

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 43

Folk Traditions and Performances V

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. Today we are going to discuss two more folk theatre forms, Raslila and Ghoomar. So, starting with Raslila, we see that it is a type of religious operatic play devoted to the image of Krishna and Krishna's life, Krishna being a very popular icon in India and by extension in South Asia. Raslila particularly emphasizes Krishna's youthful and lovelorn years and it is celebrated in Uttar Pradesh, Orisha and Manipur. Raslila developed in villages and cities that are associated with Krishna's life, the folklores, the different folk tales associated with Krishna's life, and we see that performances also take place in the southern parts of Delhi and we see that performances take place in the southern areas of Delhi. Some boys in Raslila play the principal protagonist Krishna, his beloved Radha as well as the Gopis or the cowherd girls.

The custom of acting out significant events from Krishna's life as Raslila is considered to have begun almost 300 years back, mainly in the geographical areas that are associated with Krishna's mythology, which would be the current state of Uttar Pradesh. So, Raslila is a style of folkdance or theatre which is popular in the northern part of India and in this theatre form, when lone incidents from Krishna's life are acted out on stage in both solo and group dance settings accompanied by loud instruments, you know elaborate singing and recitations. So, the traditional tales are told and performed in Raslilas, drawing on some of the prominent Hindu scriptures, particularly the Bhagavad Purana, the Bhagavad Gita as well as some of the devotional literatures such as Gita Govinda.. Jaidev's Gita Govinda. So, Krishna here is mainly depicted as the main deity and the protagonist as a young hero and a divine trickster.

So, the Raslila is one of the highest and most esoteric of Krishna's pastimes according to the Krishna Bhakti tradition. Here the romantic love is seen as a reflection of a higher form of love, the devotees' soul's, you know, original ecstatic desire to be one with the God, with the devoted. So the earthly love between Radha and Krishna is a reflection of

or it signifies a ethereal form of love between devotee and the God. And we need to understand that here Krishna is not the figure of a shrewd politician or even a serious individual, you know, dealing with state affairs, the figure that one sees in Mahabharata. Rather, Raslila emphasizes on the figure of Krishna as a cowboy, as a lover, as a flirtatious and charming male that is loved by all the gopis and especially by Radha.

People scorn and scoff at him, but people cannot really, you know, dismiss him. And everyone.. and so he enjoys the attention especially of the women folk due to his charming spirit and appearance. In the Raslilas, actors and Gods enter the stage at the same moment and in the same bodies, right. So this once again symbolizes the human-like, you know, nature and feature of the God, right. So God can be human and human can be God.

That is the sentiment, that is the essence that plays in most of the theatre forms in India, especially the folk theatre forms. The dual perspective on theatre and religion goes beyond the ideas of persona and performance in order to present God on stage, not as a metaphor, but as a tangible, tactile, palpable reality. So God is not something that needs to be contemplated as a part of the abstract, abstruse idea. God is out there on the stage as a figure, as a human form. That is at the heart of Krishna Bhakti tradition.

So they are coming from the Sagun school, right. They understand God as part of the sensory world, the sensory human-like anthropomorphic God. So a number of scholars have researched on Raslila and have written at length about the public Raslila performances that are held each year in the pilgrimages of Vrindavan, Vrindavan being the heart of all the Krishna devotees in India. So they describe elaborately regarding the arrangement of the stage, the elaborate costumes and costume making process, the stylized gestures and dance practices and forms, the special convergence of private worship and public performance and the extensive literary repertoire that inform the romantic dialogues taking place on stage.

So the tradition of Raslila is credited to three prominent Vishnu Bhakti saints, Gomand Dev, Hitharivansh and Narayan Bhatt. So Ghumand Dev, Hitharivansh, and Naryan Bhatt; all these three prominent saints built it upon earlier folk customs and the Kathak dancing technique. The troop of Raslila typically consists of five musicians, a Swami or a group leader, two boys that are aged between 11 and 13 years who portray Krishna and

Radha, and then we have a group of boys aged between 8 and 10 who portray the gopis or the cowherd girls who are important in these exploits and miracles being narrated from Krishna's youth. The figure of jester or clown is also prominent and these figures, the supporting roles such as the jester are sometimes played by the adult men who also play music, who are also musicians in the performance. So Raslila is inspired by Bhakti literature written in devotional Braj language.

In fact, the Braj language, Braj bulli became popular primarily because of this folk theatre form, through this folk theatre form. Nearly every significant moment in Krishna's life has been depicted in a dramatic form or through a Leela. The verses are sung aloud by the group's Swami, who is usually a knowledgeable Brahmin priest, and following him it is acted out on stage by the performers. So here also we see that the stage becomes a religious site, the stage flows into the concept of spirituality and religion and elements of religion are part and parcel of the theatrical performance. Throughout the play, the supporting characters such as the clown or the jester are supposed to speak their own lines.

Five musicians often sit in a semi-circle form between the acting arena. They perform using a number of you know instruments such as a harmonium, a hand drum, cymbals and sarangi, sarangi which is a string instrument. The Bhakti culture of the area is reflected through the local musical renditions. There are two portions in a Raslila. One is the dance performance, the Ras dance and then the Leela performance which is the theatrical or the play part.

So Ras refers to dance which is performed first followed by the Leela play which happens next, which follows. So about three hours are dedicated to this entire performance. Depending on the requirements of the specific performance, a variety of Leelas are available for selection and rituals, and fastings are performed prior to the performance, which makes the actor something more than an artist. So the actor's body needs to be purified in order for him to be able to embody Krishna; painting the god entails some kind of you know prior rituals. So the artist is kind of impersonating or it is almost like being possessed by the god.

The artist does not remain a performer alone. He becomes something more than that. So since the concert is thought of as a religious supplying, the orchestra members are not

permitted to consume any food or beverages while performing. Just like I was saying, it is not only a stage act taking place, it is almost bringing the gods down and impersonating and being possessed by them. It is through human forms that gods are acting.

So the bodies of the performers need to be purified. They have to go through certain rituals prior to the performance of Ras Leela. So while the sacred Ras Leela is typically performed in the temple courtyard, the secular Ras Leela can be enacted in the streets. The real performance area is separated from Krishna and Radha's throne by a two-sided stage. And backgrounds are usually painted with gorgeous lotus ponds and forest vistas are also frequently used.

So, so one feels that one is in a, in an ambience that reminds one of Vrindavan. So one sees similarities exist between Hindu ritualistic practices and Ras Leela performance, particularly with regard to the philosophy of Darsan. Darsan or Darshan which is usually interpreted as visions or glimpses of the divine. So on the stage there is a Sthula or resident god statue, a statue of Krishna which is thought by the Vaishnavas as Krishna's archavighraha form or the physical representation of his divine presence. The archavighraha also known as a Murti or divine image is typically kept hidden by a curtain in order for the audience who are all devotees to see him and in turn be seen by him and get his blessings.

So it is only a glimpse of Krishna that is sometimes shown, otherwise he is the archavighraha or the Murti hidden behind the curtains. And then, like I was saying, the attendant Pujari occasionally lifts the curtain in order to display the god. So it is.. there are certain, so we see that there are sudden rapturous moments when the phenomenon of Darsan can happen. When god sees the devotee or the audience and the audience of the devotee can see him back, there is a kind of spiritual consummation through these moments, through these ecstatic rapturous moments when the veil is lifted and the god can be seen. Taking or receiving Darsan therefore refers to the ritual viewing of the archavighraha.

We have the figurine of Krishna on the stage covered and occasionally revealed to the public eye, and then we have the human form of Krishna in the form of the artist who enacts the different exploits from Krishna's life, from Krishna's myth, from the different

chapters drawing on Bhagavad Purana and Bhagavad Gita as well as Gita Govinda. Next we are going to talk about our second folk theatre form today, which is Ghoomar from Rajasthan. Rajasthan's traditional and fervent folk dance is called Ghoomar. The word Ghoomar traces its origin to Ghoomna in Hindi. So Ghoomna is the source of this name, the name of this magnificent artform.

In this dance which is performed by a group of women, the colours of the ladies' or the women's flowing skirts play a very important role because the gestures are mainly centering the act of pirouetting, you know, pirouetting or constantly rotating in circular motion. So as the dancer rotates, the colourful flowing long skirts locally known as Ghaghras would also rotate and it lends a very colourful, a very bright ambience through the performance. So on occasions such as festivals, religious ceremonies and weddings, Ghoomar is frequently performed or executed. The dancers' faces are concealed by a veil as they swerve in swift circular motions with an astonishing elegance, while their long skirts or Ghaghras, you know, slowly flare. So Ghoomar also known as Jhumar is performed mainly in Rajasthan.

Women from all age groups execute this dance form which involves simple swaying motions. The dance's captivating element is its exquisite footwork complemented with very colourful attires, you know. So the attires, the women's dresses play a very important role in enhancing the visual effect, right? So and as the Ghaghras or the skirts flow, the footwork can be better exhibited. This dance has no time restrictions and it can go on as long as people want to continue the entertainment as long as the merry-making continues. So Ghoomar was first practised for the purpose of honouring goddess Saraswati and was initiated by the Bhil tribe, the Bhil community, a tribal group from Rajasthan.

Now the Bhil tribe was conquered by the Kachwahas of the Rajput dynasty who controlled Jaipur. So afterwards if we look at history, we would see that both the Rajput clans and the Bhil tribes coexisted and shared this dance form. So although it originated among the tribals, it was also accommodated by the Rajputs. So several of Bhil customs and traditions like Ghoomar were adopted by the royal Rajput clans. The dance was afterwards even connected with the regal lineage, the royalty.

So in contemporary times Ghoomar is carried out by a majority of Rajasthani families regardless of their regal origin and it is mainly performed on important occasions and festivals such as Teej, Holi, the beginning of the monsoon season called Bhado and the entrance of a newlywed bride in her marital home. The key areas that are known for this dance style include Jodhpur, Udaipur, Kota and Bundi. So Ghoomar is a dance that is primarily performed by Rajput women and hence it is clearly a female and caste-specific pastime, and hence it is a female and caste-specific pastime in today's Rajasthan although its roots trace back to the Bhil tribe. During Ghoomar, two or more Rajasthani women whirl in opposite directions at the same time effortlessly and gracefully move in circles. This dance is performed by women, like I said, whose faces are covered by veils and they wear vivid colorful attires that covers virtually all of their body except for their hands and their feet.

The women frequently wear expensive jewelry. If they are coming from upper-caste backgrounds they would particularly wear you know some expensive jewelry, particularly anklets or ghungru, bracelets and necklaces. Anklets are worn to make melodious noises accompanying the dhol beats. As the dhol beats the anklets or gungru complement the sound of the drum. A few Ghoomar compositions are frequently sung by ensembles of outcastes too.

So even the lower-caste musicians can participate in the Ghoomar performance most notably the dholis, the langas and the manganiyars after the dance. So a few Ghoomar compositions are frequently sung by ensembles that originate from the lower-castes or even from the outcaste social groups such as the dholis, the langas and the manganiyars. Although Ghoomar used to be primarily associated with the Rajput women, currently women from all castes and groups participate and enjoy this dance form, and its music during festivals and social gatherings in Rajasthan. So the Ghoomar dance form is unique in that different regions of the state of Rajasthan have left their mark on the motions of this dance style. This is to say that the nuances of Ghoomar, the intricacies of dance form change a little with each region have their own speciality or their own intricate gestures.

Due to this dance form's proximity to Gujarat, Udaipur lends Ghoomar a distinctive garba flair. So garba is a dance form observable and you know, popularly practiced in Gujarat and we see Udaipur drawing on the garba style of dancing, the Udaipur Ghoomar drawing on the garba style of dancing practiced in Gujarat. So the limb movements are more vigorous in the Ghoomar practiced in Rajasthan, such that the dancing form in Jodhpur is jerkier. It is, it happens with certain jerks, jerky movements. The Kota-Bundi

region's dance style is vibrant and it is complemented with certain catchy musical dance forms.

The Ghoomar forms practiced in Marwar is typically performed at the wedding ceremonies and its numerous rituals, such as the Lady's Sangeet are representations of womanhood and celebration of femininity. So it is an all-female cosmos or microcosm that we see being celebrated through the Ghoomar dance form. In the contemporary times, women can be seen wearing chaniya, stunning chaniya on the performance day. These garments come in hues, different bright hues such as red, green, pink and so forth and have intricate embroidery or mirror work on them.

So the dress itself is an art. The dress itself can be seen as a text and a narrative in its own right which carries the heritage, which carries the culture and heritage from the region. It carries the history and the culture of Rajasthan as well as Gujarat. So there is a lot of mirror work in the performer's dress. Gota or lace on a piece of fabric with a translucent color and the broad skirts allow for twirling and flowing movements. Here, we also need to understand that Ghoomar, which sometimes draws on the garbha dance form, could symbolize the cosmic movements.

The you know constant rotation by the performers could emulate the planetary movements and we see these movements very prominently in the case of garbha, right? Rotation and revolution taking place simultaneously. So you know it could be that the macrocosm is being represented through the microcosmic body. Its spiritual relevance lies there, right? To enhance the flow of the dress cotton chaniya are typically chosen, although depending on the occasion the dancers can also wear other materials, other fabrics, such as silk or chiffon. So chaniya and veils frequently feature some very rich hand-woven zari work and the choli are typically basic and solid color, and the blouse or choli are typically basic and one solid color. So with this, we come to the end of this lecture, where we have discussed two prominent and very popular folk dance forms, folk theatre forms.

One is Raslila, the other is Ghoomar. I will meet you again with another round of discussions in another lecture. Thank you.