

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 25

Gender and Performance in Bhakti Movement I

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Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, today we are going to start with a new module titled Gender and Performance in the Bhakti Movement. So, we will see how gender comes to play a momentous role in the entire, you know, Bhakti movement. The cult of Bhakti is deeply informed by a notion of gender subversion, interplay and experimentation with gender, where the question of 'trans' once again comes back to our mind, such that gender is no longer, you know, watertight and something that is codified and abiding by the social norms, the traditional, you know, customary rules. Gender becomes a site of experimentation, a site of transgression as far as the Bhakti movement is concerned. So, we see that till now in most of our modules we have been talking about Bhakti as a literary movement, Bhakti and the concomitant art and aesthetics, the cultural, you know, dynamics associated with the Bhakti movement or the Bhakti tradition.

Now a scholar like Rekha Pandey sees the Bhakti movement as treated chiefly as a literary movement or an ideological phenomenon with religion as the basis of its inspiration. This has mainly happened due to lack of emphasis on social history and hence the socio-economic factors, which aimed at bringing in a change have generally been ignored. In other words, because the onus of Bhakti tradition or any scholarly intervention of the Bhakti movement has been on the cultural factors, on the literary and artistic factors, Pandey would argue that the socio-economic dynamics... so for example, the social dynamics, the social history, the factors that focus on the class factor, right, subversion in class and caste terms have largely been ignored.

So every religious reform movement rises out of certain socio-economic factors or conditions and aims at the upliftment of the underprivileged populace and the oppressed sections of a society. Now when we say this, even when we agree with what Pandey is

saying here, we need to understand that the texts, the artistic texts, the works of art and aesthetics, the poetry, the vast corpus of poetry that we get from the Bhakti poets, the Bhakti saints, the enormous literature, you know, and even the theatrical forms that have emerged from the Bhakti movement... we are not really ignoring the context, the manifestation of artwork and aesthetics emerging from any given period cannot be really dissociated from the concomitant socio-cultural or economic dynamics. These factors cannot be really decoupled and the reflection of class and caste is very much present in the poetry being created during this time. So situating a text within the context renders a more holistic picture and so when we are reading poetry or looking at an artwork from the Bhakti period, we are not necessarily ignoring the context from where it has emerged. The society very much mirrors through and in the artwork, in the artforms.

So from here I am going to get into the discussion of a very interesting work by John Stratton Hawley. It is called Krishna the Butter Thief and Krishna as a popular icon is at the heart of the Saguna Bhakti movement, Krishna who is the worshipped hero in the Vaishnavite tradition, by the Vaishnav. So John Stratton Hawley in his work Krishna the Butter Thief has given his insight on the popular icon of Lord Krishna, and he is focusing mainly on the act of stealing butter, right? The baby Krishna is constantly seen as stealing butter. He does not ask for it or he does not eat it in a way that can be seen as legitimate. He necessarily steals it.

So it is like more of a forbidden fruit that he is trying to attain here, right? Now this whole episode of, you know, stealing butter and dairy products by the baby Krishna can be seen as an act of performance. It is a chapter and an episode in its own right. It has its own Madhurya, right? It has its own charm. According to Hawley, he explains very beautifully, so thievery refers to the fact that what was outside Krishna the thief has come in and thereby what was inside, which is butter inside the pot is taken out now. So boundaries have been ruptured in the course of this Leela, this Leela centering the act of theft by baby Krishna.

In the symbol of Krishna eating butter, taking the butter from outside of the pot, the pot could be seen as the codified laws that lay down a society. The societal rules, the customary principles that govern a disciplined society. When things are inside out, there is a transgression, right? So Krishna taking the butter out and smearing it all over his mouth, so the line separating the inner self and the outer world is transgressed. It is outrageous, but very beautifully so, right? Now Krishna as a figure we see, the child Krishna, the juvenile Krishna knows no respect for these socially created boundaries that

represent certain limitations and depict... and so he symbolizes, he stands for continuous subversion and transgression. He is constantly overstepping these borders, these socially created lines.

So spewing butter further in the Gopi's storeroom; so he does not only eat the butter from the pot, he further spews the butter in the Gopi's storerooms which form the next concentric boundary after the pots. So we see that what was inside has come out at several levels. Once the butter is taken out of the pot, then it is taken, you know, beyond the border of the storeroom, it is spewed everywhere. Krishna is spewing it on the Gopis, the cowherd women, the milkmaids. So what was in the storeroom is spread over the rest of the house and what was in the house is fanned out over the outdoors.

So there is no limitation that binds Krishna really. So here Hawley is trying to depict how Krishna is a figure of transcending borders. He is something and yet something else too. So he is the child, but an all-knowing child. He is a human form, but also a God.

He is.. later we see when he grows up, he is a male, but not the hypermasculine male. He is a feminized male. He is a lover boy. He is a flirtatious lover that all women, you know, that all women fall for. So this scene of spewing butter can be perceived as reflecting a Bacchanalian order where people who have gathered around to witness are being sprayed with butter.

So if we see the butter is symbolizing some kind of rasa, you know, emotion or sentiment, it does not leave anyone untouched or unsmearred. Everyone is kind of touched by the rasa. It's the beauty, the charm that the baby Krishna emanates. The role of the Gopis or the milkmaids is crucial in this regard, in this particular Leela, as they form an integral part of the performance through their resistive participation. So it goes like this.

The more they try to resist Krishna, the more it is difficult to control or bind him with rope, with chain or with any kind of limiting, you know, device. Krishna cannot be stopped. He is simply unstoppable and he is absolutely, you know, loved for the way he steals. He is stealing butter and he is also stealing the hearts of the people around. So we see that these women are, in the end, they are all playing the roles of devotees.

The milkmaids are Krishna's devotees. So here the prominent bhava we see is batsalya, the filial love that parents feel for the child and also a madhurya, an all-encompassing madhurya defines the entire scene, right? Everyone is enamored by this, you know, this child who represents the soul's beauty, the transcendental beauty, right? Not only the beauty of the physical form. So in the butter thief leelas, the gopis repeatedly announce that they will bind Krishna. They are going to punish him. They will tie him up with a rope and yet Krishna is constantly abrogating all kinds of boundaries because he in the end is a god in the human form and so he cannot be limited by or controlled or tied down by anything, any external determinant and those who would try to, you know, bind Krishna with a rope find themselves bound.

So they are bound, you know, with tied with rope and Krishna escapes, right? This is not only in the literal sense but also figuratively. It has a great, you know, symbolic spiritual meaning where it is very difficult for anyone to capture Krishna in the true sense. So we see when he grows up he has affair with a married woman Radha, right? And more than sambhoga, the entire relationship is informed by vipralambha, the longing, the separation. So Radha is constantly yearning for Krishna and when he is away she is in a mad-like state. She is in a complete state of trance and she sees Krishna everywhere.

So critics would say that because Krishna is nowhere, Krishna is no one can she feel him everywhere and she sees him in each and every one. So Krishna, the word Krishna itself means black or nothing. So he is actually not there. He is there but not there. He, you know, evokes emotions among others but he is beyond all emotions.

So he limits and binds others but he cannot be limited and bound by any kind of relation and love. He is beyond that, right? That is the essence of the human God, right? So a classic example of the anthropomorphic God that we find here through the butter thief Leelas by the baby Krishna. So Prem defined by rasa or emotion, mood, state signifies liquidity. So rasa we discussed while talking about Natya Shastra. Rasa is the emotion, right? And it refers to some kind of juice, it is liquid.

So it can flow. It does not stand. It symbolizes transgression and it is juxtaposed and opposed to the idea of, you know, strict and codified, fixed social norms that exist in the

form of discriminating boundaries, right? So we were talking about the Bacchanalian, you know, order or the Bacchanalian sense being evoked, being emanated by the act of spewing butter where what was inside is completely, you know, taken out. In the western concept also, according to the western metaphysics, so there are also two Gods representing two different kinds of emotions. One is the Apollonian. Apollonian represented by Apollo who.. or the sun god who represents rationality, reason, logic, so a more, a much more restrained figure.

And then we have the Bacchanalian order, the Dionysian order, the figure of Dionysus, the god of wine. So merrymaking, subversion and transgression comes in. Similarly, the two forms Krishna and Vishnu could be seen after these two epitomes, one, you know, Vishnu who is more like the Apollonian figure who is the image of and the symbol of balance, right? And he has his consort Lakshmi, you know, serving him in a very conventional manner, where the woman is, you know, sitting at the feet of the Lord and, you know, serving him most obediently. And in the Bacchanalian sense we see Krishna, where Krishna is holding on to the feet of Radha, right, where it is just the, you know.. the whole social convention standing on its head. So we see that Radha is scornful, she is complaining because he comes so late and she has various other complaints and Krishna is holding on to her feet trying to calm her and he is kind of, so he is pampering her, he is mollycoddling her and we have to understand that Radha is older than Krishna, Radha is a married woman.

So Vrindavan is the epitome of subversion in every sense of the term and it is very different from the Golakdhama where we see Vishnu and Lakshmi's figure in terms of propriety, in terms of social decorum and righteousness, right? So unless the Lord steals the heart of the Bhakta or the devotee, there is no meaning in the experience of Bhakti. Here Bhakti is moving away from the codified scriptures, the norms, the Brahminical order, it is saying that all a devotee needs to reach the Lord in the true sense is Bhakti, right? So stealing the butter from the Gopi is like stealing the heart. It is a beautiful charming God that comes to steal one's heart and unless that love, that personalized love between devoted and devotee comes into play, the entire experience of Bhakti or devotion remains incomplete. So Krishna's unquenchable appetite for butter and dairy products and his capacity to attract love is not thievery, as Hawley would point out. This is because he takes what is always already his.

He is the owner and he is the creator of all the love and all the emotions that are evoked in the heart of the devotee, right? He precedes that love, in fact, he precedes all these

emotions. He is the origin of all these emotions, these rasas. So the stealing of butter does not arise from any kind of scarcity. His thievery does not make things scarce. It does not create any kind of crisis.

Rather, it stands for an act of gratuitousness that plenitude makes possible. So it is not about a thief that has taken away something that leads to some kind of, you know, vacuum. Vrindavan is the source of plenitude of, you know, surplus, surplus dairy production where Krishna's thievery and his, you know, smearing of butter all over his face points to fertility in every sense of the term. So there is no lack anywhere. Vrindavan is brimming in terms of love, happiness and all kinds of fulfilment.

A child stealing butter does not make anyone poor, right? So Krishna can be seen as rasa or emotion incarnate, right? He is the origin of all the rasas. He is designated as the thief only when seen from the perspective of Maryada. So Maryada is the domain of, once again the domain of Vishnu, right, who is sitting in the Golakdham. So from there we understand these laws defining the social existence where the question of Maryada comes in. So one should not take without asking.

That is the correct way of being. But Krishna cannot be defined from the perspective of Maryada. He is something always more or less but never equal to Maryada. So the thief does not pay proper price for what he steals, right? That is the essence of being thief. So in the domain of Maryada we are bartering, we are exchanging, but Krishna will not pay for what he is taking because what he is taking is invaluable and the charm that he emanates in turn also cannot be measured through any, you know, physical unit. So he is stealing the Bhakta's love actually, he is stealing the devotee's love which is symbolized by the butter and so it is invaluable beyond any economic or societal measures.

So while the yogis attempt at self displacement through sadhana or penance, through some difficult path of meditation, we see here that the milkmaids, the gopis, instead of forcefully changing themselves through some kind of tapas or penance, respond spontaneously to the change that claim them effortlessly and irresistibly. And so what Maryada tries to achieve with a lot of difficulty, the gopis and the motherly figure of Yasoda is achieving, you know, effortlessly, very easily without even trying. So in other words, the path of knowledge is a very difficult one, very far-fetched and hard to achieve,

but the path of love, the path of Bhakti is the easiest path for achieving God. So women pour the possession of milk on Krishna, the baby Krishna, both erotically and affectionately, and while Krishna engenders the emotional excess, we see that he is himself independent of all these excesses because he is a human but a God in the form of a human, right? He is a human-God, almost an oxymoron as it sounds. So he can be seen as someone that is perpetually hungry and yet someone that is escaping all kinds of desires.

The role of Krishna's naughtiness, mischief in an orderly system and rule-bound world is to steal away the world's sins. So John Stratton Hawley very beautifully describes and explains how through stealing butter in a very symbolic sense he is actually stealing away the world's sins. Krishna's willfulness and defiant nature balances out the world's volitional sin. When we juxtapose the little child's misdemeanor with the kinds of sins that the adults are consciously, you know, carrying out, we understand how innocent and how, you know, how charming this entire episode is. A little child being tied with rope because he stole some dairy products whereas the adult world out there is, you know, the adult world is involved in so many kinds of grievous sins, right? His stealing is meant to wash away those volitional sins of the adult world.

So the adult world would call his lack of manners as thievery and as aggression. Therefore, a gap.. we have to understand there is a gap that informs the normative existence on the one hand and what we see in Vrindavan, the life in Vrindavan where values are always subverted and topsy-turvy. What is good according to the rest of the world may not be good in Vrindavan and vice-versa. So what Krishna actually steals are the hearts of his devotees. So love belongs to an economy different from that governed by Maryada.

Maryada has its own domain but the cosmos, the microcosm defined by love.. so the microcosm defined by love has its own set of rules and its own values and parameters. According to commentators such as Purushottam Goswami and Swami Ramaswaroop, Krishna's thievery is the exemplar of thieves and the profligates. Krishna is an exemplar, a model, a thief of all thieves and he is the transgressive figure beyond which there can be no transgression. He is unthinkable transgressive, he is flirting, he is the paramour of a married woman, right, that Radha is. So he is involved in all kinds of, you know, activities that are socially considered as pejorative.

The subtle act of thievery contradicts and yet gives meaning to the gross world where we live by the normative terms. So Krishna's flute we see, that is also another symbol. It is capable of controlling its own player, the flute or the murli, the basuri can control Krishna himself. Music emanating from the flute defies all kinds of boundaries, hierarchies and customs because once again music is, the mellifluous music is flowing, it is fluid. Because it can be heard everywhere, it mocks the notion of social spaces, limited social spaces, stratified social spaces, structured by distance and hierarchy.

One gopi bemoans the flute's ability to entangle Hari in a musical chord, the rope of raga. So that is also kind of tying.. he is.. everyone is enmeshed, everyone is enthralled by the raga emanating from the basuri. And so the gopis plot among themselves to reverse this act of thievery by spiriting away murali herself. They want to steal the murali from Krishna. From here spawns a leela called the theft of the flute, basuri or basichori, right, which continues to play an important role among the raslilas of today.

So it is a very important topic intervened by the theatrical form, the folk theatrical form of raslila. So thievery is such a standard term of reference that the gopis apply it not only to Krishna and to their own eyes, but to other figures as well. So murali which is Krishna's flute is often the object of allegation, of stealing, stealing the consciousness of these women, stealing you know their rationality, their sense of reason, their sense of time also. A lot of time elapses while people just sit and listen to the flute music. So while Krishna only stole their clothes, the gopis would say that the murali has gone ahead of Krishna.

It has not only stolen their consciousness, their minds but also their modesty, all their interior wealth that they had, the murali has stolen everything. Now Jāṇhavā Devī who is a female preceptor of Vrindavan Goswami's teachings insists that a man should always regard God as a beautiful and charming human being. She is a Vaishnavan, so she is thinking of Krishna here. As a transcendental rasika, Krishna's human body is seen as eternal, perfect and non-material. It is the most beautiful you know thing in the material and transcendental sense.

So beyond temporality, spatiality and any you know parameters of morality, Krishna represents Sat, Chit and Ananda. So together it is Satchidananda. Sat referring to existence absolute, Chit or consciousness absolute and then Ananda which is the bliss

absolute. At the same time, the human God Krishna can be punished by you know the ephemeral, the earthly mother, Yashoda for his misdemeanors as a child and for abrogating the codes of conduct defined by the adult milkmaids or gopis. So what is more, as Krishna submits himself to paying homage to Radha, Vrindavan becomes the unusual social system where hierarchies related to age and gender are turned upside down.

So because Krishna is younger than Radha and not even her husband. So with Krishna's playmates being both males and females and both different and non-different from him, the distinction between self and other in every sense of the term is blurred. Radha and Krishna are often seen as the two correlative aspects of the same God. So Radha is also a part of Krishna himself, not apart from him. So Krishna has bifurcated himself into the enjoyer and the enjoyed and the material duality is important for God's self-realization.

So it is like Krishna playing with his own mirror image, that is the Radha Krishna love. The God's embodied manifestation is crucial here in order to understand the shifting nature of divinity. So we see how changing and shifting the figure of Krishna is from being the illicit lover and the demented God that the Vashnavas would call as *bāware thākur*. Krishna appears also later in Mahabharata as a ruthless and cunning counselor to the Pandavas who sermonizes Arjuna about Dharma. So the God possessing a body is a sign of his existence lying at the crossroads of the finite and the infinite, the godliness and human qualities.

His imperfections are owing to his mortal body but the glimpse of the universe that Yashoda keeps seeing inside his mouth refers to his ephemeral body being in connection with and in fact containing the macrocosm and the higher being. So such a human body is capable, it is potentially capable of the impossible, of godliness. So such a god hungers for human love and the devotees reciprocate spontaneously through establishing familiar and familial ties with the god, treating the god fondly. So in Hindu traditions we see incense, flowers, candles and food are commonly used for worshipping, and this is pertaining to different religions also in the South Asian context. These objects are associated with sensory and sensuous awakening.

So they appeal to different senses of smell and taste and you know, even vision. So, and they are offered to the deity in order to be touched, tasted and returned to the devotees as

leftovers or prasad. So in many shrines it is a common thing that the icon or the symbol of worship is bathed in prized items, indulged in extravagant meals or bhog and then they are put to sleep, they are rocked in cradles in accompaniment with devotional songs or bhajans. So even we see this in Bhakti as well as Sufi traditions, there are so many devotional songs. So we see that both in Sufi and Bhakti traditions there are so many devotional songs, which perceive the god in different forms.

So different you know rasas and bhavas associated with each of these relationships, god as a teacher, as a child, as a parent or a lover. So for the hermits in the Indic tradition it is also common to treat the body as a holy text, where the divine can be persuaded to live. So many Vaishnavas, Saivites and Ram Bhaktas cover their entire body or even parts of their exposed body with some kind of temporary clay and sandalwood paste imprints or sometimes with permanent tattoos. These markers celebrate religion as a live and lived subject, which uphold the belief-system of the people from the South Asian region. So with this we come to the end of this lecture today and we will meet again with another round of discussions in another lecture. Thank you.