

# INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

## Lecture9

### Iconography

Hello everyone. Today we will discuss the history of Indian popular culture. We have already covered what is Indian popular culture and how cultural studies is situated in the Indian culture. Indian culture is a multi-ethnic nation with lots of linguistic diversity, we saw how it is difficult to situate the theoretical aspects in such a rich, diverse nation, with that, we also looked into the aspects of print culture in India, how it emerged in Goa and then its evolution through time.

We have novels, books, and magazines, and also we now have moved to the digital print age. We will discuss iconography and iconography is, again, very integral to the studies of study of cultural studies in India it as it is situated in what we call as popular culture. The meaning of popular, the meaning of culture in India, as we discussed earlier, seems to be very different from the Western idea of popular culture together. And therefore, the idea of iconography in India is also quite different. Let us move and see what iconography means.

What is iconography? It is basically the study and interpretation of visual representations. These visual representations are basically symbolic meanings of deities or religion or maybe even customs and culture. in India, how it is situated. We also understand that the content or the interpretation of iconography is relevant because we kind of understand it in the symbolism of images.

These symbolism of images not only rely on one segment, but it is also goes beyond the artistic style. When we say symbolism of images, it could mean color. So, for example, the goddess's picture in the northern part of India uses certain colors. which cater to the audience or the culture or tradition of the northern part of Indians.

But when the same picture is drawn in context with the southern part of India, the colors change the shape change. So this is why it is important to situate iconography in popular culture in order to understand cultural studies altogether.

Iconography analysis has helped scholars to understand how the visual representation functions within broader religious, social and cultural contexts in India. The visual component is coming again and again because that is the primordial element in iconography. How we see or how we perceive the images, and where it all began.

Who got the idea in a way to situate the images of God in certain ways? We have seen the images of God in India, for example, in movies, in also videos, in calendars, and in print. So what is the reference point? We will look into the reference point of iconography, and the historical background of it as well.

The popular culture the motifs and the icons can be located in various sites of production and consumption. Kajari Jain's book, *Gods in the Bazaar*, has quite distinctly talked about how gods are now in the market. Right. The market is a place for production and consumption.

The market is not just the place. There are other sites as well. These sites are basically the movies, the videos, the print or the calendar. These are also mass-produced for consumption purposes. Even the idols in the market that we buy are also a place.

Therefore, the name *gods in the bazaar*. This one very important element of iconography where located it in basically cinema or in visual interpretation as the definition of iconography goes. So, there is the idea of darshan. We also discussed it in the first, instances of films that we will be looking into.

So the idea of darshan is very important beginning from the time of the film directed by Dada Sahib Falke which is *Raja Harish Chandra* and moving to the other devotional and other mythological films where the gods used to come down from heaven or their place of abode and kind of get in contact with the devotee directly. So the idea of darshan has some element of iconography. In fact, it is wholly or solely an element of iconography. Gregory Price has called darshan a conversation of gazes. When we talk about the conversation of gazes, how this conversation is taking place, and on what levels?

So, this is what Gregory is trying to situate, which carries different meanings for both. So, Two people are conversing. One is the messenger and one is the receiver. So for both, the meaning will be different because when we are talking

about darshan, one is a god or a goddess and the other is an individual, a human or representing the human.

So for both, the connection or the conversation is different, differently perceived. Then comes Alfred Gell. who talks about the idea of darshan being a union. What is this union and then a manifestation of a social other? God is situated in this manifestation of a social other, not just God, like any deity or whichever is closer to the religious context.

Here it represents collective social identity beyond the individual. So it is kind of talking about a union that is not of an individual in the social context if it is situated. Moving on to Lawrence Babb, says that the addition of the eyes or the object of the image, if it is there in the ideal or idle or any kind of icon, which is represented in a calendar or print, is very important. And that is the point which kind of gives us the reference to darshan.

Without the eye, the darshan is nearly impossible. Therefore, these icons do need to have eyes. And these eyes are not just, passive. It's not just there. But it is very much active.

Therefore, since it is active, the idea of darshan is fulfilled. So the eyes which are active give us a sense of presence. It seems as if God, the deity are looking at us. That connection, the conversation, the union is through the eyes. In the last, 25 years iconography as a study has dwelled in different formats, for example, visual mediums like calendar art, cinema and video.

Significantly, there is someone called Woodman Taylor who has also generated meaning for the audience through the idea of gaze. He explains the idea of gaze by situating it in the South Asian concept. So, in the South Asian context, we have drishti and nazar. Both are embedded heavily in the idea of darshan.

But there is a difference between One is called Drishti, which is very a Hindi kind of a term in Hindi language term, that also means to see. And then there is Nazar. which is more like a Persian, Arabic, or Urdu word, which also means to see. But there is a difference.

The gaze that he is referring to is between two lovers. How one gazes at the other. And therefore, when we situate the idea of darshan to Drishti and Nazar, we see that Drishti is bending towards the religious context and deployed in

mythological films, whereas Nazar expresses love, poetry and romantic films. So we also kind of see the politics of language in a way that where, the Drishti, which is aligning with religion and Nazar, just because it is Urdu or Persian, situating in love, which is not in the cultural context as it is presented. The history of illustrations that began during the British Raj is what we are going to discuss now. So there was a person called Panchanan Karmakar, who was an artist trained by the Europeans, by our colonizers in a way. And his son-in-law also maintained a press. And this is happening in Calcutta, earlier known as Calcutta.

He used to use cut blocks to have the impression or to make the illustrations of the Panjika. In the Panjika, Panjika was a form of calendar in those days, which had religious festivals, the dates along with it. So that is the tradition where we can trace the illustrations that began during the British Raj period. We also can discuss that since he was trained by the Europeans, How legit the paintings or the illustrations were closer to the Indian context?

Later on, Raja Ravi Verma was called out for making, paintings and illustrations which were closer in nature, maybe the use of colour or shape. to be closer to the Europeans than the Indian context. The first book, Bengali literature came out in 1860 and with engravings by Rupchand Roy. So, these engravings were first published as a Bengali literature called Ananda Mangal and it was published by Bhattacharya.

We see that Bengali Weekly also came during a similar time frame and the Samachar Darpan appeared in 1818. So these were the few literary elements that we can catch hold of during the British Raj which tells us about the illustrations that came during this period or the engravings that came up in these pieces. The iconography of Hindu gods. India is a dominant, culturally dominant nation. We kind of try to situate or it has been situated by many scholars, the religion and the nation.

What we see or often discussed or often written by scholars that we are lining towards the Hindutva nationalism. The rise of Hindutva nationalism is said to be, the timeline is around the 1990s when the Babri Ayodhya verdict was on. So from there, we see how the images of Hindu gods have changed or how it is situated and where it is situated in what cultural context. So, Pinney and Tapati, and with other scholars, used chromolithography technique employed by Raja

Ravi Verma to, create mass-produced images. Chromolithography again is a technique, very technological in nature in a way and then since he started depicting figures from mythologies that are set in and set in realist semi-pastoral landscapes. We see the emergence of iconography of Hindu gods and goddesses coming into play. Pinney has also, as I already mentioned, has also talked about the idea of darshan.

And it became a dominant iconography, the chromolithography. And then we also see that the sartorial choices made by him also influenced Dada Sahib Falke initially when he was making films, films like Raja Harishchandra, Buddha Dev, etc. When we say the sartorial choices, it comes from the word sartor, which in Latin means clothing. So how to clothe a god?

How a god should look like? What is the style that the god should carry? These all came from, the dominant iconography, which came from chromolithography. And then later, the inspiration for the calendars and the later print illustrations were from B.R. Chopra's Mahabharata, very famous, which came in the 1990s.

And then we have Ramananda Sagar's Ramayana, Amar Chitra Katha by Anand Pai. So these were the other reference points from where the iconography of the gods and goddesses, the Hindu gods and goddesses came into existence. There is a debate around Amar Chitra Katha and the debate is that the ladies in the Amar Chitra Katha at few places look a bit different and it has been said that The painter who used to paint earlier came from a Hindu religion. Therefore, the idea of the woman was different.

At a point when he employed a Muslim artist to draw women, the painting came out differently. How iconography is situated in cultural context, in societal context and in other objects. Calendar art during the colonial period. I already mentioned Gods in the Bazaar by Kajri Jain. She has talked about and looked into the production and consumption of mass-produced bazaar arts in India and these bazaars were not only the sites for the gods and goddesses or iconography but other elements as well.

So, the amalgamation or ensemble of all the kinds of products that are being manufactured or mass-produced comes at the same place. It is quite intriguing to study such a culture. So the book discusses three areas, basically the genealogy of, the inception of the bazaars and how it got, inclined or say became a site

where the ensemble can exist and then the other area is economy because it is about production it is about reproduction it is about consumption then comes efficacy which has also been largely catered to in order to understand the economy, genealogy and iconography of gods and goddesses. The dynamics, which are very political of the art criticism, were dictated by nationalist ethos. The one that I just mentioned is that we see the rise of Hindutva nationalism. and which is becoming equivalent to Indian nationalism in a way. So how are we going to situate it?

In what context? Whether we are going to say that it is very political or are we going to say that it is quite religious in nature? So there is the catch that we are trying to address here. Art commentators such as Ananda Kumaraswamy agreed that The paintings that Raja Ravi Verma made were not Indian enough.

He claimed that since he had self-taught himself the European forms of art, he thought that his painting should not be the reference point. And this again, was a little political in nature, because of the taking on a colonial establishment that had awarded him an imperial medal in 1904. So this medal that he, Raja Ravi Verma got in the year 1904 is the reason why Kumaraswamy kind of claims that and the reason being of course political that his paintings are not Indian enough and therefore the reference point shifts to the Bengal School of art as the true Indian style and because of Abanindranath Tagore the stylistics or the dreamy wispy can be held on to to look into the iconography. So, Kajri Jain quotes, what happens when an ungraspable number of lurid, pungent, frequently tatty, often undateable, questionably authored, haphazardly archived, indeterminably representative, hitherto undisciplined Indian bazaar pictures come crowding into the chandeliered Baroque halls and immaculate modernist space of art history. Do they render the master's house unrecognizable? So this is the question that she puts in contestation with the earlier argument.

What happens when, the kind of scene that is witnessed in the bazaar, A similar kind of incident is situated in the picture from, into a chandeliered Baroque hall and the immaculate modernist paintings or art history, which is located in that place? Do they render the master's house unrecognizable, make it, kind of unrecognizable? That is the question. So can they coexist or not is the question.

Calendar art during the colonial period. She reclaims that the term bazaar has the analysis of contrast in contrast to Christopher Pinney's use of chromolithography, which foregrounds the technology of reproduction. The term bazaar in English has come in the Oxford Dictionary, but the term bazaar in general or in English might mean market. What happens in the market?

That is the question and therefore, the analysis in contrast to Pinney's use of chromolithography, more of the technology is being talked about. It is the technology of reproduction, how well you reproduce the images. This is where she situates.

So the same thing happens in a bazaar. A bazaar, you see, they don't invent. OK, they don't produce. But in fact, they reproduce. So how technology is so advanced that it is able to reproduce and cater to mass consumption.

Situating the images within the bazaar, she says that this arena of circulation has inscribed images in an economy where sacred, commercial, ethical, aesthetic and libidinal forms of values are closely intermeshed. In this bazaar, which is kind of a platform, a lot of things are coming and becoming intertwined from sacred to commercial values. from ethical to aesthetic, and libidinal forms as well. They are all getting a place in the market. So how does it look?

How does the image situate in this bazaar? And it's quite intriguing to have a discourse over this. She works through the significant images generated through their circulation and exchange. So there is generation and circulation and exchange happening all together at the same time, how these images circulate and get exchanged.

So bazaar is a place where iconography coming from one part of India and iconography coming from other parts of India might get, exchanged they could develop a third form. So that is what this bazaar is trying to represent. also looked at the corporeal aspects of images and the ways in which people engage with them. So we know that the picture that is hanging on the wall, the deity that is placed in our homes is not real. But we see how the human race or how Indians engage with the image.

This is a very common thing in households, in Indian households. There's a calendar of a god or goddess, which is hanging in every Indian household, every

Indian middle-class household. And whosoever leaves the house, they kind of bow their head to that deity. It is in a way that the image is having some sort of gaze. The image is having some sort of, conversation and how people are engaging with the image is important.

Then they occupy a certain space, both secular and religious, public and private. So the images of these gods and goddesses, whether in the form of idols or pictures, basically if we are talking about calendar art, we see that they are everywhere in secular spaces, also in religious spaces. Secular spaces could be, in institutions, right? They are considered to be secular spaces. We see the pictures even in institutes or educational institutes for that matter.

And then in private and public as well. So, for example, if it is a doctor's office or a barber shop, we see it even there or in a household shrine. So the image can be These are the spaces that the images are occupying, irrespective of whether it's secular or religious, public or private. Gods in the time of democracy.

The image or the iconography, how it has situated itself in times of democracy is, again, very important and interesting to note. Kajri Jan, again, extends the conversation from gods in the bazaar to gods in the time of democracy. And she offers a tantalizing glimpse into the complex religio-political layers of the emergence of colossal statues. We see the emergence of statues and colossal statues coming up in India. And it has shifted from the space that we were talking about, which was like the household shrines or a doctor's clinic.

It is very tantalizing to see the complex religio-political layers. She also says that the material is run by observing the popularity religious status enjoys. So, There's a lot of, popularity that these religious statues enjoy. From Nehruvian dams, which were once a site of temples, they were treated as temples of modern India to the contemporary large statues.

For example, we see the Shiva bus statue in the Isha Yoga Foundation. It represents the complex history of production and consumption. At many places we see, not just we are talking about icons like gods and goddesses, but for example, the Statue of Unity in Gujarat. you are paying to see a statue which is named the Statue of Unity. So this, again, production and consumption and the image formation and the relationship getting established is what it talks about, it discusses.



Referring to Deleuze, she kind of considers these big statue genres should be understood as vernacular capitalist, icon, democratic, neoliberal, concrete, territorial, and automotive assemblage. So it cannot stand as a singular entity. These statues that we see, either of a political leader or of a deity, we understand that it is coming from a vernacular capitalist place.

It is very vernacular in nature. And of course, it is an icon and also democratic in many ways. People of all races and people of all ethnicities in India are coming to visit. And then it is neoliberal, concrete democracy. Territorial, and automotive at the same time.

So this gives us a glimpse of how the gods or the icons are performing in times of democracy.