

Modern Indian Art from the Colonial Period to the Present
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Lecture 07
Nationalism, Abanindranath Tagore and Bengal School

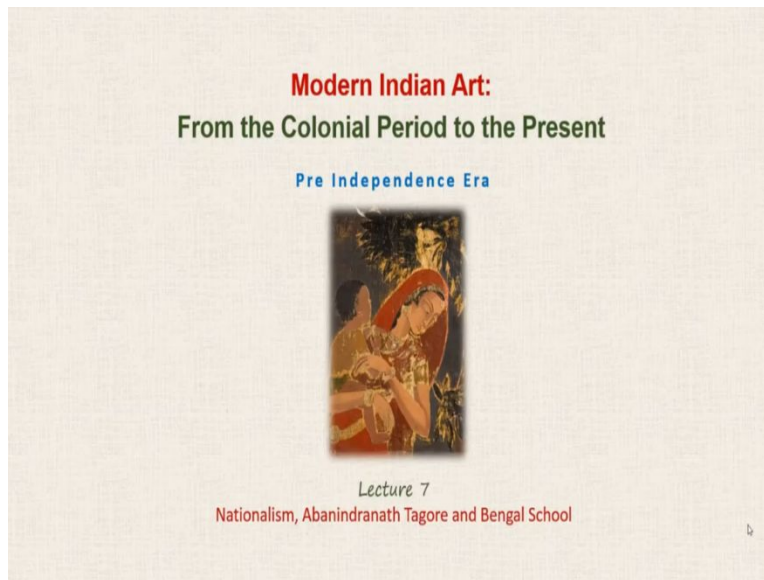
Welcome viewers to NOC's online course on Modern Indian art from the Colonial period to the Present. Today is the 7th lecture, that is the second from the second week, and as I have already mentioned in the previous lecture, that today we are going to discuss a very significant, very important phenomenon that developed during the very early part of the 20th century and that is generally known as Nationalism.

Now Nationalism was not restricted to art only, as you all know. It was a very important idea that was slowly brewing as a form of resistance against the British dominance, that is against the Colonial power. Now, today we are going to briefly see this idea of Nationalism which will be better known as Swadeshi as a self-respect, self-reliant feeling towards our own country as opposed to the idea to remain dominated and controlled by a foreign power.

So Nationalism definitely left a very important impact on Indian art as well as Indian literature and later on Indian theatre, drama, music, film, in every sphere of cultural activities. Now, what and how exactly art, visual arts, painting particularly responded to this idea of Nationalism that is going to be today's topic.

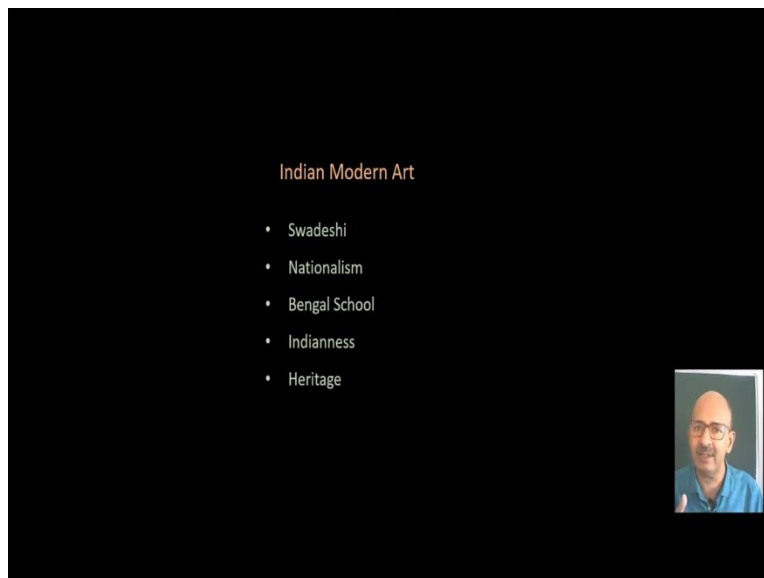
And we also know that a person who almost singularly created the visual idea, the visual form to address this political Nationalism in visual arts was Abanindranath Tagore, the nephew of Rabindranath Tagore. So in today's lecture we shall look at what Nationalism in art was all about, what was Abanindranath's contribution to it and how the very well-known school of painting, a particular tendency of painting known as the Bengal school of art which is the kind of a fall out of Nationalist art was formed and what were the examples of Nationalist or Bengal school of art.

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So this is how we have subtitled our topic today that is lecture 7. We are calling it Nationalism, Abanindranath Tagore and Bengal School.

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So when we talk about Indian art movement, we talk about a few points. Let us call them pointers which help us to understand the idea surrounding the early phase and tendencies of modern Indian art. So, number one Swadeshi, the idea of Swadeshi. As a political idea, we are all aware of that but how do you relate the idea of Swadeshi to art? This is something that we shall address in this lecture.

And of course, Nationalism. And actually Swadeshi and Nationalism are not two entirely very different things, they are closely connected and Nationalism is an idea, a pride, a sense of pride for our own country as opposed to a Colonial, not only state of political existence but a Colonial state of mind that you need to decolonize yourself from, you need to come out of that, you need to see yourself independent, free. Swadeshi is also an idea that talks about that freedom, a political freedom .

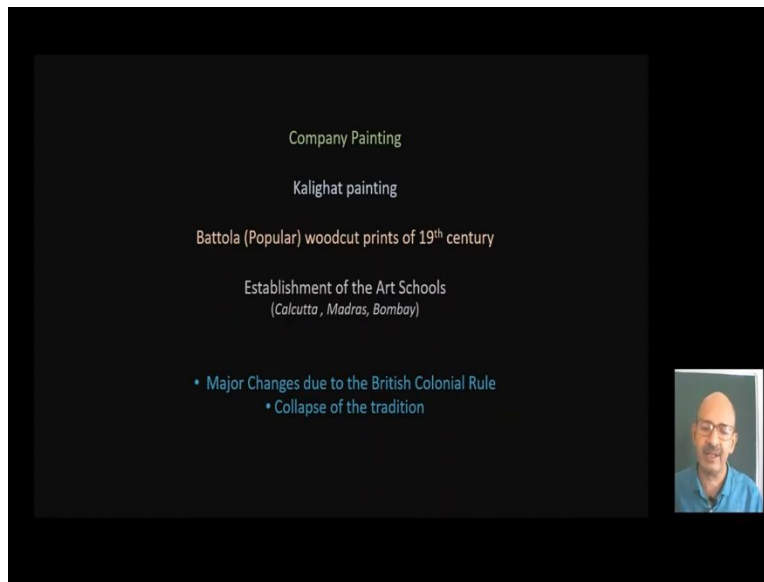
But how do you propagate that idea through your art without being propagandist, without being politically obvious, that is something that we shall see in some of these examples of Nationalist art. Then of course, a very important extension or a fall out of Nationalism and Nationalist art was Bengal School of which we can always say Abanindranath Tagore was the pioneer. And then we have this idea called Indianness, which we have already seen happening in the case of Raja Ravi Varma, in the case of Amrita Shergill, in the case of Jamini Roy.

Now this tendency, this inclination to explore, to discover, to rediscover, to find out the possible ways to establish or relate my art to Indianness will still continue during this pre-independence phase. However, in the post-independence phase, despite the feeling of one's own country, despite the fact many artists actually took part through their art works in the nation building projects post 1947, yet this Indianness- to make your art look strongly Indian with all its salient features as opposed to the Colonial power was not so relevant.

Indianness or social identity, cultural identity, these elements, these ideas were certainly important but artists approached these ideas from a different point of view altogether after 1947. So today we are looking at art pre-independence, that is before 1947 and of course when in the pre independent era artists were talking about Indianness, when artists were talking about or thinking how to make their art Nationalist, what would be the criteria of Bengal School, they always kept a very serious attention to their own past; that is traditional Indian art, that is our rich cultural heritage.

And this was the idea that in order to form a Nationalist art, in order to take art ahead and build up an art language, an art style, which is going to be a visible resistance- a strong visual resistance to the Colonial power- this cannot be done (this is what they thought) unless you are also at the same time looking at your own past, your own tradition and try to derive elements from that. So this is what we shall see also in today's examples.

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So we have already seen examples like Company painting, we have seen Kalighat painting, we have not seen yet but I shall show you, in one of my next lectures examples of the Battola. Battola is the name of a place in north Kolkata but basically, these are popular woodcut prints of 19th century which were found in street shops, road side shops etc. And establishment of the Art Schools, Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, all happening in the mid-19th century, close to one another.

So this is the scenario of the art movement or the art scenario in the mid-19th century or early 20th century. Because we have seen already that major changes took place due to the British Colonial rule. We have also seen there was a collapse of the tradition. But despite the collapse, these Nationalist artists, the Bengal School artists would be looking back at their own tradition not necessarily to imitate or copy old tradition but to revive certain values of old tradition and therefore the term 'Revivalism' will be used henceforth.

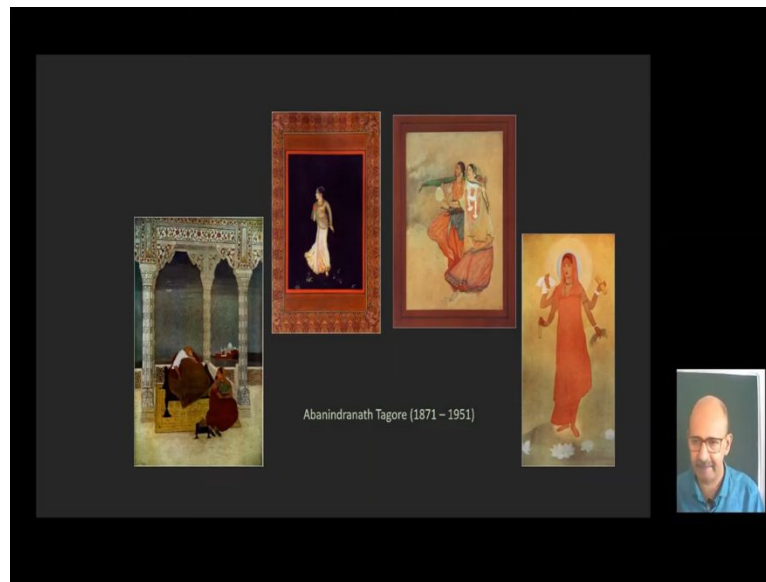
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So Revivalism, Bengal School recalling the past that is traditional styles, rejecting the Western academic style and national identity of art these are the ideas that were in circulation in those days and many artists, unless somebody who is strongly tied up to Western academic style, mostly artists were responding very positively to these ideas; ideas of Revivalism.

And they also understood clearly that Revivalism, if Revivalism meant to look back or recall the past traditional style, to understand certain values of traditional paintings so far it was okay but definitely did not mean the idea never expected the artist to actually copy and imitate the past art. Now how that was possible that you would derive elements from the past art, from a tradition, yet you do not copy them; you make an art of your own time. Yes, artists were able to reconcile these two apparently contradictory things and they could come up with some magnificent works of art from the Bengal school and otherwise also, we shall see.

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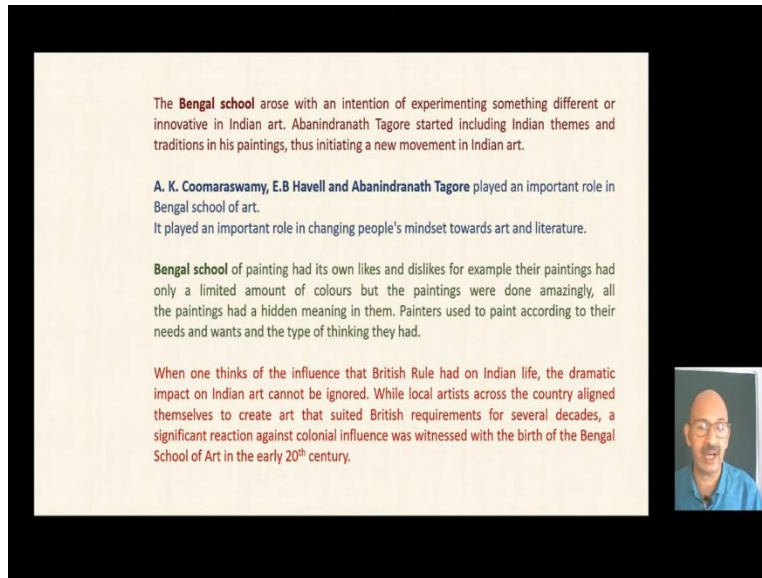


Now Abanindranath Tagore, quite early in his life was inclined to certain forms, certain formats, certain color schemes of Indian miniature paintings as you can see in this painting. And sometimes, even a re-imagination of an Indian past for example the one on the left-hand side you see the death of Shah Jahan pathetically, tragically, with a great pensive mood, he is looking at the Taj from a distance.

Now this is something that Abanindranath had to re-imagine. So he was using, without making it very obvious, a great amount of imagination. Therefore, I must make this point very clear once and for all that even if we do emphasize on the fact that Nationalist artists and many Bengal School artists were actually deriving elements from the past, Revivalism or revivalist art movement was actually becoming a very favorable, a very fashionable, very trendy art movement in early 20th century.

But what often is not discussed is the fact that there always has been a tremendous amount of application of imagination. Otherwise it was completely difficult, absolutely difficult to come up with these fascinating images. So you do learn techniques from the past, you do learn style, visual styles from the past, you do learn compositions, colours schemes, sometimes even figurations, but you cannot do these things successfully unless and until you have used your own power of imagination.

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The **Bengal school** arose with an intention of experimenting something different or innovative in Indian art. Abanindranath Tagore started including Indian themes and traditions in his paintings, thus initiating a new movement in Indian art.

A. K. Coomaraswamy, E.B Havell and Abanindranath Tagore played an important role in Bengal school of art.
It played an important role in changing people's mindset towards art and literature.

Bengal school of painting had its own likes and dislikes for example their paintings had only a limited amount of colours but the paintings were done amazingly, all the paintings had a hidden meaning in them. Painters used to paint according to their needs and wants and the type of thinking they had.

When one thinks of the influence that British Rule had on Indian life, the dramatic impact on Indian art cannot be ignored. While local artists across the country aligned themselves to create art that suited British requirements for several decades, a significant reaction against colonial influence was witnessed with the birth of the Bengal School of Art in the early 20th century.



The Bengal School arose with an intention of experimenting something different or innovative in Indian art. Abanindranath Tagore started including Indian themes and traditions in his paintings, thus initiating a new movement in Indian art. Then we have A K Coomaraswamy, a very important art historian; E B Havell, an artist, an art educator and an art administrator who was also the principal of Government college of art and he in fact invited Abanindranath Tagore to come and become a faculty, a teacher in Government Art College for some years.

And they all played a very important role in the formulation of what we call the Bengal school of art. And definitely it played a very important role in changing people's mindset towards art and literature, to move away for a while from the western art, western culture and try to see Indian art, Indian past from a different view point.

And also, with a concern, with a cause because they all understood that unless we are getting back to our root, getting back to our culture and kind of refreshing it, making it contemporary, making it today's art, we will not be able to resist the aggressive Colonial, cultural hegemony. So Bengal School of painting had its own likes and dislikes, for example their paintings had only a limited amount of colors according to some, some people say the Bengal school of art, in Bengal school of art you find figurations are too affected and they have this great derogatory quality of mannerism, often the lack, the feel of actual real life, etc., etc.

But when one thinks of the influence that British rule had on Indian life, the dramatic impact on Indian art cannot be ignored. While local artists across the country aligned themselves to create, like company painters and all, that suited British requirements for several decades but now we have a significant reaction against Colonial influence and the birth of Bengal School, that is how it took birth in the early 20th century.

And many elite houses in the upper-class Kolkata societies, they were involved in creating this cultural resistance and the Tagore's family house, Rabindranath Tagore's own family house at Jorasanko of North Calcutta was one such very important point- a outpost of resistance because all the cultural activities happening in that family were at some point or the other resisting the Colonial hegemony.

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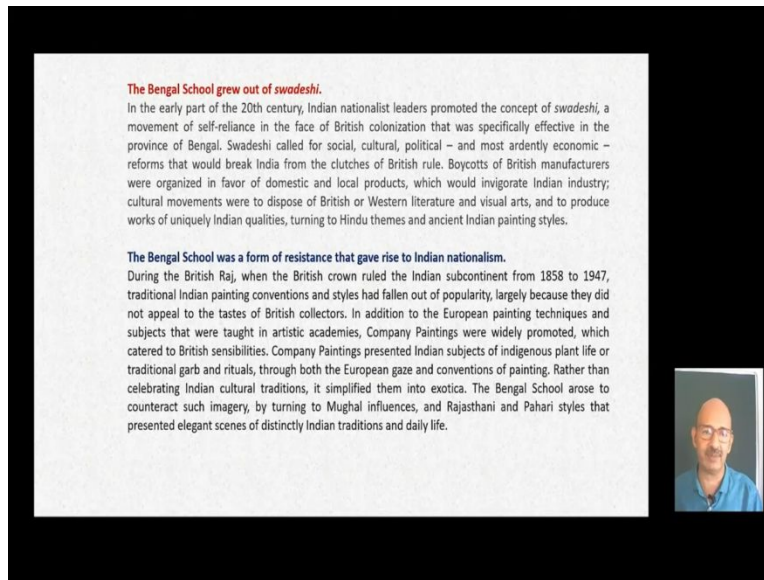


So, this painting called Bharat Mata from 1905 is considered to be the pioneering classic example of Bengal School and this was painted by Abanindranath Tagore. Now this is an iconic painting and if you look at the details clearly you can realize, it is not difficult to realize that the lady represented, the figure of a woman represented in this painting is nothing but a symbol of the India as imagined by many Indians at that point of time and particularly Abanindranath Tagore.

So, she is not in that sense a secular lady or a lady from the life around but a particular lady symbolically and iconographically represented with certain symbols in her hand, four hands is


again a significant symbol to suggest that here we are not looking at an ordinary woman but we are looking at an iconic woman. However, the following examples of Bengal School were not always so much of an example or a result of a Nationalist construct or Nationalist imagination of an Indian icon as we see here. But mostly they were following certain Bengal School norms.

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The Bengal School grew out of swadeshi.
In the early part of the 20th century, Indian nationalist leaders promoted the concept of *swadeshi*, a movement of self-reliance in the face of British colonization that was specifically effective in the province of Bengal. Swadeshi called for social, cultural, political – and most ardently economic – reforms that would break India from the clutches of British rule. Boycotts of British manufacturers were organized in favor of domestic and local products, which would invigorate Indian industry; cultural movements were to dispose of British or Western literature and visual arts, and to produce works of uniquely Indian qualities, turning to Hindu themes and ancient Indian painting styles.

The Bengal School was a form of resistance that gave rise to Indian nationalism.
During the British Raj, when the British crown ruled the Indian subcontinent from 1858 to 1947, traditional Indian painting conventions and styles had fallen out of popularity, largely because they did not appeal to the tastes of British collectors. In addition to the European painting techniques and subjects that were taught in artistic academies, Company Paintings were widely promoted, which catered to British sensibilities. Company Paintings presented Indian subjects of indigenous plant life or traditional garb and rituals, through both the European gaze and conventions of painting. Rather than celebrating Indian cultural traditions, it simplified them into exotica. The Bengal School arose to counteract such imagery, by turning to Mughal influences, and Rajasthani and Pahari styles that presented elegant scenes of distinctly Indian traditions and daily life.

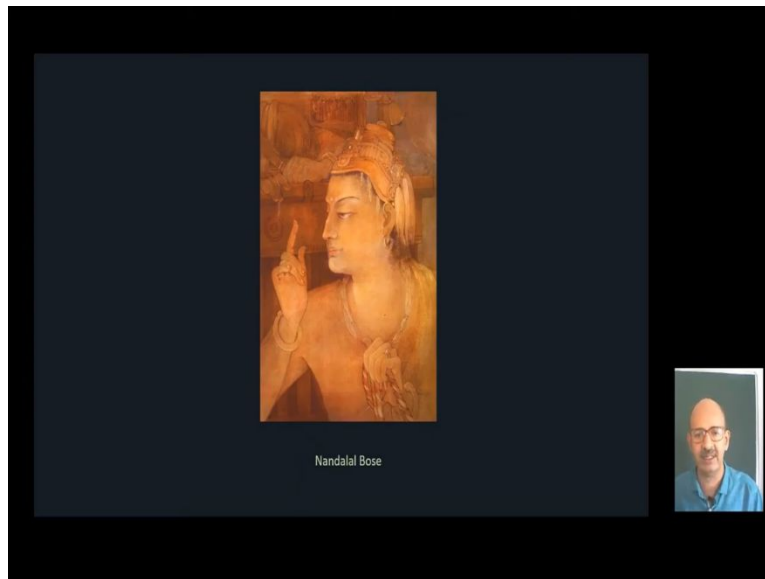


So in the early part of the 20th century Indian Nationalist leaders promoted the concept of Swadeshi, a movement of self-reliance in the face of British colonization that was specifically effective in the province of Bengal. Swadeshi called for cultural, social, political and most ardently economic reforms that would break India from the clutches of the British rule. To boycott British manufacturers, and were organized in favor of domestic and local products. So we all know that how this form of resistance was happening and then we come to know that how it is also leaving an impact, it was impressing upon the visual artists.

So during the British Raj when the British Crown ruled the Indian subcontinent from 1858 to 1947, traditional Indian painting conventions and styles had fallen out of popularity, largely because they did not appeal to the tastes of the British collectors. So, there was a break which we have already discussed, there was a rupture. We also know that in addition to the European painting techniques and subjects that were taught in artistic academies, Company Paintings were widely promoted which catered to British sensibilities.

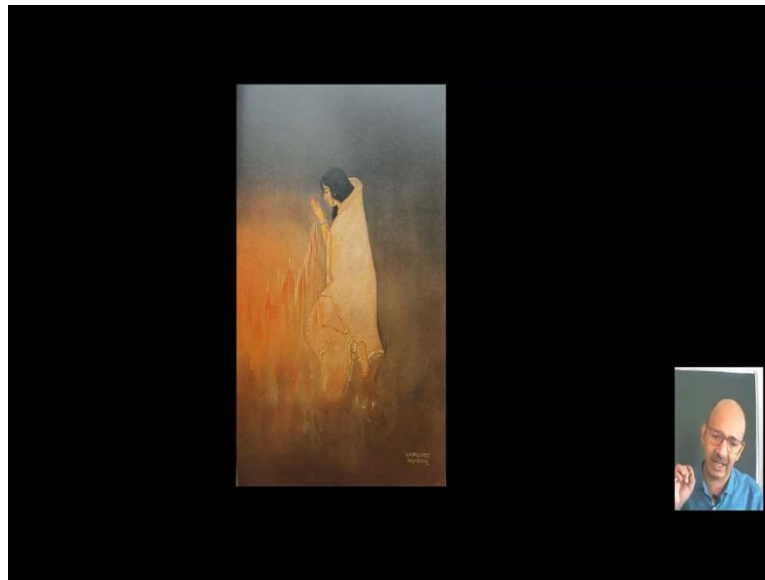
We also know that Company Paintings presented Indian subject matters of indigenous Indian life or traditional garb and rituals through both the European gaze and conventions of paintings. Rather than celebrating Indian cultural traditions, it simplified them into exotica. We have seen that happening in company paintings. And now we have the Bengal School arise, to counteract such imagery by turning to Mughal influences and Rajasthani and Pahari styles of miniature painting that presented elegant scenes of distinctly Indian traditions and daily life.

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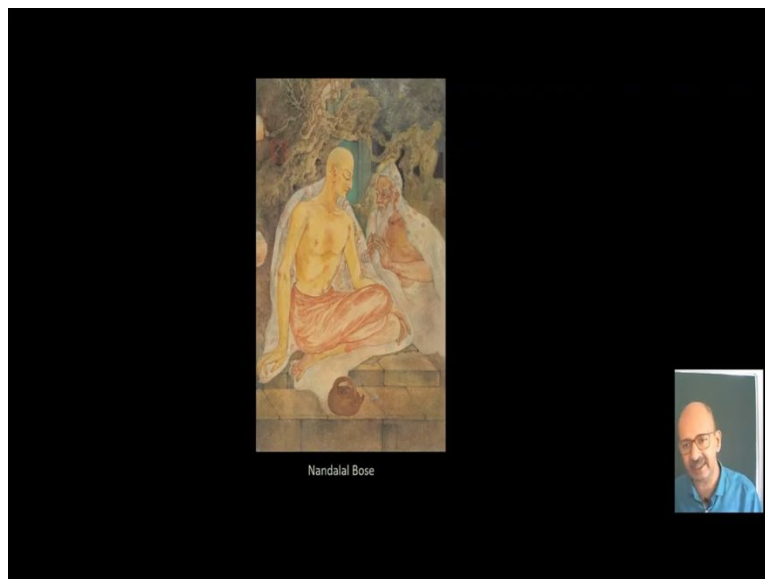
But within this format of Bengal School, not only we get to see this kind of traditional, religious, iconic images like Lord Shiva by Nandalal Bose.

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We also see that the same Nandalal Bose is also doing an image which he is not directly calling Sita but it looks like it refers to the Agnipariksha of Sita. Therefore, he is deriving this subject from the epic or from mythology or from religion or for that matter Lord Chaitanya.

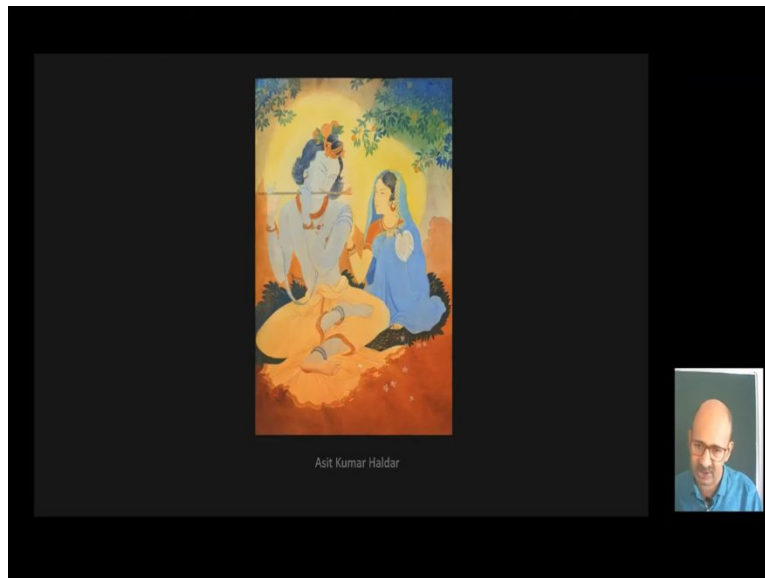
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So Bengal School allowed the Indian painters to deal with traditional subject matters but not necessarily in a very traditional style because Nandalal Bose for one, and even for that matter Abanindranath Tagore and many others, even when they were painting, doing paintings based on traditional themes, highlighting certain religious leaders, they were trying to re-contextualize

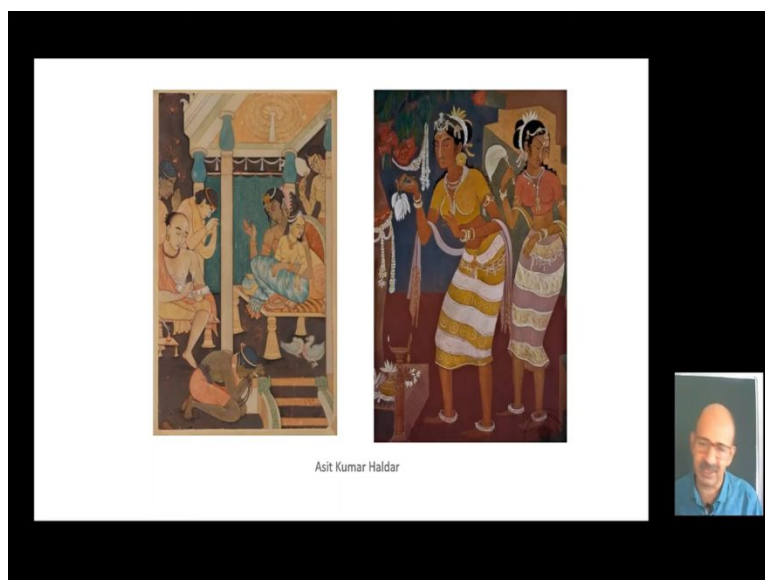
them or rather at least visually relocate these great religious icons and leaders in the 19th century, early 20th century India.

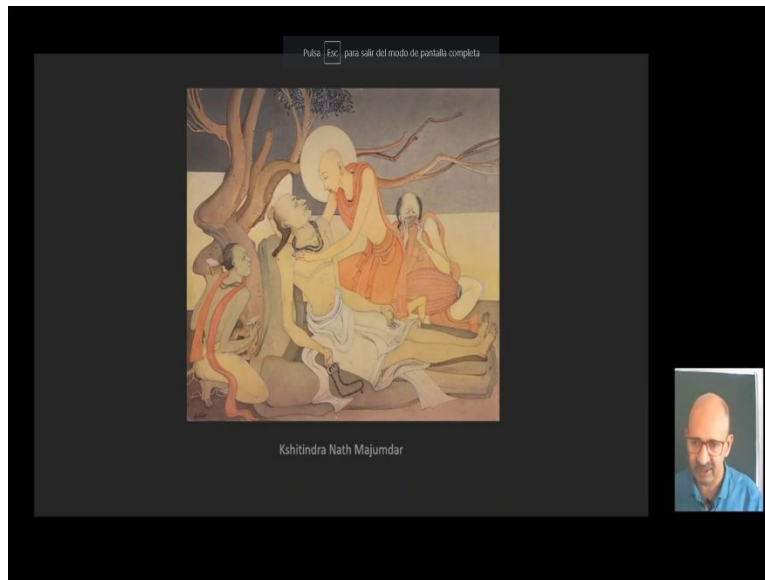
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We also have somebody called Asit Kumar Haldar doing Bengal School paintings and his elements are highly derived from traditional Indian paintings. But he is also using certain personal and individual technical applications like the foliage that you see in the trees is not exactly a way a miniature painting would be doing from the 17th, 18th or 16th century.

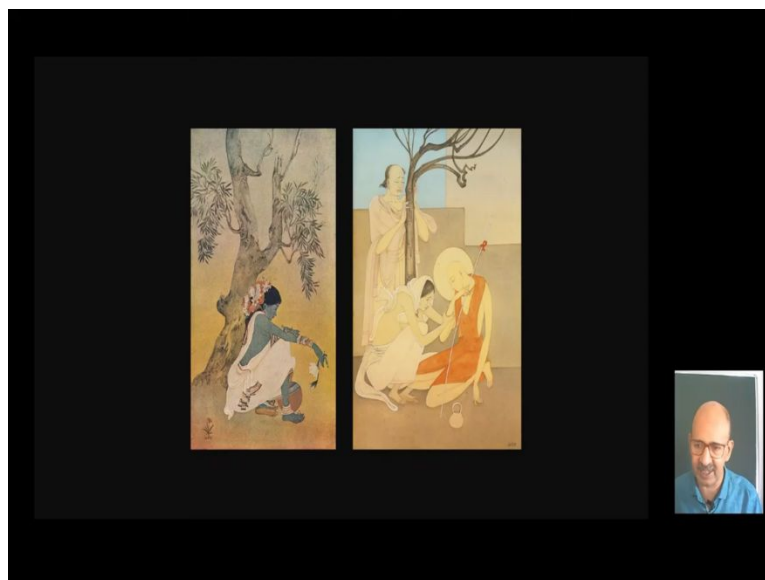
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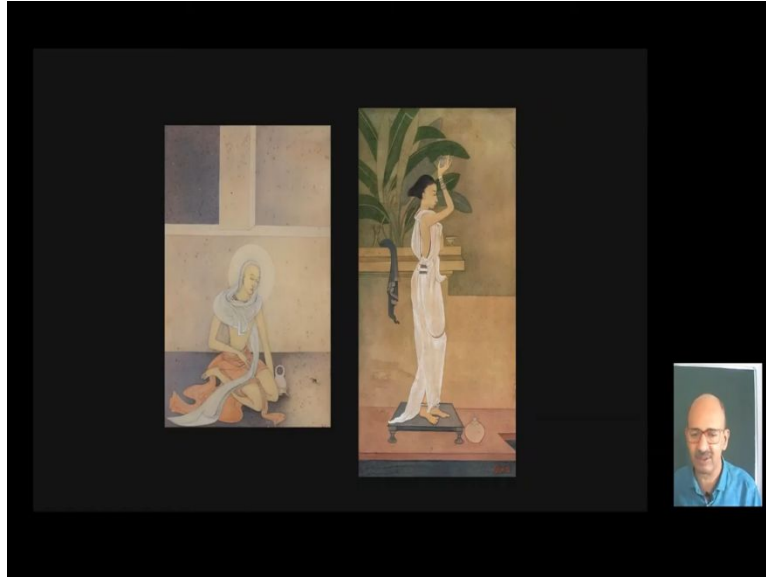




So therefore even when Asit Kumar Haldar is almost directly copying the style from Ajanta he is using his own details besides maintaining certain Ajanta norms in terms of style, dress, detailing etc. So these are the forms of cultural resistance we are talking about where the British interests nowhere were reflected.

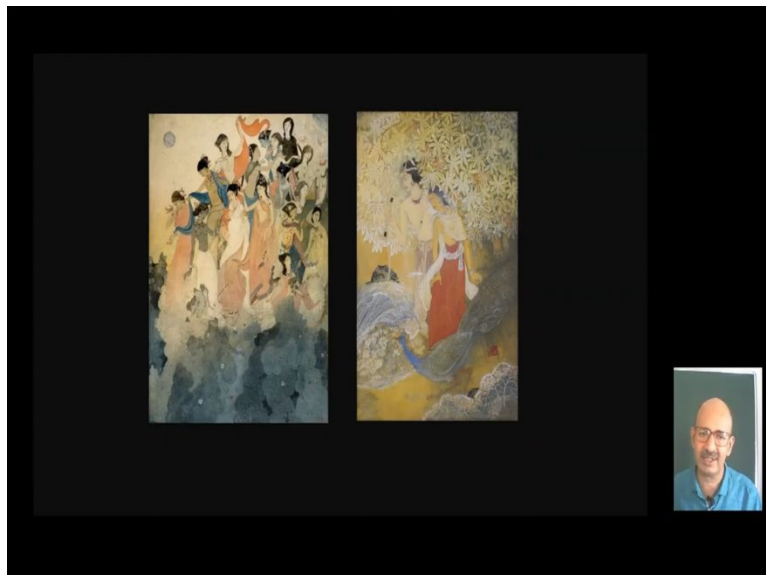
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Then we have Kshitindranath Majumdar who also did a number of paintings based on either very contemporary themes or themes taken from the past tradition, mythology but redrawn, relocated in a more contemporary setting whether it is Chaitanya or a mendicant or could be a Buddha, everything, or a local normal lady in her moment of bath, she is taking bath and all these images are located in a more or less familiar context.

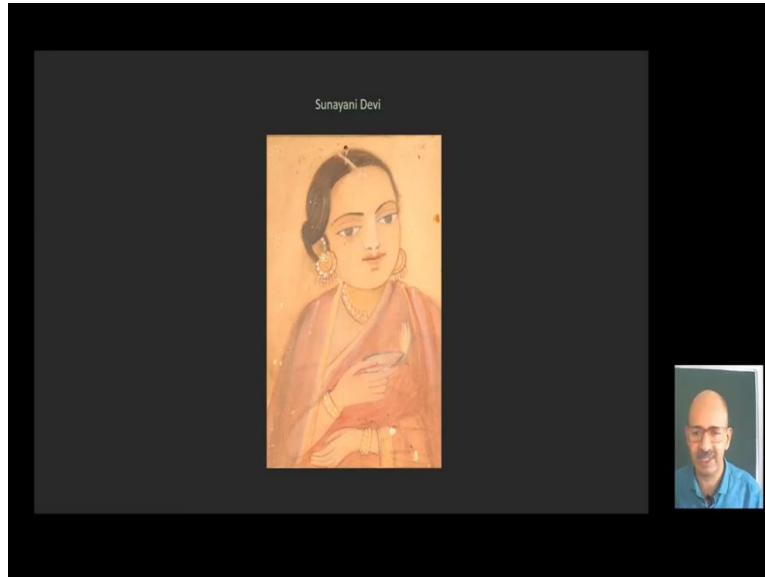
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But even when they are not, we are looking at certain figurations, certain styles of paintings, certain color palettes, which do not have any reference to real realistic observation, but they do have references to particular objects like trees, like dress, like costume, like ornaments. But as a

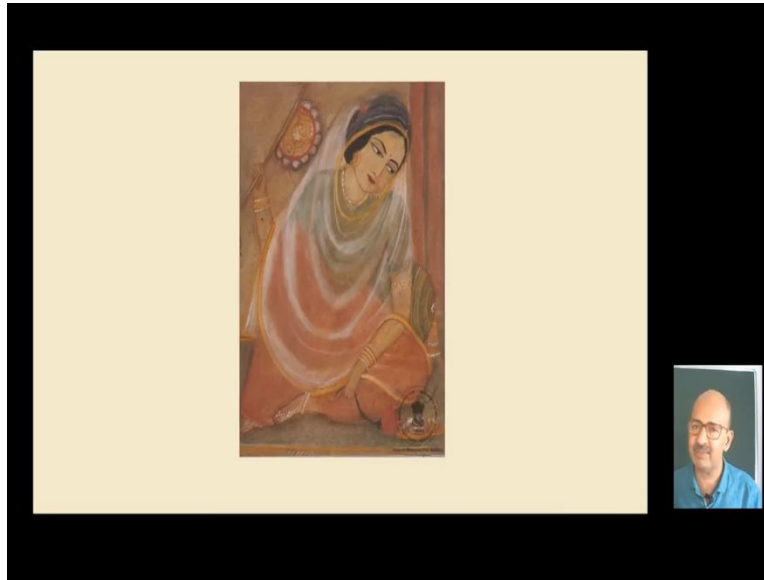
whole these paintings never try to convince us with any realistically or illusionistically executed forms.

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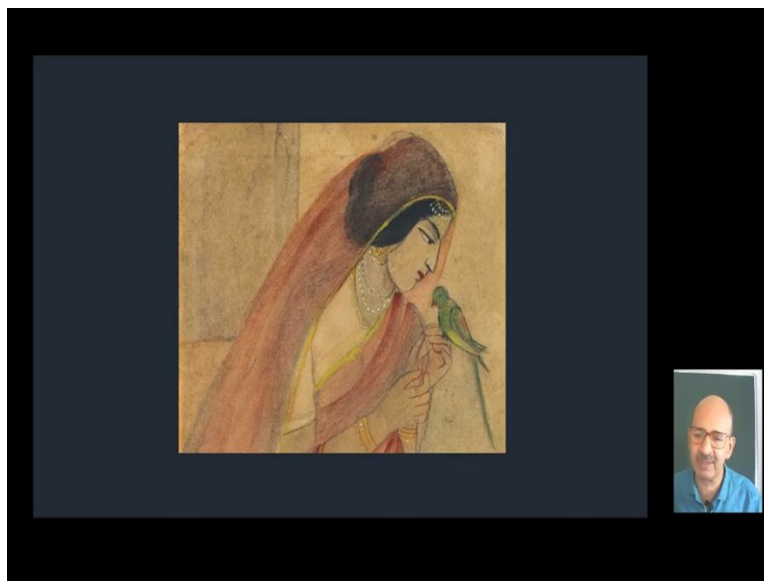
Then we have from Tagore's family, Sunayani Devi, an exceptionally brilliant painter who despite remaining with her house chores and domestic duties she could manage to find time and did some marvelous paintings. Today Sunayani Devi is a much sought after painter also in the art auction market and elsewhere. She is now being profusely studied, thoroughly studied by the art historians.

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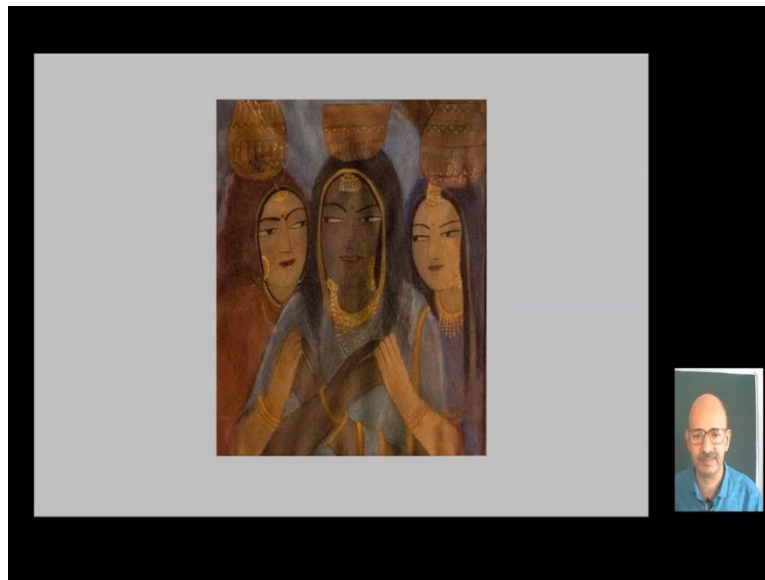
So Sunayani Devi is also applying the norms of Bengal School, certain ideas and values of traditional Indian miniature painting but she is also looking at subject matters which are very, very contemporary in style.

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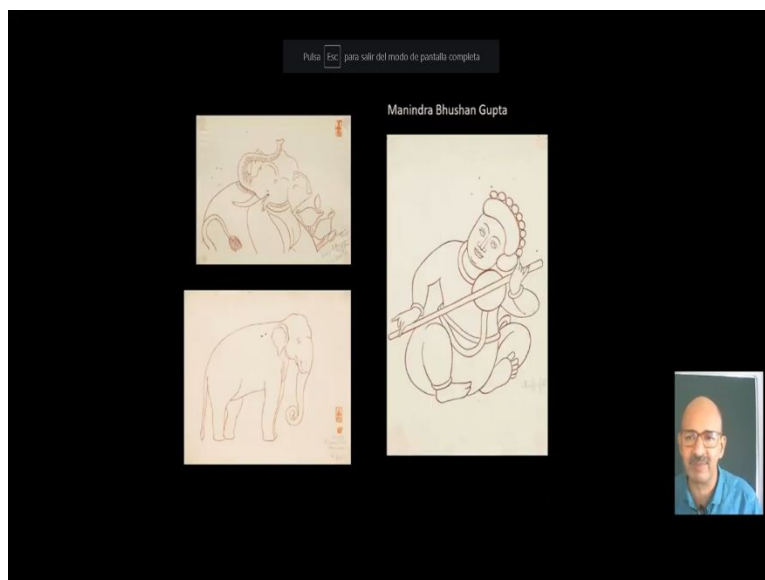
She is looking at subject matters which she must have seen around her or must have read in some book but stylistically she is following a particular characterization or stylization.

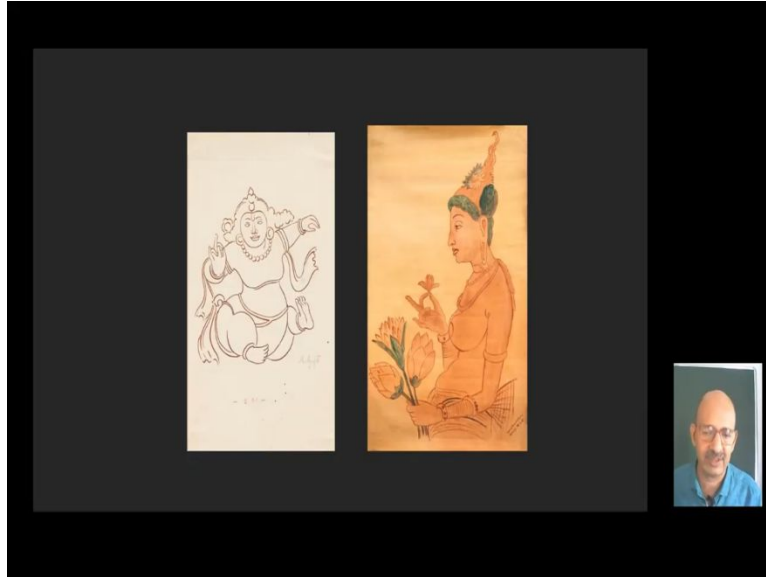
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So even when Sunayani Devi is painting based on themes which do not necessarily have a religious or cultural past, she can transform them into very enigmatic and imaginative composition.

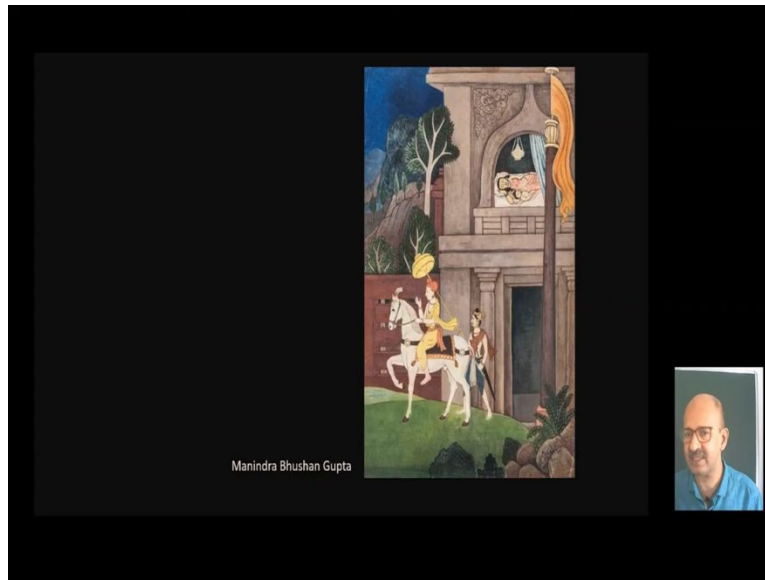
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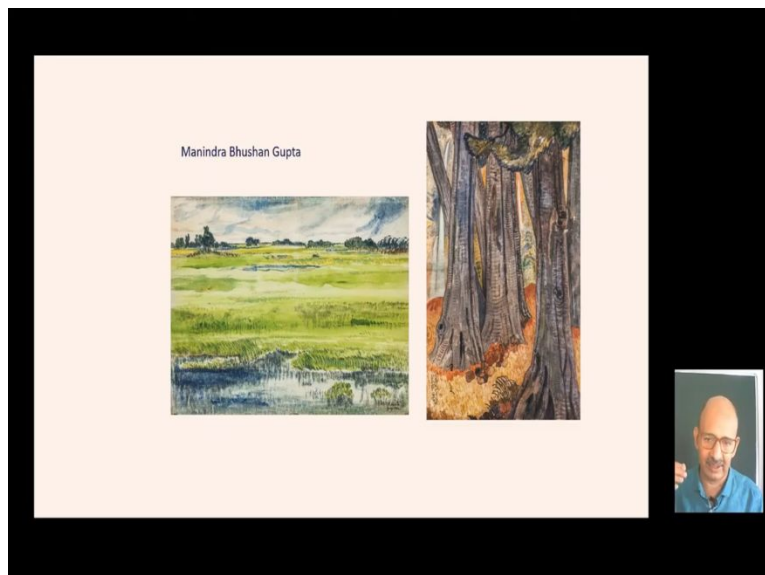
Then later, as followers of Bengal School we have Manindra Bhushan Gupta who directly studied traditional Indian paintings, figures from sculptures, from paintings and did plenty of such drawings, on the basis of which he also drew traditional paintings.

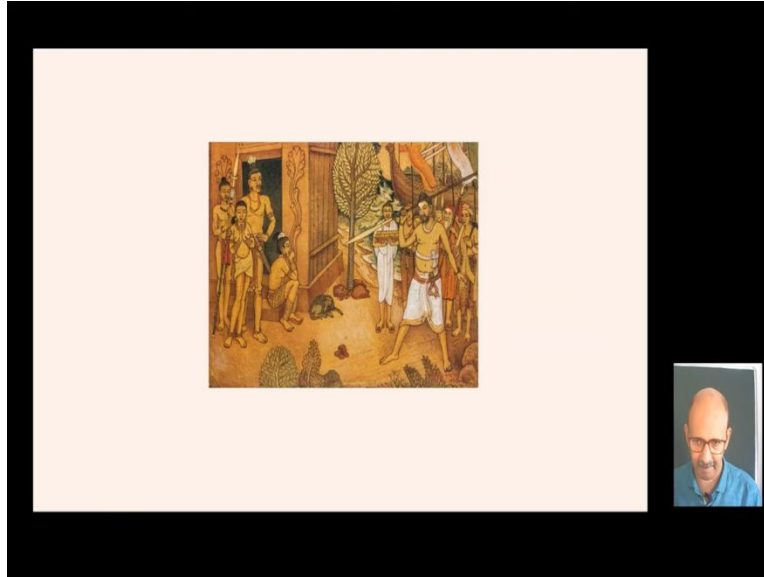
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Like this one, completely, you can say an imitation of the traditional painting but with certain changes of space, form and details and very interestingly, in these kinds of paintings beside adopting a traditional format, the artist Manindra Bhushan Gupta is also making certain changes, visual changes.

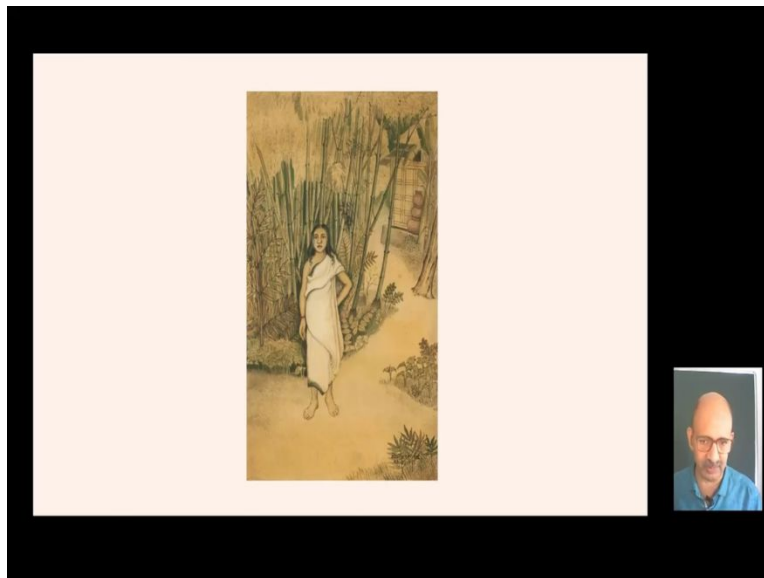
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So all of them are trying to kind of reconcile between their knowledge and awareness of the past and their present concern to look at nature and people around from a different perspective and completely avoiding, very importantly the western academic style.

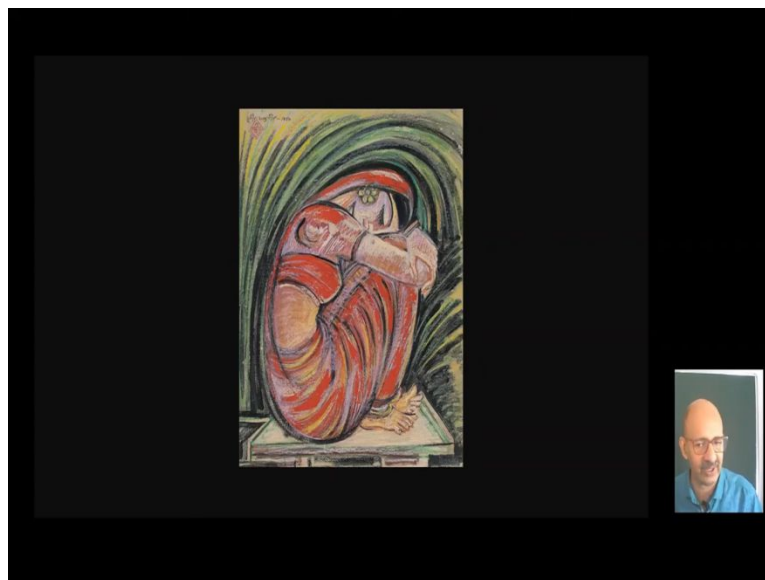
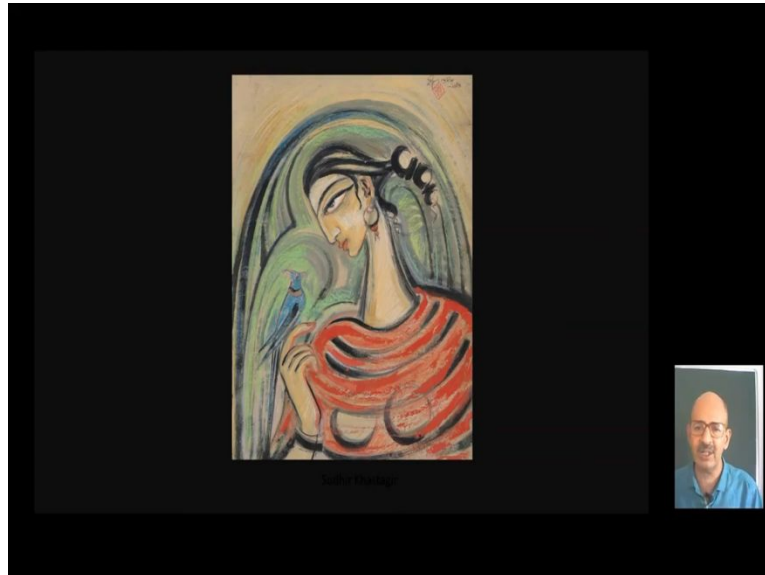
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So even when Manindra Bhushan Gupta is doing a painting based on his direct observation of a small rural neighborhood, where you can see a woman standing right in front of a bamboo grove, you can also see the house in the background with clay pots kept one on top of the other, a very, very reassuring rural scene of Bengal, but Manindra Bhushan is also making it look like real Indian painting. It is not just the subject matter that makes the painting look Indian or local, it is

also the style of painting which is not western, realistic for its linearity, for its space, for its color and primarily based on certain sensibilities and values one derives from one's knowledge of the past traditions.

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Then we have later followers whose works do not directly make us believe or recognize quickly as Bengal school but you can clearly see the stylization of figure and the background and the colour that you see in this painting by Sudhir Khastgir or this later painting by Sudhir Khastgir, definitely his paintings bear and reflect a strong strain of Bengal Nationalism in art, whether you

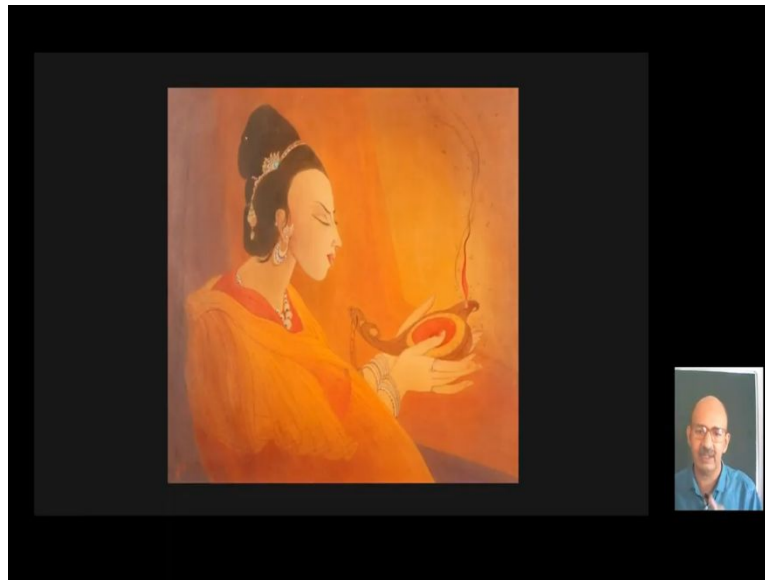
call it a Bengal School of Art or Nationalist school of art. So that kind of stylization, that kind of mannered way of executing a painting can be seen still alive in many later painters like Sudhir Khastgir in the early 1940s.

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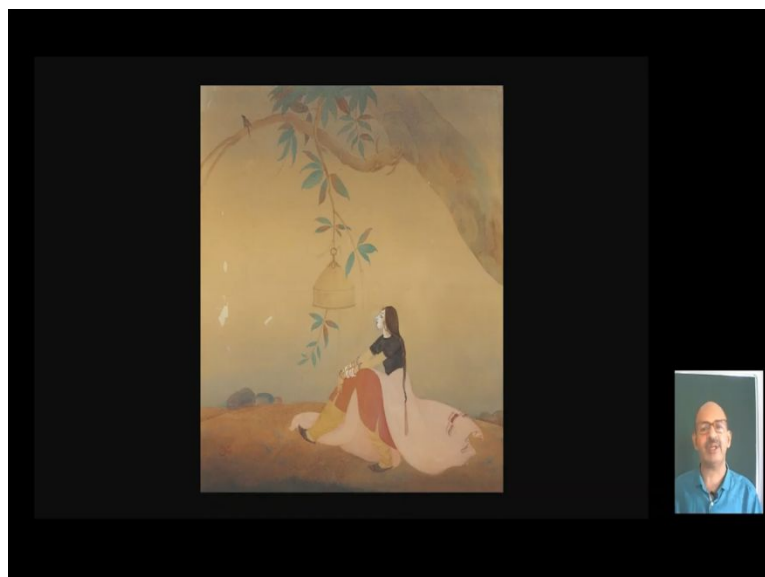
Or even A R Chughtai from Pakistan, slightly earlier where I can see that his paintings, may be subject matters are derived from his community, from his neighborhood but the application of color, application of composition, the linearity very soft subtle linearity of the compositions and the figures they all point to the possibility that A R Chughtai was greatly influenced by, inspired by the Bengal school of art.

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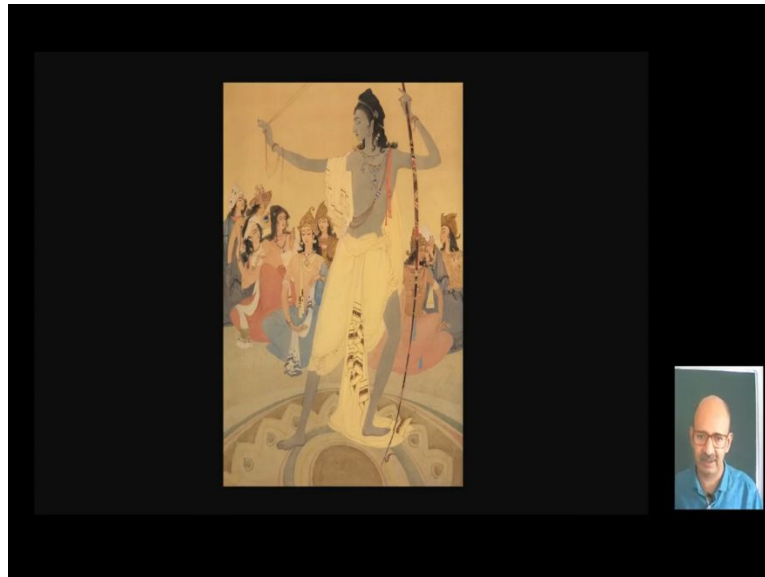
So I am bringing in the example of A R Chughtai only to remind us of the fact that Bengal school of Art did not necessarily remain restricted within Bengal. We have many examples later on artists from Andhra Pradesh, artists from Karnataka, artists from Maharashtra, Gujarat, all over India, were highly influenced by the possibilities proposed by the Bengal school of art. Therefore, even if by 1920s and 30s, Bengal school of art itself lost its steam, I mean there were artists who could follow Bengal school of art very skillfully but somewhere, Bengal school of art lost its relevance.

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Whereas outside Bengal, within India and also in the present Pakistan like A R Chughtai, Bengal School was still a very important role model for many artists as a part of a cultural resistance against the British Colonial rule.

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In fact, even when somebody like A R Chughtai, who did this beautiful painting based on the theme of Arjun's Dhanurbhanga, the part of the very famous episode from the Mahabharata you can see that though it is from the Epic, though it does not have any direct reference to the contemporary life, A R Chughtai is representing the forms- he is actually bringing up certain details in the form which follow not just Bengal School per se but many Indian and other Asian traditions.

He is reviving those values in a painting where again the main subject matter is from one of the greatest epics called Mahabharata. But there is a certain way of doing it, if we look at the composition, if we look at the postures, gestures and the looks of the various figures, this is something that you do not find in this particular way in any traditional Indian examples.

So this is where Chughtai is contributing, this is where most of the Bengal School artists were also contributing. So, although we call it little mannered, although we always associate Revivalism in the context of Bengal School and Nationalist art, yes, these things were there, no doubt about that but at the same time it will be a gross injustice if we do not pay to the minute contributions left behind by the Bengal School artists.

So, two things are happening at the same time on the one hand, this derivation from the past tradition and on the other hand artist as a person, as an individual how he or she is contributing to the development of a particular art trend. This is even more clear when you look at somebody like Sunayani Devi's artworks. Because she was not simply following Bengal School she was also able to create a style of her own and that style became a kind of identity style for Sunayani Devi. So, Bengal School despite being a movement definitely had a kind of possibility to become a space or a platform for individual artists to develop their individual styles. Thank you.