

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 24

Bhakti Mysticism and Poetics VI

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. So this is our last lecture from this module Bhakti Mysticism and Poetics. Today we are going to discuss the poems by two, one could say, rebellious female Bhakti poets, one being Mirabai, the other is Akka Mahadevi who etched their own alternative figures within the larger Bhakti movement through gender subversion and unconventional understanding and performance of gender that is reflected in their poetic works. And later in this lecture we are also going to look at a few song lyrics composed by Rabindranath Tagore where the Bhakti movement's reflection is very prominently available; how Tagore was inspired by the Bhakti movement is something we are going to look at very briefly. So talking about Mirabai, Mirabai's songs about Krishna are rich in devotional feelings, and they are markedly different from the songs of Surdas and Tulsidas in a number of ways. This is primarily because Mirabai was a female poet who accepted Lord Krishna as her husband and her true lover.

Mirabai's poems can be classified roughly into the following categories. Poems of salutation, poems of love for Krishna, poems of dissatisfaction with the world and worldly affairs including her social relationship with Rana, the man she was married to, and the poems of separation where she is longing to be unified with Krishna. There are also some poems on Braj, it describes, they describe the milieu, the general cosmos of Braj. There are poems on Krishna's childhood and his flute or murali and also on stealing the garments of the milkmaids or gopi.

However Mira's most powerful poems are those in which she is accepting Krishna as her husband and describes her loving devotion towards him. In these poems, Mirabai shows the full depths of her heart and her passion as well as her singleness of mind. The poems of Mirabai are also musically rich in character and like other, you know, padas or

verses composed during the Bhakti period, they are associated with melodies or ragas to which they could be sung. Just like we see that Kabir's verses and Nanak's verses can be sung as bhajans, similarly Mirabai's verses can also be put to music and sung. Mirabai loves Krishna who is in the fullness of youth; he is the epitome of youth and he wears a peacock crown.

His earrings are kind of resplendent in his ears, a garland of jasmine flower decks his neck and bust, there is a yellow garment on his body and he has flute at his lips. So he is the embodiment of the transcendental rasika, the beautiful human god that is meant to be loved, that is seeking the devotee's love. So this is how Mirabai's poem goes. This is one of the poems by Mirabai and the following are the lines: Live in my eyes, Nandalal.

Your peacock crown and fish-shaped earrings
and the red tilak on your forehead are beautiful.
Your figure is charming, your face is dark and
your eyes are large.

At your nectar lips there is a flute, and a garland
of jasmine adorns your chest.

Mirabai says, the Lord is a giver of joy to the
pious and the protector of the poor.

So in the end we see the bhanita where Mirabai's signature is present at the end of the poem. Mirabai's Krishna is an incarnation of god who saved his bhaktas through different avatars and set them free from the bondage of the material world.

Here we see that her Krishna had saved, we see that Krishna had saved Prahlad as Hiranyakashipu and Dhruva as Hari. So different forms of Vishnu.. as Hiranyakashipu he saves Prahlad and as Hari he saves Dhruva, and then he lifts up the mountain Govardhan, right? He saved the honour of Draupadi as her friend and then he gave redemption to Ajamil and Kubja. So these are the different avatars of Krishna that are celebrated through Mira's verses or padas. Mirabai calls Krishna by very many names. He calls him Natavar or the great dancer, the Mohan or attractive, Giridhar, the one who lifted the mountain and someone who is yet ultimately a yogi.

So in spite of the fact that Mirabai describes Krishna in human form, she imagines Krishna as a human form, she never loses sight of the fact that he is eternal and transcendental, he is more than the human form, he is the Lord himself. In many places Mirabai in fact calls him as Avinashi or the eternal one. He dwells in everyone's heart and so Mira would say, "O antaryami, come to me soon, I cannot live without you" (Pada 85). And again Mira says,

The pain of my love cannot be cured unless
the real physician comes.

The physician lives in my heart and only he
knows the cure [Pada 73].

The personal Krishna has become impersonal. Here Mira also identifies Krishna with Rama. She says that-

Without Ramaiya (Ram) I cannot sleep. Sleep
does not come and the fire of separation consumes me [Pada 74].

Ramaiya, I love you. Don't break off my love.

Please love me more and more [Pada 59].

Ram, I am dedicated to you. Please pass by my street.

I am restless when I don't see you [Pada 113].

O heart! drink the delights of Ram, drink the
delights of Ram.

Shun evil and sit in the presence of the holy men,
listening to the tales of Hari.

Put lust, anger, arrogance, greed and selfishness

out of your thoughts.

Mira's Lord is Girdhar. She is drenched with
his color [Pada 129].

This notion of being drenched or being coloured by the essence of one's lord's, you know, colour, this notion, this concept of being doused or being coloured by the same hues that one's lord wears is also available later in Sufi lyrics. I mean, once again going back to the song, right? So this concept of my own picture being subsumed, being submerged by the larger picture of the transcendental, my own colour disappearing and losing its character when it merges with the transcendental colour. This comes back again and again in Mirabai as well as other, you know, Bhakti saints' poems and ultimately it also echoes in a number of Sufi poems, Sufi lyrics that celebrate the Murshid-Murid relationship. Mirabai loved Krishna as her husband.

Her Bhakti is therefore called Dampatya or conjugal love. She calls her Bhakti and her love as the path of loving devotion, Prem Bhakti:

Yogi, don't go, don't go.

I touch your feet, I am your servant.

The path of loving devotion [prem bhagati] is
unparalleled, show me that path [Pada 46].

Mohan, I knew your love, I knew your love.

My way is the way of loving devotion,

I don't know anything else [Pada 56].

right? So we see in Mira.. rather than the Sringar Rasa that informs the Radha-Krishna love primarily, here we see a very beautiful manifestation of Dasya Bhav also. Mira constantly says that I am your servant. She is a lover but also a servant, completely in a servile position, subordinate to Krishna. And she is longing for Krishna but not in the same way as Radha. In her journey to unify with the transcendental, she is not alone.

She is travelling for Krishna but she says that I am travelling also with Krishna. I am never away from him. There is no longing because I am always with him. It is very paradoxical. She wants to be with him but then she feels that her journey is not a lonely one because he is always already with her, you know, helping her through her journey, helping her through her sojourn.

Mirabai refers to Krishna through so many different endearing names such as Pritam, Pia, Dulha, Sajan, Saiya, Balam, Kant and so on, all of which mean or refer to him as her husband. Mirabai also uses the traditional imagery of moon and chakor, the chand and chakor bird as well as lamp and moth, water and fish in order to express her powerful, you know, feeling of love towards Krishna. Some of these metaphors are very much available in Sufi songs also. The metaphor of Gul and Bulbul is, you know, constantly used and available in Sufi poetry. Similarly, shama, parvana, the lamp or light and the moth is very much available and part of the Sufi repertoire.

The moon, the lamp and the water are supposed to be the lover, Krishna himself, whereas the chakor, the moth and the water are described as the loved one in the Indian literature. Mirabai also says that the love between Krishna and herself was not something new but existed from time immemorial. She says that it is an eternal love which goes on between herself and Krishna, and that even in their previous lives they were lovers. Mirabai says continually that she is the servant of Krishna's lotus feet. So she somehow does not enjoy or does not even want to enjoy the position of an equal partner that Radha in a way is.

She is never shown in any imagination as sitting on the same pedestal as Krishna. Her love emerges mainly as a devotee. So she is always shown in any artistic depiction of Krishna and Mirabai, sitting at the feet and worshipping Krishna. Although he is a husband, she sees herself as a servile, a wife in a servile position, a wife that is happy acting as a loving servant. So the dasya bhav, the servile love or feeling is predominant over here.

She is never sitting on the same platform as Krishna. This is the kind of bhakti which was preached in the Naradabhakti Sutra, which is a work of unknown date but definitely earlier than Kabir as well as Mirabai. This kind of bhakti, the bhakti as a servant is

available in Naradabhakti Sutra. Next we are going to talk about the works by Akka Mahadevi. We have already talked a little about this rebellious female bhakti saint poet.

Akka Mahadevi is regarded as a "star of the first magnitude," someone who successfully demonstrated in her lifetime the religious principle, "Sarana Sati, Linga Pati" which means.. so according to this principle, a devotee holds her God as her Lord or husband. So in her case, her God, Chenna Mallikarjun, her Shiva is her husband. So very similar to Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi gave up the riches and the comforts of, you know, worldly life and she became a wandering devotee of God Chenna Mallikarjun or Shiva and spent the rest of her life as an ascetic, as a saint and hermit in the Srisailam mountains, where she is said to have realized her ultimate goal. Now Akka Mahadevi's religious experience is seen in her Vachanas, which literally means sayings. She belongs to the Veer Shaiva school, which is known for writing Vachanas and Vachanas literally means sayings, sayings in rhythmic prose which serve the same purpose as poetry.

So Vachanas, like I said, were widely used by the devotees of the Virasaiva sect and formed the unique contribution to the Kannada literature, the Virasaiva sect emerged in Karnataka. So Akka Mahadevi has to her credit more than 315 Vachanas that convey her intense feeling, deep insight and, you know, profound mystical experiences through rich imageries. It is said that Akka Mahadevi displayed her religious inclination even as she was a little girl. There is a popular legend that Rudrakanika, who was of the order of Parashiva, had taken birth in the form of Akka Mahadevi. So Akka Mahadevi in her previous life was Rudrakanika, who belonged to the order of Parashiva.

As Akka Mahadevi grew older, her piety and devotion towards Chenna Mallikarjuna grew stronger. Even when she reached the age of 16, she remained unmarried which was a rare practice in her times. The reason was that she firmly believed that she was married already to Chenna Mallikarjuna and she says this in one of her Vachanas, I have fallen in love, O Mother, with the beautiful one who knows no death, knows no decay, and has no form. I have fallen in love, O mother, with the

Beautiful One, who knows no death,

Knows no decay and has no form;

I have fallen in love, O mother with the

Beautiful One, who knows no birth and

knows no fear,

I have fallen in love, with the Beautiful

One, who is without family,

without any country and without any peer;

Chenna Mallikarjuna, the Beautiful, is my husband. (TNS 33)

However, Akka Mahadevi could not avoid marriage for too long. According to a legend, when King Kausika was returning from the hunt, he saw her and he fell in love with her. He wanted to marry her. When the royal proposal was brought to her parents, they could not reject it for too long for fear of, you know, punishment.

Because if they rejected the royal proposal, it could endanger their own lives. However, Akka herself had rejected this proposal. She did not want to get married. Akka Mahadevi agreed to marry the king, but on conditions that are detailed in one of her Vachanas.

It goes as follows: I shall engage in the worship of Shiva, as I like it;

I shall spend my time in the company of Maheswaras,

as I like it;

I shall be with the prince as I like.

I shall forgive only three violations of

these conditions. (TNS 33)

The life continued on this note, but not for long.

Her Vachanas are witnesses or they are testimonies of her anguish as well as her anger, her frustration at being compelled, being forced to fit between devotion to God, the

spiritual life and, you know, engagement with a husband or the worldly life. In one of her Vachanas, Akka Mahadevi expresses her desperation-O, Lord, listen to me if you will,

listen not if you will not;

I cannot rest contented

unless I sing of you.

O, Lord, accept me if you will,

accept not if you will not;

I cannot rest contented

unless I hold you in my arms.

O, Lord, look at me if you will,

look not if you will not,

I cannot rest contented

unless I gaze at you in

overpowering longing.

O, Lord, Chenna Mallikarjuna

I worship you and revel

in the thrill of pleasure. (TNS 34)

One of Akka Mahadevi's last Vachanas reveals that she at long last and after a lot of spiritual travel and penance, a long spiritual journey had the supreme vision. She attained the supreme vision, the vision of her Lord Chenna Mallikarjuna. It is widely held in Karnataka that through this experience, Akka ultimately realized her ultimate goal. The following Vachana with its rich characteristic imagery describes Akka Mahadevi's profound experience:

I have seen him in his divine form,

him with the matted locks,

him with the jewelled crown,
him with the gleaming teeth,
him with the smiling face.
him who illumines the fourteen worlds with
the light of his eyes.

I have seen him and the thirst of my eyes
is quenched.

I have seen the great Lord whom men
among men serve but as wives.

I have seen the Supreme Guru Chenna Mallikarjuna
sporting with the primeval Sakti,

And saved am I. (TNS 40)

This is one of her last Vachanas where she is describing her vision where she has witnessed you know Shiva and Sakti involved in some kind of amorous play, amorous game or Leela, "and saved am I". So that has you know saved her from the cycle of birth and death.

Presumably she has attained salvation after this vision. Next from Akka Mahadevi I would you know come to the modern times and take up one of the modern poets, a more contemporary poet. You know it is a leap from the medieval time into the modern times just to understand how the impact of a powerful movement such as the Bhakti movement lingers through years, through centuries, through decades and it reverberates, it echoes even in much later works. In the modern times Rabindranath Tagore is one poet that was greatly influenced by the Bhakti tradition, especially the style of singing by the bauls or the wandering minstrels from Bengal. Tagore deploys the long lost mystic traditions of the bauls in his artworks, in his lyrics while exploring the question of divinity or God.

So Rabindranath Tagore was a believer in the essential unity of man and the eternal universe. In Gitanjali his realization, his exploration of this mysticism is found again and

again. There is an element of mysticism available in his lyrics, especially when we look at the puja paryay songs, the puja category songs composed by Tagore. These songs are devotional hymns of a dedicated soul whose ultimate aim is the realization of the divine.

He calls the body as the Seema. So within the Seema or the limit, the Ashim or the limitless can be discovered. In his voyage through life Tagore realizes divinity amidst mundane or the ordinary and he grasps the infinite in the midst of the finite, like I was just telling. So the following lyrics by Tagore is influenced by the baul tradition in Bengal. In Bengali it goes as follows and then I am going to read out the translation in English. The song is influenced deeply by the baul tradition, the wandering minstrels of Bengal, the mystics of Bengal.

Amar praaner maanus aachhe praane/ Taai heri taay sakol khaane.

Aachhe se nayontaaray aalokdhaaray, taai na haaray -

Ogo taai dekhi taay jethay sethay taakai aami je dik-paane.

So when translated to English it means- my innermost one resides within me and he seems omnipresent. Hence he rests within my eyes, I need not search him at all elsewhere. Whichever direction I look at, he seems within sight, hence.

Right? So to search for God I don't have to go elsewhere. He resides, my "moner manush," the man of my heart, the person of my heart, the innermost being resides inside me. He is everywhere and yet he is also inside me. I need not look elsewhere. An introspection, an inner journey could enable me to discover the God that is present in me. Further, deeply inspired by the Bhakti tradition, Tagore writes the following lines:

I will read them first in vernacular and then the translation.

Taai tomar aanondo amar par/tumi taai esechho niche

Aamay noile, tribhubneshwar, Tomar prem hoto je michhe.

Aamay niye melechho ei mela, Aamar hiyay chalchhe raser khela,
Mor jibane bichitrorup dhore/tomar ichchha tarongichhe.

In English-Thus is your happiness with me/Therefore have you come down to me
Without me O Lord of three worlds/Futile would be your love
In me a display of your wares/A play of emotions in me
Taking varied forms in my life
Ripples and rolls your own desire

So you are manifesting your desire through me. Tagore has also artistically treated Mahabharata Upakhyans, as well as the Radhakrishna love repertoire through his well-known dance-dramas. So he has produced some great dance-dramas that experiment with, that rework some of the well-known Upakhyans from the primary epics. One such work is Chitrangada, the other is Bhanu Simha Thakurer Padavali.

So Bhanu Simha Thakurer Padavali, the songs of Bhanu Simha Thakur is a collection of Vaishnav lyrics that were composed in Brajbuli by Rabindranath Tagore at the tender age of 16, only at the age of 16. As a teenager, he composed such a masterpiece. Bhanu Simha Thakurer Padavali celebrates the Radhakrishna folklore with a predominant emphasis on Vipralambha or love in separation, where the Nayika, heroine Radha is eagerly waiting for Shyam to arrive, her emotions dwindling or fluctuating between hope and hopelessness. Tagore follows the Bhanita style of Kabir, Nanak and Mirabai and he writes the lyrics of Bhanu Simha Thakurer Padavali or Bhanu Simha Padavali under the pseudonym of Bhanu Simha.

He is Bhanu Simha. The following song from Bhanu Simha Padavali is an ode to Radha. In the original language, Brajbuli, it goes as follows:

Sajani sajani raadhika lo, dekha abahun chaahiya/ Mridulagamana shyam aaoe mridula
gaan gahiya.

Pinaha jhatita kusumahaar, pinaha nil aangiya.

Sundari sindoor deke seethi karaha rangiya.

...

Sajani, aba ujaar madir kanakadeep jwaaliya ,

Surabhi karaha kunjabhabana gandhasalila dhaaliya.

...

Trishitanayana bhanusingha kunjapathame chaahiya -

Mridulagamana shyama aawe mridula gaana gaahiya.

When translated to English, this ode to Radha reads as follows:

Radhika, o Radhika, dear my friend, look now, lo!

Comes Shyam, with gentle gait, gentle song, so

Make haste! This garland, this blue veil, don

O great beauty! Sindoor do you, now, put on -

Colour your siNthi [hair parting], with red, blood-red! ...

This lonely grove, brilliant with lamps of gold

Perfume, friends, with spray of scents

With eyes athirst does Bhanusimha look, and say, lo!

Comes Shyam, with gentle gait, gentle song, so!

With this ode to Radha, I am going to conclude our lecture here and also this module comes to an end. I will meet you with a new module and a new set of discussions in our forthcoming lectures. Thank you. Thank you.