

## **Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia**

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**Lecture 27**

### **Gender and Performance in Bhakti Movement III**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. We are discussing gender and performances in Bhakti movement. So today we are going to mainly focus on the Vaishnavite tradition, Vaishnavism and we will look at figures such as Chaitanya, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. So Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was a 15th century saint and a very important figure of the Bhakti tradition of the Vaishnavite trend. So he has been considered as an avatar of both Radha and Krishna and it is believed that he worshipped Krishna mainly with bhajan, kirtan and dance. So performance becomes very important when we talk about the trend that began with a figure like Chaitanya Mahaprabhu from Bengal.

He began the cult, the school which is today known as Gauriya Vaishnavism, the Gauriya Vaishnav cult and performances at the heart of this school or this cult. Chaitanya expressed his devotion through performance of kirtan with his group of devotees. Kirtan, the word kirtan consists of or refers to the choral singing of hymns and you know taking or rotating the name of god, and it is often accompanied by dance movements which culminate frequently in states of trance. So it refers to certain extreme bodily gestures, a rapturous ecstatic state that the devotee reaches through a constant taking of the name of god. So here we can see a representation of the dance of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, a kind of rapturous expression where you know the bodily joy, a state of bliss is being conveyed through dance.

Now a version of the Chaitanya myth believes that Krishna himself intended to experience the servitude of Radha and that is how and that is why he took birth as Chaitanya as an avatar. So that way Chaitanya is seen as an avatar of Krishna, right. So through this birth he has taught Madhurya Prem Bhakti in topmost Bipralambha bhava. So Bipralambha.. just harkening back our previous lectures, Bipralambha referring to

love in separation and He has taught you know love in separation to the people of the Kali Yuga through the birth of Chaitanya. So like I was saying, Bipralambha bhava refers to the feeling of separation.

Chaitanya during his last 12 years of existence at Jagannath Puri taught the people of the world how through a feeling of separation one can develop one's love for God and Chaitanya's God was Krishna. So the language of the Gauriya Vaishnavite cult, the language which was kind of you know started by Chaitanya is suffused with priti rasa, amorous sentiment, and it is informed by the Viraha bhakti. Just now we were talking about Bipralambha or love in separation. So a devotion arising out of state of separateness and Chaitanya writes, "My mind is agitated, it cannot be still, streams flow from my eyes" (In the Kadamba Grove) (4). This is a line, you know, verses taken from a poem called In the Kadamba Grove.

So "my mind is agitated, it cannot be still, streams flow from my eyes." According to the Bhakti tradition, a bhakta or devotee passes through five successive stages, which begins with the Shanta rasa or the resigned contemplation of the deity, further leading to dasya bhava or the practice of service to the deity, followed by sakhya bhava or friendship which warms into batsalya or filial affection and lastly it rises to madhurya or an all-engrossing amorous love. So for Chaitanya, the realization of erotica and ecstasy are not through sexual consummation in a heteronormative sense, however. We have to understand that although he is talking about Amour, about priti and you know bipralambha too, that is not a reference or allusion to a heterosexual or a heteronormative kind of sexual expression or sexual consummation. He describes his state of possession by Krishna, which is also known as Radha bhava, as a blend of poison and nectar.

So it is a state which entails breaking down of socially ascribed codes of normalcy and sanity and therefore it is in a way transgressive in nature. So when he is possessed by Krishna, he attains Radha bhava. He becomes a blend, a coming together of Radha and Krishna within the same body. So mystic poets such as Chaitanya and Nammālvār bridge the gap between the mythical Krishna and their personal male self. The concept of body in mystic traditions neither symbolizes lust or karma nor male pride or purushabhiman.

Rather the mystic identifies with the sentiments of the female playmate or the gopi. So here the amour is not referring to any kind of lust, like I keep saying again and again. It

is more of the Radha bhava, where the blending of the male and female counterparts happen within the body, within the soul of the saint. In the Antyaleela of Caitanya Caritāmṛta, Krishnadas Kabiraj describes Chaitanya with the following words, “His mouth spuming, body delighted, eyes welling up/ He lies unconscious like a fruit, Outwardly fatigued but delirious within”. So this is something that can be seen as similar to the concept of Śūnya-samādhi.

Sunya Samadhi or a state that signifies the ebbing of all differences, difference between human and God, the fervent devotee and the non-committal devoted or almighty, the seeker who is trapped in worldly sorrows and the sought who defies all boundaries and is therefore blissful. In the end what we see is Chaitanya's body understood as the feminized male Krishna whereas his soul becomes Radha and as one, they deliver a kind of divine ecstasy in a temporal setting. So all the opposite forces kind of blending within the form of the, within the form, the ephemeral form of the saint, the human and the God coexist, the devotee and the devoted coexist, the male and the female, you know, aspects, Radha and Krishna become his soul and his body respectively. When we look at this tradition of Kirtan, it also has its own social angle. It is responsible for producing an egalitarian society.

It is an attempt at, you know, overthrowing the hierarchies defined by the caste system. So it is a step towards realizing a caste-less society. Chaitanya threw open the door of religion regardless of caste and other barriers in the Hindu society, and Lalitavati writes, “His approach to religion was not merely theoretical but practical. He sought to unite society by introducing 'Nam sankirtan, Nagar Samkirtan, Mahotsva, Rathayatra', thus bringing about social equality of a rare type. In these sankirtan assemblies, the sudra and untouchables came in physical contact with brahmanas, sharing the same carpet. In these social gatherings which also served as a social coalescer, we witness a serious violation of caste rules”, unquote. So the Nam Sankirtans, the Nagar Sankirtans, these different performances were the Kirtans through which Chaitanya would mainly worship Lord Krishna along with other devotees. Vaishnavism lacks sectarian organization and its

classifications are usually vague. A number of Vaishnav sects accommodate the marginal subjects. For example, most of the public women working as sex-workers are disciples of the Kardaha Goswami lineage, the Kardaha Goswami lineage in Calcutta.

On the other hand, we also have the orthodox schools such as the Shantipur Advaita Goswamis that do not allow the lower caste and the so-called immoral elements to become members of their school. And then fringe subjects are traditionally found, you know, being admitted among the Nityananda's descendants. So the fringe subjects traditionally find admission among the, among Nityananda's descendants. So on the other hand, we see that the Shantipur Advaita Goswami's are more orthodox and they do not allow the fringe elements, the lower castes and the so-called immoral elements to, you know, get membership within their school. The fringe subjects usually get absorbed and find admission among Nityananda's descendants.

So Vaishnavism as such has no one trend or, you know, tenet. Depending on the school, particular school and the guru from which the school descends, its outlook, its worldview is formed, it can be anything ranging from very orthodox to very liberal and very accommodative. Having said that, we should also remember that Krishna, the figure of Krishna finds a lot of popularity among the unisex people in the, in the context of unisex people, you know, locally known as the hijras, the transgender section of the society. According to a myth, Krishna is considered as the husband of the hijras, the transgenders and the unisex. So he is a very popular figure among them and the Vaishnavite tradition kind of accommodates what today we call as the LGBTQIA section, the non-heteronormative section of the society, identify their spirituality going with the Vaishnavite tradition. They are absorbed by many of the relatively liberal Vaishnavite schools.

So according to the Indic mythical tradition, the unisex people considered Krishna as their husband and so what we know today as a LGBTQIA section, the non-heteronormative section, find their spirituality reverberating with and finding some kind of space within the Vaishnavite tradition, some of the more liberal schools of the Vaishnavite tradition. So the Chaitanya Vaishnav include the Sudra caste devotees and allow them to take the bhik or beggar's attire. On the other hand, the sanyasis who are very similar to the Vaishnavite tradition follow caste discrimination. The renunciatory ideals in sanyasi order also talk of women as temptresses, who are at the root of the saints' fall. So the sanyasi tradition apparently very much parallel to the Vaishnavite tradition is more orthodox.

They have a more gendered, more casteist approach and are not all accommodative, all inclusionary in nature. So Chaitanya temples follow the lesser manuals derived from the authoritarian text Haribhaktivilasa. And for many of the Vaishnav sects, we see that the object of worship is Chaitanya rather than Krishna. So they have a figure of Gauranga in their, you know, in the Garbhagriha inside the temple and that is the core object of worship alongside Radha and Krishna, along with Radha and Krishna. So the devotees coming down from Chaitanya tradition would mainly worship the icon of Chaitanya or Gauranga, rather than Radha and Krishna.

Radha and Krishna would also be at the side, but the main icon of worship remains Chaitanya himself. In Mahaprabhu's house, the liturgy followed by the pujaris is in Sanskrit. However, the Sankirtans are mainly in vernacular or Bengali. Although Gauranga himself was a caste-defying leader and the kind of kirtans that he propagated, that he spearheaded were ways of breaking the shackles of the time-worn caste system, one sees that the seating arrangement for food within his house, within the precincts of his house, separate the vairagis from the householder and then the untouchables are allowed only till the open courtyard, but not inside the Garbhagriha of the temple. So next talking about Vaishnavism, we look at the culture, the school of Madhva Matha in Karnataka, which was made after Vedantic philosopher Madhvacharya from the Vyasa period.

In the Madhva Matha, during the evening ritual, the scholars give a discourse on topics such as Mahabharata outside of the sanctum sanctorum. And after this discourse, women can sing bhajans in praise of Lord Krishna. So this participatory role of women, this inclusionary, you know, process reduce the sharp difference between the genders and also allows the members of non-Madhva caste to participate. So these activities reduce the sharp difference between the genders and allow the members of non-Madhva caste to participate, where discourses are being usually practiced or delivered by the males. However, the women are also included at the time of singing bhajans in praise of Lord Krishna.

Now, gender blur is observed in the practice of the Krishna's icon being decorated with the costumes of goddesses during the Navaratri, which is the nine days of worshipping Sakti or feminine deity. So during Navaratri, the Vaishnavites actually imagine Lord Krishna himself as a female deity and dress him up like a goddess. That's a practice

referring to some kind of gender blur or playing with the concept of gender, right? The Mathas attempt at orienting according to the modern system of schooling, and education is available through bringing out.. or is practiced through bringing out journals, magazines, souvenirs and books on philosophy in different regional languages as well as in English. According to a senior Swamiji in Adaman Matha, I quote: “The only way out is education. One has to break the cycle of corruption which the Kshatriyas and Brahmins – the rulers and politicians have brought about”, unquote.

So next we are going to talk about the Sahaja Vaishnav, one of the marginal Vaishnav sects that do not find, you know, inclusion within the, for example, a mainstream school such as the Gaudiya Vaishnav sect. There is a common saying among the Sahajiyas, a marginal Vaishnav cult in India that “What is not there in the body, is not there in the universe”. The Sahaja Vaishnavism epitomizes a case of gender blur. The practitioners of Sahaja Vaishnavism observe retentive sexuality, which denotes both the partners drive, both the male and the female partners drive for being a woman. Both are striving to become a woman, regardless of their biological orientation or biological sex.

Such a non-ejaculatory method of sexual union is opposed to the heteronormative imagination, and they are not driven by the utilitarian social aims of pregnancy and reproduction. In its condition of eternal and immutable joy, the practice of retentive sexuality makes the body replicate an ecstatic experience of Brindavan and the body becomes the Gupta Brindavan, the secret Brindavan itself, right, through the practice of retentive sexuality. So through body-centric expressions, the Sahaja Vaishnav unsettled the normative social oppositions between the householder and the renouncer and even rejects the social process of marriage as a warrant for sexual association. A Sahajiya practitioner is free to simultaneously enjoy the contradictory ideals of worldly detachment and sensual desire. Additionally, when married couples adopt Sahajiya sanyas or hermitage, the woman has to take off her markers of Hindu marriage such as the vermilion and other, you know, objects that a married woman is supposed to wear and she also needs to shave off her head.

This is highly transgressive when compared to the laws that shape the normative, the heteronormative Hindu society. The Sahaja Vaishnav couple unifies through Yukta Bhairagya, Bhairagya that is practiced both by the husband and the wife. It is also known as.. Yukta Bhairagya is also known as Gopi Sanyas and it is, it refers to an ego-effaced feminine mood. There is no ego, there is no one body dominating over the other in a heterosexual sense. There is just an ego-effaced feminine mood.

These unconventional bodily performances derive meanings of sexuality from the concept of compassion. So, these unconventional bodily performances derive meanings of sexuality from the concept of compassion rather than hierarchy and domination. And they therefore push the boundaries and question the dichotomies and the rigid social orders that form, that inform the institutionalized religions. Now similar to the Sahaja Vaishnav, the Bairagis live in Akhras that are close to the Vaishnav temples. These sects, the Sahajiyas, the Bairagis, they are all offshoots of the Vaishnavite tradition but they are not, you know, accommodated by mainstream Vaishnav schools such as the ISKCON, the Gaudiya Vaishnavite sects and so on.

They are Vaishnav at the fringes. Unlike the mainstream Vaishnavism, the Vairagis are not ruled by strict and fixed dictates. Illiteracy prevents them, you know, access to texts and in the absence of definite prescription or teaching, education is inducted among the Vairagis through inspirational agency, such as songs of mendicancy expressing humble joy. So for the hermits in the Indic traditions, the body is often times seen as a holy text where the divine can be persuaded to live. Many Vaiṣṇavas and Rama-bhaktas cover the entire body or parts of the exposed body either with temporary clay and sandalwood paste imprints or with permanent tattoos. These markers celebrate religion as a live and lived subject and uphold the belief system of the masses.

So the Vaishnav's mark, their torso, arms, neck and face with gopichandan or a kind of yellow clay with the symbols of conch or shankha, disc or chakra, mace or gada and lotus or padma as well as symbols of Narayan or the Narayan mudra. Similarly, among the Veer Saivites, we see that they often tattoo or paint their body with the symbol of the shivling. So here we have a bhajan whose author is Govinda Das Kaviraj and this is how it goes. Bhaja ho re man, Sri Nandar nandan, abhaya charanar vrinde, durlavam manavajanam sat sangye, taraha e bhava sindhure. When translated to English, it goes as follows, O mind, just worship the lotus feet of the son of Nanda, which make one fearless, having obtained his rare human birth, cross over this ocean of worldly existence through the association of saintly persons.

Next we are going to talk briefly about tantra, the school of tantrism. It's a school of mysticism in India whose name, the name tantra etymologically roots back to the word 'tanu' or body. So tantric or tantrism or tantra comes from 'tanu'. Tantric modes of worship entail body-centric experiences and license the discharge of corporeal or animal

instincts. With the help of religion and semantics that are primarily fleshy and rooted to the body, the tantric mystics discipline and channelize the base bodily urges, the urges that are conventionally considered as base through sexo-yogic mechanisms.

And they follow the tantric teaching that “One must rise by that by which one falls”. So body is traditionally considered as the root of the fall of the man. So one must rise by the body rather than consider it as a weakness. One must rise by that by which one falls. The mystic's sexual impulses synthesizes bhoga or indulgence with yoga or liberation, pointing out that individual lives are inseparably unified with the schemes that drive the larger universal system.

Going back to what I said before, what is not there in the body is not there in the universe and vice versa. So the starting point of the mystic schools is the body. However, they supersede the metaphor of the body in order to reach a rapturous existence. So the tantric practices require identifying and activating the different chakras or discs and the padmas or lotuses located at the different zones of the body, which enables the practitioner to discover oneself and alongside discovering oneself one can discover the macrocosm better. By knowing the body they know the universe better.

Empathy is built in tantrism through mudras or gesticulations and touching various parts of the body which is known as nyasa, which has spiritual as well as therapeutic values. David Levin states that the significance of mudras lies in, I quote Levin here, “...break[ing] down our ego-structured encapsulations and open[ing] us up to the being of other sentient natures...mudra contributes to our self-development by anchoring our life in the compassion of a transpersonal field” (Levin 1992 [1987], 246), unquote. So a body that realizes that it is in continuum with the universe. So developing a kind of compassion which is only aroused through a recognition of a transpersonal field or a discovery of a transpersonal self, a self that is more than only itself, a self that is a part, a strand and in causality with the larger macrocosm, the universe. The ultimate aim of tantrism is to overcome the limits of the annamaya and the prānamaya existences, the systems centering food and breathing and hence materialism and gross physicality.

And even it aims at exceeding the bounds of the manomaya and the vijñānamaya, referring to the mind and consciousness, hence the ego. And by overcoming all these aforesaid states, the annamaya, the prānamaya, the manomaya and the vijñānamaya, the



tantric ultimately attains the state of anandame or pure rapture, pure bliss. The state of ānandamaya invokes sunya-samadhi or perfect equilibrium. Through sunya-samadhi, you know, there is a confluence of opposite forces. I will just go back to what I said when discussing Chaitanya's experience of a union of Radha and Krishna inside his body, a union of the male and female forces inside his body.

He says that Krishna is my body and Radha is my soul. This is akin to sunya-samadhi. This is the crux of the tantric idea of the body. And it is beyond the perceptual knowledge of positive and negative traits. Krishna means an equilibrium, a balance where it is neither bama nor purush.

It is actually celebrating the state of equilibrium and a state of neuter, also known as avadhuti. Right? The harmony that describes sunya-samadhi is metaphorically also seen as unification of the feminine self, Radha or Sakti with the masculine self Krishna or Shiva. So similarly Buddhist Tantrism looks at monasticism and sexuality as two complementary rather than contradictory qualities of the body. And when a tantric, you know, meditates on a lifeless corpse, he realizes the temporary nature of the material body or rūpa kāyā, the material body's ephemeral nature, transient nature and that is why it is called the rūpa kāyā. And yet such a corpse can also be seen as the Bodhisattva's dharma-kāyā that is in the process of overcoming the conditions of embodiment, overcoming the schemes of causality and therefore, such a corpse on which the tantric sits and meditates is damaged but still beautiful.

So with this I am going to stop my lecture here today and let us meet with another round of discussions on the same topic in another lecture. Thank you.