

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 20

Bhakti Mysticism and Poetics II

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. We are discussing Bhakti mysticism and Poetics. So Bhakti poem models itself on local folk traditions and therefore, no two presentations of the same poem can sound the same. These poems have their oral quality, they are meant to be sung, they have a mellifluous quality and they are mostly accompanied by instruments. And so, we see that every time it is being recited the order or the images change according to the person reciting it. The narrative comes in a bright, sharp image through personal interjections.

So poems are not meant to be rote and reproduced verbatim. There is a lot of individual kind of agency or individual mediation by the poet involved while reciting the poem. So the rapturous moments are fully utilized. There are moments of interjections, of excesses, emotional excesses, and so Bhakti narratives when recited are not about mundane storytelling.

Contradictions are common in Bhakti poems and they owe their logic to dreams, trance, linguistic puzzles, reference to the uncanny and the supernatural and so forth. So meaning of Bhakti poem emerges through the poet's passion and involvement in the art of orally reproducing the narrative. Hence they are romantic in nature rather than classical. This is on life experiences over delicate reworking of known themes and therefore, this performance of reciting or enacting in any kind of narrative is more spontaneous rather than eloquent. It has less to do with the classical tradition, just harkening back from our previous lecture.

The words and music are rough and they have a rustic, earthy appeal. They are mainly in the vernacular, which is a way of foregoing the Sanskrit classical tradition. The Bhakti

poet creates a theatre of participants, pulling the listener into its world. Such a world is an alternative society governed primarily by love rather than law. So it is more a heart-centred rather than mind-centred performance and spontaneity becomes extremely valuable in such enactments.

Through dialogue, the reluctant audience is drawn into a relationship with the poet's alternative society. The poet creates a counterculture and a community of visionaries, who tend to live by the questions that are raised by the poem. So in other words, the performance is so live that we do not know when and how poetry or art flows into life and vice versa. So questions posed by the artform are carried into and are pondered or they play an important role in real life. They carry a significance in the real life.

They are not only restricted to the artificial or the created fictional art form. They are not restricted to the artform. The poem is an act of both body and spirit. The poem is lived bodily and spiritually. Like I was saying just now, it is not only a piece of fiction.

It is not only meant to be read mechanically and forgotten. It calls to attention the inseparability between the body and the spirit. This is very different from the western metaphysics that values the spirit or the mind over the body. The western metaphysics, the philosophers from the west like Rousseau have talked about the body being feminine whereas the mind being a site of rationality and therefore masculine and hence superior. In the Indic tradition, it is not like that.

We do not know where the body starts and the mind stops and vice versa. Dance is a potent technique of ecstasy and it is frequently central to all the Bhakti performances along with the full range of vocals which can include sighs, weeping, you know, a group of people weeping over a song or a poem full of pathos. That happens a lot when there is a Jatra performance or when in Ram Lila the scene of Ram's exile is being enacted. The audience actually emotes through a public act of weeping, a collective act of weeping. So, the responses are very very spontaneous in this regard.

Now, sexuality can be challenged through Bhakti poem. Its key element lies in raising the body to a state of vigilance or heightened sensitivity. Poets' language is meant to reach inside and make the vision available to the listener. Poems are neither didactic nor

descriptive nor expository. So, they are not, you know, carrying some kind of message or explaining morality to the people.

Their main aim is to transfer the listener to another state, onto another plane altogether. But the poets sing to a personalized God, a God that is realized through love once again, not through scriptures and rituals. And this God not only has a name but also a definite form. So this is a God as envisioned by the Sagun school, a God with, you know, very humanized attributes, a God that is figurative. Contrarily, the Nirgun school refers to truth that is free of attributes, quality or descriptions.

Rather than tracing the historicity, a Bhakti poet's life is understood through the prism of received traditions and legends. In other words, instead of tracing the authenticity of the poems, when we look at a Bhakti poem, rather than tracing its historicity, sometimes there is no way of doing that, for example, of knowing the actual date in which it has been composed. The readers have to rather accept the poem prima facie or its face value according to the poet's name as it appears in the bhanita, the poet's name that is undersigned, right? We have no way of going back and knowing who has actually originally composed it. So we have to understand that it is composed by Guru Nanak or Kabir or Mirabai because it has a line in the end saying Mira kahe or kahat Kabir, something like that. It is called bhanita.

So drawing on the conventional medieval lyric poetry, bhanita comprises the signature of the poet. It consists of words such as 'Nanak says', 'Kabir says', or there is an interjection such as 'O Tulsi!' adding an element of personal witness to the verses and at the same time reminding the audience of an overarching design in which the narrative is set, the overarching design within which the narrative happens, right? So bhanita is a moment where the poet that is composing it is standing outside of the poem, right? In the, usually in the last line it is like the poet says remember the name of god or something like that, that is bhanita. So bhakti poets were inspired and dedicated to the feeling of common welfare, their experiences and literary approaches were grounded in mundane ordinary life and reality. The poetry grew out of the popular culture and this culture then became the preserver of bhakti poetry. Bhakti poets and bhakti art forms are largely dependent on the masses, and they represent the emergence of a mass culture and even a counterculture that resists the existing feudalism.

Expressing defiance against the king's rule as well as the feudal system, the bhakti poets would often declare what has saints to do with Sikri. So 'santan ko kaha sikri se kam.' So the narratives of Krishna and Rama, which Surdas and Tulsidas allude as the foundation for their poetic creation, are based on an idealized tradition of Sanskrit and they draw on figures that are well-known in public life. So they are writing for example about Rama, their own different renditions of Ramayana, whereas Ramayana by the time they are writing is already a very popular piece of work. It's a work that has been written in different ways, in different parts of India.

We have already talked about this. Ramayana is one text that has been.. so Ramayana is a text that has undergone so many different kinds of experimentations in the different parts, not only of India but also in Southeast Asia. So it has so many different versions. The heroes of these tales are usually courageous men that rebel against injustice and exploitative forces. So once again coming back to the figure of Rama, celebration of Rama is basically celebration of Dharma.

The anti-feudalist conscience of Bhakti poets has found expression in the form of human connection and feelings portrayed through their works. So for example in Surdas's poetry, Krishna's affection for Radha and for the other Gopis is free of feudal moral standards. The notion of unrestrained love for a married woman is the love of a paramour. It is not socially speaking the correct thing to do. And so we see that Bhakti is not always very didactic in nature.

Bhakti arts are not meant to preach. What is at its heart is celebration of love. So the notion of unrestrained love and its depiction in the form of human interactions run counter to the feudal view of marriage or sectarian parochialism. Bhakti is aiming at celebrating love rather than preach right from wrong. Bhakti is a heart-centred religion which liberates people from the constraints of caste, class, race as well as religion and also from the fear of all types of ruling authority.

So Bhakti poetry unites all kinds of opposing tendencies. This is something I have mentioned in one of my previous lectures. Bhakti is a kind of umbrella tendency or an umbrella movement where the Vaishnavites and the Saguns somewhere coalesce with the Saivites or the Nirgun saints. It even engages with the offshoots of other religions

such as the Sufi cult. Love takes a wide variety of forms in the different writings by the different Bhakti poets such as Kabir Das, Malik Muhammad Jayasi, Surdas and Mirabai.

And despite their apparent differences in tone and form, the underlying feeling is almost the same. Now from here we are going to move into our new topic today which is Tulsidas's Ram Charit Manas. Ram Charit Manas is a quintessential work by Tulsidas and it needs detailed discussion when talking about Bhakti tradition. It is one of the most important works produced during this movement, the Bhakti movement. Ram Charit Manas is composed by Goswami Tulsidas in the 16th century AD in Awadhi dialect of Hindi.

The word Ram Charit Manas refers to the lakes of deeds of Rama. The entire story consists of poems narrated in a mellifluous style. It is a narration by Lord Shiva to Goddess Parvati. So the word Manas, Manas means lake, it refers to the lake conceived in the mind of Shiva that he is communicating to Parvati. So Valmiki originally wrote the Ramayana in Sanskrit sometime between 1500 and 500 BC.

The exact date of the book's production is not known. On the other hand, we see that although Tulsidas is a very learned scholar of Sanskrit, he chooses to write his version of Ramayana, that is Ram Charit Manas in Awadhi in order to tell the tale of Rama, a great hero in a local language and make this great piece of work, this masterpiece available to the masses. Awadhi at the time of Tulsidas was the language used in general parlance. It was the dialect of the common people. It was the dialect of the common people in major parts of central and northern India.

Sanskrit, on the other hand, was then used and understood only by the scholars and the upper-class people. At that time, many Sanskrit scholars had lambasted or criticized Tulsidas for reproducing a work of such brilliance in a vernacular language. They expected it to be created in Sanskrit. However, Tulsidas remained firm in his purpose of simplifying the great knowledge contained in the stories of Valmiki's Ramayana. Through Ram Charit Manas, the story of Rama spread wide and large in the northern India and it was celebrated with even more participation from the local crowd.

According to an Irish administrator in British India named John Grierson, for the missionaries to understand the natives of northern India, reading Tulsidas's Ram Charit Manas was imperative. So that is how important Ram Charit Manas is, we understand. While the Indologists read the Sanskrit classics, for the administrators to understand the sentiments of the common people, to understand the standards of their moral conduct, to understand the values of both the learned and the unlearned masses, reading the Manas was very important. It was a way of learning the everyday lives of the ordinary people in India, how the people in India live and think. Mahatma Gandhi called Ram Charit Manas as the greatest book of all devotional literature and according to many western scholars, it is the Bible of northern India.

The French writers also looked at it as the guide to the popular living faith of the Indians. Till way into the 19th century, one sees that the knowledge of Ram Charit Manas played as an important criteria of literacy for many aristocrats and landowning families and it is a qualifier for a marriageable girl's accomplishments. In Ram Charit Manas, the pictorial description of a lake is compared to the Manas, the mindscape, the mentalscape of Shiva. And we see the swans here symbolize wisdom and detachment, the fish symbolize various poetic devices, stylistic markers, whereas the surrounding forest of mango trees, the forest that surrounds the Manas, refer to assemblage of devotees. The prevailing spring season symbolizes the faith of the good people, the Santhajan or saints, and their faith beautifies the lake further.

And then we see that the seven cantos are the seven steps leading down from the bank into the lake. You know, journeying through these seven steps, we can actually get into the depth of the Manas. Now, the vindictive and lustful people have been compared to the crows and storks, but the Manas has no attraction for them in the form of frogs and snails, right? This is because the Manas does not narrate sensual stories. Sensual stories attract a lustful audience, a vindictive audience or people with negative traits, but the Manas is not the right text for them to read or witness. The Manas is mainly a work, you know, directed to the saintly audience.

So there are two frames of Ram Charit Manas, the larger frame being the dialogue happening between Shiv and Parvati and then within it there is the smaller frame comprising the story of Rama's life and his journey, right? Tulsi himself is outside of both these frames, both the frame of Shiv Parvati discourse and Rama's life. So the

performance of Manas serves both the formal or private communication as well as the affective dimensions of communication. It can be recited solitarily and there is a meditative purpose or reading associated with Manas as well as it can be enacted. Some costumed actors can perform it before a large crowd as it happens during the Ramlila performance, the Ramlila festival. So it can be used for solitary reading in a meditative manner as well as for a public performance.

So the ordinary speech associated with Ram Charit Manas emphasizes the prosaic or mundane usage of meter and rhyme in order to enhance the experience. So the experience reaches the common masses immediately, the impact on the audience is immediate and it adds a dramatized effect. This would not be possible if the language was synthetic, it was artificial; because the language is live, it touches the audience immediately. This expository manner greatly draws on Katha or Pravachan style. So Ramlila happens through the cooperative efforts of a large number of people.

We will discuss Ramlila elaborately in another module but it suffices for us to know that Ramlila involves people from all sections of the society. It is not, you know, concentrated to the upper class people or to people from a particular caste. It almost encompasses the entire society when it is, you know, performed, when it is celebrated in different parts of Northern India. Ram Charit Manas belongs to an era when the prose tradition was not very strong. Literacy was not widespread, only a handful would be literate and so there was hardly any technology for the mass dissemination of texts.

People would not be literate. So people barring a few would not be literate and there was no mechanism to disseminate the texts wide and large. And therefore, we understand that Manas is not a literature of reading. The fact that it was not meant to be read is mentioned a number of times in the text itself. It is more important for its aesthetic and religious appeals or qualities. The public recitation tradition in Ram Charit Manas is rooted to a strong Vaishnavite training.

A literature such as Manas has given birth to the profession of Ram Kathākāra as well as Hari Kathākāra. It is the profession of singers. Singers, artists, reciters and instrumentalists all at once, they hail from different class backgrounds as well as diverse educational trainings. So we can see that Manas in the Indian context is an institution in its own right.

It has given birth to new professions. It has become a source of livelihood. It has given birth to a very prominent festival such as Ramlila in North India. Now Tulsi is heavily drawing on and also contributing to the Hindu tradition. Ram Charit Manas can be considered as a reaffirmation of the Hindu tradition against the contemporary Muslim political rule that culminated in Akbar's universalist policy. In Sanskrit literature the term charit is used in biographies of religious figures.

We have seen a number of such works, for example, Buddhacarit by Asvaghose, as well as Harsacarit by Banabhatta. So they are biographies of different religious figures or great rulers and kings. So what do we mean by charit? Charit is the circle that inscribes someone's life. It is encompassing the journey of a prominent figure, a prominent persona. So Ram Charit means it is encompassing, it is inscribing in a circle the journey of Rama.

So in Ram Charit Manas Tulsi is capturing the orbit of Rama's journey like I was saying through the mortal world towards the infinite, his journey from being a mortal towards becoming a Purnavatar, a complete incarnation of Vishnu. Manas comes from the concept of man, meaning to think, imagine, cogitate, comprehend and perceive. Similar to the origin of Valmiki Ramayana's inception which happened through a triggering of a tragic emotion or shoka... I have already discussed how Valmiki Ramayana happened from an experience of shoka inside him, he is composing verses, Valmiki is composing verses also known as sloka.

Shoka gives birth to slok. Here Manas is also a metaphor of the mind in its highest state or highest aspect. Manas happens through a series of interwoven conversations, mainly a conversation, a discourse between Shiva and Parvati which can be seen as a simplified version of the narrative technique that has been used by Valmiki. So Ram Charit Manas is a more simplified, a more earthy and vernacularized version of the narrative technique that Valmiki has used. I will stop my lecture here today. We will continue with the discussion of Ram Charit Manas in our next lecture. Thank you very much.