

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 19

Bhakti Mysticism and Poetics I

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, today we are going to discuss Bhakti Mysticism and Poetics. This is a new module that we are starting today. We need to understand what mysticism is. Before we start talking about Bhakti Mysticism, the central philosophy in the Bhakti movement, we need to understand how we can define mysticism and how mysticism has been defined by different scholars. So, we see Otto Pflieiderer defines mysticism as the immediate feeling of the unity of the self with God.

It is the fundamental feeling of religion with the religious life at its heart or core. So, what makes the mystical special is its proclivity or inclination towards immediacy of the life in God, regardless of or removed from all intervening channels and thereby finding a permanent abode in the abstract inwardness of life of pious feeling. On the other hand, we see Edward Caird defines mysticism as religion in its most concentrated and exclusive form. So, Caird sees mysticism as that attitude of mind in which all other relations are swallowed or engulfed in the relation of the soul with the God.

Here P. Hodgson understands spirituality as, I quote Hodgson here, “both concretely figured and open to new possibilities” (2004 139, quoted in Malinowski 2013 12). Roger Gottlieb says that spirituality could be an agnostic or metaphorical attitude towards the metaphysical claims of traditional religions. In contrast to such different definitions of spirituality, Diarmuid O'Murchu defines religion as an experience at a more established stage of spirituality. So, while spirituality could be seen as something more discursive, something less formed and hence the concept of being institutionalized is less associated with the idea of spirituality, whereas religion is as O'Murchu understands, spirituality at a more established stage, it is you know something more concretized, something that has become an institution, something that is more definitive and more prescriptive.

At a more mature stage, spirituality goes on to become a more definitive religion. So, it is formalized and structured and based on dogmas, codes of ethics and ritual elements. So, the journey of spirituality towards becoming religion happens through addition of you know, priestly interventions for example, and then addition of different codes of ethics and ritual elements. So, we understand that by the time spirituality becomes religion, its discursive nature becomes more concretized, it kind of becomes a social prescription, it has all the normative codes for laying out a society. And so, religion often expurgates the animistic qualities that are usually symptomatic of spirituality.

So, animism is expunged and there is a more refinedness or a more codified structure imposed and that is how spirituality becomes a recognized religion. Now, several mainstream schools of theologians and philosophers are hostile towards the mystics. To believe that the vision of God can be attained without priestly intervention and the fact that sacraments or rituals are not essential and also that spiritual experience is a surer basis of faith rather than ecclesiastical or priestly authority is to strike at the root of religion as an institution. So basically, spirituality renders an individual practitioner with greater freedom, whereas religion is a way, religion comes from "religãre", Latin word which means to combine, to bring together. So, it is a binding mechanism, it brings the society together, it is a glue for disciplining the society, it is a disciplining mechanism.

So, that is lacking in spirituality; in spirituality there is more individual freedom and so religion is not happy with mystics, you know, celebrating their own agency and trying to realize God without any priestly intervention. Indian mystics find the experience of ecstasy or rapture as very pleasurable and this is the case with mystics the world over. So the mystics employ different kinds of addictive sources such as hashish, alcohol and mescal in order to attain a state of being that is possessed by supernatural spirits. And this is also true for the indigenous groups in different parts of the world where they claim to attain some kind of vision, you know, dream quest or vision after taking some form of alcohol or after smoking some weeds, right. So being possessed by spirit happens simultaneously with.. through these addictive measures, through consuming alcohol or smoking weeds.

And the dances by the dervishes and, you know, mystics from other groups produce collective excitement, leading to exhaustion and even loss of consciousness. So mysticism is not weakness but an intense concentration of one's will. According to Roger

Bastide, mysticism is not a dissociation as much as it is creation of a new ego. So with mysticism we do not lose our ego but we develop an alternate source or an alternate ego that we discover, and so with mysticism we do not entirely lose our ego but we disassociate or discover our ego in an alternate way. So mysticism is essentially ontological and a mystic aspires to the vision of God and believes that this vision is within his reach.

If his quest is not met, the mystic will consider the entire life as a delusion. So the mystic's life is basically a search for God and unless that realization happens the rest of the life is considered as futile. So the mystic rises to the contemplation of the absolute through basically two parts. One is through the path of dialectic and the other is through the empirical path, the path of experience. So the path of dialectic has more to do with you know learning, imbibing the theoretical aspects of religion and theology, whereas the part of experience or praxis is you know through first-hand experience, through first-hand knowledge that one gains from one's everyday life, mundane existence.

So mysticism is marginalized in the study of sociology or social aspects of religion and this is because the ones that look at the social dimensions of religion, the impact of religion on the society see the mystics as asocial or antisocial people, right? The social reformers look at mystics as dropouts and their practices as a form of egoism and escapism from the social realities and the problems, the issues that the society posits. So similarly we see that the mystics also express their contempt and displeasure, general displeasure with the society. Yoga's first step on the mystic path is vairagya, right? So detachment and renunciation is generally the path that a mystic follows and that is how, that is why the social reformers or the ones that are working on the social aspects of religion, the practical aspects of religion frown at the mystics because they apparently escape from the questions posed by the society, the life questions posed by the society. So Hinduism's ideal results from a synthesis of two opposing paths, the path of asceticism and that of society and social responsibilities. So sannyasa is advocated only for those that have gone through the entire gamut of social responsibility or dharma.

So basically according to the four ashrams in which early Vedic life divides human life, we have the brahmacharya and then garhastha followed by vanaprastha and finally sannyasa, one that has gone through all these stages, the previous stages can attain or can step into the life of the sannyasi. One cannot automatically become a sannyasi without experiencing the life of a scholar, the life of a householder and then a renouncer and finally an ascetic. So a mystic is also blamed for not contributing directly to the solution

of the social problems and this is something we have been talking about just now. So the society poses its own problematics, its own issues to which a reformer needs to respond, a mystic usually escapes from this process of engaging with the society. From here we move to the idea of advaitic mysticism of Sankara.

So what does Sankara say? Sankara talks about, you know, avidya and then he talks about the brahmanubhava. Let us take them up one by one. So experience in its empirical sense is not possible without a distinction between the knower and the known and therefore it involves the activity of knowing. From ignorance we move towards knowledge, from darkness we move towards life. Knowledge or the experience of knowing is a journey.

Knowing cannot be immediate and you know available at once, there has to be a journey undertaken in order for someone to know something. So in the absence of either the knower or the known, empirical experience is not possible. If there is nothing to know, how will knowledge be formed? If everything is known from beforehand and there is nothing further left to know, then how can knowledge happen even? So knower and known are based on ignorance which Sankara would call as avidya. So absolute oneness precludes the possibility of either knowing others or being known by others and this is where duality comes, importance of dualism. And that is where the Sagun school of Bhakti is also coming from.

In order to know himself, Krishna is, you know, bifurcating his identity into two ephemeral beings, he is becoming Krishna and Radha through the amorous play, you know, through this way of one part getting to know the other, Radha and Krishna getting to know one another, the God also attains knowledge of himself. So as pure Brahman there is nothing further to know, the knowledge is already encapsulated within Brahman. So absolute oneness or Advaita does not entail, does not, you know, involve further process of knowing. This process of knowing, this, you know, sort of engagement is only possible where there is a knower and there is something to know, there is a duality. So the absolute oneself, the absolute self which is a state of pure consciousness cannot be differentiated into subject and object as long as there is a duality, there is a scope for experiment, there is a scope for play, there is a scope for discourse and knowledge emerges through this discourse.

It could be amorous act, it could be even rivalrous relationship where the God is born as Rama and as his enemy we have the figure of Ravana. Discourse happens even through conflict or through amorous play but when everything is merged into the absolute one there can be no possibility of further knowledge. So multiplicity or duality is necessary for creation of knowledge, for the activity of knowing. So unlike empirical experience which is based on ignorance, Brahmanubhava is absolutely free from ignorance. So Brahmanubhava as a concept is opposed to the idea of Avidya.

Knowledge in its empirical sense is relative and therefore transitory, it originates and vanishes along with the objects known. So knowledge itself is in a state of flux, there is no such thing called absolute knowledge. Knowledge is contingent on a number of different factors. So depending on the subject and the object the nature of the knowledge also changes. On the other hand Brahmanubhava is timeless, there is nothing transitory or nothing left to be known, nothing further to be changed in Brahmanubhava and so it is timeless, it is uncaused.

There is nothing that can alter Brahmanubhava through a chain of cause and effect, through causality for it is of the nature of Brahman. It precedes gender, it precedes knowledge, it precedes causality and it precedes dualism. Now Brahmanubhava is immediate and direct. Knowledge is a process from Avidya to Vidya, from ignorance to enlightenment, whereas Brahmanubhava is you know almost an omniscience idea.

The idea of Brahmanubhava points to omniscience at once, it is immediate and direct. Its attainment is neither through the mediation of the senses, it is beyond sensory mediation and it is also beyond and over and above the involvement of the mind. So it does not entail the minds, it does not entail you know the effort for the mind to know, nor is it in any sense indirect. It is at once, it has always been there, it is timeless. It is not attained through effort, right? It is not mediated.

In other words, it cannot be attained through mediation of our five senses and our consciousness or mind. It exists regardless of our senses and mind. So Brahmanubhava is ineffable. We cannot explain it adequately in words because its description is impossible as it is unperceivable, in other words, atindriya and unthinkable or achintam; language fails to encapsulate, to contain and describe it.

According to the Upanishads, Brahman is the truth or satyam, knowledge or jnanam and infinitude or anantham. Every kind of meaning or mediation on Brahman is therefore superimposed and secondary, it is second-hand and derivative. Brahman is its own explanation. Brahman bears its own knowledge, you know, a commentary on Brahman or an explanation of Brahman is still secondary and derivative to the existence of Brahman itself.

Now, devotion or bhakti can be used in realizing Brahman, which makes emotions as valuable. So, while realization of superimposed differences can be understood as unreal and everything can be realized as one or unified with the Brahman, at the same time we must understand that the disappearance of plurality is also, it has its own problematics. So, one can have emotions like love and affection even after realizing Brahman through plurality or dualism. So, we have, when talking about bhakti, we have realized that bhakti envisions God as a loving God, a God that can be loved through madhyurya, through dasyabhava, through sakhyabhava and so forth; that would not be possible without plurality or dualism. Sankar describes the following emotions belonging to the brahmagyani, the feeling of love or rati, affection or ramanam, play or kriya and the enjoyment of company or midhunam, right.

So, all these things are once again directing towards the sagun bhakti, right. How can one love and play with the shadow of one's mind? for that duality is important. God dividing himself into two parts becomes an imperative. God can be known either indirectly through scriptures or directly through the mystic experiences. So, the bhakti movement is a ubiquitous cultural movement that manifested itself in different kinds of cultural expressions including religion, philosophy, language, art and literature.

The development of the bhakti movement started in the southern part of India between 7th and 9th centuries and later it spread to Karnataka and Maharashtra and reached the northern parts of India in the 15th century. In fact, this is a pan-Indian uprising of the people's culture against the existing feudal system. This movement, the bhakti movement arose from some substantial transformation events in the 11th and 12th centuries when separate castes emerged and regional languages and literatures were formed. So, the bhakti movement accelerated the development of diverse regional languages laying the groundwork for the establishment of modern Indian languages. Apart from Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and Apabhrahmsa, literatures in regional languages entered into a new phase of growth and development during the bhakti movement.

Consequently, Indian literature and culture broke the shackles of feudalism and they were heading towards a more creative and a more inclusionary people's culture, a more plebeian culture. Bhakti poetry free of the formality of old poetics, feudalism as well as the general courtly milieu is a reflection of the masses' culture, the mass culture, the common people's emotions expressed through their own languages. So, cultural awareness, ideals and sensitivities are exhibited in a very prominent manner in the bhakti movement and the literature produced by the bhakti poets and bhakti artists are more directly tied to the contemporary culture, the local cultures and society rather than having their loyalty tied to old Indian cultural and literary traditions. The essence of bhakti poetry stems from the experiences of common people and their culture. The oral tradition of village songs is the source of bhakti lyricism; its metrical forms are therefore similar to Hindi or we could say the local languages, it could be Hindi, it could be Kannada, it could be the Punjabi language.

So, the different regions where these bhakti saints, you know, start teaching their philosophy, we have these bhakti saints and philosophers emerging from different parts of the country and they are preaching in their own language. So there is a direct move away from dependence on Sanskrit. These local cultures, these local traditions, the regional languages have their own distinct flavor, flavors that are different from Sanskrit. So, bhakti poetry begins in the human voice and it is associated with orature, it is meant mainly to be spoken, sung and chanted rather than documented. However, the most significant fact is that for the first time in the history of Indian literature, the spoken language rather than scriptural expression began to move closer to poetic language in bhakti poetry.

So the courtly language, the contemplated language became, you know, redundant during this time. This is also because bhakti movement had at its heart a section of people who did not have access to literacy and they were composing more spontaneously. So they were composing out of their heart's joy, it was a pure joy that was transcribed into lyrics and such lyrics need not have loyalty to any kind of scriptural or courtly language, right? So the spoken language was at the heart of bhakti poetics and the bhakti movement rather than the written and classical style of expression. So spoken language had its greater importance during the bhakti movement over the classical style of writing and expressing.

Bhakti poetry and its documentation were preceded by oral culture, and so its natural habitat has always been performance. Bhakti is best expressed not through solitary reading of literature, not through contemplation, not through analysis of scriptures, but through spontaneous performance where, you know, so many kinds of ramifications, artistic additions and individual interpretations are possible, right? So when.. even when a listener is listening to a piece of art, they interpret it in their own way, that interpretation can also be considered as a performance. Now documentation misses out on the modulations in the singer's voice, for example. A documented work is a frozen work, not much can be done with it.

We cannot play around with documented work. The repetition of words and phrases cannot be aptly represented because of the distortions, right? So, there is a lot of the, the immediacy... so we see that immediacy is missing in any kind of documented work. The immediate effect, on the spur.. heightened moments of rapture cannot be produced, cannot be arrested through a documented work. Now, mystic folk traditions point to the possibility of a song's apparent meaning not being the most important aspect.

For example, yoga and tantra cultivate the paradox through inventing language within language. Charyapada has its composition entirely in a language called the sandhya bhasa, sandhya bhasa or the twilight language. So the language is layered, it is a twosome meaning, it says something at its surface and it refers to something else. It is a language full of symbols. So mystics are more interested in what a poem does rather than what it means.

Now, when we are focusing on the meaning of the poem, we are talking about deliberating or analyzing the intellectual part or aspect of the poetry or the art whereas what the poem does has more to do with its impact on the audience, right? What kind of effect it leaves in the audience's mind. So that entails a live recitation and hearing of the poem and its connecting with a state of consciousness, its collective experience, its shared experience in the mid of a larger audience. So, oral poetry is more open-ended. Someone that has listened to it can make manipulations and recite it again in a different manner, right? So, there can be as many writers as there are listeners of a given oral piece.

Every time someone re-recites it, they are rewriting it too. The oral culture is resistant to the process of Brahmanization of the lower caste poets by orthodox gurus and this is more because there are a lot of, you know, subcultures and localized cultures emerging from the so-called lower caste communities which are endangered through the process of Brahmanization. When mass Brahmanization happens, the heritages of the lower castes, their art forms, their practices are usually destroyed. With this, I am going to stop our lecture here today.

Let us continue our discussion in the next lecture. Thank you. Thank you.