

**Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia**

**Prof. Sarbani Banerjee**

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee**

**Lecture 18**

**Sufi Tradition IV**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, we are discussing Sufi tradition. Today we are going to talk about the different confluences between Sufism and the Bhakti tradition. We have already talked about some of the commonalities, the common points and the exchanges that happened after Sufism arrived in South Asia. We will continue with that discussion. So, we see that Sufism has had different kinds of relationship with core Islam.

Even though Quran says whichever way you turn there is the face of Allah, it possibly cannot contain a figurative rendition of a sensuous personal god, a god that can be perceived through senses, who is a compassionate and merciful Rahim or Rahman. So, in fact Mirza Ghalib has very heretically written that either you let me drink inside the shrine, inside the mosque (which is completely shunned, alcoholism is completely shunned by Islam) and here Mirza Ghalib is saying that please let me sit in the mosque and drink or else show me a place where Khuda is not present. They were implying that God is not only restricted to the shrines, but is everywhere, is all-pervading, right. And these were considered as very radical and absolutely objectionable by the core Islamists.

So, the complete submission of the devotee is shown, where devotee is taking up a feminine persona, who is full of social impediments and who is traumatized by an inhibited erotica and a lack of mobility against or juxtaposed with the aggressive male lover or Allah who is traditionally authoritarian in this lover-beloved relationship. So, God as the male lover, devotee as the feminine persona, the beloved. And in so many poems by Rumi, by Amir Khusrow, by Mirza Khalib, we find this imagery, this metaphor coming back of the Shama Parwana, of the Gul and Bulbul, right. And these all have Sufi undertones in them. So, here the Sufi singer becomes the agent of the discourse.

So the feminized self becomes central and it speaks from within the poetic domain, and the erotica is the discursive agency. Sufi self constantly and recurrently identifies the devotee's merged non-existent presence within Allah during the nascent or since the nascent state that goes back even before the creation. So, "na hota mein to kya hota," just going back, "kuchh na tha to khuda tha, kuchh na hota to khuda hota, duboya mujhko hone ne nahota mein to kya hota?" This is also a very famous, you know, verse. These are some of the very important memorable works that we can remember when we talk of Sufi poetry.

"Ye zameen jab na thi ye jaha jabna tha." It is a retrospecting, it is going back to the purest form where this "I-thou" bifurcation or dichotomy was not there, the subject-object difference was not there. The devotee was merged and was inseparable from Allah, right? And so this entire life process is seen as a separation from that pure state, right? And through attaining certain stages such as fana or self annihilation, one can momentarily go back to that feeling of union with Allah or the God. It is a common stock image or motif of the Sufis to show the soul as the light, the light of a candle which is separated from the larger source of light by the physical body. Once the ephemeral body, this material, you know, the body, the material body, the body as a matter disappears, this soul, individual soul which is a smaller light will merge into the larger light, the ever-present light which is the God, the Almighty.

So the body actually is the obstacle, the impediment and it needs to be forsaken, it needs to go. So this metaphor or this image is highly akin to the Upanishadic concept of Brahman and its manifestation as a shadow in individual souls. What does Upanishad say? It says that the Brahman is like.. or the great soul, the transcendental soul is like a moon and in each creature is like a pot full of water and so the reflection of moon is in all these pots but none of them is the God, the God is the real moon. We, all these creatures, larger and smaller creatures are its reflection. So all of these creatures are its reflection.

The Quranic teachings are not very different from what the Sufi's teach. This is something I have been, you know, stating since our previous lectures, and even they talk of a reunion with God. Oneness of Islam or the concept of Tawhid says that Allah is the only God, right? La ilaha illallah, which means Allah is the only God and Muhammad is his Rasul or Prophet. So they want to destroy this incommensurable gap between God and one's own self and in this journey of reunion with God, self-knowledge becomes the first step, the first step towards transcending the mortal conditions of birth and death. And

this is something we find everywhere, even in Buddhist teachings, right? Self-knowledge, what does Buddha say? Atma Deep Bhava, Atma Swaran Bhava.

So Atma Deep Bhava, Atma Swaran Bhava, you become your own light, you recourse to yourself for knowledge. And what does Bulleh Shah say? Bulleh Shah sings, Bullah ki jana mai kaun? Does Bulleh Shah himself know who Bulleh Shah is? So through undertaking a journey of quest, the knowledge of God is also fulfilled. Through knowing oneself one can know God. Just as the Bhakti cult has vernacularized and revisited the Sanskritized phrases and made them massy via Prakrits, made them more populist, more plebeian via, you know, deployment of the Prakrit language, here the Sufi cult has also vulgarized the Shariati phrases, so they are understood by the common man.

Bhakti is a movement 'from below' just like Sufi is also a movement originating from the grassroots and they are making Shariah simplified and understandable and accessible to the common masses. They have a massy and populist appeal. So the concept of Tasawwuf, Tasawwuf means Islamic mysticism, which deals with Sufi philosophy's spiritual alchemy of heart. While early Sufi was not very different from Islam, it had originated from Islam, we see that by the time it travels to South Asia, its South Asian experience undergoes a shift from its origination, from its provenance. It functions like Upanishad, that is a continuation of Veda, but has a modified exposition, a diverse potential from that of the classical age.

Sufism had first commenced in the Arabic peninsular. We have talked about its origin in Iraq, in Egypt and later it had proliferated to Persia which is present-day Iran, to Turkey, the Mediterranean and to Europe. Sufi has a metaphor of 'safar'. So there are different critics that understand the etymological root of the word Sufi in different ways. Some critics understand that the word Sufi means 'wool' and there was a practice among the Sufis to wear woolen clothes.

On the other hand, Sufi has this metaphorical connection with 'safar' or journey, a process of assimilating knowledge through ideological, spiritual and social interaction with different communities and with other religions, and subsequently modifying one's own dogmas according to the geographical influence, according to the local influence, thereby redeeming or thereby becoming more flexible from the static Quranic framework. Quran is more rigid, it is more codified. Sufism travels, it has a metaphor of 'safar'. Wherever it

goes, it picks up and absorbs the local influence, the local essence and it modifies accordingly. This is manifest in Amir Khusrow's songs, such as 'Mohe Rang De Basanti' or 'Suhani Suratiya Mohani Muratiya', which are explicitly hinting at the popular Indian icon of Krishna and a highly celebrated festival in India, not only India but in entire South Asia, the festival of Holi and the saffron colour used in it.

Saffron colour is also the colour very frequently referred or associated with Bhakti. So we see that Bhakti and Sufi are growing and expanding very parallelly, they are interweaved into each other, they are influencing each other very beautifully in the South Asian context. Sufis had generally forsaken the elite etiquettes and they lived in poverty, they enjoyed living in poverty. So, they believed in the 'safa' of the spirit, 'safa' or cleanliness of the spirit than the outward cleanliness and showiness. Their sense of purification was not pertaining to their garments, of clean garments or Jama-i-Suf, but an inner refined soul, the safa or the cleanliness of the soul because this body is perishable, it is impermanent and has to undergo different levels of penance; it should not be unnecessarily mollicoddled, it should be inured to the inclement.. to the harsh conditions.

So according to the Sufis, “He who is purified by love is Safi and he who is purified by beloved a Sufi.” Al-Hijuri is a saint who came to Sindh in the 8th century and from him culminated an organized concrete form of Sufi education in the Sindh region. Islam as we see in history has been a military expansion whose proliferation as socio-political and religious dimensions took place under the rule of the Umayyad Caliphate, and so it was a hardcore Quran based consolidated preaching and teaching that denoted spreading of the Islamite culture. It was a very codified and a very strict and kind of rigid module or structure within which Islam was proliferating itself. On the other hand, Sufi was a marginalized fluid entity that was apolitical in nature belonging to the shatter or the liminal zone and which could not affiliate necessarily with any autonomous practice, and it became part of the diaspora where it reached; wherever Sufism reached it picked up from the local essence.

So their practices were concentrated at the Dargah and the Khanqah, and this concept of Dargah and Khanqah is very similar to the concept of Akhada in Vaishnavism, the Vaishnava Akhada. So there is a Gharana and a preceptor and this Gurushishya or the disciple and the mentor relationship is, you know, kind of defines these spaces. Sufis say that man is part of God Himself, whom He has separated from His Being in order to create an amorous companion with whom he can play the game of love, right? God separated human from him in order to play an amorous game. This is exactly what we

find in Vaishnava Padabali, where one says that Radha is not actually separated from Krishna.

Radha and Krishna are one and the same. Krishna made Radha, you know, as an extension of himself. He made her as a separation from himself so that he can involve in amorous acts with his feminine counterpart. So Radha is not any different from Krishna, just like the devotees are not different from God. They have been separated so this game of life, the amorous sport can go on.

One can connect Sufi concept of rapture with the frenzied Bhakti Rasa that emanates from.. that reflects in Mirabai's Bhajan. So the movement of Sufis we can see, it emulates a cosmic movement, a circular movement and this ecstasy, this madness is present very much in Mirabai's Bhajan. "Aisi lagi lagan Mira ho gayi magan, wo to gali gali Hari gun gane lagi." So Mira was so, you know, so engrossed, she became so ecstatic, she went from place to place singing the song of Hari, praising Hari, Hari referring to Lord Krishna. So this same kind of ecstasy and madness is present in both Bhakti and Sufi cults.

So the circular movement of the Sufis emulate the cosmic motion and it designates oneself as a link between the ethereal and the ephemeral worlds. We see that Sufis usually put one hand towards the heaven or towards.. one hand upwards and the other towards, you know, showing downwards. So we see that Sufi dance form commonly involves putting one hand skywards and one hand towards the earth. It symbolizes that the human body is a connection, a juncture between the celestial or the cosmic and the earthly. The human has both the possibilities, the human is a liaison between the cosmic and the ephemeral, the ethereal and the ephemeral.

Persian Sufi saint, Al-Hallaj says "Anal-Haqq", which means "I am he". It is radical and in the Islamist tradition it is a dangerous thing to say, "I am he", right? When you say that you are referring to a personal god that has tactile characteristics, you know, a physical form just like humans, and this is something completely shunned by Islam. God cannot have any form. So "Anal-Haqq" or "I am he" signifies that only with self-knowledge may one attain the knowledge of God. Symbolically it means that, you know, I am trying to know myself and through myself, through my own agency, I am trying to know God.

But at the same time, like I said, it is a very radical thing to say. So it can be interpreted in very many ways. It is a subversive statement that vilifies Quranic faith. So many Sufis towards the initial phase were executed by royal, you know, authorities and Al-Hallaj was one of the martyrs who was executed for saying “Anal-Haqq”, I am he.

Sufism also talks about Dhikr. Dhikr is an involuntary reflexive process and a practice to forget one's self. Dhikr means repetition or rotting of the name of God, rotting of the name of Allah. This is very similar to the process, to the practice of Naam Sankirtan among the Vaishnavs or Naam Gaan, among the, you know, different sects of Hindus, which elevates one's spirit above the mundane conditions, above the mundane bonds and triviality, right? So what is an ideal Dhikr? In the end, Shibli would say: “True Dhikr is instrumental in forgetting your Dhikr.” When you are doing the Dhikr in a very concentrated, in a very immersed fashion, you would even forget the fact that you are doing Dhikr, you are... the process of doing Dhikr, you are so immersed into it.

So such self-effacement is found in Bulleh Shah's following song on, you know, Heer Ranjha. So Heer Ranjha's, you know, fable or lore has found its presence repetitively in so many Sufi songs. So the Sufis from the northern and the northwestern part of India have traditionally been, you know, inspired by the lore, by the romance of Heer and Ranjha that has become a kind of a legendary presence and found its prominent space in Sufi repertoire. So what does Bulleh Shah write? He writes, “Ranjha ranjha kardi ni mai aphi ranjha hoi”. So Heer has repeated the name of Ranjha so many times that.. to an extent that Heer has become Ranjha, the difference between Heer and Ranjha has effaced.

And this is parallel to Vidyapati's line in Bhakti tradition. What does Vidyapati say? “Anukhan Madhab Madhab Snharite Sundari bhaili Madhab”. So Anukhan.. constantly taking Madhav's name, sundari (referring to Radha) has become Madhav. [Sundari/Radha] and Madhav are one and the same, their entities are no longer different, just like Heer has become Ranjha.

That is the kind of self-effacement. So we see that both Sufi and Bhakti are harping a lot on man-woman love relationship. They are drawing a lot on the local, you know, folklorist traditions, on the local ballads and legends and lores. But all these love stories,

stories of romance between Heer and Ranjha, Radha and Krishna, they go on to, you know, signify something higher to the love between man and woman; goes on to become the love between God and devotee. That is the ultimate meaning these songs, these lyrics are striving for. The mundane love being elevated to the level of ethereal love, the love that stays forever, the permanent love.

Another way of performing is Sama. I have already talked about Sama in my previous lecture, Sama comprising auditory experience of music, the sensory, you know, immersion in music in a "majlis". Then there is also the concept of Nazr among the Sufis. Nazr meaning the concept of eye contact.

I have also talked about this. "Dekhu rang bhari" is something that Sufi poems, you know, keep talking about, perceiving that rang.. internalizing that rang, rang of the God, color of the God, which endows one with an active religious agency. So, in one of the Sufi songs, it begins like this, "apni chhavi leke mai pike paas gayi, piyu ki chhavi dekhi to apni bhul gayi." So when I took my own image and went to my lover, once I saw his, you know, image or color, I had just given up..I have given up my own color, my own separate identity. I am no longer a separate color or separate identity from that of my Lord.

I have merged into him, right? So, "apni chhavi".. there is no such individual apni chhavi anymore. Once I have seen his "chhavi", we have merged into one another, right? Such engagement creates a mystic ecstasy. In South Asian context, the Sufi mystic renditions of ghazals show a gender reversal in the aesthetics, where the speaking subject of desire is male and the passive desired object is a female, who is being unveiled. So both are present in the.. in the Sufi, you know, aesthetics.

On the one hand, you know, the singer is a devotee, the feminized voice who wants to meet the aggressive male lover that God is. On the other hand, we see that the passive desired object is a female, signifying the God who is to be unveiled, right? So, what is this veil? Rumi says that veil is a notion of the unattainable, a cover over self-knowledge. So therein lies one's understanding of God. The ethereal conditions, the material conditions put a veil on our self-knowledge and so to resolve the difference within one's self, this veil needs to be removed.

The God that is present in us needs to be discovered, needs to be revealed and we need to remove the veil thereby. That is the symbol of veil, the bride that is covered by the veil. This image keeps coming back in so many Sufi poems. The younger generations of Sufi wanted aesthetic and literary means rather than only philosophy, and so they conglomerated Perso-Arabic expressions with the local Hindustani idioms, and that is when new forms and new performances are coming up. Very interesting amalgamations happen once Sufi travels and enters South Asia.

The change in gender context is realized through the mythical reference of Zuleikha. Zuleikha, who is the queen of Egypt and who is enamored by her slave Yusuf and unveils him to realize erotic ecstasy. So female that is unveiling a male, that kind of gender reversal, role reversal is also available in Sufi poetry. When the Sufi cult enters India in and after 12th century onwards, there were some popular traditions of Jayadeva's Gita Govinda and the local romance and ballads such as Heer Ranjha and Laila Majnu already existing in the society, which deal with the concept of paramour love relations, the concept of Avisar, right? Loving the "other man". Instead of introducing alien experiences, we see Sufi saints like Baba Farid and Bulleh Shah using the local stock themes, which are already involved and inveterate in the common folk's psyche.

So, Indianized Sufi draws deeply upon the sub-generic repertoire of Viraha and from there we have the songs, such as a very famous popular song Aaj jane ki Zid na karo, always you know counting on and anticipating some kind of separation, an impending separation between lover and beloved. Like Radha Krishna's unsanctioned nocturnal tryst, these themes overcome mundane institutional married love and thereby we have a very popular song which has had many renditions by different, you know, musicians including Abida Parveen, Runa Laila among others, right, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.. they are all singing this song, "Chhaap Tilak Sab Chheeni Re Mose Naina Milaike," which refers to abandoning of all signifiers that root one to social belongingness, thereby facilitating the process of union with the lover. And in the song we have certain lines, certain you know lyrics that mark the fervid emotions. "Mora Jauban Girvi Rakhlay Khwajaji", which is dedicated to the Murshid, Murshid literally meaning teacher and metaphorically referring to the god. So, the devotee is saying- you keep my "jauban", my youth to yourself.. "girvi rakhlay", right? I am just keeping it as a treasure to you, khwajaji, my teacher.

"Main to Piya Se Naina Lara ayee re" shows the god and devotee on the same platform. So, there is no hierarchy and given an equivalence of expression the beloved activates her voice. So, the beloved also has an agency, she is an abhisarika, she has abandoned social



mores and concepts of social prestige, she has gone on to you know make eye contact with the lover, return the gaze. This is very similar to the concept of chakshudan, you know, the rendering of eye to the idol in the Hindu tradition where the eyes of any deity, of any idol is you know painted last. And once the artist paints the eyes of the god, the artist is you know symbolically rendering vision, you know, offering vision to the deity.

And with that vision who will the deity see for the first time? The first thing or the first person that the deity sees is the artist. So both are happening, both are existing because of each other. The god exists because of the human that has created him and vice versa. It is like the devotee and the devoted being on the same platform, the hierarchy is completely gone. So, one of the songs by Khusrow where Perso-Arabic merges with Brajbuli is- “ze-hāl-e-miskīñ makun tağhāful durā.e naināñ banā.e batiyāñ”,

It shows how Sufism has become a part and parcel of Indian thought and practice, using frequently the metaphor of Holi, Vidai and even the domestic chores such as spinning of a charkha. So, Bulleh Shah's poem says, “Tere Ishq ne nachaya karke thaiya thaiya,” where Ishq becomes an active agent whereas the process of dancing or nach is a predictive move, invoking the body and emanating you know aesthetic relevance and merging aesthetic you know movements with spirituality. Bulleh Shah makes a confluence of Sufism with Indian images, where the reference to Gafur, a Quranic figure keeps coming back which is very parallel with Krishna. Both are you know very similar. The figure of Gafur as one of the characters, the Quranic figure, and the cowboy you know character Krishna who is an icon in the Indian context, a popular icon.

So Bulleh Shah's concept of Anagak coalesces with the Nirgun Upanishad whereas the concepts of Omkar and Dam are both very similar to Tantric Buddhism. The blasphemous Bulleh Shah subjugates the idea of pilgrimage, of you know going to Mecca, Madina, Kabbalah or Killah and he says that all these pilgrimages are you know complemented and completed by the overwhelming experience of Ishq. In the experience of love, Makkah, Madina, you know Kabakilla, everything ends there. Ishq is holier and more elevated than all you know pilgrimage. Sufi's intense realization shuns ostentatious and showy practices, and outgrows the scholastic claims converging upon oneself and self-knowledge and today I would like to end my lecture with the following lines by Mirza Ghalib.

So what does Ghalib say? "hastī hamārī apnī fanā par dalīl hai, yaañ tak miTe ki aap ham apnī qasam hue". The subject-object gap, this bifurcation is completely gone. So through self-knowledge I am attaining the knowledge of God. The God is not to be found in any pilgrimage, the God is only to be found through self-knowledge and through one's you know experience of love. With this I am going to end our lecture here today and let us meet with another round of discussions in our next lecture. Thank you. Thank you.