

# **Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia**

**Prof. Sarbani Banerjee**

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee**

**Lecture 01**

## **Introducing Performance and its Characteristics in the South Asian Context I**

Good morning students. I heartily welcome you all to the first lecture of my very first module in the lecture series -Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. I thank you all for taking this course and I hope we will have a wonderful journey together. Here we talk about the different religions and religion-based performances that are observed and practiced in South Asia. So we talk about the different religious principles, the song, dance, dance- drama, performances associated with these practices, these religions. We talk about the different local beliefs and practices.

We talk about the classical dance forms, the folk dance forms and finally we are also going to talk about the representation of South Asian performance in the filmic context. So I hope you enjoy the journey. We are going to open our discussion, the very first module with an introduction to performance because performance is at the heart of religious practices in the South Asian context. We cannot really divorce or decouple performance from religion in this part of the world.

There have been so many different influences that have shaped, reshaped, modified our performances, the sundry performances that we have in the geographical region that is today known as South Asia. So, we are going to talk about performance and its very characteristics in the South Asian context today. So, let us see what Encyclopedia Britannica has to say. Encyclopedia Britannica traces the roots of interrelationship among various groups of South Asia as reflected through the epics, the two most prominent and great epics from the South Asian region that are the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. So, in Ramayana and Mahabharata we get a glimpse of the multicultural, multi-ethnic societies that we have in South Asia.

Interrelationship is also shown not only at the level of you know human existence, but among the celestial and the ephemeral beings who exist on different planes. This kind of you know celestial-ephemeral exchanges is evident in our Mahakavyas and the names of

the places themselves often evoke common sources, right. So, although what is India today and even before that what has been the Indian subcontinent is a vast, it is a huge spanse of land, it is a widely spread geopolitical kind of milieu, but here we see a lot of commonalities tying one culture or one region with the other. They are not really existing or they have never really thrived in isolation from the other. There have been continual attempts by different great, you know, emperors and different great dynasties to bring this entire geopolitical space or geographical region under one umbrella to impose a political unity over this entire region that we presently call as the South Asia.

In the third century BC for example, the great emperor Ashoka had conquered almost all of this region under his faith. In the 11th century AD Rajendra Chola conquered almost the whole of what is India today and a significant portion also of the Southeast Asia. And then the Mughal emperor Akbar conquered a larger part of India in the 16th century. So, through the expansion and attenuation of boundary lines, boundary lines have always been very, very protean and changing their shapes and changing their limits. The political convergence and divergence that we have seen through decades, through centuries of this region shapes the South Asian history, and through socio-cultural and linguistic exchanges for over centuries, the culture has remained eventually one.

Through a lot of giving and through a lot of taking, this region has benefited, this region has gained culturally, linguistically and socially, right? The myths of the society witness to so many different rulers, so many different dynasties that have come and gone, ruled and have been toppled by other dynasties. So the myths, mythologies, fables, heroes of the region attest to the different dynasties, the different regimes that have come and gone, one that has been replaced by the other through so many centuries of history, right? And a lot of this history is depicted, is you know carved out in the temples, in the scriptures, in the different primary and secondary epics which actually substitute the formal historical documentation. We have to understand that the writing of history is a very recent tendency, and it comes from the West. In the Asian context, in India, in China, history has been written in parallel ways, in simultaneous manners on the walls of the temples. So history has been written on the walls of the temples through different depictions, sculptures and then we had anonymous manuscripts too. So, we are going to talk about all of these. So rather than formally documenting, we have had so many different ways of recording and preserving the past.

Much of it has existed till a long time in oral form and disseminated from generation to generation through you know, memorialization, through remembering and reproducing. So the association of the different lakes and springs with the water spirits and the sylvan fairies - these fairies are locally known as the Yakshas and the Nagas - is common throughout the region. So for example, Karkota is the name of an early dynasty which itself signifies Naga worship in the Kashmir region. The sculptures of Nagas and Yakshas that are found in widespread sites suggest a common spirit of veneration. So

from South to the North, from West to the East, we see that the kinds of gods, goddesses or demigods that are being worshipped are not very different from the other.

They have a kind of commonality, a kind of convergence. The myths have different renditions, local, you know, folklorist colorations are there, but then there is a commonality in the belief system that shapes the spirit of South Asia. So sculptures, paintings, temples and religious texts from the region have been preserved for centuries within and through the oral tradition, through orality, through disseminating from memory, remembering what is being said and then reproducing it again to another generation, to another audience. That is how the stories, the fables, the lores remain at the heart of the society in the collective consciousness of the society. So that is how the fables, the lores, the ballads, the legends are preserved in the collective consciousness of the society.

The oral narratives have accumulated local renditions are available, but they have not evanesced altogether. So the classical dance forms that are seen in the sculptures available in the Gandhar region- that is now in Pakistan, in the Parkhut region of the north, northern India and then the Amravati region in south reflect a lot of commonality, right? So what is available in the Gandhar region, in the northern part of India and then the southern part of India, they are spaced from one another in terms of geography, but in terms of belief system they are tied to one another. There has been a lot of exchanges, you know, time immemorially there have been exchanges, adaptations and receptions from the abating culture. So in the context of secondary epic Silapathikaram, we see that alongside the mention of the Chola, Chera and Pandya dynasties, these are the major kingdoms from the south, the work Silapathikaram confirms knowledge of the northern kingdom. So in a southern secondary epic that Silapathikaram is, there are mentions of kingdoms from northern India, such as the Chedi kingdom, the Uttarkosala kingdom and the Vajra dynasty and all these dynasties, these kingdoms were known to the Tamils at that time.

The epic Silapathikaram vividly describes the Tamil society and the people's religious and folk traditions as well as their gods. So through these epics we can get a glimpse of the contemporary time. Similarly, we see that the northern part of India was also very well aware of the culture in the south. The Atreya Brahman, which is a later Vedic text, shows awareness of the southern quarter which they called as the Dakshinadis. Also they know about the Dakshinadis.

Panini who was a great grammarian from the 5th century BC spoke of the Pandya region, which is presently Madurai in Tamil Nadu. Ashoka's edicts mention the Cholas, the Chola kingdom which is presently the Kaveri valley, the Pandya kingdom which is the Vaigai valley close to Madurai, the Satya Putras which is the northern part of Tamil

Nadu presently, the Kerala Putras which is Kerala to India as well.. So Ashoka mentions all these regions as his unconquered frontier areas. These are some of the regions from south India that Ashoka had not been able to bring within his own control. Further, we see that the Greek accounts of Megasthenes mentions Pandya as Pandyan and this mention by the great traveller and someone who recorded the culture of India, Megasthenes' works have been subsequently quoted by Greek and Latin authors.

So the Greek accounts of Megasthenes, a great traveller that came to India mentions the Pandyas, the Pandya kingdom and the Pandya dynasty as Pandyan and Megasthenes has been subsequently quoted by the Greek and Latin authors. The royal courts and temples of India were the main centres of performing arts. In ancient times Sanskrit dramas were staged at seasonal festivals and also in order to commemorate and celebrate special events. Now we see that theatre and dance- all the entirety of South Asia have been primarily and fundamentally influenced by and trace their roots in India. So they have the Indic context as their backbone.

They have mainly been inspired by the culture of India. The principles of aesthetics which are the reference point for artists even in the contemporary times draw greatly on Bharat Muni's Natya Shastra, a very important work and one of the, if not the oldest work on Indian aesthetics and dramaturgies. 2000 years old work on Sanskrit dramaturgy, its conventions are even performed by the folk artists. So in India what is or in the South Asian context what is really beautiful is how we cannot very strictly bifurcate the folk from the classical. They have had great many, very many exchanges and they have drawn on one another since eons. So for example, even the Kandyan dancers from Sri Lanka preserve some of the the wheels and spins that are described in the ancient Indian texts.

So we find some of these artifacts being, you know, preserved in Sri Lanka. Further, we see that despite the cultural changes that have taken place for over the years, theatre and dance still have the presence of their ancient core. The ancient principles, for example, that have been depicted and prescribed in Natya Shastra have not entirely gone away, they are still considered as the rule book. This Natya Shastra is still considered as the rule book as far as theatre and dance are concerned. In the early years, in the ancient times, kings from the southern part of India would have a general practice of sending the priests, the artists and court dancers overseas and this led to a cultural expansion to the countries of south-east Asia, such as Myanmar [which was Burma earlier], Cambodia, Java, Sumatra and Bali because these were the cultural ambassadors from India, the priests, the artists and the court dancers were the repository of the cultural knowledge and aesthetics.

They were very, you know, highly sophisticated ambassadors and they spread the Indian culture through exchanges and a lot of Indian, you know, cultures, myths were embraced

by the countries from south Asia, like I already stated. So even when these south-east Asian countries embraced Buddhism or Islam afterwards, they continued performing dance-dramas with the Hindu gods and goddesses at the heart of their performances. And to these gods and goddesses, they have added their own local myths, their own local costumes and masks. So we see that a lot of hybrid, you know, we can say subcultures, sub-practices are emerging which are very interesting phenomena actually. We see that all across South Asia and South-east Asia, there are so many hundreds of versions of Ramayana.

Within India, there are so many versions of Ramayana, so that the question of copyright of a genre like Mahakavya does not arise. People add their own local myths, their own local essence and their own emotions, their own kind of context to re-read or re-engage with a great work like Ramayana. There are so many versions where there is a kind of experimentation with some of the important characters- Hanuman or the monkey god being one of them. There are so many different imaginations of Sita, of Ravana, of Lakshmana and so forth, right? So, we see that the two ancient Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata- they are store-houses of dramatic personae of traditional dramas, right? They embody the essence of traditional drama. They are dramatic personae. They have been absorbed by not only South Asia, but.. so they have not only been absorbed by or in South Asia, but even beyond, in southeast Asian countries as a part of their own cultural heritage. In fact, some dance forms, gestures and vocabulary that had become extinct or almost extinct, they were about to die out in their own land of origin found a kind of a new life in Bali.

A lot of these, you know, gestures, forms and vocabulary have been very well preserved in Bali. The art of South Asia usually expressed a set of moral and ethical attitudes. So, what influences the stage or performance or what informs them is dharma. Dharma is something that we need to discuss, you know, in a more extended manner. Now we need to just understand that there has to be a set of moral and ethical attitudes that guide even stage performance and these dramatic personae.

So, the glorification of the image of the king and the king's desire to serve the public has been expressed through art since centuries. In Natya Shastra, Bharath Muni gives us some specific, you know, moral and ethical codes of conduct that are associated with the king, the chaplain, the minister, the prince and so on. That is how a society functions in an orderly fashion. The royal courts and temples of India traditionally have been the centres of performing art. And Sanskrit dramas were staged at, you know, special events. So, premier classical texts such as Periplus of the Erythraean Sea by an anonymous author that is recorded to have belonged to the late first century BC, the Naturalist Historia by Pliny the Elder who is recorded to have died around 79th century BC and then the Geographie Huphegesis by Caludius Ptolemy who existed circa 150 BC, are some of the classical texts which eloquently speak of the importance of the South Indian

regions, the South Indian kingdoms and their richness and South India, the southern part of India also known as the Tamil Desam is mentioned especially in the context of South Asia's booming commerce.

So, they would be mentioned in the context of sustained maritime trade with the Roman Empire and the Eastern Mediterranean. This maritime profile of the Tamilakam, the Tamil Desam is reflected through the imaging and imaginations of the poets and bards from the Sangam period. Sangam period has been extremely, you know, fertile and rich in terms of its booming culture, its very prosperous and promising culture of literature and poetry traditions which depict the southern Indian kingdoms very vividly and in very intricate manner, right. So, dance is a form of expression that informs the local, the micro as well as the macro-cultures in South Asia. Dance is a form of expression for the farmers, the hunters before their harvest or even the fishermen before their good catch.

A lot of folklorist local beliefs are associated with different dance forms. There are community dances for seasonal festivals especially among the tribal populations. There are religious fairs, there are, you know, performances associated with marriage, birth and even death. The warriors in different Indian cultures, in different South Asian cultures used to dance in order to seek the blessing of gods and goddesses before, you know, their venture. And as a way of expressing themselves, their gratitude to different deities, they would dedicate their performance to these supernatural beings.

So, religious festivals are still the most important occasions for dance and theatrical activities. We have in mind the Ramlila, the Krishnalila and the Raslila, which are the major festivals from northern India, northern India encompassing Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Rajasthan, Haryana and Punjab. Then we have the Chhau Dance Drama from the eastern India comprising Bengal and Jharkhand. Then we have the Bhagavat Mela in Melatur village in Tamil Nadu. All these are performed annually to celebrate the glory of their particular deities.

So there are many such minor and major performances taking place seasonally all across South Asia. During the Dashahara festival, all the villages in North India enact for a fortnight the story of Rama's life, right? And they perform it with songs, dances and pageants. The Jatra in West Bengal is a year round dramatic activity; especially in the rural regions of West Bengal, the Jatra tradition thrives. And then there is the major festival of Durga Puja in Bengal which you know attracts even a lot of tourists from outside.

Then we have the hill and tribal people whose cultures are you know totally performative. Their existence is based on performance and they celebrate their community festivals and weddings, even the death rituals with elaborate masks, pageants and carnivals. So an integral part of Indian dance and theatre is you know instrumental music and singing. So all these instruments play a very important role.

In all of Asia the musicians sit on stage. So there is a live play of music on stage, to which the dancers and the performers respond. And there is a kind of dialogue, a live spontaneous dialogue going on where the stage is being performed. The stage sometimes also flows into the audience. The stage and the audience cannot be, very strictly speaking, separated, right? Even the audience can prompt from among themselves, right, to the stage and actors.

K. Ayyappa Paniker divides Indian narratology under ten headings or ten main or major characteristics. Interiorization, serialization, panoramic fantasization, cyclicalization, allegorization, anonymization, elasticization of time, spatialization, stylization and improvisation. Let us take them up one by one. So by interiorization what do we mean? It is a process by which a distinction or a contrast is affected between the surface features of a text and its internal essence, right? In some texts, the inner and outer structures may be parallel or contrastive. The outer frame may even be used to seduce the reader away from the inner core, right? So we have you know this kind of very unique dynamics going on.

So we have a very unique background between the outer and the inner layer of a text, which are very different in terms of narrative fabric or narrative texture.. which are very different from each other in terms of narrative texture, narrative essence and this contradiction makes up for very interesting you know discourse or gap which becomes a characteristic, a chief characteristic as far as Indian narratology is concerned. A text may be, for example, a hard nut to crack like a coconut, but within it may be very soft and sweet. This is compared with a coconut, the coconut model locally known as Narikera Pakkam or the coconut model. So a text is said to be also like grapes, the grape model. It is another model, right? It is inside-out sweet.

The outer layer is not really contrasted with the inner layer and the narratology is sweet you know inside-out. It is sweet through and through. That is a grape model. If we have the outside as hard as compared to the softer inside, it is the coconut model. So one of the most significant examples of the grape model is the style of interiorization that we see in Valmiki's Ramayana.

The poet Valmiki has seen to it that no one reads his work as a single layered text. So within the story of Ramayana is a interiorized symbolic mythical account of the daily routine of the sun causing the day and night cycle and the day being represented by Rama of the solar dynasty and Ravana being his opposite is representing the forces of darkness. So within the story of Ramayana, we see this kind of interiorization, a symbolic mythical account of the daily routine of the sun rising and setting. On the one hand, we have Rama as representing the solar dynasty and Ravana who is his diametrical opposite representing the forces of darkness. So through abduction of Sita the daughter of the earth these two very opposite symbols connect in terms of mutual opposition as rivals.

Next we have the trait of serialization. Serialization implying the structure of the typical Indian narrative which seems to prefer an apparently never ending series of episodes rather than producing a unified single strand streamline course of events which centers around a single hero or a single heroine. So rather than having a very unilinear and a very kind of convergent or centripetal pattern, it has a more centrifugal pattern where the narrative is following a never-ending series of episodes. It is not tied in the ends. So the Indian narrative is made up of episodes some of which are detachable without any.. without causing any larger change to the narrative's total frame. So in Mahabharata, for instance, we have episodes or Upakhyans related or relating to Nal or Sakunthala, which provide a sort of expansiveness to the central story, but then they are not integral to it.

So what we find here is called the circle within circle structure. The different cantos in Ramayana, for example, they are complete in themselves and if we remove one Upakhyana or one sub-narrative or sub-plot the larger plot will not undergo any kind of detriment. It would not be detrimented or affected. So these sub-plots are complete in themselves and they carry the essence of the larger epic. In a nutshell, they have all the rasas and bhavas.. largely most of the rasas and bhavas that depict or that inform the larger epic.

So there are small similar circles within the larger circle. So the episodic looseness of the Indian narrative allows for variations in terms of tone and style in the middle of the work. Even the gaps function as a part of the system and whenever necessary, we see a song or a dance or even a variety show being inserted as a way of filling up the gaps. So in the Dravidian context, we see Silappatikaram has many such episodes which are like effusions that are inspired on the spur of the moment, and they seem to.. they have a very harmonizing you know impact over the entire structure of this secondary epic. With this, I am going to stop my lecture here today and let us meet again with another round of discussions in another lecture. Thank you. Thank you very much.