

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture 10

Bhakti Tradition I

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, we are going to start with a new module today on Bhakti tradition. Bhakti, when we talk of the Bhakti tradition or the Bhakti cult, we need to understand that it emerges from within what we call as Hinduism today. A lot of it is an offshoot or most of it is an offshoot of Hinduism. However, it is also a protest cult which breaks away from the ritualistic traditions that are at the heart of the Brahminical traditions or practices of Brahminical way of worshipping the God. The pomp and show and more specifically the caste system that is inbuilt, that is a part of.. a very important part of the Brahminical system or Brahminical way of dividing the society.

So, it is important to remember that Bhakti movement emerges from 'below.' It is essentially a grassroots movement. So, the development of the Bhakti movement started in the southern part of India between 7th century and 9th century. Bhakti is a way of attaining the God through appeals, especially meant for those devotees that do not have other ways of reaching the God, other ways referring to Gyan or Karma.

So, there are basically three yogas. So, the Hindu tradition understands that there are three major paths for reaching the God. One is a Gyan yoga through scriptural knowledge, reading, learning, knowing one can attain the knowledge of God. The other is Karma yoga through the right action, you know, doing your duty in the sansara or the samsara. The third is through devotion to the God, which is Bhakti.

The symbols conventionally associated with these three yogas are.. so for the Gyan yoga we have the symbol of the rising sun, that is knowledge. For the Karma yoga we have the symbol of waves. And for the Bhakti yoga we have the symbol of lotus, the lotus flower.

So when a person becomes very, kind of, a master, when a person attains mastery over all these three yogas, the person is called as a Paramhansa. Paramhansa or the great swan, meaning that the person is a great sage.

So the combination of all these three yogas is the Raja yoga. Raja yoga which includes the Gyan yoga, the Karma yoga and the Bhakti yoga, the symbol of Raja yoga is kula kundalini. So the symbol of Raja yoga is kula kundalini, the snake. So what I am trying to, you know, tell about the Bhakti tradition is that for a person who is at the margins of a society, who does not have any way of acquiring knowledge, attaining education, reading scriptures, or by virtue of belonging to a certain lower caste, the person is not allowed to access, you know, the Brahminical, the Vedic scriptures. And the person has no idea, has no guidance regarding the righteous karma, the right duty, which is also inscribed in a way, prescribed by the scriptures.

So a person who does not have access to either knowledge or karma can be guided to the God through sheer devotion and dedication, right, that is Bhakti. A person who cannot go to the temple has only his body as the possession, and that body is the temple basically where God resides, right. So Bhakti, the word Bhakti comes from the root words bhaj plus tea. So 'bhaj' and 'kti', where 'bhaj' means to pursue and to recourse to love in order to reach the God. Bhakti can have either a secular or religious aspect.

So an object may or may not be specified. So we will see that Bhakti as a cult has accommodated so many different types of trends within it, so many different, you know, tendencies. For example, the school of Nirguna and then the school of Saguna, one that is.. and they are completely in opposite directions. Similarly, the Vaishnava sect and the Shaiva sect, the Alwars and the Nayanars, they are also worshipping different deities. So within the Bhakti umbrella we have all these different variegated tendencies that are opposed to or that are not completely in agreement with one another.

The traditional idea of Bhakti, you know, is incumbent on a fundamental difference between the creator and the created, right. So this is however, you know, the basic idea of Bhakti where there has to be a duality. So Bhakti is therefore antithetical to the concept of monism because monism problematizes the dualistic, you know, presence of God and devotee and it effaces any difference between God and devotee. Monism is a doctrine of Advaita Vedanta, which calls the unified whole as Brahman, right. So what is a

Brahman? A Brahman is something that is prior to, that precedes any sound, perceptibility, shape, gender or attributes that is at the heart of Advaita Vedanta, an intangible, impalpable concept of Brahman.

Now Bhakti is not consistent with this philosophy of Advaita Vedanta or the concept of Brahman, since this Upanishadic notion supports a oneness of religious practice whereas Bhakti essentially thrives in factions. Bhakti is more resilient, Bhakti is more accommodative towards differences. There are so many different branches, like I already stated just now, so many tendencies. Bhakti is accommodative of the Nirguna Bhakti as well as the Saguna Bhakti. It can consider one of its schools as worshipping the Vishnu as the major god, the supreme god, either Vishnu or Krishna in other places.

Another one, the Shaivites are considering Shiva as the highest deity. And history shows that there have been a lot of, you know, major prominent conflicts between these different schools. So Bhakti is anything but a homogenous tendency or a homogenous cult. It is just very beautifully accommodating all the differences. So Bhakti deals with the Saguna Brahman whereas Upanishadic philosophy says that both Saguna and Nirguna are merged into one, into that one Brahman.

So but having said that Bhakti deals with Saguna Brahman that is also one of the schools of Bhakti which is dealing with the Saguna Brahman. Nirguna Bhakti is dealing, it is closer to the Upanishadic concept of Brahman actually. It does not believe in forming an icon of the god. So Bhakti entails a concrete personal god and establishes a personal relationship with such a god instead of worshipping the deity as a shadow of one's mind, a tendency that one finds in the Upanishadic concept of Brahman. So Bhakti problematizes in fact the concept of Nirguna because.. so although Nirguna Bhakti is part of Bhakti tradition, Bhakti as such problematizes the idea of Nirguna.

It is not very happy with the idea of Nirguna because Bhakti has different streams or different manifestations of love within it. Bhakti is celebrating love for god and this could be different streams of love or different manifestations of love. It could be the love of a servant. So we have these different bhavs, right? The Madhurya bhav, the Sakhya bhav (the love of a friend) and then the Dasya bhav. So in the form of Madhurya bhav we have the Radha Krishna's eternal love.

In the Sakhya bhav we have Krishna and Balram's eternal friendship. We have Krishna and Balram's friendship. Then as the Dasya bhav, we have the figure of Hanuman who is such a great devotee of Rama. And then the filial love, the mother-son love where we have the figure of Yasoda who is not the biological mother of Krishna but still she is the epitome of motherly affection and motherly love. So Madhurya or Dasya or Sakhya- all these things entail a figuration, a personalized god.

They cannot love a shadow of one's mind. So the idea of Brahman is discarded here. Brahmanism propounds that dualism is possible within one's self where the higher and lower being, the Brahman and the seeker of Brahman are confluenced within the individual himself or herself. So there should be no seeking outside but an inner journey; through introspection one can find God. So the onus is on knowledge or gyan.

Contrarily the Bhakti is essentially an outward journey. It requires an icon and loving the icon. So in the Indian tradition we have seen this very commonly within the temple complex, within the premises of a temple or shrine. The god that is considered as a child is put in a cradle. So throughout the day the chores are centering that deity and it is a, there is a figuration.

It is not an imaginary deity without an icon. The deity is put in a cradle, the deity is being bejeweled, the deity is being clothed and bathed and fed and even songs are being sung to put the deity to sleep. The most common imagination is that of Gopal, the child Krishna who is pampered by the devotees who put in a cradle and you know then put to sleep, given meals from time to time. The entire you know service of temple is centering this child deity. And so, there is a concept of a kuldevata also.

A kul devata in the Indic context where the figure of the deity in some way or the other, it could be a female or a male deity, is considered in terms of relation. Whether he is the son of the house or the son-in-law of the house. So there are many houses that call the Madan Mohan as the son-in-law of the house or the deity Durga as the daughter of the house, and that is how she is or he is attended, they are humanized. So that this is very much a practice, a culture, a belief system you know coming down from the Bhakti movement. It is you know assigning some kind of you know or assuming some kind of human relationship with the god.

It is not possible without an iconization, an outwardly figure of the god. So Srimad Bhagavad Gita perceives Bhakti as the supreme form of yoga. Although that can be contested as Bhakti is not in contradistinction to jnan or karma after a point. So just like I said Bhakti has so many different branches but after a point we see that they are also confluencing, they are coming and merging you know in the same direction. There are different paths for reaching the same god.

So Gita says that Bhakti is the greatest way of reaching the god but having said that it also says that Bhakti is not in contradistinction with jnan or karma. They kind of co-exist. So even Shankaracharya who was a great proponent of Upanishadic Brahman and an epitome of the jnan yoga talks about Bhakti, right? Gita is where we find Lord Krishna himself saying that out of the four types of Bhaktas who worship him, the four types of devotees that worship him, the Arta, the Jijnasu, the Arthi and the Gyani. So the Arta, the Jijnasu, the Arthis and the Gyanis, he loves Gyanis the best and the Gyanis can love him the best.

But what kind of Gyani is this? Is this Upanishad's, Shankaracharya's notion of Gyan yoga? Not really. In this case, Gyanis does not pertain to any scriptural institutionalized knowledge. Rather, it is the innate knowledge that one is born with. It is the intuitive knowledge of god that is already there in us.

So we do not have to write a book. We do not have to follow a prescribed ritual. The one who seeks for true knowledge of god is the Gyani who submits himself to become complete with god's soul, who submits himself to become one with god's soul and surrenders his karma and Gyan to god through bhakti. So bhakti is the highest form and it actually encompasses Gyan and karma within it. There is a sense of surrender and a wish to become one with god. You know, not an arrogant form of knowledge where, you know, having the knowledge makes you feel superior and almost like the god.

So that is a way of separating oneself from the god. The knowledge that makes one submit, submissive towards god is the, you know, the correct way of knowing the true knowledge. So one realizes that the polemic of monism and polytheism resolve after a point because Krishna himself says in Gita... what does he say? That those who understand his eternal supreme state, the avyaktam, do not worship him as a manifest or an idol, as he is not personal. So within bhakti, the difference between Gyan and Gyeo,

the knowledge and the object of knowledge, manifest and non-manifest, the exposed and the unexposed after a point get dissolved, right? As Krishna himself is shown as indifferent and yet the bearer of all.

So unlike in the Islamic or the Christian faith, where there is a conformity to one undisputed god, so there is a definitive understanding of god and violating or trying to reinterpret that understanding is considered as incorrect. There is no such absolutism in bhakti as a cult, as a practice, as a religion that would exclude others. So although bhakti has the tendency towards sagun, we also say that nirgun is also another form of bhakti. It is also accommodated by bhakti. So all the opposing tendencies are also incorporated, nothing is left out.

Although we say that, you know, bhakti has its onus on devotion, it is also taking into account, you know, Gyan and karma and through, you know, through devotion one can attain Gyan and know the right karma or action as well. So they are not really antithetical to one another. Similar to the Indian phenomenon, there was a continuity between mainstream Christianity which believed in pantheism and the western metaphysics whose proponents were philosophers like Hegel and Immanuel Kant, who brought in the concept of god within the body of western philosophy. So we see that subsequently what happens through these philosophical interceptions, what happens is that definitions of god are given through one's personal understanding. So Hegel calls god as an absolute spirit, Berkeley calls the same god as the concept of one's mind, and René Descartes would finally say that god is nothing but an innate idea.

So different ways of intercepting this idea of god through western metaphysics, western philosophy. So, western scholars like H. T. Colebrooke marginalized Hindu polytheism and they would rather focus on Upanishad and they stated that the essence of the Hindu religion lies in monotheism. At the same time, they critique Advaita Vedanta.

So all those, their onus is on monotheism, they are critiquing Advaita Vedanta, calling it as a glorification of self. With so much of inward journey, you know, just worshipping a shadow of one's mind, there is only a glorification of self, right? Unlike the narcissistic notion of self that emerges or that arises in the west, the Upanishadic self, the Advaita Brahman is, has been largely misunderstood by the western scholars. So Brahman is not an individual 'I', it is not an insistence on the individual 'I' that can be divorced from

god's existence, right? So there is no concept of individuality within the Indian tradition and by extension, even within the South Asian, you know, practices and belief systems by and large. Even in the, we could say that in the Indo-Chinese understanding of religion, it is vastly community-centric, right? The 'I' that emerges is not separated from we and within this collective, the meaning of god also emerges. So god is not somewhere outside of or something abstract or abstruse and unreachable to the commoners, to the common people.

So God resides among the people in the Indian context, right? So here again, knowledge and bhakti become complementary and inseparable, right? As for revelation and self-realization, one needs self-knowledge which can be achieved through devotion. So we see that rather than knowledge and bhakti being, you know, opposed or opposite tendencies, they complement one another. One cannot be fully realized without the other. Another fallacious understanding among the western thinkers about what they call as the orient is to equate Vaishnavism as a synonym with bhakti. So there is a lot of misunderstanding pertaining to this bhakti tradition or bhakti movement or bhakti cult, where bhakti has been recurrently synonymized with Vaishnavism, whereas in practice, in reality Vaishnavism is only one of the branches of bhakti, right? Not all of it.

There are also the Saivites. So there has also been an endeavor to trace the influence of Christianity onto Vaishnavism, where there is a kind of analogy drawn between the popular icon of Lord Krishna with Jesus Christ. These are some of the fallacious tendencies that have been countered time and again. Gita becomes a perfect site of bhakti, as it exhibits a personal exchange between the disciple and the God as well as a complete surrender of the devotees as any reason or cause. And we see that what is the dialogue of Gita about? What is Srimad Bhagvat Gita about? At another level, we see that the devotee and the devoted are also best of friends.

They are.. So a friend, philosopher and guide who after the Vishwaroop Darshan becomes the God and suddenly this friendly relationship takes on to another level, the level of the devoted and the devotee. And we see Krishna as a shrewd politician from being a, you know, a lover and a very, you know, flirtatious lover at that. And a mischievous boy. Here we see the figure of a shrewd politician and he is the Partha Sarathi. He is very symbolically holding the reins of all the horses of Partha or Arjuna.

So all the horses which could be seen as the different senses are running amok in different directions in a battlefield of Kurukshetra. Krishna is holding the reins of all these horses. He is the charioteer and he is the shrewd politician who is constantly counselling. He acts as the minister of his friends. So beyond the relationship of friendship, here we see a different, another face; and at the moment of Vishwaroop Darshan he shows that when Arjuna is hesitant to kill his own relatives, you know, fight with his own relatives or even his own preceptor on the other side of the camp, in the rival camp, Krishna opens his mouth and shows the universe inside.

He says that everyone is always already dead. You are just the mediator. You are not going to do anything new. Everything has been pre-ordained. So we see these two different, you know, levels at which at one point he is a friend and only at another point he becomes a charioteer, the counselor, the politician and the guide-philosopher and finally the god. And this keeps coming back in the relationship between the child Krishna and Yasoda also.

When Yasoda asks Krishna to open his mouth and show what he has stolen.. he is the butter thief, right? She asks him to open his mouth and every time he opens his mouth there is a glimpse of the universe inside him. So what has he stolen? He has everything inside him. He is the all, right? So Gita says that Shraddha is very essential for Bhakti and it varies according to the gun or virtue of the one who practices it. So for example, the sattvic worships God with Shraddha, the Rajashik worships Yaksha with Shraddha and the Tamashik worships the Pret with Shraddha. So out of all these different forms or different, you know, ways or depending on the object that we are worshipping, out of all these three the sattvic Shraddha is called Parashraddha and is of the most superior form of all, you know, yogis.

So the sattvic yogi is the most superior yogi according to Bhakti. Gita also says that God can be recognized as personal against the notion of Brahman. So it is just like we were saying, it is a departure from the Upanishadic concept of, you know, a Brahman that cannot be actually defined in tactile terms. Gita distinguishes Bhaktas from the worshippers who pursue God with rituals. So the Brahminical tradition is a way of having a priest as a mediator and following the prescribed scripted rituals, right? And those that follow the scriptural practices have only little understanding and they can ascend to the Devlok.

By following scriptures where can you go? You go to the Devlok according to the Bhakti tradition, whereas the ones that worship from within their own devotion, with all their heart and soul, with their passion, they immerse their identity into the God himself. Where do they go? They go, they do not go to any loka, they go into the God himself. The four pioneering figures of Vaishnavism are Ramanujan, Madhavan, Nimbarka and Ballava who accommodate Advaita Vada within the concept of duality, right? And this they do through adjusting the sectarian deity within Nirgun Brahman or conversely, they identify the Brahman with the attributes of Saguna. Shaivites refuted Shankar's tenet that there is no difference between Jiva and Brahman, right? And they called Shiva as the cause who is unlimited whereas, Jiva as the effect who is limited, right? So, Jiva and Shiva are not the one.

This is where Upanishadic Brahman is coming from, non-duality. Whereas the Shaivites would say that Shiva is the cause who is unlimited whereas, Jiva is the effect, Jiva or the ephemeral life, the worldly forms, right? Living forms they are the effect and they are limited. Similarly, Advaitabad encourages sectarian thought by calling Shiva as Maheshwar, the highest deity. While Svetasvara Upanishad describes Shiva as exceeding all subtle substance or attributes, Pashupatya Yoga Sutra denotes Shiva as the lord of all beings, right? So Pashupatya Yoga Sutra says that all beings are bound by some para or limitations, right, whereas Pashupati is their absolute and instrumental cause. So Pashupatya Yoga Sutra has five fundamental ideas. A, Karya or exploration of the universe that is effect, B, Karan or cause which is none other than Shiva himself, C, Yoga which is the method of union with Brahman, D, Vidhi or ritual that consolidates a sect by observing certain common practices contributing to a uniform identification such as formation of a sect called the Virasaivas who carry the sign of a Shiva linga on their body.

And finally, E which is the fifth, you know, idea of Dukhanta which is the ultimate objective of the Bhaktas, the end of Dukh, right? Dukhanta, end of all miseries. According to the Pashupatya Yoga Sutra, the ways of liberation are Charya or service to the deity, Kriya or invoking him with affection that pertains to personal bhavas, right? That is where Bhakti, that is at the root of Bhakti. What is Kriya? Kriya is invoking the God with affection. And there are certain personal relationships established with the deity, personal bhavas such as Batsalya, Dasya, Sakhya, Madhurya; and finally, you know, another way of liberation that it suggests is jnana, which gives the ultimate feeling of union and yoga. So according to Pashupatya Yoga Sutra, the different ways of liberation are Charya or service to the deity; Kriya or invoking him with affection which pertains to personal bhavas or Batsalya, Dasya, Sakya, Madhurya, so establishing

personal relationship with the God; then jnana which gives the ultimate feeling of union; and then finally yoga and then finally jnana which gives the feeling of union or yoga with God.

So negotiating with the Shaiva Siddhanta, Pashupatya Yoga Sutras shows that jiva and Shiva are abhinna and non-separate, yet there is a scope of distinction or anyata. The Saivites are saying, what the Saivites are saying has been exactly, you know, reflected in the Vaishnavite schools as well. We will see that, I mean, this concept of abhinna and yet anyata, right, they are non-separate, but there is a scope of distinction. That is exactly what Radha and Krishna are. Radha is an extension of Krishna's identity, his mirror reflection, right.

Abhinna and yet anyata refer to experiences of a duality without nullifying the unitariness of Advaitabada. So they are two beings just because they want to play the amorous, you know, acts as earthly forms, but beyond this earthly form they are Advaita, they are abhinna, they are actually the same. They have made this distinction in order to play the Leela, right, as earthly beings. So Bhakti follows two tenets, the great tradition which is Sanskritized, standardized, classical and erudite and then the little tradition which incorporates parochial popular regional folklorist practices of public or the common masses. So here also we see that Bhakti is very beautifully conglomerating, bringing together, blending the Sanskritized tradition with the local traditions.

Bhakti is actually a kind of glue that brings together many opposite tendencies, right. It is a movement about, you know, unifying the different schools rather than thriving on sectarianism or separation. So this kind of bifurcation threatens any homogeneity. However, it would be erroneous to say that the Sanskritized tradition and the parochial or local traditions are mutually exclusive, watertight compartments. This is because there is a constant influence and exchange between the two.

We see that the classical and the folk traditions are completely interdependent and complementary and they have for.. since eons, for centuries, you know, taken from and given to each other. There have been very fruitful exchanges between the two. So for example, Mahabharata is an epic written in Sanskrit. However, its historical propagation leads to many folk renditions of the mainstream plot, whereas practices like Ramlila, right, in the northern part of India shows a reclaiming of the scriptural source material of

Ramayana. Ramlila is reclaiming this.. the scriptural source of Ramayana, Valmiki's Ramayana through many diversified, ramified understandings, and it goes on to become a pan-Indian experience.

The major shift from Sanskrit Ramayana to Tulsidas is marked by introducing musicality intricately, you know, close to the poems. The major shift from Sanskrit Ramayana to Tulsidas is marked by introducing musicality to the verses in addition to the secular Sanskrit emotions found in the original Valmiki Ramayana. In other words, the Valmiki Ramayana was more secular. It is, you know, journey within the Indian history of the figure of, you know, the icon of Rama from being a prince Rama, a prince to a lord.

He is undergoing, you know, some deification. There is a deification of Rama. By the time he reaches the Bhakti movement, he is being treated and, you know, by Tulsidas, a Bhakti poet, he becomes Lord Rama, right? And there are certain portions from Ramayana that are meant to be incorporated or interspersed with the religious practices, the chalisa, the chaupais that are being written, right? So the musicality becomes a focus. The musicality is accentuated at the level of Tulsidas's Ramayana. So in Gita, the personal bond of disciple with God is shown through the use of recurrent vocatives, and these vocatives within Srimad Bhagvad Gita imply a passionate outburst or rather outbursts through the repetition of words that are reinforced through interjections, right? So, texts like Gita Govinda and then we have Krishna Padamrita, and these were originally written in Sanskrit, but they have later been vernacularized. So we see that the Sanskrit tradition and the local traditions are not quite diverse from one another.

The journey from epic form to musical renditions, like from Valmiki Ramayana to Tulsidas, involves consideration of length, rhythm and alliteration, and every small section is transformed into an independent form adhering with certain tunes that kind of fit with the particular emotion displayed. With Prakrit playing as intermediary and vernacular elements being added or adapted within the scope of classical, there is a paradigmatic challenge from below to above, right? So Prakrit is being mixed with the Sanskrit tradition. So we see that the masses from the so-called lower castes are also becoming visible in this movement in a great way. With this, I am going to stop my lecture here today. Thank you. Thank you.