

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture 21

Bhakti Mysticism and Poetics III

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. Today we are discussing Bhakti mysticism and Poetics in the light of Tulsidas's most prominent work Ram Charit Manas. This is in continuation from our previous lecture. So according to Tulsidas, we see a different rendition of Rama. So in Tulsidas's work, we see a different rendition of Rama, a different imagination of Rama, which is a continuation and yet, you know, a metamorphosis from how Valmiki had conceived Rama as a character, the central character in his Ramayana. So Tulsidas's Ram is a personal god and Ram Charit Manas attempts to define the principles of the religious significance of Ram in Hindu theology.

So this is a journey of Valmiki's Ram, the Prince Ram into becoming Lord Rama in a part, a quintessential part of the Bhakti tradition by the time he becomes the hero in Ram Charit Manas, Tulsidas's Ram Charit Manas. So Tulsi constantly reminds his reader that taking Rama's name repeatedly, rotting Rama's name allays one from all sufferings and brings peace. So this is not possible when Rama is human. He is no longer a human, the way he is being treated in Tulsidas's Ram Charit Manas; even taking his name, you know, pacifies and allays so many crises in life.

Tulsi brought the divine from the sacrosanct pedestal or precincts of the temple to the homes of the ordinary people, the homes of the commoners, presenting dharma as a way of life rather than as an austere religious matter. So dharma is something that is being explained in a simple manner through ordinary instances of life by Tulsidas, something that is no longer alien to the masses. Valmiki had depicted Rama as a human being, as a Maryadapurushottam. So he is the, he embodies the benchmark of justice and you know, equity in a society. That is the idea of Maryadapurushottam.

He is the superlative male and he is the epitome of Maryadapurushottam or ethics. The Valmiki is Rama and this is how we understand Rama. The portrayal of Rama is as Maryadapurushottam. On the other hand, Rama is depicted as the Purnavatar. I was talking about this in my previous lecture, I remember, Rama as Purnavatar, the complete incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

By the time he is a part, he is the protagonist in Tulsidas's Ramacharitmanas. So a deification happens in a major way, deification of Valmiki's prince. So in Ramayana, Rama acquired all his skills primarily through practice, through a certain training given by his guru and through sheer dedication and devotion. On the other hand, in Ramacharitmanas, Rama is assumed to already possess all kinds of virtues and qualities because he is shown as the incarnation of God Vishnu himself. There is nothing further or nothing more for him to learn.

He is almost born as someone learned, someone omniscient. That is the essence of Purnavatar in Tulsidas's Ramacharitmanas. If a person reads Valmiki's Ramayana without any prior knowledge of Hindu mythology, he will consider Rama as a human being, a human being with all the best set of skills and virtues. In Tulsidas's work, on the other hand, the narrative is reinterpreted, reworked in the light of the Bhakti or devotional movement. So within the larger corpus or within the larger frame of Bhakti movement, Tulsidas is writing his own understanding or his own interpretation, his own unique treatment of Ramayana.

And so his characters do not remain literary characters anymore. They go on to become something much closer to the masses. They acquire two things at the same time. They are deified and yet because they are gods of the ordinary people, they become very close to the heart of the commoners. So a very plebeian god, a god that is accessible to all, not exclusive in their nature.

So Tulsidas transformed a prince with godlike qualities of heroism that Ram had in Valmiki's work into a full-fledged divinity, the supreme deity. He is incarnation of one of the major gods in the Hindu pantheon which is god Vishnu. So he is not only an epitome of best qualities of heroism, compassion and justice that Maryada Purushottam possesses, but he is a little more than that. Now while Valmiki's Ramayana is read by a number of critics as the process of Aryanization, what does Ramayana mean? The word Ramayana

means journey of Rama, right? So the process of Aryanization, Sanskritization and agro-based expansion directed towards the southern part of India. On the other hand, we see the Bhakti movement beginning or emerging from the south, the southern part of India, and moving northward which was characterized by a focus on the local languages, the vernaculars, the regional dialects and thereby it made, the Bhakti tradition made teachings accessible to the widest possible audience regardless of their class or caste origin.

So these are the two very opposite trajectories that we can trace. Valmiki's Ramayana originating in the north and moving southwards, the process of Sanskritization, you know, it is a top bottom one could say movement, whereas Bhakti movement emerging among the grassroots, with the grassroots originating in the south and moving northwards. In the process we could say, if we may use the word infecting or kind of absorbing the flavors of the regional masses, in the process being infected by or absorbing the colors and the flavors of the regional masses, the masses from each and every region. So the qualities of omnipotence and omniscience that Valmiki's Rama had acquired through training and disciplining became a part of self-staged divine sport or Leela in the case of Tulsi's Rama. So Tulsi's Rama being an incarnation of Vishnu and Avatara of Vishnu always already knows the outcome of all the actions, for example, he knows the future.

So he has descended in an ethereal form only to do his Leela, the self-staged divine sport. So making a departure from Valmiki's Ramayana, Tulsidas is also influenced by a number of other Sanskrit texts. So Valmiki's Ramayana is not the only possible influence on Tulsidas's Ram Charitmanas. We see the Bhagavat Purana probably influenced the description of Ram's childhood, right, the Bal Canto was influenced probably by the Bhagavat Purana, whereas the Prasanna Ramayana influenced a renowned scene of romantic encounter between Ram and Sita in a phulvari or a flower garden. So different bhakhyas or different cantos and chapters in Ram Charitmanas are influenced from different sources.

So another likely influence on Ram Charitmanas is the Adhyatma Ramayana, the Adhyatma Ramayana which was composed in South India around late 15th or early 16th century AD. So Adhyatma Ramayana added a significant dimension to the theology of Rama and presented him as the Brahman of Upanishad as well as the Advaita in the non-dualist school of philosophy. So in Adhyatma Ramayana we see Ram beyond you know the humanized traits, he is like Brahman, he precedes any kind of earthly qualities. He is

the supreme one or the supreme soul from the medieval Adhyatma Ramayana, the Uttara Kanda of Brahmanda Purana which was authored by Vedavyas, which had transformed Ram as the Parabrahma.

Here we see that Ram Charitmanas added a popular symbol of worship to the text and it depicted Rama as the embodiment of Dharma. So both are treating Rama you know as God, as more than human, more than a superhuman. Both have this dimension of divinity associated with the figure of Rama. There is a deification being extended to this figure of Rama both in Adhyatma Ramayana and in Ram Charitmanas. But Adhyatma Ramayana is giving all the nirgun qualities, rendering Rama with the nirgun qualities.

So, in Tulsidas embodiment is very important. Ram is the embodiment of Dharma. So for ordinary masses once again for the masses that are not educated, the larger populace, it is easier to identify with the latter, with Tulsidas' imagination because it has a tactile tangible body that one can touch, that one can see, that one can you know intervene through different senses and thereby it is a God that can be loved, a personal God once again. This is the concept, the moot concept in Bhakti movement, a humanized God, a personal God. In Adhyatma Ramayana, Ram is projected in terms of the nirgun aspect.

This is what I was saying along with the Purushottam attributes of Valmiki's Ramayana. On the other hand, for Tulsidas, Ram represented the sagun form of incarnated divinity which manifested itself on earth to convey the message of Dharma and devotion. So apart from Rama, we see that the characterization of Sita is also changing in Ramacharitmanas when compared to Valmiki's Ramayana. Both the books, both the texts treat Sita in largely, through certain qualities that are quite similar. For example, she is a pious woman.

For all these authors, Sita is imagined as a pious woman, a loyally devoted.. a woman that is loyally devoted to her husband and someone that puts Dharma above everything. So piety, loyalty and anuragi of Dharma are some of the characteristics of Sita both in Valmiki as well as in Tulsidas. So there are certain aspects where Sita's character changes in Tulsidas. In terms of Sita's outlook for example, so in Valmiki we see that Sita has been portrayed mostly as a strong and outspoken woman, sometimes even aggressive and someone that sees herself as an equal to her husband Rama. There is an instance in Ramayana where Ram, you know, prior to taking Sita's Agni Pariksha also you know

offers her to marry any of her brothers because she has spent a significant time away from him and in Ravana's kingdom, he somehow is not sure of her purity anymore and he even offers as one of the viable options according to him that Sita should marry any of her brothers, any brother that she chooses to marry.

And that is the point when Sita exposes her aggressive and outspoken nature or demeanor. She calls Rama as someone who is non-Aryan, someone that does not have, does not bear the Aryan traits and so he can scorn his, he can scoff at his wife like that and tells her to marry any of his brothers. It's a behavior not akin to an Aryan. So in Valmiki we see that agency in Sita to even, you know, scorn, to even chastise her husband when she is offering her to do something she would never imagine to do. In Ram Charitmanis on the other hand, Sita is shown as more of a submissive, docile, reticent and soft-spoken woman.

This basically stems from the role of the women in society in the 16th century, the period during which women were commonly given a subordinate position compared to the males in the society. The women during this period, during the medieval period did not have much say in the worldly affairs and they were largely oppressed in all fields. So Tulsidas had to portray Sita as someone submissive contrary to her avatar that we see in Valmiki's Ramayana. Similarly, we also see that the depiction of Hanuman is quite different in the different versions of Rama's narrative, be it Ramayana or Ram Charitmanis or Adhyatma Ramayana. So in the case of Ramayana, Valmiki's Ramayana, Hanuman is depicted as a person belonging to a specific tribe, the tribe of the Vanaras, the Vanaras tribe who lived in the dense Dandak forests whereas Valmiki shows that the stronghold of the Vanaras tribe was in Kiskinda.

Tulsi on the other hand, treats Hanuman as an ocean of wisdom and virtue. He is called as the Bhushan of the Kapikul. He is the kind of the jewel, he is the jewel, he is the gem of the entire dynasty or the tribe of Vanaras. He possesses immense knowledge and wisdom as well as virtues and he is an illuminator of all the three worlds. So he is the Hanuman god to the devotee who is at the margins of the Brahminical religious cosmos and who cannot have direct access to the Hindu pantheon.

There are people from different castes and different sects who, especially in the medieval times when Tulsi is writing, would not have access to temples. Over these masses, the earthy, crude, you know, simple nature of Hanuman god was greatly appealing. The ones that would not be allowed to worship perhaps the figure of Vishnu or even Rama inside a temple would espouse or embrace Hanuman as their god. So Hanuman has this very earthy appeal which is embraced by the larger populace, especially in the northern part of India. Tulsidas was a great devotee of Hanuman himself.

He is the composer of the greatest hymns that is dedicated to Hanuman called the Hanuman Chalisa. Tulsi himself composed the Hanuman Chalisa. Hanuman's presence, especially in the Sundarkand we see, alternately evokes laughter and tears. He is a very simple individual with immense physical strength, right? Unlike Ram's unattainable traits.. Ram is like the veritable god, someone that cannot be identified with immediately. Hanuman on the other hand is identifiable to the masses and he is, like I was saying, he is earthy and he is more accessible even by the commons.

So the masses appreciate the simian simplicity, crude strength and accidental destructiveness which Hanuman is committing again and again, right? He is, you know, good-willingly trying to do something but in the process there is a small error but it makes him all the more loving, it makes him a very endearing character, someone that is so lovable. He is such a dedicated bhakt.. once again Hanuman and Ram's relationship, you know, evoking the dasya bhabha. The purity in Hanuman's love is unsurpassable, it cannot be met by any other, perhaps not even by Lakshman and Bharat. So this kind of simian crudeness and simplicity is appreciated by the masses, right? In fact, Hanuman is treated as an avatar of Shiva by Tulsidas, someone that was born as Pawan's son and who merges the great tradition with the little tradition. So the vernacular Ramayana was initially derided by the conservative Sanskritist quarters.

The Sanskrit pandits would deride Tulsidas for composing such a great work, such a masterpiece in vernacular. However, despite a lack of printing and overwhelming illiteracy in the contemporary society, Ram Charitmanas had found enthusiastic reception among the mercantile class as well as the lower orders of the society, including the religious mendicants who had this tendency to rote certain lines and sing them, the singing, wandering minstrels. It found a lot of popularity among these sections of the society. So Nabadas in his SriBhaktamal hails Tulsi as a reincarnation of Valmiki himself, who was born to reissue another version of Ramayana. So the legend says that

the Brahmins of Vanaras had put Ram Charitmanas to the test, they wanted to test Ram Charitmanas and were later forced to give it respect, goes on to show Tulsi's success at transcending the sectarian differences and you know synthesizing the diverse strands of the Hindu tradition.

So he was drawing on, he was inspired greatly by a Sanskrit text, but to his own credit, to his own credit he is making this Sanskrit work, this original Sanskrit work Ramayana accessible to all. So he is you know a kind of synthesizing figure, a figure that synthesizes the opposites. So he is very much symptomatic of what Bhakti tradition at large is also aiming to do. You know in the contemporary society there were so many kinds of sectarianism, there was prevalent feudalism; as a way of mobilizing against these malpractices, Bhakti tradition, the Bhakti poets would preach the understanding of a simple god, a god that can be loved even without or regardless of rituals and you know, institutionalized sanctioned practices.

So Tulsi was doing something similar. We see as a synthesizing figure Tulsi reconciling Shaivism with Vaishnavism through the figure of Hanuman. Hanuman himself being an avatar of Shiva as he depicts him, but also a Ram Bhakt. So we have seen in history so many tiffs, so many face off and conflicts between the Saivites and the Vaishnavites, each claiming its own superiority. A figure like Tulsidas is coalescing these two opposite tendencies through a figure such as Hanuman. Both the Saivites and the Vaishnavites find Hanuman as acceptable.

Tulsi advocates Shiva as the father of the universe whereas he himself maintains utmost devotion to Ram. So there is no way of saying who, which sect he prioritizes or gives more importance. He never says, he never identifies solely either with Vaishnavism or Shaivism. Further Tulsi brings together the Nirgun and the Sagun schools of thought, the traditions of a formless god and a god with physical attributes.

So Tulsi's Ram is an integral symbol. He is born as a human but then in him we see the shadow of the Purnavatar. So we are celebrating the Nirgun aspects of Purnavatar, the god and this god cannot play, this god cannot express itself without the mediation or without a human body. So the Sagun aspect also becomes important, right? The god's Leela becomes very important. Scores of lines from Ram Charitmanas have entered the folk speech as in the form of proverbs and wise sayings. For example, Tulsidas in Ram

Another ornamental couplet used in Manas is called Doha or couplet with two unequal parts, and each line has a break between its two parts. Doha is a kind of couplet that one finds in other Bhakti poets prominently in Kavirdas and Guru Nanak. Another verse that is present in Ramacharit Manas is Harigitika Chand. So Harigitika Chand, a meter of short songs to Vishnu. Now what is the difference between the function of Chaupai and Harigitika Chand? We see that the Chaupai is more prosaic and it helps to advance the flow of the narrative.

So it is, it has more to do with the progression of the plot, one happening after the other, one event happening after the other; that would be described more in terms of Chaupai; whereas Harigitika Chand seems to be inserted at moments of heightened emotion. It is a kind of an anomalous situation, something out of the ordinary situation. When trying to describe that, the author would deploy Harigitika Chand, heightened emotion, as a way of elaborating on something that has already been described.

So it is not enabling the plot to progress. Harigitika Chand is not a way of taking the plot or the story line forward. Rather it is more of an interjection, it is more about harping on certain emotions. So we could say that its poeticality is more underlined, more accentuated. The poetic quality in Harigitika Chand is more accentuated as compared to the Chaupai describing the prosaic advancement of the story line. Harigitika Chands can be taken out of their context and separately set to melody and sung as devotional hymns.

So the powers of Harigitika Chand can be seen as a separate bhajan or a separate devotional hymn in its own right. A meter called Tomar Chand, similar to the Chaupai but with shorter and more strident lines occurs twice during the battle scenes. So the Manas's narrative keeps its audience in mind. And the story, the narrative goes in two forms. Just like in western narrative we talk about the mimetic mode and the diegetic mode.

In a very similar way we have here the narration happening through two strategies. One is prasang, episodes of prasangs and then dialogues or samvad. And they draw on the oral storytelling and inclusionary recitation traditions, right, where we have in mind, where, you know, the author Tulsi has kept in mind a participative group of audience or

devotee. So narrative like I was saying can progress in two ways. A prasang where a kind of omniscient, omnipotent narrator is narrating the story.

And then we have the story progressing through a dialogue between two characters within the frame of the narrative, right. Sometimes an oral discourse or upakhyān that has hardly any organic unity with the larger narrative becomes popular and self-complete in its own right. For example, we see that the discourse between Lakshman and the tribal chief Guha in Book Two is commonly known as Lakshman Gita, and it can be read separately from Tulsidas's larger text Ramacharit Manas. It becomes a text in its own right. With this, I am going to stop our lecture here today and let us meet again with another round of discussions in another lecture. Thank you. Thank you.