

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

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**Lecture 36**

**Gender and Performance in Sufi Movement II**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So we are discussing gender and performance in the Sufi movement. We were talking about the figure of the Sufi saint, this figure of Sufi Baba in the Ansari sect or Ansari community, where he is a very heretical figure, not a very conventional figure of a mystic or a saint. He is thriving or his presence is felt more among the marginal subjects in the society such as the women. He offers curative procedures or some curative potions for women. He is a go-between for the prostitutes and their clients, and then he also is a vehicle for entertainment.

So he is like a jester, right, who makes his audience laugh. So he is a very unconventional figure that is definitely a departure from the serious facet of religion, mainstream institutionalized religion that Islam is. So far from being perceived as an affront or an injury to gender sensibilities, in multiple contexts we see the Sufi Baba stands at the crossroads of belonging and alienation, a part of the Ansari community yet someone who is ritually humiliated and ridiculed by the community. He laughs with the community laughs or evokes laughter at himself because of his outrageous gender bending antics. He is at the same time a father and a husband but also a perpetual outsider, a master of teaching weaving techniques to others.

So they are, Ansari's are essentially a weaver community, so he is teaching the art and technique of weaving but then he is also positing himself as a failure at mastering the art himself. So he is a master and a failure, a preceptor and a joker at the same time. So he posits a very complex, a very motleyed position. We were talking about this in the previous lecture. So through the multiple sides of self-configuring, a figure like the Sufi Baba among the Ansari sect, you know, in the Ansari community defies and challenges the community's perception of gender roles and human relationships.

Next we also have another heretical and very radical figure, the case of a 'khala'. A 'khala' who is a female disciple or murid of Nawāb Sāhib, the third peer of the Gudri Shah Chisti order. So she is a female mystic and she was a disciple, murid of the third pir of the Gudri Shah Chisti order and her story is chronicled in the book titled "Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines of India". So her story is chronicled in the book titled "Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines of India." Her gender-bending activities are both instrumental and inherent to the spiritual station that the mystic has achieved, right.

So we see this khala's adoption of male clothing. There is a lot of transvestitism that defines the Sufi mystic. Here we see, we were talking about the different 'trans' or transcending, transcension that inform a mystic. It could be transcension of any border, the gender border, the sartorial border in terms of clothing, in terms of gender, the religious and spiritual border, so they are transcending and you know adopting the traits, the philosophy, the outlook of other religions, you know, transcension of national borders and so you know, transcending being something plus, something over and above what is institutionalized defines the mystic essentially. So here we see transvestitism, you know, cross-dressing, the khala adopting male clothing and her willingness to breach any kind of protocol and wanting to sit not only inside an all-male mahfil-i samā, an all male sama or gathering where she wants to sit and not only that she would insist that she sits next to the Nawab Sahib who presided over the entire event.

This was interpreted by some of the disciples as an affront, as an outrageous act to the hierarchy of the order and to the gender norms in general that would prohibit women from attending such assemblies, except for a few. So khala's position also can be mapped, can be traced as transcending the pre-given borders, boundaries and codes and codifications in a society. Yet, we see very interestingly that Nawab Sahib, the pir, right, of this Chisti order is encouraging her. He interpreted her act as a sign of spiritual greatness. So for him, khala's willingness to risk all kinds of social codes and social prescriptions in order to be near her master, to sit near the master, marked the traits of the true devotee.

He interpreted her, not only the transcending but the transgressive behavior, as a mark of a true devotee. It served as a testimony to her spiritual power and her, you know, genuine spiritual worth and her elevated status in the spiritual sense, her elevated spiritual status. So the story goes that a young disciple had physically assaulted and ejected khala

from the assembly because she wanted to sit beside Nawab Sahib and in an all-male space and later this disciple is going to have died from some unknown causes, shortly after the affront. So khala has been described by her sheikh as a very big saint, a great saint and later we see how, you know, the insult, you know, meted out to a disciple or a murid also transcribes onto the murshid. If a disciple, a true disciple is humiliated, the master is thereby humiliated too.

The Nawab Sahib would be greatly offended at the khala being, you know, evicted, being thrown out of the assembly and so he also abandoned this mahfilkhāna, claiming that this assembly has been ruined now after her assault and could never be used for Sufi mahfils again. So this episode which is part of the oral history of the Gudri Shah order underscores how the normal rules, the so-called normal rules of gender should not be applied to the understanding, to the interpretation of extraordinary women who have transcended the limitations of gender. Far from being an anomaly in the Sufi circles, a figure like khala who represents, who embodies gender reversal is a trope that is commonly found and which keeps coming back in the stories of, you know, gender-bending, gender-bending and experimenting Sufis everywhere. They are figures of transcension who are transcending and transgressing at the same time and, you know, constantly doing so. Such gender inversions and defiance of the social rules that mandate separation of genders and you know, thereby locating men within a homosocial discourse into homosocial worlds have become a part and parcel of the criticism by the Sufis from within the Muslim community.

And the.. so the Sufis see this kind of gender segregation, space segregation in terms of gender as something that needs to be criticized, that needs to be reformed from within the Muslim community. They call this type of behavior, this kind of classification as un-Islamic and operating outside the pale, the essence of Islam. At the Hazrat Lal Shabaz Qalandar shrine which is located at Sehwan Sharif, the woman faqiriānī or caretaker is given the duty of, you know, offering water to the devotees. So the faqiriānī, so the faqiriānī or the caretaker is in charge of offering water to the devotees. According to the Islamic tradition, giving water to the thirsty is a savab, savab or a charitable act and the act of giving water to the thirsty is eulogized by many oral Sufi traditions as well.

So the female myths in Sufi poetry represent the voices of marginalized groups and it has been used as a representative frame. There are two things, one we are talking about the women, the biological females. On the other hand, there is also the concept of the feminized male, the male singing in feminized voices. There are lots of, you know,

instances where men sing qawwalis in feminized voices where they are, you know, imagining themselves, they are imagining themselves as the bride of the god, right. So here the qawwali singers are the imaginary embodiment of a female, a female devotee who is seeking the attention of the male god.

So both are mentioned commonly and, and you know, both are mentioned, so both find mention in Sufi literature, the presence of women, the contribution of women and the female saints themselves like the case of khala and then the celebration of the feminized male, the feminized self within the male Sufi, right. So female singers perform sufiana-kalam or mystical poetry at Sufi shrines and in concerts, in folk festivals and domestic life, whereas male singers assume the female voice when singing the myths of heroines in qawwali and in sufiana-kalam. Like I was saying, here we are talking about two things, the celebration of female agency within the Sufi order and then the celebration of the feminine self within the male himself. So Sufis have been time immemorially criticized as, you know, immoral or unconventional or a breakaway from the core Islam for... and this is because they welcomed women into their circles as disciples and as spiritual warriors on the same rank as the men. So the close relations that many Sufi men and women have enjoyed within the space of communal dhikr, dhikr meaning.. dhikr referring to the rotating or repetition of God's name or mahāfil-i samā or even during a celebration of the 'urs signal to the moral decline of contemporary Sufi practice in the minds of many of his detractors.

So many, in other words, many, you know, more conservative branches perceive the participation of women in all these practices, in dhikrs and mahāfil-i samā and 'urs as a general trend of decline within the Sufi circle. They are of the opinion that women should be segregated and kept in pardah. So yet we see that Sufis have always been known to challenge these kinds of ready assumptions regarding morality, gender, whether through, you know, scrambling of material notions of masculinity and femininity through celebrating the spiritual virtues of males as the bride of God and females as men in the shape of women or through practices in praxis with the uneasy and still contested acceptance of the female peers and khalifas. So Sufism has constantly revisited these kinds of very fixed and kind of, you know, static positions that core Islam has assumed time and again; they have kind of reshuffled the fundamental notions associated with masculinity and femininity and they have given importance, prominence and visibility to the female peers and khalifas. So a few names of female Sufis have become known through the tabaqāt, tazkirāt and malfūzāt literature through nasab nāmas and spiritual genealogies and other forms of Sufi literary production, and recently there have also been some historical and ethnographic research on the female Sufis.

So we see next that among the Chishti Sufis and some other Sufi orders that exist in the Indian subcontinent in South Asia, there has been a perceptible shift towards interfaith activism and this is observable, this is available since the 1990s and alongside this tendency.. this tendency to mingle with other religions, an emphasis on universalizing narratives that incorporate opportunities of demonstrating, of expressing gender equity. So gender equity, interaction with other religions, becoming more liberal and more inclusive in general has been a trend that one sees in the Chishti Sufis and other Sufi orders since the 1990s. In the case of the Chishtis, the narratives drawing liberally upon elements of the lives of Mu‘īn ud-Dīn Chishtī and Prophet Muhammad, de-emphasize or move away from the question of Islamic authenticity and they emphasize discourses and social actions which promote a vision of you know, shared faith, a community of shared faith in the divine. So they are basically shedding or getting rid of their rigidity. So these two twin you know modalities, religious activism and then discursive production highlight the ways in which narratives are being mobilized in serving the aims of the present society, the current world.

So bringing two genders in parity, as equal and then you know the desire, the need for Islam to open up, to become all-embracing, also interact with other religions. These are two imperatives that one finds you know operating at the heart of Sufi circles in the.. since the 1990s. These suggest that some of the Sufi orders in the Indian subcontinent since 1990s have begun recasting gender in ways which suggest you know, that the Sufi Niswa or Niswan, the women practitioners of the feminine equivalent to Sufi chivalry or fatwa. So scholars suggest that some of the Sufi orders in the Indian subcontinent since the 1990s posit or recast gender in ways which suggest that the Sufi Niswa or Niswan, the female practitioner of the you know from the Sufi cult as equivalent to the concept of Sufi chivalry or futuwwa. So the male practitioner and the female practitioner are perceived as you know, perceived as belonging to an equal platform.

The Niswan is the feminine counterpart to Fityan, the men, the male who practice spiritual chivalry. So latest trend being that the Niswan or the female chivalry is being seen on the same level as the Fityan or the male practitioner of spiritual chivalry. This recasting posits the women of the Sufi orders as active agents who are fully involved in participating in the social mission of the order, which in turn functions as a kind of symbolic capital that can give rise to transformations and transformative social actions. So we see that Kelly Pemberton highlights the way in which the Gudri Shah Chishtis have turned the narrative of inter-communal harmony into the defining mission of their

Sufi saint's school. So at the heart of the Chishti tradition or Chishti order is the mission for inter-communal harmony.

So it is founded by Pīr o Murshid of the Gudri Shah order named Hazrat Inam Hassan. These discourses of harmony intersect with narratives of gender equality and social activism, making a mark of progress both in the spiritual sense as well as in the material sense. On both planes it is making a progress. So Pemberton studies the case of the Maizbhandari Silsila that is located in Bangladesh, which is a classic case of intersection of Sufism with social activism and it was founded in the 19th century by Maulana Sayyid Ahmadullah. So in the Maizbhandari Silsila in this order the gender and the specific you know, in the Maizbhandari order, the gender and more specifically the use of a type of feminized masculinity is deployed to the service of two interrelated aims.

The first aim being providing a counter example to a rising tide of discourses of hyper-masculinity - something that is predicated on the linkages between power, hegemonic authority and public demonstrations of physical force. It is completely antithetical to that. So Maizbhandari Silsila is trying to focus on the feminized qualities of the male, the softer traits of the male and it is a breakaway, it is a way of you know, it is a way of opposing the hyper- masculinist tendencies, the exhibition of physical force and violence in the society. The second you know aim of this Silsila order is offering a model of social reform which reinforces the importance of Quranic guidance and looking at Prophet Muhammad's figure as an example, as a guidepost for future actions. So these ideas are articulated within the notion of a, within the notion of a Maizbhandari Darsan or philosophy that is at the heart.. of the Maizbhandari Darsan or philosophy.

So the hagiographic narratives of several sheikhs of the Maizbhandari order link the language of inclusiveness with spiritual development. The Maizbhandari website states that Hazrat Syed Ziaul Huq Maizbhandari was a perfect model of 'Rabubiyat'. So this leader Zia-ul-Haq Maizbhandari was model of Rabubiyat both in action and in spirit. He was a philanthropist. He loved all people regardless of their sex, caste, creed and religion, and that is the model path that the Silsila is trying to show to the common people, to the commoners.

The Maizbhandari order could be understood as signaling a type of familized masculinity in order to fashion a progressive-minded mission, which has social and

economic implications for forging alliances with other non-Muslim groups globally.. across the globe. So the kind of feminized masculinity that Pemberton refers to here is founded upon and draws heavily on the model of prophetic Sunnah, right? Prophetic Sunnah by which Prophet Muhammad is understood to embody both ideal masculine and feminine characteristics in his leadership of the Islamic community. So who is the ideal person? That is what the prophetic Sunnah is trying to describe. The ideal person is beyond you know, the biological demarcations of male and female. The person, such a person possesses.. so such a person possesses the perfect qualities of both the masculine and the feminine, and can thereby become a leader for the people.

So feminized masculinity facilitates a total submission to the will of God and fulfillment of the prophetic imperative to deliver a message of salvation. So submission once again is the meaning of the word 'Islam', we have to harken that back. Salvation is achieved not just through acts of piety but through attention to the needs of the most vulnerable members in a society. So a mission which evokes the divine quality of Rahim or mercy. We are not celebrating you know aggression, we are not celebrating here domination or you know the match of power; here we are celebrating Rahim or mercy.

It draws on the notion of the idealized feminine in Sufism, which points towards the ideal of ego destruction because ego is at the heart of you know all differences, all wars and violence; so it is pointing toward, it is suggesting ego destruction and a loss of self, to which the Sufi seeker aspires in his search. What is this journey about? The Sufi journey is about you know repudiation, about giving up on worldly affairs, giving up on ego for a direct experience of the divine, and finally annihilation within it, Fanaah. Fanaah means self-annihilation and what is self-annihilation? It is not destroying the body, that is a very vulgarized understanding of self-annihilation. It means losing the sense of self, losing ego and thereby becoming one with the God, that is Fanaah or you know destruction of the sense of self, sense of ego. So the hagiographic narratives surrounding the life of the fourth peer of Maizbandari Sufi or Zia-ul-Haq suggest him as a man who embodied some of the classical characteristics of spiritual seeking and loss of selfhood.

So his spirituality was centered on loss of selfhood. So in the imaginary of both the state and the social actors, the Sufis you know make up or constitute a significant force for social change and their political interception or political contribution lies in you know awakening, in provoking the moral force, in pushing forward the moral force that they embody, which is largely connected to their status as social and spiritual elites. We are

going to continue with this discussion in our next lecture. Thank you. Thank you very much.