

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 47

Classical Traditions and Performances II

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, today we are going to continue with our discussion on Bharatnatyam and then further move on to another classical dance form called Kuchipudi. So, continuing from our previous lecture, we see that one very important figure in Bharatnatyam's revival is Rukmini Devi Arundale, who is responsible for institutionalizing Bharatnatyam through establishing the Kalakshetra Dance Academy in 1936. So, there are majorly three distinct forms that follow the Bharatnatyam system. These three forms are also related to one another, we will see. One is the Sadirnatyam or the solo dance form performed for several centuries by the Devadasis or the temple artists in temples and eventually performed in royal courts of southern India, especially in Tamil Nadu.

Next is Bhagavata Melam. So, Bhagavata Melam comprises a group form of dance drama from Tamil Nadu with all the roles performed by men and the themes being chiefly based on mythology. The third distinct form is Kuravanji, which is a group dance by women based on interpreting literary or poetic compositions that are typically on the theme of fulfillment of love, love of a girl for her beloved. So, there are two styles of Bharatanatyam outfits.

They can come in a different skirt type or a pajama style. These two outfits are both very practical as well as aesthetically appealing and they support the dancer's move, the movement of the limbs of the dancer in accordance with the tal sounds. The Bharatnatyam clothes are made through stitching embroidery with various religious motifs and patterns. Beautiful designs and motifs are embroidered into the saree pleats using the zari, the zari style or the zari technique. The pleats of the saree expand wonderfully like a fan when the dancer makes a sitting posture or a half sitting gesture.

The male dancer's dress covers the lower body and the upper portion is covered with a simple jewel. So, in the case of the male Bharatnatyam dancers, the upper body is usually left bare. The upper part of the body is usually left bare with only adorning a simple jewelry around the neck. Rich embroidery and silk threads are utilized as motifs on the dhoti of the male dancer. And male dancers wear much less jewelry compared to the female dancers.

Although both, you know, performers from both genders can wear sufficient makeup. So, we see that with the evolution of the dance form, the male dancing bodies wearing strivesham was soon displaced. So, there was a revival of this dance form where the male dancers would no longer wear a strivesham. They would have a dress of their own. So Bharatnatyam in the 1930s, in the early 20th century, reflected a concern for sexual and aesthetic propriety on the part of the upper class female performers.

Additionally, there was also a parallel concern for the nurturing of a new masculine identity through dress, through makeup. So the male performers, like I already said, would not wear strivesham anymore. And the new masculinity was largely a reaction to the colonial construction, the stereotypical colonial understanding of the South Asian male as effeminate. So according to modern Bharatnatyam performer Ramli Ibrahimy, patriarchal societies in the South Asian context more commonly eroticize the feminine form than the male. So we see that the female dancers undergo or experience some kind of collective gaze on their body.

It could be in the positive sense as well as in the negative sense. So however, this gaze is not much less in the case of the male performer as well. Since male Bharatnatyam dancers perform bare-bodied, their bodies are also subjected to the unrelenting scrutiny and gaze, the collective gaze, and they often receive, you know, unflattering judgment for the way they are built, the way their physique is built. So Hari Krishnan, who is a Tamil dancer from Singapore, holds a perspective which is different both from the Devadasi tradition as well as the resurgent or the reinvented Bharatnatyam tradition. So Krishnan we see plays a female character in his on-stage appearance and he is bare-chested, he dresses in trousers and sports any kind of stage makeup, and yet he strongly draws on a drag performance.

He reminds the audience of a drag performance. So Hari Krishnan also informs his audience very clearly of his difference or his dissociation from the persona that he plays once he exits his feminine courtesan avatar and he makes a more commonplace, you know, movement or a more commonplace appearance. So Krishnan's status as a male practitioner of what is likely a feminine activity is complemented with the fact that he is also a choreographer. So his authorship of these feminine activities make his role besides what is traditionally expected or understood of male dancers. So in contrast to the dance performers, Krishnan emphasizes his function as a choreographer, a role that is more readily associated with masculinity at least in the South Indian context as well as in the North American context.

So we see that he is a peculiar figure vis-a-vis classical dance performance, who cannot be associated with the stereotypical, you know, understanding associated with the feminized male body that is kind of imposed on our understanding or assumptions about the male dancer, male classical dancer. So he is a typical and a very peculiar figure who cannot be stereotyped and pigeonholed according to the traditional assumptions associated with the feminized classical male dancer. He is also a choreographer, a job that is associated with masculinity. So in 2009, NDTV Hindu made a report titled "Navarasa Nayakans" on the lives and struggles of the male Bharatanatyam dancers. So the kind of struggles with the.. not only with the dance form but with the audience, with the, with their own body and the kind of gaze that they deal with is also a subject of important study and examination we see.

As we see in this case of this report by NDTV called Navarasa Nayakans. So we see that the struggle that the male performer undergoes with his body, the kind of gaze that he endures is also a subject of important study and examination, which this report called "Navarasa Nayakans" is dealing with. Next we navigate to another classical dance form called Kuchipudi. Kuchipudi originated from the town of Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh. So Kuchipudi is a small village or town in Andhra Pradesh from where this well-known traditional dance form emerged or originated and it drew its name also from the name of this town.

So Kuchipudi has evolved as a form of religious expression that is connected to spirituality and temple. Now Kuchipudi town itself is known as Bhagavathula Kuchipudi. Why? Because many of its Brahmin residents, the residents of this town from the Brahmin caste are professional artists who perform the Bhagavatkatha through dance, theatre and a song. Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu also made dancing music and singing the

stories of Krishna as the career of these artists. So Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu has witnessed a lot of these Brahmins make their career out of dancing, singing and telling stories, reciting stories of Lord Krishna.

So they are majorly artists coming from Brahmin caste backgrounds. So this is observable in many parts of India and in many different performing arts across the nation, where artists make their livelihood out of narrating the stories of Lord Krishna who is a protagonist of Mahabharatam, and they make their livelihood through dancing and putting to music all these narratives, all these story plots. So Bhagavatkatha becomes an institution and a source of livelihood for the poorer sections of the society. They make a career out of it. Musical instruments that are associated with Kuchipudi dance form include cymbals, mridangam, violin, tambura and flute.

The male performers or the male characters wear dhoti whereas the female characters wear bright saree with pleats that are embroidered into it. And just like in the case of Bharatanatyam, the pleats can be displayed, they can expand like a hand fan when the dancer stretches her limbs, when the dancer bends her limbs while demonstrating different footwork. The female performers, different parts of bodies, her nose, ear, arms and neck are decked with traditional jewelry from the region. She wears gold or brass waistbelt and there is a specific anklet. So it is an encased anklet in leather with metallic bells embedded in it.

It is called the ghunghroos. So small metallic bells that are encased in a leather anklet, it is called ghunghroos. It is worn around the ankle. So there is also a unique piece associated with the Kuchipudi repertoire where the dancer performs rhythmic sequences while standing on the rim of a brass plate and simultaneously also balancing a pot on her head. We have the picture on our slide that represents this kind of piece where the dancer in her yellow attire, bright yellow attire is standing on a brass plate and she is also balancing a little vessel, a little brass pot on her head.

It entails, it requires a lot of expertise, training and balancing skills. So according to popular mythology, Siddhendra Yogi is the founder of the Kuchipudi dance form. Siddhendra Yogi had seen Krishna and his consort Satyabhama in a revelatory vision. This is how the myth goes; and after this revelation he had given up all his worldly ties

and had dedicated the rest of his life to chanting the Vedas. Now Bhamakalpam depicts Satyabhama's love for and her longing and separation from Krishna.

So Bhamakalpam is centering Krishna and Satyabhama's love and separation and it was written by Siddhendra Yogi in which he is a, you know, a feminized narrator. He imagines himself as Satyabhama. So Siddhendra Yogi mandated the Brahmin boys from his own village of Kuchelapuram which is now Kuchipuri to continue wearing Satyabhama's vesham for generations. So following Siddhendra Yogi's tradition, the boys from Kuchipudi village have continued to wear Satyabhama's vesham or attire for generations together. The life of Siddhendra Yogi was enlarged into a devotional hagiography of religious significance by the Telugu elites who situate his life story within the larger context of vernacular Bhakti movement or Bhakti traditions.

And they see him as a supreme male devotee who communicates his spirituality, his spiritual feelings, his devotion through Satyabhama's female voice to the character of Satyabhama, and this is how through Satyabhama's voice, Siddhendra Yogi yearns for his lord, lord Krishna. So he assumes the feminized form of Satyabhama and through Satyabhama he expresses his yearning for lord Krishna. The life story of Siddhendra Yogi is not extraordinary if we study it in the broader context of vernacular Bhakti tradition, in which employment of vocal guising is a common literary trope. So male singers adopting of feminized persona, singing in feminized voice and expressing their desire to become the consort of the male god is not very uncommon in Bhakti tradition. This is very much available also in Sufi traditions, where the devotee, regardless of his biological gender, is a feminized persona.

Within the context of the art form and the poetic tradition, the narrative, the dance-drama form, he assumes the female form, the form of Krishna's female consort. It could be Radha, it could be Satyabhama. So this is not only in the case of Siddhendra Yogi, we have seen this in the case of Chaitanya too. Many Brahmin men from the Kuchipudi area describe Satyabhama and Krishna respectively in terms of Siddhendra the Jivatma and Siddhendra the Paramatma. So Siddhendra's individual soul is Satyabhama whereas the aspect of him which is, you know, which resonates with the divine soul is the Paramatma.. is the Krishna.

So the Jivatva part of him is Satyabhama whereas the Paramatma part of him is Sri Krishna, Lord Krishna. This implication of Siddhendra Yogi's gender identification with Satyabhama sets the stage for the practice of impersonation through the Bhamakalapam dance-drama tradition. So Bhamakalapam becomes a rich ground for almost a gender blurring, gender experimentation, cross gender identification and impersonation. Kuchipudi scholars and dancers look at Siddhendra as the ideal Bhakti poet artist whose longing for his God, Lord Krishna manifests and materializes through poetic productions. So the history of Kuchipudi between 1860 and 1960 may be referred to as the Natya period, whereas post-1960 can be referred to as the Nrtya period.

Lasya, Tandav and Abhinay are variously used in Kuchipudi which are largely classical in their style, and they are meant for interpreting the different slokas. So Samyutha and Asamyutha Hasthas, Karana, Chari, Angahara, Mandala, Nrutha Hasthas, and so on are the different aspects of this dance form. Due to its expressive Abhinay, the bodily gestures as well as the rhythmic hand movements or mudras, Kuchipudi has been increasingly espoused on a global scale. All four Abhinay forms including Angika, Vachika, Aharia and Satvika, so Angika, Vachika, Aaharya and Satvika - all these four Abhinay forms are given equal weight in Kuchipudi.

This aspect is unique of Kuchipudi. In fact, it is typically associated only with the Kuchipudi dance form in classical tradition. Now we see that Nattuva Mela and Natya Mela both existed as two parallel dance schools which evolved into Kuchipudi dance drama. However, Nattuva Mela further ultimately transformed into Bharatnatyam. So these are two parallel schools where they converge or evolve into Kuchipudi, but Nattuva Mela further transformed into Bharatnatyam. Kuchipudi's national reach is attributed to a single figure from the mid-20th century, which is Vempati Chinna Satyam.

So Vempati Chinna Satyam is associated with its transnational reach or fame. Nagabhushana Sarma states that a Brahmin from Kuchipudi village called Chinna Satyam had left his hometown in the 1940s and he had moved to the urban center of Madras which is today known as Chennai, and that is where he established the Kuchipudi Art Academy. So many essential components of Kuchipudi as it was practiced in his own village were abandoned through Chinna Satyam's experiments with the dance form. So all the earlier practices underwent some kind of evolution, some kind of transformation under the auspices of Chinna Satyam. He started teaching both men and women from different cast backgrounds and he choreographed elaborate dance dramas with

mythological as well as social themes and most importantly, he stopped the male dancers from wearing the Streevesham.

So we see this once again happening in the earlier half of the 20th century where there is a significant change in the attire of the male classical dancer also in the case of Kuchipudi, just like we were discussing in the case of Bharatnatyam. So Chinna Satyam's experiments with impersonation are in fact remarkable, particularly as they pertain to Siddhendra Yogi's dance drama Bhamakalapam and we see that he has re-choreographed his own version of Bhamakalapam especially with respect to the character of Madhavi. So Chinna Satyam entirely transformed the gender composition of the dance drama through recasting the roles of Satyabhama and Krishna, which are to be enacted or which were to be enacted by female dancers, and he also altered Madhavi's you know character to a gender variant one. So Madhavi became a gender variant character to be enacted by the male performer. There was a significant experimentation going on.

Satyabhama and Krishna to be played by the female artists, whereas Madhavi to be frequently enacted by the male performers. Now Chinna Satyam's Bhamakalapam includes both female and male performers from all kinds of caste background. So there was no fixity or obsession with the upper-caste you know performers only. He opened the performance to performers.. to practitioners from all different cast backgrounds, and this is an experimentation of the traditional version of Bhamakalapam presented in its provenance, in its origin where performers are hereditary you know from the Brahmin caste, from the Brahmin community, and they are only males. So it was opened to the females, it was opened to the non-Brahmin castes.

Kuchipudi dance in contrast to Bharatnatyam began as a male-driven dance style with pagati veshas, yakshaganas, as well as other dance plays. In earlier days men took on both the roles of men and women in the dances. This is most likely the cause of an increased dramatization of the female characters. When males play the female roles there is a lot of dramatization associated with it. So the transition of Kuchipudi from male dancers to female dancers and back to male dancers is therefore a very intriguing and unique journey that entails scholarly intervention, scholarly examination.

So a lot can be said and observed within this dance form. It marks a very interesting and unique trajectory. So it is therefore obvious to expect that the Kuchipudi as a dance form

has involved a lot of bodily and emotional quotients, and the bodily and emotional quotients have added their flavors to the journey of this dance form. So the way it has experimented with genders has entailed, has involved a lot of bodily and emotional quotients, a lot of experimentations and these flavors have added new values to the journey of Kuchipudi. So let us take a look at the performance of Kuchipudi.

So it is a performance of Kuchipudi by Manju Bargavee. There is a male performer and a female performer. There is exquisite footwork as we can see; and through the dance the male and the female are dialogizing. So Nritya and Natya once again they speak to one another through the dance, through exquisite footwork, mudras, as well as the dress; the attire has a great role to play, a narrative is being written live on stage. And the kind of coordination of hand movements, leg movements is remarkable.

It entails, it involves a lot of training, a lot of expertise. We can also look at the male performer who is, you know, wearing a dress very different from the female. The males no longer wear the strivesham after the transformation in the dance form. With this, I am going to conclude my lecture here today. Let us continue with this module, with new dance forms in our following lectures. Thank you very much.