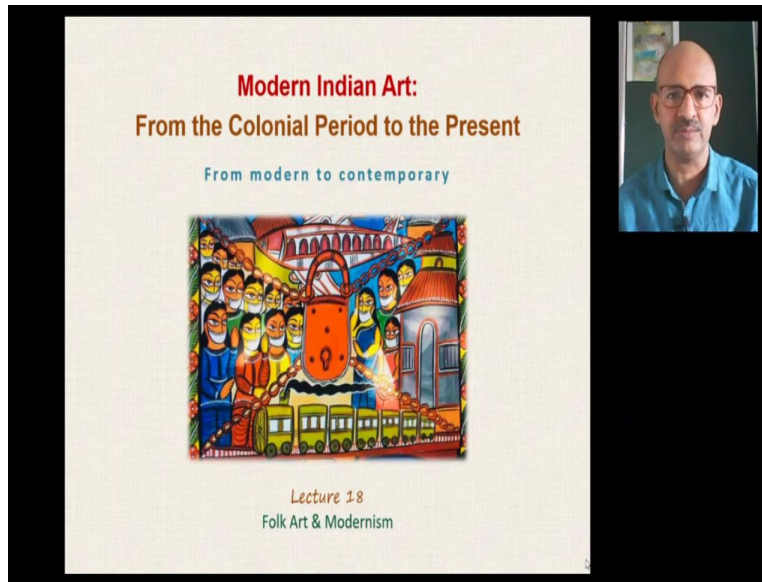


Modern Indian Art From the Colonial Period to the Present
Professor Soumik Nandy Majumdar
Department History of Art, Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan
Visva-Bharati
Lecture 18
Folk Art & Modernism

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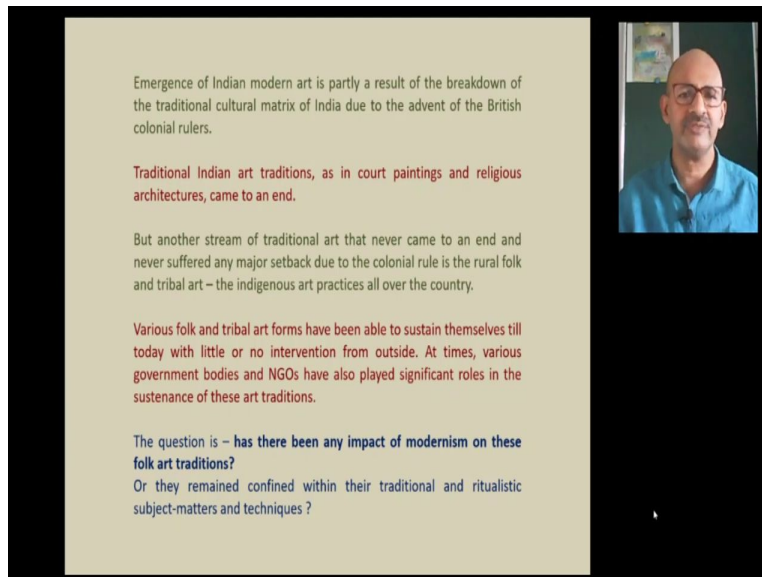
Hello viewers, welcome to MOOCs online course on Modern Indian Art From the Colonial Period to the Present .Throughout this course till the last one that is the lecture number 17th, we have been mostly looking at the developments of modern Indian art in mainstream history.

Now, we know that in terms of the wider cultural matrix of India beside the mainstream culture, we also have a very rich tradition of folk culture, tribal culture- that is in other words, indigenous cultures. They also have their own visual art traditions. Almost every nook and corner of India, we find a very powerful, conventional and long age-old tradition of visual art, performance, music, oral literature, tapestry, weaving, pottery, sculpture, what not.

Now, when we talk about modernism in art in India we often do not look at that part of Indian culture because the general conception is whereas the modernity or the modern art we are talking about is mostly based in different cities of India, so far we have been talking about Kolkata, Bombay, Delhi, Madras, but apart from these cities this urban-centric art, we also have village-centric art traditions. The rural arts that is, the folk art or tribal art.

So, the question is-is there any possibility of these folk and tribal art traditions, that is, the rural art traditions to receive any impact or impression of modernism or it is only meant for the urban art practices? So, today we are going to address this question and we will be looking at a few examples of folk art where we do find a very strong and visible impact of modernism of contemporary elements in their works of art.

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Emergence of Indian modern art is partly a result of the breakdown of the traditional cultural matrix of India due to the advent of the British colonial rulers.

Traditional Indian art traditions, as in court paintings and religious architectures, came to an end.

But another stream of traditional art that never came to an end and never suffered any major setback due to the colonial rule is the rural folk and tribal art – the indigenous art practices all over the country.

Various folk and tribal art forms have been able to sustain themselves till today with little or no intervention from outside. At times, various government bodies and NGOs have also played significant roles in the sustenance of these art traditions.

The question is – has there been any impact of modernism on these folk art traditions?
Or they remained confined within their traditional and ritualistic subject-matters and techniques ?

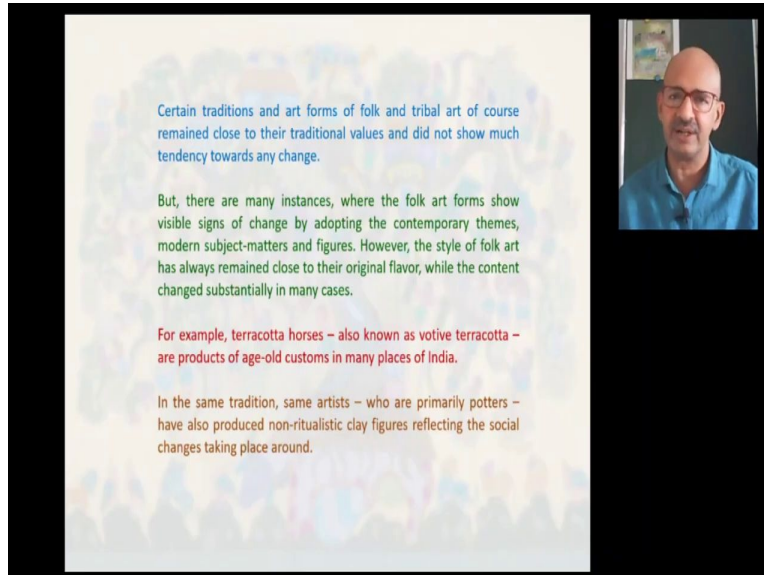
Now, this is true that the emergence of Indian modern art is partly a result of the breakdown of the traditional cultural matrix of India due to the advent of the British colonial rulers, we know that. Now, traditional Indian art really speaking as in Court paintings and religious architectures came to an end or almost an end because the sponsors that is, the rulers and the kings they lost their financial power and therefore they were not able to sponsor them anymore.

Now, we also know that the existence of another stream of traditional art that never came to an end and never suffered any major setback due to the colonial rule or colonial culture and that is the rural folk and tribal art. The indigenous art practices all over the country.

Now, various folk and tribal art forms have been able to sustain themselves till today with little or no intervention from outside. At times various government organizations and NGOs have also played significant roles in the sustenance of these art traditions. The question is has there been any impact of modernism on these folk art traditions or tribal art traditions or rural art traditions

or they remained confined within their own traditional and ritualistic subject matters techniques and styles?

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Certain traditions and art forms of folk and tribal art of course remained close to their traditional values and did not show much tendency towards any change.

But, there are many instances, where the folk art forms show visible signs of change by adopting the contemporary themes, modern subject-matters and figures. However, the style of folk art has always remained close to their original flavor, while the content changed substantially in many cases.

For example, terracotta horses – also known as votive terracotta – are products of age-old customs in many places of India.

In the same tradition, same artists – who are primarily potters – have also produced non-ritualistic clay figures reflecting the social changes taking place around.

Now, certain traditions and art forms of folk and tribal art of course remained close to their traditional values and did not show much tendency towards any change. They remained so to say unchanged. But there are many instances where the folk art forms show visible signs of change by adopting the contemporary themes, modern subject matters and modern figures that is modern characters.

However, the style of the folk art has always remained close to their original flavor while the content changed substantially in many cases and this is what is very interesting about those examples of folk arts where we do find an impact of modernism that is there is definitely very very visible and immediately noticeable signs of change mainly in terms of subject matter and content and the thematic choice.

But as far as the style is concerned, as far as the pictorial configurations are concerned, as far as the aesthetic choices are concerned most of these traditions, I will not say they did not go for any change but they went for very little change.

By and large the Madhubani painting remained Madhubani in spite of the fact that Madhubani painters are doing some paintings based on contemporary themes, completely different from

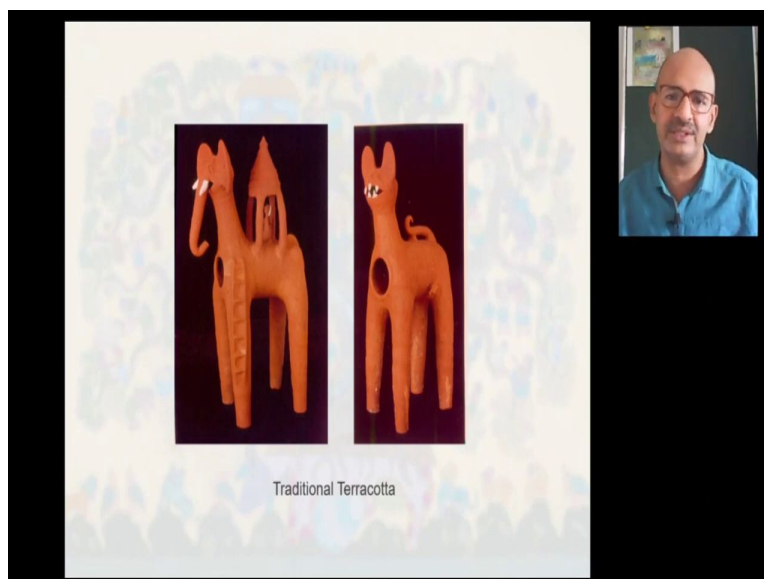
their mythological or traditional themes. So, there are many such instances -Madhubani painting, Bengal Pata painting, Gond painting, Bhil painting where you do find absolutely remarkable and visible changes, thematic changes, subject matter changes, but stylistically more or less remaining the same .

Now, for example, if you look at the terracotta traditions, terracotta horses also known as motif terracotta are products of age old customs and rituals in many places of India. And in the same tradition by the same artists who are primarily potters have also produced non-ritualistic clay figures reflecting the social changes taking place around.

So, there are moments in the history of traditional folk, rural tribal art where the artists or the communities do respond to certain social and environmental changes which means it is allowed not that it is never allowed but there is also the presence of a convention which is not exactly very oppressive but pretty much there, very strong and very consistent and therefore the need to change is not so much urgent.

It becomes urgent when the artists themselves feel that there is something very urgent, something very significant has happened during my time and let me address that within my pictorial language and this is what they have done repeatedly, that is reflecting the social changes taking place around.

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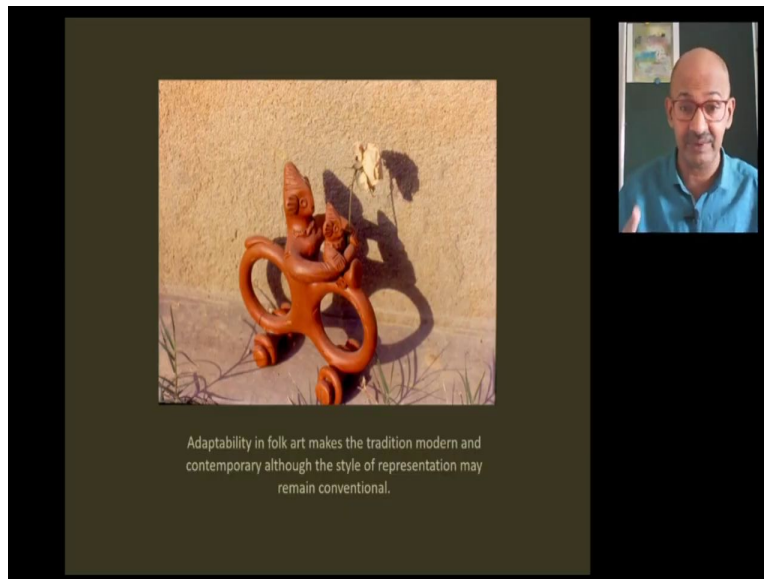
Now, these are two examples of somewhat traditional terracotta horses maintaining the traditional motifs of one horse, one elephant- looking large animal with one human figure atop that too under a kind of a small little shelter canopy and with a shoulder. So, this is- I would consider conventional examples of motif terracotta horse and elephants.

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But now you have from almost the same tradition, similar traditions, terracotta figures and using or reflecting on very very contemporary and modern motifs like a scooter or a railway engine. So, it is like as if the horse gets replaced by the modern locomotive engine or a scooter but stylistically they more or less remain the same.

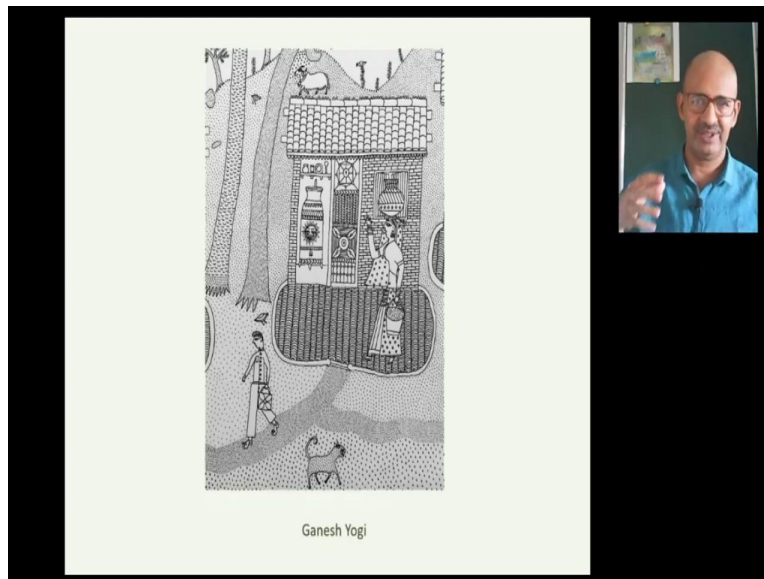
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You can even have an example like this where I see mother and child and mother and child happens to be a very very common theme in our folk traditions, as far as terracottas are concerned, paintings are concerned, various kinds of dolls are concerned, mother and child is a very common theme.

So, in terms of theme it is not very uncommon but what is uncommon, what is very modern in this particular work is the introduction of the cycle as the vehicle. So, mother and child on cycle has to be a modern take on the changing scenario around. And this is where many of these folk artists become very creatively free and very very open to ideas. Although the basic style and handling of medium and form remain more or less the same. Adaptability in folk art makes the tradition modern and contemporary although the style of representation may remain conventional this is what exactly we are trying to say.

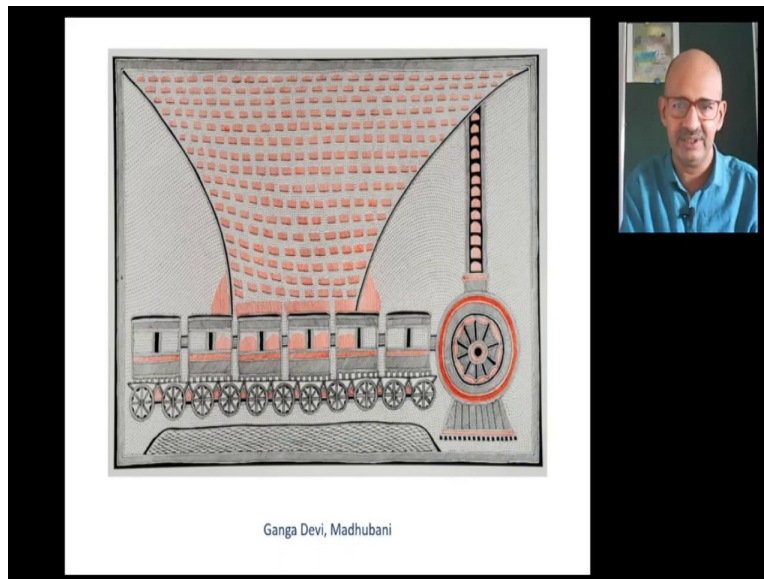
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Now, here you have again a brilliant example of folk art where a contemporary motif, very striking but almost very naturally introduced in this drawing which is drawn in a ballpoint pen that is also a very modern tool on paper. So, I am sure you can find out whereas the rest of the motifs and elements in this drawing remain pretty conventional and they conform to certain folk styles and folk motifs and folk life.

But suddenly here you see a man with a briefcase held in his left hand who appears to be a very modern urban office goer. So, this kind of very subtle introduction of modern motifs into the main body of folk painting can be considered as not total but partial influence of modernism at least as motifs on the folk art traditions. So, mostly it is the thematic change.

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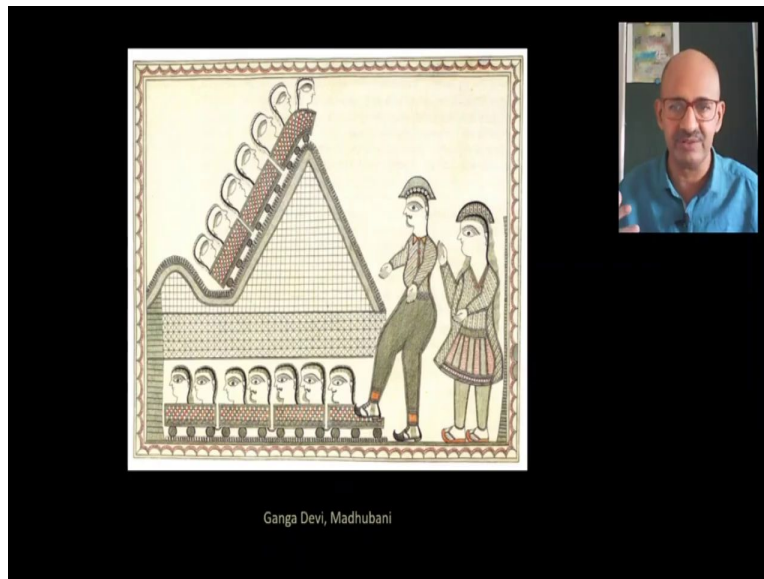


For example, when Ganga Devi drew and painted this railway engine. Ganga Devi belongs to a very traditional Madhubani painting school, who prior to this had never painted anything but mythological stories- Radha Krishna and themes and goddesses and deities, devas and devis, mostly that.

But now, when she started at a certain point drawing and painting independently not on the Madhubani painting not as Madhubani painting on wall but Madhubani painting on paper. So, the moment it is paper which is again not a traditional surface to paint on and therefore it is detached from its original context that is original village, original house, original wall that naturally inspired the artist.

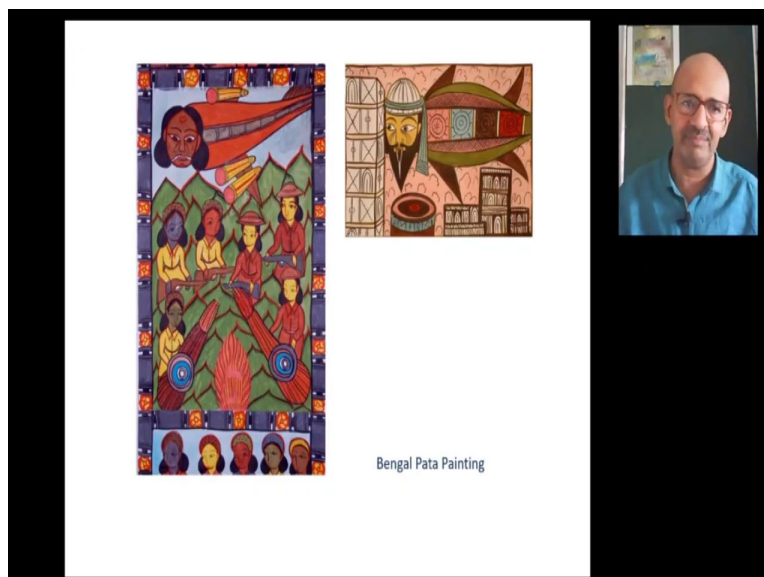
And somebody like Ganga Devi who was very creative, very talented to do something which she will not be allowed to do on the wall but because this is her individual, intimate drawing, a private drawing, a personal drawing she can do it over here.

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So, she introduces railway engines and she also draws roller coasters which she must have seen in some fairgrounds. So, she is creating certain devices to depict the new motif, the new experiences which were never there in the traditional Madhubani painting examples.

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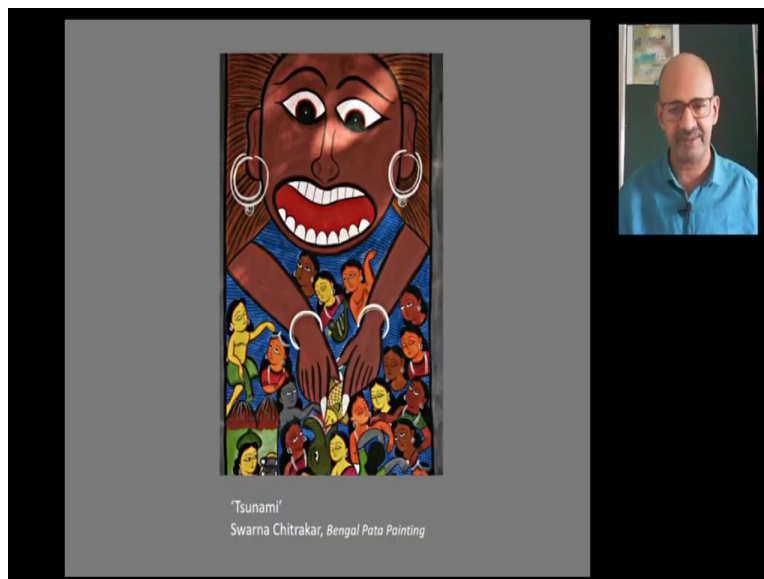


Similarly in Bengal Pata painting you get to see these wonderful examples where the painter takes a big creative leap and liberty to introduce things like Osama Bin Laden apparently who was instrumental in attacking the twin towers in New York which was a very very sensational

and an international news of a great devastation. And that was immediately ,within a few months responded to, addressed by these painters from folk Bengal cultural tradition who are known as Pattachittrakar.

So, these Pata paintings then do not have any traditional themes, they do not have any mythological motifs. They only have, now, contemporary themes, as far as these Pata paintings are concerned. But this also does not mean the traditional Pata paintings have been stopped. No, these painters continue to do that also. But simultaneously they introduce these themes, contemporary themes, absolutely modern themes within the same stylistic format.

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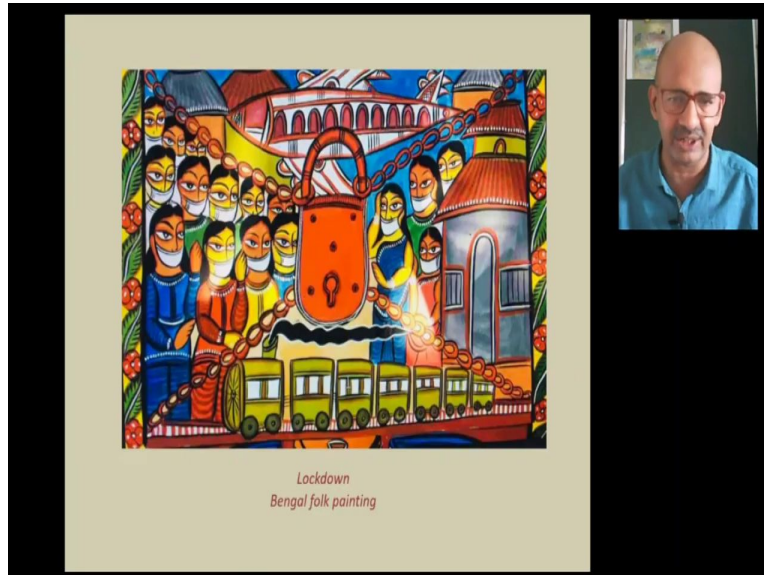


So, you also have a painting- again from Bengal painted by the famous painter Swarna Chitrakar and the theme is Tsunami because Tsunami was a big kind of news those days, everybody was shaken to know about the extremely devastating power of nature which had hit Indian coastal places.

Therefore, that became a very sought after theme, a subject matter for some of these painters and again when this painter is doing this painting based on the theme Tsunami which was a very contemporary theme, she obviously did not give up her own stylistic method. So, again and again we shall see this is happening that when a traditional painter is addressing a non-traditional

contemporary modern theme, the painter is not necessarily, in fact not at all giving up their own stylistic method of representation.

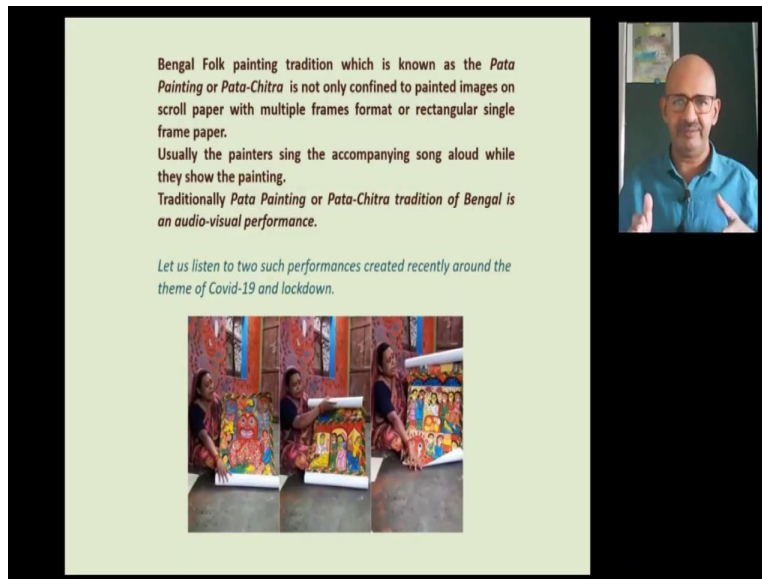
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Even here which is a very very recent painting as you can see it is about the lockdown due to the Covid19 situation and you can see that the entire composition is or has to be a new imagination. They have never heard of lockdown before, forget about Corona or Covid19. So, first time they are experiencing this situation like most of us.

And these painters decided to do a painting based on this new situation using their own traditional style. So, they are arriving at a very strange and interesting art language where new themes, contemporary themes, absolutely fresh themes like lockdown, like Corona, like Covid19 situation can be addressed by using the age-old style.

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Bengal Folk painting tradition which is known as the *Pata Painting* or *Pata-Chitra* is not only confined to painted images on scroll paper with multiple frames format or rectangular single frame paper. Usually the painters sing the accompanying song aloud while they show the painting. Traditionally *Pata Painting* or *Pata-Chitra* tradition of Bengal is an audio-visual performance.

Let us listen to two such performances created recently around the theme of Covid-19 and lockdown.

Now, Bengal folk painting tradition which is also known as the Pata painting or Pata-Chitra is not only confined to painted images on scroll paper with multiple frames, format or rectangular single frame paper. Usually the painters sing the accompanying song aloud while they show the painting. So, this is very interesting that this kind of art performances actually require not just the demonstration of the artwork but also music, some performances, song, like you see in Bengal Pata painting tradition or also in the Phad painting of Rajasthan. So, basically these are audio visual performances.

And now I will be showing you two such performances created recently around this theme of Covid19 and lockdown and where you can once again see along with the song and the painting together using their traditional art styles how powerfully, how strongly these folk artists can actually address absolutely new hitherto unknown unaddressed themes and subject matters like Covid19.

(Video/Song started in Bengali: 20:10)

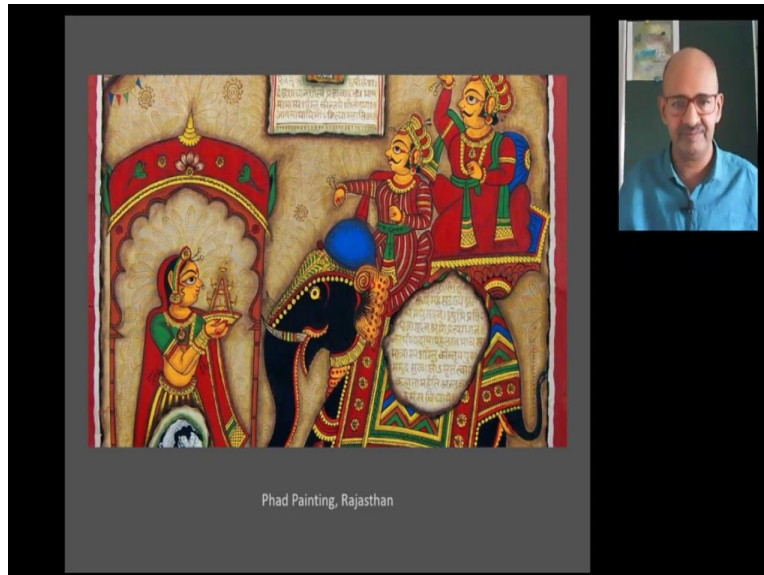
(Video/Song ended in Bengali: 22:32)

(Second Video/Song started in Bengali: 22:34)

(Second Video/Song ended in Bengali: 25:00)

Professor: You can find out the whole range of expressions and the impact of modernity, the modern times, the contemporary times on these traditions like Bengal Pata-Chitra where it is not just the picture but also the entire performance which absorbs modernism in its own way.

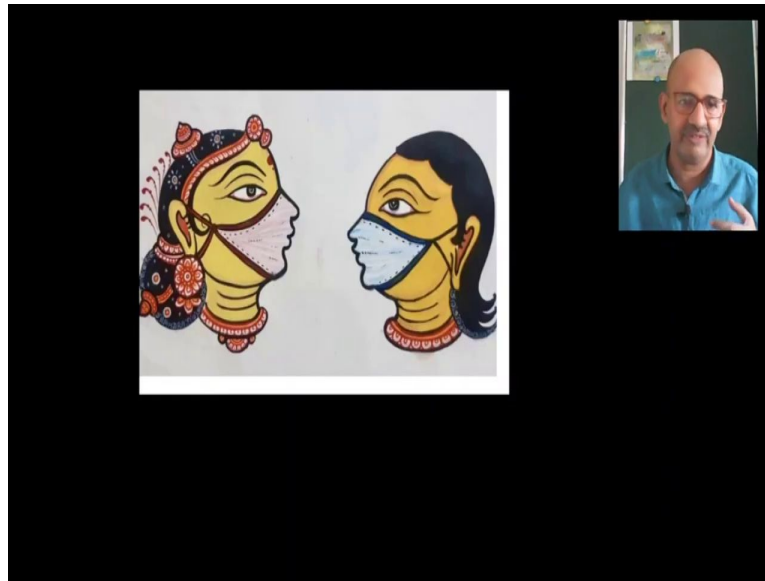
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Now, we are looking at another example of folk painting, a very famous example called a very famous tradition called Phad painting from Rajasthan. This is an example of a traditional kind of painting with a little bit of differences, but even in for a painting some of these people like Kalyan, Shyam and many other artists, they have started painting themes directly related to the

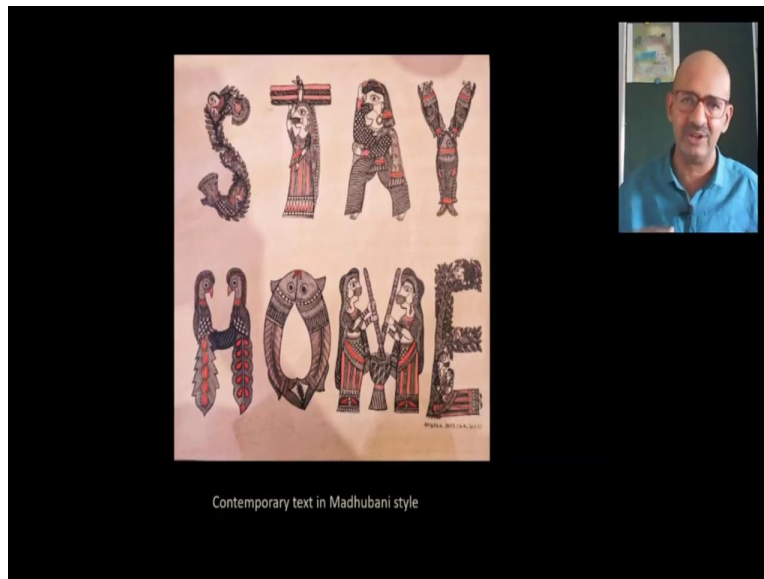
Covid19 situation and mostly following the health guidelines circulated by the government of India health department and creating what we call public awareness visuals along with text. But not done in a typical academic style or realistic style but in the Phad painting style. This is again a very interesting situation that any urban modernity can face.

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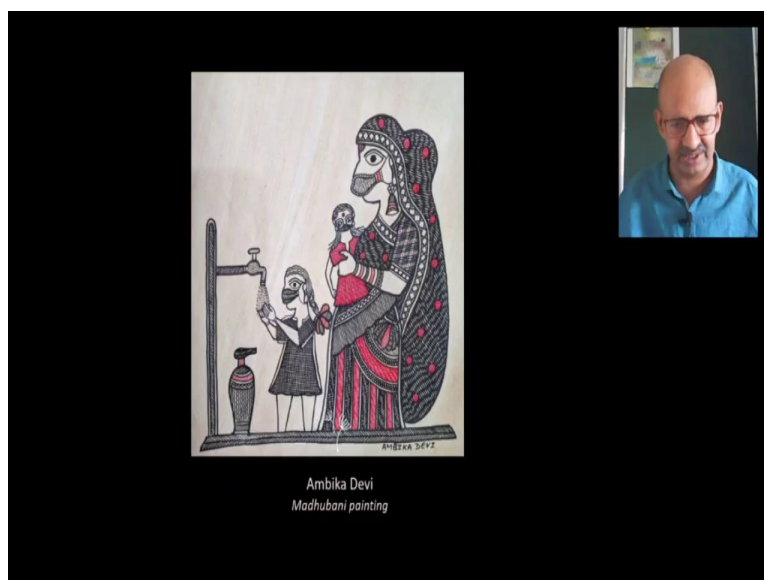
The fact that or the idea that modernity also required a massive overhaul with the visual language is applicable to the modern art practices emerging from the city centers, from the urban centers but what about this rural centers? There, modernity is perhaps more appropriate, more convincing, more effective when you do not give up your traditional style and that is how you see particularly during this latest Covid19 situation a lot of artists from different folk art traditions be it Bengal or Rajasthan or Madhubani. People have been actually many artists addressing this Covid19 situation using their folk styles.

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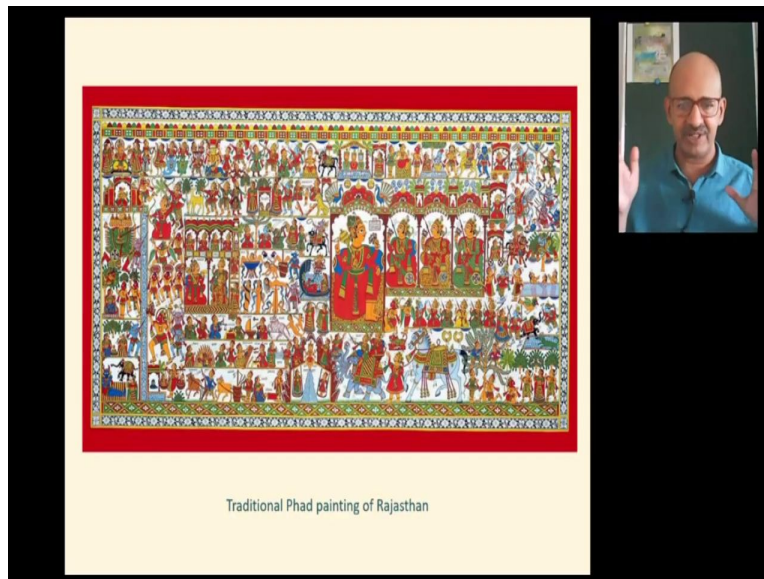
In Madhubani style it is not just the painting, they are actually creating a text like what you see here is clearly written as stay home by an artist called Ambika Devi but so even the letters have been, alphabets have been transformed into pictorial letters or pictographs and within the pictographs you also see human figures with the mask. So, therefore masked human beings in their own daily activities but they are masked- a new accessory has been very readily absorbed and accepted within the fold of folk art traditions.

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And therefore you get to see a number of such paintings and drawings with a little mask on the face of this mother and two daughters here. Again the washing of hands becomes a new important and health activity that needs to be conveyed again and again to your own community, your own public, your own viewers.

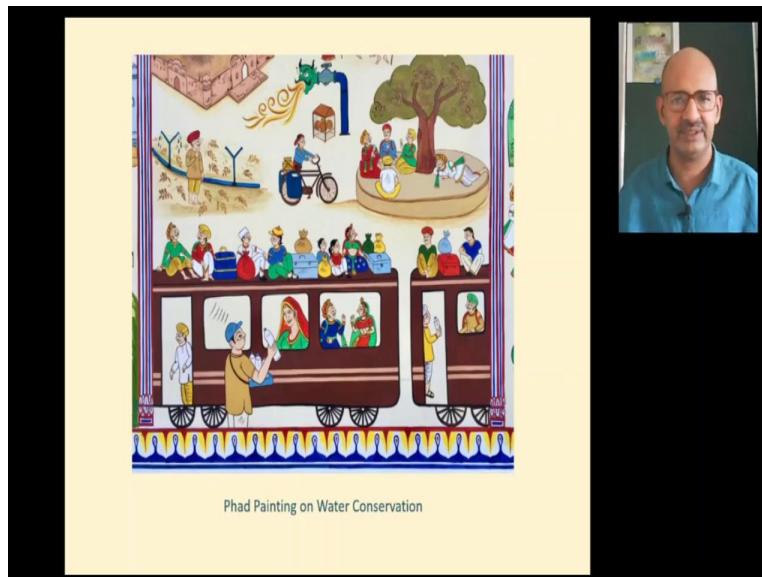
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Now, this is an example of a traditional Phad painting of Rajasthan using the same format, you can see a Covid Phad painting of Rajasthan has been painted where there are various instructions coming from the government of India, from the health department and how the entire world has

been captured within one single Phad painting using that format of Phad painting where you draw the entire painting not in terms of one frame but in terms of several frames, several segments, several pockets of small little visualizations .

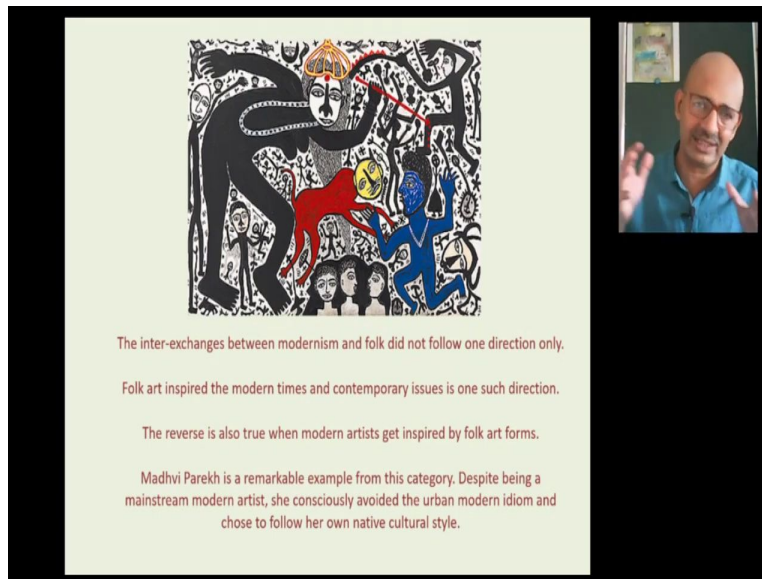
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And not only Covid, in recent times we come across various subject matters not only that they are contemporary but sometimes extremely urgent and relevant subject matters, like this Phad painting is on water conservation.

There are many such Bengal Pata paintings addressing, for example, adult education, addressing the safety for women, addressing ecology, environment and various other things which are not really traditional in the sense nowhere related to mythology and traditional themes but very urgent, very contemporary and they need to be painted the stories of these themes need to be told. So, it is that sense of urgency which drove these artists to do something else.

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The inter-exchanges between modernism and folk did not follow one direction only.

Folk art inspired the modern times and contemporary issues is one such direction.

The reverse is also true when modern artists get inspired by folk art forms.

Madhvi Parekh is a remarkable example from this category. Despite being a mainstream modern artist, she consciously avoided the urban modern idiom and chose to follow her own native cultural style.

Now, let us look at least one example of a reverse flow because this inter exchanges between modernism and folk did not follow one direction only. Folk art inspired the modern times and contemporary issues is one such direction that is folk art inspired by the modern times and contemporary issues but the reverse is also true when modern artists get inspired by folk art forms .

Madhvi Parekh is a remarkable example from this category. She lives in Delhi and has been working for the last many decades. Now despite being a mainstream modern artist and located in an urban center, she consciously avoided the urban modern idiom and chose to follow her own native cultural style of Gujarat.

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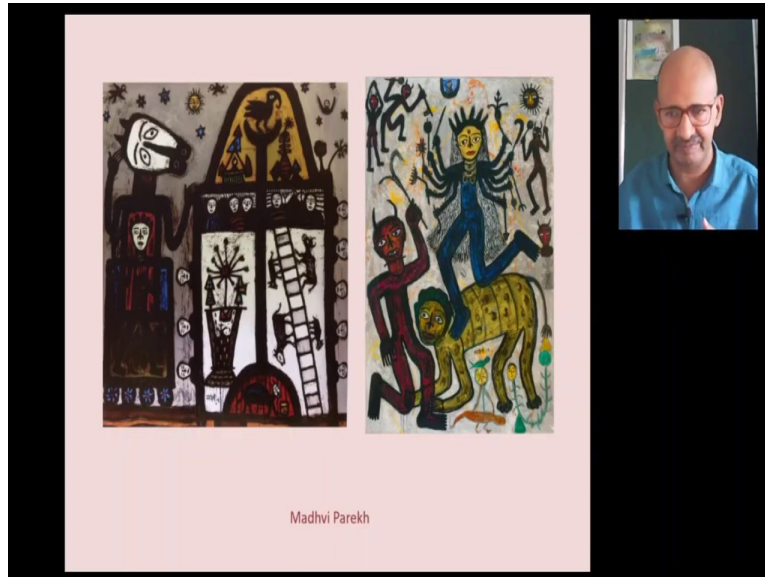


Madhvi Parekh



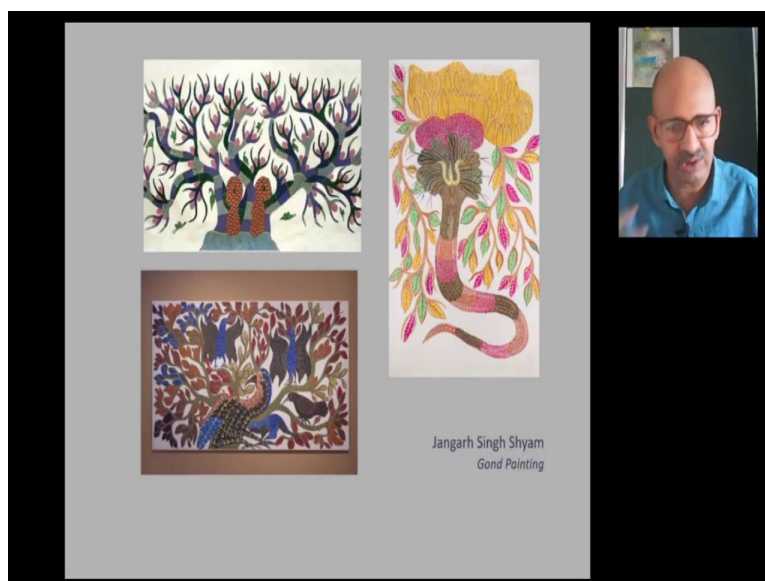
Madhvi Parekh





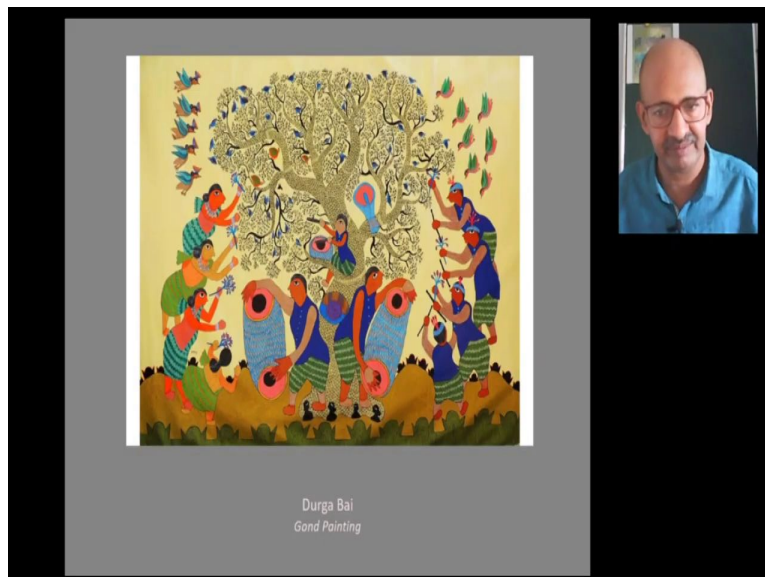
Therefore, when you look at Madhvi Parekh's paintings it is difficult to realize in the first glance that she actually belongs to the mainstream urban modern art because Madhvi Parekh's works in a very pronounced way evoke the sensations, the linguistic flavor of folk painting may not be of one any specific place but for painting in general and also the naive feeling, certain kind of less refined finish of the paintings and the figuration, everything suggests that Madhvi Parekh has been looking at folk art, folk painting for her inspiration.

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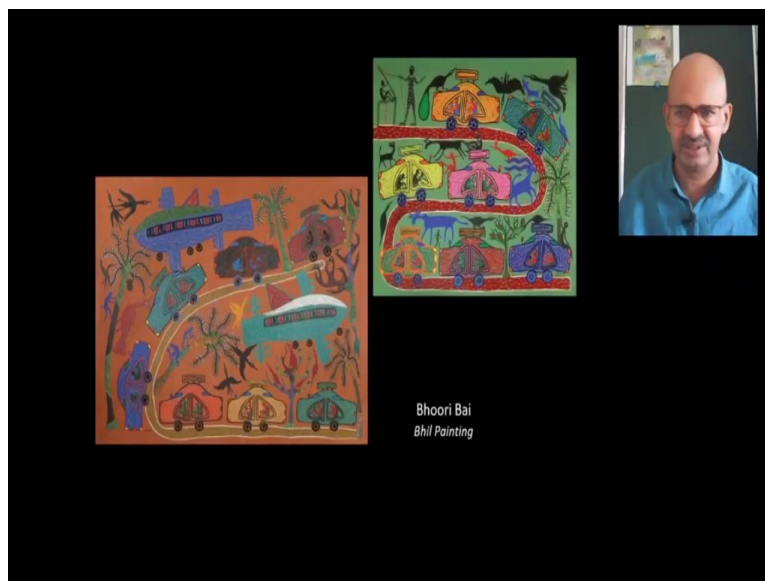
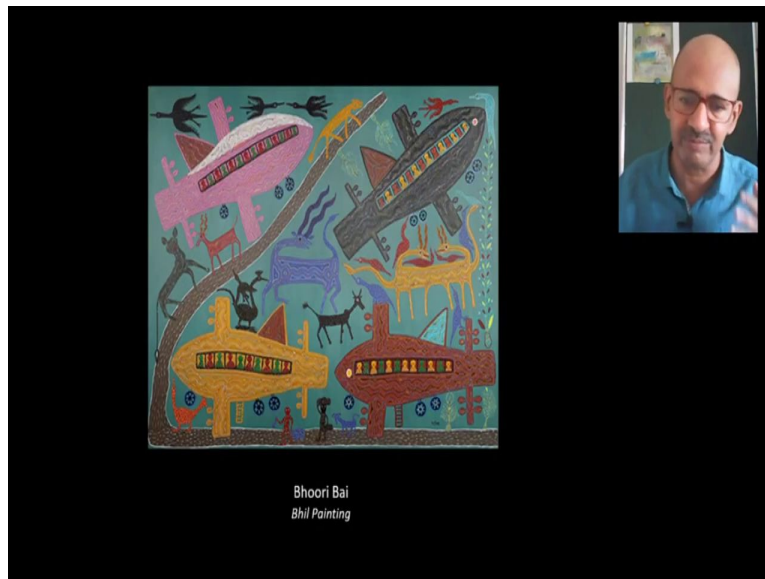
Then you also have painters from Gond tradition, for example, Jangarh Singh Shyam, maybe his paintings do carry certain elements which are little conventional and traditional but the way Jangarh paints, draws, colors and composes these themes they create a look of the modern and not necessarily very traditional or conventional because when you look at Gond paintings painted for their own ritualistic needs, their textures, their characters even though in terms of the linear refinement they are different. Jangarh Singh Shyam kind of refines the whole tradition addressing the modern art scenario and no wonder that Jangarh Singh Shyam has been represented as a part of many modern art shows.

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Similarly, you have Durga Bai, again following folk art style even the subject matter does not have anything to do with necessarily very modern or contemporary but it is the dislocation, decontextualization from its original context that makes these paintings very modern, very contemporary.

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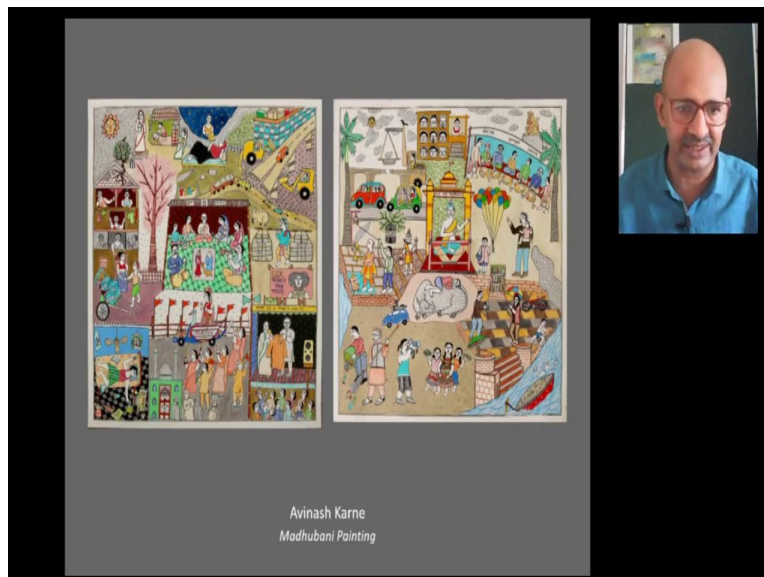
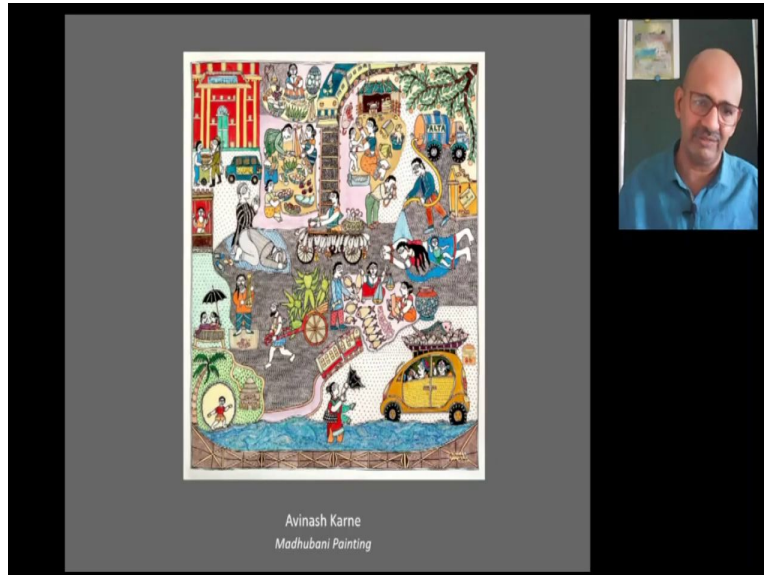
Then you have Bhuri Bai, another very significant painter from the Bhil painting traditions and you can see that she is really drawing very modern and contemporary objects like aeroplanes, like motor cars, different kinds of vehicles all freely flowing into each other. So, it is the fluidity of space that Bhuri Bai uses. She is excellent in exploiting the flexibility of the compositional space wherein she puts all her motifs and most of them are very modern motifs or motifs from the modern world.

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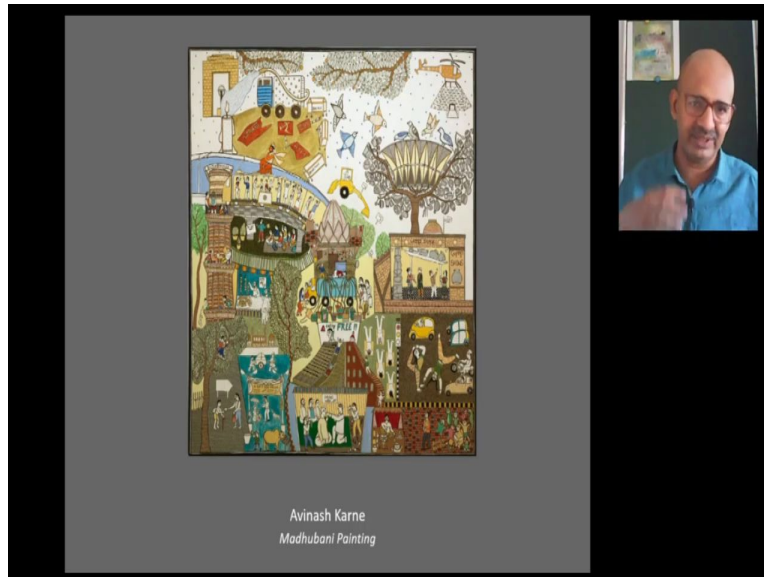
We also have somebody like Bhajju Shyam from Gond painting who draws and paints absolutely independent and individual paintings not connected to his traditional and ritualistic requirements but using to some extent the traditional stylistic elements but arriving at a new kind of form, idea, subject matter and composition. And therefore, here in this case and some other cases also you see how these folk artists Bhajju Shyam or Bhuri Bai even the later works by Ganga Devi through these works they are shifting their location, position from being a purely folk artist to a part, a very important artist in the mainstream modern art arena.

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And finally we look at a few works by a very young artist Avinash Karn who hails from the Madhubani painting tradition but he right from the beginning has decided to use the Madhubani style but address very contemporary subject matters in a remarkably fluid compositions where you can see different pockets, different segments within the same painting and therefore Avinash is able to say multiple stories, multiple narratives something that we have already observed in the art works by Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, by Bhupan Khakar, by Nilima Sheikh and now you see almost a similar approach to the narrative art a new possibility of narrative art but using very traditional Madhubani painting style.

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Therefore, with this last painting in today's lecture you can feel that how another, almost simultaneously another very strong tradition of modern art has been in existence which may not have directly anything to do with the mainstream history but they have been consciously later but maybe in the beginning slightly intuitively these artists from the folk art traditions have been creating very creatively with great amount of imagination a parallel history of modern art. Thank you.