

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 26

Gender and Performance in Bhakti Movement II

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, today we are going to discuss the most important figure perhaps in the entire Bhakti movement, a female saint who is synonymous with the question of gender subversion as far as the Bhakti tradition is concerned. So, we are going to talk about Mirabai. The Bhakta or devotee Mirabai was born in the 16th century. She was a Rajput princess from Chittor in Rajasthan and she is well known not only in the locality where she belonged, that is Rajasthan and Gujarat, but she is kind of venerated and celebrated all over India and beyond. So, we see that Mirabai had wandered in quest of her favorite deity Krishna that she calls as Ranchhor, singing his praises, right.

And so, we see through this figure the idea of a woman outgrowing her familial ties, her ties with her husband, the ties with her immediate society and even her complexity [with respect to] the gender norms. So an understanding of Mirabai's exercise of her gender subjectivity can be seen in her writings and devotion to Ranchhor or Krishna. The nature of her love turn to Bhakti, the ephemeral love turn into a spiritual love moves beyond the patriarchal hierarchy and it surpasses, it transcends caste and the feudal orders through her resistance against the institution of marriage. So her husband was from a Sakta family, he was a Rajput from a Sakta family who would worship the female deities whereas she was from a Vaishnav origin.

So she never espoused the tradition of the household where she was married. She would rather transcend the norms of that household, the household of the Rajput where she went as a bride and rather she would become a poetess and a saint wandering from place to place, you know, singing the praises of Krishna. So the metaphor of madness is recurrent

in Mirabai's poems. There is this poem called "I am Mad" and the lines go like this, "I am mad with love and no one understands my plight." It foregrounds a personal spiritual space which cannot be pervaded or intruded by the larger society and even by the Rana, her husband.

She views Krishna as “infamy, her delicious Prince,” and suggests that she is not perturbed by and in fact she enjoys the vile comments made by the mainstream social order towards her, just as she enjoys the trysts with her Lord with all her five senses. So it is.. these bhajans appeal to senses, they are very sensory but then they are also transcendental, they are beyond the senses, right. So for a female saint like Mirabai, madness not only means an upsurge of passion but it also refers to defying of the patriarchal dictates such as refusing to commit sati right after her husband Bhojraj's death. At that time performing sati was the social norm. The woman had to jump into the pyre of her husband and die with him, be immolated in his pyre.

She refused to do that when Rajabhoj died. As she desires to preserve her own body that is enamoured by Hari, she claims it back from the community that objectifies her body and treats it as a property of the male kin. She does not let the patriarchal or the male-centric society do what they like with her body. For Mirabai, devotion to Krishna is a way of asserting her heretical or unorthodox understanding of spirituality, love and even body. So the vision of herself is that of an incipient sati.

She sees herself as a sati but in a very unorthodox sense; she says that she would build her pyre only to be lighted by Krishna and after the fire has turned to ash Krishna should smear his body with the ash and merge her ephemeral light with his own unlimited ethereal light. This ability to internalize and depict the image of interiority is you know.. is central to Mirabai's philosophy, Mirabai's poems. It adds, it defines the profundity of her writing. So scholar Sunita Sharma writes that the canonical figure of Mirabai raises a radical image of Bhakti womanhood, an ideal that seems to challenge a woman's dharma in the most fundamental sense, at its most fundamental points such as resisting to the act of performing sati. The poetry and hagiography of Mira form a united form of literature and project her as a woman who defy traditional patterns of womanhood through her devotion towards Krishna.

So Mira turned into a diasporic, a single woman pilgrim in the 16th century. She appears to easily enter into the domains that are considered as you know pervaded by males, the male-centered domains, and thereby she symbolizes unaccompanied diaspora which is a very radical concept way ahead of its time. So she traveled to Vrindavan, the great center of Krishna worship in Braj where she was not accommodated by the Vaisnava philosopher Jiva Goswami because he had vowed never to have you know concourse with any woman. So we see that as juxtaposed with a prominent figure like Jiva Goswami, Mirabai is much more marginalized even in a space like Vrindavan. She is writing from her position of marginality, from her precarious position and this sense of precarity keeps coming back again and again in her writing.

So there are you know bhajans where lyrics, some common verses go like- the Rana is sending poison and... the Rana is sending spears to impale her, poison to kill her but by the grace of Krishna, she is being saved again and again. So it goes like this in Hindi, "zaher ka pyala Rana bheja dijo Mira pilai, naye dhoye Mira pivan lagi mano amrita achaye." So it is like- the poison turns into nectar by the grace of, by the blessings and mercy of Lord Krishna and even Rana cannot affect her or harm her. Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita speak in a more relevant manner about the melting of social boundaries and borders as well as barriers that mark Mira's refrains. So Mira calls herself as a dasi and she is free.

The connotation of dasya bhav seems to be appropriate because her constant proximity, intimacy and surrender of will is evocative of a dasi, a servant serving her lord most respectfully. It is a transcendental form of love that we find here. She gives herself in complete self-abandoning desire such that control and authority in any sense of the term, in the familial sense, in the sense of the wedlock or the contract of marriage, all of them get annulled and diluted and Mira becomes what she wants to be ultimately. So here we have, you know, Lata Mangeshkar singing a very famous Mira bhajan. She is singing "payo ji maine ram ratan dhan payo", right? And that is one of those very popular and time immemorial Mira bhajan that has its timeless charm and appeal.

So famous modern singers like M.S. Subbulaxmi and Lata Mangeshkar with their melodious renditions of Mira bhajans have contributed to the resurrection of Mira Bai's figure. It is very important to also mention the figure of Anup Jalota who is, you know, famous, who is very popular for singing all these bhajans. Mira presents no great affront to dharma when she leaves Rana Bhojraj.

So she is not committing adharma by leaving Bhojraj, especially because she considers Rana only as her guardian, her social guardian, not her husband according to her. The intensity and musicality as well as the force of Mira's, you know, bhajans, her devotion and the lyrics, the verses that she create, dedicated to Krishna are traditionally seen as outflowing, outgrowing and thereby a great challenge to the institution of marriage. The force, the passion involved in those verses, those writings cannot be accommodated within the space, within the institution of marriage. One rarely finds in the Bhaktamala a sense that the life of Bhakti needs to be justified through the eyes of conventional dharma. This is going back to our previous lecture where Maryada and dharma have their own domain but Bhakti does not always abide by them, and yet it has its own parameters of right and wrong, its own value system and order.

So a lot of Mirabai's compositions are still performed as bhajans in the contemporary South Asian society. So her poems are lyrical padas or metric verses in Rajasthani language. There are no surviving manuscripts of her poetry from her time and the earliest records of the two poems that are credited to her go back to as early as the 18th century. So John Stratton Hawley regarding the figure of Mira says the following.. Hawley says, I quote, "When one speaks of the poetry of Mirabai, then, there is always an element of enigma. (...) there must always remain a question about whether there is any real relation between the poems we cite and a historical Mira", unquote. So the mythohistorical figure that Mirabai posits, she is almost a legend in her own right, as popular perhaps as the icon of Rama. Not everything that we get to know about these Bhakti saints, be it Mirabai, be it Kabir, be it Guru Nanak, especially some of them disappeared, how they died is not known to the local populace. This renders some kind of mythical quality to their figure. They are not only saints or poets and artists, they are something more; the way they are remembered in the collective consciousness of the people from the South Asian region.

So, "After making me fall for you so hard, where are you going?

Until the day I see you, no repose: my life, like a fish washed on shore, flails in agony.

For your sake I'll make myself a yogini, I'll hurl myself to death on the saw of Kashi.

Mira's Lord is the clever Mountain Lifter, and I am his, a slave to his lotus feet."

So here she is referring to Krishna. In the original language, she is referring to him as the Govardhan. So there are so many names of Krishna, and she is pining for him because he wants to leave. Once again, Mirabai's love is realized through the essence of bipralambha or longing.

There is hardly or there is almost no sambhog, there is no love realized in union, rather it is the love that fructifies through longing, through yearning and pining. So her lyrics are mostly, you know, devout effusions, they are emotional outbursts, you know, overflowing sentiments, very rapturous in nature that defines and describes Krishna, dialogizes with Krishna. The language spoken in the area where she originally belonged was western Rajasthani, although her poems are also found to have been written in Braj Bhasha, which is a dialect of Hindi in which much of her devotional poetry or bhajans were composed. At the same time, she also composed some of her works in Gujarati. So her poetry signifies that there is no difference between Krishna and her, between Mira and Krishna, just like the sun and its rays.

So Mira depicts her life of peregrination as the only alternative to death, either she has to wander or she needs to be united with Krishna, or else sometimes she spends, you know, her days in contemplation. She wanders and she contemplates on the image of Krishna. She sees herself as walking death and this diasporic journey can only be ended through meeting Krishna. Mira imagines herself not only as a wanderer in search of Krishna, but also wandering alongside Krishna. This journey is not always about longing in the strict sense because she also feels a sense of union, you know, in her mind.

So within herself, she feels as united with Krishna. She is not walking a lonely journey. She imagines Krishna alongside her. So Mira merges her yogic life with the happier vision of life in the presence of Krishna. Krishna is forever present with her through her bhajans and performances.

So Mira characteristically represents her yoga, not as static and meditative, but as a discipline of life that keeps her on move, peregrination. And she is constantly wandering for Krishna, wandering for Krishna, wandering in search of Krishna, wandering with Krishna. So sixteen of Mirabai's poems appear in Guru Granth Sahib. We see that there

is an interface between Mirabai and Sikhism. This is a very interesting interface, given that Sikhism drew more on the Nirgun Bhakti.

So there is a very interesting interface between Mirabai and Sikhism. It's all the more interesting because Sikhism drew more on the Nirgun facet of Bhakti, whereas Mirabai is mostly celebrating the Sagun Bhakti. She is a Krishna worshipper. So she is worshipping lord in the Sagun form as a tactile figure. So the poems of Mirabai appear in Kartarpur Pothi and deserve to be canonical, focusing on the binding power of love.

It is a trope that is constantly and the most celebrated in Mirabai's poetry. The account of Mirabai's association with Ramdas is further supported in the early Sikh anthologies, which culminated in the Guru Granth Sahib. A postscript is provided by Prem Abodh, which is a hagiographical collection from Punjab, a manuscript dating back to 1783. So in Prem Abodh, Mira is arrayed against her husband Rana which makes it clear that according to the social norms, Rajput woman's place was inside the home and not with the wandering mendicants and minstrels. Mira had flouted this tradition by becoming a yogini and a wanderer, which is seen as an act of Rajput courage which enabled her to defy and criticize any kind of gendered restrictions imposed on her.

However, for this she is devotionalized only in Prem Abodh and not in other works such as Bhakti Rasabodhini. So Mira's verses are a crucial reason for her popularity. These verses are of literary value and were collected in Vrihat Kavya Dohan. To her Krishna is a yogi and she vows, she is constantly vowing to become his yogini.

So P. Govinda Pillai writes that the Kali Yuga actually prepared the ground for Bhakti Renaissance; resurgence of the Bhakti movement or the heightening of the Bhakti movement was possible only in the Kali Yuga, the Yug that is called as Kali. Interestingly, the Kali age or Kali Yuga was not condemned as a curse by some of the Puranic texts and commentators. They also saw something good about the Kali Yuga. It insinuates that the Bhakti movement is associated with Kali. According to the perspective of sage Parasara on Kali Yuga, the role of the subaltern sections from a given society is almost similar to the contributions made by the radical poets and saints from the early Bhakti movement.

So not everything about the Kali Yuga is negative. As sage Parasara notes, the rise of the subalterns, the voices of the subalterns being heard is very similar to the compositions, the artistic contributions made by the radical poets from the Bhakti movement, especially the ones that shun the caste system, the Brahminical pomposity, the caste system, and you know, even the gendered form of oppression. So we see that Bhakti is a way of giving voice, of rendering voice or rather voices to the peripheral subjects, to the subjects that have hitherto existed in the margins. With this, I am going to stop my lecture here today and let us meet again with another round of discussions in another lecture. Thank you.