

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 49

Classical Traditions and Performances IV

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. So today we will discuss two more classical dance forms, one is Odissi, the other is Sattriya. So starting with Odissi, we see that Odissi dance has nearly 2000 year old heritage and according to the historical resources, the Manchapuri Gumphā of Udayagiri, which was carved during the reign of King Maha Megha Vahana Aira Kharvela, it was carved during the reign of King Kharvela... It contains the earliest distinct representations of an Odissi dance. Odissi dance is originally from Orissa, which is Odisha today. Odissi dance was regularly performed at Shaivite, Vaishnavite and Sakta temples of Orissa, starting with the ceremonies of Sri Jagannath temple in Puri.

Odissi dance was originally created as a court dance form and over the time it became connected with the Jaina monasteries due to royal patronage. So later on we see that it also is performed in different places of worship, which include the Buddhist monasteries. So Odissi as a dance form is connected not only with the Hindu gods and goddesses, but it has also been patronized by the Jain and Buddhist rulers and it has been performed in the Jain and Buddhist shrines. Now the eastern Indian state of Odisha is the place where the classical dance form known as Odissi first emerged, and it is one of India's eight classical dance genres.

Since the 12th century the Devdasi dancers who were also called the Maharis, right, have performed Odissi at the temples. Mahari means those who are dedicated to the dance and they have performed Odissi in the temple premises. Odissi uses movements and gestures to convey ancient music and poetry. Many of the lines read during the Odissi performance are from Jayadev Goswami's Gita Govinda which is a compilation of romantic or we could say erotic poetry in Sanskrit. The dance postures have been recorded for future generations in the friezes.

What are friezes? Friezes are the sculpted embellishments in the walls of the sun temple in Konark. And so we see these friezes available from the 13th century which feature the musicians, dancers and other performers related to the dance tradition of Odissi or the dance form of Odissi. It is as old as the sun temple if not older than that because we see its sculptures on the friezes on the walls of the temple. The Odissi dance consists primarily of five stages or five sections. The dancer enters the stage during the Mangala Charan which begins with a flower offering to Lord Jagannath, the god of the Odissi dance.

So Jagannath is evoked, he is propitiated by the dancer and blessings are sought before the performance begins. This is the stage of Mangala Charan. The Mangala Charan is followed by Pushpanjali or offering of flowers and Bhumi Pranam, which is salutation to Mother Earth. The invocation also includes Trikhandi Pranam or the threefold salutation, which include salutation to the Devs or the different deities, the Gurus or the teachers and then to the Lokas or Rasikas which includes the fellow dancers and the audience. So, it is a kind of thanksgiving which marks the inception of this performance and this is true in the case of different classical dance forms from different regions of India.

We see that invocation of gods and goddesses, acknowledgement and welcoming of the audience, all these things lead to the main performance, right. It is like setting the stage, setting the platform for the main performance. The next sequential step after Bhumi Pranam and Trikhandi Pranam would be Batu. So Batu which is also known as Battu Nritya or Stayi Nritya or Batuka Bhairav. It is a fast pace pure dance performed in the honor of Shiva.

So Batu Bhairav or Battu Nritya is dedicated to Lord Shiva. There is no song or recitation accompanying this part of the dance, just rhythmic music. We see that this Batu Nritya or Stayi Nritya builds up to Pallavi, the next stage. So Pallavi is often slow, graceful and lyrical movements of the eyes, neck, torso and feet of the dancer, and it slowly builds to a climax in a fast tempo. So there is a kind of crescendo, there is a kind of cascading of the tempo from slow to fast and Pallavi is a complex fusion of intricate rhyming schemes, music, movements and expressions.

The stage after Pallavi is called Abhinay or an expressional dance, which is an enactment of a song or poetry. So the dancer communicates a story through sign language, through gestures, using mudras or hand movements, bhavas or enacting mood and emotions as well as eye and body movements. Then we see Mokshya. Mokshya in Sanskrit means salvation. So this final section of Odissi dance represents the dancer's submission, a whole-hearted submission to God and percussion instruments are used to accompany its quick tempo.

In Odissi dance form there are three body positions, namely tribhangi, chouka and samabhanga. Let us take them up one by one. Tribhangi entails three bends. During this position the head, hip and knee bends are prominent and the hand ought to be positioned half way down the thigh. So after Tribhangi comes chouka.

For this posture alongside a lofty upper body, the legs are bowed and pointed outward. The hands are pointed forward and the arms are levelled with the bowed shoulders. Finally Samabhanga, the dancer stands upright with her toes pointed forward and her feet together on either side of the waist, the hands are fisted at the hips. So these are the three main body positions commonly found in Odissi dance. So we see that there is a transformation and you know metamorphosis in the course of the journey that Odissi undertakes.

By the 1970s the Odissi dance style is no longer considered as a subset of Bharatnatyam, but rather it is a separate and ancient dance tradition in its own right. So it kind of attains its own autonomy by the 1970s. Sunil Kothari describes in Odissi Indian classical dance art that this dance form incorporates elements of the oral traditions and practices both of Carnatic music and Hindustani classical music. So it belongs to the Carnatic and the Hindustani cultural matrices. This is a very peculiar exchange that we see in the case of Odissi.

Following the discovery of Odissi dance artefacts, it has been established that some aspects of Odissi postures, movements and themes may be linked back to the sculptures from the second century as well as to the specific Natyashastra connections that are associated with the state of Odisha. So Gita Govinda is a collection of ecstatic erotic songs that are dedicated to Lord Krishna and Krishna is seen as the quintessential male lover in this Vaishnavite tradition of worship known as Bhakti. So regardless of the

devotee's gender, all the devotees of Krishna are connected with the Radhabhava, right? They have this Radha's never-ending feeling of longing and yearning for the Lord's presence, and so all the devotees regardless of whether they are male or female, consider themselves as Radha to this quintessential Nayak or lover that Krishna is. So the internal act of devotion in Vaishnavite worship is associated with Madhuri. The choreographic techniques used by one of the famous male Odissi dancers, namely Kelucharan Mahapatra disrupts the audience's habit, the audience's time-worn habit of identifying with a strictly male or female orientation.

So he is experimenting with the traditional understanding of gender or the gendered stereotypes associated with the dancers, the kinds of gaze that the male and the female dancers or performers sustain. He is experimenting and blurring the traditional yardsticks. He is playing with the traditional yardsticks in a way. So the performer-audience exchange inherent in the tradition of darshan supports the original ritualistic purpose of the dance, which is transforming the viewer's state. So just like when there is an eye contact of the devotee with the deity, there is a kind of rasa evoked in the heart of the deity.

Similarly, there is a kind of connection happening between the performer and the audience through the performance, which transforms the viewer's state. It evokes certain rasas depending on the emotions or depending on the bhavas being displayed on the stage. When the relationship further carries over to staged and televised performances of the classical dance, it involves an alternative gaze, right? And it involves diverse performer-audience positions, right? It is one thing when the audience is sitting in a hall in an auditorium and watching the performer live. And it is another thing when this is recorded, pre-recorded, it is frozen in a way and it is being televised. The whole concept of darshan, the audience-performer eye contact, engagement and evocation or evoking of rasa changes, right? So it entails a number of different meanings vis-a-vis performer-audience positions and the question of gaze, right? It is no longer live when it is being televised.

The modern day Odissi, however, is the result of reconstruction from a variety of Odissi dance traditions, which include the Mahari, Goptua, and Bhandanrutya traditions. The Devdasis from the southern regions are the Mahari's counterparts, whereas Goptuas are essentially men who performed Mahari dances while dressing as female dancers. They are males that, you know, impersonated females while dancing. Pankaj Charan Das, who

is a famous guru of Odissi, came from a Mahari family and it is often said that he is responsible for teaching the Mahari style of Odissi.

He is one of the forerunners of the Mahari style of Odissi. Similarly, Deba Prasad Das is an important name associated with the dance form. Deba Prasad has been a member of an Akhara in Puri, which is a place where young men trained in combat and bodybuilding techniques would play the Mardala, they would smoke Bhang, dance and sing and kind of amuse and entertain each other. That is the culture of Akhara where, you know, a figure like Deba Prasad Das, an important figure associated with Odissi dance form had been groomed. This is a performance of Odissi.

We see the instrumentalists sitting in the background and the coordinated hand and leg movements, the facial gestures. It entails a lot of training and skills in order to perform such dance form. It has some similarity in a way with Bharatnatyam, but like we have already discussed, it has separated itself and it has been able to claim an autonomous identity in the late 20th century as a separate dance form. After this, we come to the next classical dance form, which is Sattriya. Sattriya is a branch of the new Vaishnavite movement that was started by Srimanta Sankar Dev in Assam in the 15th century.

It had its beginnings in the Sattria monastery. So, Sankar Dev spread the concept of "ek sharan naama dharma", in other words, devotional chanting of one God's name. The fundamental attitude of Sattriya dances sets them apart from other dancing styles. It is known as Purush Pak for men and Prakriti Pak for women. The dance is based on the ideas drawn from mythologies.

It uses the traditional Assamese music, which is known as Borgeet. Also it refers to or makes use of musical instruments, including the huge cymbals and drums, the vibrant costumes and intricate choreography. It makes reference to different taals for each stanza that are performed by the vocalist in addition to having specific mnemonic bols. So the bol, the taal, the cymbal, the drum, the influence of Assamese Borgeet, all of these in addition to the vibrant and colourful costumes together make up the effect of Sattriya dance. So Ankiya bhaona and Ojapali dances are both included within the corpus of Sattriya dances and they involve, they train the lead singer singing, performing Abhinay, telling stories, and a group of backup dancers who dance and play small cymbals.

Shrimanta Sankaradeva served as a potent tool and a medium for spreading the Vaishnava religion. Sankaradeva created a wide range of dance forms that combine art with devotionism or bhakti tradition. Drama and music were used to better or to develop the Assamese culture, which afterwards also attracted and incorporated certain esoteric tantric influences. So Sankaradeva introduced the concept of sattras. Sattra meaning Vaishnava maths or monasteries.

So because of its religious character and association with the sattras or the monasteries or maths, this dance style has been aptly called as Sattriya. So the root, the etymological root of Sattriya dance goes back to, traces back to sattra or monastery. Shrimanta Sankaradeva wrote several plays which include Kaliya-damana, Keligopala, Rukminiharana, Parijata harana, and Ramavijaya. Except for Ramavijaya-nata, the Bhagavat Purana serves as a constant inspiration and it influences the themes of the Sattriya plays. So Madhavadeva is another figure who has contributed vastly to the Sattriya tradition.

He is credited with writing a number of hymns including Arjuna-bhanjana, Chordhara, Pimpara-guchuwa, Bhumi-lutiwa, Rasa-jhumura, Bhusana-harana, and Kitora-khelowa. So the Sattriya dances follow the authoritative treatises and dictates set forth by Bharat Muni's Natyashastra. They are greatly informed by Natyashastra's prescriptions. So Sattriya dance tradition is governed by strictly laid down principles with respect to the hand gestures or Hasta Mudras, the choreographic patterns, footwork, the distinctive abhinayas as well as the music and deployment of a variety of masks. The Sattriya tradition has two distinct streams.

One is the Bhaona-related repertoire which comprises the dramatic representations beginning with the Gayan-Bayanar Nach and then continuing with the Sutradhari Nach, the Gosai Pravesha and the Gopi Pravesha Nach; and the Bulan or gait is the term used for foot motions. The dancers from Sattriya tradition adhere to particular footwork styles. The names of some of the gaits include the Hasti Bulan or elephant gait, the Mayur Bulan or peacock gait, the Shankha Bulan or conch gait, the Ghora Bulan or horse gait as well as the Sinha Bulan or lion gait. These different gates appear to be the echoes of more traditional names such as the gaja-lila-gati, tarangini gati, asvotplavana gati, simhi gati, etc. So, these different Bulan or gaits echo with the traditional names, some traditional names such as Gajalila Gati, Tarangini Gati, Asvotplavana Gati, Simhi Gati and so forth.

The Sattriya dancers known as Bhariman have certain footwork patterns that they adhere with. Some examples, some of the examples of footwork patterns include Chirol, leseri, nupurcholoua, kerepi, juti, tewai, and so forth. The Sattriya dancers frequently feature powerful and stunning Vachika abhinay, especially those connected to the characters of Ankiya naat. Ankiya naat is a class of one-act play performed in Assam. Here we see the figure of Sutradhar as very important.

He is an important character that stays on the stage throughout the performance and acts as a liaison between the performers and the audience. He is a bridge between the performers and the audience and he informs the audience of the benefits of Bhakti Rasa. So he is making an overarching commentary. So he is within the narrative and yet he is talking from outside of the frame of the narrative. He does Abhinay, Sutradhar himself does Abhinay while singing, dancing and using different hand gestures to convey the diverse meanings.

The Sattriya dance represents Aharya Abhinay through its elaborate and unique form. The applications of the costumes, jewellery, make-up, mask as well as effigies each have their own distinct characteristics and significance. The Raga and Taala systems used in Sattriya music are unique and typical and they do not always follow the rules of either Hindustani Khayal or Carnatic classical music. They have their own unique style. The Taals used in dance are typically selected to fit the specific circumstance and mood or attitude of a relevant character in a particular narrative or you know drama being enacted.

So initially in the Sattriya tradition, in the Sattriya dance form, the main musical instruments used would be Khol or drum as well as Taal and cymbals. So Khol and Taal were the main musical instruments but with progression of time other instruments such as harmonium, Tanpura, violin and flute have also been introduced. In the year 2000, Sattriya was given the status of a classical dance form by the Sangeet Natak Academy. Here is a live performance of the Sattriya classical dance. It is deeply inspired and influenced by the Vaishnava tradition.

Once again hearkening back that the name Sattriya itself goes back to Sattria or monastery. So it is influenced and informed by the Vaishnava Bhakti tradition and at the heart of it there is devotion to Lord Krishna. Its founder was a reformer, a social reformer

himself, Sankar Deva. So this dance form cannot be dissociated from religious significance.

So with this we come to the end of this lecture. I will continue with the discussion on classical dance form with one more dance form that we discuss in our next lecture. Thank you. Thank you.