

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 46

Classical Traditions and Performances I

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. After we complete our discussion on the folk dance drama theatres and practices from different regions of India and by large of South Asia; now we are going to talk about the different classical traditions in the Indic context. So today, we are mainly going to discuss two classical forms. One is Mohiniyattam, the other is Bharatnatyam. Let us take them up one by one.

So when we talk of Mohiniyattam, we look at the etymology. Etymologically 'Mohini', the word 'Mohini' means 'enchantress' or 'temptress' and it is associated with the female avatar of Lord Vishnu and the part of the word 'attam' in Mohiniyattam means 'dance'. So it is the dance of the enchantress. 'Mohini' means or 'Mohini' refers to a fascinating woman and is related to the root word 'Mohana'.

We know that Mohana is also the name of Krishna. So Mohana means delusion or Maya, temptation, seduction and magical charm to bewilder the enemy. So according to the Vishnu Purana, there are a number of myths that are associated with Lord Vishnu taking the form of dancing Mohini. So taking a female form of a dancer, an enchanting dancer... So Mohiniyattam is a classical dance form of Kerala and it has its roots, it traces its roots from the Devdasi dance culture.

So the renowned king of Travancore, Swati Thirunal is known for his enormous efforts for the transformation of Mohiniyattam from the Devdasi dance culture. Now Mohiniyattam broadly follows rules that are laid in Bharat Muni's Natyashastra and the form, the dance form is mostly either circular or spiral in terms of its movements, in terms of the movements deployed by the limbs of the body. So Mohiniyattam's evolutionary

history spans a larger region that extends beyond Kerala. This region is entirely or in totality known as Tamilakam. Tamilakam is the entire region where Mohiniyattam is or has been practiced, rather than being limited only to Kerala.

So this artform is thought to have sprung from the Devdasi's sacred dance known as Devdasiyattam. So Kalyanikkuttiyamma in her famous book Mohiniyattam Charithravum Attaprakaravum, describes the mythological genesis of the Devadasi tradition or the origin of the Devadasi tradition. Enormous sprawling bungalows would be built by the Deewaswom specifically for these Devadasis, the dancers, the temple dancers that had dedicated their lives to the deities and service to deity, and so their opinions were respected in all issues pertaining to the management of the temple. So in earlier traditions we would see that the Devadasis had a prestigious status in the society. The Devadasi system evolved into a form of sacred prostitution eventually, where the Devadasis would be exploited by the temple priests.

So over the time their status decayed, deteriorated, right. Royal households would no longer offer their women to the Devadasi service. They would not offer their women to the temples as Devadasis due to the moral decay that had engulfed this entire system surrounding the temple or centering the temple community. So in Mohiniyattam women are usually shown, women have been historically shown as sexual objects with their appearances coded for a strong visual and erotic impact. The circular swaying movements enable for the complete display of the feminine body in all its curves, right.

The moral deterioration of the Devadasis was also reflected in the artform of Devdasiyattam. So Mohiniyattam, as M.K.K.Nayar in his work, Classical Arts of Kerala says, and I quote, "In their dance, they imported more and more of the erotic, ignoring their spiritual and aesthetic values". So Mohiniyattam eventually started to gain popularity because of the Kalamandalam. It underwent a standardization procedure through expunging or removing the erotic aspects, the erotic components that were or that had accumulated in its form, in its gestures over the time, in its design. So it tried to recuperate its spiritual significance, its aesthetic significance.

So Mohiniyattam's narrative style has been modernized and modified through influences from a number of dances, ceremonies and theatres, and a lot of these traditions that influence Mohiniyattam predate the practice of dance itself, the practice of nrtya or the

nrtya tradition itself, right. The early Mohiniyattam choreography was primarily concerned with the dance movements and the structural characteristics associated with music rather than with the expression of a narrative. So earlier Mohiniyattam was more concerned with nrtya, but later on it also accommodated the aspects of natya. The semiotic processes of Mohiniyattam dances' reconstruction in the 20th century facilitate a re-evaluation of its traditional character, which is mostly based on iconicity. So the 19th century locus of Mohiniyattam dance practice and performance were mainly two districts, one is Thrissur, the other is Palakkad in central Kerala.

And the women who practiced Mohiniyattam during this period would mainly come from the Nayar community. So the novel Meenakshi by Chathu Nair (1890) and Govinda Menon's article (1895) throw light and provide literary references to the performance of Mohiniyattam in the 19th century. So we see that Indian classical dance forms in general are divided into two groups and the body movements follow mainly two theories of movements, Volution and Revolution. Mohiniyattam follows the path of revolution. The body of the dancer is divided into two halves at the waist.

The upper part of the body is made absolutely independent of the lower part. That is a very fundamental knowledge associated with the classical dance practices. So the connecting point between the upper half of the body and the lower half of the body is the extremely flexible vertebra that is immediately below the center of the back part of the waist. And in the dance jargon this part of the waist would be called as the lotus. The lotus, this is considered as the soul of the dancer.

This is where the soul or the spirit of the dancer resides. The movements of the upper part of the body go in revolutions with the lotus acting as the pivot and giving the impression of actually a broken back. So the way the body is moved around resembles a broken back. Similarly movements of neck, shoulders and elbow, wrists, knees follow the same principles. These parts are 'broken'.

They seem as disjointed in terms of flexibility, the way they are moved there is an impression that they are disjointed from the rest of the body. So Swati Thirunal has composed a number of padas, pada, jathi, thillana, varna, and jathiswara. The musical composition associated with Mohiniyattam is mainly based on Carnatic music. The founder of Kerala Kalamandalam is national poet Vallathol Naryana Menon and he has enormously

contributed to the growth of Mohiniyattam during the 1930s that is the earlier half of the 20th century. The instruments that are used in Mohiniyattam dance form include mridangam, violin, flute and idakka.

This classical dance form is largely composed on the lasya bhava, right? And the mudra-abhinay is based on what is known as hastalakshmanadeepika, right? So mudra-abhinay is based on hastalakshmanadeepika. Mohiniyattam comprises mainly Sringeri padam. So its focus, its emphasis is on love emotion, the emotion of love and love lyrics, right? And the prominent bhava expression is Sringeri. Mohiniyattam never displays the raudra or anger expressions. It is a very soft, very subtle and feminine dance form essentially.

So the main attraction of Mohiniyattam are these hasta mudras, the mudras or different gestures used by the dancer's hand. Songs of Mohiniyattam are composed in a number of ragas. These ragas are once again pan-Indian. They have their own twists, their own experimentations in the southern and northern parts of India. So depending on the Carnatic music or the Hindustani classical music, the renditions, the treatments would be different, but the ragas are more or less the same in the pan-Southeast context.

So some of the ragas that are used frequently in Mohiniyattam dance form include Anandha Bhairavi, Bhoopalam or Bhopali, Tori, Kalyani among others, right? This dance form actually begins with an ode to Lord Ganesha, right? Invocation of Lord Ganesha called Ganesha Vandanam followed by Cholkettu. So Cholkettu is the devotional aspect of this dance which comprises praising any Devi or Devan, so praising any male or female deity. And following this comes the Jathiswaram, which focuses on dance movements, right? Jathiswaram is further followed by Varnam and then the Padams, where the Abhinaya gain the most importance, right? These are basically the love lyrics. So Abhinaya gains a paramount importance in this part or this stage of the dance form. Following Jathiswaram comes Thillana, which is soft dance movements and finally following Thillana are slokam and saptam.

So this dance form represents mythical stories from different Puranas and it indeed often ends with singing the Mangalam. So through Nrtya.. we see through Nrtya or dance which is an expressive aspect of Mohiniyattam, there is communication of a storyline with emotions and feelings as well as spiritual themes, right? In a Nrtya the dance acting which is called Abhinaya expands to also include silent expressions of words through hand and

facial gestures as well as bodily motions, which are set to musical notes. Just now we said that mudras play a very important role in this dance form. So the attire for Mohiniyattom is a white saree bordered with a broad golden brocade also called kasavu in Malayalam.

So K.R. Kavyakrishna in her essay “Gender and Performance: The Re-invention of Mohiniyattam in the Early-Twentieth Century Kerala” points out that classical forms such as Mohiniyattam gain their significance mainly through repetition. A good classical performer is supposed to repeat or reproduce the essential qualities and essentialities of the art form. This repetition represents the ideal femininity of the decent woman, the aristocratic woman and it is also responsible for producing a kind of hegemonic femininity or feminine ideal, which in turn marginalizes other forms of femininities. So next we see that Mohiniyattam is therefore, like I was already discussing, it is a very feminine form, it is considered as feminine associated with very docile soft movements as opposed to major classical forms such as kathakali, which is predominantly performed by males, male dancers. Kalyani Kuttyamma who is known as the mother of Mohiniyattam says that the body movements of a Mohiniyattam dancer should resemble the soft movements of paddy leaves in a soft calm breeze, the way the paddy leaves move when wind blows.

So Mohiniyattom relies on the historical norms of female behavior such as it actually banks on certain soft emotions such as shyness, vulnerability and the desired, the culturally socially desired permitted body language of decency that can be associated with the aristocratic woman. So the traditionally understood, the stereotypically understood feminine traits make up this dance form of Mohiniyattam, shyness, humility, vulnerability, whichever way we put it, a kind of docility is expected in this dance form. So the dress code of Mohiniyattam comprising white saris with thick golden borders and the Kerala style gold jewelry was mainly incorporated due to the 1990s urge to make this dance form essentially Keralite in nature. So in addition, we see that the hairstyle and the dress resembles the upper-caste women that are available in Raja Ravi Verma's paintings. So we see that male Mohiniyattam dancers are rare phenomenon and this is because they are minority group of performers in this dance fraternity.

This is mostly performed by women and so there is a lack of performance opportunities for male Mohiniyattam performers and there is instability in the work environment and as a result, the financial needs and requirements are challenged in the case of male Mohiniyattam dancers. The male Mohiniyattam aharyam or costume were designed under the guidance of Kerala's scholar, historian and poet Kavalam Narayana Panicker. So Panicker himself was a dancer. So like I said, he was one of the few male Mohiniyattam

dancers who initiated the idea of the male dancing body within this genre. So let us take a look at how Mohiniyattam is performed.

Even as we look at this dance we remember what we have been discussing just now. So the dress, the sensuality associated with the dance form it is very feminine, shyness, docility, softness that are akin to or associated with feminine nature are all you know reflected in the form. So we have the woman that has dressed up very brightly, she is wearing white gold sari with traditional Keralite jewellery and lustre or the Sringaras, right, is prominent in her expressions; there can be no traces of Uradha or any strong expression. Everything is very subtle and very aesthetic in this dance form. The circular movements are also observable.

We see that the mudras are very prominent, the hand gestures play a key role in the movement and the movements are very soft, very subtle. And she is not only doing nrtya, through nrtya she is also telling a story. So natya and nrtya being interspersed through this dance form. From here, we next move to our second classical dance form which is Bharatanatyam. So Bharatanatyam is a magnificent dance form that originated in the southern state of Tamil Nadu.

Bharata, the word or the term Bharata in Bharatanatyam is composed of three elements, bha from bhava or the mental state of feeling, ra from raga referring to musical mode or melody and ta referring to taal or the time measure or the beat. So Bharatanatyam is dedicated to Lord Shiva. The god of this dance is Lord Shiva and he is referred to as nataraj. His nataraj form is evoked in Bharatanatyam right especially in the dance drama culture in Indian tradition the form of Shiva that is worshipped is called nataraj, the dancing Shiva figure. It embodies Dravidian traditions and it draws greatly on Bharata Muni's Natya Shastra.

So Bharatanatyam includes a variety of dance pieces which include different gods and goddesses, a number of deities and prominent among these deities are Shiva and Parvati as well as Radha and Krishna. The dance styles foundation is music which is provided by a variety of musical instruments including the violin, veena, tambura, ghatam as well as others. So Bharata in Bharatanatyam reminds us that the climax or the key understanding of Bharatanatyam lies with bhav, ras and taal. So Bharatanatyam started as a temple dance

which was performed by the servants of god popularly known as the devdasi. So it also originates like Mohiniyattam, Bharatanatyam also originates from the devadasi tradition.

So Bal Saraswati and Rukmini Devi played quintessential roles in the evolution of Bharatanatyam. Bharatanatyam's movement vocabulary constitutes of a number of aspects. One is nritta or the abstract footwork, mudras or the hand gestures as well as abhinaya or the gestural language through facial and bodily movements. And its roots are mainly in Hindu religion, mythology as well as the two major Indian epics Mahabharata and Ramayana that have inspired contemporary Indian classical dancers at large. So contemporary Indian dancers may reference the religious foundation of classical Bharatanatyam while re-imagining the concepts of bhakti and the mytho-religious figures in ways that are distinctly different from the early 20th century artists.

At different periods under different movements this dance form has undergone different kinds of transformations. So against the backdrop of nationalism, nationalistic movements, anti-colonial rhetorics and you know celebration of classical Indian dance form, there have been a number of manifestations and experimentations associated with this form that might have been different from the way this dance form has been imagined alongside the bhakti tradition. And the mytho-religious figures. So in the first half of the 20th century a series of historical circumstances which include nationalism, Brahminization of performing arts and a dialect between western and Indian artists converged together, all these factors converged together into bringing Bharatanatyam to the proscenium stage where it became, its performance became more and more acceptable for the upper caste women too. With this I am going to stop my lecture here today.

Let us continue with our discussion on Bharatanatyam and we will also introduce Kuchipudi in our next lecture. Thank you. Thank you.