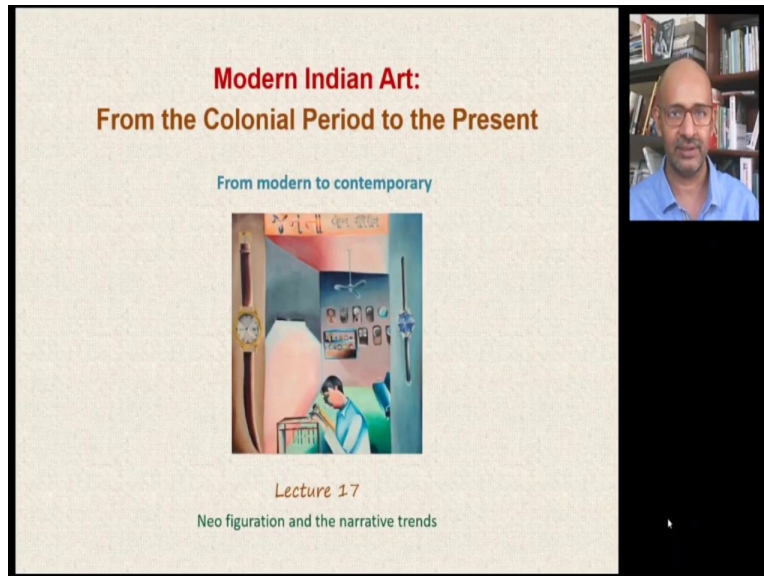


Modern Indian Art From the Colonial Period of the Present
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Lecture – 17
Neo Figuration and the Narrative Trends

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Hello viewers, welcome to MOOCs online course on Modern Indian Art From the Colonial Period to the Present. Today the seventeenth lecture from this series will be about the further developments in the area of figuration; which has always been one of the prime features of modern Indian art, or for that matter modern art of any part of the world. Though we do have a very pronounced category of abstract painting, we do have a very strong tradition of landscape painting by the Santiniketan artists and artists elsewhere.

But, we also have- in fact primarily modern Indian art history has to be traced by following the developments and the innovations, and the creative outputs, evident in the figuration. Now, why does figuration become very important? We know that primarily artists tend to use a human figure, the human body- male or female, grown up or children as their main motif to express their feelings and their responses to the time, to their own experiences. And by doing so they often sometimes become a little more descriptive, they want to tell more than what can be seen on the canvas.

And therefore some artists, not all become a little more descriptive leading to narrative. So, we have figuration in modern Indian art, where any story around them or within them is never

highlighted- that is not important. And there are paintings and sculptures- mostly paintings, where it is not just the expression of the figure but it is also the incidents, the events and the related incidents, the related events. Sometimes even the stories they contain become important as well.

So, we have a whole new trend- although diverse, full of diversities and variations; but a whole new trend, where each and every artist is dealing with the form and representation of the human figure. Completely afresh independently, with a remarkable individual style imprinted on the way they deal with the figuration.

And at the same time, we have some artists mainly active from 1970s and 1980s, who, not only dealt with the figuration, the idea of figuration as the main motif to express what they want to say, but also they would like to put and use certain additional features and elements, which make the figures little more vocal and therefore narrative. And we can see both these trends in relation to each other; so when we say this, this of course does not mean that we had never seen any figurative tendencies before. This is not to say that we have never seen any narrative tendencies before.

We have seen some superb figurative examples, with new ideas of figuration; which is different from the academic idea, different from the purely realistic representation. We have seen them, we have seen them in the hands of Rabindranath Tagore, we have seen them in many paintings by Abanindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, Ramkinkar, Benode Behari, Nandalal Bose and many others. But, what is important here is not just the figuration itself, but also the content.

Now, therefore, from 1940's we begin to see a new content that these figures upheld, and very importantly this new figurative styles; not style but styles. Because each artist is coming up with a signature style, with its own way of dealing with the figuration. How do you draw the figure, how do you paint the figure in a unique way; a style that you own- that you have authored and you have the full authority and authorship on that style. So, each figurative style eventually becomes associated with the artist, who has invented or who has created them.

So, we do have examples of figuration, new kinds of figuration; recall the sculptures by Ramkinkar Baij for example. And also the sculptures by many following sculptors from the later decades, who have mainly dealt with figures, but, not at all conforming to the academic norms,

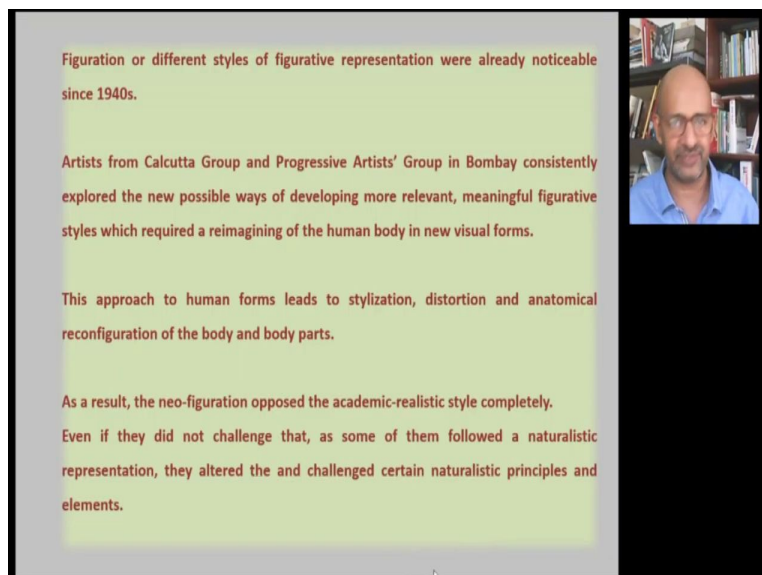
not realistic norms. And once you decide that you are not going to conform to the academic norms, you are left with what? You are left with certain possibilities of innovating your own figures, therefore you tend to stylize; therefore you tend to exaggerate.

You may also use the word distortion- though distortion is a derogatory term, and usually I would like to avoid that term, and replace it with more positive terms- elongation, exaggeration; playing with the body parts in different ways according to the formal demands of a painting -things like that. But, by and large the stylistic search was very important behind this kind of figurations.

Now, in 40s we have also seen new kind of figurative representations by the very important socially conscious artists of 1940s like Zainul Abideen, like Chittprosad, Somnath Hore, who have not only drawn the figures just as they saw, but we know that each figure they have drawn or Somnath Hore later sculpted- also carried some anecdotes, some stories, some narrations; stories not produced by the artist, not literal stories but life stories.

So, therefore we have a narrative figurative trend and we also have a figurative trend where narration is not important; but the feeling, the expression is more important than anything else. So, let us see how these ideas unfolded in the history of modern Indian art after the 1940s.

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Figuration or different styles of figurative representation were already noticeable since 1940s.

Artists from Calcutta Group and Progressive Artists' Group in Bombay consistently explored the new possible ways of developing more relevant, meaningful figurative styles which required a reimagining of the human body in new visual forms.

This approach to human forms leads to stylization, distortion and anatomical reconfiguration of the body and body parts.

As a result, the neo-figuration opposed the academic-realistic style completely. Even if they did not challenge that, as some of them followed a naturalistic representation, they altered the and challenged certain naturalistic principles and elements.

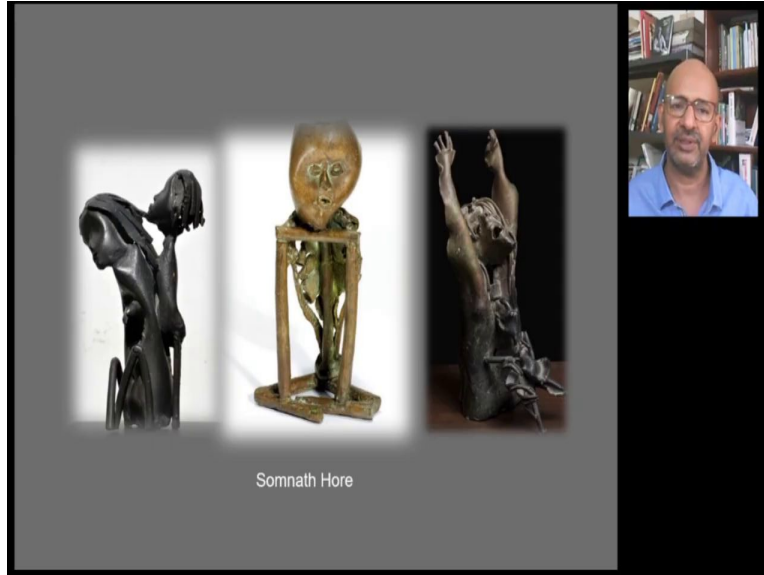
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So, new figuration and the narrative trends can be seen as something like an extension and also an alteration of what was happening before. Because, in the 1940s, figuration or different styles of figurative representation were already noticeable, very clearly. And we know that artists from Calcutta group and Progressive Artists Group in Bombay, consistently explored the new possible ways of developing more relevant, meaningful figurative styles; which required a reimagining of the human body in new visual forms.

This approach to human forms leads to stylization, it leads to distortion- though a negative term; and it also relates to anatomical reconfiguration of the body and the body parts, in terms of what you think is proper for you. So, that is more like an aesthetic decision than anything else.

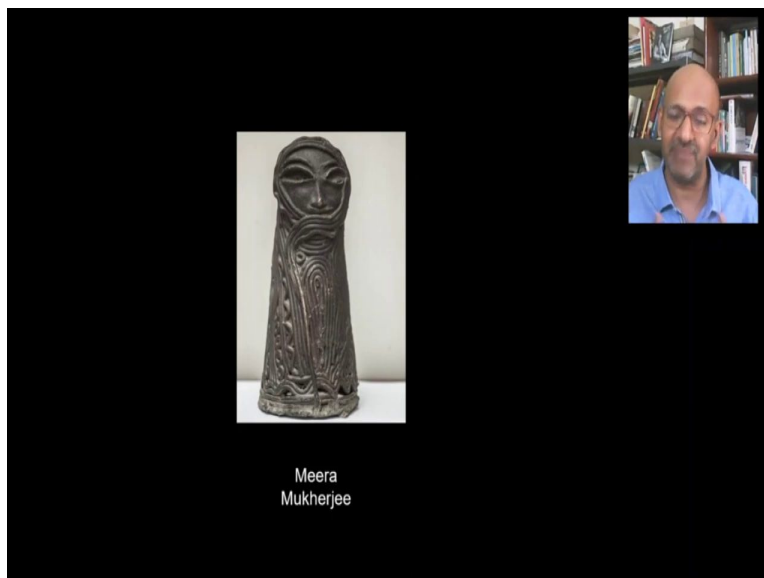
So, as a result the new figuration opposed the academic realistic style completely, after new figuration entailed stylization; which obviously look very non-realistic, even if they did not challenge that as some of them did follow a naturalistic representation, for example, Bikash Bhattacharya from Calcutta in 1960's, 70's, 80's. But they did alter and they did challenge certain naturalistic principles and elements. Therefore, if you go back to Bikash Bhattacharya's paintings, we saw before I think in lecture number fifteen, you will see that though his paintings appear to be very straight forward realistic, almost bordering on photographic realism, yet, his figures are pretty unnatural and that is a shock, you get a shock; and there is a reason why he gives a shock, to say something that is very crude, something that is very shocking, unnerving et-cetera.

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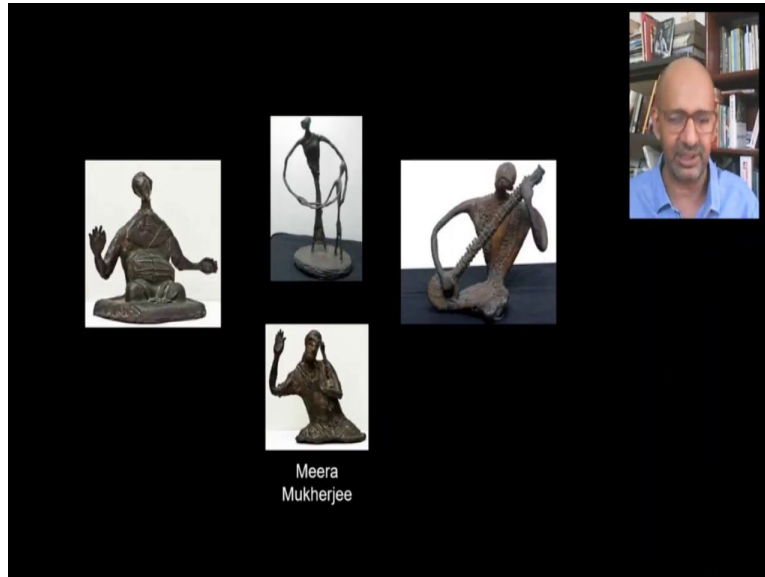
Now, coming back to the new figuration, it is true that we have already seen absolutely remarkable visual ideas of figure. Of course, with an intention driven by certain content, for example, Somnath Hore sculptures; where either it is the hunger or it is deep suffering or pain, which are the main driving forces behind this kind of figuration.

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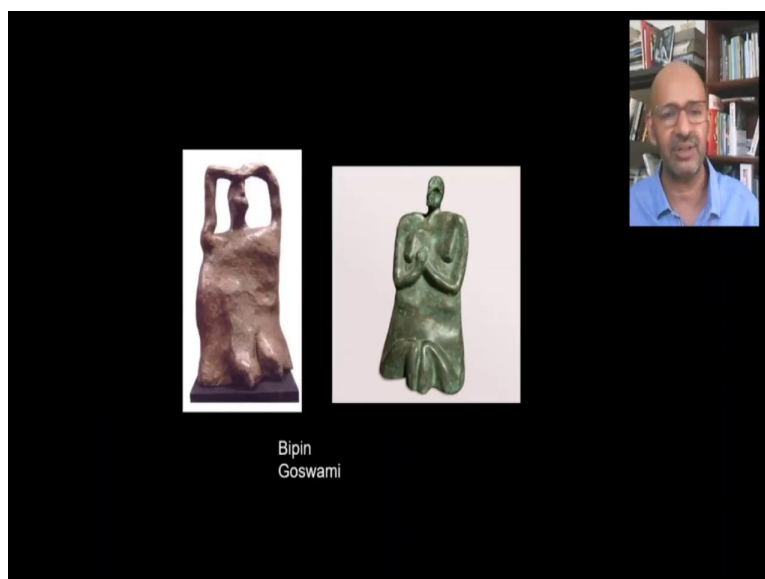
We have seen such sculptures by Meera Mukherjee, where a figuration becomes almost a motif for an idea, for some idea that is deeply rooted in Indian culture.

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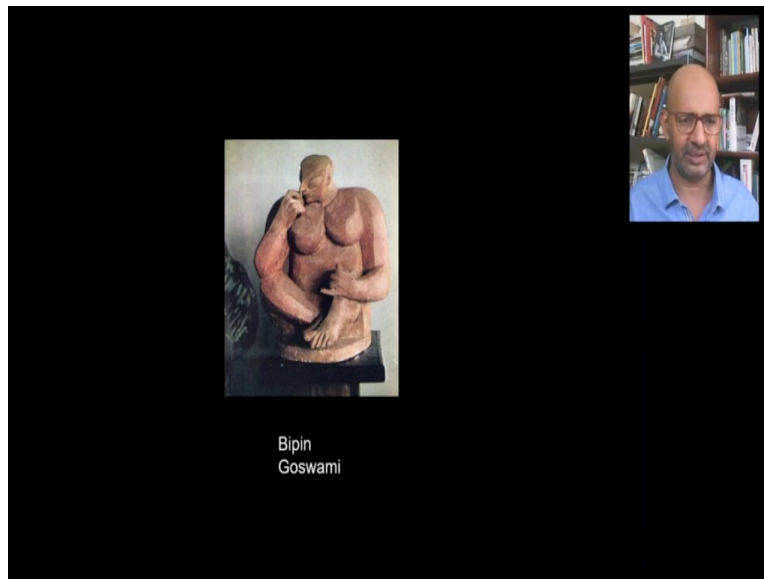
So, therefore when Meera Mukherjee executes these sculptures- figurative sculptures, and when she takes the freedom, the liberty, the aesthetic liberty of extending the arms, elongating the human bodies, deliberately breaking down or altering the naturalistic proportions, she is certainly having an intention and that intention is obviously to introduce some fluidity in the form, some lyrical quality in the form which may not be possible by following a strict academic realistic representation. So, new figuration becomes more and more innovative as it moves away from the academic, naturalistic mode.

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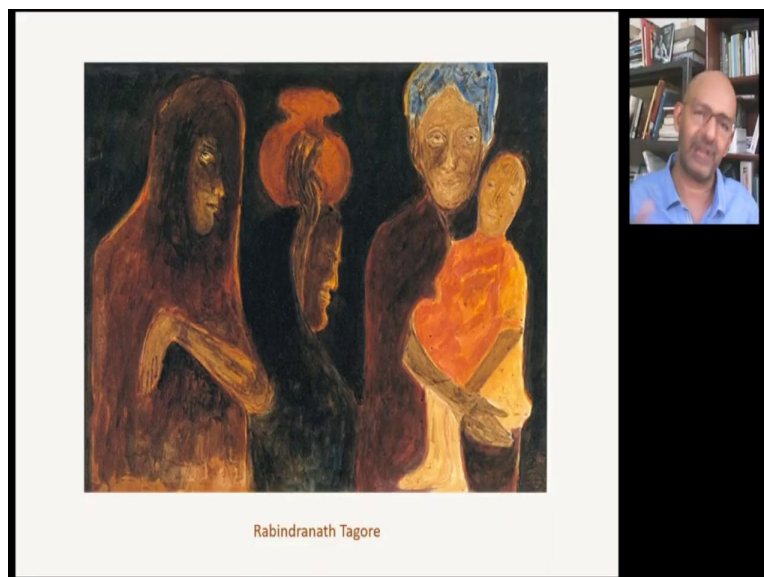
Similarly, when you look at the works by this very famous sculptor Bipin Goswami. Again, while you can clearly identify the figures but, you can also see how these sculptures are more than mere identification. These sculptures are trying to give birth to a new idea of figure, not a realistic figure; but a sculptural figure, which can actually convey certain ideas of human existence, human feeling, human emotions; which again may not be possible if you are strictly following a realistic academic mode.

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Now, if you look at this kind of figures, again, you know that figuration is becoming the art. It is not the content but how you are reproducing a human figure without merely replicating it in a naturalistic way.

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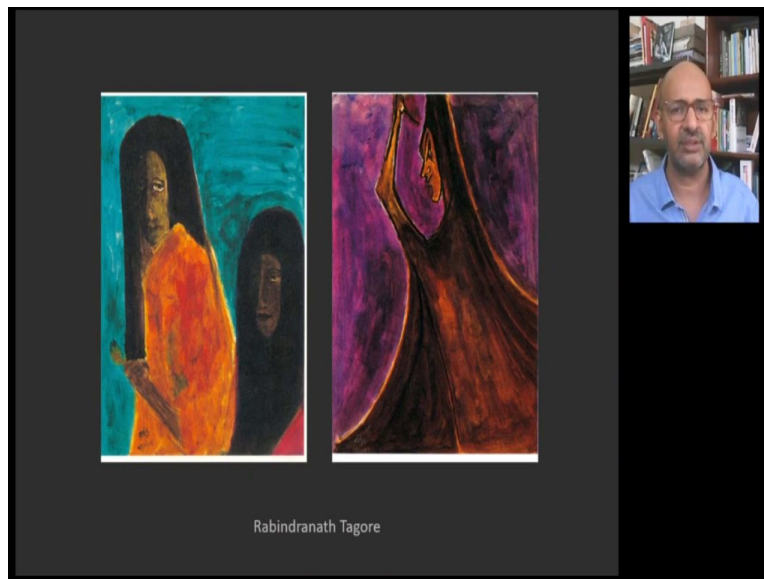


We know that way back before 1940, Rabindranath had already done that in his innumerable, almost more than two thousand paintings. Repeatedly Rabindranath had exercised his own

aesthetic freedom and produced highly innovative creative figuration; which never conformed to any academic norm.

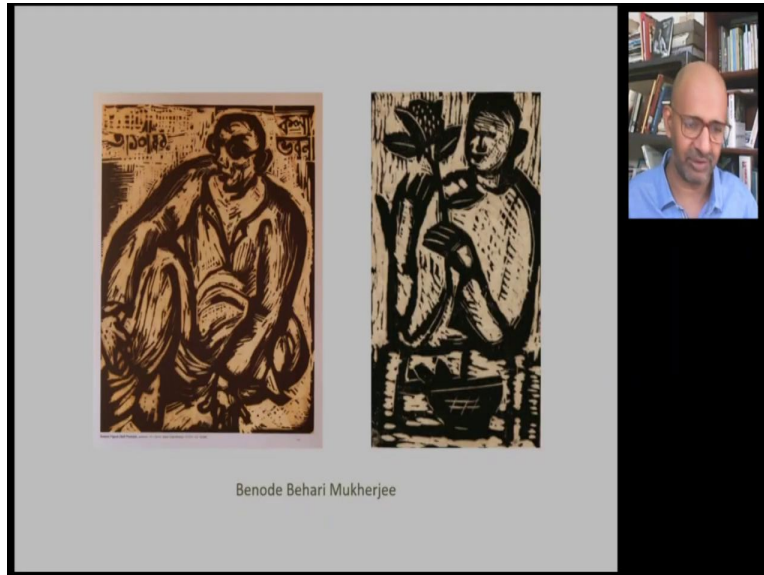
But, they do become very potential figuration, very potential motifs because they express a lot. We do not know exactly what these figures express, but we know they do express, they create a communication between you, the viewers and the painted figures over there.

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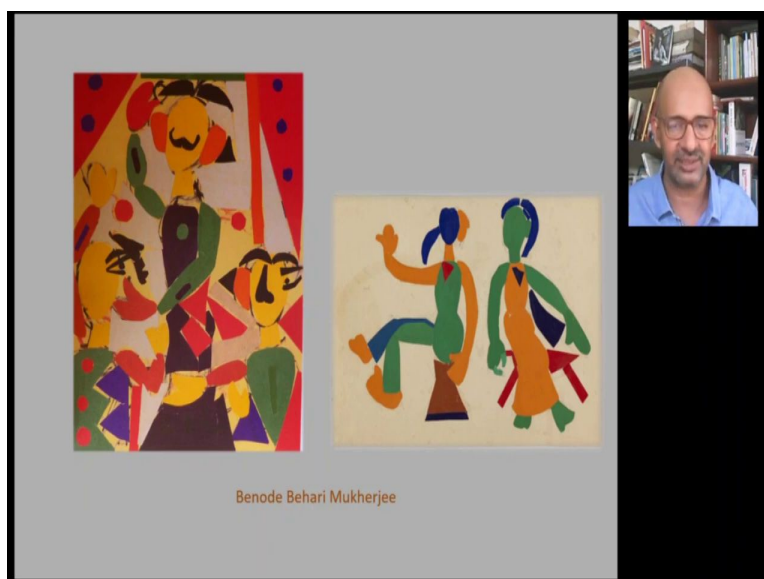
So, you can see so many of his paintings actually gave birth to absolutely new figurative ideas; which was completely unknown in India at that point of time.

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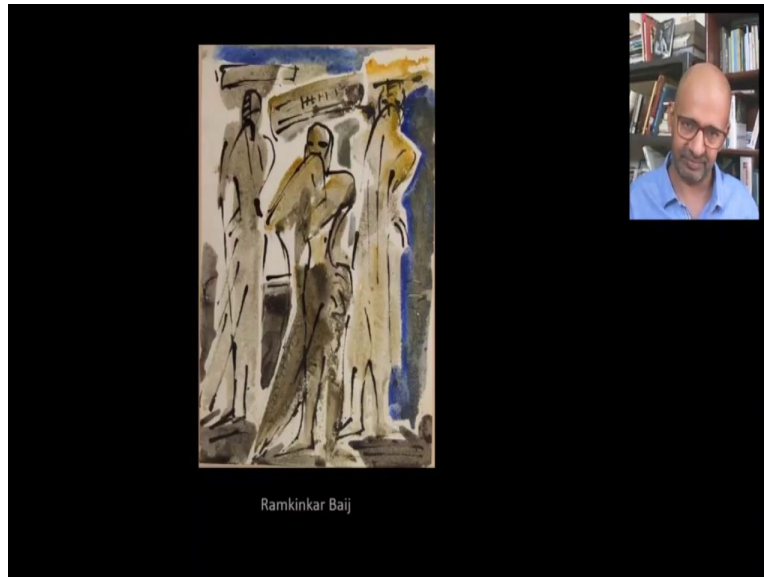
Even Benode Behari Mukherjee for that matter- though subject matters not for Tagore but for Binode Behari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar could be something very real. But, instead of going for realistic representation, they create slightly imaginative figures and that is the point when figuration begins to emerge as a new form of expression. You have an observation but you are not completely surrendering to the observation. You are also having an imagination; you are also having your own mediums and tools to play with the imagination. And thereby arriving at completely new ideas of imagination, and that gets reflected in your figuration.

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Even in these collages made by Binode Behari Mukherjee also lend themselves to new ideas of figuration.

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Ramkinkar Baij, of course for him it is a human energy; not only human energy it is the energy of nature. In combination of course the human energy that he always wanted to address in his paintings. Therefore not neatly contoured, detailed human representation, but, quickly done, absolutely forceful and highly energetic representation of human figures lend themselves to again a different idea of figuration. So, from 1940'-s figuration is no more about a very realistic representation; it is all about a very imaginative representation of human figures.

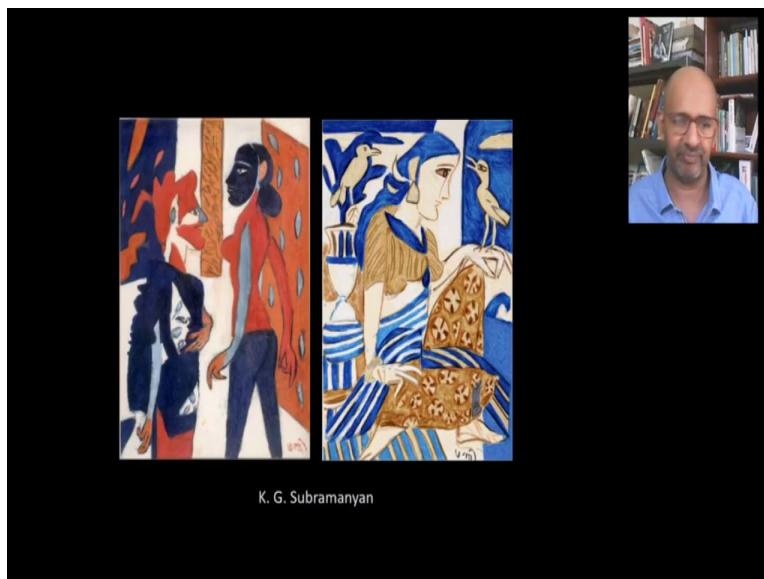
So, it is not only on the basis of observation, there is a very obvious combination between observation and an artist's own imaginative mind. So, one has to imagine one's own figures on the canvas, which is not entirely based on observation; but also based on conceptualizations. How are you exactly conceptualizing the figures?

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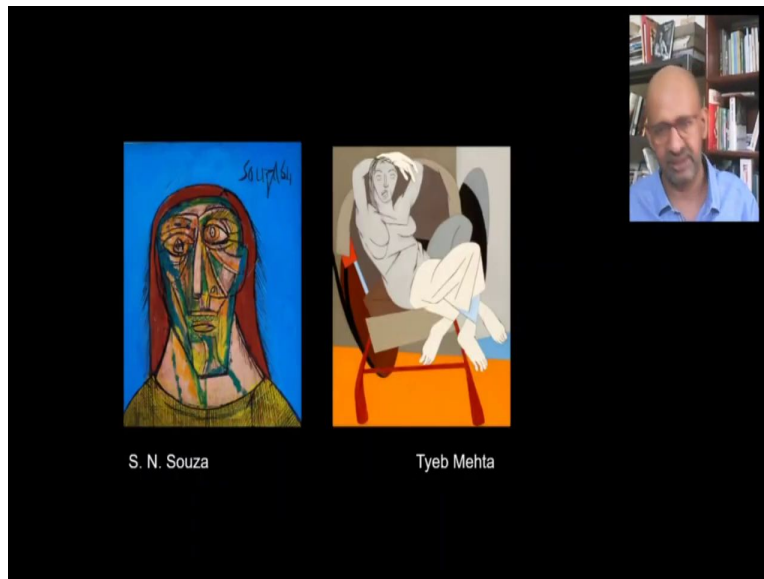
So, in these new figurations, there are many artists who played very important roles of whom you have already seen works by M. F. Hussain.

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You have already seen a few works by K.G. Subramanyan.

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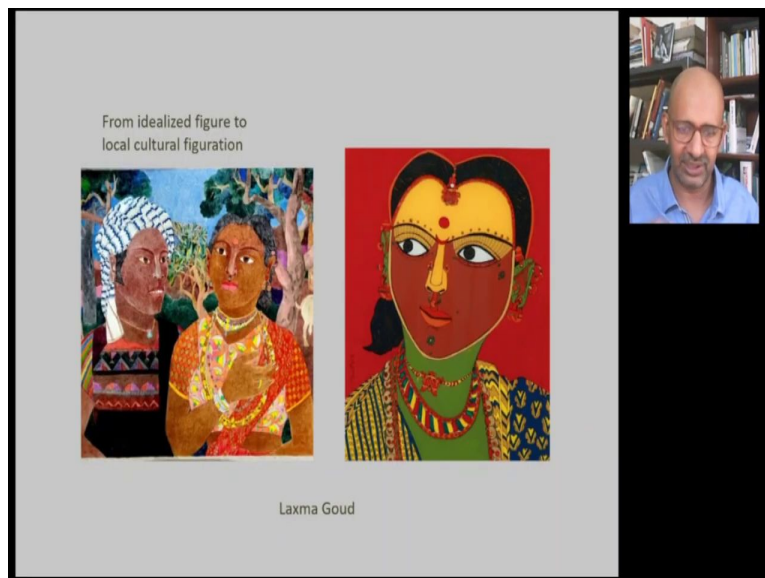
You have seen Souza, Tyeb Mehta. I am repeating these artists though we have seen their works in previous lectures. But, I am repeating them only to recall the fact that this new figuration we are talking about, has already started in the 1940's by these artists. And this approach to figuration not in terms of style, but simply in terms of this freedom that you do not have to conform to academic realism anymore. This very idea gives a lot of liberty, freedom and therefore creative energy to many artists who explore newer possibilities of figuration; and thereby arriving at their individual stylistic choices and decisions.

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Tyeb Mehta once again.

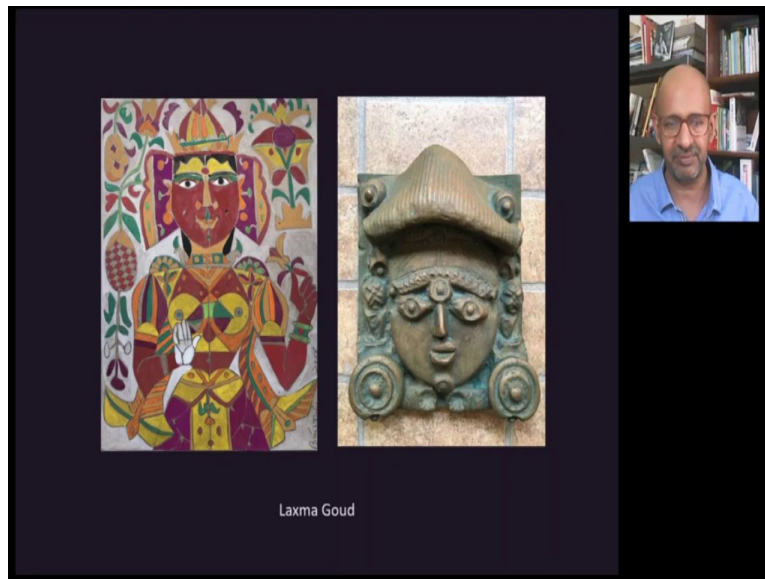
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Now, for example Laxma Goud an artist, who hails from Andhra Pradesh would build up his figuration on the basis of the local, rural culture. So, his figuration is based on observation, but again stylistically, not realistic. It is based on imagination, it is based on decorative elements; it is also based on a certain idea of the power of the rural woman and man. So, figuration actually moves away from the idealized figures, although individual the idealized figure or figuration we have seen in the works of Tyeb Mehta and Souza, and Hussain. So, they move away from that

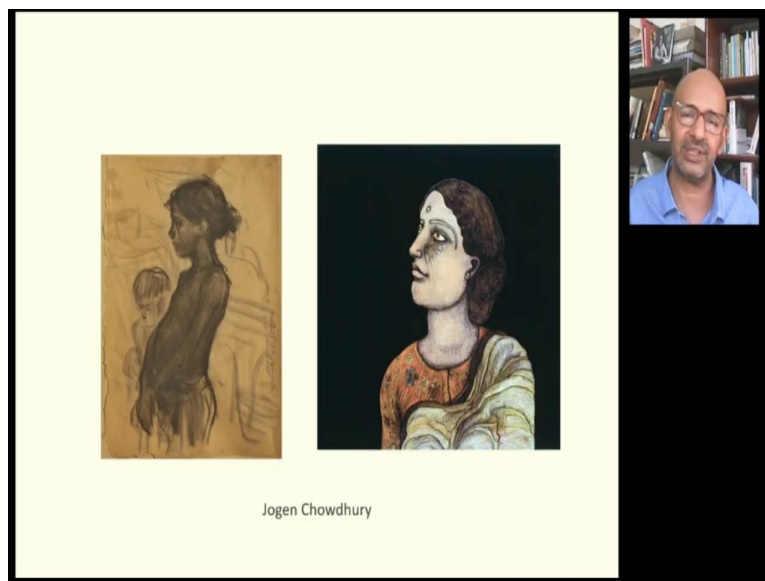
idealization of figure to more local cultural figuration; that your figuration will almost breathe and smell the local culture- though may not be realistic at all.

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So, we have Laxma Goud who worked on the basis of certain local cultural ideas of figuration.

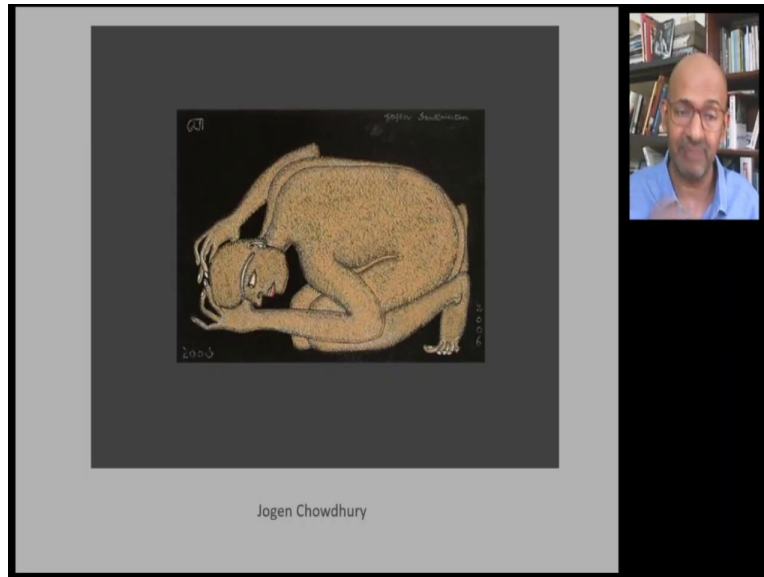
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And then we have somebody like Jogen Chowdhury, who was in Delhi and later on moved to Santiniketan and also in Kolkata. So, on the left hand side you see one of those academic studies and practices that everybody had to go through in their Art collage; Jogen Chowdhury also had to go through.

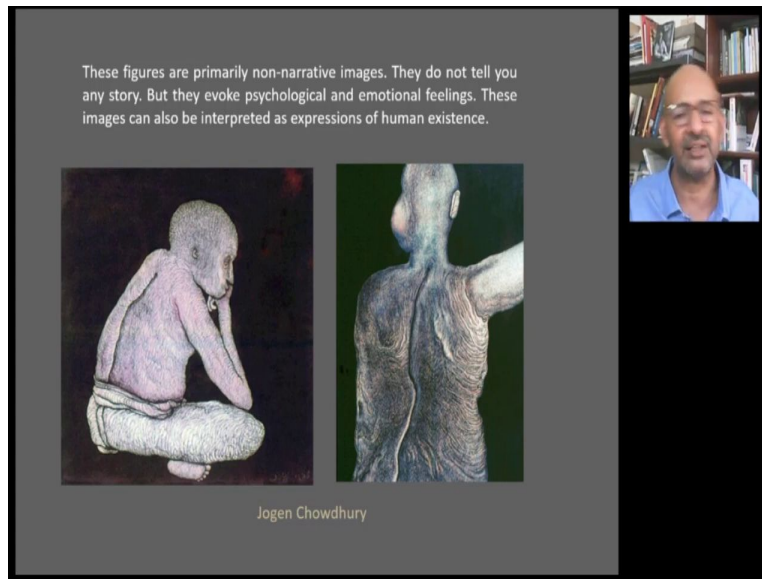
And then there was a shift, so I am deliberately keeping these two works side by side, to highlight this point, that for a stylized figuration, many artists had to actually pass from a deeply focused and engaging academic practice to a stylization. So, this figuration did not actually come out of the blue. In most cases whether it is Jogen Chowdhury or Bikas Bhattacharya or Ganesh Pyne or anybody from his generation; would certainly have a very strong academic background.

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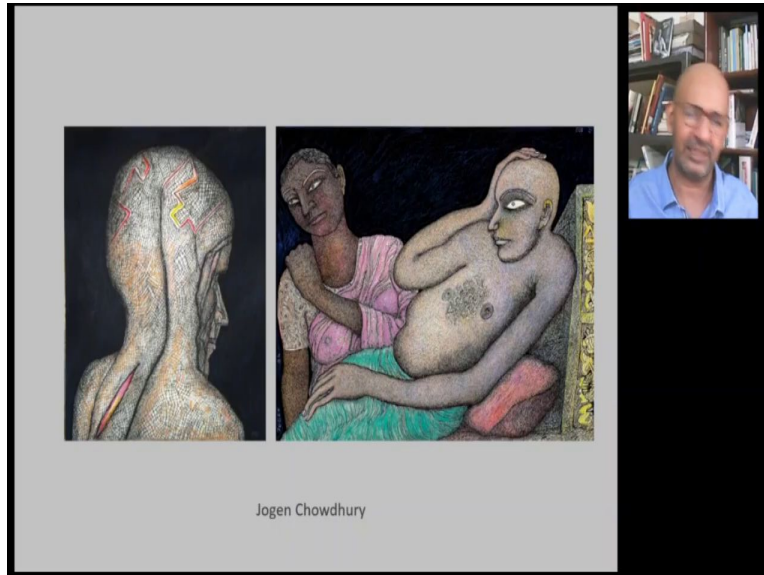
But, then this was a deliberate choice that they wanted to shift, move away from a pure academic representation to a more expressive representation which entailed stylization, exaggeration which entailed different norms of anatomical reconfiguration. And these norms are not given, not institutional, not academic.

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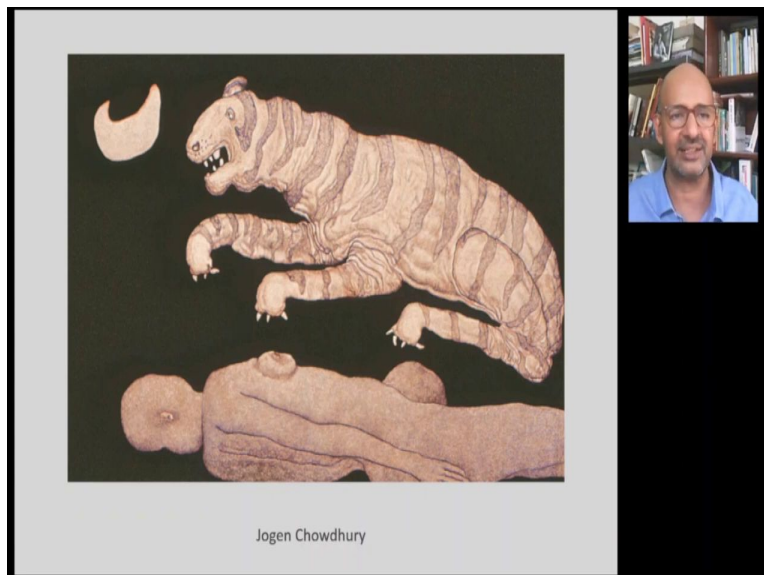
These norms of figurations are entirely coming from the artist's idea, imagination et-cetera. So, these figures are primarily non-narrative images, this is very important at this moment of our discussion that till now we are looking at images; which are non-narrative. Do not go for a story in these images, but look at the images; you feel the expression, you trace the process of imaging. And also try to touch the psychological and emotional feelings these images are trying to evoke. And of course as a viewer, as a student, student of art we should feel free to interpret this figuration that is one thing.

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But, later on in a few paintings by Jogen Chowdhury and many other paintings by other artists, whom we shall discuss under the category of narrative paintings; we shall see that despite the fact that in most of these paintings painted by Jogen Chowdhury, the figures occupy an unspecified, a non-specific space; there is no other reference. But, still they seem to be containing some tale, some narration which is not very specific, very clear.

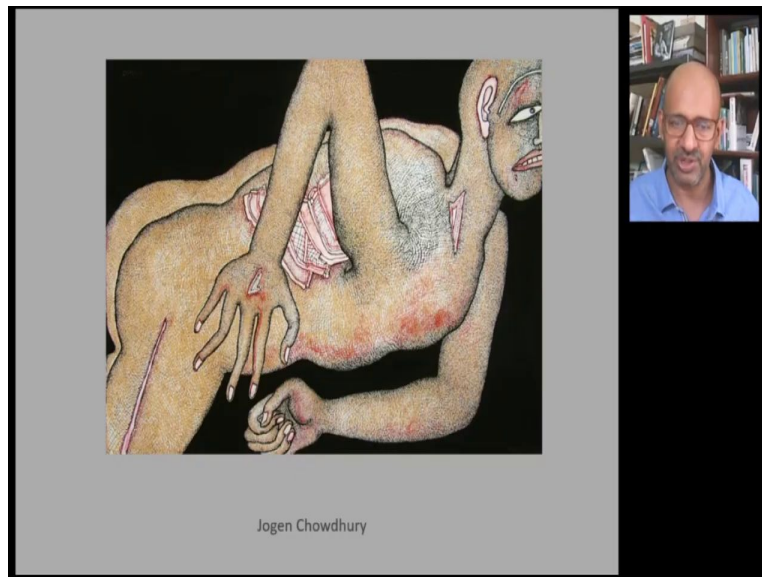
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So, there is no narration as such in this painting, but clearly it is a juxtaposition of these three motifs. A leaping tiger and a moon and a reclining figure; that all these three motifs together

form a particular and extremely powerful and strong imagery, which is left to us individually to interpret. So, interpretation is not given in this kind of painting.

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We really do not know which wounds Chowdhury is talking about; what kind of blood he is referring to. But, definitely this image does not represent, but it refers to some wounded figure; figure or wounded humanity. So, this is up to us to interpret and because the interpretation is open; at least the artist wanted to keep it open. Therefore, the background is completely non-specific, deep black without any specific reference.

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Figures gradually lend themselves to descriptive details.

Figures do not inhabit an undefined space any more.

Human beings are now situated in a descriptive space with details of an environment, location, situation.

With all the details together they tend to weave a sequence of tales.

Therefore, the images become narrative and one can often relate them to specific time and place.

Narrative paintings are empowered with a new power to relate the images to the immediate world, daily life and even metaphors from the mythical past.

However, these narrative images are never linear in character. They are complex in composition and they touch upon multiple layers

Now, slowly we shall see from the 1980's, figures would gradually lend themselves to descriptive details; figures do not inhabit an undefined space any more. In the case of narrative paintings, even the background space will have a lot of details with which we can associate and relate.

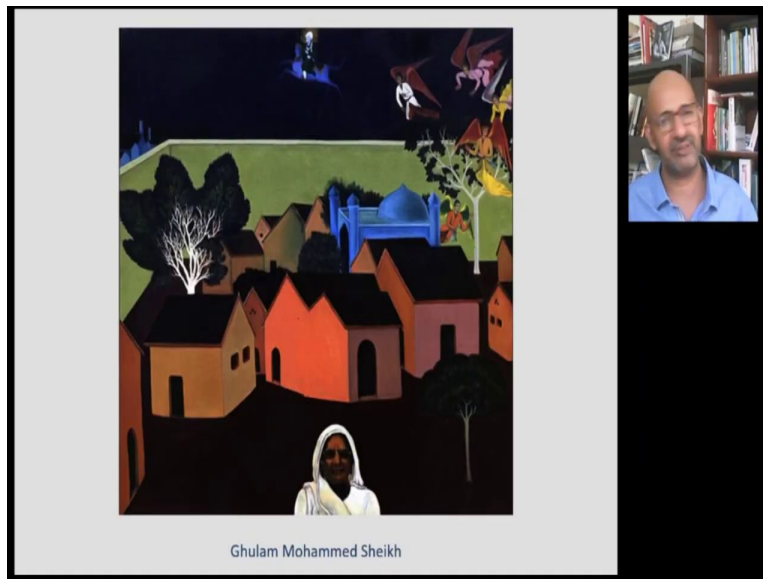
Human beings are now situated in a descriptive space with details of an environment, location, situation. With all the details together they tend to weave a sequence of tales. So, the tales are not necessarily given, but there are details, there are threads; with which you can weave a tale. And the tendency is of course to tell the viewers not one, but maybe many stories.

Therefore, the images become narrative and the one can often relate them to specific time and place unlike Jogen Chowdhury's drawings for example or many other drawings like the paintings by Souza or Tyeb Mehta's paintings where it is difficult to situate the figures in a given or a known social context or real life context. It is so black, so non-specific, some neutral background; but in case of narrative paintings, the backgrounds will contain a lot of details, a lot of narrative clues.

So, narrative paintings are empowered with a new power to relate the images to the immediate world, the daily life, the surrounding atmosphere, even metaphors from the mythical past. Sometimes they would do that, play with the now that is the present time with a few motifs from the past, the mythical past; and create multiple layers of narration.

So, that is what the last statement tries to say that however these narrative images are never linear in character. They are complex in composition and they touch upon multiple layers, therefore multiple narratives. So, if we are looking for a single story in these narrative paintings; probably we will be disappointed.

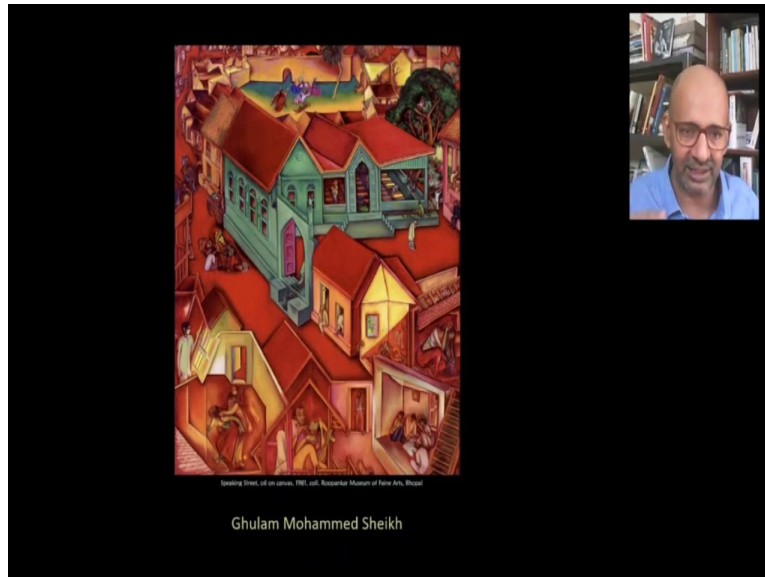
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So, let us not look for a single story, let us look for multiple stories in the narrative paintings by Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Bhupen Khakhar, Nilima Sheikh and Sudhir Patwardhan, many others. But, we will have a selected group of artists, for example, Gulam Mohammed Sheikh. So, I am not describing the paintings right at this moment that will take a lot of time. But, what I am trying to say, even if you do not know the background of the painting, you do not know the exact context of the painting, but, by looking at the elements, by looking at the motifs you can weave a story of your own.

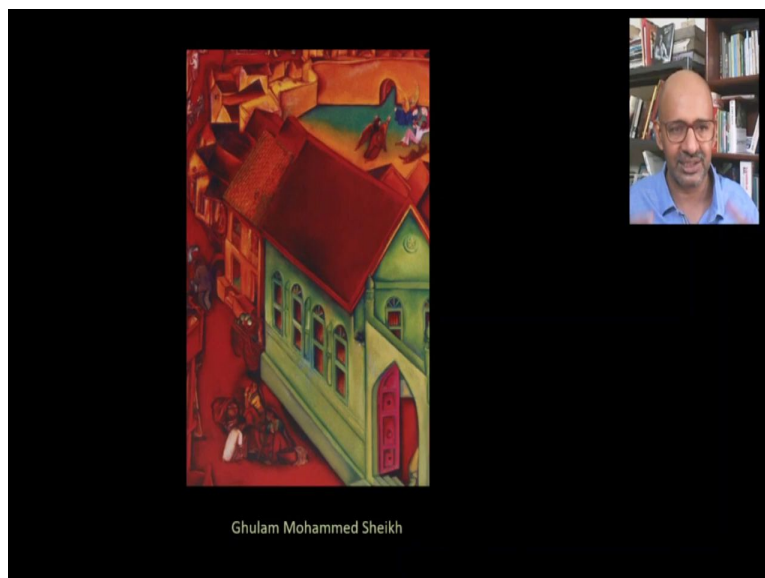
This possibility is I will not say not there in Jogen Chowdhury's paintings; it was there. But, the clues were highly reduced or almost no clue; but here the clues in terms of detail.

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And I would also say cultural clues, so you can almost identify some of these buildings, some of these people whom you see over there. You can identify the gestures; you can identify the characters, and also the social atmosphere; which are specific, not vague or non-specific. And that is why these paintings tend to become narrative.

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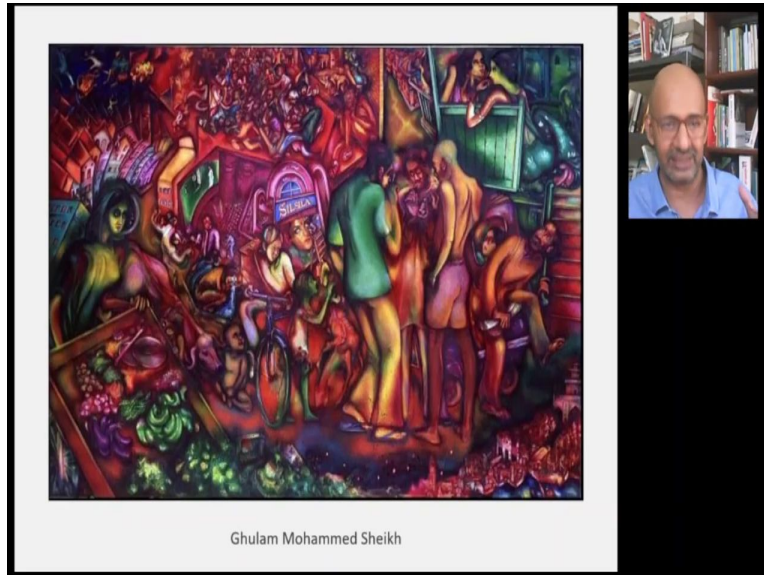
I mean look at these details. This is clearly not one story, but it is about several stories unfolding themselves at several layers of life; and also of our locality, our town, our villages, et-cetera. Now, how do you capture that?

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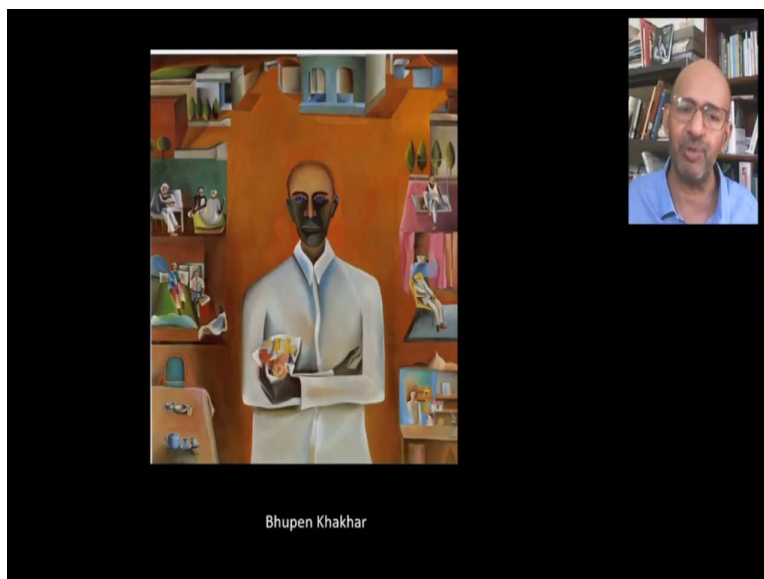
In order to capture this multiple stories, multiple voices, multiple layers of experiences; people like Gulam Sheikh, Bhupen Khakhar and many others. They followed certain compositional styles, which lend themselves to multiple divisions of spaces. And therefore, there is no way that you get stuck to a linear compositional pattern, and therefore linear narrative pattern. Multiple narratives can be incorporated within their compositional structure.

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Whether you know this story or not; we will know at least you can see that so many things, actions actually happening in the same painting at different corners. Which means this one painting, one composition is not necessarily telling you the incidence of one time or one space. Several times, across several times, across several spaces; these stories are emerging but from one single canvas. So, Gulam Sheikh and his associates, many others- they kind of perfected this art of multiple narration. But, not necessarily in more than one canvas, maybe in just one single canvas.

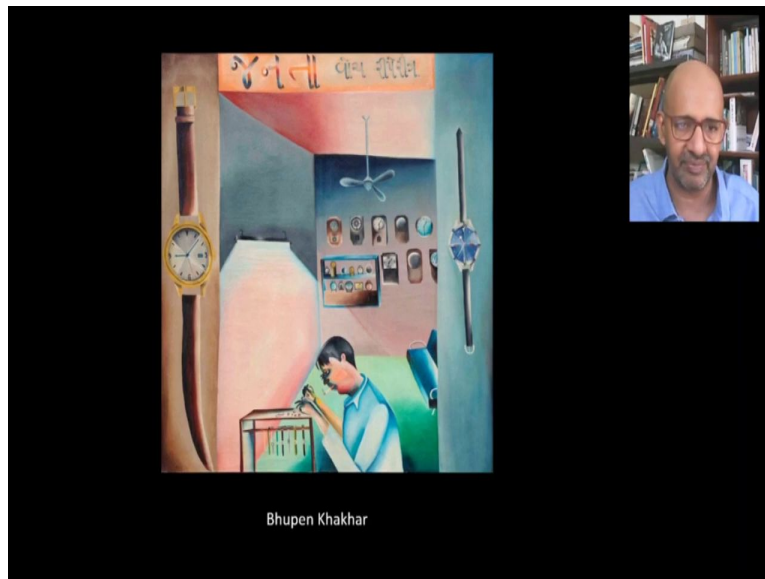
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Then we have Bhupen Khakhar who sourced his subject matters mostly from the most ordinary features and scenes and visuals and happenings of daily life. And therefore, in many of his paintings you see absolutely ordinary actions, ordinary gestures, ordinary situations; but, painted in a slightly fragmented way, not necessarily within one single perspective composition.

Bhupen Khakhar could actually focus, highlight or take certain motifs back into the painting. Create spatial depth, everything with a certain kind of naivete, with a certain kind of innocence; which made his paintings look, appear and certainly they are. Very easy to communicate and see. Also because of the subject matter.

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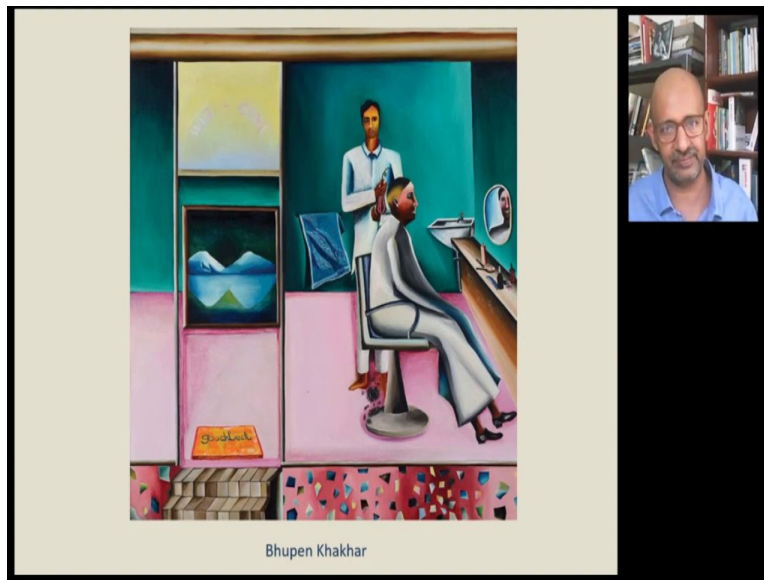
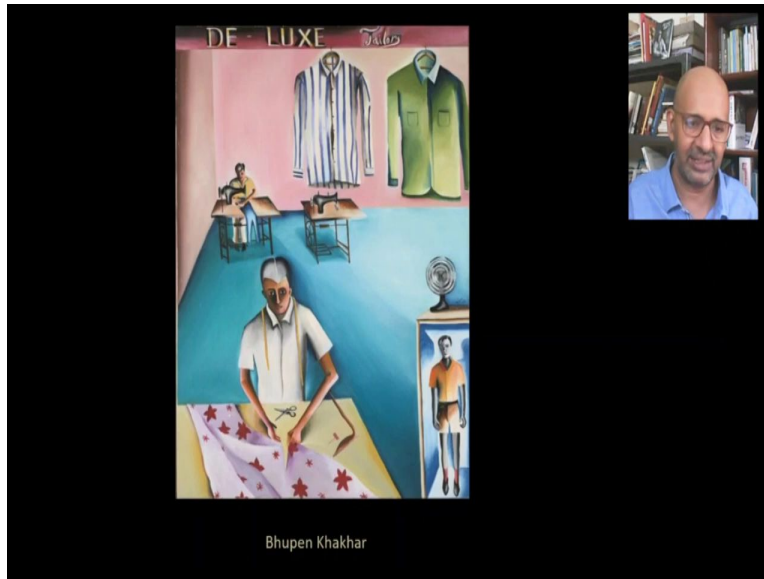
For example, the man who is repairing the watches, so this is a shop which sells clocks and wrist watches. And here is a man who is totally focusing on his job that is watch repair.

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Now, interestingly that this could be a subject matter for art; it was almost unthinkable in the previous era. Slowly it got accepted.

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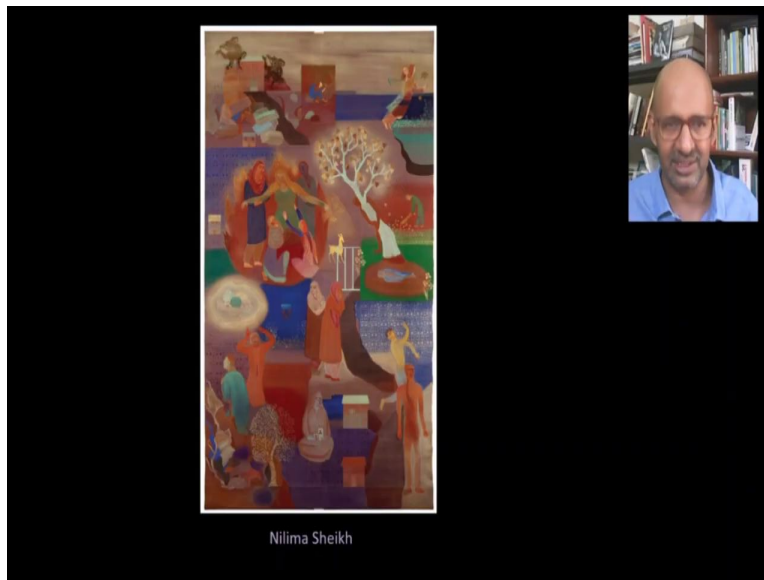
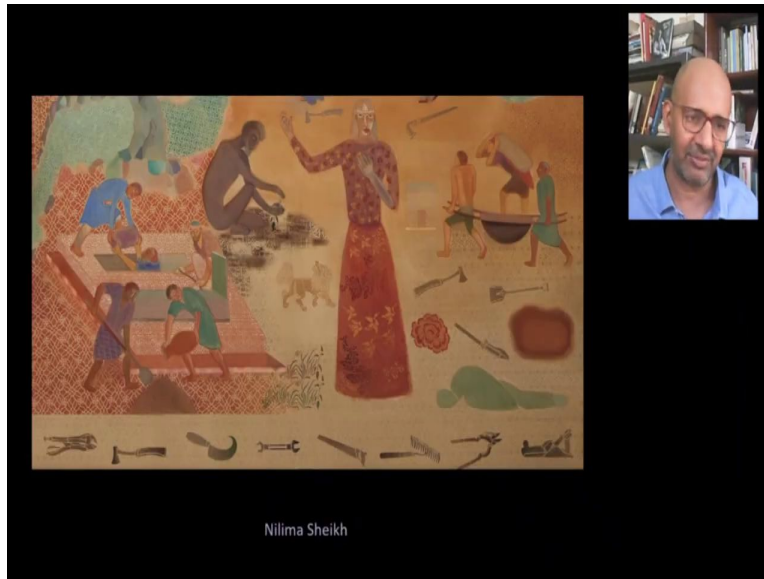


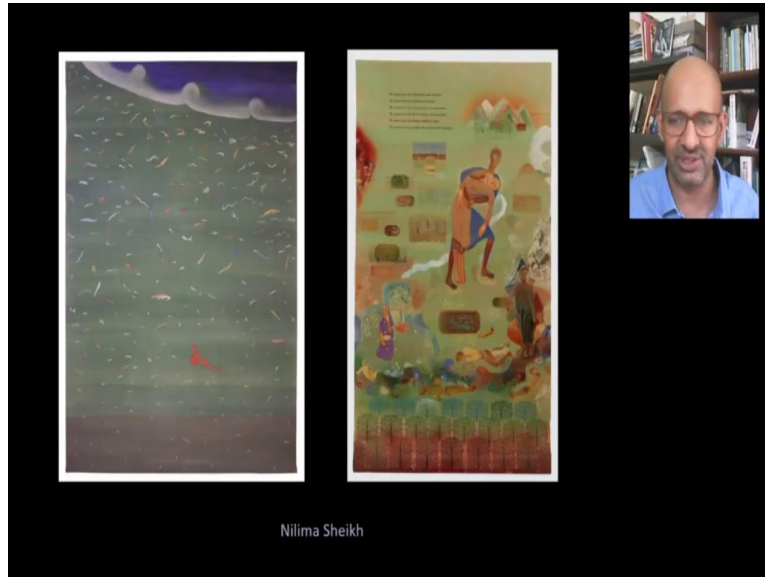


People like Bhupen Khakhar made these subject matters, whether it is a watch repair shop or a tailor shop; that this very very ordinary subject like this could also be a subject matter for a serious art. And Bhupen Khakhar not only makes narrative paintings, but through these narrative devices he also introduces our life at its most ordinary level, ordinariness.

Usually Bhupen Khakhar's paintings in his paintings you do not find very heroic persons, you find most ordinary people coming from ordinary life and like this saloon or this huge space ,inside which you find small small pockets of life; and it is these lives that we are referring to as narratives. Not necessarily a literal narrative that you get to know one single story sequence by sequence. No, it is the existence of life narratives in different compartments and parts of one single painting.

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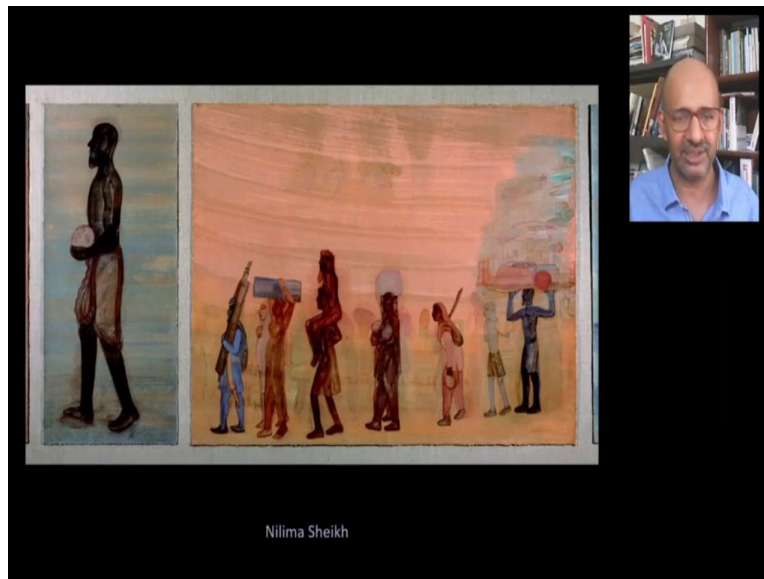




And then you have a brilliant artist Nilima sheikh, who is also from Baroda; by the way Bhupen Khakhar was also from Baroda, Gulam Sheikh is also from Baroda. Now, here you can clearly see that Nilima Sheikh is also using the devices of multiple narratives. She is also using different motifs and forms from different past art, traditional art, historical arts.

But, ultimately building up her own story or for that matter this one; this one single painting having multiple stories, multiple details, unfolding themselves in multiple compartments and spaces. This is one of the salient features of narrative art; that it does not usually try to tell you one single story in one single frame. It usually tries to refer to various incidents happenings stories within one or two canvases and frames but by breaking up the space into multiple compartments and pockets.

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This is also a wonderful painting by Nilima Sheikh where through a very simple motif she is actually able to show one very poignant slice of life, a situation of life when human beings are forced to migrate, leave their homes, and move on to the unknown world.

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Now, we have another brilliant artist from Bombay- Sudhir Patwardhan, who straightforwardly addressed and represented the street scenes of Bombay. Very local visuals and visual experiences that we see in our neighborhood, particularly the middle class Indian families in Bombay;

whether they are inside bus or on a Bajaj scooter or inside a house or in the kitchen, or in their bedroom or in their living room, anywhere.

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So, these kinds of paintings by Sudhir Patwardhan are narrative in the sense, they narrate experiences we are all familiar with as Indians.

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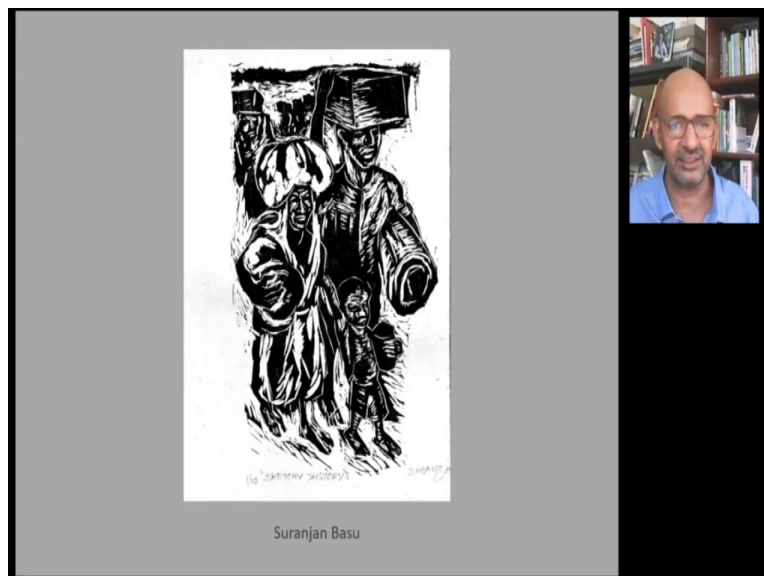
So, in terms of colour, the motif, the figuration and the details his paintings are very much local.

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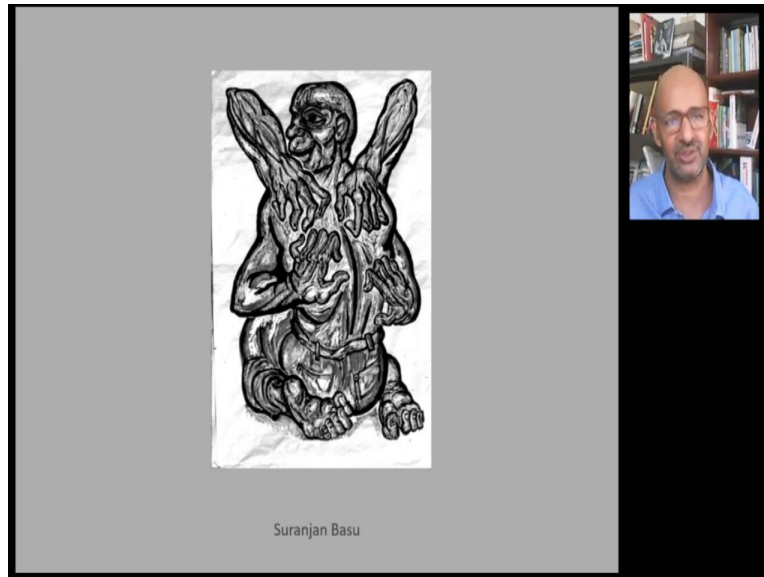
Sometimes it is incidental like this accident on the street; but it is such a daily and a regular incident to happen on Indian streets, that this has become very banal, very ordinary; yet at that moment all attention is drawn towards this man, who is a victim of an accident. But, the rest of the environment remains as it is like any other city of India. So, Sudhir Patwardhan's paintings actually carry not just the details of a story but also the background.

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Now, here we have lastly another artist who is of course somebody belonging to a much later generation. His name is Suranjan Basu, he worked in the 90's and early part of this century; mostly in the late 80's and 90's. And his figures are also narrative because they directly talk about certain life experiences of certain social classes. For example, here you can clearly see that this picture is all about again the migration of the poor people, and the next one.

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Here you can see Suranjan Basu again doing a strange figure with four hands, which is absurd; you cannot have four hands. But, because of the narrative intent, he puts four hands belonging to one single body, one single human being. So, that when you scratch your back, your two hands are not enough; you need four hands. Of course, it is narrative and of course it is satirical, so narrative art cannot be understood in terms of just one dimension.

Sometimes it is or very obviously social, sometimes it could be political, sometimes it could be satirical, sometimes it can have some mythical associations. But, nevertheless there is a deep and sincere urge to describe and tell the stories of life, mostly contemporary life. That is what narrative paintings generally are all about. Thank you.