

Indian Art: Materials, Techniques and Artistic Practices
Prof. Rajarshi Sengupta
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology – Kanpur

Lecture – 53
Multimedia Approaches - 1

(Refer Slide Time: 00:22)



Hello everyone. I am Rajarshi Sengupta and we are talking about the developments in the contemporary art after India's independence. So, we have looked into the painting practices that how different kinds of painting practices like oil on canvas and of course the works on paper and so on they have progressed after the India's independence. Now here we see the use of sculpture and printmaking.

So we will start our discussion with sculpture, and of course sculpture also has a long history and for our time constraint I would not be looking into too many of those examples, but few things for us to understand that what are the relevance of sculpture we find. Now, unlike painting like the painting on canvas which requires an indoor space and many times we see that how they are utilized by the government bodies or the institutions are restricted.

So, in that term we find that sculptures from very early times, during the colonial time period and after India's independence, there was a need for making public sculptures. So, it was very different from the way we see the paintings in the gallery spaces or in the indoor spaces and then many of the sculptures that we find them to be placed in the important public places. So

that also had this impact on how the training in sculpture had begun and how it continued in the post-independence India.

So, on one hand if we see that there were the sculptures which were required by the government officials, by the city councils and other bodies, the government bodies for these public places, but then we also find that there were sculptural practices which were much more inclined towards the individualistic practices, which would be closer to what the people in Bombay Progressive Artists' Group or people like Gulam Sheikh and all were doing.

So, we are coming back to what was happening in the public sculptures. So, this is one of the examples, very well-known example, which is called the Triumph of Labour and it was made by D. P. Roy Choudhury and D. P. Roy Choudhury was trained in the government school of art in Calcutta and he knew the art scene in early 20th century Bengal and then he moved to Madras for teaching in the government school of art in Madras and eventually he became the principal in the school.

So, what we find in this particular image which is called the Triumph of Labour and it is prominently featured near this very well-known site which is known as Marina beach in Chennai. So, what we see here that there is this high pedestal onto which there are those labouring bodies that we find, the labouring human bodies, all of them are men. So, what they try to do here is that we see that they are trying to throw a hurdle out of their way and the hurdle is this large piece of stone.

And so this is something that we find that this large piece of stone cannot be removed by one person, but it is something that if people come together as a group, if people come together as a collective, then this collective effort can make this impossible into possible. So, this is a message that we find that is conveyed in this sculpture and this is a bronze casting. So, again going back to some of the classical sculptural medium which we find in the; European context, so many European sculptors that we find from Rodin and Giacometti and so on.

We find that all of them have worked with this medium and so in here what we find that and bronze is also something that gives permanence to the forms. So, since this form is opened in an open space and then there is no canopy or anything on the top of it, so it needed to be made with the material which is stable enough to bear the climatic conditions and everything else.

So, this what we find in this sculpture is that there is this meticulous depiction of this labouring bodies that all of these bodies that we see they only wear loincloth and perhaps in some places we see they also have this cloth that is wrapped around their head like a turban. So, this is something that is a sign of the labours who work in our country. They can be agricultural labourers, they can be the labours in various construction sites, they can be artisanal labour.

So, what we find there is that these labours are not people who are always recognized for their work. And in this monumental sculpture, the labours are the ones who are given the priority or whose work has been celebrated. So, that is the reason we see their bodies and not really heroic, all the muscles and the veins everything as seen in their body, but when all of them when they put together their work then the impossible hurdle can be removed from the way.

Now, if we also think about its situation this sculpture is actually situated on high pedestal, so high pedestal like this and if there is a person who will be standing here, so our height will probably be around the pedestal. So, we will have to look up at this sculpture. So, this is not something that we see the sculpture being on the eye level as we walk and what does that do? We definitely have a long history of using pedestals in the European context.

And of course, with the colonial art education, this idea of pedestal had also emerged in the Indian subcontinent. Now, what the pedestal did was usually we find that there were those figures who are the important figures for administration for the state and for the nation, so those figures were the ones who were featured on this high pedestal.

But now when we see that there are these common people, the people who are not acknowledged anywhere else for their work they are featured prominently on this high pedestal where everyone else can see them, so that makes a different kind of, that gives a different message from the ones which were already there. So, the figures, the so called great figures who were featured on the pedestal.

If we compare that to the one that we see here, the Triumph of Labour, so there we certainly see a shift that had taken place after India's independence. And this was also something we can imagine it was not the idea of S. P. Rao Choudhury whatever it was a common emotion that many people had shared during this time. So, the first prime minister of India Jawaharlal Nehru

earlier lecture. So Mrinalini Mukherjee was trained as a painter and she did not have institutional training in doing sculpture. But then she became more and more interested in different kinds of natural fibres like hemp and nettle and so on and she started knotting them and making them into forms.

So this painstaking process which would start by doing the small knots and putting them together into an organic form, so that is something we find that those were then later on displayed as the sculptural works. So, the image that we have on the left side of the screen, here we see that one of her work is hung from the tree and of course this is the artist Mrinalini Mukherjee, she is here with her work.

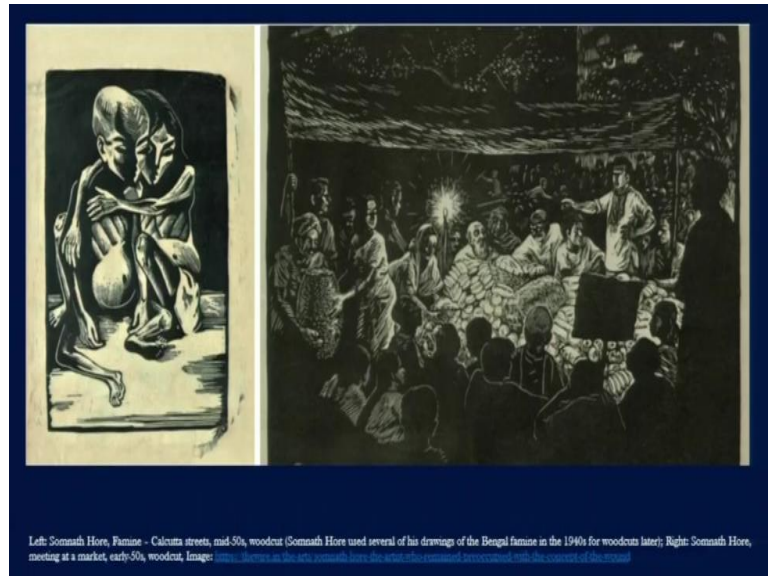
So, what we find here is this entire work that is made by knotting, so this entire work is something that is made by her with the use of these fibres, the hemp fibre and nettle fibre and then this kind of forms cannot stand on its own. So they need to be hung or they need to be supported by something. But once they are hung, they have these gigantic forms and the forms which can be in some way comparable to the sculptures.

But of course for their material quality, they have the organic growth within them which is not possible in the more conventional sculptural materials. So, this is some of the ways in which we find that she had challenged this idea of what can be a sculpture, what cannot be a sculpture, so those things and through that she had paved the way for many other artists who would come to work with fibre and how to expand this idea of sculptural expression.

At the same time how to also dismantle the boundary between the way we understand more the masculine material and the feminine ones. So these are some of the ways in which we find that it is not always on the surface, but there are silent gestures, silent protest against this hierarchies which were already established in the field of fine art.

And also it is not just there in the field of fine art, but in the society in terms of the gender hierarchy and our identification in terms of what we choose to do. So, this kind of work we find that they had sent this strong message towards understanding the world or having a different worldview to reassess the situations.

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Now, from sculpture if you look into the other practices, we find that there are printmaking practices and in the printmaking practices as we have already discussed that how relief, intaglio and planographic films those were introduced during the colonial time. So when we talk about the printmaking practices in the post-independence India, we still talk about these colonial practices.

The printmakers did not go back to the indigenous printmaking practices but they explored newer possibilities of the techniques which were taught by the colonial institutions. So here there are some of the prints and as we can see that there are those prints are by Somnath Hore. So, Somnath Hore was a printmaker and he operated from 1940s. So, in the early 1940s, we find that there is this famine in Kolkata.

Then also we find that there were the attempts of the communist party of India to see the different working conditions of labourers and agricultural workers in various parts of India. So, Somnath Hore had travelled various places in Bengal to see what were their livelihood and quality of living. So, from there we find that he had travelled across Bengal and his travelogue was full of drawings.

Full of drawings and then he had also made this the super woodcuts from those drawings and does ink drawings both pencil drawing and ink drawing. So, those are the ones which we find those were then translated into woodcut. Now, why did he make them into woodcut like the one that we see here, for example on the right side of the screen? So why did he make them

into woodcut is because that as he had travelled with the communist party of India, there was a need for making booklets.

And those booklets to be circulated among many people so that the urban people who did not really knew about the dire condition of this famine in the rural Bengal and also in the other urban places, so they can be aware of this, they can also come forward and they can help to change this situation. So, this was some of the reasons why we find that he had chosen the expression of woodcut.

And woodcut also has the graphic quality that is something that we have discussed if we consider the image of Gandhiji that is by Nandalal Bose and many other images that we have seen. So, there we find that this graphic division of light and dark in areas in woodcut, for example that we see here the stark dark figures and then like the areas which are illuminated, so this help gaining immediate attention from the viewers.

And this darkness in the images also talk about this dark condition and which the hunger, the distress and everything. So that is how we find that how for its use for circulation, but also to show the starkness of this situation, how Somnath Hore had employed woodcut for communicating his thoughts and his experiences to a wider audience, and similar thing we can say about the image of the famine in Calcutta which was there in the early 1940s.

So this image is made in mid 1950s, the image on the left side of the screen and what we see here is are those two slightly stylized images and both of them are children, and these two they clearly suffer from malnutrition and for the reason this disproportionate bodies are shown there and two of them they closely hold each other and perhaps they are in front of this undefined future.

So this is something we find and this idea of this starkness that they are placed against this dark background all those things are shown here. And perhaps the stylization here we see it also is something that exemplifies the bone structures of the body and the faces, like the way we see the faces here like how the cheekbones and then the depth and the dark recesses under the eyes, around the eyes, those are shown here.

So, this is something that we find that this stylization is not there for exploring the form, but it is there to sort of exemplify or to emphasize the situation of their dire condition. So, this is something we find that the stylization as opposed to this representation where we find that this is much more a naturalistic representation of the scene, so this stylization is something that was intentional and why this is also something that we need to understand as contextual.

So, this stylization is not there for the artist to explore the form, but it is there for as I have already mentioned to emphasize this bony structure of the bodies to show this malnutrition, this condition of these people. So, this is something we find that Somnath Hore had explored to a great extent in his works.

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So, from there we find that Somnath Hore had slowly ventured into this idea of a wound. So, we find that Somnath Hore in between had also operated in Delhi and then had also seen many other events which added to his experience of recording the distress among common people and that eventually led him to do the celebrated wound series and in the 1960s, 1970s, we find that he had experimented with this print.

For example the one we see on the left side of the screen in which all the details of the narratives, all the details of the human bodies and everything else have been removed and what remains here is marks, the marks which resemble wounds on our bodies. And if we see the kind of the wound that he created on to the etching plate. So, etching plate is basically this is the intaglio plate onto which all these marks are created and then the print of it is taken on a paper.

So, what we see the kind of mark is there that there are again the starkness we find that there are the depth of the marks which are certainly not pleasant, and then how those marks are exemplified or emphasized by this slight hint of colour and in the stark background. So, these are some of the characteristic features we find that Somnath Hore's work had and with time we also find that the way he had worked on the etching plate.

So, if you remember we have spoken about the use of etching plate for doing the very fine lines, so the linear drawings are well executed on etching plate, whereas in Somnath Hore's work we do not really see any of those fine lines, but we see there are those large surfaces which were perhaps kept open, there was no acid resistant material in it and he dipped them into the acid bath and that is how large areas of the etching plate was etched and that is how those wound marks were created on to the etching plate.

So, in other words we see that from his highly narrative works, he moved towards gestural works where the process itself would be a reminder of this idea that if we talk about the wound in our body, then the material or like the process of making the wound itself also reflects making of a wound on the etching plate. So, that is how this idea and the material explorations they came together in Somnath Hore's work.

Now, the other things that we also find which also had high prominence in his work is that he had moved to few of the other much more unconventional works and that is like a pulp print. So, this is a pulp print that we find and that was done in 1970s and he continued making this pulp print. So what is a pulp print? So we find in this time like either cement block or block of plaster of Paris he had chosen to work with.

And then on those blocks of plaster of Paris if someone drops water on it or if there is an object that is just put on this block of plaster of Paris or cement when it is still wet, then the movement of the water drops or the shape of the objects which are dropped on it that also makes a recessed area in it or like different kinds of forms are created on them and all these forms also reflected his idea of the wound.

So, then what we find that he allowed those blocks to be dried so that these gestural marks which are created on this wet surface on the soft surface is made permanent and then on the top of that he had placed pulp paper and that is how the impression of these wounds are taken

on to this pulp paper. So, that that is how we find how this paper making has also been part of his expression of creating wounds.

So, if we consider what was happening in Somnath Hore's work, we find that from these narrative expressions he had moved to this minimal use of line and this economic expression, but at the same time he held the essence of all those, the distress and these periodic experiences of evidencing things which disturbed him. So, if those things were expressed in the narrative form in his early woodcut and then later on in this pulp print as well as in his etching print.

We find that he had explored different possibilities, different avenues to see that how printmaking can still be utilized for expressing his concern, expressing his thoughts. We will continue on this in the next lecture. Thank you.