

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 17

Sufi Tradition III

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. We are discussing Sufi tradition. Today we are going to continue from our previous lecture and we are going to talk about the different practices in Sufi tradition. So the notion of disinterested love in God or love of God was for the first time articulated by a female Sufi saint. So her name is Rabia al-Basri. Rabia al-Basri is talking about a disinterested love of God and she articulates about the selfless love with an overpowering force.

Because of her advocacy for disinterested love of God, she became the model of selfless love among the Sufi circles. So Rabia al-Basri urged worship of God out of love instead of just recouring to, you know, rituals or scriptural mandates or prescriptions, in other words referring directly or mechanically to the Shari'ah. So one should.. the love for God should come from within and one should not venerate God out of fear of hell or out of one's selfish desire for paradise. So Rabia al-Basri taught that a Sufi must love God for his own sake.

Next we have another saint called Junayd al-Baghdadi. Junayd al-Baghdadi advocated the principle of sovereignty which is called sahw, sahw in Sufi practices and behavior. So his apparent behavior, actions and utterances are however, you know, coming back to the Shari'ah because he is talking about sovereignty, he is talking about, you know, rationality, calming down of the excesses or the rapturous practices. So we see that Baghdadi makes a comeback to Shari'ah and for this reason Baghdadi's Sufi doctrines and practices were generally approved by his contemporary theologians, jurists and even were welcomed by the prominent ulemas or priests. The principle opposed to sahw, sahw is that of ecstatic intoxication or drunkenness.

So on the one hand we have the restrained self defined by sahw, on the other we have the ecstatic state defined as sukr. So sukr and sahw are the two states and they have their very different goals, they are divergent from each other. The sukr, as we can see, is characterized by a loss of self-control because of an excess of longing and extreme love and it was propagated by the early Sufis such as Abu Yazid al-Bistami and al-Hallaj. So then we move on to the foremost Sufi doctrines, such as the doctrine of voluntary poverty, the concept of faqr, faqr which was characterized by a denial, a self-denial and you know, a denunciation or renunciation of material needs. The lifestyles of the Sufis in general exhibited indifference towards wealth.. material wealth and that was also the reason why they came to be referenced as the fakir, fakir or the poor or destitute man.

So the manifestation of poverty would include extreme simplicity in terms of living, denial or defiance of worldly positions, wearing of coarse and simple clothes and having very simple food including some herbs and even continual fasting. So one of the earliest Sufis, Hasan al-Basri, cherished the values of hunger and poverty, branding wealth as an evil which distracts people from their righteous goal or their righteous path. Here we would need to understand that Sufism has its own commonality because its roots are in Islam. It is not talking very differently from the Prophet's, you know, teachings. Even Prophet Muhammad at one point says that anything in excess is poison, excess of material wealth can corrupt an individual.

And if you look at the Prophet's life, towards the end of his life he became... he forsook all material pleasures, he was eating very simple food, sparsely eating, and he had given up on very luxurious or very excess living, he had given up on sensory pleasures. We see that he.. towards the end of his life he became a complete hermit. So having celebrated the philosophy or the concept of, you know, starvation, of surviving with very limited resources, we also see that some of the Sufis...there are some exceptions and some of the Sufis, such as Harith al-Mushasibi, so Harith al-Mushasibi also prefers wealth or ghina over poverty. So Sufis are mostly, you know, they are advocates of a simple life, simple living, but some like al-Mushasibi have practiced and observed the Sufi path despite not renouncing or not giving up on wealth. The Sufis believe that hearing and recitation of the Quran, chanting of poetry or music can induce ecstasy in an individual, and that is where the concept of rapture or excess is coming from.

So.. and that is once again a moveaway from the restrained values that Islam celebrates. For this reason, you know, for arousal of an ecstasy, devotional music or Sama is considered by a large number of Sufis as a source of joy, as a source of rapture and a

method of spiritual realization and therefore they permit bodily excess, right? Realization of God or the absolute union with the God through performance, that is where Sufism is fundamentally coming from. Devotional music and ecstatic dance were meant to arouse spiritual ecstasy and rapture and many Sufis are said to have even died out of this state of excess due to this state of heightened emotions caused by song, dance and performance. The formal practice of Sama was supplemented by ritualistic ecstatic dance or Raqs. So Sama is the music, Raqs refers to the ecstatic dance which was intended to plunge the dancer or take the dancer into a state of concentration on Allah.

So here we see that the onus is shifting from the mind to the body. One is not trying to grasp the Almighty through reason and rationality, through reading and interpreting scriptures but through performance, through enactment, bodily enactments, right? The practice of Sama and Raqs became especially popular in the medieval period with the Sufis in Persia, India and Anatolia. So the practice of Sama found its highest expression among the Sufis associated with the Mawlviyyah Silsilah. Mawlviyyah Silsilah refers to a particular gharana, Mawlviyyah gharana or in Sufi tradition we call them as Silsila coming from the lineage of one preceptor, whose founder was like.. I was talking about the preceptor, in this case the Mawlviyyah Silsilah's founder was Jalaluddin Rumi from Konya. So Rumi founded the Mawlviyyah Silsilah and Rumi as we all know is a famous Persian Sufi poet.

This group practiced Sama along with his disciples and associates. So the practice of Sama found its highest expression among the Sufis associated with the Mawlviyyah Silsilah, Silsilah referring to a lineage or a gharana; in the Indic sense what we call as gharana and the preceptor, the leader of the Mawlviyyah Silsilah, its founder was Jalaluddin Rumi from Konya. Rumi who is a famous Persian Sufi poet and they practiced the.. they widely practiced Sama among the disciples and associates. So devotional music and ecstatic dancing among Sufis evoked a lot of criticism and objection from within Islam. So the Ulemas who were proponents of exoteric practices, the jurists and theologians that adhered with core Islam started objecting, started resisting these practices and they were more concerned with outward conformity to the law or to the Shari'ah.

Criticism of practices such as Sama and Raqs came not only from the Islamic Republic but from the juridic circles, especially from the Hanbalis but also from the sober branches of Sufis, the sober Sufi circles. So we have to understand at this point that Sufism is not a homogenous or an umbrella tendency. After its origination it has also branched out; there

were some more sober Sufi groups we have already talked about Baghdadi's Silsilah, which was closely adherent with and accepted by the core Islamists and some were of radical departure, who faced vehement criticism. So there were cases where the more ecstatic or the more radical Sufis were being criticized by the more sober circles of Sufis. Another important Sufi doctrine in this regard that we need to mention is that of companionship or subbah.

Subbah especially refers to a Sufi's return from seclusion as well as the company of a Sufi master for the Sufi disciple. So you know realization of God according to Sufi belief or Sufi philosophy can happen both in isolation where a person, a practitioner is moving away from the society and then God can also be realized through socialization, through company such as the company of the pupil or the disciple or the pupil known as Murid with the master who is the Murshid. So the company of the Sufi master or Murshid for the disciple or the Murid. Another related doctrine is that of retirement. Just now I was talking about attaining knowledge of divinity, realizing divinity through socialization between Murid and Murshid.

Similarly, God can be realized through retirement from public discourse, from socialization. This process of retirement, this you know becoming a hermit is called khalwah. So adherence with the Sufi way of life did not necessarily involve continuous seclusion or solitude however. One would sever ties with the people at large. However, the Sufis would also come back to the worldly life.

So the Sufis used to retreat from worldly life for some period of time in order to attain spirituality, spiritual elevation.. in order to realize spiritual gains, and this process of seclusion from the rest of the society is basically known as khalwah. Early Sufis while practicing khalwah would retire to forests, to deserts or even sit alone in wilderness. For some it lasted for months, for others it would stretch over years and even they would disappear from public eye for decades. Nevertheless, Sufis would not always in general lead a life in quietude and in seclusion. That has not always been the case.

It is essential to remember that the practice of khalwah was a temporary phase and so after the period of solitude one would return to the normal life and resume living among the people. It is important to note that the Sufis stressed the principle of service to humanity, and this service would not be possible, serving humans would not be possible

unless one actually lived in the society. One would possibly not be able to serve the society from a wilderness. So it was also important to come back and work among the people, serve the people. Other important doctrines include the concept of sincerity, ikhlas which required that one seeks God in all situations, one obediently seeks God in all situations and one seeks God in all situations and it also implies...ikhlas also implies sincerity in every thought and action.

The concept of repentance or penitence is also present in the Sufi teaching. So, Tawbah or penitence includes repentance from a sin as well as from forgetfulness and destruction from God. If we are distracted from God, we ought to repent. That is Tawbah. The concept of heightened or concentrated piety, Zuhd.. Zuhd often is confused with asceticism, but asceticism and piety are not one and the same according to the Sufi tradition.

Piety is called the Zuhd and it is significant in the sense that it is a kind of a spiritual practice. It signifies avoidance of even the permitted worldly pleasures and eventually it requires a practitioner to give up on every such thing that distracts one's heart and one's mind from the God. So basically, retreating or withdrawing from material pleasures, worldly pleasures. The concept of trust in or one's realization of God is called Tawakkul. It was developed by a Sufi saint called Shaqiq al-Balkhi, a pupil of Ibrahim ibn Adham.

An essential Sufi value is also that of tolerance, being a tolerant individual as you know in one's social exchanges and having a universalist approach. So, tolerance in social behavior and universalism in approach. These are two essential traits that are prized and valued by the Sufis. The Sufis had an inclusive approach towards people that belong to different sects, to different schools or madhahib, different race and ethnicity and people who were coming from other religions. Sufis displayed a lot of tolerance towards even the non-Muslims, and this is not the same attitude that one finds among the core practitioners, the juristic Islam or the theologians of core Islam.

In fact, Sufism served as a kind of a tool for.. as a point of contact, as a junction for the mystically inclined adherents from other religious traditions. And that happens a lot in South Asia, like we are going to discuss in our next lectures... what happens to Sufism after it comes to South Asia. It has wonderfully mixed and formed hybrid practices in coalition with, in adherence with the existing traditions, existing laws, existing belief

systems in South Asia. It has never separated itself from or conflicted with the existing traditions. So, that has always been a beauty of Sufism.

So, Sufi tradition, wherever it has gone, it has mingled with the local culture and it has, you know.. resultantly we have witnessed very beautiful hybrid forms, beliefs, practices, music and so on and performances. So, since the society under the vast Muslim empires of Umayyad and Abbasid had a pluralistic environment in terms of race, ethnicity, culture and religion, it formed a very rich platform. It provided great opportunities for interaction with people belonging to different racial, ethnic, cultural backgrounds as well as holding, you know, possessing different faiths, different religious traditions and beliefs. The Sufis held discourses with Christian priests, Jewish rabbis and the Buddhist Zoroastrian sages. So, discourse and exchanges were active and dynamic.

Sufis have never been a, or Sufism has never been a static knowledge system. It has constantly exchanged, given and taken from the others. Sufism was perceived as a threat and a challenge to the power and authority of the ulema and the jurists of Islam and that was precisely why one comes across tensions between Sufism and the juristic Islam all throughout the medieval period. Many Sufis were accused of being heretical, they were shunned for the heresy and some were even given punishments by the political authorities. Scholars have argued that there were different patterns in this respect that one sees, different patterns of interaction that one witnesses between the Sufis and the state.

So, on the one hand, there were diverse patterns of Sufi responses to the state and to the political authorities, which would range from alliance and collaboration with mainstream Islam, with the intent to reform the policy, to criticize on the personal and political conducts of the rulers and this would also extend to political clash and conflict with the political authorities. So, there were diverse patterns of Sufi responses to the state and to the political authorities. It would range from a direct alliance and collaboration and adherence with the intent to reform policy, to criticizing on the personal and political conducts of the leaders and even go on to become violent clash and conflict between the Sufi exponents and the political authorities. So, there could be some moderate conflicts and sometimes it would be very extreme differences. On the other hand, the policy of the rulers also varied depending on the principles or the attitude of the rulers.

So, the rulers and the political authorities were also not consistent. Rather, they would exhibit quite diverse patterns. So, for example, some rulers enjoyed friendly and cordial relations with the Sufis and they also extended them official patronage. Some Sufis would become patrons to kings. They, such rulers offered official relations with the Sufis, recognized and also extended them, you know, sponsorship, support and patronage, offered the Sufi saints official positions and grants and they supported their khanqahs.

So, there were cases where the state was supporting the Sufi mission and vision. So, on the other hand, many of the Islamic rulers perceived the Sufis as a threat for their political authority and so they tried to control and contain these more radical strains of Sufi performance and practices and these rulers, you know, tried to subordinate the Sufi saints to their state. Some of the rulers even coerced the Sufis into accepting the official theological doctrines. With this, I am going to stop my lecture here today and let us meet with another round of discussions in another lecture. Thank you. Thank you.