

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 29

Sufi Mysticism and Poetics I

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So today we are discussing Sufi mysticism and Poetics. Now when we talk of Sufi mysticism and Poetics, we have already discussed the basic philosophy or the basic worldview in forming the Sufi cult, the Sufi movement that originated in West Asia or Middle East. Now some of the major singers of, you know, the Sufi cult or the major performers of Sufi cult that emerged in South Asia are something that interests our course. So talking about Sufi mysticism in South Asia, one of the most popular songs that has been remixed and that has been, you know, sung by different artists that has had so many wonderful renditions is the Mast Qalandar song, right. It has found its space, it being discussed within popular cinema, even in Bollywood.

So Mast Qalandar dhun is a tune sung all along the Rajasthan, Sindh, Baluchistan and Iran continuum. So basically we are looking at the Punjab, the undivided Punjab and North Western Frontier Province, and then further moving westwards towards Iran. So the Mast Qalandar dhun or tune pervades this entire geographical area. This melody is dedicated to Ali.

Ali who was Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law, and it is sung in all the regional languages along this geographical continuum like Rajasthan, Sindh, Baluchistan and Iran. Almost every folk singer in, you know, this region, belonging to this region can relate to the Mast Qalandar dhun and can sing it because of its simple mnemonics and rhythm. Although the lyrics are dedicated originally to Ali, like I said, the lyric is also dedicated to Hazrat Lal Shabbaaz Qalandar who was a Sufi mystic of Sindh. So Lal Shabbaaz Qalandar belonged to Sindh and this song can be seen as dedicated to him. In Sindh, at the Hazrat Lal Shabbaaz Qalandar shrine in 1999, a singer who was originally from the Gypsy tribes, Reshma, sang this song and she rose to her international fame after she sang the famous Mast Qalandar melody.

So Reshma, also known as the Nightingale of Desert, sang the song in Saraiki language at the Lal Shabaaz Qalandar shrine in her 60s with passion, a deep passion that made her internationally renowned and her rendition is unforgettable and unparalleled basically. The way she has sung the Mast Qalandar remains, you know, a kind of, it creates a kind of timeless benchmark that can hardly be, you know, touched. So she has created her own benchmark through her rendition of Mast Qalandar which can hardly be surpassed by any other singer or performer. So performers like Reshma sing Sufi melodies in their high pitched full throated voices. It is kind of a very spontaneous rendition which does not even need the support of microphones.

They make a very live and lively performance at the shrines and they do not need the electronic supports. They also sing poetic texts that glorify the karāmāt or mystical prowess of Hazrat Lal Shahbaaz Qalandar. The Sufi saint Lal Shahbaaz Qalandar is also known as the jalālī Pir, a mystic with intense supernatural energy. So Hazrat Lal Shahbaaz is revered and venerated through this lyric as the bestower of children and bounties. So the standard lyrics sung in the popular Mast Qalandar folk melody goes as follows.

I will first read it in the original and then I will read the translation. So this is how the lyric goes: "Lāl merī pat rakio bhalā Jhole Lālan Sindhṛī dā Sehwan dā Of Sehwan Sakhī Shāhbāz Qalandar Damā dam mast Qalandar Alī Shāhbāz Qalandar Alī dam dam de andar." So when translated to English it reads as follows: O Lal Kalandar save my prestige, O thou of the cradle, O thou of Sindh or belonging to Sindh, thou bounteous Shahbaaz Qalandar, thy ecstatic trance is the healing breath, Ali Shahbaaz Qalandar.

Ali's name is the healing breath. Thou giver of children to mothers, thou giver of brothers to sisters, O thou of the cradle, O thou of Sindh, of Sehwan, thou bounteous Shahbaaz Qalandar, Ali's name is the healing breath. So we see that here we are celebrating Lal Shahbaaz Qalandar who is still in the cradle. And this is where the cultural exchanges show; Sufism in its South Asian avatar has drawn substantially on the Bhakti tradition. So there have been so many, there are so many Bhakti bhajans and poems, lyrics basically celebrating the birth of Krishna.

So when we see Lal Shahbaaz Qalandar in the cradle and he has certain divine qualities, he is the giver of bounties, the giver of children, the bestower of children, we are reminded of the newborn Krishna and you know all the milkmaids and the entire tribe of Nandlal coming, visiting to see the child, the newborn beautiful child. So we see that this kind of cultural exchange is rife. Next, we are going to talk about Amir Khusrau, who is said to be one of the earliest exponents of the qawwālī form or tradition and he used the Khari Boli form of the dohā and the gīt as lyrics in a number of his melodies. In his melodies we find that the speaker is frequently a female. So once again Amir Khusrau's creations take us back to what we were talking about just now, the South Asian avatar of Sufism that has undergone a certain degree of metamorphosis, a certain transformation it has adapted; the local flavours which is evident in the fact that Khusrau is using the Doha, the Doha or Doha couplet which has been used by Bhakti writers such as Tulsidas, Surdas as well as poets from the Sant tradition like Kabidas and Guru Nanak.

So he is also using the gīt in order to write his lyrics and what is important is that the voice of the female is very prominent, right? The speaker, the narrator of these words of you know song or the lyrics is a female most of the times... and what is remarkable is that the speaker is frequently a female, the one that is narrating these lyrics according to the Sufi authors is a female, it is written from a feminine position. These songs are written from a feminine position. So like the Doha, gīt is a simple poetic construction that is used for composing a song or a hymn. Although a number of Amir Khusrau's best qawwālīs are composed in the Persian ghazal form, Khusrau has also often used the Khariboli and its simple poetic constructions and you know written in the Doha form for his native audience who largely belong to the grassroots cultures. So the Persian ghazals would be understood more by the elite section of the Indian society, whereas the Khariboli would directly appeal to the ordinary masses.

Khusrau also experimented by mixing the Persian ghazal with the Khariboli Doha in order to compose his popular lyrics, one of the most memorable one being such as: “ze-hāl-e-miskīn makun taḡhāful durā.e naināñ banā.e batiyāñ.” The Doha in Hindi poetry can be compared to the Persian or Urdu ghazal, and for several centuries Doha has remained a popular form of poetic composition for devotional purposes in the Indic context. Apart from narrating only divine or religious content, Doha has also had its secular topics to discuss. So apart from discussing godly and religious topics, Doha has also used secular topics, it also has had a secular content. Unfortunately a large part of Amir Khusrau's written Khariboli or Hindawi poetry is lost.

However, scholars have researched several of his Dohas and gīts which are sung in the oral traditions. There are dominant female voices in Khusrau's poetry. Now Doha which is quite similar to Persian or Urdu ghazal conveys an idea or an image in two verses. Only in the Indic context we have to understand that the audiences are very different. For the Urdu poetry there are admirers mainly from the elite section, from the upper echelons of the society, whereas the Dohas being written in Khariboli would be appreciated by the masses.

However, the composition is quite the same. Both Urdu ghazal and Doha comprise two verses and Doha has been described as an old popular Prakrit and a Hindi meter in which a couplet is put together, where the two verses rhyme. Apart from devotional content, Doha has also additionally been used to express you know, very secular subject matters. This is something I was telling a while back. Doha can be used to express eroticism, valour, meditation, mundane life, ecology, proverbs and maxims in mystical literature.

And because of its simplicity, its earthy nature, Doha as a poetic form has also been used to describe the spiritual states and experiences using sensual imagery. So in Doha we find spirituality being expressed through sensual and sensuous imageries. Doha as a poetic form has been the medium of expression in the mendicant's lore as well as the roving minstrel traditions in medieval India, right. Doha was mainly used in the Bhakti poetry emerging from the northern and the central states of India. So poet-saints such as Kabir and Nanak have extensively used Doha while writing their mystical poetry.

Amer Khusrau found the Doha as an appropriate form for the lyrics in his qawwalis and other Sufi poetry. Khusrau's poetry has been sung outside the qawwali tradition too. There are several verses or Dohas that Amir Khusrau has created on the death of his sheikh and mentor, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. So Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya was the mentor of Amir Khusrau and as the story goes, on hearing the news of his sheikh's death, Amir Khusrau had torn his clothes and blackened his face to lament. That was the intensity of devotion and passion that he felt towards his preceptor.

So Ustad Ghulam Mustafa Khan has sung a number of Dohas composed by Amir Khusrau. One of the Doha's goes like this. I will read it in original and then in translation: Gorī sowe sej par, Mukh pe ḍāle kes, Cal Khusrau ghar āpne, Rēn bahī sabdes.

"The beloved lies on her couch, black dresses scattered on her face. Khusrau let us go home now for the darkness shrouds the earth." So this poem is apparently very sensuous. A beautiful fair lady is lying with her tresses covering her face and Khusrow almost in the style of Bhanita, Khusrau writes his name as the undersigned who has composed this poem, Khusrau is telling himself to, you know, return home because it is dark.. darkness covers/ envelops the earth. So this definitely has a transcendental symbolism, a symbolism that is beyond the mundane scene or the mundane meaning. The woman whose face is veiled is once again, you know, the god.

This has been envisioned by a number of Sufi poets where the woman whose face is veiled is equated with a veil on our self-knowledge, a veil on our inner knowledge, right? A veil that separates us from God and then Khusrau has to go home now, which can be seen as reunion with God, going back from where he came and darkness pervades. So the journey of life eventually comes to an end. Darkness descends.. as darkness descends one goes back from where one came, right? And this veil on self-knowledge that separates us from God needs to be lifted. So we see that at one level we have a very sensuous imagery and imagination in forming this poem. On the other hand, we also have a divine connotation associated with this Doha.

So there is enough evidence to support the fact or the argument that a substantial Sufi poetry in the Indian subcontinent is sung in the female voice. The narrator who is a male poet, you know, so the male poet assumes the position in the voice of a female narrator. Female musicians use inflection and by default the female voices are heard through their syntax and semantics. The way a poem or, you know, verses are composed can only be spoken by a female narrator. It is... many of these poems are clearly written from the feminine position celebrating or bringing to the fore the feminine perspective.

So in the Sufiānā-kalām and qawwāli songs, the idealized female voice is very prominent. Poet performers present themselves as the female and imagine their beloved and mentor as the male. So at the shrines of Shah Abdul Latif, Bulleh Shah and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, the fakirs sing in falsetto voices assuming the metaphor of the bride who is yearning and longing for unification with the beloved. So at one level it is the relation, the sensuous relation between the earthly lover and beloved where the beloved is the male Sufi saint and singer whereas the lover is the god being addressed to. So at one level we see a sensuous relationship being celebrated between the lover and the beloved

but at another we see that the beloved or the bride is the devotee, the Sufi saint who is singing, whereas the lover is none other than the god.

And so longing for unification with god underlies the aims and desires or the passion driving all these Sufi poems and verses. Fakirs use the artist's agency, so they are artists and they use their agency to question clerical, patriarchal and casteist sentiments. At the shrine of Bulleh Shah, dance is performed by transvestites. So transvestites meaning men dressed as women, the cross-dressers. And a legend also goes that Bulleh Shah himself became an intersex or a hijra in order to win the affection of his mentor or preceptor.

Shameem Abbas in her study has transliterated some of the lyrics by Amir Khusrau from the recordings on audio cassettes and videos and the melodies are sung in the form of female narratives. So male singers singing from the female position. Here is one of the songs composed by Khusrau. It goes like this. First I will read the original and then the translation.

"Khusrau ren suhāg ki Jāgī pī ke sang, Tan mero, man pīo ke, Do bhāī ek rang. Cakwa cakwi do jane In mat mār koī, Eh māre Kartar ke Ren bīchohā ho-e. When translated to English, it reads as follows. Khusrau, that night of the nuptial, awake remained with the Beloved. The body mine, the soul the Beloved's, two beings, one color...

Chakwa chakvi are two beings, none ought to persecute them. Almighty's beaten are they, separated are they in the dark." So once again, you know, the symbol or the trope of the nuptial comes. We are talking about union and separation of the lover and the beloved. We are talking about the bridal night, the longing and the desire for union and yet at the symbolic level, at the transcendental level, it is the yearning for the devotee to unite with the divine.

So here we see that the nuptial as a symbol, as a trope keeps coming back in a number of Sufi poetry. So we see that the nuptial as a trope keeps coming back in a number of Sufi poems where the lover and the beloved are separated, they are longing for union and there is this, you know, this discussion on color. The beloved losing her own color and becoming one with the color of the lover, right. So this color could symbolically mean or

this could stand for the soul. So one is merging with the, the, the greater spirit, the, the, the soul of the devotee emerging with the greater soul, right.

And almighty's beaten they are because it is lamenting the state of earthly existence basically because they are separated, the earthly journey of the, the devotee makes her separated from the God and so the devotee is surrounded by darkness. This darkness can only go once the devotee reunites with the God, with the divine. So recent scholarship points out that Khusrau adapted songs or gīts that women sang at seasonal festivals in order to write lyrics in praise of his sheikh Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. So his poetic persona is essentially very feminized, a feminine, you know, voice he is adapting in order to praise Nizamuddin Auliya, his preceptor and through Nizamuddin Auliya he is praising God, right. So regardless of the biological, you know, gender identity, the poetic identity of Sufi poets remain the feminized one and they always, almost always assume a feminine position, the position of the bride, the position of the beloved, you know, you know, burning with the desire to unite with their preceptor, with the divine, with the God.

I will stop my lecture here today and let us continue with this discussion in our next lecture. Thank you.