

Researching With the Visual 1
Module 07 Section 02
Lecture 53

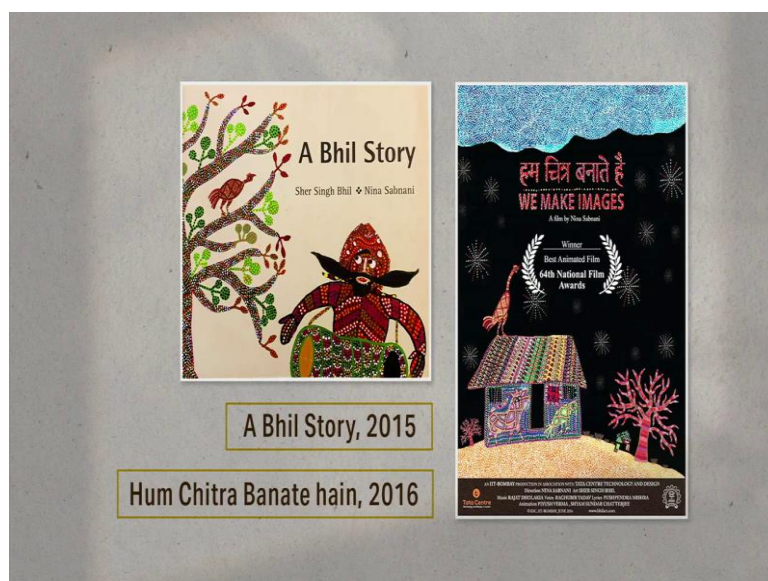
In researching the visual, we attempt to read the stories that a visual or an image tells. An image, like any other entity, is situated in a given context.

(Refer Slide Time: 0:17)



It derives its meaning from all aspects that make up the context, people, activities, events, beliefs, ideas and so on. In a sense, images too become our participants, and through them, we try to learn about the environment in which they exist. Maybe an example will make this clearer.


(Refer Slide Time: 0:39)



Let us refer to a strand of my research into Bhil painting. In the exploration of the journey of Bhil painting, my team and I came across what seemed like an important moment in its history. This was the shift from painting on walls to painting on paper or canvas. This shift had come about as a result of interventions by artist and craft activist in the late 1980s led by the artist J. Swaminathan.

The shift was connected to the socio-economic conditions of the community; the Bhil have faced decades of social and economic discrimination and marginalisation. Their forests have been usurped by multiple mainstream governments. Due to these factors, generation after generation the Bhils have had to leave their villages and their forests, to make a living as manual unskilled workers in large cities.


(Refer Slide Time: 1:39)



“That such communities should be left alone to themselves doesn't seem to be a viable proposition either. Their jungles no more belong to them, they can no more practice their traditional mode of cultivation in the name of conservation of forests (which are anyway being systematically destroyed for catering to

J. Swaminathan, 1987

FROM DAGWORLD.COM



systematically destroyed for catering to "urban and development needs") they cannot seek and hunt game any more and the inroads of the money economy are seemingly irreversible.”

J. Swaminathan, 1987

FROM DAGWORLD.COM

That such communities should be left alone to themselves does not seem to be a viable proposition either. Their jungles no more belong to them, they can no more practice their traditional mode of cultivation in the name of conservation of forests which are anyway being systematically destroyed for catering to urban and development needs. They cannot seek and hunt game anymore, and the inroads of the money economy are seemingly irreversible.

Swaminathan suggestion that the Bhils paint on paper and sell their paintings through fairs and exhibitions gave them access to a new means of livelihood. This was an opinion that enables them to remain connected to their culture. Understanding this history, I came to see that there is an important connection between the shifts in Bhil painting and the community's socio-economic conditions.

Exploring this connection helped me understand the socio-economic structures and the history that have defined the lives of the Bhils in Madhya Pradesh. As the paintings become more commodified, many things changed.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:51)



The size of the paintings changed. They became smaller to fit paper and canvas.

(Refer Slide Time: 2:57)



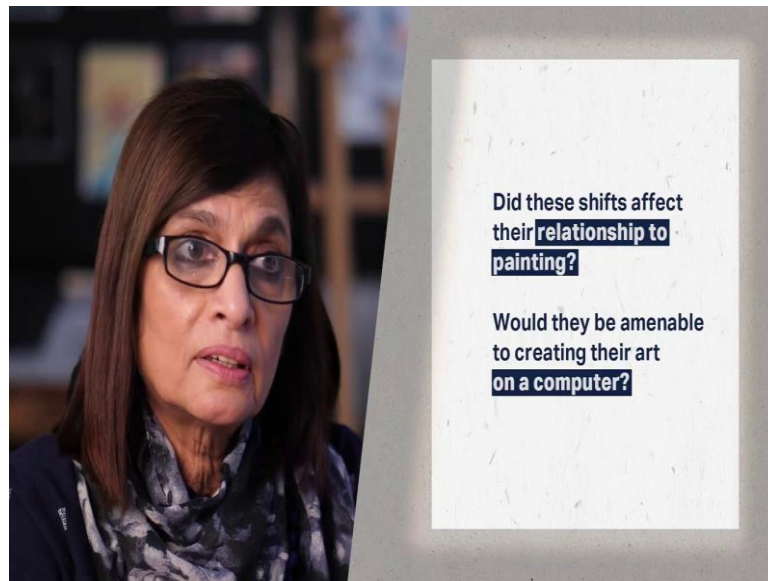
Because they were being painted for a larger audience, they now depicted subjects that related to the Bhils everyday lives.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:05)



And Bhil women who traditionally are not allowed to paint secret images were now making paintings on canvas and paper. Observing these changes, I wanted to explore one more question.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:17)



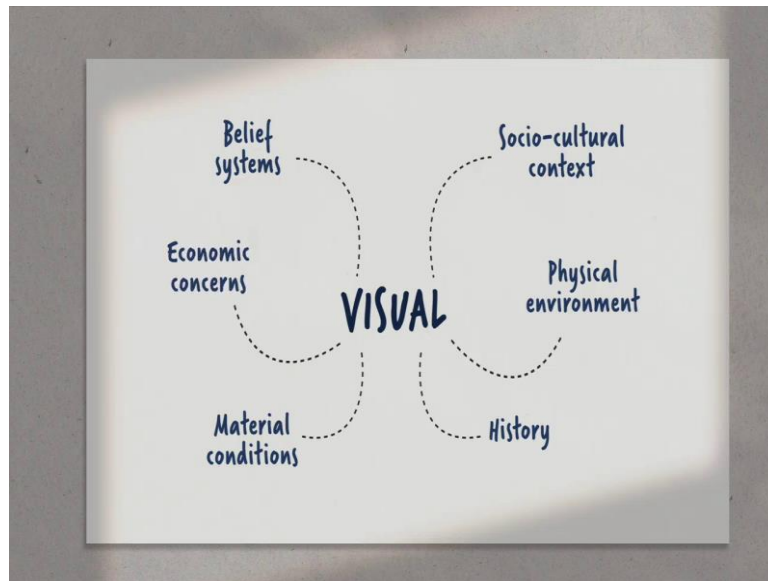
Did these shifts affect their relationship to painting? Would they be amenable to creating them on a computer? And they said, No, it is still a secret art and has to be painted by hand, and because I asked this question, they explain to me.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:34)



That each dot that forms a Bhil painting represents an ancestor, so each image that they make is a universe of memories of their ancestors. The fact that this painting is going to be sold does not change this. For the Bhils, painting remains a way of praying to their gods for the well-being of the community.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:00)



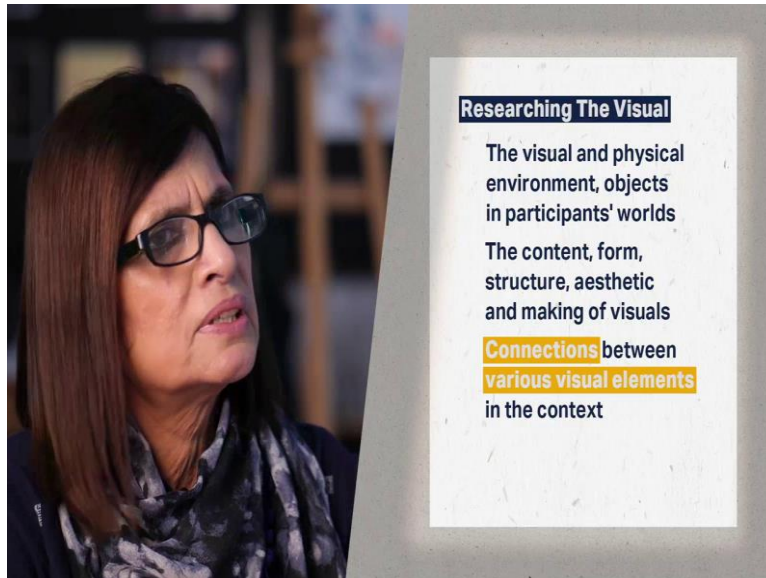
As we read visuals and the act of making them, we are able to draw connections between the visual and its context. Making these connections, we learn about the larger socio-cultural and economic structures in which the visual exists. And we learn about the meanings individual participants associate with the visual. There is another aspect to researching the visual.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:24)

The image shows a woman with long brown hair and glasses speaking. To her right is a slide with the following text:

Researching The Visual

- The visual and physical environment, objects in participants' worlds
- The **content, form, structure, aesthetic** and **making** of visuals
- Connections between various visual elements in the context



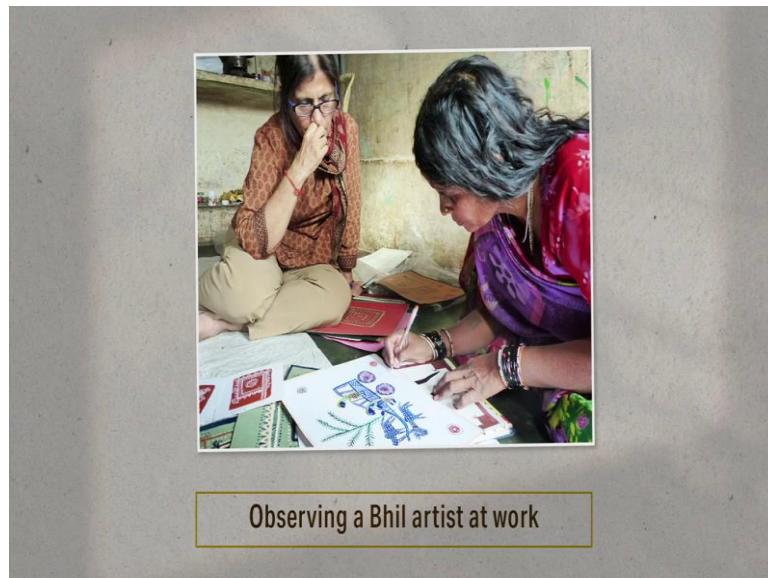
We pay attention to the content, form and aesthetic of the visual. We draw connections between a particular visual and the other visual elements in the environment. By drawing these connections, we try to understand the visual culture or what we may call the visual language of our participants' world.

(Refer Slide Time: 4:46)



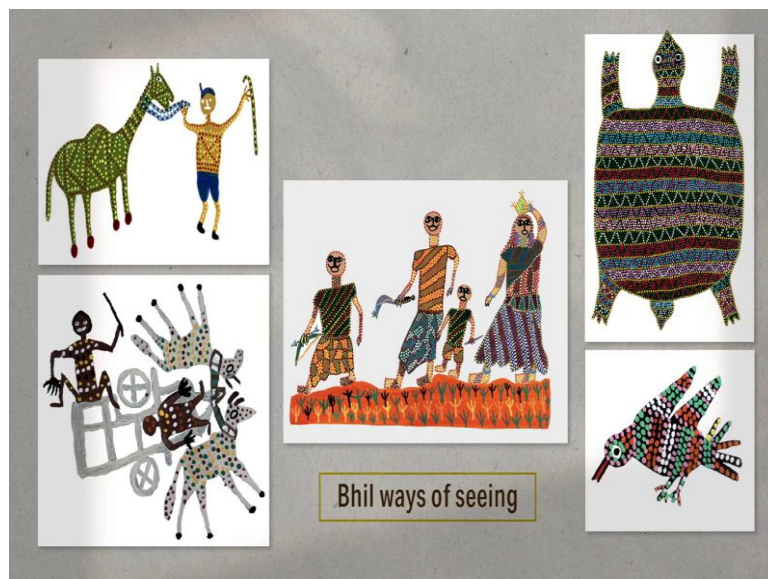
Let us elaborate on this a bit more. In doing visual ethnography, we try to read a visual at multiple levels. We try to read a visual or a set of visuals on its own. What does its form, content and aesthetic tell us?

(Refer Slide Time: 05:04)



So, for instance, in reading the Bhil paintings, I paid attention to their form made of dots, to the colours used and the characters and objects depicted. In doing this, I tried to understand what the painting or the art form was trying to convey.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:22)



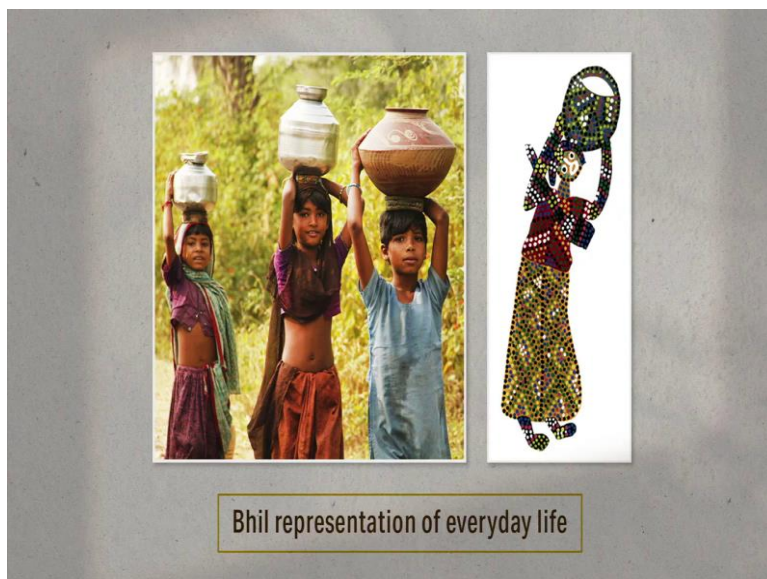
So, for example, I noticed how people, objects and space were depicted in Bhil paintings. Objects and structures like houses, trees, rivers are painted such that they are easy to recognise. But the human form is quite abstract. This tells us something about the Bhils' ways of seeing.

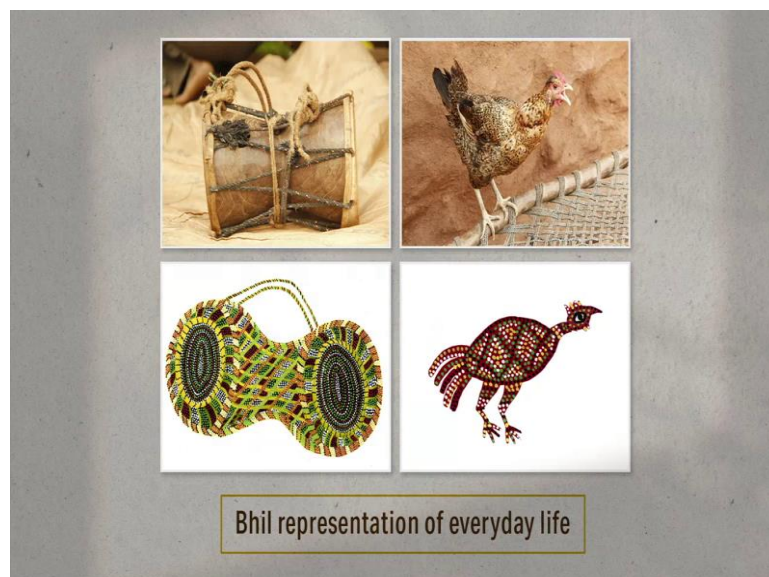
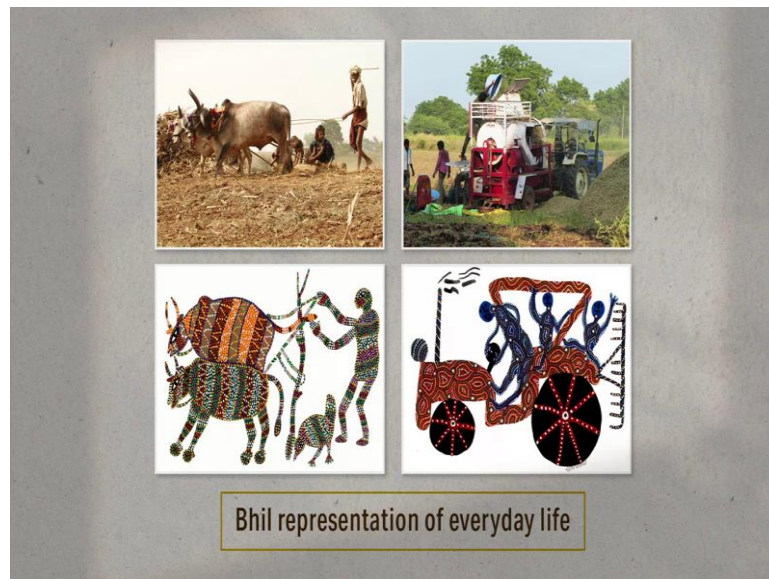
(Refer Slide Time: 05:43)



We also try to read different forms of visual expressions such as craft objects, paintings, prints, media images and so on. So, in my work with the Bhils, besides observing their paintings.

(Refer Slide Time: 5:57)





I also observed the objects used in their everyday life and in their rituals. I looked at their landscapes and activities and how these were represented in the paintings. Looking at all of these, I learned something of the community's visual language. Additionally, I looked at the Bhils traditional stories and folk their oral culture.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:19)



I observe their prayer rituals which engage all of the senses, smell, sound, taste.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:26)



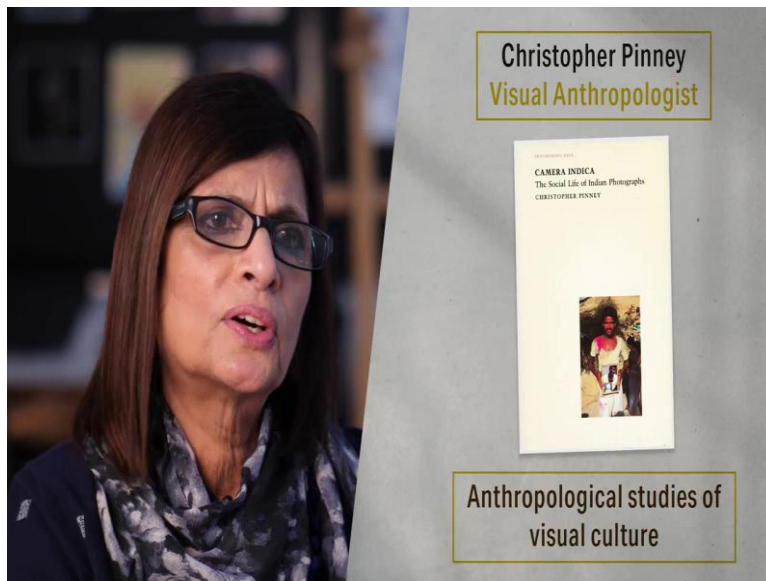
In living with them, I experienced the food they ate, the weather conditions they lived in, the textures and smells that made up their worlds.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:37)



Through these, I attempted to draw connections between their sensorial experiences and their visual expressions.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:47)



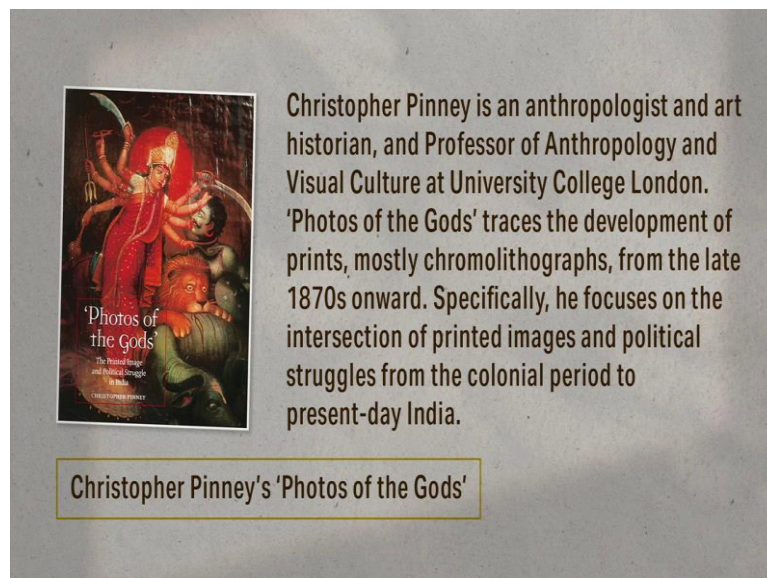
Let me give you another example that I like very much, which is the work of anthropologist Christopher Pinney.

(Refer Slide Time: 6:50)



His work focuses on the poster making tradition in India in particular on the pictures of Gods created in the early days of printing in British India. These images are known as chromolithographs. We are quite familiar with these images as we may have seen them in many homes and establishments.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:11)



In his work, Photos of the Gods, he analysed these to create a narrative of national consciousness that emerged in the subcontinent around that time.

So, what do you think Pinney asked himself as he looked at these images? Pinney's process of researching these visuals is relevant to our discussion. He interprets the images at two levels, first, by reading what the images themselves say. And second by reading different forms of

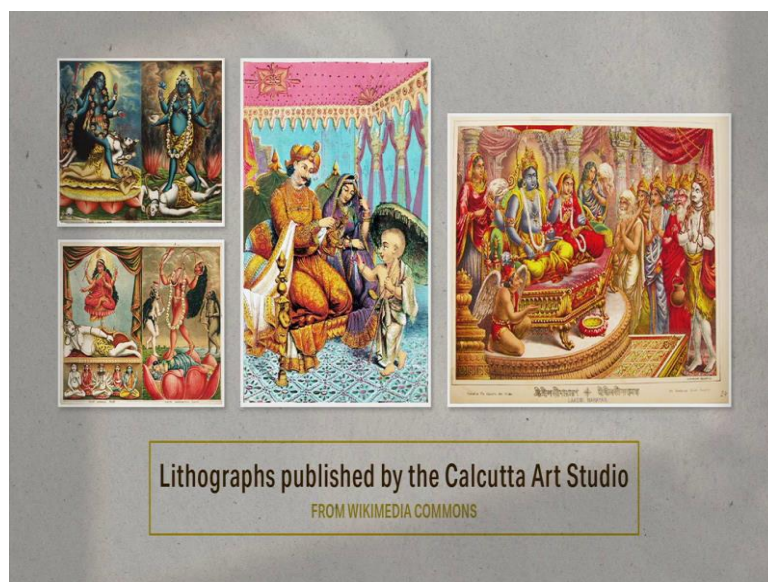
visual expressions such as theatre painting and prints. Let us see how he does each of these and what he learns in the process.

(Refer Slide Time: 7:54)



One of the contexts in Pinney's research is Calcutta of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

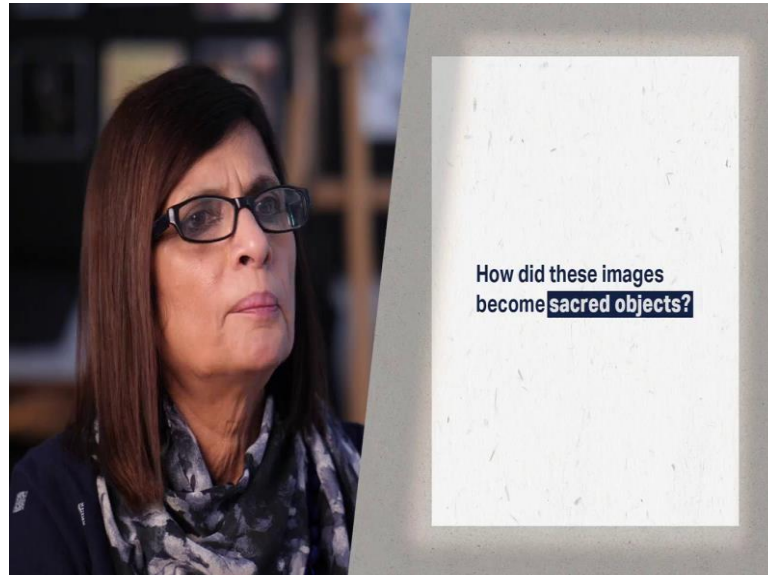
(Refer Slide Time: 8:02)

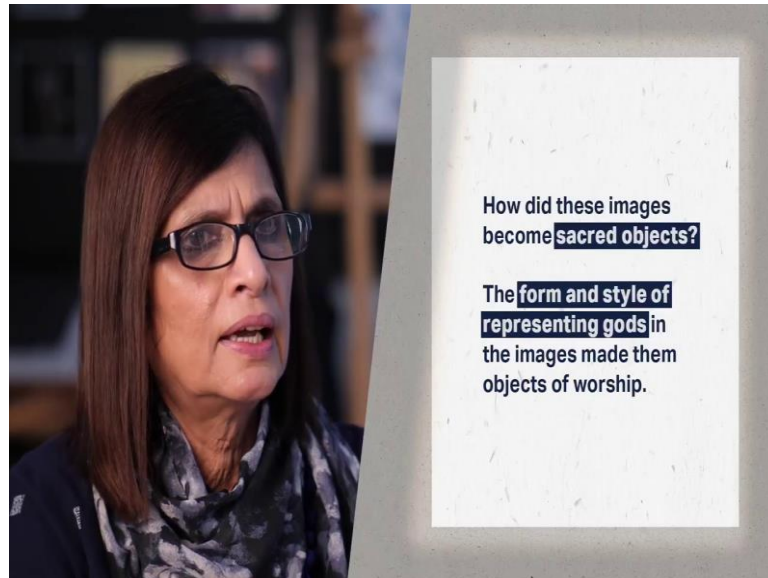


This is where the first lithography press, the Calcutta Art Studio was established. The studio began with creating images of Gods which became hugely popular. The patrons of the studio

bought these images not as 'art' but as a picture of god, which they could worship in their homes.

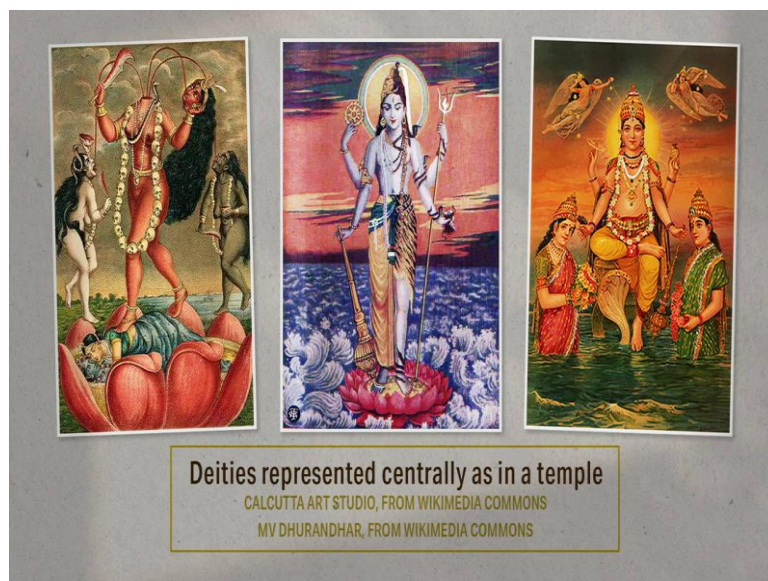
(Refer Slide Time: 8:22)





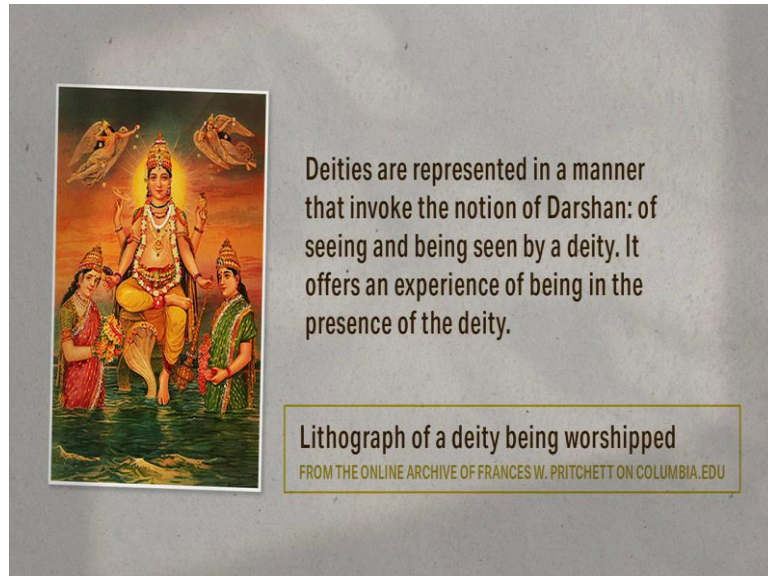
Pinney became curious about how these mass-produced images became sacred objects. He looked carefully at what the images depicted and what ideas defined the subject composition and aesthetic of the image. He came to see that images were defined as sacred because of the ways in which the gods were depicted.

(Refer Slide Time: 8:45)



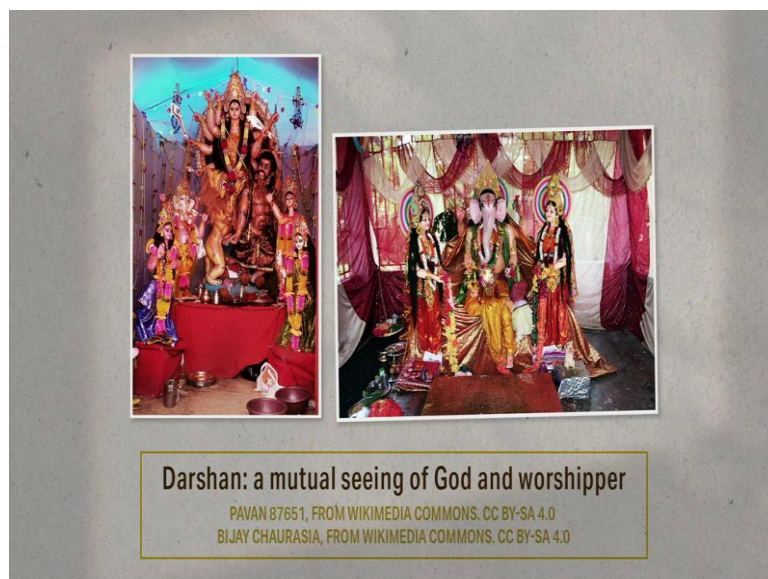
In many of the images, the deity was placed in the centre, front-facing, sometimes framed by worshippers on either side. This was uncannily similar to how idols are placed in temples. This led Pinney to explore the idea of darshan, which is an important concept in Hindu practice of worship.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:06)



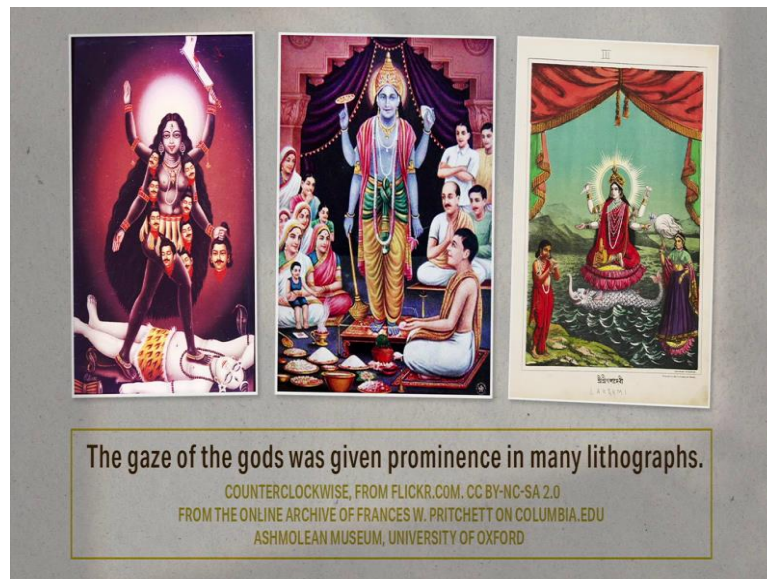
To perform a darshan means to see the gods, and to be seen by them. Forms of worship such as pilgrimage, or praying before an idol or a picture are based on and defined by this mutual 'seeing' of the god and the worshipper. If you have visited a Hindu temple, think of how the idol is placed.

(Refer Slide Time: 9:27)



It is always made to face centre front. It just visually emphasised by placing various elements such as pillars or even, smaller idols on either side. It is often placed in a way that enables the worshipper to make eye contact with the deity. In making the chromolithographs, the artists translated this idea of darshan into their prints using these basic visual techniques.

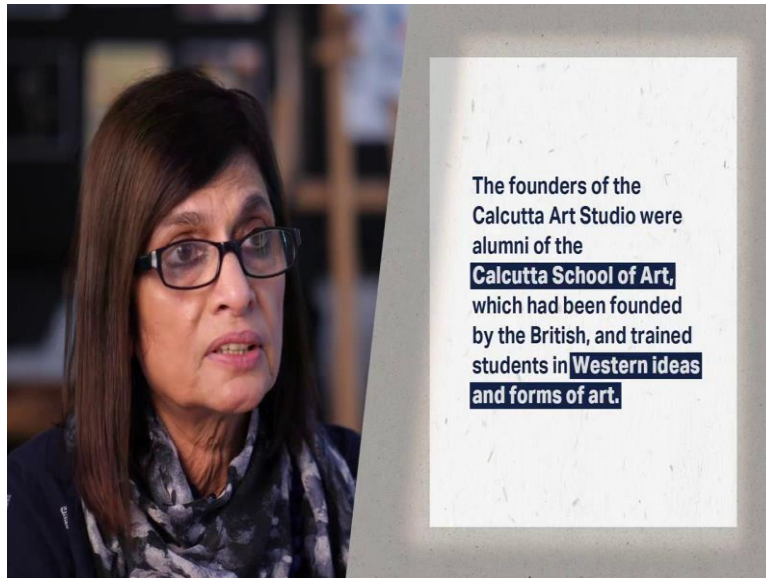
(Refer Slide Time: 9:59)



Besides placing the deity centre front, they emphasised the gaze of the deity by giving visual importance to the eyes or by making them large. Sometimes they added props such as curtains framing the deity giving them more visual importance. In this manner, the artists tried to emphasise the visual connection between the deity and the worshipper, thus fulfilling the desire for darshan.

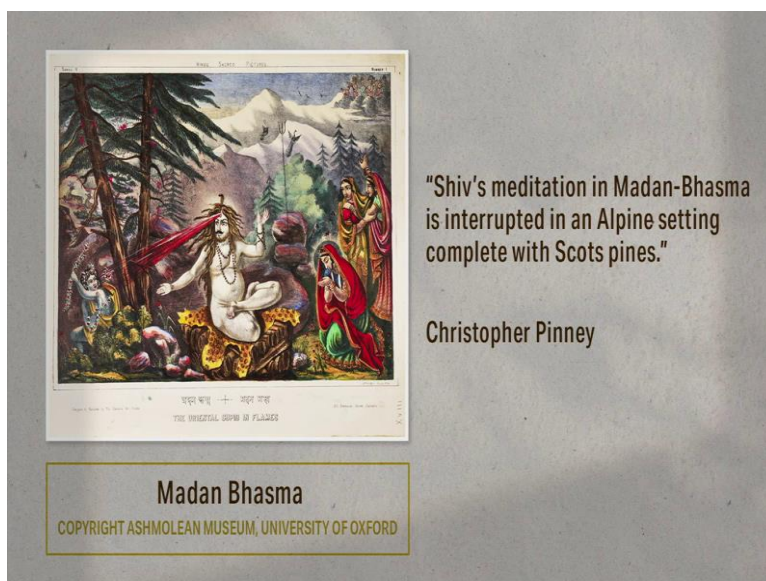
To Pinney, coming from a Western culture, such a depiction stood out. It contrasted with how gods were depicted in Western classical art as a separated from the world of the devotee. But in 19th century Bengal, these contrasting ways of seeing were coming together. Modernist ideas championed by the British and existing ideals of Hinduism were interacting with each other. This interaction created a new form of Hindu consciousness. Pinney recognised this mix of ideas in the prints created by the Calcutta Art Studio.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:02)



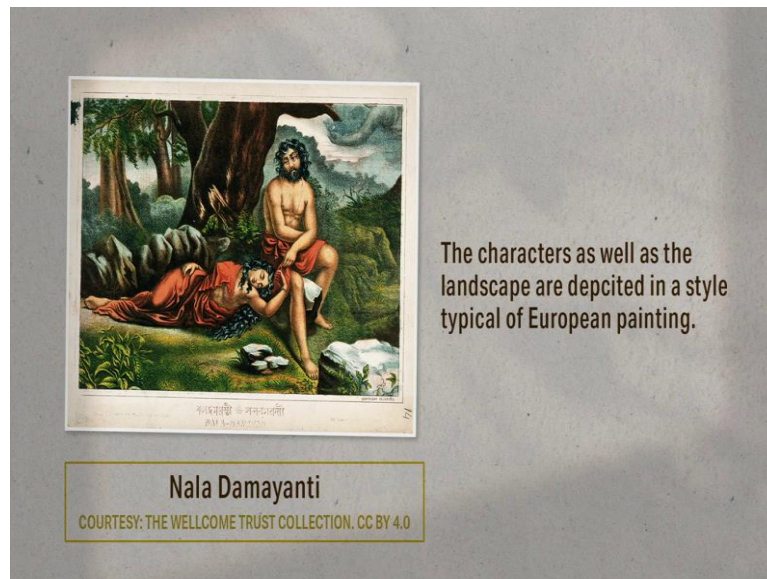
The artists of the studio had been trained in art schools run by British educators and administrators. The artists were influenced as much by the ideas of their Hindu patrons, as they were by their British instructors. The images from this coming together of ideas were interesting and sometimes strange.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:23)



Like this image, depicting a myth from the life of Shiva, where Shiva seated not quite in the centre looks sideways and directs his burning gaze towards Madan, a minor deity. As you may notice here, the painting departs from the centre front style of idol depiction. But that is not the only departure. Shiva's Kailasa Parbat is transported from the Himalayas to a setting resembling the European Alps dotted with pine trees native to Scotland.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:57)



Let us take one more example. See this image of Nala and Damayanti, produced by the studio in 1880. Nala and Damayanti characters from the Hindu mythology were royals of distant kingdoms. They fell in love with each other, simply by hearing about the others' qualities. Damayanti chose Nala as groom, rejecting the gods who had proposed to marry her.

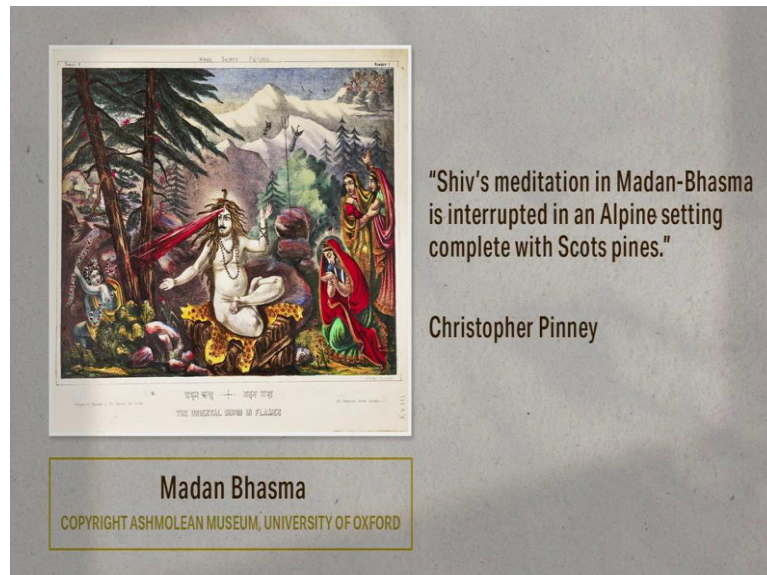
Angered, that she chose a mere mortal over gods, the demon god called Kali cursed the couple as a result after some years of living together as king and queen, they were forced out of their kingdom and exiled into the wilderness. One night during their exile, under the influence of the curse, Nala abandoned Damayanti while she was asleep.

This print depicts that fateful night. The image locates them in a pastoral landscape which looks very European. Nala and Damayanti, the demon Kali showed in this sky, the trees and rocks are all painted in a classical European way. All this must have been unfamiliar to the Indians buying these prints.

Both these images situate familiar characters Shiva, Nala, Damayanti in a unfamiliar European looking settings. Why would the artist do such a mix? There can be different interpretations of this. Pinney read these images as a coming together of different symbols, entities and styles. As they came together, the symbolism and meaning of these entities transformed. In European art, a pastoral setting was often used to depict a sense of belonging

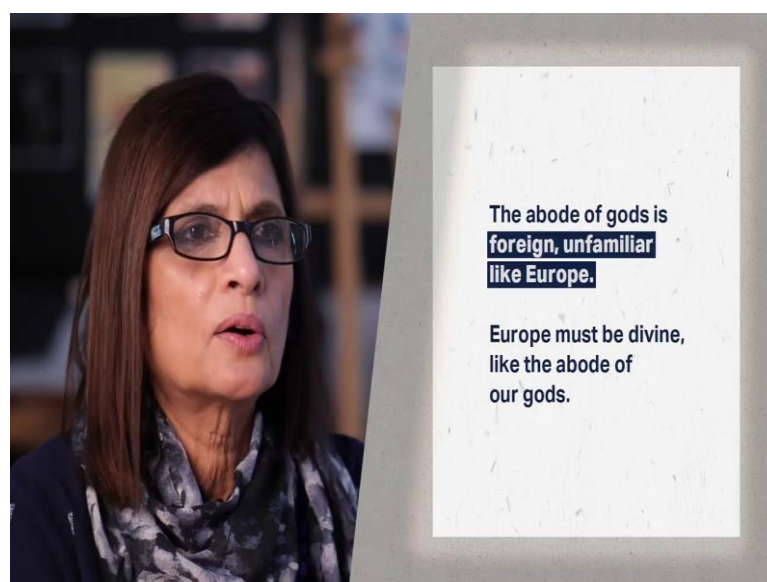
with nature. In the Nala and Damayanti image, it becomes a space of un-belonging, posing harsh and unwelcome conditions for Nala and Damayanti who have been forced out of their palatial lives. There can be one more interpretation.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:08)



Let us look at the Madan Bhasma print once again. Here, Shiv's abode Mount Kailash resembles a Swiss Alpine landscape. Perhaps, the artist was trying to equate the divinity of Kailash with the foreignness of European mountains.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:21)

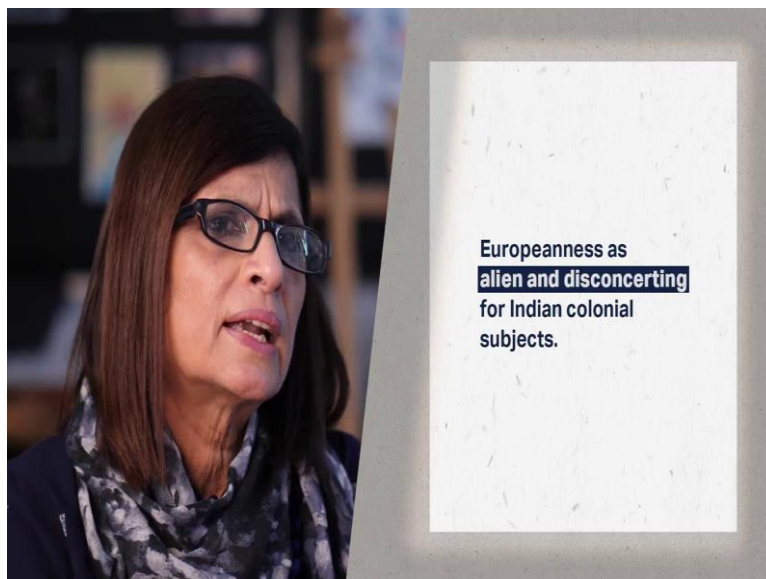




By making this comparison, he could be saying that the place where our gods live are foreign to us. They are unlike anything most of us have ever seen or will see. He could also have been saying that Europe must be divine, like the abode of our gods.

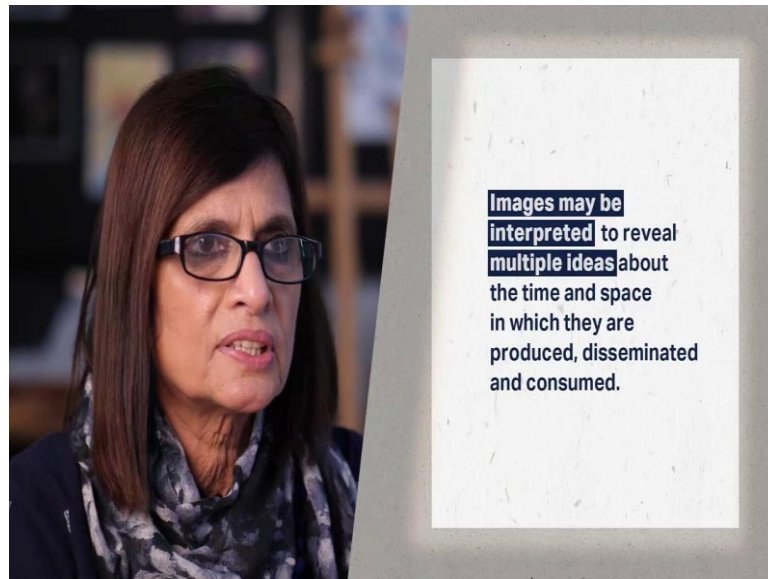
In the Nala Damayanti print, the artist creates a space that is mighty imposing and terrifying. There is nothing familiar or comforting in this forest. The foreign elements and style of painting and the situation of Nala Damayanti together create a sense of unbelonging and helplessness. Here, the artist equated European-ness with a discomforting kind of foreignness before which one is helpless.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:12)



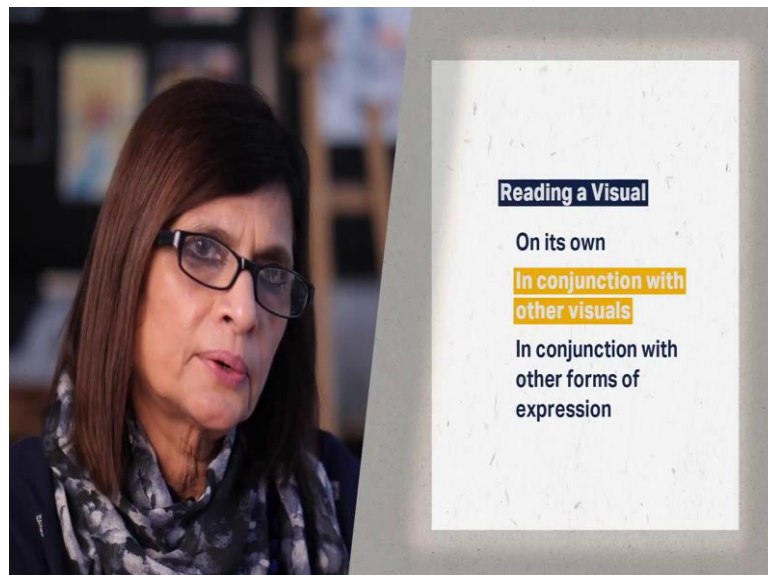
So, maybe in making this print, the artist was depicting the sense of alienation and lack of control that many Indians felt before their European colonisers.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:21)



In this manner, we may read an image to come up with multiple interpretations of its context. Pinney read these images to make sense of the different social and cultural movements taking place in the early 1900s.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:37)



So, far in this discussion, we have talked about how Christopher Pinney tried to read a set of visuals on their own and the insights that emerged from such reading. In the same study, he read across different forms of visual expression. And he explored the theatre productions of

that era. This led to some fascinating insights. We will discuss those in our next section, where we continue this conversation on researching the visual.