

Folk and Minor Art in India
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Lecture - 13
Contextualization and De-contextualization

Here, we are discussing the context of folk art to understand the few ideas which were connected to the previous two modules. We are beginning our third module with the topic that relates to the context of Folk and Minor art in India and the real meaning of Contextualization and hence De-contextualization and we will try to understand it from the fundamental of the idea that where we are placing them and how we are looking at them and when we are looking at them what is working at the back of our mind and are we looking at them with a particular context, what is the connection that makes it call a work of art and why is that we doubt whether they are made for the sake of art or it has some other purposes to attain. So, from all those things that we have been discussing so far, we are trying to give some light on the issues of contextualization and the context of folk art in the perspective of colonial and post colonial India which covers the past 100 years almost and we are again going back a little bit to realize that in the following lectures.

So, the first lecture has this topic contextualization and then we are going to discuss about the concept of communication for social purpose and then we are also discussing along with it the aesthetic perspective which works as the operating factor for this practice and then there is another important thing that we mentioned in the previous lecture, but we are trying to discuss that in this context which is the secularity and religious purposes as well as the religious plurality that acts as a major factor in building up the structure of this whole habitual practice that we go through in social context and then there is another factor that needs to be discussed thoroughly and that is the ethnographic perspective of the study of folk art and culture and how ethnography is connected to that.

And when the ethnographic studies look at folk art from some like they find some significance of it and what are the areas that they find to be interesting and we are just having a general idea of that in this context because our way, our basic aim of

approaching towards this kind of a course is not following anything that is anthropologic, but there is some kind of an ethnicity which is connected to it and we need to see that from proper and clear light and with that we are also discussing the exponents who brought the culture under the limelight and what were their realizations and how they are connected in today's context. So, this is a basic study to realize that we are going to also watch a few images to understand that we are not analyzing those images right now, but we are just getting familiar with execution and we are using them as examples in our discussion.

Changes in the cultural perception prove that there is no universal definition which determines academic art. So, artistic expression in modern term can only be understood in the functions of specific social and political context, but artists are ideologically defined on the basis of their academic background and the consciousness is of central significance to contemporary theorization of art and its practice and its role in the society at large. The role of art and the viewing of art almost like the critical viewing towards art practices play a very different role and it is rather a discipline where we see that it must be realized in the relation to the values of a particular culture. It is very cultural when we look at them or when we view them and one has to be familiar with a particular culture to understand the meaning or the expression that comes out of this kind of execution to get a general view of it.

Now, this is also true that the aesthetics is it is like a artistic expression that is academic traditional and it can also be naive or amateurish, it can be conventional, it can be conventional or professional or whatever it is, but it has to be scrutinized in terms of their aesthetic merit and methods may employ to construct an artistic version of a narrative idea which is prevalent there. So, it is more like the role of art appreciation or art criticism or the critical viewing then it deals with the directness of the making of art and that can be academic, but it is true that there is a making of art in line with the interests of the critic authority and how the critic is willing to view it from his own perspective.

So, there is another concern which is related to it and that to be also addressed with some seriousness and which is also perhaps a concern that is a ability to comprehend a particular style, a particular genre that is indicative of a certain culture, the sort of image being that is being looked at and the compositional formation of religious and secular compositions is it has their own characteristics for example, if it is a secular composition

then we see that the emphasis on symmetry is much lesser rather it can be totally asymmetrical and dynamic where as the religious compositions can be also identified by the compositional structure which is more symmetric and centralized and this is how they appear to us. So, conventionally when we look back into other cultures, apart from India or like we shift our focus from the Indian happenings and we look into the other cultures for example, if we take some ancient culture of Europe which is also connected to the medieval and early Christian culture and what we see there is that there is also a tendency to use a lot of symbolic images into the practice to communicate in a social periphery.

There also had been one urge that what letters can do with the literates and images can do with the illiterates and it all started from there, but it is also true that the only textual messages were not effective enough to involve or engage the common people into the stories morals and the other things that was involved with narratives. So, from time to time these people felt that it should be supported by the illustrations or illumination and then they took reference of different symbolic ideas. For example, if we just go back and think of certain European cultures and the kind of symbolism and allegories that were used in those cultural motives and we see that it also has a wide range of biblical images all over.

So, conventionally the religious things included biblical illuminations and the pictorial depictions of saints performing miracles, the visions, the martyrdoms, the fragments of great epics, the secular subject matters which ranged from landscape, portrait and still life to commercial images as main genre or the stylistic categories and such themes of art for ages were subjected to academic hierarchies which were eventually confronted by the wave of modernism. Allegory and symbols which literarily means speaking with an alternative term as a common feature of a particular time associates artistic acts in terms of conveying the meaning of the idea by means of something which is completely different.

So, those are more like using some symbols and one has to be familiar with those symbols to grasp the idea and that needed a different kind of academic training to communicate with those images and it was very cultural. So, people learnt it naturally and it was part of their daily life and being then it was not very difficult to understand

them and it was not really separated and nobody really need to struggle a lot to understand all those images.

So, I will give you some examples for example, it was more like some examples, those symbolic meanings were to conjure the ideas like eternity was always shown with a snake that is in a spiral order and which is biting its own tail and those images are very common in early Christian art and also much before that during medieval and dark ages, we see lots of similar symbols in the religious un secular art practices and one has to know that it means eternity to understand it and there are also images of the winged women, they are not the cupids but the women with wings that gave the idea of victory. The human figures holding a olive branch to depict a peace and the florid female figure bearing a wheat or some kind of crops that showed prosperity and there are images of old hag with shrunken skin and limbs for poverty, Venus always for love, Mars for war. Creativity by muses and different types of muses, Christ was often symbolized by the tree of life and heaven by golden stairs and there are many such examples which are found all over in Europe.

So, allegory is the symbolic things that are known as Rupak in Indian classical theory of drama and performances and those Rupaks which comes as a secondary factor for this kind of figurations and it was much more classical than folk, but we still see a lot of such images in folk and minor expressions as well. So, it is more like the allegories and symbols that we have been talking about which literarily means that it is the alternative term that idea gets conveyed with and that was associated with artistic acts in terms of conveying a meaning or another idea by means of something which is completely different.

The act aims of creating immense ambiguity for viewers with culture orientation and it is more like if somebody is not aware of that particular culture, it will be very difficult for the person to understand or decipher those images and connect them with the idea that they are willing to convey perfectly. So, they cannot just do it from the common sense they need to have certain understanding and some thematic knowledge to understand them. So, these are more like approaching towards the icons the symbols allegories and they are found all over the globe which is connected to the artworks which were connected to a particular culture. So, we look at them from a purely cultural context unless we understand that context or if we remove that context then it may appear with a

very different meaning because unless we are familiar with that culture the images can be highly ambiguous.

We will try to see that with some examples. So, presence of allegory in art notifies its viewers about the additional layer of meaning hidden beyond the usual elements like line color, form, texture which are apparent on the surface of the picture. We will try to realize that with one example where in the picture, we will see different fragments of a narrative painting from early 20th century Bengal which is kept in a museum in a confined area with the framed structure. So, when we see the thing we must know that also this is part of tradition that is called as Chalachitra painting and chalachitra means the bad drop painting which comes almost like a renaissance allegory at the backdrop of the idol of Durga in Bengal in eastern India.

Now, when we look at it, we see that this is a supportive narrative that is created at the backdrop of the main idol, but the image that we are going to see next is taken from a museum place where the image is framed and displayed somewhere and that too we are watching it in today's context and when we visit the museum what we get to see is a free form which is free from the idol and it is free from any other things and it is decontextualized in that way because it is separated from its basic context and they are shown as a narrative urge like painting which is independent of any other thing.

So, it actually has a different identity which is more like a supplementary image, in one context when we change the context and put it under a different context, it just gives a very different expression a very different meaning and it is also connected to the iconic and thematic understanding of a particular visual. So, in that way if we have no clue like whether it is a chalachitra and which culture it belongs to or even if you are not familiar with the images which are there and the characters which are having some strong icons, it is very difficult for a person who do not belong to this particular culture to literally decipher the meaning of that illustration and they can only understand or appreciate the quality of narrative because of the use of its line color form tone texture..

So, let us see the images and try to understand that. This is part of the picture where we see that the images are made with a strong black contour line.

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Almost all the images have that line and the delineation of forms are primarily made out of those strong border lines and it has a surface which is not very deep and at least the classical or renaissance like scientific perspectives or the linear perspective is not shown anywhere, but it has layers that divides the space into a background and a foreground and also there is a middle ground that is somewhere in between then what we see in the picture is a human figure with a white body. In Indian culture, it is very easy to recognize this character as Lord Shiva who is a prime deity worshipped by the Hindus and this country, but then there are other characters who are the secondary characters and here we see that Shiva is sitting with a tiger skin drapery and he is sitting in a relaxed gesture.

He is almost like a king or somewhere the figure is getting some kind of an importance because the entire thing is part of a context where it was used as a allegory and at the same time, the other figures at the background of Shiva is also working as a secondary allegory for the picture. So, it is a continuous frame and let us see it from left to right formation.

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So, this part is the left and the beginning of the scroll. The entire painting has an order which goes from left to right and this is in a semi circular formation which is put somewhere in the museum, Gurusaday Dutt museum in Kolkata and what we see in the picture are some elephants and horses and there is another goddess which is like it has a very strong iconic feature and it is a goddess with some dark blue skin color and she is fighting with the opponents and most interestingly what we see in the picture if this is connected to any other theme which is connected to some religious stories then there is also presence of a flag which is the Indian flag in the picture which has the tricolor, the other symbols, the motives are not shown. So, it is not the Indian official flag, but it has the color combination of the national flag and that gives us a nationalistic element which was very common for that time then the blue bordered goddess in our culture is simply or easily identified as the Goddess Kali and she is fighting with another group and she is facing the war and she is confronting the enemies, the opponents then the frame gets continued and let us see it in closer.

Then we see in the second frame which is a continuation of that and there are gods like Brahma seen in the picture are his many heads. So, through that iconic feature we are able to identify this image as the image of Brahma and then there are other people who are coming and approaching Shiva who have the possession of some authority. So, the authoritative figure of Shiva is placed right at the center and the scroll is going from left

to right. It has a symmetry-asymmetry condition where asymmetry is getting emphasized.

So, Kali was fighting and then the gods and also the Asuras, the demons come and meet Shiva and they want him to do something about it which is generally understood by the images and then also we see that these are the detail of the images where we again get to see Shiva in focus and that is the center of the picture and there are other images and attendants of Shiva then we see the same blue skinned lady is perhaps defeated temporarily and she is ill she is not in good health and a doctor is checking her like they are doing, conducting a health checkup and other people are concerned about her and then finally, in the frame it shows that this lady is again getting converted into a different image of Durga which is the same lady with a different feature she has a yellowish pale skin color. So, it just gives us the idea that this is the same form of the mother goddess who was in the form of a blue bodied Kali and then she transfers into Durga. We need a lot of cultural reference to understand it partially and fully.

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Then in the last form, we see the same thing that Durga is getting active and at the end, we see that she is also fighting with the same group the opponents and at the back there is a Indian national flag which is there in the picture. So, there are two groups of enemies which are fighting, the green ones are from some other group with the flag and the red

ones are in the front. It comes with a lot of ambiguity and at the same time there are certain things that we can easily identify if we belong to a particular culture.

So, with that particular image in one sense, we were trying to understand one concept that how we should look at an image as a general viewer and that if we understand or if we are able to recognize some of its characters then it enhances the enjoyment to some extent, but even if we are not able to understand it completely, the ambiguity can also give us a different kind of a pleasure that happens when we look at the images from other culture. The cultural context is completely dynamic and it shifts from time to time for example, what we have seen now was part of a context as we said it was the entire scroll, the entire narration where Kali is getting transformed into the Durga. So, the strength that is transformed and Shiv is creating these two mother goddesses and Brahma is also responsible for the creation.

The only thing was Kali was defeated and Durga takes over and the central strength remains the same. So, the whole narrative is part of idol and it used to be like that and that time it was an allegory itself where as when we separate them and look at them separately then we see that there are other factors the secondary images and the pictures are working as allegory there. For example, there are that national flag or the images where we see certain lady who is nobody but just a general attendant of Shiva and as well as the mother goddess and she was wearing a transparent drapery which is typical of Kalighat urban patachitra. So, there are multiple influences and we can go to the deeper core of its thematic and iconic understanding and we can go on and on in understanding them. Coming back to our context, I will quote a very different thing from another scholar, but before that I would also like you to understand things from a general perspective where no academic things are connected but we try to understand it from a general world view and it is a common human tendency that when we want to transform a space into a different space.

For example, we have a table or a pedestal which is used for a common purpose but we want one religious idol to be placed there. In that particular time, we try to make the pedestal or that platform into a sacred platform. So, we generally wash it, clean it and we also decorate it with some motive and that way the usual platform gets transformed into the place of worship and this is common for all religious activities or the customary rights. Even when we go for a general performance, we make sure that prop is properly

set the context is set there. So, all these things are more like having a center where we try to accumulate as much energy as possible and that becomes the context of our performance or anything that takes place there in the form of art in the form of any other thing that is related to art.

This is how we change one context into another context. So, one idol may get worshipped in one culture but if we pick it up and we do not recognize it as a god or goddess and then we just appreciate for its beauty of making, it does not remain the object of fear to us and I can place it anywhere if I am ignorant of that particular religion or culture. So, that is how it is all connected and in quoting from Kapila Vatsayan, 1997, she writes all ritual first establishes a point, a metaphorical center around which lines are drawn to make triangles, squares and circles of great symbolic value. Notions of space and time are comprehended through it. Indian folk paintings fundamentally adhered to a few norms by either following them or simply negating them and in either case, a viewer requires some prior cultural understanding to decode the visual image and general viewing of these compositions may not lead to their identification as religious or secular.

As religion here is meant to reach out the common people and therefore, not bound to maintain a centralized symmetrical outer structure for it. There are images that are secular, but due to the progressive content are full of icons and symbols. Nevertheless, all folk expressions has a religious root and that is evident in the compositional formations and elementary style in contemporary scene, the definition of folk art can be free flowing and ever changing to encipher the orderly constructions of space in traditional folk painting, we cannot depend on a single image but to a particular style or genre. When we look at some image from Madhubani, Bihar, let us use them as an example and try to understand it.

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This is an image from Madhubani, Bihar commonly devoted to the wall of a bridal chamber, a significant ritualistic practice of the region that is locally known as Kohber. The lotus pond and paired fish symbolizes female beauty and fertility and the bamboo stands for male lineage, pairs of fish, lovebirds, snakes and turtles are common in these kind of paintings with some variations with the beaming sun and moon are common elements that elicits the prosperity aspect of it. The conception of the space division is centralized and symmetrical to ensure harmony in the composition and the image is linear and radially balanced with a distinct point at the center around which images that are symbolically related to fertility are drawn to adequately fill up the space in an orderly formation and the apparently intricate and semi recognizable motives are the derivatives of natural elements like flowers, weeds, seeds and aquatic animals amphibians and reptiles.

The compositional formation is confirmed within the boundaries of squares and circles which is decorative and repetitive patterns to ensure a clear readability to the heavily crowded visual. So, the space organization has some symmetrical order but it is not in incomplete symmetry and it has some bit of an imperfect order which gave it some kind of a life. An example from Madhubani is also talking about non dualism or the not two in its premanifestation as they are. So, it is complete, whole and indifferent as a point which is like the Bindu or a dot at the center into which all will ultimately withdraw and get spreaded and that is radial. The radiant quality, the spread or pulling things from the

center, going off center and again converging into the center is one expressionistic aspect of it.

Now, when look at this Kohber which is painted on a paper surface and which is not actually made on the mud wall for a ritualistic purpose and it is just looked at as a creative expression. It is shown into a different context and then it may change its meaning to some extent. So, this is very important for us to see it from a context where the artists and their habitual living is connected to a particular artistic expression and then when they are separated from its existing context and it is taken out and decontextualized, it faces a complete different challenge of being free from all its thematic and iconic understanding and they are shown free from any culture specific connotations and they are completely shown as artistic expressions. There lies the basic challenge for this kind of artwork to be able to sustain its quality and survive in the modern context.