

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 14

Bhakti Tradition V

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. We are discussing Bhakti tradition and today we will discuss Sikhism and the central figure of Sikhism, that is Guru Nanak. So, the emphasis of the Sikh religion is on Guru Nanak, who lived between 1469 and 1539 AD. The first Sikh master was Guru Nanak and his philosophies have brought both encouragement and relief to the Sikh community, both during their tough times as well as in less difficult times. So, we see that the figure of Guru Nanak acts as a point of union of you know, or a point of convergence of opposing thoughts, of different kinds of societal and communal differences. Sikhism becomes a point of interface.. productive or peaceable interface between Hinduism and Islam in the South Asian context, where Sikhism renounces caste practices; it emphasizes service for people.

So, it is mainly drawing on Nirgun Bhakti tradition where idol worship is renounced, eradicated and so, Guru Nanak was a very popular figure who has been venerated, who has been revered by the Hindus and the Muslims alike and he is very similar in this sense to the figure of Kabir Das, right? Sant Kabir Das who was also similarly revered and admired by the Hindus and Muslims alike, figures that transcend any kind of communal identity and communal boundaries. So, scholarly studies emphasize the originality of the way in which Guru Nanak refracted his cultural and intellectual inheritance through the lens of his own personal understandings, thereby transforming what was a relatively loose collection of ideas into lucid and systematic doctrines, right? He is known as a great poet who has composed so many Dohas, poems and songs, right? So, Nanak's doctrines in conjunction with his prescribed practice of Sadhana or Nam Simran or roting and repetition of the divine name allows the devotee to achieve the knowledge which enables or facilitates liberation from the cycle of life and death, from the cycle of ephemeral existence. So, Guru Nanak's concepts were eventually collated and structured into Guru Arjan's masterpiece the Adi Granth, commonly known as Guru Granth or Guru Granth Sahib.

According to W.H. MacLeod, the studies on Sikh history and scripture demonstrate the effects of Nanak and his principles on the long progression of the Sikh Panth and the extent to which his teachings and ideas had shaped the Sikh scripture subsequently. So, contemporary Sikh scholarship has followed the trend established by Sikh authors dating back to the mid 16th century, which trace the beginnings of Guru Nanak's religious biography or rather biographies known as the Janam-sakhis, right? 'Janamsakhi' literally meaning birth evidence. So, the janam-sakhis are short tales written in Punjabi Gurmukhi script and scholars emphasize that they are the oldest existing examples of writings in Gurmukhi script. They are Sakhis or short tales, stories about the birth and life, Janam of Guru Nanak who was the first prophet-mentor of the Sikh religion.

The earliest Janamsakhis came to be written towards the end of the 16th century and have been passed down the generations.. passed down through the years in a variety of renditions such as the Bala, the Miharban, Adi and Puratan. They emphasize the significance and distinctiveness of Guru Nanak's birth and life in terms of each writer's particular beliefs and preferences. So, they have this quality of oral tradition, orality where not all versions are uniform across all the writings. There are certain personalized treatment of these Janamsakhis, where different authors have their own different versions when writing about Guru Nanak's life and experiences. So, despite the variants, the different versions of Janamsakhis available, these Sakhis have one common thread which is the representation of Guru Nanak's life in an idiom and manner that is evocative of allegory and myth.

So, Guru Nanak's life is narrated through all these different renditions of Sakhis in allegorical and mythical fashion. In contemporary times, the popular narratives of Guru Nanak's life are almost entirely derived from the Janam Sakhi accounts. So, in a sense, it would not be wrong to say, although we do have specific dates about Guru Nanak's birth and death, he also stands as a mytho-historical figure because to the progeny he is available not in the form of a concrete formal history, but rather through these Sakhis that are layered, that are nuanced, whose intricate details change from author to author. And so, his life is available more in the form of a myth and through allegories rather than through, you know, depiction and documentation of facts, as we see in the case of any modern historical writing or biography. So, based on the stories in the Janamsakhis, it is clear that the most meager of connections to Guru Nanak was enough to obtain liberation.

Even an individual's connection to Guru Nanak would facilitate moksha or liberation from birth cycle. So, in one Sakhi, for example, it is said that Guru Nanak's mere glance towards the smoke of a very sinful person, a murderer's funeral pyre was enough for this man to secure paradise. So, Guru Nanak has been treated as a mytho-historical figure, as almost a superhuman through these Janamsakhis. Guru Nanak propagated the philosophy of darsana, darsana whose root word is 'dars', its etymological root is 'dars', literally meaning 'to see'. So, Guru Nanak, as I was saying, propagated darsana of reality.

This seeing provides Nanak with a spontaneous recognition of absolute knowledge of divinity. So, seeing and intrinsic knowing are one and the same. Darsana through seeing a spiritual perception is shaped and one knows merely through seeing, that is the idea of darsana. So, darsana in Sanskrit denotes both seeing and philosophical speculation. Now, several of Guru Nanak's hymns bear witness to this act of darsana or seeing of the transcendent as a source of knowledge.

They stand in fundamental opposition to insights gained through doubt, as one sees in the case of Descartes' thoughts. The Descartes metaphysics that talks about, you know, doubting as contingent to one's existence, because we doubt we exist, right? We think, therefore we exist. And Nanak's, you know, understanding of darsana is also different from the question or the concept of intense inquiry as one finds in the Upanishads. So, scholars have stated and elaborated in diverse ways that Guru Nanak was a follower of Sant Kabir Das, who was the forerunner, who was one of the.. one of the leaders that spearheaded the Hindu school of Nirgun Bhakti. So, Nanak greatly draws on the teachings and philosophy of Sant Kabir Das.

MacLeod has claimed that Guru Nanak's thoughts were strongly influenced by the Nirgun tradition that pervaded, that was pervasive in the northern part of India. This Sant tradition was itself a synthesis of three principle traditions, drawing on the elements of each of them. So, Sant tradition firstly drew on the Vaishnav Bhakti, in which divine love was directed to one of the ancient incarnations of Vishnu. Second, it was drawing on the ancient tradition of tantric yoga represented in northern India by the adherence of comfort or natsect of yogis. And finally, the Sant tradition drew on the Sufi orders, although the latter's contribution was comparatively marginal or less significant.

According to MacLeod and he says, I quote, "it was this Sant tradition which provided the basis of Guru Nanak's thought and inheritance which, like Kabir, he reinterpreted in the light of his own personality and experience" (unquote). Later, he asserts.. MacLeod asserts, "Nanak did not found Sikhism, for this would have meant founding something which already existed," and that Nanak replicated teachings which were already current in North India. This is not to say that Nanak was not the forerunner or the harbinger of the Sikh religion, but rather to allude to the different influences that have shaped the early years, the early stages of Sikhism. So, some of the religious practices, some of the religious sects that were already prevalent in North India greatly speak to the Sikh practices and the Sikh.. you know, basic tenets of Sikhism as it exists in India today. So, Guru Nanak taught about God's unity, the fact that there is one God and similar to Kabir, he strongly condemned, you know, practices such as caste distinctions, idol worship, going on pilgrimages and also other, you know, lofty formal religious observances, rituals and ceremonies that verge on pomp and show.

So, rather than advocating Vairag or sannyas, Nanak would suggest or call for a middle-path through which a spiritual life could be led even while living within the bounds of domesticity. So, spiritual life could coexist with domestic responsibilities; one did not have to become a sannyasi and leave the precincts of household. One of his famous quotes is that, "Abide pure amidst the impurities of the world." So, pure cannot be sought through renouncing impurity, pure has to be sieved from within the impure state. So, Nanak intended to blur the lines between Hindus and Muslims in order to foster a climate of peace, friendliness, harmony and reciprocal relationship.

I was talking earlier how he, the figure of Nanak becomes a point of convergence for many conflicting ideologies or philosophies where Hindus and Muslims alike admire the teachings by Guru Nanak or the tenets of Sikhism. Throughout and beyond his lifetime Guru Nanak was revered both by the Hindus and the Muslims. Guru Nanak preached that the real cause of misery of the people was their disunity, owing to differences in belief, differences in faith, differences in the path, spiritual path that they follow. So, he considered a kind of sameness at the societal level that would lead to harmony. He considered education as essential for the attainment of a fruitful life, of a more complete and truer life.

He advised his followers to achieve a state of mind where there would neither be pain nor happiness and this could be attained through the, you know, Nam Simran, constant recitation of the Satnam or the sacred name of God. Nanak's conception of religion was

therefore practical and ethical. He would condemn the superstitious practices, the superstitions and formalism of Hinduism as well as Islam and he denounced all forms of vice, selfishness and hypocrisy, especially associated with caste practices. He preached the unity of God and equality of all humans and emphasized the need for a Guru. So, the Guru tradition becomes central or at the heart of Sikhism where the figure of the preceptor or Guru is important for guiding the follower in the correct path, in the path of God or Divinity.

So, here let us take a look at one of the poems or Doha by Guru Nanak. It has been translated by Neeti M. Sadarangani, and it is extracted from Guru Granth Sahib. This is how the poem goes. "Trudging headlong through the continent, he meditates upon Rubba as standing on one foot.

Securing his wind-like mercurial mind, he remembers him and bows low. Extremely low he bends his head. Who does he lean on? Whom wish to force? Who can say, Nanak? Whom the Creator will bless with bounty? Beneath his commands the Swamiki keeps us all. The fools expose their own folly." So, we see that in this poem, Guru Nanak's tone is clearly sarcastic.

He is mocking and scoffing at the extreme religious practices of austerity in expectation of God's blessings. The devotee standing on one feet, in a state of penance, expecting the God to come and bless. But these external, you know, manifestations, these complacent gestures, do they really mark an authentic devotee as such? This is something he is questioning here. Who does the Creator bless with bounty? So, all these external rituals, all these, you know, superstitions are something that Guru Nanak's teaching wants to eradicate. So, bowing too much, standing on one feet, these gestures do not necessarily make a person pious.

Piety has got to do more with good practices, good ethics and renouncing of hypocrisy and falsehood. Next, we have one more Doha. In original, it would read as follows. It is a very short Doha comprising two lines- Dukh mahuah maran hari nam, Sila santokh pisuno pisuno hath dan. When translated to English, it goes as follows, The arsenic of pain I kill with Hari's name. And pound it in the mortar of contentment, With hands that are your gift.

So, it is also taken from Guru Granth Sahib here. We see celebration of the practice of Simran, taking of the God's name, repetition of the Sat Naam, which generates a sense of happiness, contentment and ultimately submission to the Absolute, to the Divinity. So, with this, we come to an end of our lecture on Sikhism. I will meet you again in another lecture with another round of discussions. Thank you. Thank you.