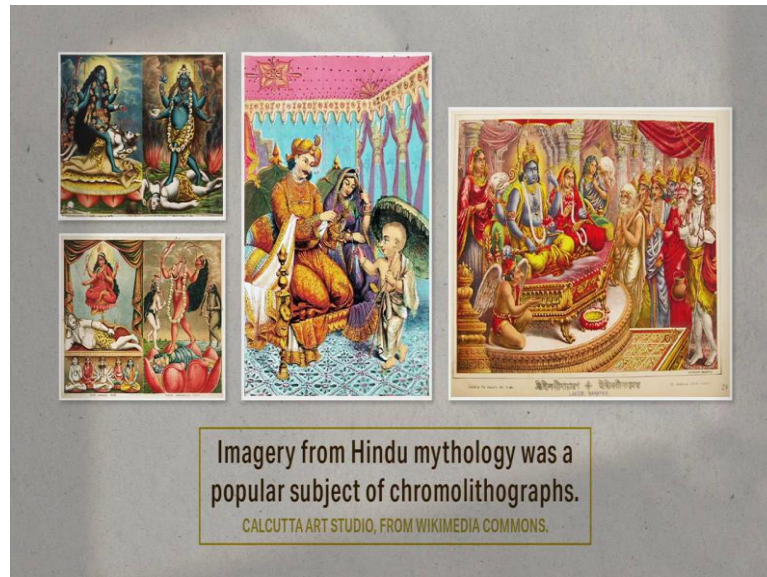


Researching the Visual 2
Module 07 Section 03
Lecture 54

As we discussed in our last section, a new form of Hinduism emerged in Bengal in the late 1800s.

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Influenced by this movement, artists and performers developed material based on myths from the Hindu epics.

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One of these was the story of Nala Damayanti. And the Calcutta Art Studio weren't the only one inspired by this story. In fact around the same time as this print was produced a theatrical version of the story was staged. And this production had a very successful run in Calcutta.

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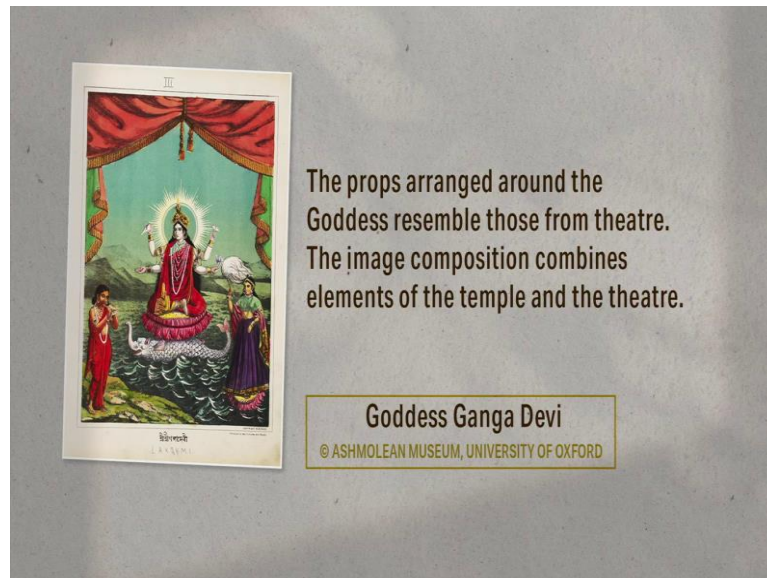
Curious about this coincidence, Christopher Pinney decided to explore the linkages between chromolithography and theatre.

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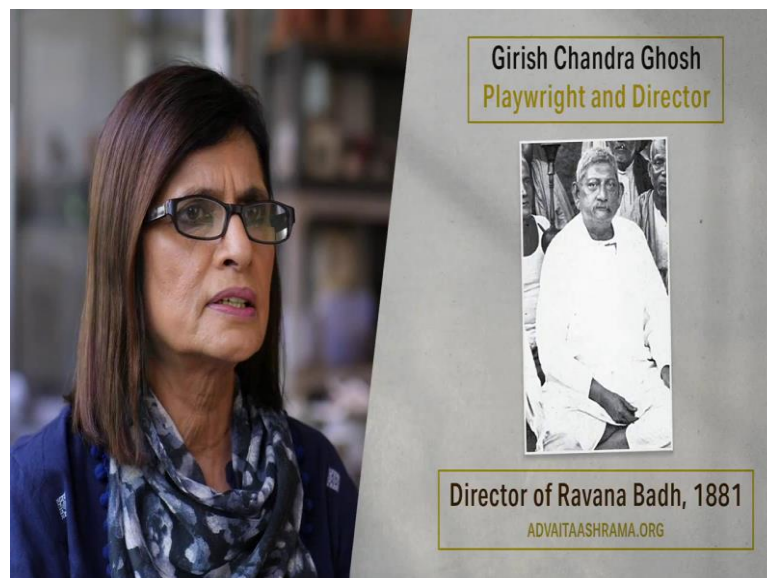
As he read across different forms of visual expressions, he gained some fascinating insights. Let us discuss this here. Theatre gained great popularity in Calcutta around the same time as chromolithography. Amateur plays were performed in the houses of upper-class Bengalis and several popular plays were staged in public theatres across the city. The visuals created on stage and those printed on paper sometimes bore a striking resemblance to each other

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Like this image of the river goddess Ganga, the curtains above the goddess appear to be similar to the ones popularly used in theatre of those times. Pinney found that the visual language and narrative styles of many chromolithographs were indeed influenced by theatre. He discovered even more striking overlaps between these two cultural forms. Let us look at ones such instance.

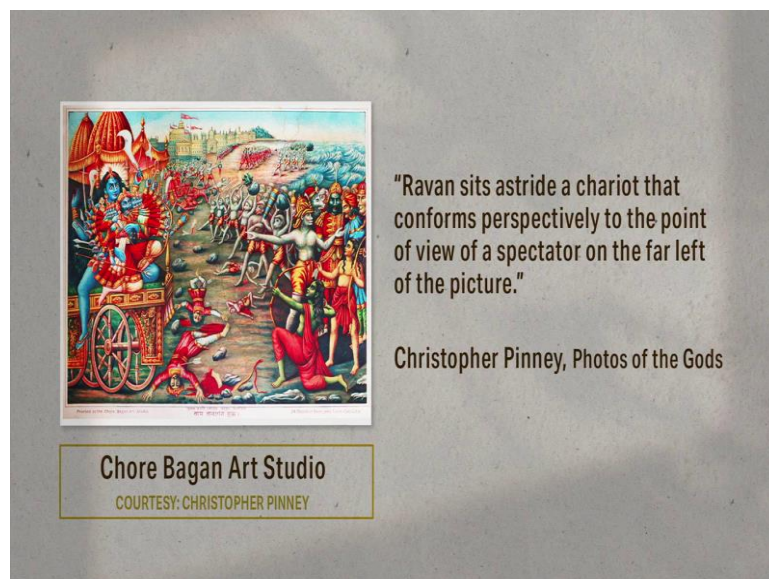
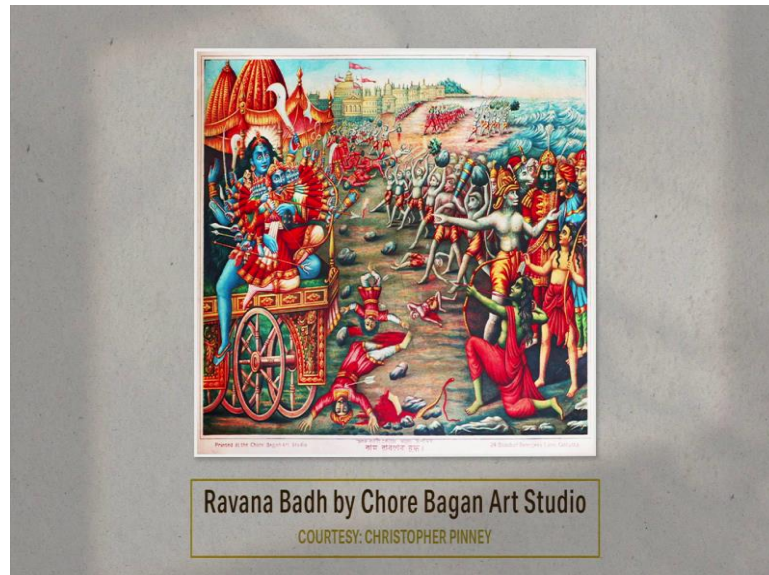
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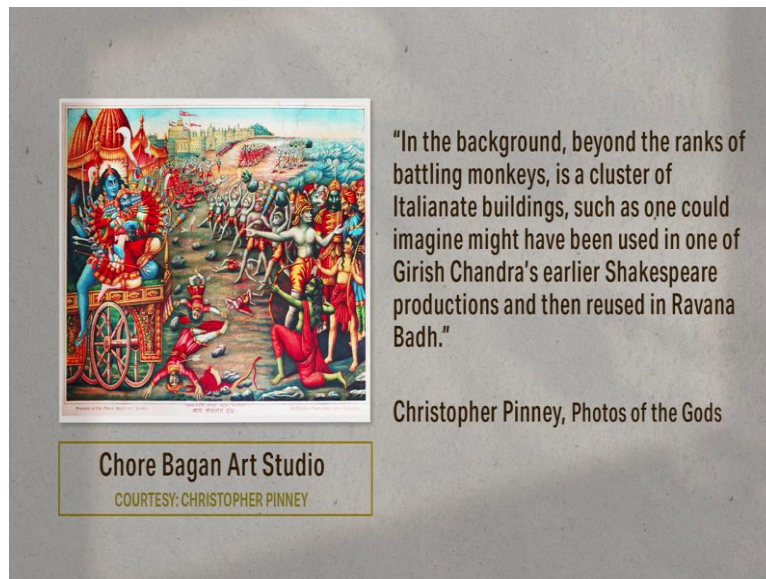


A hugely successful play in Bengali theatre was Girish Chandra Ghosh's Ravana Badh or the slaying of Ravan first staged in 1881. The story is from the Ramayana, the Hindu epic written about Ram, the righteous king of Ayodhya. While Ram was serving a period of exile, his wife Sita was kidnapped by Ravan, the king of Lanka. Ram, supported by an army of

monkeys, attacked Lanka to rescue his wife, and slay Ravan. The final battle scene between Ram and Ravan formed the climax of the play Ravana Badh.

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This same scene was depicted in a print by the Chore Bagan Art Studio, another of Calcutta's early printing presses. Look carefully at the visual language of this print. Does it not look like we are viewing a scene on stage seated in the corner of a theatre? The background of the image too, looks very much like a backdrop used in a play.

Pinney came to the conclusion that the artist of this print had probably attended a performance of the play. Inspired by the play, he created a chromolithograph around the same theme. Not only the content but also the style of the painting was influenced by what he may have seen on the stage. Following this chain of thought, Pinney arrived at one of his major insights. That there was an informal perhaps an unintended exchange of ideas between printing and theatre.

He emphasised that visual language and ideas flow across different forms of expression in a culture. What we see in a two-dimensional static form such as print or painting, may well be influenced by a three-dimensional, live performance, such as a play, or a dance. The lesson we learn is that our visual ethnographic inquiry must take into account different forms of visual expression that exists in the context.

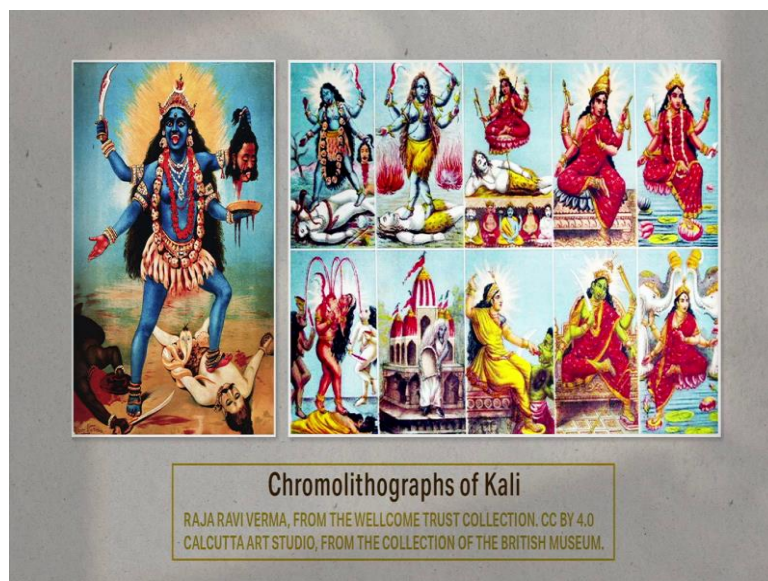
At this juncture, I would like to draw your attention to an interesting point that emerges from the various examples we have shared. In each of these visuals are not simply mute pictures. They seem to exercise a certain agency, a power over their creators and viewers. As pictures of gods, they act as representatives of divinity.

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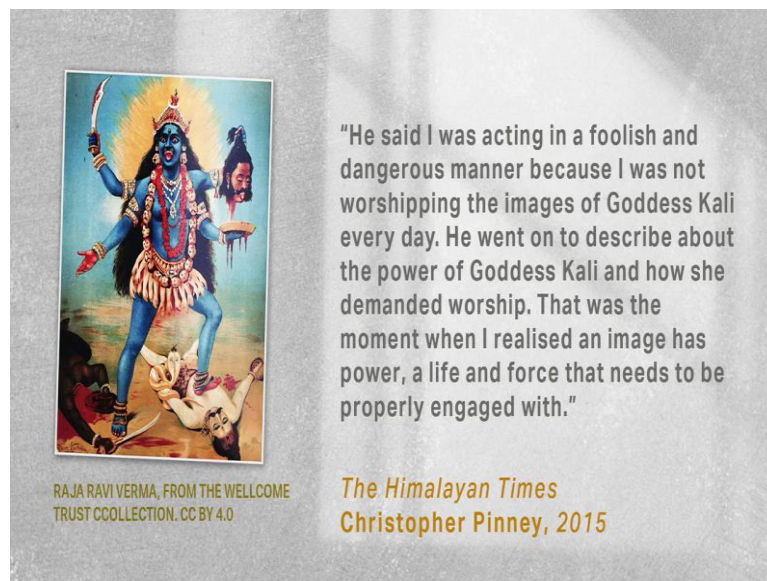
Christopher Pinney terms this as the 'power of images'. He came to recognise this power or rather was made to recognise it early in his career by one of his participants.

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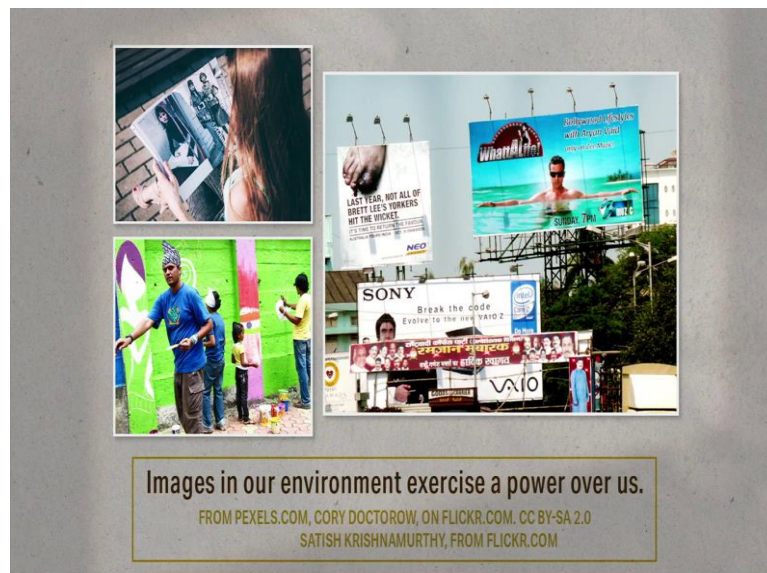
While he was doing fieldwork in a remote part of central India, Pinney became fascinated by printed images of Goddess Kali. He started collecting all the different prints that he could find in the local shop. One day one of his participants walked into his room and saw a big roll of these prints.

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He said I was acting in a foolish and dangerous manner because I was not worshipping the images of Goddess Kali every day. He went on to describe about the power of goddess Kali and how she demanded worship. That was the moment when I realised an image has power, a life and force that needs to be properly engaged with. His participants were speaking about the power and meaning in western in pictures of gods. But this idea extends way beyond religious images.

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Just look at the visuals that surround us in our everyday lives. Advertisements, films, posters, memes, all of these exercises some power over us. They represent and define a desires and aspirations. They shape who we want to be, how we want to be seen by others and ourselves.

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This suggests that an image or a visual is invested with meaning by those who make them and by those who consume them. The collective meanings associated within the image gives it a certain power over its viewers and makers. So, as we research the visual, we must try to read images not only through the lens of our participants but also the other way around.

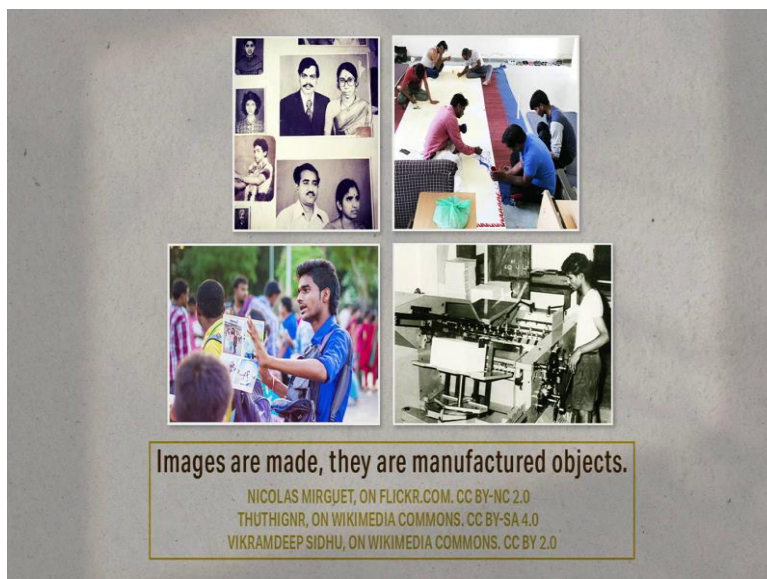
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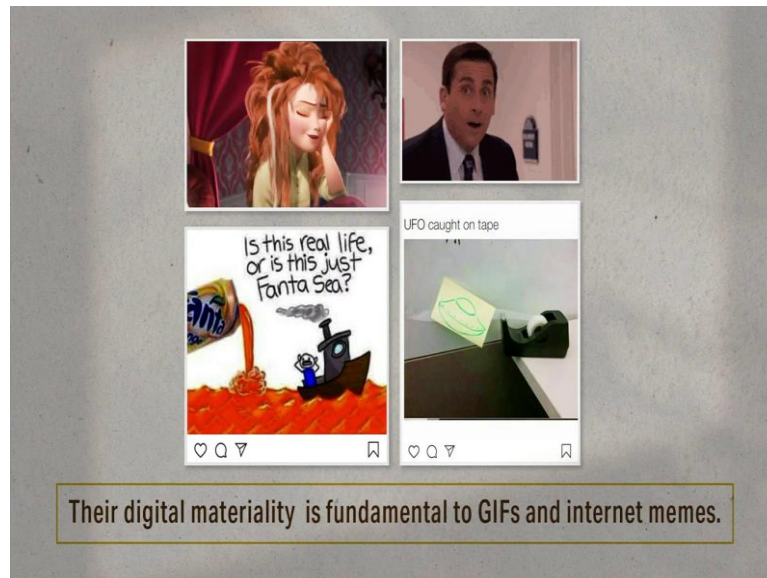
We must try to read what images tell us about our participants and their culture. There is another interesting point that emerges from our discussion on researching the visual, that the visual is not only a picture or an embellishment on a surface. It is also an object.

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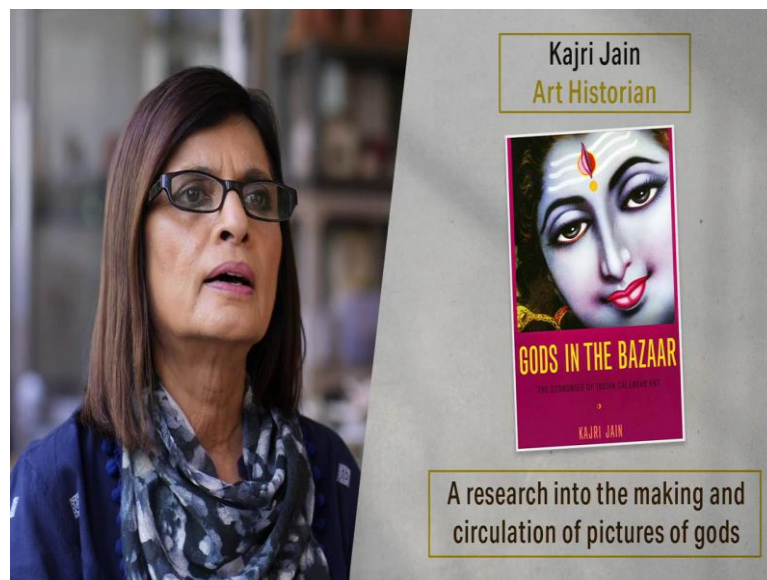
A painting, a print, a film or a photograph, these are all things, things that are made sometimes in a home or a studio and sometimes in a factory. They are sold and bought in markets, exchanged as gifts and stored as memories. Some of them are enclosed in frames and put up on shelves, walls or niches. Others are worshipped in homes and offices.

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And this applies not only to physical images but also digital ones. Think of the memes and GIFs we share every day. One of the most important characteristics is that they can be shared or circulated. They are digital in nature; they are of a certain size and in a certain digital format. All of these characteristics make them sharable media. And it is this share-ability that gives these images their unique 'power' or agency.

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This is a point that is made by art historian and researcher Kajri Jain in her work Gods in the Bazaar. Jain's research too looked at the posters or chromolithographs that are so abundant in our environment. She was intrigued by how these images are to be found in almost every home, shop and office across the country.

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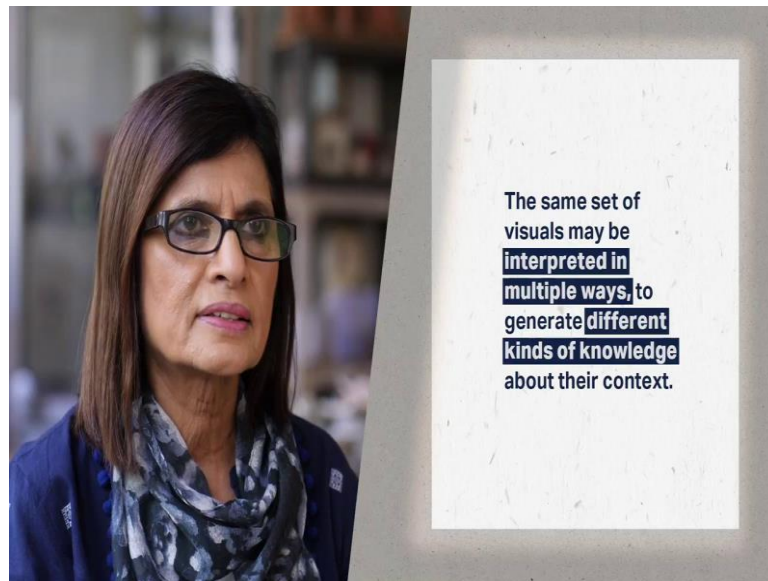
And so she trained her lens on the processes by which these images are made and circulated in the market or Bazaar. She spent a considerable amount of time observing and examining the production, buying and selling of these images. Kajri Jain's work is particularly interesting because of the method she uses in her research. Much of her knowledge comes from conversations with those who make and circulate the images - artists, printers, publishers, sellers and buyers. For her, the prints are not simply visuals enclosed within a frame, but objects - as posters or calendars, as advertisements or merchandise.

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You can learn more about Kajri Jain's work, her method and the role of ethnography in her research here.

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Christopher Pinney and Kajri Jains work shows us that we may look at a similar set of visuals through very different lenses and come to different insights.

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And that in doing visual ethnography, we learn from the visual and from its context. With this, we close our discussion on researching the visual. From the next section onwards, we will take a detailed look at what it means to research with the visual.