

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture 44

Folk Traditions and Performances VI

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So today, this is a continuation of our discussion on folk theatre and performance, right. We are going to discuss mainly Swang, Mudi yettu and Garba. So talking about Swang, we see the Swang or saang, which originally means "to fake", right. So in various Indian states, Swang is known by a number of different names. It is practiced mainly in the northern states of India.

It is referred to as Bhand Pather in Kashmir, Nakkaal in Punjab, Khyaal in Rajasthan, Nautanki or Ras in Uttar Pradesh, and it is known as Swang or saang in Haryana. It is also practiced in the Malwa region of Madhya Pradesh. So in the northern and central states of India, Swang is widely practiced. Like I said, the word Swang means "to fake" or "fake".

Themes from mythology, from popular history as well as religious and devotional content form an important part of the Swang performances. These topics are merged together in the operas, in swang operas, and the emphasis is mainly on secular principles. So a swang performance is usually a well-balanced mix or amalgamation of acting, language, music, dance, lyrics, storyline, worship and spirituality. So all these aspects together constitute the swang operatic performance. Now swangs usually end with a message of victory of the good over the evil.

So we see that the Haryana swang, which is one of the most well-known type of swang performances, is based on the open stage style and it adheres with the long-standing tradition. It is more traditional in terms of form and content. Usually there are 20 to 30 artists, including the director, producer, musicians and actors, and this is usually an all-

male cultural ensemble that we see in a swang troupe. So usually the stage of the swang is a crude handmade kind of a stage. It is not something that is permanent or that is very sophisticated.

It is made up of wooden beds, sometimes it is made up of wooden beds and swangs are performed outdoors at night. They are very live and lively, and males are usually seen in the female roles. The males play both the male and the female parts. However, in some rare occasions there are also female troupe of swang artists. So swang can be traced back to a figure such as Kishan Lal Bhatt, who was also the founder of the current folk theatrical aesthetics.

These critics would attribute the provenance or the origin of swang to a poet and artist from Meerut named Kavi Shankar Dass. So both these artists Kishan Lal Bhatt and you know, Kavi Shankar Dass have had great contributions to this theatrical form, folk theatre form of swang. They are almost the founding fathers. And swang is considered as one of the oldest folk dance-drama form in India, especially in the northern regions. The actors perform from a central location from within the audience.

They are usually surrounded by audience and the stage is very crude and simple. Like I said, marshals provide the lighting. So talking about the provenance of the swang dance-drama theatre form, we remember a figure such as Ali Bux of Rewari, who is a noteworthy early pioneer of swang and who is remembered for his performances on topics, such as "Fasanai," "Azad," and "Padmavat". So the Haryanvi folk opera Swang reached its peak at the turn of the 20th century, and one name that comes to mind vis-a-vis the Haryanvi folk opera swang is Deepchand. Deepchand was 20th century's champion in terms of Swang performance.

The most well-known name in Haryana's Sonapat is Deepchand Bahman. So he has contributed a lot to the Haryanvi style of Swang. Prior to Deepchand, mainly we see that kirtan and nautanki are the forms that would be available, that would be practiced. He is responsible for introducing song, dance, pantomime or mukābhinay, rhythm or chhand and ballad or gāthā-path. So all these new aspects he has added to swang, and in his locality in Sonapat he would be known as the Shakespeare and the Kalidas of swang.

He was given that much of importance. He also refined and adapted Ali Bux style into the Haryanvi swang. So swang's theatre style originally focused on music. It was mostly centered on music. But later on, prose and dialogues also began to be included within swang.

So it is part of Loknatya or folk dance-drama. So it exhibits subtlety of emotions, mastery of rasa, different rasas and also a growth of the characters. Usually, there is a sarangi player and a dholak player. So the instrumentalists accompany the performer on the stage. In the background there are some instrumentalists playing the instruments while the performers perform.

So some of the common topics from history and myth that are played by swang artists include Vikramaditya and Vetala... So some of the common topics played by the swang artists from history and myth include Vikramaditya and Vetala, Padmavati, Raja Bhoja, Draupadi cheerharan, Keechak vadh, Prahlad Bhagat, Heer Ranjha, Amar Singh Rathore, among others. And depending on the orthodoxy of different regimes, one sees that women's participation in the swang performance has been disallowed and accepted across different ages. Sometimes, in more liberal regimes, women would participate actively in other more, you know, orthodox regimes. They would refrain from playing on the stage.

So a crude stage, lack of microphones and absence of a proper green room characterize the swang theatre. It is very, you know, in a way it is very plebeian. It belongs to the people. It is of, for and by the people. The performers are enacting live surrounded by audience.

So before the start of the show, the orchestra artists usually create the ambience for the performance. Even before the performance begins, there is a pre-performance one could see. And this comprises singing devotional songs or songs that are related to the main performance. This is like setting the stage. Even before the performance starts, you sing songs about the performance, right? You set the expectations of the audience that way.

And through these invocative songs, the guru is summoned. That is very important in Indian theatrical tradition; invocation of gods and goddesses of deities and of the preceptor or guru is very important. We seek blessings even before we embark on a new

performance, a new artwork. So the artist has to seek blessings. Here the guru is invoked and summoned.

And once the guru or preceptor emerges, the disciple artist has to touch his feet and seek blessings. So we see that religion and performance in the Indian context are totally interspersed. They cannot be decoupled and understood. Further, before beginning the performance through a song or hit, goddess Bhavani, also known as the goddess of knowledge, is invoked. And there are implorations.

She is propitiated. The disciples implore to her, they beseech to her that once the curtains are raised and the artists are exposed to the audience and they open their mouth, the goddess of knowledge, Bhavani, should sit on the speaker's tongue literally. From their speaking skills, she should act so that only pure melodies are produced by the artists. So that is why Bhavani is invoked. And after this, a number of lyrical forms such as chamola, kafis and sabiyas are performed. So this is how swang usually takes place.

In Rohtak and Haathras, we see that some very specific and significant swang styles are performed. The language employed is of the Rohtak specific manner. Each place has its own style of swang and the inflection, the accent of language, certain myths change from place to place. So for example, the swang practiced in Uttar Pradesh or in the Malwa region of MP (Madhya Pradesh would) not be the same as the ones practiced in Rohtak or let us say, the ones practiced in Rajasthan. So the language's inflection, the emphasis, the myths change according to the local culture and the local audience's expectations and taste.

In Haathras, the language mainly used are Brajbhasa and Haryanvi, also called Bangru. So the play is introduced briefly before it is performed. We already talked about that. It is introduced through certain devotional songs or songs that narrate the content of the play. In this regard, we should remember an artist called Lakhmi Chand.

Lakhmi Chand, who was a famous folk artist from Haryana has produced songs and ragnis; his swangs were considered as vivid and as solemn as the ghazals of Mirza Ghalib. They were widespread and very famous. They were widely espoused by people in his region as well as in the abutting regions. So a number of disciples that Lakhmi

Chand left behind included Pt. Mange Ram, Mai Chand, Sultan, Chandan and Rati Ram. These were some of the artists that picked up the style and the innovations of Lakhmi Chand.

Here we have a video of swang performance. We see that it is very live. The artists have worn some peacock feathers on their headgear and we have a full set of instruments being played in the background. The artists are carrying two, you know, string instruments in their hand. It could be an iktara or a veena that they are carrying in their hand, not the actual one, but as props, and it is a very lively performance.

They are almost dialogizing with the audience, right. It keeps the audience constantly engaged the way the performance takes place. What is remarkable here is that out of the two artists, we have one that is female. It is an unusual situation. It is an unusual case where a woman is also present on stage.

Usually the parts of women are also played by the males. Next, we are going to move to another folk dance theatre form called Mudi yettu. Mudi yettu is one of the folk dance theatre genres that originated in Kerala. So Mudi yettu displays a dramatic rendition of the Darika-Vadha puranic tale. It has similarities in many ways with other forms, such as Kathakali and Krishnanattom, which are parts of the classical tradition.

Now Mudi yettu is typically performed as an offering to the goddess in the Bhadrakali temples of central Kerala. So here also, we see that dance-drama performance is constantly speaking with the idea of religion. Dance-drama cannot be removed far away from the sanctum sanctorum. They are usually performed in the temple complex and they are dedicated to one of the deities. So Mudi yettu has a number of characters, typically seven characters which include Shiva, Narada, Darika, Bhadrakali, Kooli, Danavendra and Koimbidar or Nandikeshwara.

So the ingredients that are used for the makeup on the face.. because the makeup is elaborate... Usually both the classical and the folk dance theatre forms that originate from the southern part of India entail a lot of you know, makeup, very colorful elaborate exquisite makeup and you know, ornaments and headgears and costumes. So it takes hours actually for an artist to dress up for a performance. So the ingredients used include

a Chayiliyam or red pigment, Manayola or yellow pigment, Mashhi or black eye paste, Manjal or turmeric as well as rice paste, caustic lime and indigo. All these things are applied to prepare the face for the performance.. for the makeup, the facial makeup for the performance.

Now wooden headgears or Mudis as well as ornaments worn on one's arms and other parts of the body are carved, gilded and bejeweled with glass beads, peacock feathers and even they are you know, embedded with beetle shells. All these materials are used for decorating the ornaments. Shiva's forehead has a distinct mark for the third eye and Narada's forehead has rice paste tilaks. So Shiva and Narada are both covered with headgear or Mudi. We see that in Mudi to performance Danavendra and Darika both wear the same kind of cosmetics.

They usually have red, green and black paint all over their faces. And it is very interesting how Bhadrakali's face is made up. So completely covered in black paint and dotted with white nee-paste dots, Bhadrakali's face is usually defaced. Basically one cannot see because it has a black paint on it and then there are some white dots. Between the dots there is a thin layer of red powder comprising turmeric and caustic lime paste and between the dots there is a thin layer of red powder that is made up of turmeric and caustic lime and on the forehead red petals from chethi flower are also applied.

So we see that a lot of preparation and a lot of investment goes into the process of you know, making up the artist. So we see that a lot of investment and a lot of you know, thought goes into dressing up the artist, the process of make up, the process of adorning the artist into becoming a particular character. The mouth of Bhadrakali is fitted with two long sharp metal teeth and Bhadrakali's headgear is specifically known as Valiyamudi. And we have the Kooli's character as a comedian. Kooli is a comic character, so there are no specific rules governing her appearance. Depending on the performer's preference the actor's faces are painted in a variety of colors.

Kooli's makeup can be a little flexible according to the rules of Mudi yettu, you know, makeup. The character of Nandikeshwar or Koimbidar is a classic Nair warrior from antiquity who usually carries a sword and a shield. So the literary work that serves as the script of Mudi yettu's performance is a combination of prose and verse. The language is a

blend, a very interesting blend of Tamil, Sanskrit and Archaic Malayalam. So the first performance is always conducted in the Ernakulam district's Kalambukavu temple.

In the Bhadrakali temples of Kerala performances of this dance-drama, performances of Mudi yettu typically starts in the month of Vrischikam, the Malayalam month of Vrischikam which is between November and December. Before the performance starts a large image of Kali is drawn in the space called Valiyambalam, the space near the Sanctorum which is called Valiyambalam. We see a huge colossal image of Kali is drawn. So these performances are full of color, full of energy, they are very lively and they entail certain you know specific rules and dictums to be followed, and they are very tactile in nature. There is nothing you know abstract, everything is kind of painted and represented.

And so they are very remarkable in terms of the sensory experience of the audience, what the audience is seeing, what they are listening is something that is remarkable, that stays with the audience. To create the image of Kali, mostly powdered rice, paddy, charcoal, turmeric and leaves from the vaka tree, slaked lime are used. When yellow color is desired, turmeric powder is employed. For black color the paddy charcoal powder is utilized and so forth. So we see that for painting the image of Kali as well as for the makeup of the artist, natural colors, natural sources of coloring are used by the artist, right? It is a huge investment actually, a lot of time, a lot of energy is required for preparing the ambience and even preparing the artist for the performance.

Typically the Kurup community members draw the kalam or this image of Kali. So on the four sides of the kalam there are Nilavilakku, in other words oil lights. So we have the kalam at the center surrounded by the Nilavilakku as well as corn, paddy and coconuts. So after the completion of the kalam drawing, the location within the expansive compound enclosed by the temple's outer walls is selected for the Mudi yettu performance. And the public is informed through instrumental music, right, that Mudi yettu is about to start.

Kotti-ariyippu is the word used for drum beating and announcement. It is a name for the style of ritual announcement that involves banging drums and other musical instruments; through playing these instruments, the audience is informed that the performance is about to start. Let us see this video on the Mudi yettu ritual theatre and dance drama from

Kerala. So we see that some of the lamps are being lit and drums are being played to the audience to announce the start of the performance, right.

And so we see that it is, there is a kind of cover around which some of the dancers roam the Hindu god Shiva or Pashupati in his abode in Kailasa. So these representations are so graphic. Sage Narad tells Shiva about the cruel deeds of Darika and Danavendra, right. So the verses and dialogues are used and there is also use of fire, which makes the entire performance so, so you know, so graphic, so vivid.

Next, we move to another performance folk form called garba. So garba or clap-dance is a folk form from Gujarat. It is performed across the world during the nine nights dedicated to the goddess festival called Navaratri. So Navaratri's garba or clap dance represents Shakti, the divine female power. Every night the believers in the Gujarat region offer prayers to a particular manifestation of Shakti. So garba does not exhibit a romantic relationship between the hero and the heroine, nor does it particularly narrate activities of gods.

Rather, the rhythmic movement demonstrates war between demons and goddesses, suggesting that it might belong to the Nryta category, the Nryta category of dance, especially the lasya dance. So critic and scholar M. L. Varadpande proposes that garba could have originated from the lasya tradition of dance in the Saurashtra region of Gujarat. So the more energizing and forceful masculine performance is known as garbi.

We see that the performances are gendered in nature. Garba and garbi are performed by, you know, different genders. One is for the male, one is for the female. Although garba and garbi are prominent gendered acts or gendered performances, such distinctions have started to dissolve mostly in the urban settings. Because in urban spaces, in cities, we see both men and women performing in both these genres. However, distant rural parts, the remote parts of western Gujarat district such as Porbandar, Bhavnagar and Surendranagar could be distinguished by garbi as a specifically male form of performances.

In these, in some of these regions of Gujarat, the gendered nature is still retained. So garbi is performed mainly by the males. So the word "garba" has three meanings according to an online version of the Gujarati encyclopedia called Bhagavadgomandal,

which traces the word's origin to garbhadeep. So the three possible meanings could be A, an earthen pot with several holes inside of which a lamp of clay is kept and lit. Second, a circular motion performed in front of an earthen lamp or a mandap. And third is a method of performance. So the word "garba" could have three possible meanings. Garba and raas are forms of devotional performances that are offered to the goddess as well as to Krishna. The Gujarati community uses symbolic verbal as well as gestural components in order to rearrange, supplement and syncretize, you know, into ritual mosaics that prove meaningful to the worshippers. Now, in contrast to the urban celebrations of garba where men have progressively entered the garba arena which is traditionally occupied by female and conversely women have taken part in the garbi; in the rural places we see that this kind of mingling of the sexes is prevented through creating two separate circles.

So in the rural areas, usually the inner circle is meant for women and the outer circle is meant for men and the intermingling is usually disallowed. With this, I am going to stop my lecture here today. Let us continue with our discussion on folk theatre forms in our next lecture. Thank you. Thank you.