

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

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**Lecture 39**

**Folk Traditions and Performances I**

Good morning and welcome back to a new module today. So, we are starting with a module on folk traditions and performance here. In this module, we discuss the importance of these folk traditions and performances that have time immemorially spoken to the classical traditions, the classical and the folk.. to you know, different traditions that have run parallelly, you know, at all times historically; we see they have borrowed from one another. So, we see the provenance how these cultures have grown, what these performances imply and who the audiences are, and how the variations happen from one region to another. So, the first folk performance today we are going to discuss is Tamasha. Tamasha is a form of theatre which came into existence in the early 16th century in Maharashtra.

Tamasha as an artform is performed by local or travelling theatre groups within the state of Maharashtra. So, in Maharashtra there are mainly two types of Tamasha, first being the Dholaki Fadcha Tamasha and the other being the Sangeet Baaricha Tamasha. So, Dholaki Fadcha Tamasha and Sangeet Baaricha Tamasha. The first type Dholaki Fadcha Tamasha is completely an art which includes song, dance, theatre or drama.

On the other hand, the Sangeet Baari style is focusing mainly on music and dance. It is mainly performing or communicating a theme through song and dance rather than through drama. It is known for its suggestive lyrics and also for the borderline erotic movements and content. So, Tamasha includes a play, song and also the concept of worship or aradhana apart from lavani. What is lavani? Lavani is love songs.

Lavani plays a very important role, crucial role in making the folk art popular among the common people. So, it is vital to note that each region has its own Tamasha. Like I was saying that you know, any folk performance or artform has its own inflections, it picks up

from the local culture. So, even within abutting regions its nuances, its you know.. it could be the costume, it could be the makeup of the artist, it could be the delivery, it could be the content of the song, the dialects, these things change, these things vary from region to region. So, each region has its own Tamasha.

The origin is believed to be Maharashtra and the Tamasha troops usually comprise artists, instrumentalists, they have their own cook, stage designers, porters. So it is a microcosm, a complete kind of microcosm in itself. So Tamasha also has an association with the Islamic tradition. During the late 16th century the Mughal invaders introduced some of the entertainments to the local troops that were known for their bodily excesses. So Urdu singing styles brought to the Deccan plane by the Muslim soldiers are thought to have been combined with the local indigenous forms of entertainment, and that is how Tamasha churned out.

So the Islamic styles being wedded to the local traditions in and around the Deccan region gave birth to Tamashas. So the Sangeet Baari performance has a fascinating dynamic of female power inbuilt into it. The female performer's ability, inherent ability to attract the male audience through submission and domination combined alternate you know expressions of submission and domination. The dancer's playful rhythms constantly alternate between concession and withdrawal. So here we see inundating or altering moods, expressions and expectations on the part of the audience.

So now we have to understand that it is very commonsensical that owing to its bodily excesses, its reference to love and erotica, the female dancer's playful rhythms and movements that Tamasha has been traditionally rejected by the upper-class audience and they thought that these bodily excesses were basically improper. The Mahars and the monks or Kolhati are the two outcast communities or castes that were the pioneer performers of this art form. So Tamasha originated mainly among the Mahars and the monks. The Mahars and the monks formed the roots of the Dalit identity in Maharashtra. The monks were traditionally agricultural labourers although just like the Mahars, they turned their skills to all sorts of artistic professions.

And soon they became, you know, indelibly associated with the Tamasha art form. At the outset in a Tamasha performance one sees a dholkiwala and a halgiwala entering the scene and they contribute to the musical background of the performance and announce the

beginning of the show. We can see this in the picture alongside. The performance starts with invoking Lord Ganesha followed by a Gavalana. So female performers often perform acrobatics and some of the popular ragas that are deployed, that are used in the musical scores in accompaniment with dance include Yaman, Bhairavi and Pilu, and some of the costumes that are used in Tamasha are called gammat and phada worn by various communities in Maharashtra.

So the performance ends with a moral tone celebrating the victory of good over evil. Now the changes in technology and the taste of the audience in general has created a huge impact on the Tamasha performers. Tamasha has undergone transformations regarding the methods of execution. For example, men and women earlier used to travel on bullock carts with elaborate troops which were managed by production houses. So we see that historically the owners of different Tamasha groups or troops get very low profits after meeting all types of expenditure and making payments to artists, maintaining the lighting, sound systems and transporting the, and you know paying for the transport vehicles.

So the struggle is immense to get good jobs and usually these artists, you know the folk artists have a dream to be launched into cinema. It could be regional cinema and the highest hope is to be, to become visible in Bollywood, but that is a very hard nut to crack. The performers get jobs as supportive dancers in the last rows sometimes, and they can fetch at the most some minuscule roles in the regional cinema. Now moving on to the next performance, next folk performance that we are going to discuss in our lecture today, it is called Chhau. So the name 'Chhau' comes from the ancient Sanskrit word 'chhaya', 'chhaya' meaning shadow or mask.

So implying that the most important visual focus of the Chhau dance is the mask. Chhau is taught as a traditional form, which is fixed in its style and repertoire. So J.B. Singh Deo states, 'Masks conceal the identity of all the dancers from the audience, neither the personal beauty nor sex determines the capability of the dancer.'

Here it is very important to understand that of all the forms that we are going to discuss in this course, Chhau and Kathakali are two forms that entail a lot of you know vigorous performance, excessive bodily movements and a kind of fitness, which it is very difficult for a female performer to maintain. So Chhau and Kathakali are commonly and usually you know performed by male artists, that is one thing. By virtue of the fact that the face is

covered with a mask, we know that in any art form, especially dance forms, the expression of the eyes become very important but when there is a mask covering the expression of the face and the audience is not riveted to the facial you know gestures or the face responding to the mood being enacted, the body has to compensate for that. So when the face is invisible to the audience, the facial expression is that of a mask and it is a static pre-given expression, the body has to make up for it. The body has to pick up some very fast, very you know vigorous and ambitious movements, which entails a lot of you know acrobatic skills and fitness.

And it is very impersonal after a point, it is also symbolically... when we see that the face is covered and replaced by the mask of a God or a Goddess, let us say Durga or Ganesha's mask is worn by the artist, the dancer, it symbolically means that it is no longer the artist performing, it is the God that has possessed the artist, it is the God performing. Nowhere can the artist's face be seen as long as the performance is going on. The immense, the elaborate headgear and the God's you know mask make the audience forget for some time that it is a human performance after all. And this is something that pertains to so many or most of the folk dance performances or artforms, where the audience we see are reciprocating with immense devotion. So it is no longer an artist, but the person is deified and elevated to the level of God or Goddess, to the level of a deity.

So three types of chhau exists, namely you know, the Seraikella chhau, the Purulia chhau and the Mayurbhanji chhau. So Seraikella chhau coming from Jharkhand, Purulia chhau coming from West Bengal, and Mayurbhanji chhau coming from Odisha. Chhau is a dance form mainly belonging to or coming from the eastern part of India. The chhau performers come together for competitions and village performances during, mainly during the New Year celebrations, immediately following the Chaitra parva and also chhau is performed during the Sun Festival. So Purulia chhau originated from Baghmundi dance from Purulia district with patronage from the local agrarian community.

It originated in the local warrior caste which is called the dom. So among the dom community chhau emerged for the first time and in the present we see that the dom community is you know, required or they are employed for playing or beating the drums for the chhau dances and they have been you know considered as an outcast community. The pattern of the performer's steps imitates the natural environment. So it imitates, the steps imitate trees, animals, gods and even the primitive hero, the primitive men, the primitive heroes and the primitive men. The masks represent mythological characters,

animals, demons and gods and the headgear or the elaborate headdress becomes very important.

So I was talking about the inflection, the small you know, intricate things that change when the chhau forms as they travel from Odisha to Bengal to Jharkhand, right, certain features change. It could be the design of the headgear, it could be the motifs you know built or painted on the face, on the headgear or the style of wearing a dress. It varies from region to region. So usually a big fanning headgear or headdress is worn by the dancer, which shakes and vibrates with the violent shaking of the upper part of the body.

The Purulia chhau dances can become quite violent and even out of control. Masks therefore form an integral part of the chhau dance in Purulia or Seraikella styles. Unlike these two regions in the Mayurbhanji chhau, we see the performers do not wear the big mask, but their faces are very heavily painted. Now Mayurbhanji chhau has originated in Baripada, Odisha. Their movements are often circular, jerky and aggressive and they transform into lyrical fluid steps and acrobatic poses.

It entails a lot of bodily fitness and a lot of practice that goes into making a successful you know performance. They often demonstrate hunting rituals or even mysterious representations of Hindu epic stories. So Seraikella chhau and Mayurbhanji chhau have historically been rivals. Not only are they common and different at different points, so they have their commonalities and their differences, these different chhau practices from different regions. And additionally they have also been contending with one another.

They have had rivalrous positions. So for example, like I was saying, Seraikella and Mayurbhanji chhau were rivals with different styles and forms, and we see that historically Mayurbhanji chhau had pedagogical clash with Seraikella chhau. Critic Farley Richmond claims that the Seraikella royal family exaggerated the classical status of the Seraikella dance form, often denying any tribal origins for the form. So this has also been a common phenomenon in you know, folk traditions, history coming from different regions. In many folk forms there has been, you know, a usurpation of the provenance by the classics, the classical tradition.

So the classical Sanskritized influence kind of usurps, kind of appropriates the tribal influences. The tribal influences are evanesced, they are kind of made to disappear, and the classical forms claim you know the credit to the entire dance form. whereas in reality research would say that these dance forms stand at the crossroads or the intersections of very rich you know exchanges between the classical and the folk or tribal traditions. One cannot be wished away and you know onus cannot be unduly placed on the other. It is as much the credit of the folk as that of the classical into the making of different you know performances, the way they are.

They are very hybrid, however, some of the you know royal lineages claim their provenance or their origin you know as classical. The complicated relationship between the resurrected classical Odissi dance, the local martial art form Parikhanda and Seraikella Chhau would suggest that there is rather a constant symbiosis, constant you know scopes for exchange and sharing of elements which point to you know, a very ramified, very complex and hybridized you know mishmash. No straightforward linear relationship can be traced or the influences are very difficult to identify; what elements in a dance form came from the classical tradition and what elements came from the folk you know origins or folk influences. The basic stance of holding a sword and a shield in the Seraikella and the Mauryabhanji styles of Chhau also echoes with the demi plie of western classical ballad. So influences are multiple and variegated, they are not one and it would be very difficult for any one source to claim an entire dance form and say that it is coming you know purely from that particular influence, be it classical or tribal or folk.

So the dance imagery in the movements, particularly of Seraikella and Mayurbhanji Chhau are inspired by the life of the common people. So basically what we are trying to say is that Chhau is considered as a folk art form, it is not classical, it is something that is performed, that has been historically performed in open fields among common people and its inspiration, its sources of inspiration are the you know, the commoners, the daily chores of housewives, the farmers' activities in the field and the even the movements of animals and birds. It is not removed from the mundane lives of the ordinary people and the performance also happens not on a podium or an elevated dance, it happens in an open field among the common audience, audience coming from very ordinary backgrounds. Purulia and Seraikella Chhau dance blend forms of dance and martial practices employing you know, some mock combat techniques which are called Khel, stylized gaits of birds and animals which are called Chalis and Topkas, and finally the movements based on the chores of the village housewives, which are called the Uflis. The sources or the inspirations can be traced to very grassroots origin, not something that are very grandeur in style or in terms of origin.

So sources of Chhau dance form can be traced as very mundane and you know, coming from the grassroots level, not something that is coming from the elite section of the society. Now traditional groups of Seraikella Chhau dancers are formed on the basis of communities. The dance is performed by male dancers in an open field, in an open space which is called Akhara. Akhara also referring to wrestling arena. So the combat techniques, the warrior techniques or movements are very much present in these dance forms.

The knowledge of dance, music and even the artistry associated with mask-making is transmitted orally from generation to generation. This dance is rhythmic and set to traditional folk music. It is played on the reed pipes called mohuri and shehnai. A variety of drums accompany the music ensemble including the dhol, which is a cylindrical drum, a dhamsa. Dhamsa is something that is deeply influenced by the abutting tribes, the Santals, the Oraons, they all play the dhamsa.

So a large kettle drum and then they have the Kharka or Charchadi. The themes for these dances could include, they could be local legends, folklore and episodes from Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as some abstract themes. Also Seraikella chhau tradition is associated with the Shiva cult and practiced mainly during the annual ceremonial dance celebrating the Chaitra Parva or the spring festival. Gradual development of the dance, you know, the well-knit phrasing and controlled movements full of explosive energy inform and epitomize the Mayurbhanga style. Each chhau dance has its own distinct or special elements.

So it could be swinging, gliding and startling movements and twists of the body, slow conservation and you know, abrupt release of energy and trance-like ecstasy. So all these characteristics, for example, are commonly associated with the Seraiella chhau dance, and some of the common motives or some of the common themes that keep coming back that are most representative in the Seraikella style include Radha-Krishna, the Chandrabhaga, the theme or concept of Ardhanarishvara, and the theme or motive of the Nabik or the sailor. And then we see that in the case of the Purulia chhau dance form... So the Purulia chhau dance begins with a striking pose made by the dancer heightened by the accompanying music. The dance proceeds to the next stage called Chali, which is a highly dramatic gait and then subsequently it concludes with a heightened tempo,

very quick shift of movements happen in all the different chhau styles or chhau dance, you know, practices you know in the different regions of eastern India. Vigorous bodily performances form the basis of the chhau dance. In the Purulia style the precursors of the chhau dance were the Paika and the Natua and additionally, the Nachni dance also played an important role in rendering chhau its present identity. So chhau dance borrows its female gestures, female movements from the Nachni dance and the female dance elements in chhau introduces the aspects of Lasya bhava. Lasya bhava, which has been described or which draws on Natya Shastra and because of these feminized qualities some you know, some elegance, sensuality and beauty is adhered with the dance form.

On the other hand, the male dance movements greatly draw on the Shiva's Tandava style of dance. So those are the virile movements. On the one hand there are the lasya forms, on the other hand they have the tandava forms. So with this, I am going to conclude my lecture here today, and let us meet again in another lecture with more dance forms and discussions on them. Thank you very much.