

Modern Indian Art From the Colonial Period to the Present
Prof. Soumik Nandy Majumdar
Dept. History of Art, Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan Visva-Bharati
Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur
Lecture 04
Kalighat Painting- From Folk Art to Urban Milieu

Welcome viewers to NOC's online course on Modern Indian art from the colonial period to the present. Today is the 4th lecture from the first week. And as you know, today we are going to talk about another important phase from early modern Indian art history, which is known as the Kalighat Painting.

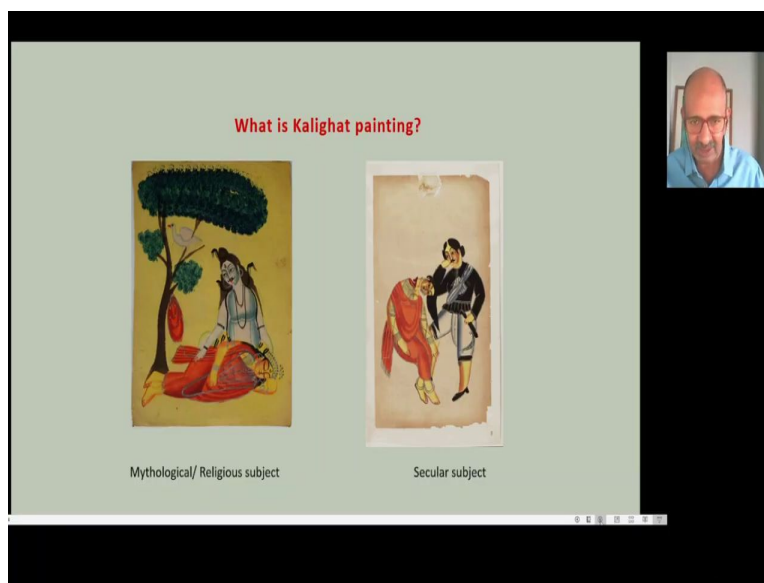
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I have deliberately put a byline there. Kalighat painting - from folk art to urban milieu. This byline is necessary essentially to suggest that Kalighat painting is or carries a story of transformation of its own. Because when you look at Kalighat paintings, when you know its history, you would know that Kalighat painting, despite the fact that we do consider it as an art product of the new urban India mainly Kolkata, but it carried a memory of its own past, which belong to the rural Bengal traditional folk painting. And this is what makes Kalighat painting even more interesting and fascinating for us.

So there is a story of migration, there is a story of stylistic shift, there is a story of a transition. So Kalighat painting in that sense, a wonderful example to illustrate that how modern Indian art and particularly its beginnings is characterized by this transitional stories be it Jamini Roy, who was shifting from western to a more folk idiom or Amrita Sher-Gil shifting from her own European Academic naturalistic training to an Indian style of painting. And of course, now we have Kalighat painting, which demonstrates a wonderful shift- social, stylistic, political shift and thereby producing some of the greatest artworks from the early modern Indian art.

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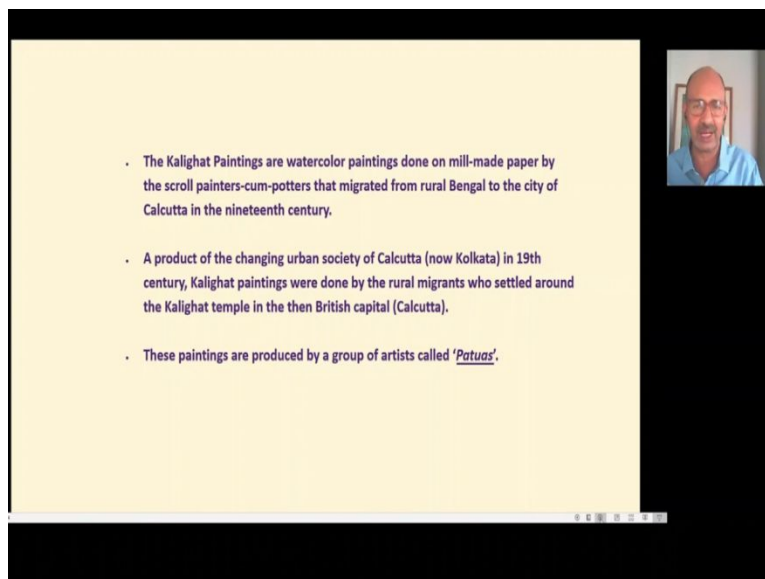


Now before we move on to reply to the question what is Kalighat painting? Quickly let us look at two examples side by side given right now in this slide. Both are from Kalighat painting, but whereas the painting on the left hand side depicts a couple, which is obviously religious. Because of the iconography we can immediately identify that is Lord Shiva, that is Parvati. But on the right hand side, the couple is or the couple does not have any religious association, no mythological association.

In fact, something strange is happening here. Most probably the man has just beheaded the woman. So before going further into the subject matters, just on the basis of these two examples, let me say that Kalighat painting covers a huge range of subject matters.

On the one hand, Kalighat painting or Kalighat painters did a number of paintings based on religious and mythological subject matters. On the other hand, the same painters also painted secular subject matters. The life and observations of the new India, the urban India, the babu culture, the street culture and also there are paintings which refer to the contemporary scandals and very popular stories of that time, but nothing religious about it. Nothing mythological about them.

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- The Kalighat Paintings are watercolor paintings done on mill-made paper by the scroll painters-cum-potters that migrated from rural Bengal to the city of Calcutta in the nineteenth century.
- A product of the changing urban society of Calcutta (now Kolkata) in 19th century, Kalighat paintings were done by the rural migrants who settled around the Kalighat temple in the then British capital (Calcutta).
- These paintings are produced by a group of artists called 'Patuas'.

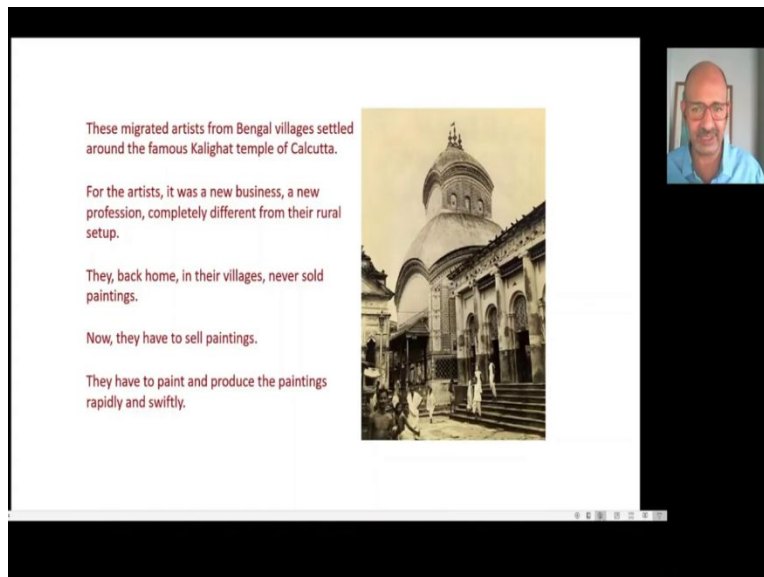
So Kalighat paintings, technically speaking, are watercolor paintings done on mill-made paper by the scroll painters-cum-potters because these Kalighat painters who came from villages and settled in and around Kalighat temple located in South Calcutta, they were all originally from their own respective villages.

And before coming to Kolkata, they were painters and some of them were mostly potters and they had to leave that, not profession, but their places, their villages in search of jobs. Coming to Calcutta and because of the kind of skill that they had to paint and to make things and various kinds of stuff. So they settled in the vicinity of Kalighat temple because that was the most well populated and frequently visited place.

So there was a market, already a thriving market and Kalighat painters and actually Kalighat painting can be also seen as a product of the changing urban society of Calcutta in the 19th century.

And because they were done by these rural migrants who settled around Kalighat temple, they started everything afresh, but they also carried some elements of the tradition that they left behind. And these painters were called by their traditional name as Patua or Poto (in Bengali), Kalighat Poto, Kalighat Patua, which means painters hailing from traditional rural origin.

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These migrated artists from Bengal villages settled around the famous Kalighat temple of Calcutta.

For the artists, it was a new business, a new profession, completely different from their rural setup.

They, back home, in their villages, never sold paintings.

Now, they have to sell paintings.

They have to paint and produce the paintings rapidly and swiftly.

The image shows the Kalighat temple in Calcutta, a large domed structure with a prominent dome and a smaller dome on top. The temple is surrounded by a fence and has a set of stairs leading up to the entrance. There are people visible in the foreground, some sitting on the ground and others standing. The overall scene is a busy, urban environment.

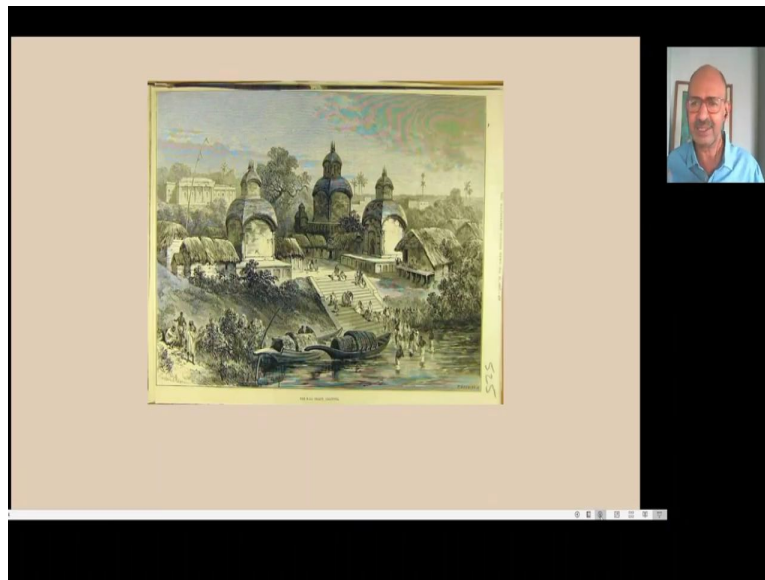
So these migrated artists from Bengal villages settled around the famous Kalighat temple of Calcutta, as we have already mentioned. And for these artists it was a new business, it was a new profession, completely different from their rural setup. So they, back home, in their villages, never sold paintings. We need to remember that the traditional scroll paintings, which in Bengali known as Jorano Pata or square rectangular formats of paintings, which in Bengali again is known as Chauko Pata.

Chauko Pata still they used to sell but they never sold the scroll painting. They were meant to be shown as a part of demonstration, while singing along. But now, the painters for the first time in an unknown setup, in an urban Calcutta they were about to sell their paintings and they did. And therefore, because they were selling to unknown customers, not to known patrons to floating

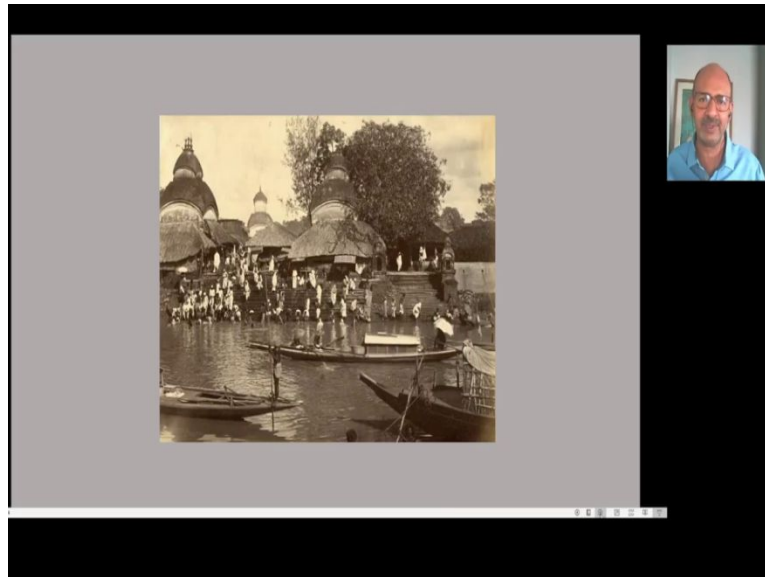
customers so they, every time these Kalighat painters faced a challenge to produce something novel, something new, something attractive.

That also kind of led to creation of a new style of painting, which was quick, which could be done in a small time, which was not very time taking, time consuming, but because you have to produce a lot, because gradually Kalighat painting became a very sort after souvenir, a memento for the visitors and pilgrims who were coming to Kalighat temples like this.

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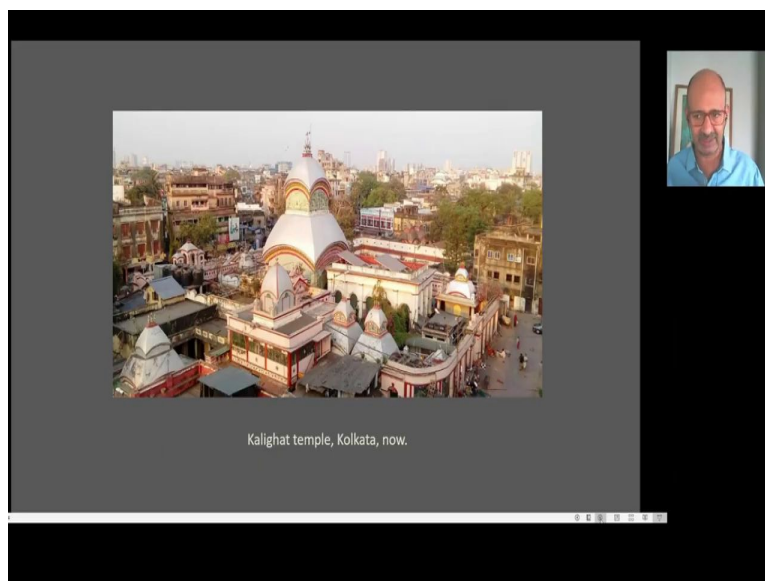


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This is an old picture of Kalighat temple area where you can have a look at how this place was actually a very, very sought after, and populated place. Therefore, in the vicinity of Kalighat temple we see the emergence of Kalighat market, Kalighat bazaar wherein these Kalighat paintings were sold.

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This is a more contemporary view of Kalighat temple today in South Calcutta.

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Mythological/ Religious subject




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- The painted figures have a plaque-like effect on neutral background given the shaded contours and articulated movements.
- Originally, the paintings depicted religious note, especially Hindu Gods and Goddesses.
- Over time, these paintings were used to express social sentiments.
- Kalighat paintings are considered first of its kind in the country to express subaltern sentiments and address customers directly.



Secular subject



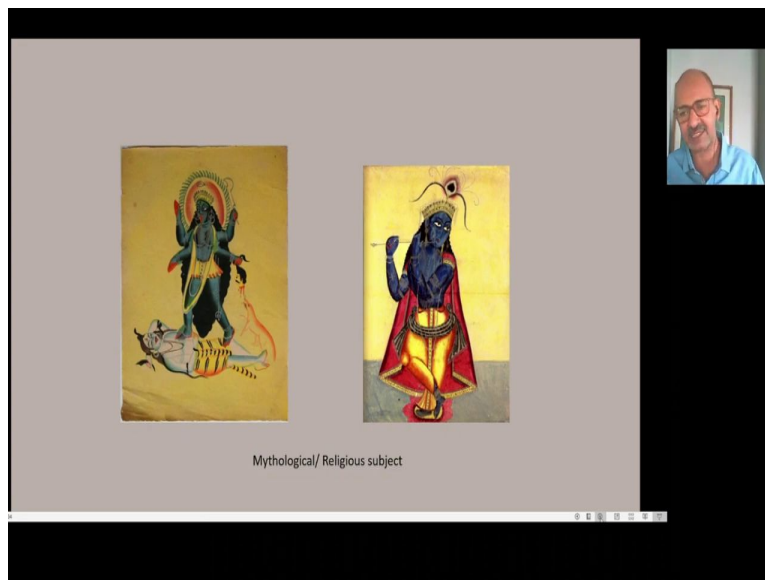
Now, the initial examples from Kalighat paintings are mostly mythological subject matters like this. Maybe Lord Krishna, but suddenly you also get to see an image of supposedly, a Purohit, a priest, a Hindu priest, but strangely, with a bird perched atop his head. Anyway, we will come back to this, the significance of the secular images in Kalighat painting.

Before that, let us see how these painted figures have a plaque-like effect on neutral background because the background is again neutral like most of the company paintings, therefore, they seem to be offset from the background. Originally, the paintings depicted religious notes, especially Hindu gods and goddesses.

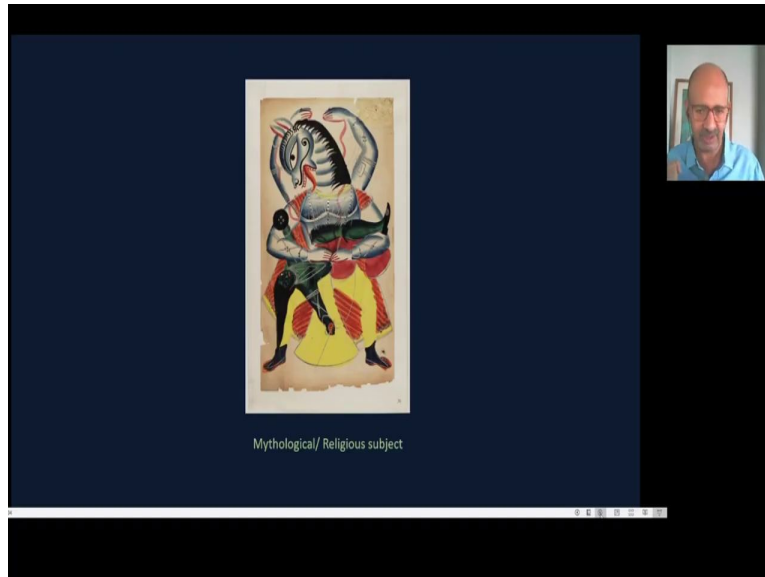
But over time, these paintings were used to express social sentiments, social observations because Kalighat painters were also responding to the urban cultural life to which they themselves did not belong. But they were observing the life of the Babu culture, the moneyed, the rich people and also various scandals surrounding them, various events that they got to know.

So Kalighat paintings are often considered to be first of its kind in the country to express this subaltern sentiments and also, which address the customers directly not through any patron.

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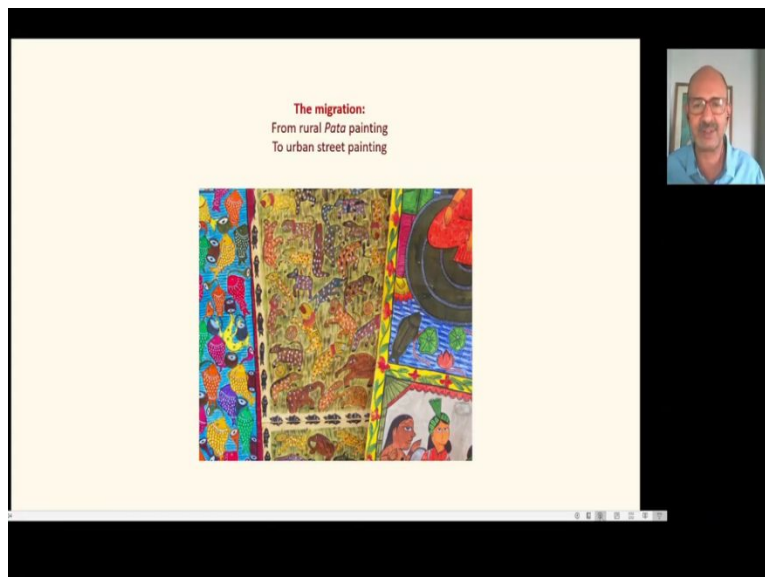


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So mythological and religious subject matters were already there in Kalighat painting and some of these paintings are just marvellous in terms of execution, in terms of boldness, in terms of the dexterity and the control of the skill.

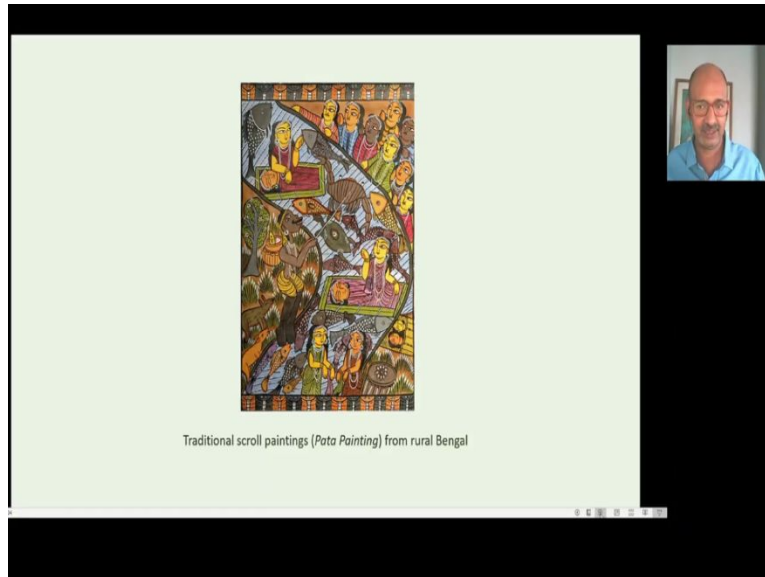
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But at the same time, you can see whether it is religious or not, they were able to develop a different style. We are coming back to that but before that quickly, let us browse through some of the, or examples of some of the painting that these Patuas or their ancestors and forefathers

used to do back home in their villages. That is a traditional Bengal Pata painting, the scroll paintings.

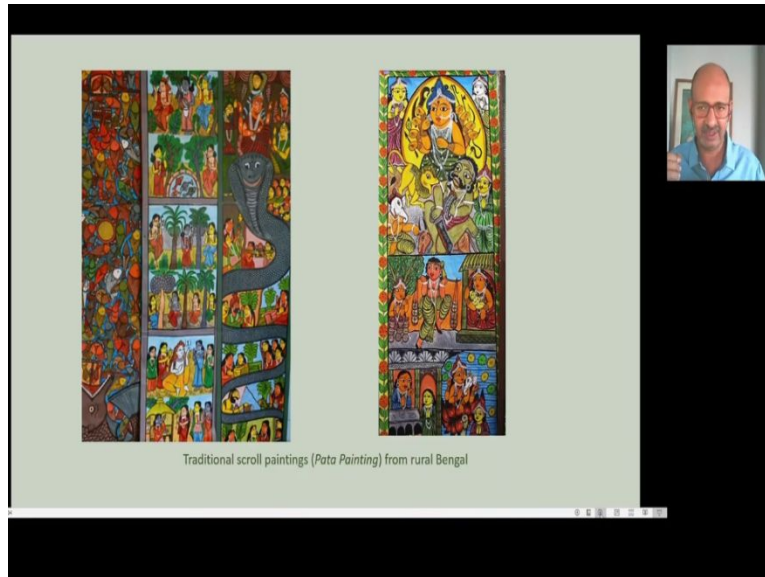
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If you look at these paintings very carefully you will see a couple of things which set them apart from the Kalighat paintings stylistically. Number one, most of these pata paintings have very dense composition, filled up with people and objects and animals, textures and architectures and trees everything.

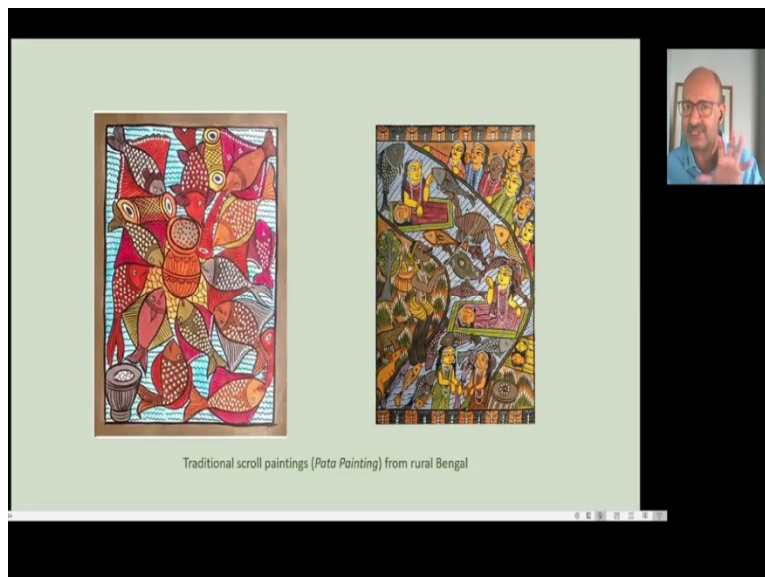
Whereas Kalighat paintings mostly have neutral background and very minimal motif. Maybe 2 figures, at the most 3 figures not more than that. But in Bengal Pata paintings, most of their compositions are populated by a huge number of people.

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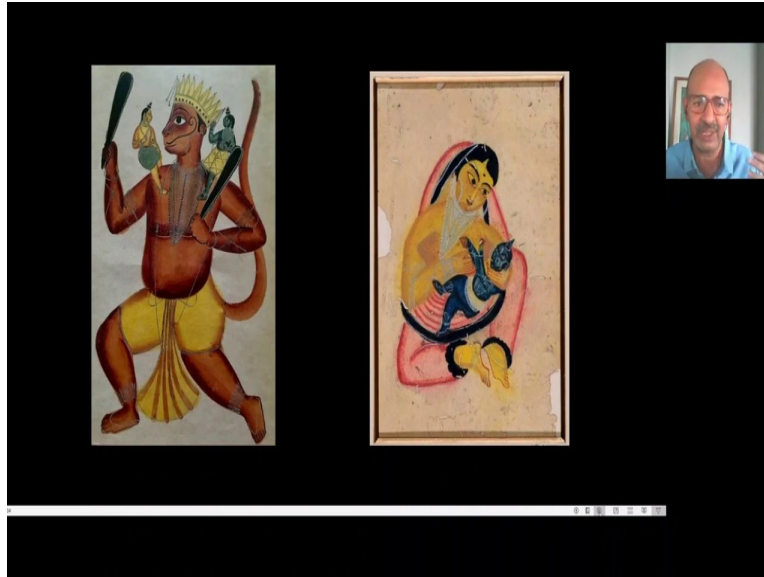


Look at this, all decoration ,all elements. So when you compare Kalighat paintings with traditional Bengal scroll paintings, which have very compact and condensed and often congested compositions, Kalighat paintings do look extremely blank or bland, but it is not.

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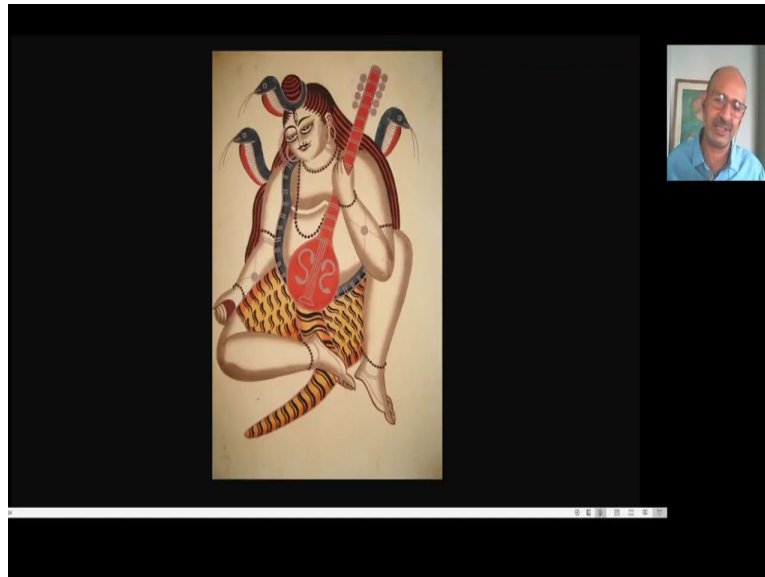
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We know that when the focus is on certain gestures and aspects of Kalighat paintings, the characterization of the figures then the so-called blank background or the neutral background really does not matter. It does not matter because we also stop expecting any narrative or descriptive clue from the background.

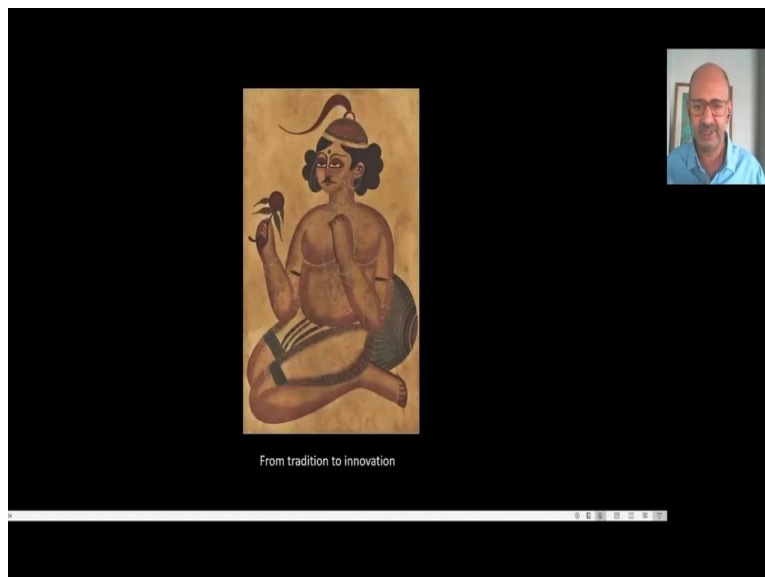
We, like the Kalighat painters, also focus on the paintings. And then, we get fascinated by the gesture, by the expression, by the activity, by certain details like ornaments and jewelleries of the figures.

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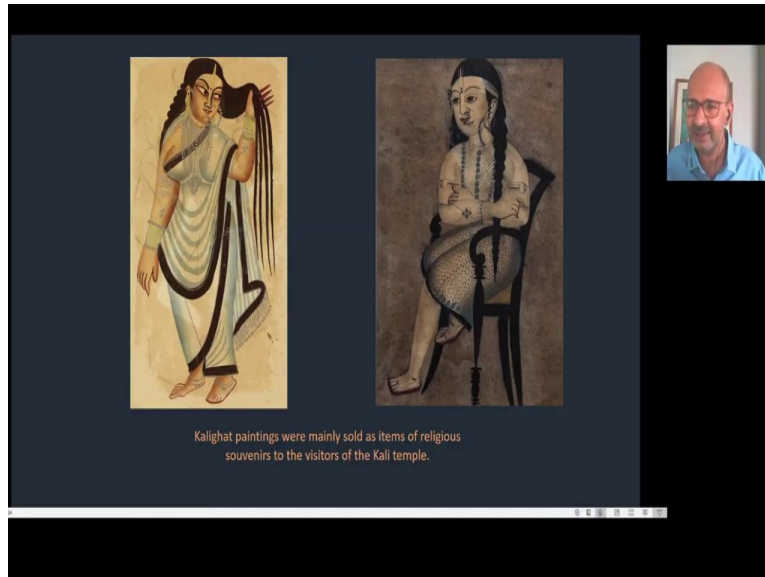


And we also for the first time get to see some lovely unique depictions of mythological subjects like this flat, but yet fat and inflated Lord Shiva. So it is not just the subject matter that makes Kalighat painting so special, but it is also the technique of painting.

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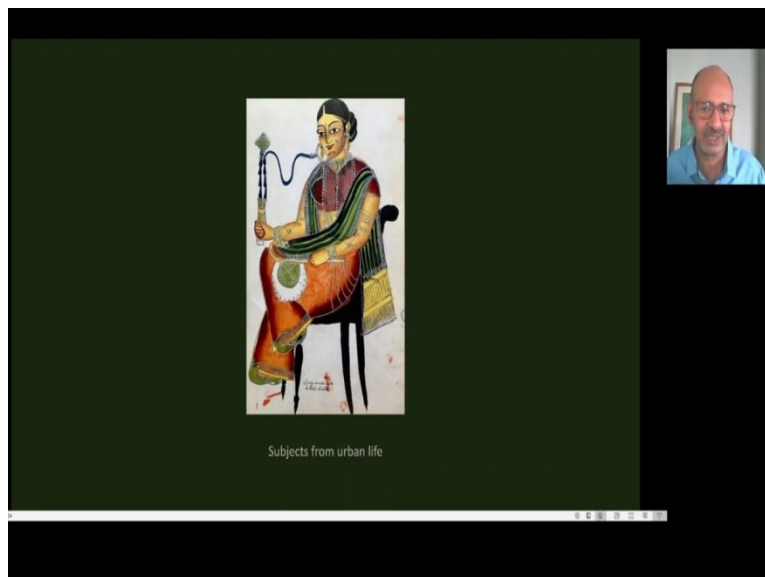


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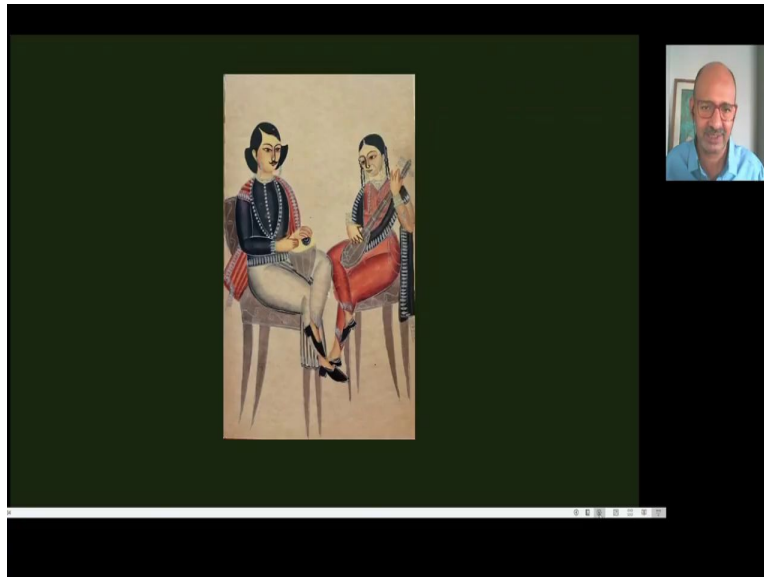


We know that usually they would start with a line drawing, then they would fill up the inside with tones and colours, whether it is a mythological subject or from or you find a similar technique also with non-religious, secular subjects like this but usually that is the technique. It is highly drawing based and in certain paintings, the contour line-drawings are left like that or sometimes they are also highlighted with some colour.

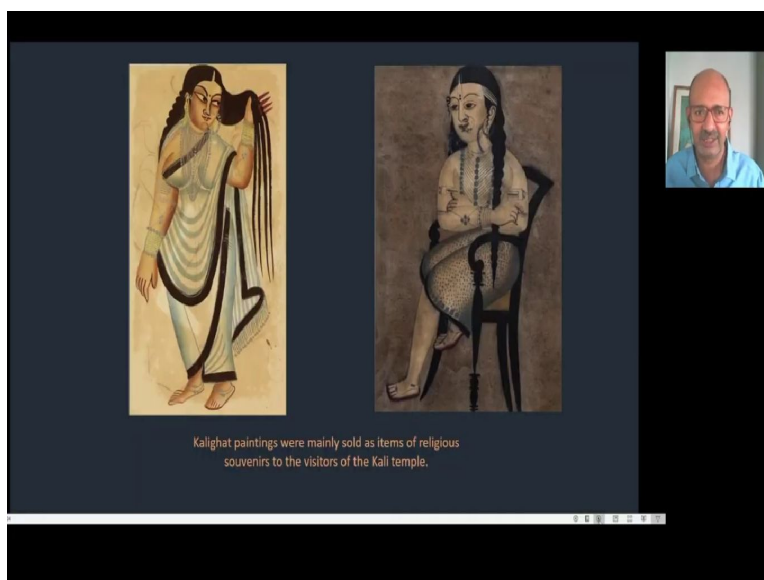
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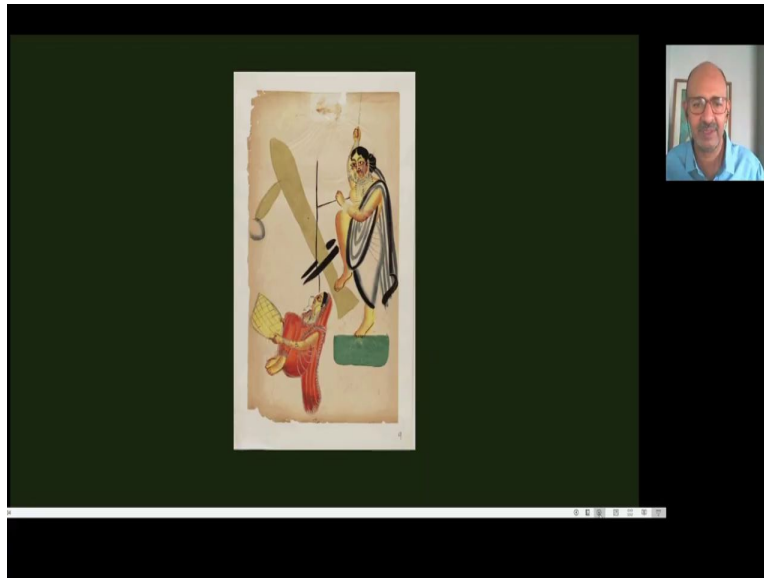


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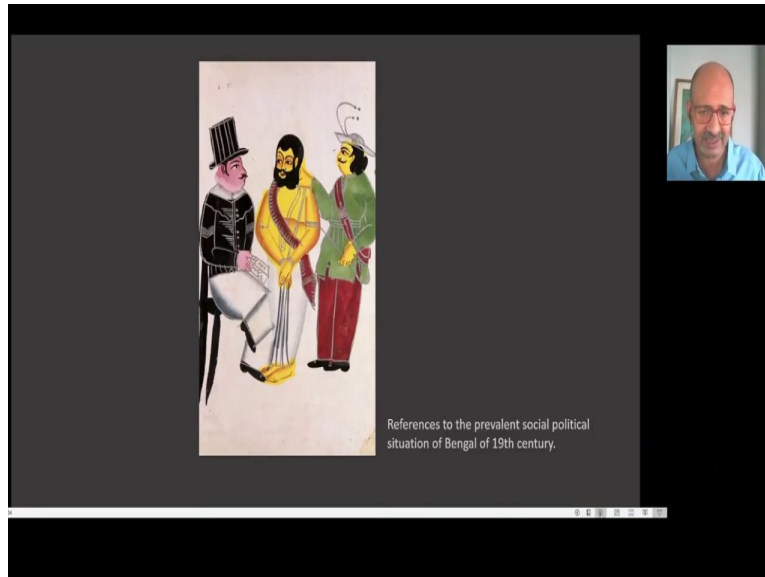
Then there is this famous tonal wash in Kalighat paintings alongside the contour line. And we are also not missing out on the subject matters, which have never appeared in this way in Indian art history before. So we have images of couples, musicians, we have images of a single woman smoking hookah or probably they are courtesans like they are this new women of an urban society, the courtesans.

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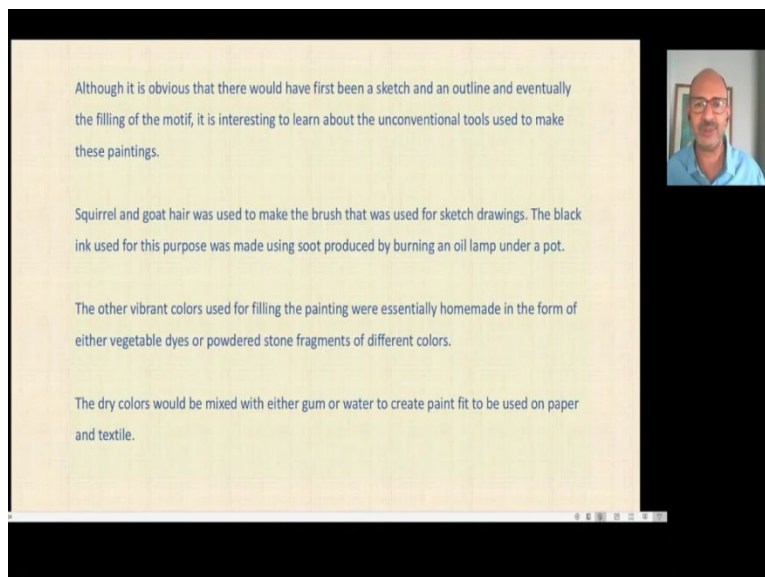
And then we also have some paintings which depict women in some activities, domestic activities like this one.

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Then there are paintings like this, which evidently have some reference to some story behind though the story is not shown. But there is a story behind this story, behind this visual depiction.

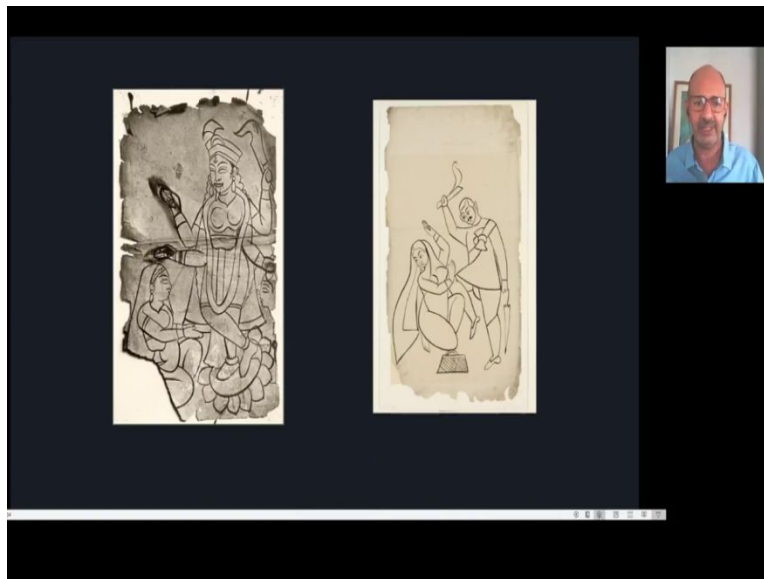
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So although it is obvious that there would have first been a sketch and an outline and eventually the filling of the motif, it is interesting to learn about the unconventional tools used to make these paintings. And by unconventional, we actually mean that they are using squirrel and goat hair or they are using some kind of ink and paint made from organic materials.

The other vibrant colours used for filling the painting were essentially homemade in the form of either vegetable dyes or powdered stone fragments of different colours. The dry colours would be mixed with either gum or water to create paint fit to be used on paper and textile. Because they were painting on fragile papers, they were careful about the paint. And they were also careful about the fact that since they were selling these paintings, these paintings should remain, stay for a while.

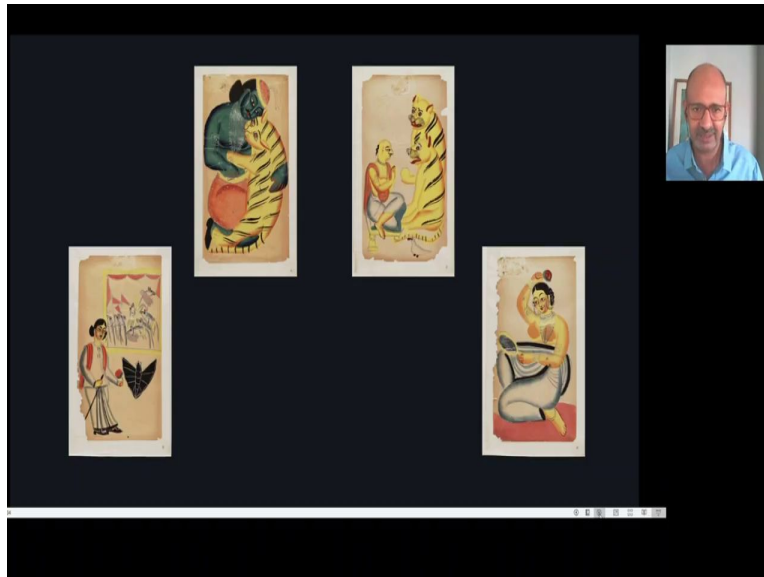
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So we have Kalighat paintings without the pigments applied or colour applied. Therefore, they do have very strong drawing lines and we can see those lines very clearly, and there are hundreds of such drawings left behind, so we wonder why they did not apply colour on them? There are some answers to this question.

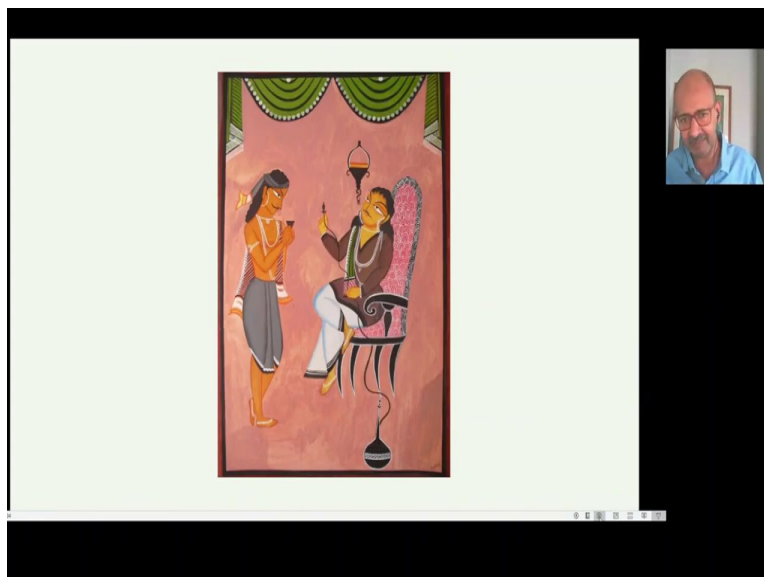
One of them is that they deliberately left some drawings unpainted later to be used as role models, as templates, which the later artists might follow if they want. So they are like sample drawings which they created in huge numbers.

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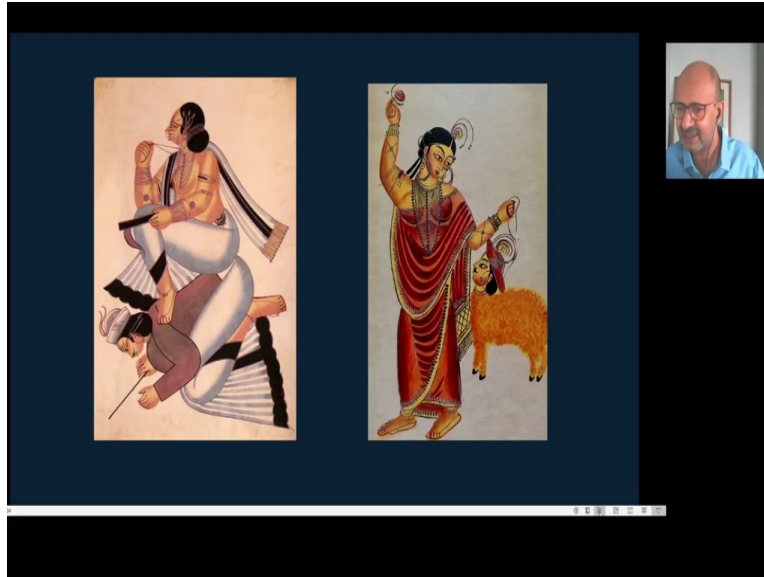


But when these drawings get layers of paint they acquire a different look, a different appearance. Like this, and here also you see different subject matters. Some strange relationship between man and tigers and a woman who is holding a mirror in the left hand and a rose on her right hand. And again, a typical figure of a Babu of the 19th century, a moneyed man always living a life of luxury and pleasure with a rose in his left hand.

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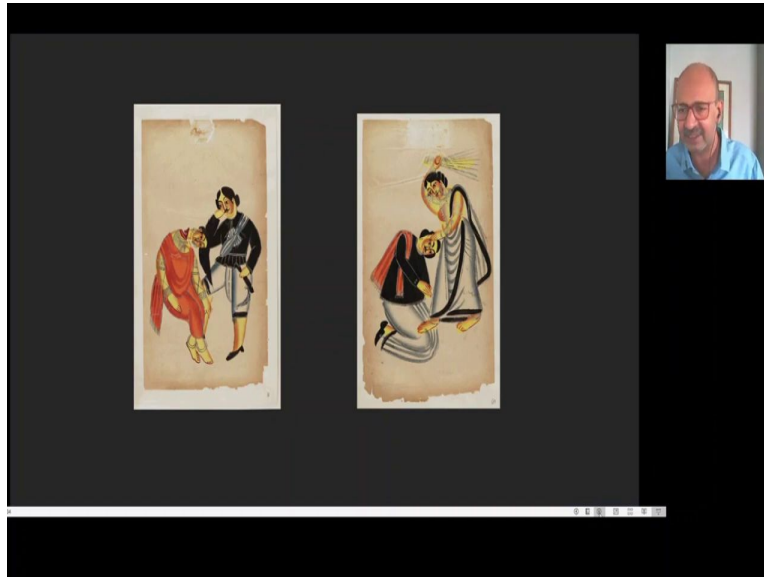
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Again, a Babu shown in his life of luxury. But sometimes there are role reversals as well where you see that Babu is not dominating anymore, but he is being dominated by a woman. Woman could be his wife, woman could be his courtesan, women could be a singer, musician or a prostitute.

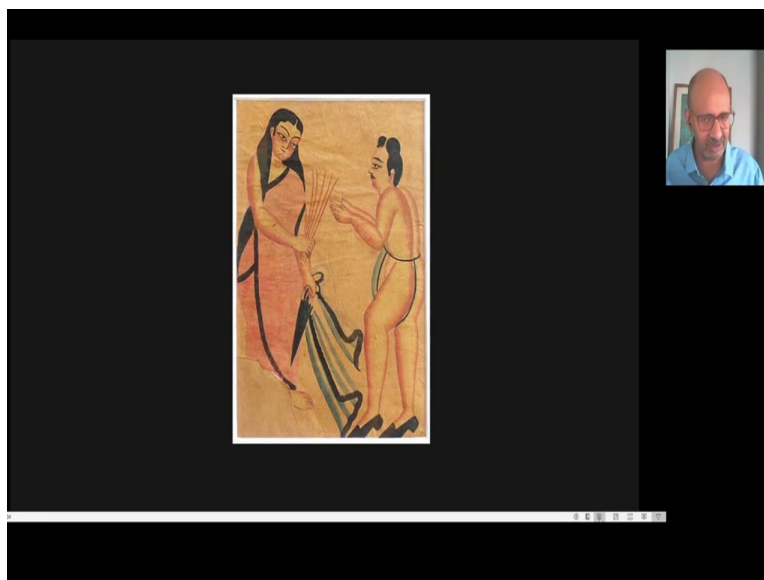
So these are paintings where evidently a strong satire has been created. A sarcastic way of looking at the position of these men in the new urban society who have become completely dominated by their woman folk.

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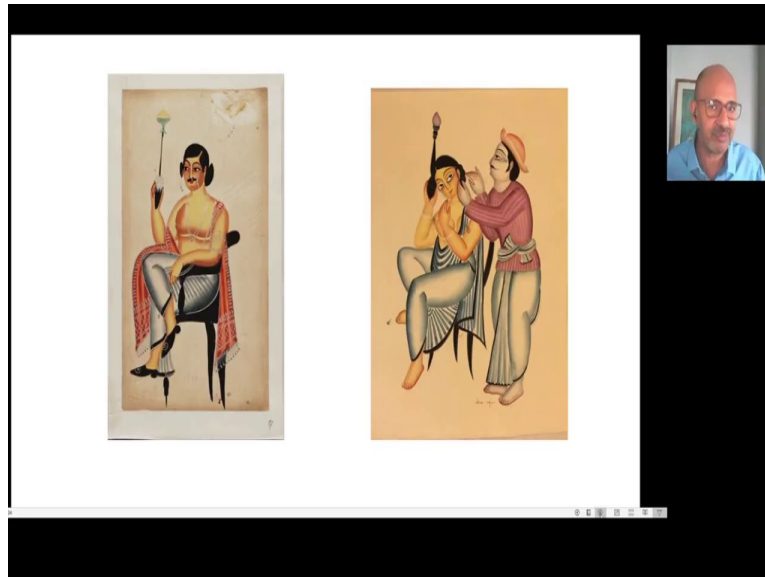


So therefore, on the right hand side you see this picture where you see a woman with a broom is actually beating up that man. So these are the strange incidents and events and phenomenon, which the Kalighat painters surely observed or got to know and they started representing them in their paintings.

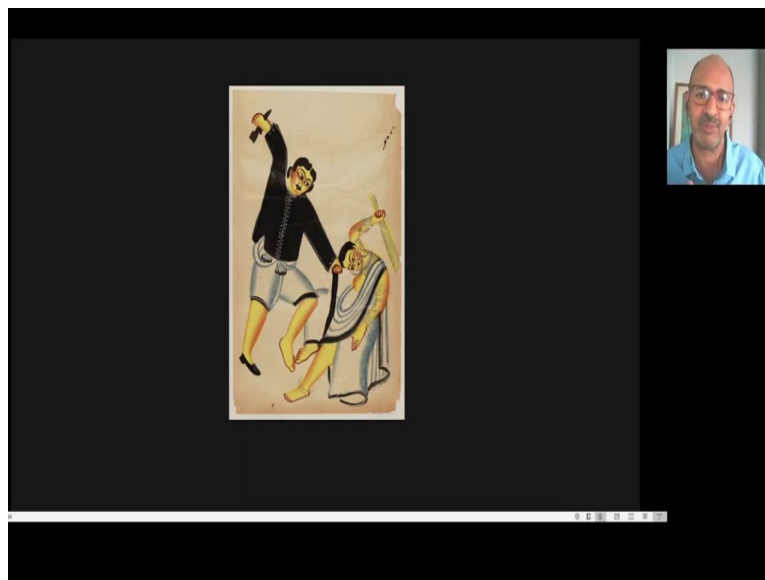
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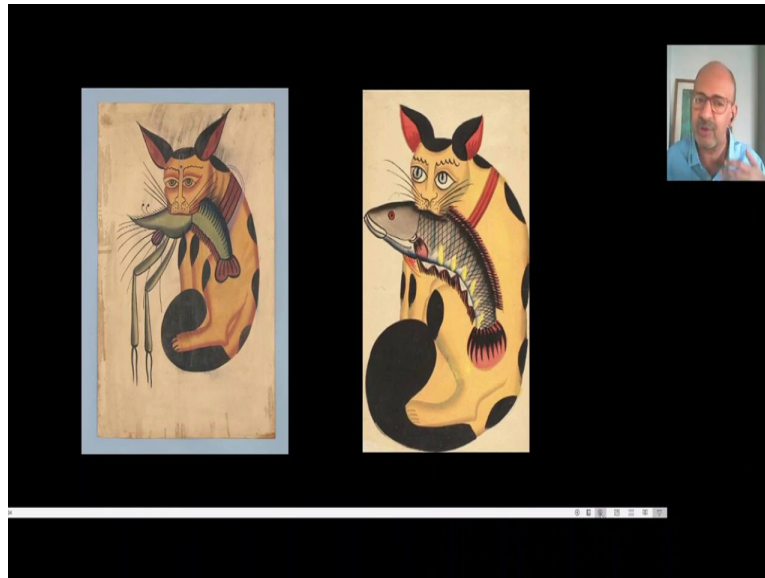
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So you can go on adding. Plenty of these paintings are available on the net or in books. You can create your own archive of Kalighat paintings, divide them or classify them under different heads, religious, secular, and scandals, and satirical drawings and paintings and see how the subject matters although they might look a little bit stylized and decorative and traditional in the first glimpse.

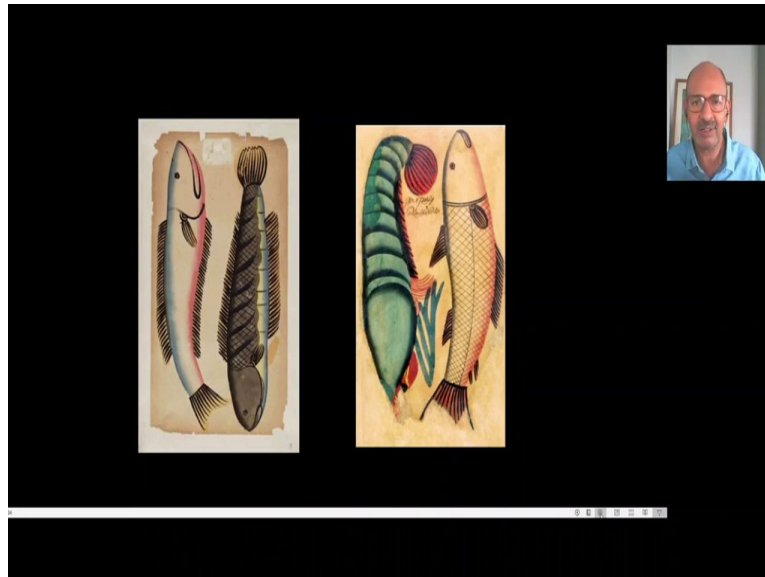
But when you study these paintings, you can gradually notice that the subject matters are indeed very contemporary to their time. And that is exactly why they are really very modern. Because you see one of the criteria of modernity and modernism is contemporariness. That you have a contemporary field, contemporary subject matter, contemporary approach or a contemporary take on your life, on your surrounding, on your time.

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So even when you see these paintings, a cat eating a fish, probably it has some double meaning, probably it has a symbolic satirical meaning attached to it, not a very simple and innocent depiction of a cat eating the fish.

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And there are plenty of such depictions, which is a kind of continuation of birds and animals in Mughal painting, birds and animals in company painting and now you have fish and why fish? Because Bengal and Bengali as a community is well known for their appetite for fish, a fish-loving community. So Kalighat painters used fish also as a contemporary motif, a secular motif.

Now from next week, we are moving on to the next important phase of the history of modern Indian art where we do not find such classifications like company painting or Kalighat paintings because company painting and Kalighat paintings also produce some traditions.

From now onwards, we will see emergence of individuals and at the same time, later, we shall see the emergence of new situations, new ideologies like nationalism, etc. So in the next lecture we shall look at three very important individual artists right after these phases working towards the formation of modern Indian art. Thank you.