

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 58

Bhakti, Sufi, and Cinema I

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. So today we are going to start with a new module called Bhakti, Sufi and Cinema. So we have already discussed the core philosophy in forming the Bhakti and Sufi cults or the Bhakti and Sufi movements. We have discussed the major poets from both these movements. Now let us see the filmic adaptations of the Bhakti and Sufi cults in cinema in the Indian context and by extension in the South Asian context. We will mainly focus on the films that are produced, that are made in India which have the influence of Bhakti cults and the Bhakti philosophy as well as the Sufi cults and Sufi philosophy.

So let us start by looking at some of the critics, how they understand the Bhakti philosophy. A.K.Ramanujan for example writes that the Bhakta needs to possess him (he is referring to God) and be possessed by him.

So basically it is a kind of inter-reciprocatory relationship between the devoted and the devotee. And further Ramanujan says he also needs to sing, to dance, to make poetry, painting, shrines, sculpture to embody him in every possible way. So we have already discussed in our previous modules that Bhakti does not abide by the idea of worshipping the shadow of one's mind or the formless Brahman. It basically thrives with the idea of worshipping God as a personalized humanized existence, as a lover, as a teacher, as one's child, as one's master and so forth, right? In some kind of relationship, it could be the relationship of a friend, a lover, a husband, a teacher and so forth. So all these relationships entail some kind of bhav, it could be the sakhya bhav, the madhurya bhav, the dasya bhav and so forth.

So Bhakti has been called as a less God-fearing and more God-possessed mode of devotion by critic Arundhati Subramaniam. Over the years, the cinema, referring to Indian cinema here, the cinema has been a medium for expressing the Bhakti and Sufi worldviews,

and cinema is responsible for interspersing these philosophies with the core filmic narrative. So within the filmic narrative, we see some performances being made which are deeply inspired by both Bhakti and Sufi metaphysics, Bhakti and Sufi worldviews. Song-dance performances have played crucial parts in such depictions in filmic narratives. Cinema therefore gave a platform, a medium to dance and music for the expression of spirituality through performative mode.

Through performance as observable in cinema, as observable in the song-dance sequences in cinema, the ideas of Bhakti and Sufi were propagated, sometimes in the traditional sense and sometimes as we will see through a hybridized and diluted manner, through hybridized, diluted manner, through subversion of the core ideas. So we will start looking at different films where the influence of Bhakti is available. One such film is 'Baiju Bawra' made in 1952, where we had a number of songs that resonated with the ideas of the Bhakti tradition. A song like 'O duniya ke rakhwale,' and 'Man tadpat hari darshan', these bhajans basically express the urge and the longing to experience the divinity of God.

There is the imagination of a personalized humanized God as experienced through the figure of the preceptor or guru. So Baiju Bawra particularly emphasizes this teacher-disciple relationship. The video of 'Man tadpat' shows the relation of guru shishya or teacher-student, where the shishya is beseeching, requesting for God's appearance and also curing the guru through his song. The student sings brilliantly, he is an extraordinary singer and the song is informed by a strong Bhakti spirit where a revelation of Krishna or Murali Manohar, his idol happens almost as soon as the guru appears. So in the song we see that the guru appears and at the same time, Murali Manohar's or Krishna's idol becomes available in front of the screen and to the shishya.

So it implies that God and teacher are one and the same. So the student through his song had been longing to get a glimpse of Hari and who is this Hari? We see that simultaneously the teacher walks out of his room and emerges in front of his sight, and the idol of Madan Mohan or Murali Manohar is also exposed. So one's identity is transposed on to the other, teacher is the same as Hari here. So the power of love of the shishya can be seen when the guru is finally cured by his moving bhajan, by his highly dedicated and passionate bhajan and lyrics like "Tumhare Dwar ka Main Hoon Jogi Hamari aur Nazar Kab hogi?" So I am the ascetic or the sage standing at your door, when will I see you again? Roughly this is the translation of these lyrics.

So the reference to Nazar and darshan are concepts that are highly prevalent both in Bhakti and Sufi traditions. The consummation of a love relationship through eye contact. That element, that code is available in this bhajan. There is also a reference to the restless soul, "Man tarapata." So the soul is restless and the devotee's soul yearns for the God's sight and it can only be pacified through the God's appearance.

It is the same as the guru's appearance. Through the guru's appearance, he can feel the appearance of the divinity. So then in another bhajan from the same film "Baiju Bawra", we see the lyrics. So "Aye Duniya ke Rakhwale", there are lyrics like "Ab to neer baha le", so "you shed tears for my pain"; and then the singer, the devotee says "Bhagwan bhala ho tera." It is a way of provoking God's guilt for not reciprocating to the call of the devotee and for not pacifying or allaying his pain.

So here we see that when the devotee beseeches or even demands that the God shed tears at his pathos, at his pain and even in a way we could say he is cursing God for being so stoic for not reciprocating. The devotee says Bhagwan Bala Hothera, may you be happy that you are not responding to me, may you be happy. This is how the devotee is addressing to God. Here the position of the devotee is on an equal platform with the devoted. The hierarchy is almost lost.

And here is video from the song "Man tarapata Hari Darshan Ko aj", where this is the denouement, the climax of the song where the devotee says "Murali Manohar Aas na Todo", and the guru who was unable to walk, through the magic of his performance, through.. by listening to his song the guru is able to walk once again and come.. and appears in front of the Shishya. So then next, we see the song from film Seema made in 1955, which shows some people gathered together to pray to God. There is the icon of Lord Krishna and the song defines God as a notion of love, "pyar ka sagar" and the devotee is thirsty or longing for its single drop, "Tere Ek Boond Ke Pyase hum." So it represents a very persistent love of the devotee towards the God, where the Bhakta or the devotee is reluctant to return without receiving God's reciprocation, without receiving God's love. And then further we see that the song addresses God as "tu", which is a very intimate form of addressing someone that we are very close to.

So here we do not see the concept of a distant and a fearful God. That kind of a God which we are supposed to you know revere is not available in the terminology and in the

expressions of Bhakti. The Bhakti's God is a lover, a very close and dear relationship, and so one speaks to God as if talking to one's beloved. Next, we have a bhajan from Shagird, a film that was made in 1967. The song goes like this "Kanha aan pari main tere dvar".

So this song is sung from the point of view of the devotee, the female devotee who wants Krishna to accept her as his servant. So the dasya bhav of Mirabai is very much evident in this song, especially as there is a juxtaposition of Mira with Radha. This is a very common device, a common trope that comes back again and again in Mira bhajan. There are a number of songs made in Bollywood in different decades where this juxtaposition is available. One such song is "Radha ka bhi sham hai to Mira ka bhi sham"; then "Ek Radha Ek Mira dono ne sham ko chaaha", and so forth.

So the two kinds of love where one is celebrating, the Radha's love is celebrating Sringar and Madhurya, whereas Mira's love is celebrating the dasya bhav, the servile emotion or attitude. So these two kinds of loves are constantly juxtaposed in Mirabhajan. Similarly we see this trope being used in "Kanha aan pari main tere dvar." So the song goes like this, "tu jise chahe waisi nahi main haan teri Radha jaisi nahi main, phir bhi hoon kaisi kaisi nahi main Krishna mohe dekh to le ekbar." So "the kind of lover that you seek Krishna, I am not like her, I am not exactly like your Radha, but still how I am, can you see once and tell if I am good enough?"

So the concept of darshan comes back again. There is a desire in the devotee that Krishna, this figure of a transcendental rasika and the beautiful human God see her. He directs his gaze at her once, and this refers to the concept of darshan, the bhakti concept of darshan, and depicts a sensuous God that loves and hungers for devotee's love and this kind of love once again is very sensory in nature, it can be touched, it can be seen, it can be heard and so forth. It appeals to the five senses. Then we see that the song "Kanha aan pari main tere dvar" expresses a complete surrender and utter dedication towards the end of the bhajan.

This is how it goes, I will read the original and then I will translate it to English.

"Maati karo ya swarn

bana lo/ tan ko mere charno se laga lo/

murli samjh haatho me utha lo" –

So when translated, "you turn me into dust or gold, bring me to your feet, pick me up as your flute." These lines reflect the essence of bhakti where attaining of God happens through traversing the path of love and through complete surrender to him. Once again bhakti, the path of bhakti or the bhakti marg is different from the jnan marg.

So God is not attained through scriptural knowledge, it is through sheer love, through a rapturous and ecstatic performance for God that the knowledge of God can be attained. Next we come to a bhajan from the film "Gopi" that was made in 1970. It is a bhajan that goes like "Sukh ke Sab Saathi dukh mein na koi." It centres a scene of prayer to God and we have such prayer songs as very common presentations or you know very common performances that are inserted in the filmic narrative in the 1970s decade. It adds to the spiritual quotient of the film and the spiritual message that the film is trying to convey.

Here in the case of "such ke sab sathi", we see a group of people sitting in the vicinity of a temple or sitting in a temple complex with the lead character, the protagonist singing and praying to God. The song is about selfless love towards God with the image of Hanuman being focused towards the beginning of the song, Hanuman sitting at the feet of Rama, Lakshman and Sita. The song is evocative of the ideals proposed by Ramrajya and it focuses on the dasya bhav or the servile love that Hanuman feels for Rama. It is in a way you know proposing a kind of an ideal society that became a dream of post independent India, the dream of the nationalists especially. These films have the tendency to support the nationalist dream of an ideal post-independent nation, right? An organised society.

And so the evocation of Ramrajya, the idol of Ram, Sita, Lakshman with Hanuman at the feet becomes a common trope seen in different bhajans of different films during this era. So this is a snippet from the bhajan where we see the idols of Ram, Sita and Lakshman and you know the devotee, the leading singer singing in the temple complex. So the song promotes the concept of an egalitarian society through a reference or allusion to the Ramrajya or Rama's unparalleled and ideal kingdom. There is a proposal, a desire for an egalitarian society- in the eye of the god, the rich and the poor are the same. They meet the same end, they die alike regardless of which class they come from.

So death is the ultimate end of everyone regardless of their class. A society with equality has been a crucial element of the Bhakti culture which was evoked in the nation building process and the films that supported this nation building process in the post independence

era. Further, this bhajan encourages detachment from worldly pleasures, calling life and one's embodied existence, one's *kaya* as a delusion, a *maya* and therefore false. So it says that this bodily existence, the material conditions are all delusion, it is temporary and so one should not seek their identity, their permanent identity through the material conditions. One should transcend it and one should concentrate on god.

So made in the post independence era like I was saying, this bhajan deploys Bhakti ideals to shape a new generation of citizenry and audience that is modern in its disposition and yet not detached from the traditional values. That is the kind of society which mixes the modern values with the traditional ideas that was desired, that was being envisioned. Next in 1971, we see kind of a new trend being set by a very popular song from the film "Hare Rama Hare Krishna" made in 1971 and it ushered in the hippie culture in Bhakti presentation, thereby diluting the traditional sense in which Bhakti was understood and presented in the past decades in Indian films. So this is a kind of, you know, incorporation of the Bhakti codes were to show a westernized hippie culture. It has got a lot to do with globalization.

We need to remember that from the late 1960s and early 1970s, the beauty pageants became very popular. A lot of Indian beauty queens were winning these pageants. They were becoming Miss World, Miss Asia Pacific and so forth. They were bringing home these laurels. So there were certain modern values and the impact of globalization writ large in the cinematic performances.

The song "Dum Maaro Dum" is symptomatic of this change of Bollywood culture, this change in the Bollywood culture. The song which is shot in an era of globalization is about a carefree life regardless of the world, regardless of the society and intoxication comes to help when one wants to forget the difficulties of life. Because the song lyrics go like this, it goes like, "duniya ne humko diya kya? duniya se humne liya kya? hum sabki parwa kare kyu? sabne humara kiya kya?" So "what has the world done to me? How has it helped me? And why should I even reciprocate to the society and to the world?" A very individualistic stance, a very independent stance is emerging through the impact of modernity and globalization where the traditional Indian value where we see ourselves as part of the collective, the part of the community responsible towards the community, towards community-building is being disrupted. So it is like the free life that I want to live.

Protagonist Zeenat Aman who is a beauty queen and who actually brought in some very alternative values encourages one to take another toke. She says "Dum Maaro Dum". So she dances with a look of ecstasy on her face and she wears the saffron attire, the color that is traditionally associated with the saints. The song therefore encourages detachment from the world and there is a departure from the traditional bhakti values. The song is presented by lyricist Anand Bakshi and composed by R.D.Barman. It was originally intended to be a duet with Lata Mangeshkar singing the 'good girl's' background and Usha Othup singing for the 'bad girl'. So this 'good girl'-'bad girl' rhetoric was originally envisioned for this sequence. However, it was entirely sung by Asha Bhosle in the end like we know. So one of the reviewers Daniel Shiman says that the song "is a montage of creaking synthesizers, psychedelic guitars, and... vocals nailed by Asha Bhosle in an ear-piercing exposition of sound." So Zeenat Aman like I was saying, she was Femina Miss India Asia Pacific 1970, and she redefined the screen heroine's identity with her westernized image, her hippie like image.

She had some kind of bodily erotica or excess that she showed on screen which was unprecedented, right? The cino-sexuality that she represented and she became the item number queen also. With Zeenat Aman we get this idea, this concept of item number for the first time in Bollywood that entirely refashioned Bollywood's commercial cinema and also the middle class gaze, right? It educated the middle-class audience to revisit the concept of the Indian heroine. Earlier the idea of Indian heroine would be associated with docility, with shyness, you know, with propriety and so forth, especially the kinds of films that we see in the 1950s decade like Mother India, very idealized notions of womanhood, motherhood. From there a figure like Zeenat Aman completely disrupts the traditional values. The second part of this song is a corrective measure to the first part, which is very interesting.

It's a kind of the two parts dialogue with one another. So one part says the "Dum Maaro Dum Mit Jaye Gum". The second part says "Ram Ka Naam Badnam Na karo." This line itself means "do not desecrate the name of Rama." It is an immediate repartee or response to the song "Dum Maaro Dum".

It counters the idea of intoxication of substance abuse in the name of love for God. So it rather emphasizes on attempting to bring love for God through a proper understanding of God and his or their teachings. So God's understandings and the teachings of God should not be vulgarized or diluted. So Ram Ka Naam Badnam Na karo" suggests reading Gita for example, referring to Gita instead of losing one's consciousness and giving away to

substance abuse and drugs. So the song encourages some normative ideas about social life saying that life is about working, do not take rest.

And through these lyrics it puts at the center the ideals of a productive worldly life, a human life that is purposeful, that is serving the society. However, we see that this is also a very modern idea which is not directly linked with the Bhakti ideals. This utilitarian concept of human life is also a departure from the Bhakti worldview, and it is also another kind of dilution of the Bhakti culture. Bhakti saints would normally be quite radical and not always abide by the social mores and the conventional parameters set by the society. So that way this is also a very contemporary approach that can be seen in the light of a nation building, how an ideal nation should be built in its post-independence era.

Everyone should be working and not take rest, right? That is the second part of the [song]. It is directly contradicting the first part. So the first part is about fun frolicking and giving in to substance abuse. The second part is about being an aware and responsible citizen. Next we have a song from "Do Chor", a film made in 1972 where the song "Yaari Ho Gayi Yaar Se" very much echoes the sentiments or the worldview that is proposed by the [song].

So this phase of cinema in the 1970s marks a clear dilution and appropriation of the Bhakti culture and the Bhakti codes. In this song we see the female protagonist is actress Tanuja who is also Miss India. She is part of the beauty pageant, she is a beauty queen and hence a different kind of cine-sexuality is observable through her presence. This song "Yaari Ho Gayi Yaar Se" depicts the hippie culture. It is located in Goa and the hippie culture has properly entered Bollywood songs in the era of globalization.

So it shows the people intoxicated and revelling in a sea-shore thereby mixing Bhakti codes with western values, which leads to a hybridized effect. The protagonists in the song wear westernized clothes and they can be seen as revelling in God's names. They have the Rudrakshamala around their neck and the Tikka that they don, make them appear as yogis, thereby they are focusing on the image of the saint. It is remarkable that these, you know, while celebrating the idea of narcotics they have a picture of Vivekananda somewhere kept at the center of this performance. So this is a complete subversion and dilution of the teachings that saints like Vivekananda had preached.

So from the 1970s in fact this trend becomes common in Bollywood. The song encourages a type of love which is sans any inhibition. It breaks the stereotype of hiding or hesitation and shame. The female protagonist counters the idea of Parda or Anchal, right? So through this she is resisting the normative standards of relationship. She encourages living openly, living in a free society and doing things that make her happy.

She depicts, she represents a free woman. So the lines when translated to English go like this, "Love is not concerned by the world full of lies, religion is about laughing and expressing, we don't know how to hide in Anchal or veil." So there is no need to hide anything. There is no need for inhibitions or shame." So love without shame is also a crucial bhakti element that the song is drawing upon. So since God is omnipresent one cannot hide anything from him and live.

So this is a snippet from the song where we see some hippies dressed as saints in the saffron, so use of saffron, use of rudraksh and then mishmashing it, kind of jamming it with some guitar, some hippie dance in the seashore. It heralds the Goan culture, the Christian culture that we see in Goa. So it is a very hybrid effect that emerges through this song. I would like to stop our lecture here today.

Let us continue with this discussion in our next lecture. Thank you.