

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 13

Bhakti Tradition IV

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. Today we are going to continue our discussions on Bhakti tradition and we will be discussing Buddhism and Bhakti. So, following the development and expansion of Buddhism in India between the late 16th century BC and the 2nd century AD, the medieval Bhakti movement was the most extensive, far-reaching and multifaceted movement that emerged in India. In different eras, the Bhakti movement touched practically the whole country. So, Bhakti originated in the southern part of India, but in the subsequent decades and centuries we see it moves in the northern states and it becomes a pan-Indian, almost a pan-South Asian phenomenon. And its significant impact not only felt in terms of religious doctrines, rituals, morals and popular beliefs, but also moving out of the purview of religion and touching art, aesthetics and culture.

So, these in turn had an influence on the medieval states and ruling classes' value frameworks, right? The core principles, the core tenets of Bhakti influenced the ruling classes' values, and that is where we see Buddhism emerging. Buddhism mainly emerged as a heterodoxical religion, a heterodoxical sect which broke away from Hinduism, mainly frustrated by the caste practices, so casteism and animal sacrifices, so bloodshed and the elaborate rituals and pomp and show which attracted a lot of wealth, which entailed a lot of wealth. So, Buddhism was frustrated by the casteist practices in Hinduism, the animal sacrifices or unnecessary bloodshed as well as the pomp and show in all the rituals that attracted and entailed a lot of wealth.

So, in the cultural sphere the expansion of regional languages, devotional music, dance, art and sculpture was inextricably linked to the Bhakti movement. So, we see that the Bhakti movement is not restricted only to influencing and revisiting the religious doctrines, religious tenets and values, but they also.. the tradition also had a societal

dimension where it influences the music forms, the dance forms, art, aesthetic and sculpture. During the invasions by the Sakas and the Hunas, two categories of religious practices are formed. One is the Brahmanbad, the other is the Sramanabad. The two mainly differ from each other in terms of ritual observances as well as the social divisions or varnashram.

So, Sramana, Sramanahad being a heterodox sect replaces separate social factions with universalism. In other words, Sramanabad which is the harbinger of Buddhism is a proponent of, is in favour of a caste-less society. So, Theravada Buddhism which is one of the oldest form of Buddhism was at first crystallized into a compilation in Pali language, in Pali script. During the third council of Ashoka, Buddhist canonical literature was formulated and in the third century AD, the final scriptural formation of Buddhism takes place soon after Buddha's death. Prior to that Buddhism was more archaic and it would be passed down generations through Smriti, right, or oral tradition and memorialization so that there was no fixed canon; it happens only after Buddha's death during the third council of Ashoka. The canon of Ashoka is called Mahasangha, which is the basis of the Hinayana or Theravada Buddhism. The split between Hinayana and Mahayana sects is mainly on the basis of the text used because the Mahayanis want to include the interpolations post-Ashoka besides the Mahasangha. On the other hand, the Hinayanis claim that the books till the time of Ashoka should be considered as sutras, whereas the latter works should be considered as commentary, they are not a part of sutras. Now, during King Kanishka's rule, Buddhism was translated into Sanskrit.

So, Sanskritization happened during Kanishka's regime and what we get as a result is called the Sarvastivada. Both Sarvastivada and Theravada therefore come from the Mahasanhika or three baskets, also known as three pitakas, baskets or pitakas - Sutta pitaka, Abhidhamma pitaka, and Binayaka pitaka. The word 'Theravada' itself traces its etymological roots to 'Sthavir,' the word 'Sthavir' which means the one who has attained the highest and the ultimate form of knowledge. So, Buddhism prescribes two states of renunciation. One is the middle-path followed by the Upashaks, who observe austerity within the familial domain.

The other is the Bhikshus, who abandoned family life in order to become ascetics. The theories or practitioners of Theravada propounded dynamic phenomenalism, in which one connects with the universe psychologically through his perceptive sensory faculties. So, Theravada Buddhism says that all factors of our normal existence have basically three marks or Lakshanas or lakkhanas rather. They are all impermanent and fleeting,

hence subject to changes. Everything (conditional to the world and mundane living) is ill and connected to “dukkha” or sorrow, which relates to the four sights that Buddha had, which were life-changing sights which changed him from a prince to an ascetic.

One is ill, the other is old, then dead and finally ascetic. So, these four sights had made Buddha leave his family life, renounce family life and become a seeker. And then the final factor for all normal existences or the final Lakkhana is that they are all non-self. I would just repeat them and summarize the different Lakkhanas, the three different Lakkhanas- that they are all impermanent and fleeting, everything is connected to Dukkha and they are all non-self. So, the four noble truths of Buddhism say that the world is full of sorrows.

Sorrows happen, sorrows follow when an individual wants gratification of senses without realizing their impermanence. So, the cause of sorrow is human craving, the sensory cravings. Third, sorrows can cease to be only when the cravings are limited, something that Buddhism calls as “nirdha,” limitation of human cravings. Finally, cravings can be stopped through following the codes and conducts of the Ashtangika Magga or the eightfold path. So, Theravada Buddhism says that everything is in Sankhara or form and nothing is independent of others.

So, these forms are not permanent. So, there is no concept of self or atman. They are all contingent.. based on the, you know, contingent factors. They are all dependent on other abutting forms. They are not absolute, they are contingent.

They are shaped by the concomitant factors, concomitant forms. So, Sankhara, the idea of Sankhara or form in Theravada Buddhism refers to mental formation as an aggregate comprising a group of mental factors or concomitants, also called as cetasika. So, to put this very simply, there is no concept of an atman, the Vedic or the Upanishadic notion of atman. Buddha's teaching talks about anatta or conditionality. So, forms are transitory, fleeting in a state of flux and they are based on certain conditions.

They will shift and change when the condition also changes. So, the concept of self or atma does not hold. So, a change in context changes the object itself. There is continuity

and also a disruption between the former and the latter configuration of objects. So, they are in a continuum and yet they are not the same.

The object in the previous moment is not the same as it is in the next moment, although there is a connection, a flowing continuum between the two. This is the concept of anatta or conditionality. So, Buddhism annuls the concept of the Upanishadic atma, which is supposed to be at the heart of the Brahminical texts, right? It is the concrete manifested identity of self. Buddhism talks about non-self, anatta. Buddha says whenever the conditions break, such existence is no more.

Any form is based on conditionality. Atma cannot exist according to Buddha because sankhara or form and skandha or mental factors have transitory existence, such that they cannot be attached to any permanent identity. So, as long as something does not reveal its dharma, it remains a skandha or matter. Upon revealing dharma, it becomes a sankhara or form. Something without any characteristics is skandha.

Once it starts exhibiting its features, it becomes a form and this form derives its essence from the contingent forms. It is not a meaning in itself. It is a meaning through its state of conditionality. In, you know, in the presence of other forms, it is also another form. So, formations have no unity as they are the derivatives of skandha or matter which are impermanent.

So, atman's concept brings forth a sense of permanence and dependence which Buddhism basically rejects. Buddhism is doubtful about the Upanishadic notion of atman. So, not realizing the temporal nature of the world eventually leads us, the ephemeral beings, to the state of dukkha. So, ephemeral beings are affected by dukkha's sorrow because they do not understand that everything is fleeting and impermanent, and the process of nirvana or moksha can only transcend such earthly bonds. Only through, you know, overcoming the earthly bonds can one overcome the state of sorrow or dukkha, and that is when one attains salvation or nirvana.

Now, the ancient Gupta empire which marked a golden age in Indian history covered the northern Indian hemisphere approximately between 550 and 320 BC. So, during this period, one witnesses a resurgence of Hinduism and a corresponding decline of

Buddhism, expansion of Buddhist thoughts and, you know, followers. Adi Sankaracharya, who lived between 788 and 820 centuries, triggered a Hindu resurgence with his philosophical thought as, you know, documented in Advaita Vedanta. With the production, with the creation of Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism is greatly sidelined. However, having said that, one also needs to state that Adi Sankaracharya himself had absorbed in his scheme, in his teachings, many aspects of Buddhism, many teachings of Buddha.

For example, he emphasized on the elaborate and wasteful sacrifices and rituals. So, just like Buddhism as a heterodox sect had broken away from Hinduism, owing to its pomposity, its caste practices and animal sacrifices, Adi Sankaracharya would also emphasize on these negative aspects and, you know, urge that Hinduism should get rid of these malpractices in order to resurface, in order to resurge in a prominent manner. So, along with the eminently sensible and radical elements in Buddhist teachings, Adi Sankaracharya also adopted some of the abstruse and subtle concepts from Buddhism, such as the concept of Sunyavada or Madhyamikas, whose chief proponent was a spiritual leader named Nagarjuna. So, Sankara's absolute idealism and his denial of material reality under the mask of Mayavada is greatly connected to Nagarjuna's Buddhist concept of Sunyavada or Madhyamikas. So, Sunyata.. what is Sunyavada based on? Sunyavada is based on the idea of Sunyata.

Sunyata in Buddhist philosophy refers to the voidness, the vacuum or voidness that constitutes the ultimate reality. So, Sunyata is seen not as a negation of existence, but rather as the undifferentiation out of which all apparent entities, distinctions and dualities arise. Having said that, one could add an afterthought that Sunyata is not very different from the concept of Brahman. In Vedic teaching, Brahman is also sans any gender, sans any concept of duality; it exists prior to any discourse or duality. From Brahman, all kinds of creations happen, all dualities, all discourses, all conflicts and opposition that form the narrative of creation engender from the Brahman.

So, it would not be wrong to say that Sunyata reminds one of the concept of Brahman that precedes gender, precedes form, precedes any kind of duality or discourse. So, through this reconstruction of Hindu theology, Adi Shankara sought to establish the primacy of the Upanishads and it also laid the foundation of Badarayana's Brahmasutra and the Bhagavad Gita. With this, I am going to stop my lecture here today and I will meet you again in another lecture. Thank you. Thank you.