exploration and art theory. And perhaps like I mean why there is a requirement for looking into textiles and thinking in terms of like I mean the visual exploration, art theory and so on.

So, there are certain things we find that is there in the visual exploration and perhaps one of the things we will see that is the relationship between theory and practice. Now theoreticians Gillian Rose and Divya Tolia Kelly they have argued that how



there are ways in which like I mean the visual culture or like I mean the visual processes they sort of like I mean stay almost it's a bridge between theory and practice. So, like I mean by focusing on the visuals and not just restricting to the visual but understanding that how visual can bridge the theory with the practice that that can be one of the ways in which we can understand that direction for us to consider that the visuality of textiles that we will be looking into in this course. That the visual exploration the threads of visual exploration is something it is actually a mean of bringing theory and practice together.

Now, the other thing that we also can think about in terms of, like I mean getting sensorially involved with the methods of like I mean comprehending materials and visuals. So, when we get into the details of the materials the techniques and perhaps like I mean thinking in terms of like I mean textiles because textile is something we wear on a daily basis. It is something that is very much connected to our bodies our senses, and then this can be one of the tools for understanding that what is the role of senses in terms of understanding visual and material all of these things are there around us. And even when we are looking into the objects online and in the museum collections and so on if we can connect them to something that we have around us we might have a better understanding of the visual and material culture.

Now, the other thing that also comes up in this discussion about the visual exploration and art theory is a there is a shift in the recent literature that we also find that that sort of like I mean comes from seeing and analyzing from a distance to an immersive approach. So, when we look at something so for example the kind of that will perhaps be this shawl that we have on screen and if this shawl is something we have object or visual analysis we might look into the all is embroidered on the top of it



of course like I mean the lake, the river, the different parts of the city, all the different small sections of this neighborhoods and everything and then of course how everything is sort of framed within the borders or the edges of the shawl of course we see all of them but the visual exploration should not really just stop there we also need to pay attention to like the fringes of this shawl. That like I mean you know if we have the fringes here and it seems like I mean there is a clear sort of like a division between the fringe here and then like I mean how the fringes start there. So, like I mean what kind of like I mean technique of making might lead towards having this different fringes or is it added on the top of it or like I mean is it part of the warp and the weft? So, this kind of questions actually might lead us to understand that this is not just something as a visual that we see as a map but it sort of like I mean gives us thing that yes it is a visual but then it is also embroidered on the top of this super fine shawl that was made in the 1870s perhaps. So with this and if we then understand that the this very specific mean of like extracting wool like I mean the fiber extraction and everything that sort of like I mean takes place in it then we have much better understanding of it's not just about what is there on the shawl but how this shawl might have been made. And it's not just about like I mean seeing just the visual and then understanding that I mean what might have been the city of Srinagar in the late 19th century but we might also start thinking about that I mean what might have been the community lives of the weavers the embroiders and people who are employed in making this textile? So in other words when we sort of like I mean move from seeing and analyzing to a much more immersive approach to understand or comprehend this kind of objects the textiles then we make ourselves available to newer ideas. And by newer ideas I also mean that I mean we kind of start looking at the lives of the makers and the makers histories. Like I mean the history of producer communities are something that we find that to be neglected. Their assessment of the intellectual capability is something that is not really well recognized in the scholarship on textile and craft. And of course, also in the art historical scholarship as well. So, if this is some of the aspects, we can also sort of intervene into if we pay close attention to the materials making and technique and so on.

Now the other important part that also comes up in this kind of exploration would also be about the technologies and processes. So technologies by that what I mean is that we have

of course that there are many different techniques of making this kind of textiles and when we sort of like I mean look into them we kind of see that I mean there is this technical side of making textile and then there might also be that a much more sort of like artistic side, intellectual side of making textile. But when we sort of see that I mean taking technology or this technique are something that is not really divorced from the artistic aspect of making textile; then we start looking at the idea of art and art history in a very different way. We do not really understand that technology or like I mean the hands-on making is something that is separated from how the brain functions? And then we can also see the technologies is something that is very much sort of like I mean it's it's a window into getting more information or perhaps like I mean perceiving the lives of the makers in a much more much more sensitive way... in a in a much more empathetic manner. And then in this cases if we sort of like I mean see that I mean where do the iconography and the visual analysis they sort of like I mean stand because if we think about relevance of of course like I mean relevance of the material technique and everything else and then like I mean if still iconographic analysis hold any significance or not? And the answer will still be yes because once we start looking at what is there in the visual then we start like I mean looking at it from the point of view of our already existing knowledge. And then once we start making the connection between the objects that we study for example the textile that we have on screen with something that we already know that makes us understand that what can be the possible connection between them. Now with that we also see that I mean the visuals can sometimes also be misleading sometimes, they can also be deceiving. Now once we have a clear idea or like I mean at least a better idea about how the visual stands and then how the material technique and all those other aspects they sort of like I mean you know contribute to making a particular textile then we can always compare these two processes and perhaps we can sort of like I mean synthesize knowledge differently and not by just relying on the visual analysis. Now with those we also see that I mean the visuals are something that needs to be considered as part of a process and not really something as the end result of the process. So, a lot of times when we see that I mean there is this shawl perhaps example I mean for example if we have it here so this shawl one can think that I mean years of practice and then like I mean much painstaking work of the embroidery and the weavers that made this kind of shawl possible. So, we can see that whatever is there on

screen as a visual is actually the end result of the process. However if we think that I mean this is not the end result but it is something that was part of the community history and the makers of the shawl continued to make this kind of works perhaps not in this scale perhaps not with this much of intricacy but like similar kind of practices that was there and then then we do not really see that I mean this entire analyst I mean the entire visual as like end of a process but it is part of a process. Then it also gives us a different kind of approach towards understanding our lives as well as like understanding history itself. So, with that I mean what I'd like to sort of reminds us that I mean visual when we see the visuals we should not see that the visual as outcome but let us think about visual as part of the process. That is how we will also be like I mean approaching the other material the visual material and everything else in the later modules.

Now with those issues we also see that I mean there are some of the larger concerns that that sort of like I mean come up in terms of that how do we perceive history then? Because as I have already mentioned in the earlier lectures that we will be looking at history a lot of historical material in this course. So if we see that I mean history is something that is not there to be seen from a distance but it is something that needs to be experienced then we see that I mean this particular way of analyzing the visual material by enlivening theory and by bringing it closer to practice then allowing our senses to sort of take part in the analysis also like thinking in terms of that the visual as not the end product of something but it is part of the process so this things can also make us enliven the history and the idea of history. Which is usually relegated to the past. Something that was contested in the theories of Walter Benjamin and then Hayden White and many other theoreticians. We find that I mean how perceiving history through this kind of experiences can lead us towards understanding our material culture our lives and everything else around us in a new different light. And in all these different aspects why do we think that I mean textile plays a very important role is because textiles are everywhere. We wear them, we use them on a daily basis but a lot of times we do not really incorporate them as part of art historical studies. Thank you.