

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 28

Gender and Performance in Bhakti Movement IV

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. We are discussing gender and performance in Bhakti Movement. Today I am going to discuss Bhakti Movement and the condition of women. We are going to discuss two major female figures when talking about the Bhakti Movement, one being Mirabai, the other is Akka Mahadevi. So, shedding some light on the condition of women around the time of Bhakti Movement, Vijaya Ramaswamy writes, I quote Ramaswamy here, “Indian society being essentially patriarchal, the position of women was considered markedly inferior. The birth of daughters was an occasion for mourning rather than rejoicing. Girls constituted an economic drain because, while no material returns could be hoped for from them, one also had to spend a fortune in terms of their dowry at the time of their marriage”, unquote. So, women entered the homes of their husbands usually as child brides and this enabled their conditioning into a position of helplessness. The women were illiterate and knew little else besides some basic domestic skills.

So, against this backdrop of, you know, sheer lack of agency, sheer dependency, women's writings that emerged during the Bhakti Movement can be considered as very very radical, very much against the grain, something that is very much against what the mainstream society embraces and espouses. It became a very crucial mode carrying women's expressions. The women poets, you know, had their radical voice kind of ingrained through their words, through their bhajans. For example, the bhajans that Mirabai writes, the Vachanas that Akka Mahadevi writes, they carry the agency that was otherwise invisible, otherwise lacking in the case of the women during the Bhakti Movement during the medieval period. So, these writings which were usually poetic in form are often performed even today as songs, bhajans, poetry and they are accompanied by dance.

These writings came from their gendered experiences and express their devotion to God. They gave a voice to their union, their sense of union, their experience of union with God as well as their dedication. So, here we have a dance performance by Gagana Badrinath. It is a Sharane Akka Mahadevi Vachana which describes Lord Shiva and Akkamahadibi's deep love. She pleads her sakhi and wishes that Shiva comes to her and there is a divine union between her and Shiva.

So, the restrictive atmosphere on women made it difficult for them to express themselves. Expression of feelings, voice was curbed. The Bhakti Movement became a kind of channel, a kind of let us say medium for vending out their feelings. It was a mode of expression for women that gave vent, that gave a kind of opening to their suppressed feelings. Ramaswami further says, I quote, "The spiritual path helped women to break out of all stereotypes. As a saint, she made the unacceptable acceptable. She broke out of the chains of tradition, orthodoxy, and convention which attempted to control her sexuality, and sought God whether as a naked saint".. Akka Mahadevi, in the case of Akka Mahādēvi, she would consider herself as sky-clad and so she had shunned her garments, her worldly garments or in the case of Kāraikkāl Ammaiḃār, she would consider herself as a skeletal being. So, a lot of experimentation happening at the bodily level and thereby subversion of gender and Bhakti, the force of Bhakti as a movement helped these female saints, these female poets add voice to their individuality. The women saints emerged in the atmosphere of a suppressive society towards women, but still they blossomed as what Ramaswami says, I quote, "thinkers, scholars, and realized souls. Their life and works constitute the supreme form of the self-expression of women. Consciously or unconsciously, these women saints made a departure from the norms of social behavior and spurned the limitations imposed by their family and by society", unquote. Female spirituality can be said to challenge the normative social order during the time when they were writing. So, Deepashriday writes that the Bhakti movement witnessed a widespread participation of women saints. These women saints were either the conformists such as the daughters, wives or sisters of male saints as we find in the case of Thiruvalluvar's wife, right? Or they were rebels who broke norms of the society including the discarding of their clothes and as in the case of Akka Mahadevi and thereby they redefined the idea of domesticity as well as public space. Most of these women who became participants and practitioners and became visible within the Bhakti movement in the southern part of India came from the two extreme categories of social class.

They were either the upper social class women belonging to the priestly classes who had access to some kind of sacred and secular education or sometimes as in the case of

Mirabai, they were some Kshatriya princesses or contrarily they would belong to the lowest category, such as the Shudra class in which women were economically almost equal to the male counterparts. So Deepasree Dey talks about the presence of two types of women saints in Bhakti. One type being the conformists or the ideal stereotype of a womanhood, the pious and chaste housewife such as you know, I have already talked about Vasukiyar, the wife of Tiruvalluvar and the other type consisting of rebels like Mirabai and Akka Mahadevi who could not be contained and accommodated within the space of domesticity. In between these two extremes were saints, such as Karaikkal Ammaiyar who gave up their conventional styles of living only when they were driven to it and had no other option. So, they took to some radical you know decisions only under some forceful, some unsurpassable circumstances.

Now, Akka Mahadevi considered herself as the bride of Lord Shiva. It was not merely a metaphysical relationship but a physical surrender of her body and soul to this divine husband. Mahadevi was a poet, a saint and mystic of the Virasaiva Bhakti movement. It is said that the Virasaivas were social and spiritual revolutionaries in Karnataka during the 12th century. They opposed orthodox Hinduism and its practices, for instance the caste and the system of worship through temple and priesthood.

So, the main form of communication of the Virashaivas was vachanas or sayings, which were free-verse hymns in their mother tongue which is Kannada. Through vachanas the Virashaivas also rejected local folklore and classical traditions. Now, Akka Mahadevi's vachanas are highly regarded and they are still performed in the modern times. Purandhya in an article writes that she could possibly be the first woman to contribute in vachanas in the Virashaiivite tradition that is available in Kannada literature. She considered Chennamallikarjuna God Shiva as her husband and this is understood as you know an expression of madhur bhava or the madhur form of devotion.

So, here are a few lines of her vachanas as translated by H.S. Shiv Prakash. It goes like this,

“Guru became kin,

Linga, the bridegroom

And I, the bride

The whole world knows

...

Chennamallikarjuna is my husband,

O brother,

No one else can be my man.”

This is very much you know similar to Mirabai's interjections, Mirabai's you know overflow of emotions when writing.. when writing her poems dedicated to lord Krishna. She considers Krishna as her husband and she has renounced, she has disowned her social life, her conjugal life with Rana and she does not consider him as her husband. So, Mirabai's bhajans similarly celebrate a blissful union with lord Krishna, right, and she is like Akka Mahadevi, a rebellious woman coming from the upper strata of the society. She calls Krishna as a delicious prince just like you know Akka Mahadevi considers Chennamalikarjuna as her husband, her man, no one else can be her man.

So, according to some of the narratives, the Jain ruler of the region Kaushika proposed to marry Akka Mahadevi and as an act of defiance Mahadevi left her home, renounced her family and even discarded her clothes and left the village covered only in her long tresses. So, she considered herself as sky clad, sky is the only garment that she would wear. Another narrative claims that she did marry ruler Kaushika but on the condition that he would never touch her nor hinder her worship. So, when this was not followed Akka Mahadevi left him and acknowledged lord Chennamalikarjuna as her only husband. When Akka left everything, she left her clothes behind as well and she went to Kalyana.

This place was also the seat of saint poets, such as Vasavanna and Allama Prabhu. Here she went to the Anubhava Mandap, an academy of the saints and mystics and she was questioned for her nakedness at the Mandap because it exemplified a deliberate defiance, an outright rejection and defiance of womanly modesty that a society expects of a woman. So, it was a sheer defiance of the patriarchal standards, the yardsticks and standards set by patriarchy. It was impudent for a woman to abandon her clothes even though for male saints it was a natural practice. A lot of Shaivites would give up, would renounce their clothes but when a female saint, a female Shaivite would do that, it was

considered as you know extremely transgressive and she was questioned for her behaviour.

Here also a kind of parallelity can be drawn how Mirabai was not accommodated in Brindavan by Jeeva Goswami. So, some of the prominent male saints from their times kind of marginalize these female practitioners and do not recognize their penance, their spirituality, their spiritual calling. Allama Prabhu on the other hand questioned even the tresses that would hide her body and according to Allama Prabhu the tresses were symbols of some kind of obstacles coming in between her devotion and her submission to God. So, the tresses were some kind of pretense that she was wearing and they were coming in between her complete submission of self to God. So, here one could see that her gender was obstructing her experience of Bhakti or sheer devotion because of the social norms, existing social rules and mores which would not have otherwise affected her male counterparts.

No one would question a male if he left his home the way Akka Mahadevi did. So, Akka Mahadevi would call herself as sky clad. She thought the sky was the only attire she needed to wear and she did not need any other earthly garments. So, her Vachanas reflect her relation with God sometimes presenting you know Chenna Mallikarjuna as her husband and sometimes as her lover. A poem inspired by her experiences translated by T.N. Srikanthaya goes like this,

I have seen the Supreme Guru Chenna Mallikarjuna

sporting with the primeval Sakti,

And saved am I.

Later with complete devotion at Shrisailam mountain, she is believed to have achieved oneness with her lord, Lord Chenna Mallikarjuna. So, despite her work echoing rebellion against the patriarchy in many ways as Vijaya Rama Swami notes, Akka's words and feelings can also be seen as rooted in the patriarchal structures to a certain extent. And in this regard, Rama Swami would say that female spirituality can also be an enforced phenomenon, a diabolic outcome of a patriarchal conspiracy. So, a female sense expression can also be an echo of the contemporary patriarchal values and standards where she lives that shapes her existence.

It may not always be in rebellion or in opposition to those values, but sometimes.. many a times a continuation and a corroboration, a further reifying of those values. However, Akka Mahadevi deviates from the traditional figure of a domesticated and docile woman such as the figure of Sita. She makes her defiance heard through expressing her desire for Shiva. Purandhya has called her Vachanas as intense and sensual in nature which are a reflection of her bold and radical spirit. So, another Vachana by Akka Mahadevi expressing the immortality of her love towards Shiva is translated by Ramanujan as follows.

I quote, “Take these husbands who die,
decay, and feed them
to your kitchen fires!”

So, she is talking about you know taking away all the husbands and you know feeding them to the kitchen fire. Probably, she is talking about her social relationship with Kaushika, right? The man with whom she was married and which became a kind of relationship that comes on her way of spiritual realization. Similar bhajans of Mira, we keep you know coming across, we keep reading when discussing Mirabai, we talk of these bhajans where the Rana is sending her poison and finding numerous ways of annihilating her, of killing her, but through the blessing of Krishna, she is, Mirabai is saved again and again. So, these social bondages are kind of you know considered as burden, considered as cumbersome by these female saints and Akka Mahadevi is extremely outrageous and transgressive when she says that feed these husbands to the kitchen fires.

So, in this context, U.R. Ananthamurthy writes that “Akka Mahadevi is not just a 12th century memory but a force active in the writing of many women poets” even till date. So, I will end my lecture today with this performance, where we have you know the theme of Sharir, you know Chandralekha's explorations in dance, the idea of setting the body free. That is you know at the heart of our lecture today, how gender is not something we are born with, we keep experiment... experimenting with our gender and our spiritual voice you know, our spirituality is kind of reflected through such experimentations in literature, in artworks, in different artforms. We manifest our understanding of gender, our discovery of gender through writings, as in the case of you

know saints like Chaitanya, like Akka Mahadevi, like Mirabai, who have transcended and transgressed their socially given gender positions, their roles of domesticity.

Next, we discuss another very important poet from Kashmir called Laleshwari or Lalla Ded.

So, we have already discussed Mirabai, we have talked extensively about Akka Mahadevi and her poems. In this context, we also need to mention another rebellious female poet who was part of the Bhakti movement, the Bhakti cult and she belonged to the 14th century, she was born in the 14th century. She was a mystic poet saint born in a Kashmiri Pandit family in Pandrethan, who composed numerous four-line Kashmiri mystic poems called Vatsuns or Vakhs. So, Vakhs meaning speech in the Kashmiri language. Laleshwari is known to have inspired many Sufi poets in Kashmir.

So, in more than 260 Vakhs created by her, Lalla Ded or Laleshwari has dealt with topics such as life, yoga, God, Dharma and Atma or the soul. Her guru was Siddha Shrikanth also known as Sed Bayu, who initiated her into the mystical tradition of Kashmiri Shaivism and it is believed that she reached the state of Avadhuta or the state of being neuter, right, beyond any gendered experience and ultimately she attained Samadhi at the end of her life. So, Samadhi or the culmination of all yogic experiences that she attained before her death. So, Lalla Ded defied social conventions just like Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai and her life is very similar to the other two female saint poets that we have already discussed. In search for God, she became a yogini and some of the local myths even define her as an avatar or incarnation.

Lalla Ded got married at the age of 12 years and her in-laws were from Pampore. They would treat her very cruelly. So, after having been treated harshly by her mother-in-law and her husband at the age of 26, Lalla Ded quit family life. She renounced her family and became a full-fledged devotee of Lord Shiva and a mystic.

She started writing her vakhs, right. She spent time more in, you know, spiritual contemplation. She often used her poetry as a peaceful means of engagement both with Shaivism and Sufism. So, she is this figure from Kashmir who is known as the founder of the syncretic and the composite Kashmiri literature and culture. She is claimed and

she is revered both by the Hindus and the Muslims. Her writings have the elements of both, say, Saivite mysticism and Sufi mysticism.

So, critic M. H. Zafar says, I quote, “She was the product of the spiritual creed that had been evolving in Kashmir for centuries and her immediate predecessors were saints and scholars like Vasugupta Rishi, Acharaya Somanand, Acharaya Utpal Dev and Acharaya Abhinavagupta.” So, these are the saints and scholars whose trail in terms of writing and style Lalla Ded follows. Although born in a Saivite family from a very strong Sanskritized background, a very erudite and elite background, we see that Laleshwari or Lalla Ded wrote poems in the local vernacular Kashmiri language, which was the language of the common man instead of writing in the elite man's language which is Sanskrit. She made her spiritual knowledge available to the people at large regardless of their caste, their creed, color, sex, religion or region. So, like I said, she was revered beyond any community border, any caste or creed border.

She was known as Lalla Didi by the common people and so she became the figure of the commoners. She became the icon of a united, a unified Kashmiriyat culture, the culture of the Kashmiri community. So, her act of writing in a vernacular or local Kashmiri rather than the Sanskrit language and thereby propping up the Sanskritized tradition remains a revolutionary act in the cultural history of Kashmir, and it makes her the undisputed founder not only of the contemporary Kashmiri literature, but also of the contemporary Kashmiri culture. So, Lalla Didi's poetry has been widely translated to English by a number of English translators and scholars including Jane Hirschfield, Coleman Barks, Sir George Grierson, Richard Temple, Jay Lal Kaul, Jaishree Odin and Ranjit Hoskote. As the best known spiritual and literary figure within Kashmir, Laleshwari has been revered both by the Hindus and the Muslims for many centuries together.

So, she is known by a number of names, including Lal Daed, Maej lalla, Lalla Aarifa, Lalla Didi, Lalla Yogeshwari and then Laleshwari. So, all these are the different names by which she is commonly known. A leading Sufi saint called Nund Rishi was highly influenced by Lalla Ded. So, the Lal Vakhs were not written down during her time, they were oral in nature, her Vakhs were oral in nature. Her listeners memorized and passed down her words to the posterity through singing and performing them.

Eventually we see that these Vakhs, these vatsuns were getting recorded. So, Lal Vakhs are not only about praising the lord, especially Lord Shiva, but at the same time they are rebellion against the tradition which oppresses the downtrodden, the marginalized and the poor people. So, here are some examples of Laleshwari's writings, they are translated to English, I will read the translated versions. So, one poem says, one Vakh says,

For ever we come, for ever we go;

For ever, day and night, we are on the move.

Whence we come, thither we go,

For ever in the round of birth and death,

From nothingness to nothingness.

But sure, a mystery here abides,

A Something is there for us to know.

(It cannot all be meaningless).

So, this is a quest about life, this is a quest about death from where we come and where we go. Being a mystic, she is trying to know the origin of life and where we go, what happens to the human soul after the body dies. That is the kind of quest that usually prompted her to write her Vakhs. Next, she writes in another Vakh,

He who is the eternal 'Anaahata',

The ever-unobstructed sound of OM;

Whose is the all-permeating form of the etherial sky;

Whose dwelling is the vast transcendent Void;

Who has no name, caste, gotra, nor form;

Who is Pure, Undifferentiated Self-awareness;

Who is "Nada-Bindu", the Logos and the Light -

He is the God Who mounts the horse.

So, here he is probably trying to define the Anahata, the figuration of Om, who is this God Om, the origin of Om, he is beyond all name, all gotra and caste, he is all permeating and he is pure, he is undifferentiated self-awareness.

So, here we get the idea of Brahman through this poem that is beyond all definitions, any definition imposed on it is superficial. And here we get an essence of Advaita Vada at the heart of this poem. So, who is Nada Bindu, something that is the beginning, the point from where creation or universe started, the logos or the first word Om, Omkar and the light. So, the origin of the universe she is trying to define, she is trying to understand, he is the God who mounts the horse.

Next, Lalla Ded writes another Vakh. This is the essence of her Saivite mysticism, the school that she basically is from. So, what is she trying to say through this symbolic, highly metaphoric language- "when I became one with the supreme word", here she is referring to Om, the beginning, the origin of the universe, "my body blazed as red hot cold, then I gave up this path of the six", she is talking about the six human tendencies, right, we call them the six ripus, right. So, here she is referring to the path of six or the six animal tendencies, basic animal tendencies in humans, including envy, including state of being intoxicated, anger, lust, right. When she has given up on the path of six, all these six basic animal tendencies, she took the path of Avadhuta, which is the straight path. Avadhuta is the path that is neither inclined to Bama nor to Purush, it is the straight path and it led her to the abode of light, it has made her enlightened, it has given her the true knowledge of God.

Next, in another poem, here is a very interesting shift of a poet who is essentially, you know, a proponent of Advaita Vada, who is coming from the Saivite school, who does not believe in idol worship and does not believe in shrines and temples and forms basically, but here she is talking about dualism. Let us read the poem once, would you understand what oneness is? So, she is beginning with the concept of Advaita Vada, that is nothingness, that is Brahman, which is beyond any kind of form and then she says, "Though he is one, alone and all," so Brahman being the Atman, Brahman being the Anantam, the ultimate knowledge and yet I am caught in the war of two, "Yet I am caught in dualism, Though he has neither colour nor form, Yet I am caught in his

wondrous forms". So, here she is also propagating the idea of, you know, worshipping him, worshipping the Lord in forms, the love for the personalised God is also being celebrated. So, we see this essence of, you know, Bhakti echoing in her where the opposites are being, two opposite tendencies are being accommodated. A person who is generally writing about the concept, the idea of Advaita Vada is also supporting, is also experiencing dualism or Dvaita Vada, where forms are manifested, where God is seen in a particular humanized form, right, as a friend, as a teacher, as a lover and so on.

So, in the end we come to this Vakh by Lalleshwari, which reflects the poetic achievement, the profundity of her thoughts, the saintly and mystic state that Lalleshwari had attained. Let us read the poem. I, Lalla, entered the gate of the sushumna,

Deep inside myself,

And saw the union of Shiva and Shakti.

Oh, how wonderful!

I immersed myself completely

In the lake of nectar in the sahasrara.

I have died while still alive.

What can the world do to me now!

By constant practice,

A seeker becomes one with the entire manifest universe.

The world of name and form merges into the void.

When the void disappears,

Then only the Supreme beyond all misery remains.

This, O seeker, is the true teaching.

So, here once again, she is talking about introspection, an inner journey away from the world of forms towards nothingness, right, where everything, the manifest universe is

merged into this oneness, this nothingness, the kind of oneness that one can perceive in the idea of Brahman.

So, through constant practice of yoga, of yogic meditation, the seeker becomes one with the manifest universe and then everything merges into the void. The forms merge into the state of formlessness, into the state of Brahman and the idea, the understanding of the supreme emerges. This supreme, the seeker realizes, is beyond all misery, beyond all travails and tribulations that defines the ethereal life. So, beyond all trials and tribulations, we have the supreme meaning that is God, that is Shiva for Laleshwari. So, with this we come to the end of our lecture and our discussion on gender and Bhakti movement. Thank you. Thank you.