

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 12

Bhakti Tradition III

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. We are discussing Bhakti tradition. So today we are going to talk mainly about Vaishnavism. The Alvars were the first Brahmin emissaries, who planted the seed of Vaishnavism in the southern part of India. The Alvars gave prominence to the emotional aspects of Vaishnavism and used the language of the ordinary people, the language of the common masses in their songs, poetry and hymns, something that was immediately relatable by the common masses. The southern India had an uninterrupted series of Vaishnavite reformers, right, from the 9th century until the end of the 15th century.

The Vaishnavites flourished in the southern part of India, right from the early years of the Christian era under the impetus given by the Alvars, who preached Bhakti and devotion to Krishna in the local Tamil languages, and they composed songs in Tamil which was very well understood by the local masses. So this was a movement primarily by the ordinary people. It was a movement of, for and by the common masses and immediately relatable to them. So Vishnu and all his avatars, particularly the avatar of Krishna was the object of the Alwar's veneration.

They used to adore the idols of Vishnu in different forms although the mode of worship was mainly confined to the recitation of his name, the Namgan right and contemplation of Vishnu's different forms. The early Alvars descended from the northern Vaishnavites or the Bhagavat sects and their beliefs and writings were founded on the Bhagavad Gita and the Bhagavad Purana. So they represented the devotional and emotional aspects of the Vaishnava faith which was a departure from the Brahmin Acharyas who came after them representing the intellectual and the philosophical side. So once again going back to the question of yoga, attaining God through Bhakti yoga, through devotion was mainly

targeting a population that did not have access to knowledge, to the scriptures. So the Brahmin, you know, groups, the Brahmin Acharyas would try to attain God through knowledge, basically through jnana yoga whereas Bhakti's onus was on dedication, devotion.

So in northern part of India, Ramananda, Vallabhacharya, Nimbadiya, Sri Shankaradeva and Sri Chaitanya Deva were the Vaishnav reformers who attained great repute. It is said that there are four main Sampradayas or sects of Vaishnavism. They are Ramanuja Sampradaya, Vishnuswami Sampradaya, Madhavacharya Sampradaya and Nimbadiya Sampradaya. The Rudra-Sampradaya of Vallabhacharya traces its origin to Vishnuswami who was a religious leader and a commentator of Vedas. Vishnuswami made disciples from Sannyasashramis and Brahmins only.

So it is said that Vallabhacharya as a successor of Vishnuswami devoted himself to the expounding of Vishnuswami's cult. So even within the Bhakti we see a number of opposing tendencies, some cults or some schools that have an upper-caste affiliation where they are centered on a Brahmin descent, a school comprising only the Brahmin teachers and disciples whereas other leaders and other teachers would preach castelessness.. coming out of the caste system. So both these tendencies are observable within the Bhakti tradition. So in several parts of India, particularly in Gujarat and Malwa, a number of elite sections from the population became followers of the Vallabhacharya Vaishnavism. And then we see a small sect of Vaishnavism also originating with Mirabai.

Mirabai was married to Rana Kumbha from Udaipur but because she was staunch Vaishnav, she could not agree with her husband and his, you know, his lineage, his relations primarily because the Rana belonged to a Sakta family, Sakta tradition. And so Mirabai had to leave their protection. So she roamed over to many places and spent her life mainly meditating and chanting the names of her Ishta Devata Ranchhod, Ranchhod which is an image of Srikrishna. She is known for writing a number of devotional songs, also called bhajans. Now the Vaishnavite Bhakti movement took a long step forward in the eastern India mainly during the 15th and 16th centuries.

Eastern India comprises Assam, Bengal and Orissa which are now fragmented states. The most important stalwarts and pioneers of this resurgence of Bhakti in the eastern region

were Sankaradeva in Assam and Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in Bengal with their contemporaries and followers. So in the writings of the Vaishnavas, there are references to the Vajrayanist religion as Vamanaya or Pashandanaya as well as to its Buddhist adherence. So the Buddhists are mentioned by the Vaishnavas as the heterodox religions, the heterodox ways that have made a departure from mainstream Hinduism. Sankaradeva's Vaishnavism was distinctly personalized.

He infused some of his Vedantic ideas into Vaishnavism. Sankaradeva propagated his cult by means of theoretical books, hymns and dramas. The manuscripts for his dramas were illustrated by himself which goes on to, you know, prove his proficiency in calligraphy and painting. So Sankaradeva convened congregations and held discourses on his faith. On the other hand, we also have a figure like Madhavadeva who wrote hymns in praise of Vishnu and Krishna and his major contribution was a work called Nada Goshala.

By avoiding scholarly exercises, sacrifices and complicated rites and rituals that are more, you know, associated with the Brahminical tradition, the Bhakti's basic tenets appealed to the general public. The ideas of Bhakti were couched in the native tongues of the people instead of the Brahminic Sanskrit which the common people could not understand. Adding to the simple and attractive ideas was the lyrical and the melodious music composed by Sankaradeva. The hymns and poems that Sankaradeva composed would appeal the ordinary masses immediately. They had an immediate effect.

The basic version of texts such as the Bhagavat Purana with a well-known commentary by Sreedharaswamy, the Bhagavat Gita and Sankaradeva's Bhakti Ratnakara which was originally in Sanskrit were all being explained in simple Assamese language. So the local people could immediately relate, understand and be influenced. Further, the Assamese works by Sankaradeva were provided in the Santrams with necessary commentaries for the neophytes and the ordinary masses to understand and identify with. Now, Vaishnavites had set in motion a new resurgence in the general philosophy, literature and art in Assam. Sankaradeva himself was not just a great poet from Assam but also a musician and painter.

Madhavadeva during his visits to the various Santrams would encourage the followers to paint murals. These paintings were traditional and were intended to spread the basic ideas

of Bhakti tradition. So we see that Bhakti is, you know, Bhakti encompasses a lot of performance in terms of song, dance, in terms of paintings and graphic representations of devotion to God. So it is coming out of a kind of restraint or upper-caste cocoon which distances the idea of religion from the common masses, from the grassroots. So the Brahminical tradition is more sober, more restrained, more restricted to the temple premises and only a limited few can serve the God.

From there on, Bhakti tradition is taking God to the common people, explaining the ideas of devotion to the common folks, the common masses, right? So and there are very many representations. So it is very tactile, it is very much, you know, represented in the form of art, aesthetics and literature. So the tangential notion of religion is actually going away and being replaced by some very common representations. Now Shankaradeva used to create plays and occasionally perform them as an efficient technique of spreading Vaishnavism, even among the impoverished sections and among the ignorant masses. He used to act in plays as well as direct them.

So we see one religious leader having so many qualities, that of a painter, that of a narrator, a playwright, a dramatist and an actor, even a director. Madhavadeva perpetuated the practice through establishing temples as drama schools. So Madhavadeva would go a step ahead and turn the temples into theatres for performances. Here we see something very important happening, where religion cannot be separated from performance and art anymore. Religion is performed and in performance God is realized.

So following the growth of Vaishnavism many new men of letters emerged, a lot of, you know, new leaders emerged. Madhav Kandali who had translated the Ramayana with some significant changes was the only poet that could compete with a figure such as Shankaradeva. So Chaitanya plays a significant role, a momentous role in the Vaishnavite bhakti movement of the Indian subcontinent in general and Bengal in particular. His lyrics and writings were in the elite language of Sanskrit, which is a bit different from the Adabhakti saints who favored the people's spoken language above Sanskrit. So we see bhakti stalwarts like Gyaneshwar, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Ramanand, Ravidas and others were vocal against the caste system.

On the other hand, we see that like Tulsidas, Chaitanya are not defending caste system as a natural order, but also not opposing it. Chaitanya was not a vehement opponent of caste system. However, the total impact of Chaitanya's Vaishnavism was a rejection of casteism and he was a proponent of a caste-less society. Chaitanya's major means of spreading Vaishnavism were, you know, singing in groups and parades or processions led by him and his growing number of followers. The Gauraya Vaishnavism also known as Chaitanya Vaishnavism and the Hare Krishna cult is a Vaishnav religious movement founded in India in the 16th century.

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu rejuvenated the culture of Krishna bhakti. The devotional worship or bhakti yoga dedicated towards Radha and Krishna as well as their countless heavenly incarnations as the highest manifestation of God, this is the core premise of Gauraya Vaishnavism. Considering, you know, Radha and Krishna as the part of one and the same deity and yet, you know, two halves of Svayam Bhagavan, God himself, you know, manifesting in two parts, the male half and the female half, Krishna and Radha respectively, and dedication, sheer devotion towards them form the core of Gauraya Vaishnavism. So the worship is most usually expressed through chanting or singing the holy names of Radha and Krishna, and the chant of Hare Krishna is called as the Mahamantra. The movement is also referred to as the Brahma Madhava Gauriya Sampradaya, referring to the traditional origins in the succession of spiritual masters or gurus that originate from Lord Brahma.

So, Gauriya Vaishnavism, also called the Brahma Madhava Gauriya Sampradaya, whose original leader or guru is believed to be Lord Brahma himself. So it considers itself, the Sampradaya considers itself as a monotheistic faith and regards the many manifestations of Vishnu as expressions or incarnations of the one supreme God. So Krishna according to Gauriya Vaishnavism is the Adi Purush. Although sharing a common set of core beliefs, there are some philosophical differences which distinguish Gauriya Vaishnavism from other Vaishnav schools. So the fundamental distinction of Gauriya Vaishnavism is that Lord Krishna is regarded as God's original form, Swayam Bhagawan, rather than an incarnation of Vishnu.

Over the three centuries following the disappearance of Sri Chaitanya Dev or Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the Gauriya Vaishnav tradition evolved into its current form, the way it exists in contemporary India today. In the early years of this tradition, the followers of Nityananda, Advaita, Acharya and other companions of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu educated and initiated the masses in their own locales across Bengal. So these were some of the

devotees of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu that, you know, later went on to become proponents, the gurus of the Gauriya Vaishnav cult. So Nityananda and Advaita Acharya were two important figures that educated the masses in different parts of Bengal. They would spread the teachings of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu.

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu requested a select few among his followers who were later known as the six Goswamis of Brindavan to systematically present the eternal theology of Bhakti in their writings. So Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's teachings were, you know, further disseminated by the Goswamis, the six select Goswamis of Brindavan. This theology emphasized the devotee's relationship to the divine couple Radha and Krishna. With this I am going to stop my lecture here today. Thank you. Thank you.