

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

**Prof. Sarbani Banerjee**

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee**

**Lecture 40**

**Folk Traditions and Performances II**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. In this module, we are discussing folk traditions and performances with reference to, you know, Chhau and Therukoothu. Chhau that we have been discussing in our.. since our previous lecture, and then we are going to talk about a new folk artform or dance form called Therukoothu. So, continuing from our previous lecture, we were talking about chhau. We see that in the case of chhau, a huge drum called dhamsa... This drum has been frequently used by the tribal communities, the santals from the eastern regions, very commonly also used by the chhau performers.

And dhamsa is a major instrument used by all three styles of chhau coming from Purulia, Seraikella and Mayurbhanj. And this dhamsa, like I have been saying, it raises its origin among the tribal communities, especially the Santals. And the mention of dhamsa can be found frequently in the medieval narratives and folk heroic poetry. So, several members of the Seraikella royal family, such as the Maharaja's brothers and sons, were accomplished dancers of the Seraikella chhau.

And Maharaja himself is believed to have taken a keen interest in the dance form, such as in the process of suggesting and discussing new themes and also in conceiving the design of the elaborate masks. So, what happens to several folk artforms post-independence is that with the change of the larger rule, the sponsorship also changes, the future of the dance form changes. So, post-independence of India followed by the merger of the princely states with the federal union and thereby abolition of the princely system, a lot of dance forms were suffering from uncertainty due to lack of patronage. And there were also some questions regarding the future of the chhau dance form. But the Purulia tradition did not so much suffer, you know, in this regard.

It did not feel the crisis of the new transition or new transformation from, you know, the shift in power from princely to the federal state. This is because it had always been community-based, community-centric, and it was patronized and supported not by any royal lineage, but by the common people as a whole. It was a very.. it has a very plebeian nature in that sense. So, from the discussion of chhau, now we move on to a new dance form called Therukoothu. Therukoothu originated from the Villupuram district in the state of Tamil Nadu in India.

It is performed in Tamil Nadu and certain select areas of Sri Lanka. 'Theru' in Tamil means 'street', whereas 'koothu' refers to 'drama'. And it is also known as kattaikuttu and even kuttu. So, the stories that the artists perform are mainly inspired from Ramayana, Mahabharata and also from Shivapuram. So, we see that Therukoothu comprises of mainly dance, drama, music, prose and poetry, and this art form traces its roots during the Sangam period.

This artform traces its roots during the Sangam period. Now, 'kattai' as a word means 'wood' in Tamil. The hero characters, especially the males in Therukoothu use this term 'kattai' to denote the head, the breast, shoulder and the ornamentation as well as the costumes. And this entire costumes, this entire ornamentation and getup is known as kattai vesham. Therukoothu has gilded crowns and heavy makeup with a family resemblance to kathakali.

Therukoothu is almost a sister form of kathakali. However, kathakali's base or roots are in classics. It has a classical base and kathakali, you know, exudes artistic splendor, which is different from Therukoothu. Therukoothu, on the other hand, has been confined to the countryside. It is performed usually throughout the night, particularly in the post-harvest summer months and during festivals and their sites, their performance sites are in the non-Brahminical Hindu temples.

So, having said that, this reminds me of the Jatra form in West Bengal, the Jatra performance also meant for a rural audience, right. Rural audience usually coming from, you know, agro-based, you know, societies, agro-based backgrounds, agricultural backgrounds. And these performances, we see that folk performances are usually, you know, practiced throughout the night because the men and women are busy, you know, harvesting and cutting the crops during the daytime. So, this is, these forms of, folk

forms of entertainment, for the common masses, their plebeian nature is explained in the fact that they are performed in open fields, in open spaces, away from the elite sites and commonly they are performed in the night time.

So, they are a breakaway, they have some commonalities, but they are also a departure from the Brahminical traditions. Therukoothu features the figure of Kattiyakaran. Kattiyakaran is the person that performs a slapstick comedy with satirical elements. The Kattiyakaran acts as a facilitator that interacts between the mythical world and the real world. The Kattiyakaran is more like a go-between or a liaison between the cosmic or the otherworldly, the mythical world and the tactile, you know, real world, this-worldly.

The Kattiyakaran blurs the epic distance, you know, through laughter and ridicule. So, as the Kattiyakaran is commenting satirically or ridiculously on a topic, the sense of identification between the audience and the performer is complete. The audience does not feel distanced from the performer. There is an immediate, you know, relating with the performance and the performer. The performance of Therukoothu is generally treated disparagingly by the urban elites, right? The reason for this, you know, demeaning treatment is owing to the theatre's historical development as has been cited with some degree of reluctance by the hereditary performers.

The fact that this practice, the artform of Therukoothu traces to the Vannar or washerman lineage of performers. So, basically because it has come from a community that is not understood as, you know, an elite-class or upper-class people, that this form is not seen or treated with high regard by the urban elites. The negative implications are associated with the low status of the Tamil stage from which this theatre tradition originates. Like I said, it has its provenance going back to the washerman community, right, who are not held as very high people in the eyes of the urban elites. So, the urban elites' negative perception of the professional performers, both male and female, is influenced by social reform movements.

So, the urban elites' negative perception of professional performers, be it the male or the female, you know, is influenced by social reform movements which include the anti-Nautch or anti-Devadasi movement during the 1930s and the 1940s. The so-called progressive opinion emphasized, you know, or sidelined these performances mainly owing to their bodily excesses. So, why were these dance forms looked down upon? The

reason cited was the presence of bodily excesses which were seen as vulgar. For example, prostitution. It would, these, you know, performances were seen as bawdy, as lewd, right.

And so, the urban elites would believe that these traditional backward customs and lifestyles were associated with and insinuated prostitution. They were, the bodily excesses, you know, suggested in these dance forms would very smoothly transition a performer into the trade of prostitution. Now, we also have to understand in the context of anti-nautch or anti-Devadasi movement during the colonial period, during social reforms, we have to understand that this is the western eye, this is the eye of the British colonizer that is defining these time-immemorial or very old, you know, folk dance forms. It is the standard or the parameter of the, you know, shaped or defined by the western eye that defines what is vulgar and what is not. Even, you know, as an extension of this discussion, I would very quickly mention how, you know, as a result of the colonizer's, you know, so-called social reforms or the colonizers' perception, even a very rich practice or tradition such as the Tawaif tradition, the different gharanas of the tawaifs have been all, have been the different gharanas of the Tawaifa, the Tawaif tradition, which is a very rich tradition in India and they have their own gharanas or lineages, they have been reduced to prostitution.

So, it is the western perception that make, you know, these Indian, very old Indian practices as something very reductive. So, Tawaif is not the same as a prostitute. The Tawaif is not only, you know, involved in flesh trade she is a very accomplished artist and performer who is participating in public, you know, circles at par with the male participants. So, she is a very talented individual. So, it needs a rigorous training just like in other dance forms to become an accomplished, you know, an established tawaif.

But with the passage of time during the colonial period, these perceptions, very quick, you know, understandings or very quick kind of labels were very precipitous or let us say very, you know, reductive labels, very offhanded, you know, tagging or labels were associated with certain dance forms just because they could not be translated. The cultural translation was not very easy from the Indian culture, from the Indian tradition to the, to what the British carried with them, the British perception. This is owing to the cultural impediment and the difficulty to translate one culture through the lens of the other, that oftentimes the tawaif has been, you know, reduced from being a connoisseur of art or artforms to merely a flesh trader. So, coming back to Therukoothu, similar, you know, perceptions feed one's understanding, the western eye's understanding of a form like Therukoothu, which has, you know, oftentimes treated an artist at par with the, or

which has oftentimes treated the artist as a prostitute or seen an artist as very quickly and smoothly transitioning into prostitution. So, Kattaikkuttu performers are appreciated for their profession and their individual artistic contributions rather than in the creation of Tamil National Theatre. Rather than being associated with the national theatre or the classical, you know, the glorious and elevated classical heritage, they are appreciated for their individual artistic contributions.

Therukoothu actors participate in the general festivities connected with the, you know, the moral message of victory of the good over the evil. The days of the festival are determined according to astrological, certain astrological calculations and so 11 consecutive days are set aside for the performance of the entire Mahabharata, the, you know, the rendition of the entire Mahabharata through bodily enactment, which takes consecutive 11 days, and on each night we see a new story is being narrated. The performance takes place in acting area that faces the shrine of the chief deity of a small village temple. Before each performance, the Brahmin priests parade through the streets carrying on their heads certain deity's idols, it could be a Shiva, a Kali or even the idol of Draupadi. Temple musicians accompany this procession or parading and only when the priests return to the temple and reinstall the deities in the sanctum sanctorum may the performance of Therukoothu begin.

So, the Brahmin is also not completely, you know, invisibilized or excluded from a folk form such as Therukoothu. We see that in an Indian society, as I have been, you know, mentioning in my previous lecture too, the folk and the classical traditions and trends constantly speak to each other, draw on one another and they exchange a lot of elements. So, in the case of Therukoothu, a giant clay effigy of Duryodhana, who is a character in Mahabharata embodied as a force of evil is painted. So, we see that the deities of the temple as well as the effigies of the Pandavas or the five brothers as well as their common wife Draupadi are covered with flower garlands and they are paraded to the playing arena to witness the event, right? So, when, you know, performers are dressing up as Pandava and as Draupadi, it is as though, it is assumed that these, you know, mythical or mythological figures, characters are witnessing the performance of Therukoothu.

There is an exchange of cosmic and mundane platform, and it has always been like that. It is believed that the gods descend when an artist performs; the mythical figures witness a performance when it is done, when it is, you know, enacted in the correct manner, when it is done in the correct manner. So, performance in the Indic context, in the South Asian

context has its religious connotation. Religion and performance cannot be decoupled, right? And this is heightened with the Bhakti of the people, the devotion, the dedication of the common masses who do not, who no longer see this milieu as, you know, something that is man-made. They do not see the artists as themselves for who they are, they see the artists as gods and goddesses, as mythical figures.

They also start worshipping the persona or the character that these artists play. So, the place of performance is always considered as sacred and in fact, the ground where the artists perform is ritually cleansed of its impurities through symbolic gestures. It in effect, it becomes a magic circle. So, the way a ground, an arena for Therukoothu is cleaned is meant to prevent that space from any evil or negative intuition. So, no force, no negative force can disrupt the performance.

The stories are acted annually in connection with religious celebrations and show a conscious desire among the participants to reinforce commonly held beliefs, right? And this is something we are going to come back to when we discuss Ram Leela, very popular performance in the northern part of India. So, with every year's, you know, repeated performances and the audience also engrossed in them, these beliefs, these myths are embedded in the collective consciousness in the popular consciousness and they are so plebeian in nature. They cannot be, the society cannot be kind of dissociated from these beliefs, these very ancient myths and beliefs. The society is in fact shaped, the society's values are shaped by these beliefs.

And with every year's religious celebrations, these commonly held beliefs are further, you know, deeply entrenched, deeply embedded in the social memory, in the collective memory, collective consciousness of the people. So, the faith of the people, the bhakti of the people emerges from these commonly held beliefs. The artists through oblation, fasting, prayer and on the other hand, the spectators through their faith in the reality of these characters being portrayed enter a state of exaltation. So, this theatre becomes something sacred. The space of enactment of performance does not remain something man-made.

After a point, it, you know, takes on an elevated form and expression, where the audience has his, you know, entire faith in what he is witnessing. He is not witnessing artists, but mythical characters. Similarly, the actors also undergo, you know, all those

exercises preceding the performance such as, you know, cleansing the body through oblation and following fasting and sometimes even, you know, abstinence from any material excess- it could be erotic involvement, sexual involvement. So, they are kind of undergoing some austere practices and they are also performing prayers. So, the artists also have to undergo certain practices preceding the performance.

They are cleansing their body through oblation, they are undergoing fasting, they are praying, they are abstaining from, you know, sexuality and so there is a lot of austerity involved with developing the mood and the mindset that an artist has to acquire for performing a certain role. And finally, the religious rituals represent an elaborate cosmic form of play. It goes on to become something from profane or mundane to something divine and cosmic, something sacred and otherworldly. The performance space of Therukoothu is a square open air area, approximately 15 feet on each side. The audience sits on the ground, closely packed on the three sides of this arena and expanding, you know, outward in three directions.

So, large number of people and the open air space, the vocal projection and very high-pitch musical performance, all these combined together make the use of microphone as unnecessary. A microphone is not required, everyone is so engrossed, riveted and involved, constantly engaging with the performance that an artificial amplifier is not required, right. Even without a microphone, the immediacy of the audience-performer relationship can be felt. The connection between the audience and the performer is very strong and it is, you know, it is immediately felt, it is very, very much present, right. The Therukoothu performance space has two divisions, one is a front in which the acting takes place and then the rear area in which a four-five member orchestra or chorus team is located.

So, the front area takes up three quarters of the total space. The most important basic, you know, facial colors used in Therukoothu are red, green and rose. Red usually implying, you know, an inherently evil, vicious and powerful character. One of the typical examples of a character with a red basic makeup would be the Duryodhana or Dushashana. So, according to the Therukoothu interpretation of Mahabharata epic, these characters are embodiment of evil.

On the other hand, the color green indicates heroism, beneficence and morality as well as power and strength. So, a character like Arjun who is considered as the most valorous of all the Pandavas, all the Pandava princes as well as Bhima who is a very powerful, you know, hero, they have their basic facial color as green during the performance. So, the color of rose indicates a character that cannot be definitively categorized within the Therukoothu's conceptions of morality and thereby color. So, it is neither completely evil nor completely good. For example, the character of Dharmaraj Yudhishtir who has all the traits of a heroic prince and yet he is taking certain actions, he is taking certain decisions as a result of which, you know, a lot of harm is caused.

So, as a result of the dice game, a lot of people are harmed. So, his decisions are not really beneficial at large in many ways. So, the central elements in conventional Therukoothu costumes are the crowns and the body ornaments. Since most of the male and female characters are connected with the royal families in these narratives, they wear the crowns as well as other head and shoulder ornaments. These are made mainly of wood, colored glass and colored foils.

I am going to stop my lecture here today. Thank you. Thank you.