

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 41

Folk Traditions and Performances III

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions. Today we are going to discuss two such folk traditions, folk art forms, one being Theiyyam, the other being Nautanki. So coming to our first art form today, Theiyyam is a traditional folk art form that originated in the northern part of Kerala in districts such as Kasargod, Kozhikkode and Wayanad. So Theiyyam is also called Theiyyattam and Kaliyattam. So Theiyyam refers to or means God and thereby it is considered as an artform through performing as God. So this hearkens back our previous discussion, you know, a discussion we were having in our previous lecture on how the sacred and the profane, the mundane and the cosmic cross path and they mingle on the Indian theatre, on the Indian stage where, you know, we see that the artist is no longer a human only; the artist carries the cosmic aura, the artist becomes the figure and the imagination associated with that figure.

It could be a divine figure or a mythological, a mythical figure and the entire story, the entire, you know, narrative associated with such a figure and this, you know, other-worldly effect is accentuated and further amplified with the collective faith of the people, the audience who indeed believe, you know, that this artist is no longer a human but the artist embodies and has indeed become the character that he is performing. So the men belonging to some of these communities, such as the Vannan, Malayan, Mavilan, Cheruman, Pulayan, Parayan, Panan, Vedan, Pambathar, Paravar, Kalanadi and Koppalan communities, these are a bunch of communities that can perform the Thea Karan, that can perform as theiyyakaran. So these are some of the communities that can perform as theiyyakaran or someone, an artist that performs the Theiyyam. Theiyyam is the dance form or the art form whereas, the performer is called theiyyakaran.

The motto of Theiyyam performance is harmony of the society and its overall wellness. Let us take a look at a video, you know, on how an artist is dressed up and prepared for the Theiyyattam or Theiyyam. Here we will understand that it is not merely dressing up of a person, it is not only the makeup and the, you know, the cosmetics, the costumes involved; it is actually, you know, moving on to a different plane with, you know, the dressing up, the manifold and complicated dressing and highly elaborate and, you know, heavy makeup. The person is entering into the skin of a particular deity or a god. So let us take a look.

So here we see a very beautiful depiction of Karinkali Theiyyam. An artist here is being, you know, dressed up. So the elaborate makeup, ornaments and even the peculiar dressing and even the eye is tied. We see that the artist is wearing an elaborate headgear and it is a male artist usually who has become a goddess. The artist has been, you know, given the body and the costume of a goddess, probably the goddess Kali or the goddess Chamundi, right? And this, you know, in the process of dancing, what happens is that the villagers come, they touch this deity and seek blessings.

They touch the feet of the deity or they ask the deity to touch, you know, a sick person. They pray in front of this deity to kind of cure any problem, resolve any problem pertaining to the commoner's lives. The artist is seen almost as someone possessed. That is a very interesting phenomenon or process that we saw, how a male artist loses his self, the same Bekhudi that we were talking about in Sufi tradition. It is no longer the male, you know, person in him.

It is the goddess that performs almost. So the mundane identity and the cosmic identity, the performer and what is being performed, the object of performance are kind of merged and they become one. The artist is bestowed with the power, with the, you know, the capacity to cure sick people. This is owing to the collective faith of the audience. So theiyyakaran entails fasting and maintaining celibacy before the performance when we want to enact a deity, a powerful deity such as the Chamunda or the Kali.

The artist also has to undergo some form of, you know, spiritual and bodily cleansing, some celibacy and penance before the performance. It is no longer only a performance. It is also, it goes on to become a ritual, right, a folk ritual. So the performer uses a costume which is called vannathimattu. So vannathimattu is commonly a costume that is used.

The mother goddesses that are depicted, the main characters of mother goddesses that are performed are Kali, Chamundi, Rakteshwari, Bhagavati, Aryapookanni and Padakathi Bhagavathi. So we see here the epic stories of Bali, Vishnumoorthy, Sriram, Hanuman and Srikrishna being variously performed. Now the families of certain communities are authorized to do these ritual performances. Not everyone can do it. There are certain lineages associated with the Theiyyam performances.

It is a grand collective of musicians, painters, singers and a lot more people involved. The process of, you know, dressing or making up an artist itself is so elaborate, so manifold, like we saw in the video during our discussion. The role of everyone is considered with a lot of respect. So everyone contributes in the process of setting the mood where, you know, there is a take-off from the mundane platform and, you know, an elevation into the cosmic milieu or cosmic platform. The artist, you know, the performer is almost a deity himself.

And in the making of the artist into a deity, the musician, the painter, the make-up artist, the singer, everyone's role is very important, very important. Everyone's role is momentous in nature. So the role of these people, each of these participants is crucial and considered with a lot of respect and there is, very remarkably there is no caste distinction observed in this whole process of performance. So the deities can be classified into various categories, right? Albeit loose categories, there can be some classifications. So in origin, Theiyyam's deities were strictly indigenous to the Malabar area.

However, in the course of time, some of the most prominent gods from the Brahminical Hinduism have been appended, have been added to the local pantheon. So once again a mishmash between the classical and the folklorist or, you know, localized traditions. The mini narrative and the grand narrative or the little narrative and the grand narrative speak to each other and exchange. Moreover, many of the gods are deified heroes and a number of goddesses are also believed to have been mortal women, women that actually lived on earth and whose life story generally entailing some wrongful accusations resulting in their death elevated them to the realm of myth, transforming them into goddesses. So this is also rife in the Indic, this is also rife in the Indic tradition.

We see figures of mortals that have been elevated or that have assumed, that have achieved the status of the divine or that have achieved some qualities of divinity in them. We have the myth of Gandhari who was a very strong woman. Similarly in the Tamil epic Silappadikaram, we see the heroine's figure Kannagi. Kannagi is a demi-goddess. By virtue of her, you know, traits, her ideal traits as a woman, her devotion to her husband, she was a demi-goddess.

And Kannagi, it is, you know, described in the epic, she, you know, went to, she was taken away, in death she was taken away by some celestial beings to the heaven. So she is born as a mortal, but by virtue of her own actions, her karma, she becomes, she is elevated to the level of a demi-goddess, right? She becomes angelic almost. And there are shrines of Kannagi in the southern part of India where she is, you know, worshipped as a goddess. So this is also very common in the Indian tradition where gods are human-like and conversely humans through, you know, through tapasya or penance can achieve the status of a demigod or a demi-goddess. So elaborate makeup, flamboyant dress and splendid, you know, very detailed headgear contribute greatly to the transformation of theiyyakaran, the artist who is performing the theiyyam.

Only select castes who have the right to perform theiyyam, so I was talking about the lineages of performers and artists who can take part in this ritual. Some are entitled to perform only certain deities. So according to the lineage or the background from where one comes, one can only perform a few particular deities and not the others. Moreover, a theiyyam artist may perform only in certain shrines; as their rites are inherited at birth, no one else can become a theiyyam performer in that particular shrine. So shrines and, you know, performances or impersonation or embodying of certain deities are associated with particular lineages.

So these are very fixed and pre-given, one cannot violate the norms in this regard. Theiyyam is performed gloriously in an open-air setting. Once again being a folklorist, you know, practice, a practice of the commoners, it is open-air practice, it is an open-air performance, it is seen as a grand finale, one which clearly demonstrates the wisdom of folk performers, including the folk martial artists in folk environments. It is a very plebeian, a very populist kind of performance. During the colonial period, theiyyam received many kinds of criticism.

For example, the East India Company criticized the practice of theiyyam and considered it as a barbaric ritual which is full of superstition, which is evil, inhuman and even corrupt. So this is once again, you know, going back to our earlier discussion, the Western eye, the Western lens that adds these values that have their own baggage of understanding, their own morality, their own perception from where they are coming and these judgments, you know, come from there. So it need not be the Western parameters that define a folk practice such as theiyyam, which is an age-old tradition practiced in Kerala. So the musical instruments used for theiyyam performance include the chenda, the maddhalam, the elathalam and the kurumkuzhal. The different types of theiyyam would be, you know, Bhagavati theiyyam, Gulika theiyyam, Bhairavan and so on.

Bhagavati theiyyam is the embodiment of the primal feminine energy, the Bhagavati or the goddess, the Devi that manifests itself in the bodies of men. Once again, the concept of the feminized men, the female enacted by the men. Gulika theiyyam represents the Hindu god of death, Yama. It is believed that this prankster theiyyam, the Gulika theiyyam was born from the left toe of Lord Shiva. So all these myths, you know, so many myths and their ramifications that are available at the heart of the, at the heart of rural India.

So the myths and the folks, the ballads, the legends that shape the rural India. Bhairavan is the primary or the prime deity of Paanan community. So each community have their primary or prime deity and Bhairavan is believed to be, you know, related to or the same as Shiva, so a god that is worshipped by the Saivites, the Saivite cults. Once again we are going to take a look at another very interesting video.

Let us take a look. Here we see a man being transformed into a Bhagavati. So elaborate headgear, very heavy face makeup and a false body, you know, worn by this person and the thrilling incantations are also involved, very, you know, vigorous and very excessive performances, where the man is not only performing but actually becoming the Bhagavati, thrilling and excessive performances, rapturous, ecstatic, you know, movements, where the person one would, and there is, you know, playing of multiple drums as we can see, the audience almost treats this person as possessed by the Bhagavati, right? Excessive movements of the body, the person looks as possessed by the goddess. The goddess has descended on the artist and the artist has become the goddess, the union of the mundane and the cosmic. So after a discussion of Theiyyam, we move on to our next art form, folk art form, which is Nautanki. So the traditional folk form originally called as Sangit or

Swang is a major musical Hindi theatre form coming from or originating in Northern India, encompassing states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and parts of Punjab and Rajasthan.

These are mainly the regions where Nautanki, the folk performance of Nautanki can be witnessed. So under the influence of the Bhakti movement, the Nautanki performers used to preach during the night, imitating and enacting the contemporary religious leaders. Later these performers, these men formed their own troops and they travelled all over North India. Nautanki is less of a religious form. It incorporates a lot of dancing and pulsating, you know, vigorous drum beats and full-throated singing.

It emerged as a major source of entertainment in the Northern parts of India. So here we are going to see a video of a Nautanki. Let us see it together. So the costumes are very motleyed. We see that there are some modern influences too.

While the woman is dressed up in a very traditional way, the man is wearing a cap and a shirt and tie, which also refers to the colonial influence and there is a set of musicians with a harmonium and percussion who are accompanying the full-throated song. So the Hathras and the Kanpuri styles of Nautanki are distinguished both in terms of artistic and organizational differences. So in the case of the Hathras style of Nautanki, the songs are generally higher pitched and the singer dwells or stays longer on each note, elaborating and ornamenting each of these notes. It is believed that Hathras style developed earlier and the Kanpuri style, you know, followed it. Both the schools follow the same theatrical structure and their presentations differ especially in terms of singing style.

So the full-throated robust singing style of the Hathras school is replaced by a soft singing style and inclusion of certain dialogues in the case of the Kanpur school. So while the Hathrasi school emphasizes more on singing and is operatic in form, the Kanpuri school centers itself more on dialogues. It is full of proses. So the Hathras school emphasizes on verse, on musicality, whereas the Kanpuri school is prose filled, and the prose mixes occasionally with singing. Now Nautanki is a musical theatre form that uses sophisticated poetic meters with heavy emphasis on rhyme and rhythm.

The accentuated singing style always accompanied by a Nagara or a drum complement the popular Nautanki tales. These tales that center on the values or the morals of chivalry as well as romance and adventure. So dance scenes displaying the charms of natch girls are common across all Indian, you know, traditions, performances and practices. They are observable in performances from all across India. So in the recent times, in the contemporary times, it has been observed in Delhi that the Nautanki repertoire incorporates traditional troupes as well as urban directors and actors together.

So in Delhi it is an observable phenomenon where the urban directors and actors are performing together with the traditional artists. We see that Shanta Gandhi is a notable director who directs Amar Singh Rathod, a Nautanki in 1968 and in the process of directing it, the 10 hour script is reduced to 2 hours and it has been reoriented to fit the taste of the urban audience. So we see basically that Nautanki is undergoing certain transformations depending on the taste of the audience and the treatment by the urban, you know, directors and actors. So some of the features change. The production used professional Nautanki singers of the hathras style.

However, director Gandhi modified their mode of acting and controlled the dominance of the drum player. So the entire tone becomes a little moderate, a little kind of suppressed on the stage through the treatment of the urban director. This is something that reminds me how, you know, other folk performances also when they are taken to the stage, they also have to cut down in terms of physical movements and gestures. The bodily excess needs to be kind of toned down or needs to be moderated. For example, a performance of chhau taking place on an urban stage or even Kathakali taking place, theyyam taking place on an urban stage, a lot of, you know, excesses in terms of performance need to be discounted and a new audience, a more curbed and limited space need to be taken into consideration.

So transformations in these performances happen with their shift in space. When they move from rural to urban area, certain changes have to be incorporated, right. That is the mode of survival. That is the way for these performances to survive. Meters that are frequently used in Nautanki texts include the dohd, th chaubold, the baharetavil, and the daur, right.

So song forms that are frequently used in a Nautanki include the thumri, bhajan, qawwali and rasiyd. In the 19th century, we see that the women did not so much appear on the Nautanki stage and female roles were usually enacted by the male artists. But towards the beginning of the 20th century, by 1920s and 1930s, women began to sing and play certain parts and in the latest phase of the development of this art form, the tradition of Nautanki witnesses a new era where, you know, some females can own and operate major Nautanki companies. This is also a phenomenon noticeable in the contemporary times. Performances also include clowning sequences, erotic dancing, acrobatics and even topical skits.

So the stories are drawn from both Hindu and Islamic romances, local legends, tales of prominent saints and stories could also be based on newspaper accounts and even deeply influenced by, inspired by major film plots. So in these, the later sources are some new additions that one sees in the recent times, you know, the newspaper accounts being enacted through a Nautanki play or performance or even a very popular Bollywood movie is being enacted through Nautanki performance. These are some of the more recent phenomena. So the position of women in this theatre is made more complex through the negative moral associations of Nautanki viewing audience, especially the ones that hail from the upper-class or upper-caste backgrounds. So just like we had in the case of Sufi tradition, we were discussing in the context of Sufi tradition, here too we see that the presence of the women on stage is considered as problematic.

Women have often been prevented from attending Nautanki shows, so they were not able to participate even as audiences and it has evolved in such a way as to cater only to the male interest, the male, you know, desire or need for entertainment. And that is why Nautanki is rife with, you know, sexual display, sexual excess and innuendo and it is considered as improper for women to be present either as audience or even, you know, playing a role on stage. So one of the earliest stories in the Nautanki repertoire is Syahposh, or, as it was called in the nineteenth century- Saudagar o Syahpos. So it is the tale of a merchant's son who attempts to win the hand of a woman who is the daughter of a minister after being enchanted upon hearing her recite from the Quran. So there are many such, you know, folklores, such legends that are enacted through the Nautanki performance.

Unlike in some regional Indian performing genres that convey only one narrative, Nautanki emerges and develops in a very interesting way in an inter-generic environment. It is drawing from multiple sources in the course of its development. So it is, it can be seen as a community of forms, multiple forms. Nautanki can be understood as the unique result

of a confluence or conjunction of three major factors, one being form; so antiphonal or alternative recitation of verses alongside musical passages. So and, you know, a quick mishmash, a very interesting interaction between recitation and music; second is content and the third is context.

So form, content and context. These three factors shape the modern Nautanki performance that we know. Nautanki's origin, you know, the fact that Nautanki is developing from or and in an inter-generic environment hearkens back, you know, the term 'community of forms' used by Raymond Williams. So community of forms is a term borrowed from Raymond Williams to mean a historically specific set of practices located in an evolving social environment. They have all contributed and evolved together, you know, towards shaping the modern Nautanki. The emergence of Nautanki as a discrete genre in the early 20th century, in the 1920s, takes place through a gradual fusion of several regional vernacular forms including the swang or mime, the kbyal or folk poetry and the turra-kalagi referring to esoteric verbal duelling.

So the mime or swang, the kbyal or folk poetry and the turra-kalagi or esoteric verbal duelling all have their, you know, role in shaping the modern Nautanki as an art form. With this, I am going to stop my lecture here today. Thank you. Thank you very much.