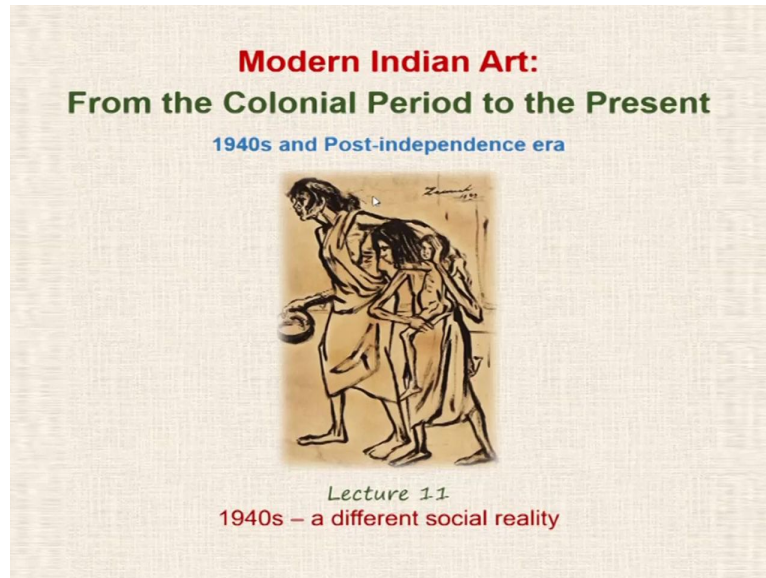


**Modern Indian Art from the Colonial Period to the Present**  
**Professor Soumik Nandy Majumdar**  
**Department of History of Art, Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan**  
**Visva-Bharati**  
**Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur**  
**Lecture 11**  
**1940s – a different social reality**

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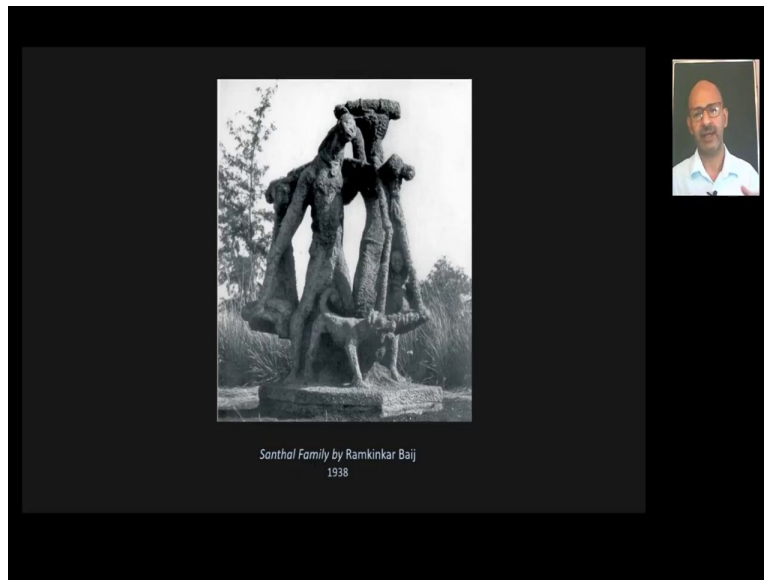
Hello viewers, welcome to NOC's online course on Modern Indian art from the colonial period to the present. Today is the 11th lecture that is the first lecture from the third week which is dedicated to the studies of the developments taking place in the field of Modern Indian art from 1947 and generally in the post-independent period.

Now in order to understand the significance of the post-independent Modern Indian art developments, we need to quickly look at the immediately preceding moments, very important moments in Modern Indian art that is 1940s. After all, 1940s not only in Modern Indian art but also from the point of view of its social history, cultural history, political history is considered to be a great transformative period and it is marked by anxieties, huge and extremely disturbing political upheavals, disruptions, trauma but at the same time 1940s is a decade full of promises for an independent India.

So overall the entire third week is classified under the nomenclature 1940s and pre-independence era and we want to dedicate this lecture that is the 11th lecture to the understanding of 1940s as

an era with a different social reality. So let us see what is happening in the 1940s and how a different social reality is leaving a great and very significant impact on the developments of Modern Indian art and eventually this impact is going to leave a lasting impression on the later development that is the post-independent Modern Indian art as well.

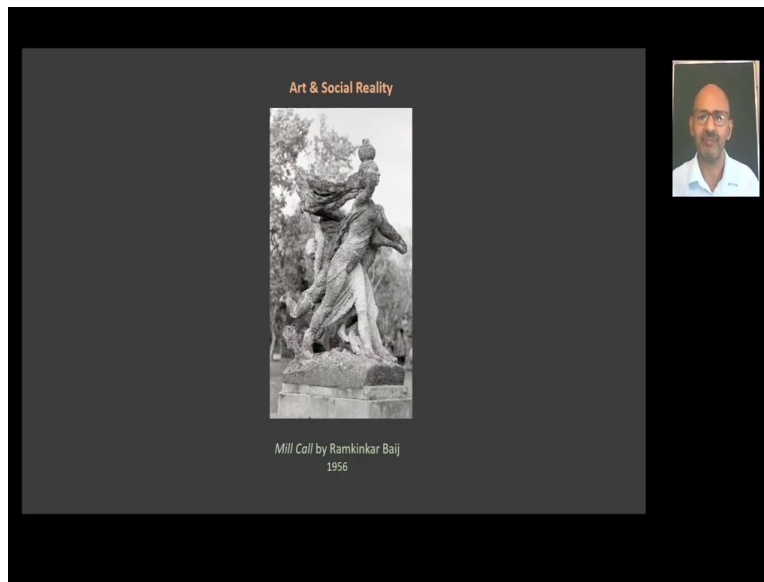
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Now we have seen that already before the 1940s, a few artists like Ramkinkar Baij from Santiniketan and a few others have already in their works, shown signs, very clear signs of a very significant shift in the content of their art. These artists are no more looking at mythological sources. They are no more looking at the romantic imagination of landscape or people around, they are also no more interested in mere documentation of life around and obviously none of these artists including Ramkinkar Baij was not interested at all to follow the typically European academic naturalistic representational style as taught by or introduced by the British art schools in India.

Therefore, for example as this particular example here, a sculpture, an outdoor sculpture in Santiniketan known as 'Santhal family' clearly indicates that here we have an entirely new subject matter for art. Not only that this subject matter embodies the life of the common people in this case the tribal people of Santhal community but this subject matter also embodies or entails a new perspective, a new look, a different kind of observation of the social reality around.

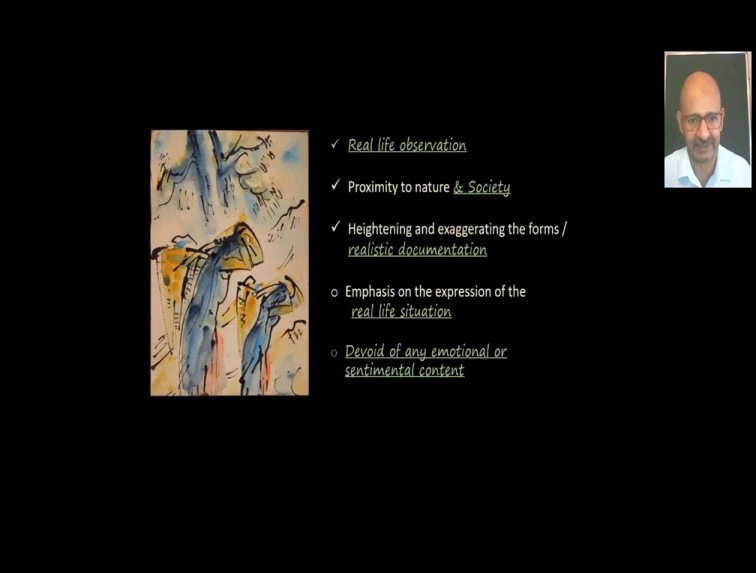
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So in fact in this sculpture and also in this sculpture 'Mill Call', Ramkinkar is not exactly showing these people, very common ordinary people as tragic heroes. He is showing them as powerful people. He is in a sense valorizing them but at the same time Ramkinkar never fails to express the fact that these people in these kind of societies are not only marginalized in some sense but they also keep fighting, they keep struggling and it is that struggling spirit that is expressed through their bodies, through their anatomies not in the academic naturalistic style but mostly in a very expressive style by using the medium and the material of art.

In this case the concrete that Ramkinkar uses in his works and when you look at the paintings by other artists with a similar intention, we will see how they are using their paint, their brush to express similar concerns, so it is a new concern that we are now looking at.

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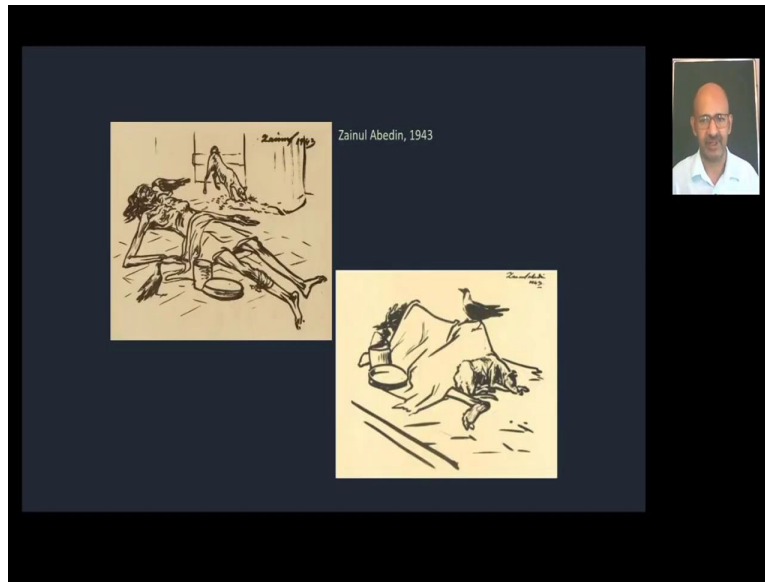
- ✓ Real life observation
- ✓ Proximity to nature & Society
- ✓ Heightening and exaggerating the forms / realistic documentation
- Emphasis on the expression of the real life situation
- Devoid of any emotional or sentimental content

So quickly, what exactly is happening now which has already begun in Santiniketan from the 1930s, it is all about real life observation. Not an imaginative content but from the real life around. It is also about proximity to nature and in the 1940s particularly the Calcutta artists, the city artists they wanted to extend this logic further and say that it is not just about proximity to nature it is also about proximity to people, to society.

Then heightening and exaggerating the forms the realistic documentation in a sense but not exactly in a very photographic way but basically empathizing with the figures and the society you are representing, you are working on. Then it is also about emphasis on the expression of the real life situation not to romanticize, not to idealize but you are trying to express the real life situation in the most accurate way, in the sense that no excess, nothing extraneous should color the expression, it should be as real as it is out there.

Then devoid of any emotional or sentimental content, because over-sentimentalization often dilutes the content of a work of art, overemotional content often creates a distance between the subjects you are showing in a work of art and the viewers. So basically from the 1940s most of the artists and mostly the artists from Calcutta and also a few artists from Santiniketan, they are trying to make the viewers encounter a different social reality and at the same time a different art language.

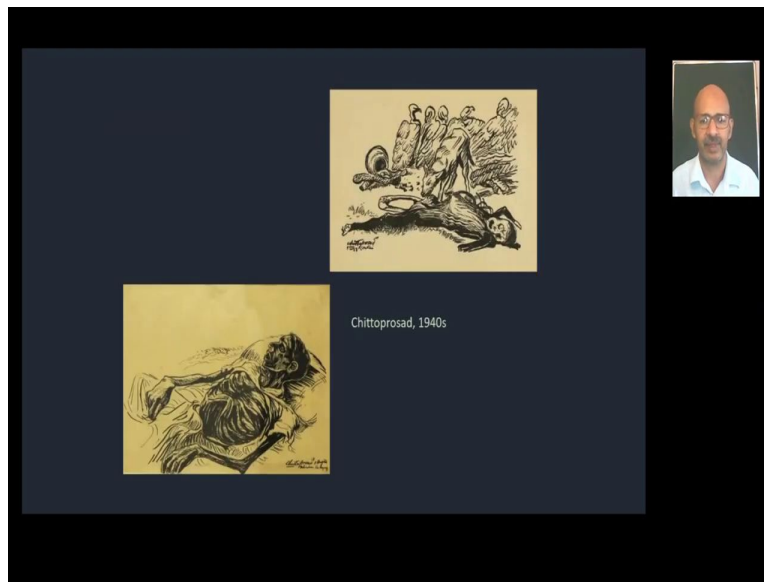
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For example, we have somebody like Zainul Abedin in 1943, who later went on to become a very important teacher and principal and the leader in a sense of not only the art movements in Bangladesh but also he took the leadership of the famous art college Charukola in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

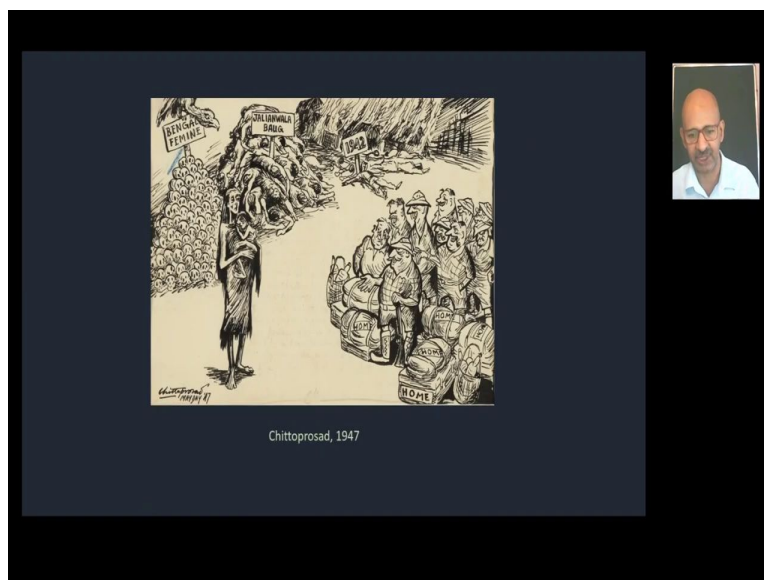
Now in 1943 when Zainul Abedin was a very young artist he was looking at the abject poverty and the dismal condition of human life right on the streets of Calcutta due to the infamous famine and he was directly sketching them, drawing them in a very sketchy language but also in a very direct language.

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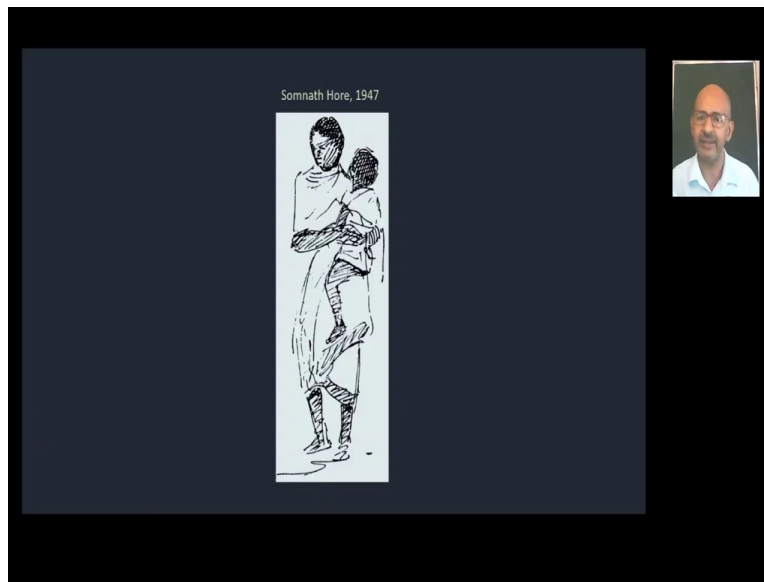
And we have almost at the same time, Chittoprosad, another very important artist who was looking at social reality as the only subject matter for his art.

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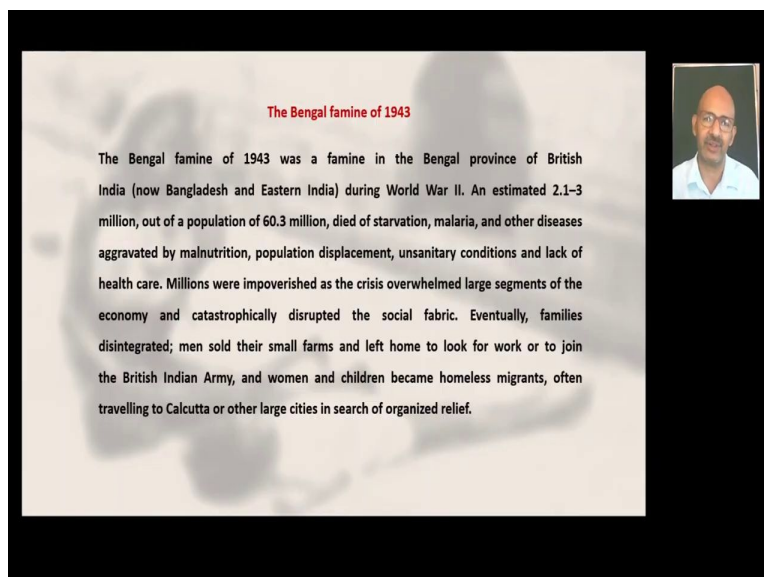
So Zainul Abedin, Chittoprosad and Chittoprosad were also doing very satirical, very caustic kinds of posters or cartoons directly attacking the oppressors, the colonial officers, the British rulers who were leaving the entire society in a dismal situation.

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And then we have another very important artist Somnath Hore who in the 1940s and of course in 1947- even before that, was directly involved with the people of India mainly Bengal -North Bengal, South Bengal and he wanted to depict the real life situations of those people who suffered most.

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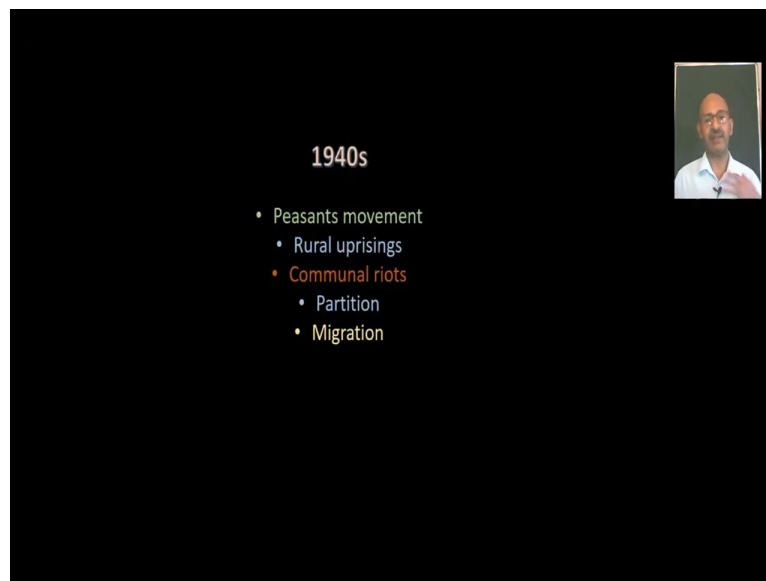


Now in 1943 there was this infamous Bengal famine and during the world war 2 and as you know an estimated 2.1 to 3 million out of a population of 60.3 million died of starvation, malaria and other diseases aggravated by malnutrition, population displacement, then unsanitary

conditions and lack of health care. Millions were impoverished as the crisis overwhelmed large segments of the economy and catastrophically disrupted the social fabric.

Eventually families disintegrated, people lost their relatives, friends, societies crumbled and a lot of people had to leave their beautiful, secured but not anymore rural set up, their farmlands and come to Kolkata and other cities for the sake of food, for the sake of work and many of these people who migrated from the villages and came to Kolkata eventually died.

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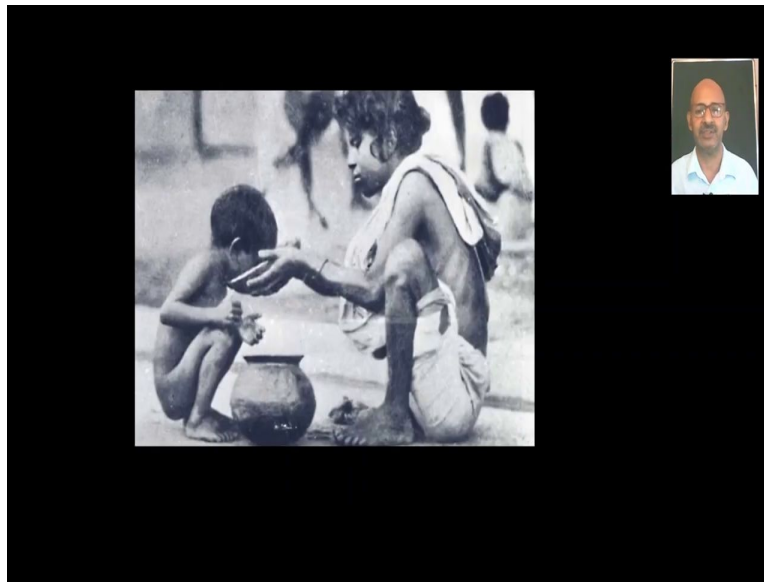


Now people like Zainul Abedin and Chittoprosad, Somnath Hore, were addressing these issues in their art. So the 1940s is a witness to a lot of peasant's movements because there was a huge crisis in the crops, in the agriculture sector. The 1940s is also witness to rural uprisings. The oppressed people, the marginalized people got fed up, they got annoyed, they got angry, therefore they started revolting. The 1940s is also a witness to tragic communal riots between Hindus and Muslims.

The 1940s is also witness to partition. Without going into the controversies of partition- whether it was good or bad- this is something that we need to admit that partition left hundreds and thousands of people in deep crisis on both sides of the borders and partition also led to migration. Now this is how the social and the political fabric- the scenario of the 1940s can be looked at.

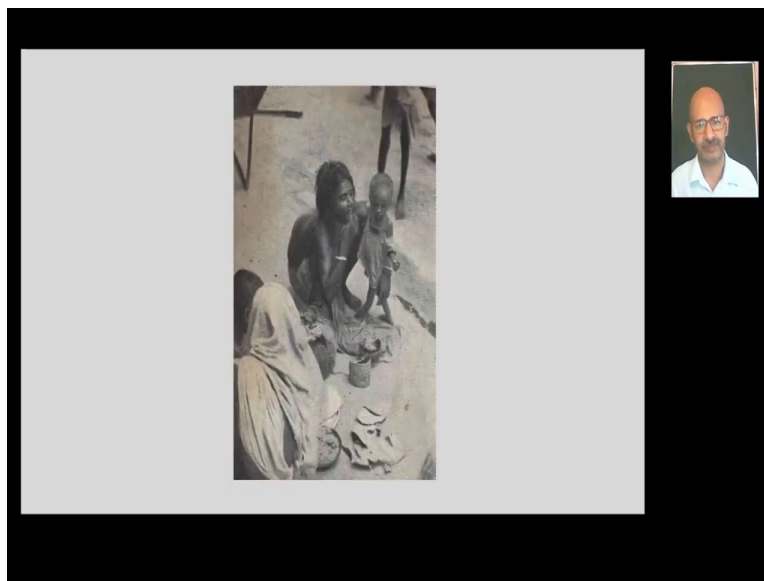


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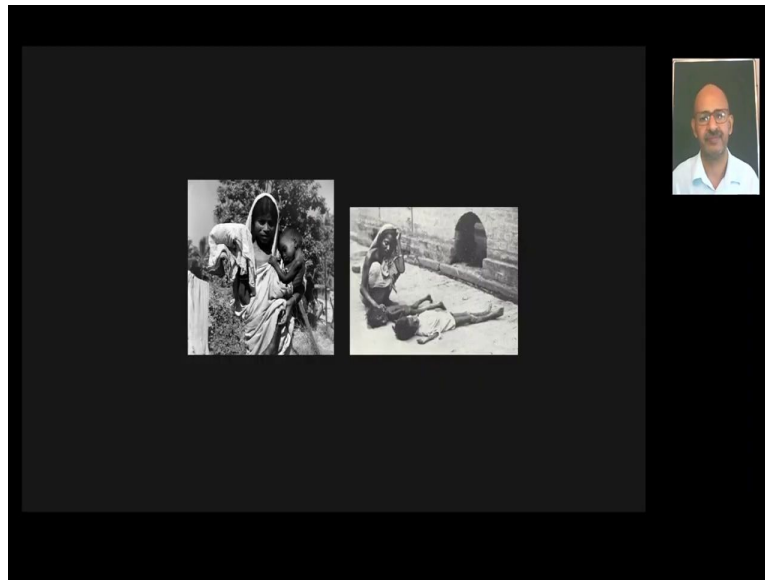
And against this background we have not only drawings and paintings but we can also see some of the photographs which are testimony to that extremely disturbing situation of life during that point of time.

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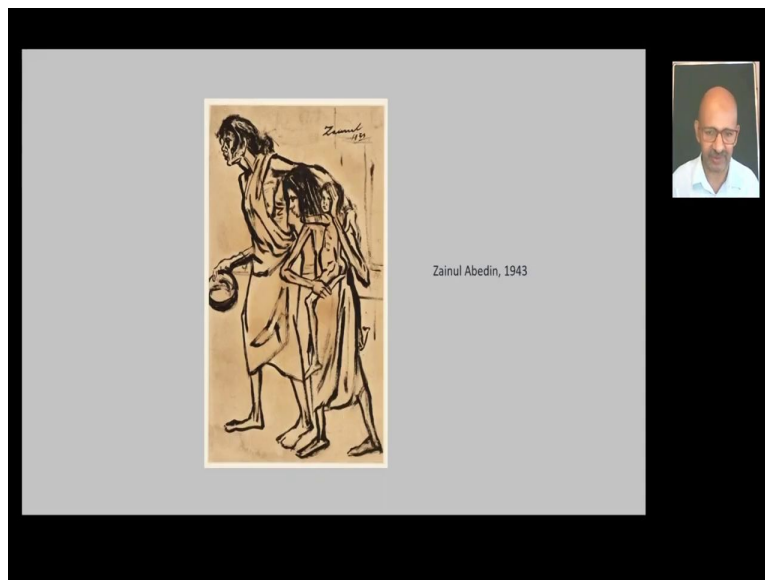
Photographs actually tell us the horrible stories unfolding not only on the rural places in Bengal but right on the streets of Calcutta.

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All these artists have actually seen people dying on the streets.

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Therefore, when people like Zainul Abedin draw these figures, these are the figures which he did not really have to imagine. These are the people, the destitutes, the sufferers, the people going under terrible trauma.

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These are the people whom Zainul Abedin saw in real life around him right on the streets of Kolkata. Therefore, in order to draw these figures, these artists Zainul Abedin, Chittoprosad, Somnath Hore developed a different approach to art, for them the source of art that is the content of the art should come directly from this social reality.

This is not the time to draw or paint imaginary scenes, sentimental subject matters or mythological subject matters or idealized landscapes or people or any other composition because right now we have something burning right in front of our eyes. So these artists now have a different view not only of art but also of the artists. Now they look at artists as socially responsible people. Now they want to feel the responsibility and execute the responsibility through their art works.

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So they also developed a new technique of art. It is not a very colorful and aesthetically pleasant painting that they are looking at. They are looking forward to and that is exactly what they were practicing- quick drawing sketches mostly black and white. These are the drawings that you see from 1943 and you can clearly see a couple of things; number one in order to make this quick drawings and sketches right from the real life observations Zainul Abedin or Chittoprosad or for that matter Somnath Hore and a couple of other artists they quickly decided on a technique that is fairly simple that is black and white technique, with either brush or with pencil or maybe charcoal.

So technically speaking they adopted a very quick and prompt method for which you really do not need elaborate arrangement. Number two, because of the technique they arrived at a language, a pictorial aesthetics which is also very quick. Therefore it enables or ensures a quick communication. So communication was something which was in their minds.

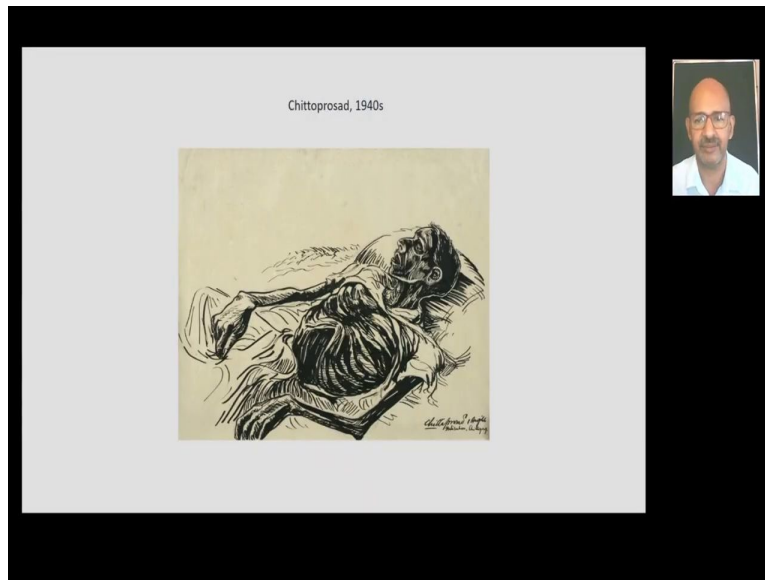
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It is not just about documenting real life, it is also about communicating this harsh and tragic reality to the common people and the viewers as quickly as possible.

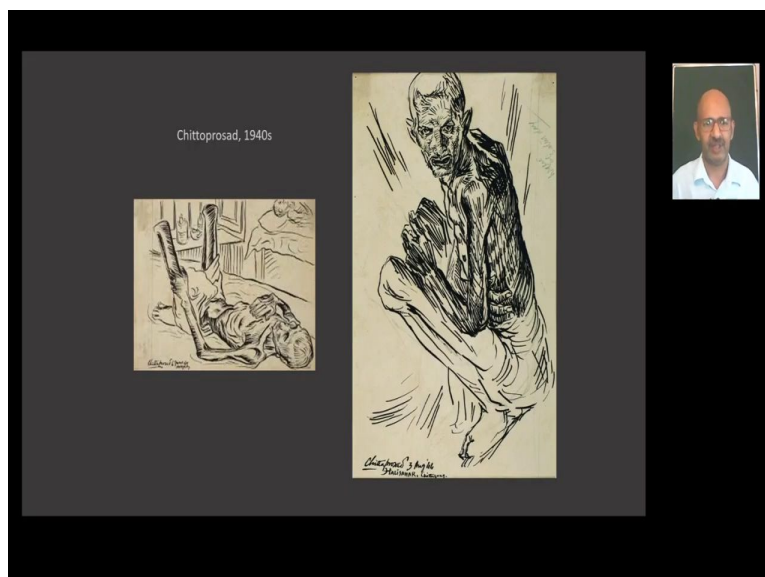
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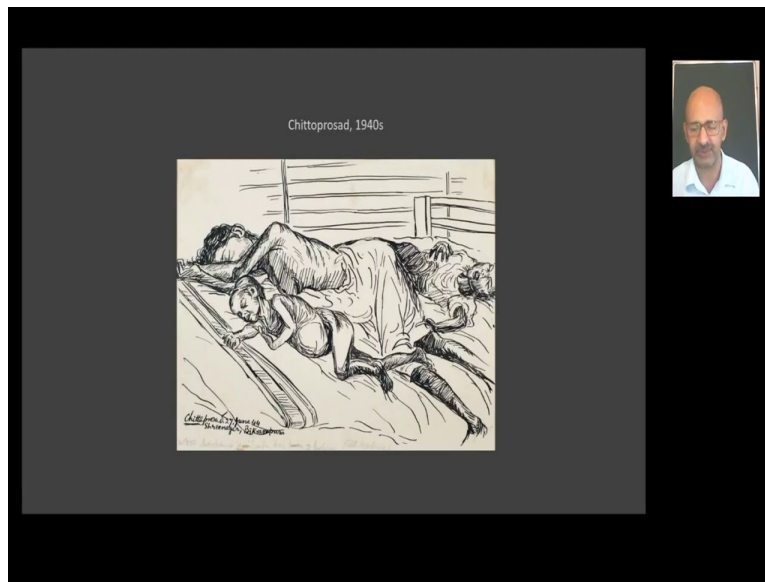
Therefore, in all their drawings made by Zainul Abedin or Chittoprosad or Somnath Hore, you feel a sense of urgency, these are not very relaxed works of art, there is a sense of urgency, there is a sense of social responsibility. There is a sense of responsibility which drives the artists to look at what is the most burning issue now, keeping aside those issues, those subject matters which are or which look completely irrelevant today and also probably unethical.

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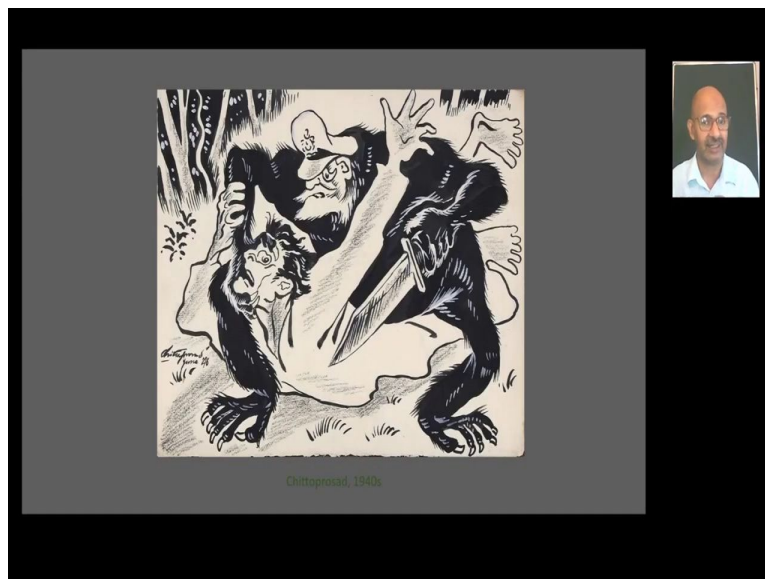
So quite a few important characteristic features of their art are emerging out of this practice, out of this engagement as demonstrated by these artists like Zainul Abedin, Chittoprosad and Somnath Hore.

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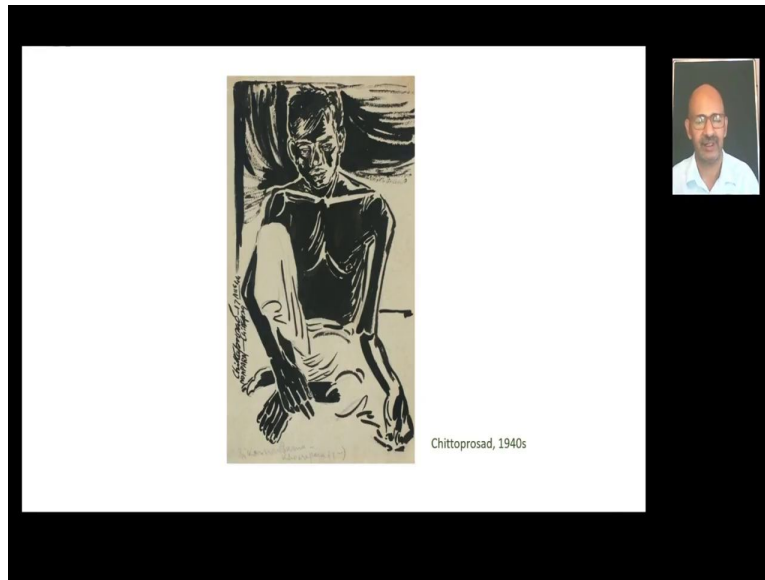
And do notice that in most of their drawings, even in later paintings the figures that you see in these drawings and paintings represent not people from the well-off or secured sections of the society but people from the suffering society, people from the struggling society.

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So clearly there is a kind of ideological commitment here. They are committed to this idea that as artists, it is our responsibility to show the sufferings of the common people, the poor people, the oppressed people.

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Therefore, they have kept on drawing and painting these people who are very important people in our society because they grow crops for our food, they do lot of labor works to keep us safe yet they had hardly got a chance to show their presence in the art until 1940s when Zainul Abedin, Chittoprosad, Somnath Hore took up this responsibility as artist to show these people.

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So that is why the 1940s is known as a very transformative period in Modern Indian art because the social changes left a direct impact on these artists and few more artists as well.

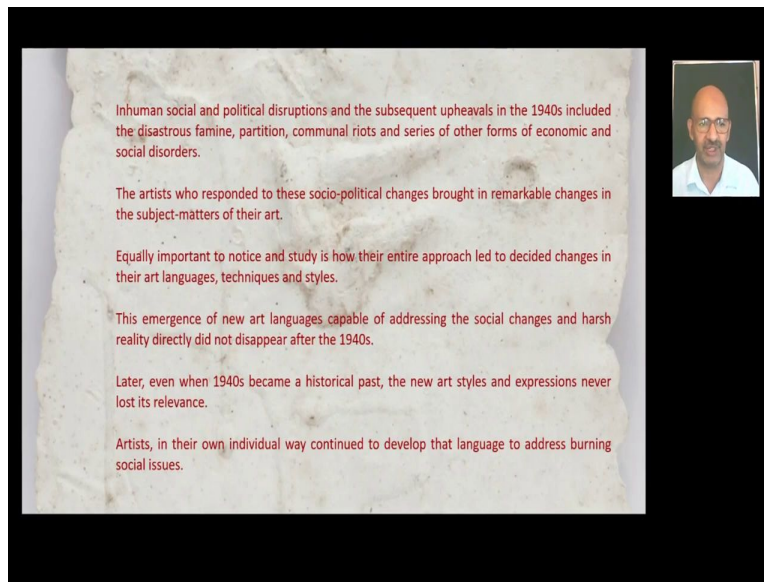


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So therefore, for example, Chittoprosad even in the 1950s he continues to draw themes may not be directly on the direct social reality always but addressing burning political issues through certain forms of art which can be called posters or cartoons like these things. So there is a strong social and political statement emerging from the art works of these people Zainul Abedin, Chittoprosad and Somnath Hore.

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Inhuman social and political disruptions and the subsequent upheavals in the 1940s included the disastrous famine, partition, communal riots and series of other forms of economic and social disorders.

The artists who responded to these socio-political changes brought in remarkable changes in the subject-matters of their art.

Equally important to notice and study is how their entire approach led to decided changes in their art languages, techniques and styles.

This emergence of new art languages capable of addressing the social changes and harsh reality directly did not disappear after the 1940s.

Later, even when 1940s became a historical past, the new art styles and expressions never lost its relevance.

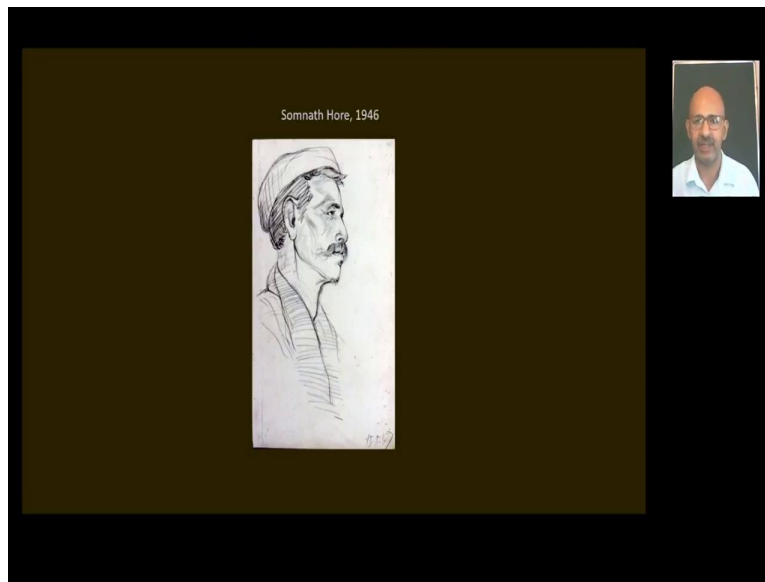
Artists, in their own individual way continued to develop that language to address burning social issues.

So, to summarize the entire situation let us look at these very important points; so inhuman social and political disruptions and subsequent upheavals in the 1940s included the disastrous famine, partition, communal riots and the series of other forms of economic and social disorders. The artists who responded to these social political changes brought in remarkable changes in the subject matters of their art already told and equally important to notice and study is how their entire approach led to decided changes in their art languages, techniques and styles which also I have mentioned already.

So this emergence of the new art languages capable of addressing the social changes and harsh reality directly did not disappear after the 1940s because from 1947 certain things began to settle down. Now we are into a new era, an independent era with a lot of dreams, a lot of promises but the commitment, social commitment that we get to see from the artists of the 1940s, they also keep continuing in slightly different forms.

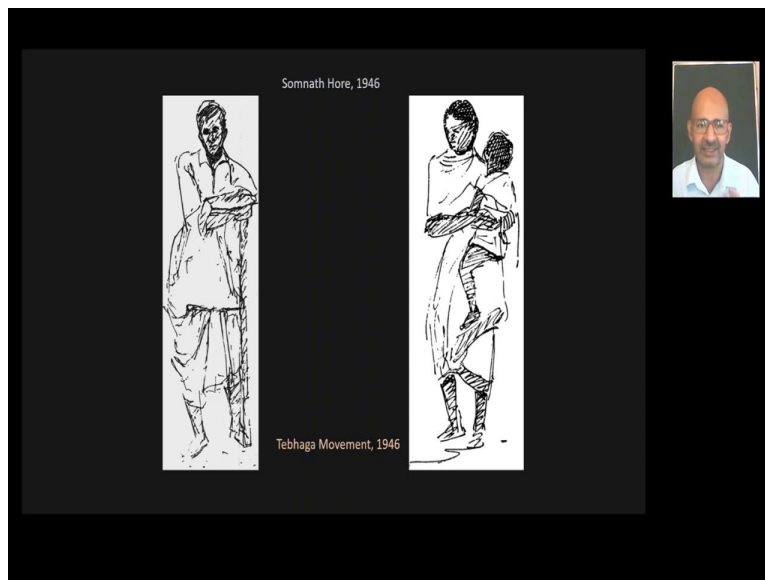
So later even when the 1940s became a historical past the new art styles and expressions never lost its relevance. Artists in their own individual way continue to develop that language to address the burning social issues.

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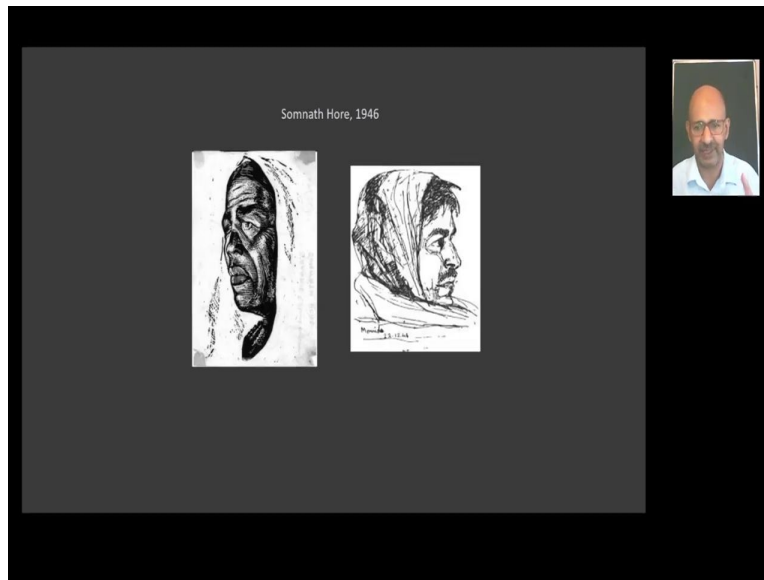
So here we have Somnath Hore, 1946, directly participating in peasant and rural uprisings in north Bengal.

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And as an artist he kept on documenting the people, the local people, the political leaders from the villages who were struggling and because he was drawing these figures as people who were close to him, not as people who were outside his world.

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So the empathy that you see in these drawings is a part of the life situation of Somnath Hore himself, he was a part of these movements, he was part of these political and ideological commitments.

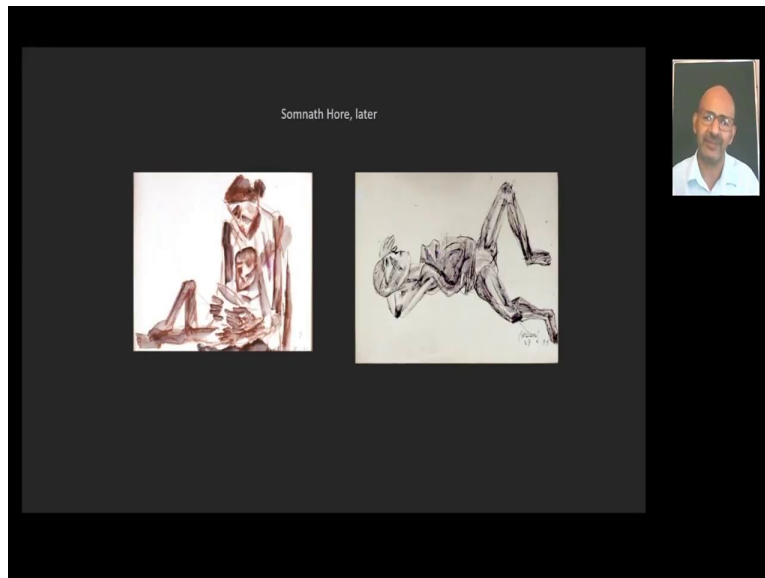
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So, therefore for the first time perhaps in Somnath Hore's works done in 1940s, for example 1945, 1946 we see drawings and prints of subject matters which are directly about the political

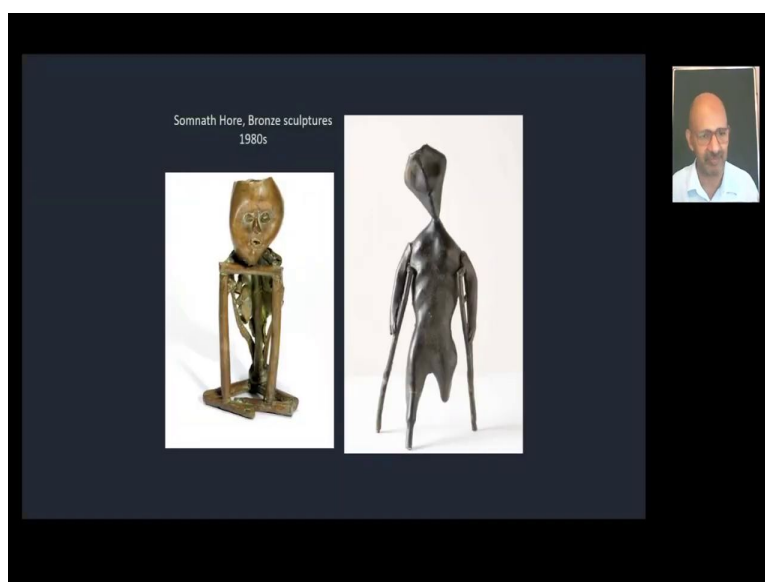
movements, political meetings, political gatherings, people planning uprisings, people planning revolts- things like that.

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In fact, even later, much later in the 80s and 90s and 70s Somnath Hore kept on recalling the pains of the society. He never forgot the pain and the sufferings he witnessed in the 1940s. For him despite all the changes we have witnessed later on in the society, certain sufferings and pains continued to be there around us. Therefore he never stopped depicting them.

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Even in 1980s in the bronze culture he kind of continued with this social concern, humanistic concern and it is this humanistic concern, with or without political commitment, with or without ideological commitment would continue to manifest itself in different artworks done by different artists not only in Calcutta or Santiniketan but entire India in the post-independent period. Thank you.