

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 11

Bhakti Tradition II

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, we are discussing Bhakti tradition. As a way of continuing from our previous lecture, we are going to talk more about the Alwars and the Nayanars. So, we were talking about the Shaivites. In Veer Shaiva tradition, the word 'Veer' traces its roots, its etymological roots to "Vi" and "R". So, it can be split into "Vi" and "R".

"Vi" referring to "the knowledge of identity of an individual soul," whereas "r" means "one who is happy to have that kind of knowledge." So, the Veer Shaivas were against the poetic artificialities, such that the rhetorics that they created in the Kannada language were called Shivabachanas, right. These Shivabachanas were created mainly, composed mainly by a prominent Veer Shaiva poet Basavanna in the 12th century, right, in the Kannada language. So, during the Bhakti movement where a new kind of culture and Bhakti paths were introduced, the former religious practices were further being problematized.

So, for example, in the medieval era, there was this dominance of the Brahmins and the people were very much influenced and the society was shaped according to the dictates of caste system, right. So, the society was facing a number of problems because of caste-trending norms, and at that point in time there was a need for a new path of devotion which include the masses that do not have access to, you know, to the temples, to money or to the wealth of the society. So, how to make the common masses visible? That is how the Bhakti as a movement emerged in southern part of India. Something that can help reform the society and break it free from the various ritual-based practices and beliefs. The Bhakti movement played a vital role in reforming the society and breaking the chain of the caste system.

That was one of the major, you know, contributions by the Bhakti cult or the Bhakti movement. It showed the path of devotion without discriminating against the people on the grounds, on the basis of their caste. The emergence of this religious movement led the path of devotion without discriminating against the people on the basis of their castes. The movement was largely led by the Alvars and the Nayanars. We have already talked about these two schools, right, who were two different sects worshipping the two different gods.

The Nayanars worshipping Shiva and the Alvars worshipping Lord Vishnu. People from all different parts of society joined the movement regardless of their, you know, caste origin. Often the castes who were considered as untouchable, such as the Pulaiyars and Panars were also accommodated and welcomed by the Bhakti movement. However, the Bhakti cult practitioners were harshly critical of the Buddhists and the Jainists. Here we have to remember that Buddhism and Jainism are two heterodoxical sects that have their roots in Hinduism, but they broke off from Hinduism owing to two major reasons.

One being, you know, caste practice, the other being animal sacrifice or bloodshed. So Buddhism has as one of its tenets, you know, peace. Peace and non-violence is something that greatly defines Buddhism and that is why it had broken away from the Hindu tradition or the Hindu religion. Having said that, we see that although Bhakti is also making similar departure that is very similar to Buddhism and Jainism, you know, it is also heretical in nature..a lot of Bhakti poets we will see are talking about very radical things, things that, you know, cannot be ideas, that cannot be really accommodated within the mainstream Hindu religion;

despite that, they do not have a very good or mutual relationship or bond with the Buddhist and the Jainists. So despite these similar backgrounds, the Bhakti practitioners do not have a very harmonious relationship with the Buddhists and the Jainists as they held an impassioned devotion to Shiva or Vishnu as the way to Nirvana. They were not really quitting the Hindu deities. The Alvars and Nayanars initiated the protest against the caste system and the different societal norms that were discriminatory in nature. So they focused on the ideals of love and heroism that have been, you know, pictured and contained in Sangam literature, and they combined them with the Bhakti principles.

So in Sangam literature, a topic apart, we see that there is vivid description of, you know, lovers and then there are also very successful depictions of the kings and their kingly royal

affairs. So Sangam literature gives a very detailed picture of the southern kingdoms or the southern part of India, the contemporary life in southern part of India. So we see that the Bhakti tradition, the Bhakti principles are greatly influenced by the Sangam poetry, the Sangam literature. The Bhakti practitioners travelled from village to village writing wonderful poems in honour of the deities that they deemed as supreme, and they were setting the poems to music. This is also very much akin to the Sangam tradition.

So moving from village to village and looking at the specific village deity or studying the specific village deity and writing poems in honour of that deity, all these things are also, once they are documented, they become, they qualify as informal history from a given period, right, because at that time there was no practice of writing history. So poems qualified as history because they give, they still give the readers a glimpse of what the southern kingdoms looked like at that point in time. So during the medieval era, the Nayanars were a total of 63 in number, a group of Tamil saints who were devotees of the Hindu god Shiva. The Nayanars played a vital role in the Bhakti movement in southern India during the medieval era. Sundarar was the first who originally produced the list of Nayanar names.

When Nambi compiled the poet's works for the Tirumurai collection, he expanded this list further to include Sundarar as well as his parents. So the four most essential Nayanars are collectively known as the Nalvar or the four, Nalvar meaning "the four", and these four are Appar, Sundarar, Sambandar and Manikkavaasagar. Similar to the Nayanars, the Alvars were also a group of saints and Tamil poets in the southern region, in the southern Indian region who were the devotees of the Hindu god Vishnu, right. So their songs and poems of longing, ecstasy and service were dedicated to god Vishnu who according to them is a supreme power and the ultimate source of nirvana or moksha. So according to some of the myths, it is believed that the Alvars were ten in number.

However, according to some other references, Andal and Madhurakavi Alvar are also included, which makes the Alvars as total of twelve in the count. So we see that Andal was the only female Alvar out of the twelve major Alvar poets. Both groups together were considered as the most important saints coming from Tamil Nadu who created a tremendous amount of bhakti literature as well as led the path of devotion, and this movement moves upwards till it becomes a pan-Indian, you know, pan-Indian tendency, pan Indian movement. During the medieval era through their devotional poems and songs, the Alvars served as a great catalyst, a great propellant, moving force for the bhakti

movement. So the Alvars honored the 108 Vaishnavite deities, which they called as Divya Desams, through their writings and songs.

They wrote and sang thousands of songs reflecting their love and devotion to God Vishnu. So the collection of their writings is known as the Naalayira Divya Prabandham. So the Alvar's bhakti literature contributes to the establishment of a culture, which is deviated from the Vedic practices and the Vedic religion basically, and which resorts to devotion as the only path to salvation. Now having said that, I may, you know, talk about this later in another lecture. We need to understand that Vaishnavism in itself is not a blanket tendency just because it has at its heart the figure of Vishnu or, you know, Krishna as the supreme deity.

In the case of Vaishnavism, we see that some of the, you know, schools or sects are very mainstream. When we think of the ISKCON culture, for example, the Mayapur ISKCON culture, it is very, you know, it is a very orthodox version of Vaishnavism. And this is very different from the Sahaja practice, right, the easy way of attaining God. This is also, the Sahaja group is, you know, coming from Bengal and they do not... they are a breakaway and they cannot be actually accommodated within the Nabadvip tradition. So, wherein lies this difference? when we see their treatment of some of the Vaishnavite, major Vaishnavite texts such as Gita Govinda, there is a lot of, you know, uncensored expressions of amour and love in these books.

And at the level of, you know, at the level of ISKCON culture, at the level of Nabadvip culture, these, you know, branches of Vaishnavism expunge the excesses, the amorous excesses are kind of censored and more spiritual meanings are emphasized, whereas the Sahajiyas do not expunge those excesses. So, all I am trying to drive home here is that we cannot look at the Vaishnavism as one homogenous, you know, historical or religious tendency. There have been many ramifications and many further conflicts and differences even within the school. So, when we come to Nirgun Bhakti, although Nirgun we say is not quite at the heart of the Bhakti principles because Bhakti thrives on the concept of Saguna, yet we see that Nirgun has also gone on to become a part of the Bhakti movement. So, Nirgun Bhakti is or pertains to devotion to an all-encompassing formless god.

This is very close to the concept of the Upanishadic Brahman. The word Nirgun means without traits, without gun and refers to the god's lack of corporeal attributes. So, Nirgun Bhakti is considered by some as the ultimate kind of Bhakti. So, for some of the scholars of religion, Saguna, the path of Saguna leads to Nirguna. Nirguna Bhakti is an unmanifested expression of absolute devotion to god.

So, 'Nir', the prefix 'Nir' refers to 'without' and 'guna' means 'qualities' or 'properties', and so Bhakti means devotion or faithfulness. These are all, you know, Sanskrit terms. They place a greater emphasis or their onus is on learning, and they scorn the scriptures and they denounce all forms of idolatry. The Brahmin's supremacy is also scorned or repudiated by the Nirguna poet-saints, and they are largely against the caste-based customs and practices of idolatry.

So, an idol can be tended and served by the Brahmin, for example, whereas someone coming from the lower strata of society, so called, you know, the lower- caste person cannot touch or serve the god or cook for the god, are some of the practices that they shun and, you know, question. So, they valued personal encounters with god and although they referred to god by various names and titles, their god was so far known for the Nirguna school, the god was primarily formless and, you know, everlasting, non-incarnate and ineffable. God is something that cannot be expressed in terms of, you know, a manifestation, such as an icon or any tactile tendency. God is beyond any tactile, tangible, you know, manifestation. Their beliefs appear to be a synthesis of three traditions.

So, Nirguna is bringing together- A. the Vaishnava bhakti, B.the Nanpanthi movement, and C. Sufism. So, they gave bhakti a Nirgun perspective. Although bhakti, like I have already said, I keep saying again and again, bhakti thrives on the concept of saguna, we see that Nirguna is later also being incorporated within this movement of bhakti, despite the fact that bhakti originates and is basically, you know, closer to the way Vaishnavs worship their deity in a very saguna, very tactile personalized form. That is the major onus of the bhakti movement. However, later Nirguna, you know, trends are also being incorporated.

Bhakti is classified in a variety of ways. Generally, there are opposite tendencies depending on the traditions or schools. So, just like we have Alwars, we also have Nayanars, just like we have the Saguna, we also have Nirguna; even certain influences of religions that

became, you know, that were not, you know.. even influences of non-hindu religions such as Sikhism or Sufism are reflected in the bhakti movement. So, it is a very, you know, pan-Indian all-encompassing movement where no one is invisibilized, everyone gets to participate, it is very inclusive in nature. Nirguna bhakti is an unmanifested expression of absolute devotion to God.

Sagun bhakti, on the other hand, is the worship and devotion to a revealed deity who appears as an idol, an image or an incarnation. So, Sagun bhakti would say that it is easier to understand the God as a manifested form. Since the Ishta devata, the kul devata.. I was talking about the kul devata in my previous lecture... the Ishta devata, the kul devata or the personal deity, the family deity is adored in an identifiable form, in a relational familial sense, it is better to have an icon that needs to be, that should be worshipped. This is the version of Sagun bhakti, right. Nirguna bhakti on the other hand is devotion to the absolute, which is the divine force that makes up the cosmos and the greatest level of consciousness.

So, union with this holy essence is the ultimate objective of the Nirguna bhakta, the devotee of the Nirgun sect. So, the Sagun bhakti school of thought believes in a Sagun Brahman. So, they are also talking about a Brahman, but not the one without any sensory traits; it is a personal God with a, you know, palpable form, which appeals to one's senses. When we talk about bhakti poems, we will see how sensory, how appealing to the senses and thereby, you know, how immediate their, you know, effects are. They are in terms of rasas and bhavas; they are almost indolent with human emotions.

They are not talking about some otherworldly distant God, they are talking about the God as one's child, as one's lover, as one's friend, as one's master, right, and counselor. So, the Sagun bhakti school places a strong emphasis on devotion and love, right. I will talk about so many of these songs, songs, poems and in this regard.. that celebrates Sagun bhakti. God, according to the Sagun school, has a distinct form, character and positive attributes and manifests himself through incarnations such as Rama and Krishna. Now, having said positive attributes, we would like to see the figure of Krishna, the Krishna as a child, as a youth.

Well, that is not really positive what he symbolizes. He is a naughty child and as a teenager, as a flirtatious lover, he is not setting a great example. So, he is making his beloved cry. He is kind of very, very capricious in his behavior and as a child, of course, he is giving a

tough time to the mother, mother Yashoda. So, we have Krishna, you know, depicted as the butter thief, right, and what is this symbol of butter? Critics like John Hawley understand this symbol of Krishna as butter thief, you know, referring to a departure from codified social norms and mores.

So, what is within? The part of the butter symbolizes the society and, you know, everything disciplined and the butter is, you know, kind of what should be within, you know, that is the ordered society where the butter or the curd should be within the pot. And as a thief, he is unsettling all these laws and rules, the time-worn laws and rules; what should be within is being taken out. So, he is making the rules stand on their head and he cannot be controlled, he cannot be tied down with a rope. He escapes that kind of punishment also. So, we have to understand that like John Hawley is very interestingly, you know, reflecting the figure of Vishnu in, you know, sitting on his throne and or the figure of Lord Rama sitting on the throne and maintaining the righteous, you know, traits of a society are very different from that of the child Krishna or even the Krishna as a lover, a youth.

So, [he is] putting all the laws stand on their head. He is making love or he is making amorous gestures with, you know, Radha or even other Gopis that are married women. So, we see that lawlessness becomes a symbol that Krishna carries on to him. And this is a thief, an adulterer, this is a betraying lover that one cannot but love, one cannot be angry with such a person, such an attractive, you know, person; with all his misdemeanors people love him.

That is where this God is coming from. So, he is not only about positive traits or the ideal traits, he is also about breaking of laws, he is a thief and an adulterer. So, the idols and pictures worship at, you know, different sites contain the spirit of this Sagun God. The Sagun school places a strong emphasis on dedication and love. The Sagun Bhakti school was further divided into two groups. The first group placing a high value on Ram Bhakti and the second category was the Krishna Bhaktas, the Krishna devotees.

So, just like I said, the figure of Vishnu or Rama are more about righteousness, uprightness, maintenance of law and, you know, forming Ram Rajya or society based on... very hierarchical codified and systematic society, stratified society whereas Krishna is a subversion of all such structured imagination that, you know, that sets a society in terms of rules and regulations, right. But he is still loved so much. That is the essence of Bhakti we

are trying to explain here. So, they acknowledge the Vedas, spiritual authority and the requirement for a human guru, right. We will also talk about how the guru becomes the God, equivalent to the God.

This is very akin also to the Sufi tradition, where the Murid-Murshid relationship is emphasized. We have Gharanas in the Hindu system and the Silsilas in the Sufi system. So, guru is given the position, the platform equivalent to that of God, right. Guru means... the etymological, you know, roots if we see, 'gu' and 'ru'. So, from darkness the person that leads you to the path of light, right.

Such a guru is not necessarily the priest from the Brahminical, you know, tradition. This is a guru that acts as a mediator between God and his devotees, right, the preceptor, right. The Sagun poets defended the caste-systems in some cases and also advocated for the Brahmin rule. So, according to Madhavacharya's Dvaita and Ramanujacharya's Vishistadvaita, Brahman is conceived or imagined as the Sagun Brahman or the personal deity, an Isvara with infinite characteristics, which includes a physical form as well. Unlike Dvaita however, Vishistadvaita used the term Brahman to refer to the world that is dependent on Brahman.

So, we see that Vishistadvaita talks about the Brahman as a reference to all minds and material objects that make up the Brahman's body. So, according to the Bhagavad Gita, Sagun Brahman is immortal and it is imperishable and ultimately eternal. Adi Narayana or Krishna is the most common personal form that is mentioned in Sagun Bhakti. Sagun Bhakti which is, you know, mainly practiced by the Alvars. So, both Sagun Brahman and Advaita were retained in Adi Shankara's Advaita.

We see that the school of thought included Ramanuja, Ramananda, Mirabai and also Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. We are going to talk more about this in our following lectures. Thank you.