

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture 23

Bhakti Mysticism and Poetics V

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, we are discussing Bhakti mysticism and poetics. Today we are going to take up a new Bhakti poet, Guru Nanak. So, we have already discussed the basic tenets of Sikhism and there we have introduced the figure of Guru Nanak whose teachings are very similar to that of Kabir Das. Now, in terms of his compositions, Guru Nanak has to his credit a number of long poems such as Jaapji, Siddha Goshti and Dakhni Omkar, besides almost more than 900 shorter poems or rather hymns because they are meant to be sung. And these are all set to the different ragas of Hindustani classical music tradition.

The Jaapji is regarded as the most important composition in Sikh literature. It is a description of the sadhana or effort that man has to make in order to realize the divine. The Siddha Goshti is a criticism against the school of Gorakhnath. It is against or criticizing the ascetic and esoteric practices of the Siddhas who are followers of Gorakhnath school.

Among Nanak's other longer poems, there are the verse, verse or clusters of verses written in Raga Majh, Raga Asa and Raga Malhar. The poem Asa-Di-Var

enjoys a prime status in the Sikh system of worship. A war in the Punjabi folklore is a verse narrative either depicting love or war. The verse in Adigranth, however, additionally also have a philosophical and lyrical nature. Their core stanzas have distinctly metaphysical meaning, but at places they also adopt a revolutionary tone.

So, let us take up the following verse. It says,

Disciples play the music,
To which their preceptors dance.
They move their feet
And roll their heads in a trance.
Dust flies – flies and settles
pon their locks.
O what a sight, people laugh!
And leave and laugh.
For the sake of bread,
They beat time and dash themselves
Against the ground.
Sing Gopis, sing Krishans,
Sing Sitas, sing Ramas and Rajas!
Fearless is the formless Being.....
The oil press, the spinning wheel,
And the quern potter's wheel;
The many endless deserts;
Whirl winds, tops; the churning staves,
The threshers, and the breathless tumbings
Of birds-
Mounted upon a stake, all are whirled.
He alone swings around mortals
Bound in entanglement.
Each must dance in accord with his deed
.....Dancing and leaping

are the mind's yearnings.

They who fear Him Nanak,

Also love the Lord.

(Granth Sahib 1534)

This is from Guru Granth Sahib. Just a few more, you know, some of the lines I am going to read again from Asa-Di-Var in order to understand the basic concept of mobility, the fact that everything is dynamic, movement, anything that lives, moves and anything that is moving is potentially alive.

That is the scheme of the universe. So everything is taking a circular pattern. That is the basic concept. Anything that is alive moves and anything that moves is thereby, it has the potential of life in it. For the sake of bread, they beat time and dash themselves against the ground.

"Sing Gopis, sing Krishans, sing Sitas, sing Ramas and Rajas. Fearless is the formless Being. The oil press, the spinning wheel and the quern potter's wheel, the many endless deserts, reared winds, tops, the churning staves, the threshers, and the breathless tumblings of birds- mounted upon a stake, all are whirled. He alone swings around mortals. Bound in entanglement, each must dance in accord with his deed.

Dancing and leaping are the mind's yearnings. They who fear him, Nanak, also love the Lord." So it is actually movement that is being celebrated in Asa-Di-Var; [people] are dancing as gurus, as disciples, [they] are taking birth and dancing to the rhythm and rhyme of karma and dharma. So we are playing Rama, we are playing Sita and each must dance in accord with his deed. Here is a reference to karma.

Dancing and leaping are the mind's yearnings. The mind is also now static. There is a world inside the mind. A subtle sense of euphemism and irony runs through the vibrant dance, music and veering movements of the poem. Here it is a circular spinning movement that is troped upon to ultimately convey the larger meaninglessness of all movements.

All movements are meaningful and then at the same time they are meaningless because the thing moving after a point has no control on itself. It is being moved by the larger force which the divinity is. We are all string puppets. We are all playing different characters. We are just doing our own parts.

That is also signified by the circular movements. We are taking birth again and again. That is also the circular movement. So we are basically string puppets in the hand of the divinity. Dancing and leaping are the mind's yearnings.

They who fear him, Nanak, also love him. It is a characteristic of Nanak to voice in the last few couplets of every poem his ideology on the formless ones, the fact that he belongs to the Nirgun school. Here Nanak's theory is that fear and love are the two sides of the same coin for engaging with the god. One way of engaging is through loving, the other way is through fearing god. This element of fear of god seems to be an Islamic influence on Nanak's teachings.

None of the Bhakti poets, not even Kabirdas before Nanak has ever referred to fear of god. So the poem also gives us a glimpse of the medieval rural Punjab where probably Nanak was born and he grew up. It is a picture of the countryside where the tops are spinning, the children play, the dancing mendicants are referred, the wailing wind and the spinning tops, they are very important in depicting the picture of the rural side. They become the synecdoche of the country life. A reference to the yogis is made, the yogis to the mendicants to the tumbling birds with the mythological deities turned into common names by Nanak.

So we see that the mythological deities are turned into common names by Nanak such as Krishnas, Sitas, Ramas and there is also reference to kings. Dhakni Omkar is a long poem in Ramkali with an incantatory rhythm and the short lines rhyme at the end. The language is figurative or symbolic in nature, rich with imageries and has a sense of splendor. Nanak in this poem is preoccupied with singing paeans to the divine light, the supreme soul that works through wind, water, fire and various shapes. He is referring to the one supreme soul that wanders through the three worlds.

The poet's theological concerns and his concept of the divine find expression as he weaves new texts of symbols to describe the kingdom of the formless being. Through beautiful metaphors and word images, he is almost weaving a picture of the kingdom of God. His canvas is an infinity beyond the bounds of time, age and place. The poet speaks in terms of four ages and three worlds and creates an ethereal world that is strewn with the gems, with the priceless grace of God's name. Guru Nanak talks about a land, the divine land where the swans are abound, which have the extraordinary quality of separating milk from water.

The poetic style resembles that of Rig Veda and the Upanishads. The poem Dhakni Omkar is incantatory in nature and shares the same sense of continuous calm that we find in Rig Veda and Upanishads. So here are a few lines from Dhakni Omkar. "The mercurial mind remains not still. Like the deer it nibbles secretly upon green shoots of sin, but he that enshrines thine lotus feet in his heart lives eternally."

So the mind may not remain still, it is mercurial, it is capricious in nature. Like a deer, right, it jumps from hither to thither, but then the devotee that has fixed his mind in the God's lotus feet, in his heart, you know, the divine resides or lives eternally. Sometimes Nanak speaks of his own personal progress through the poetic labyrinth. "Shyness and hesitation have died, vanished. I walk now with my face unveiled."

Unveiling, once again this veiling and unveiling is a Sufi metaphor. This one finds the most in Al Rumi's poems where God as a veiled bride is a metaphor for the veiled aspect of self-knowledge that we have kept away from ourselves, the knowledge of self that we are yet to discover. So this, my face is now unveiled... So self-knowledge Nanak has attained, in other words. "I surrender my mind unto thee, and lay before thee this body and soul."

"In the true guru's hand lie the endless treasures of sparkling jewels, emerald and pearls gems". So this is actually celebration and commemoration of the guru-disciple relationship, what the guru can give to the disciple. From darkness the guru can take the disciple to light. Having consolidated the need to abstain from overindulgence of worldly comforts and attachments, Guru Nanak closes the poem with an emphasis on the importance of meditating and remaining in constant remembrance of the divine. He says, "Nanak, he alone is learned, he alone the wise scholar who wears the beads of

Ram's name." Once again at the heart of all the esoteric pursuits and the yogic experiments or the yogic discoveries inside the body, what both Kabir and Nanak are seeking is Ram, the idea of ultimate God, the absolute one.

Dhakhni Omkar is remarkable in terms of its array of images, colorful details and landscaping grandeur as the poet here paints God's kingdom from the buzz of a bumblebee around a lotus in a muddy water body to the sun, the moon, the stars, the wind, and there are so many more surreal images that we are almost limning or painting a paradise through words, through poetic devices. This treatment of creation echoes the approach of the Upanishads. The following lines illustrate the same, how his understanding of creation or origin of the world is very much reminiscent of Upanishads:

The various shapes he weaves
through wind, water, fire, space,
the One soul wanders
through the three worlds. (GS 3036)
Hanging low the ambrosial rain,
incessantly drizzles.

The sublime shabad alone
can establish the mortal. (GS 3037)

This is once again reference to the origin story how the Brahman was made or formed through the sublime word, the word Om, Omkar. Importance of Omkar is immense even in Sikhism, right? The word Omkar or Om finds a great significance among the Sikhs, the Sikh cosmos as well.. the Sikh cosmology. So the sublime Shabad referring to Om alone can establish the mortal, the creation of the world through word. Next, Bara-Mah is a devotional song and can also be read as an allegory in which, like in other Guru Nanak's compositions as well as other mystical devotional poetry created during Bhakti movement, the yearning soul is depicted as the woman whereas the Lord is the divine spouse.

So, the soul of the devoted is a woman craving or yearning to meet her lover who is the divine, who is the God, right? The divinity. So, Lord, this is how Bara-Mah goes:

Lord, for me absorbed in Thy creation, what hope of liberation?

Verily, even one hour passed without Thee is death!

In this world I am like the Woman bereft of her Lord, friendless;

Grant me through grace a sip of the amrita of Thy Love!

Absorbed in God's creation, we are forgetting Him,

whose worship is noblest of actions.

Nanak is like the Woman waiting along the path of her lord,

Listen to his prayers, thou Lord of my soul!

So as the months and seasons pass in this poem, Bara-Mah, the yearning soul, the longing soul, utters its affliction, its sheer difficulty that it faces through separation from divinity, which is the sojourn of any creature, any human on this earth. As long as we are living as ephemeral beings, we are separated from divinity.

It is like the beloved separated from the lover. This entire metaphor is influenced by the Sufi philosophy primarily. So when we live on earth, we are in the midst of Maya, we are engrossed by Maya and it casts its veil of illusion of worldliness on us. Maya casts its veil of illusion on us and it keeps us away from self-knowledge. It is only through uplifting this veil, through removal of this veil can we attain self-knowledge and through self-knowledge we can attain the knowledge of God.

In the song is traced a progression of moods, different human moods- from the wail of suffering in separation and the cry of yearning towards the joy, the joyous note of reunion. So the song covers entire range from the yearning in separation to the joy in reunion. As the dark winter is ending and there is an entry into spring or Falgun, the Falgun which is a month in spring, the earth is rejuvenating and the soul also finds its bliss, its ultimate bliss. So winter symbolizes separation whereas spring is, spring stands for or symbolizes union and bliss. It is remarkable for the human imagination to

contemplate that as the end was approaching the thoughts of a savior, the thoughts of the Savior takes Nanak rather seriously, and the poet is going back to the sights and sounds of his childhood and his youth; he is hearkening back, he is reminiscing some of the visions from his childhood, the countryside which is more than 50 years away in his memory, the milieu where he had actually grown up comes back in his later poems.

So the divinity is intensely humanized as we find in Nanak's poems.

In Phalgun is the heart joyful, attuned to devotion;

Day and night is it in joy, casting off the ego.

Illusion have I cast off through love of Thee—

Show Thy grace, come back home!

What good to deck myself away from the Spouse,

Cast off from His Mansion?

Love of the Spouse is all my ornament—

Jewels, gold and silken robes.

Sayeth Nanak: The Lord hath bestowed on her Union;

The Woman hath found her Spouse and home!

So just like a woman finds her spouse and home and is fulfilled, the similar feeling Nanak you know sees the devotee feels on being reunited with God.

It is like the beloved meeting her lover. The spouse is my ornament. So rather than the material pleasures, just like a beloved finds her ultimate pleasure through her union with her man. Similarly for a devotee, the God's knowledge, the God's presence in him, the discovery of God is much more than all the jewels, gold and silken robes put together. So the poem is rich with imagery and soul-steering rhythms that reflect passion and nostalgic memories, and at the same time it is overlaid with dispassion or Vairag towards the world. While it is describing nature very intricately, it is also saying that rather than the material or worldly pleasure, the soul revels through its unity with God, with divinity.

So it is celebrating a fervent love that is ultimately directed towards the eternal. Guru Nanak here is delineating himself as the bard who is constantly singing the name of the Lord. So in Bara-Mah, the theme of separation of the individual soul or atma from the supreme soul or paramatma is rich in romantic as well as spiritual associations. And like I was saying, it is similar to the veil symbol in Sufi mystical poetry and it serves to convey the idea of the separation of the soul from God during its stay on earth. When the soul stays as an ephemeral form on earth, it is separated from paramatma.

And in the cycle of births and deaths, we are constantly yearning to go back and reunify with the divinity. The tradition of the woman as the beloved is strong in medieval Indian poetry and it is commonly available through many of these artworks, many of these poems. In the following song, Guru Nanak weaves this woman symbol in order to express the feelings of yearning and self-abasement as well as surrender. What does Guru Nanak say?

Joyful is the shower of amrita in the soul

The Beloved hath responded to the call of deep love;

fulfilment hath come:

The Woman stands in wait for the Lord with offerings of merits—

He enters whatever mansion may please him.

Others are happy with the Divine Spouse;

Why am I in neglect cast away?

So once again here mansion is a metaphor for the body.

He enters whatever mansion may please Him. Whichever body is to the liking of the God, the God will come and reside in that. And then Nanak is ruing, he is lamenting, others are happy with the divine spouse. There the reunion has happened. The other, probably other saints are unified with the God they are seeking. So why am I neglected?

Why is not my Lord coming to me? This is the kind of lamentation that is echoing throughout the poem.

The whole universe is alien and inhospitable to the soul that is yearning for the Paramatma or the infinite which is the emotional expression of the spiritual state of Advaita. So in this poem, the metaphysical as well as the romantic elements merge. We see that the lover-beloved metaphor stands ultimately for the God-devotee relationship, and it helps to give deeper expression to each other. So on the one hand we have the romantic relationship but it signifies the divine relationship between the devotee and the devoted. The four stanzas at the opening are the prelude to the great song of Bara-Mah.

It follows a month-wise progression beginning with Chet or April and continuing throughout each of the seasons, and these seasons symbolize a unique state of the soul. So it begins with Chet or April and continues through each of the seasons and these seasons symbolize a unique state of the soul. I will stop my lecture here today.

Let us meet with another poet in our next lecture. Thank you. Thank you.