

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture 04

Introducing Performance and its Characteristics in the South Asian Context IV

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. We are discussing performance and its characteristics in the South Asian context. So we were discussing narrative and specifically we were explaining Mahakavya, what is Mahakavya. So differentiation of Mahakavya from other narratives happens on the basis of form, the way it is written and the temporality, the treatment of events in time. The mode of any narrative is defined by the way it contains temporality in that text. So how the events progress in time? There could be story within story, there could be events being narrated in retrospect.

So the unilinear progression of the narrative is foiled and so time plays back and forth or let us say events play. So events play back and forth in time. A particular way in which temporality relates to the text yields a narrative. The way time is engaging with events, the way events are seated in time yields a narrative.

The problem with calling Mahakavya as a genre is that genre entails adherence with certain specificities. So it is a very stringent framework within which, you know, the generic theory of formulation happens. We apply only that formula or those many features to a given artwork, anything outside of those features makes a work not quite loyal to a specific genre. So generic formulation is a very limited idea. It kind of imposes certain limitations in the understanding of a work.

It categorizes artworks. In that sense, you know, it is very difficult to contain the concept of Mahakavya vis-a-vis the theory of genealogy. It does not stand uniformly true or it cannot be contained within any genre, not even the genre of epic. It is.. Mahakavya is more or less than an epic, not quite an epic, very similar to it but not quite the western concept of, the Greco-Roman concept of epic. So thus a narrative is defined by the fact that it contains time in it, and by and large what it is trying to show us is, you know, a flow of time.

What is represented through, you know, poetic descriptions of nature, of humans, of relationships and of problems with the trysts, with destiny is the flow of time and the arrangement of events, sequence of events in a given time. So Rasa school is divided largely into quality or goal on the one hand and technique and technicality or niti on the other. Kavya stresses more on quality whereas Natak stresses on the technical features or the niti. So niti or riti school is incumbent on technique, whereas Alankar school stresses on ornamentation. Bhaba on the other hand,... so we have talked about Rasa, now bhaba can be divided into bibhava, anubhava, sanyoget, byabhichari.

So bibhava and anubhava are essentially cause and effect. We are going to talk more about this when we discuss Natya Shastra. So we have to understand that Mahakavya thrives on and is deeply rooted in an oral tradition. Oral tradition is the indication of any culture where audibility, the audible traits, characteristics and the audible voice becomes a threshold from which the platform of the narrative is being established. The auditory quality is never gone even after a work, an artwork, you know, which is a Mahakavya is documented.

Even after it is documented, we can feel the lyrical, the musical qualities are not quite gone. They are meant to be read aloud. Similarly, I was talking about the chaupai, right, in Ramacharitmanas, they are meant to be read aloud in the presence of other people. So to understand the oral tradition, we take the example of Iliad and Ramayana. So in today's lecture, we are going to compare, take comparative study of these two works, one of which is closer to epic, whereas the other Ramayana, which is a Mahakavya.

So in order to understand, in order to grasp Homer's idioms, one needs to have knowledge of different dialects from different areas. His language largely reflects a hybridization of the relics from earlier Minoan and Minoan cultures. Homeric works mark a shift from the oral to the written tradition, where the written tradition entails an effective artificial language. Before Iliad was available in a literary form, it was meant to be memorized and, you know, augmented, accrued in the memory from generation to generation. So the task of Homer was more than telling the known plot, emphasizing on the narrative strategy where the focus was on the hexameter line structure.

Similarly, the focus of Valmiki was on stylization of Kavya. It is very interesting that in both cases, the main plot in a nutshell was.. is already known to the contemporary society. The fact that there is a very popular figure called Rama, and Rama will, you know, demolish, will vanquish this demonic figure called Ravana. That forms the crux of the narrative and it was

known, it was already embedded at the heart of the society. So what new is Rama offering, what new is Iliad offering? The defeat of the Trojans by the Greeks is known to the contemporary society.

So how the story is being told? The content is already known to everyone. The form becomes, you know, comes at the fore. The stylistic features come at the fore. The poetic qualities, how the narrator is able to grip the attention of the reader or the audience becomes much more important. So how the narrator is able to grip the attention of the audience becomes much more important.

And the way time is treated largely both in epic and in Mahakavya goes on to show, you know, the picture, the larger picture of the society and the concept of leisure of the people, how the society would operate where, you know, a person would sit in the middle and others are sitting around him, stories are being told, being memorized, and some members from this audience would in turn reproduce these stories from their memory. So the concept of free time may generally, you know, enable, allow an epic to become a very large, full blown narrative, a larger-than-life narrative which becomes more and more condensed, compressed. A lot of these, you know, Alankar's literary ornamentations need to be shed as the concept of time changes, right, the concept of leisure changes and ultimately we see that this genre of epic is almost dead, right. It does not apply to the modern man's quality of life or nature of life. So Valmiki is emphasizing on the stylization of Kavya because the story, the main plot of Ramayana is available to the larger society.

Homer concentrates on certain epic formulae that later went on to become the generic markers of any standard epic. They would, you know, become the standardizing factors for the writing of epic. The fact that Homer is an oral poet, essentially he was telling, he narrated Iliad orally can be understood from some of the epic set pieces that are available in Iliad. For example, there are redundance of certain paragraphs. These paragraphs come back verbatim in the later part of the narration, such as, you know, Zeus at one point, Zeus is sending dream to Agamemnon with a message which is exactly repeated when dream is, you know, directly speaking to Agamemnon. Like I said already, I have mentioned Ramayana is based on an oral tradition where the original story is already available in the larger culture to the contemporary people. And we see that the oral and the written traditions are not necessarily differentiated. So Ramayana qualifies both as a pathya as well as a giti tradition. Its resilience, its elasticity is amazing and remarkable.

It is a kind of work that can be read alone. So it is a pathya, an individual.. it is good for individual reading as well as, you know, adheres with a giti tradition. It can be sung as

Lavkush had sung it in Rama's court. They were singing and, you know, telling Rama's story in his court, right? So it is meant to be sung, it is meant to be read aloud.

It is a very community-binding text in a sense, and it can also be read in and enjoyed and savored in isolation. That kind of representing or, you know, accommodating different kinds of readership and audience is available in Ramayana. So in Ramayana's storytelling structure, the Shruta tradition is very much highlighted by the auditory characteristics, someone listening, remembering and then reproducing it, right? Both Ramayana and Mahabharata are oral and this can be understood through certain parts of hiatus.

hiatus or gap, right? Resting, where the tension in the narrative, the tension that has built up since last few, you know, cantos or last few strophes or stanzas have to be released with the help of a varying of tempo. The tempo has to come down, right? which makes a dramatic modulation from the climactic effect. So there are crests and troughs. There are crests and troughs in the narrative, which makes up for the modulation.

Modulation in terms of the voice of the orator, modulation in terms of the mood. So it cannot possibly maintain an excitable mood all throughout. After a chapter or a canto where a lot of excitement, a lot of, you know, very excitable things have happened, there needs to be a hiatus. So this kind of, you know, a variation of mood plays throughout the narrative of Ramayana. In Eliot's Book 3 and Book 13, Homer we see is invoking the muses.

And this invocation of the muses is a way of changing over. It is used as a changeover. So this invocation of the muses is used as a changeover. A quick shift in tone, right? It is a direct step back from the agitation of war that preceded it, right? So this is the essence of hiatus or a gap, a releasing of energy. In Ramayana, such hiatus from war can be seen where Ravan is applying his Shaktishel on Lakshmana and Lakshmana is being recuperated by Hanuman. So we see that they are moving away from the scene of war for a brief time, where Lakshmana is kind of, he has a fatal injury and he needs to be tended urgently and Hanuman is, you know, taking care of everything, bringing all the herbs, you know, the Sanjeevani to bring him back to life and activate him again, so they are all ready for the war once again. But this is a sense of hiatus that we have, moving away from the battlefield for once, releasing of the energy. So from the angle of the oral poet it also means in a very, in a very commonsensical way it also means, you know, a relief, a break while delivering the story.

So from the angle of the oral poet we see that it very commonsensically also refers to taking a break during these hiatus, these, you know, low or calm moments. The poet used to take a little

break while delivering the story. So in Iliad, Zeus we have to understand is not the same as the main gods in the Hindu pantheon such as the Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar who are the symbolic powers of creation, balance and annihilation respectively. Zeus, on the other hand, can be very easily moulded by human qualities such as lust or anger. In fact, Zeus's counterpart Hera often, you know, traps him through seduction and turns away his attention from the war field, and this gives immense boost to, you know, Poseidon, other deities such as Poseidon or Athena which result in irreparable damage to the Trojan camp.

So Zeus can be compared with the lesser gods such as Indra or some nature god who bear the mixed traits. Zeus is not quite the same as the, the, the triumvirate, the three most important gods from Hindu pantheon. He is like, more like the lesser gods with anthropomorphic qualities. So in the same way we also see that Indra, Indra is known for his adulterous nature and, you know, he is also quite infamous for destroying the penance of sages. So having said that there is a larger similarity between Iliad and Ramayana where an important, you know, pair of gods... here we have Hera and Zeus and in Ramayana we have Shiva and Durga, you know, taking sides of the opposite, the rival camps. So Zeus takes the, takes the side of the, the Trojans whereas Hera is supporting the Greeks, the Asians. Finally we see that Shiva is, has a lot of weakness and affection for Ravana whereas, you know, Durga is supporting Rama. So Rama offers his worship to Durga before going to the battlefield, whereas Ravana is a great devotee of Shiva. So there is a tiff also happening at the celestial level where the.. the couples are also fighting among themselves regarding which camp will win.

And remarkably, it is the camp supported by the goddess that triumphs in the end. So in the case of Iliad, we see that Hera has been supporting the Greeks and the Greeks triumph. In the case of Ramayana we see that Durga backs, you know, Rama and Rama triumphs in the end. So that is a kind of very remarkable similarity that one can find between the two great works. We were talking about the lesser gods like Indra, right? And Indra having some kind of, Indra the thunder god, the king of all gods has in a way some similarity with Zeus.

Indra is answerable to a superior authority and he has to pay for his pejorative, his negative acts whereas Zeus on the other hand is not answerable to anyone. So there are even instances in Ramayana where Indra is detained to the mortal existence, to mortal earth for his excesses, for his indulgences. We do not see such peremptory power that dictate Zeus's actions. We need to understand that in the Greco-Roman tradition the gods are already, they share an exchangeable platform with the humans. This is to an extent also present in the Indic context.

But there are no one superior to the triumvirate, you know, Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh were in the case of the Indian context. In the Greco-Roman context the highest position is that of fate-

what is already preordained, even gods cannot change it. The fate as three sisters, spinning their yarn, writing their own narratives, neither Zeus nor Hera nor Aphrodite, they are not even, nor Athena, they cannot play with what fate has already ordered. So in both Ramayana and Iliad therefore, there are continuous exchanges happening at the supernatural and natural or mortal levels. In the Indic context we see that gods can even take fallible decisions, they can make fallible decisions and give boons to the rakshasas, to the demons.

That is happening a lot of times with Brahma who gives boons, you know, boons to several demons including Ravana and consequently the demons can get away with some excess power and later wreak, you know, havoc to the larger society...in the larger society use their immense power against the gods themselves. Since word's power is immense in the context of Mahakavya, a curse or a boon cannot be taken back. If a word has been uttered, it cannot be taken back. To counter that, one of the three superior powers need to intervene and install their force and thereby, you know, facilitate the process of creation or balance.

When, for example, Brahma has given the wrong boon to a rakshasa which endows a lot of power to him, the creation is about to be toppled and hence another god needs to intervene. It could be Vishnu or Shiva who need to intervene and kind of balance out or be born in the form of a reincarnation, an incarnation and destroy the demon otherwise. It is a way of, it unsettles the balance, the balance of the universe. And we see the power of word, you know, taking place at many levels and that speaks a lot about the human agency of the artist also. So there is a point in Valmiki's Ramayana where we see that with the process of Valmiki writing Ramayana, Rama's life is happening.

So it is a very complex narratology or narrative strategy where we do not know whether life precedes art or the vice versa. So whether the existence of human lives and the happenings are in the hands of the artist or conversely the artist is emulating, you know, real life and drawing from there, being inspired from real life and writing on the basis of that. So that kind of primogeniture or precedence is never known whether it happens, something happens in Rama's life because Valmiki writes or whether Valmiki writes inspired by Rama's life. The importance of words is available in the form of curses by the different Rishis, Munis and sages. So we have the figure of Durvasa, right? He is the formidable sage who has attained a lot of power through his austerity and penance, and once he utters a curse, he is known for, you know, cursing.

Once he utters a curse, it does happen, it is, you know, inevitable. So the inevitability of word, word has always found, you know, the power of words has found its strong place in the Indic tradition. Time immemorally it is believed in the Vedic context that the universe was created

with word, the first word which is Om that created the Brahmanda, right? And this is believed not only in the Brahminical tradition but also in the different tribal communities within the South Asian region. It is believed that the creation began with word. So the power of word, the reverence given to word is quite prominent in the Indic context. So Indian context is ready to give an equal or even higher platform to sages who have attained, you know, certain power by virtue of their penance and discipline.

They have achieved a space from where they can even curse the profane deeds of a god. So like I said, by and large both Iliad and Ramayana are similar in this sense where a sage like Gautam muni, right, can curse a smaller god like Indra for his adulterous, you know, behavior with the sage's wife Ahalya, right? Once Gautam wants to, once Gautam comes to know of it, Gautam curses Indra, right? Even Iliad gives such space to heroes like Diomedes. Diomedes who is capable of enduring a deity like Aphrodite or Venus and even mortal warriors like Hector and Achilles are depicted as godlike and are even and they are shown as formidable, feared even by the immortals, right? Vishwamitra's figure in Ramayana we see through his Tapasya or penance, Vishwamitra has become a Brahmarishi from Rajarshi. He was a Kshatriya.

But then he has moved on to the next level. He has become a Brahmarishi from a Rajarshi through his own deeds, his karma trying to create an alternate universe which apprehends even the gods. So through.. by dint of his sheer penance and Tapasya, a sage can fill the gods with apprehension, a sage like Vishwamitra. And they can elevate their position from what they have, you know, from where they are born, from what they are born with. Next, the nature of divine intervention in Ramayana is indirect. For example, even when Ravana asks for boon, we see that there are certain gaps that need to be left.

These boons do not cover everything. There is a blind spot and that is exploited for further, you know, further vanquishing or downfall of the demon. So in the case of Ravana, like I was saying, he mentions that he should be superior over all demons, gods and other super humans. He is so haughty that he never mentions humans. He believes that he is, if he is already superior to, you know, demons, gods and super-humans, he must be superior already to the humans.

So that is the blind spot which is exploited. The cause of his destruction becomes Rama, who is a human incarnation of Vishnu. And so Lanka is also destroyed by the Kiskinda's monkey troops. So he never mentions humans and monkeys and these are the blind spots that are, you know, from where the narrative further proceeds. So this is the quality of divine intervention where you say something and you, by virtue of the fact that you have not mentioned other

factors, you know, the story moves in that direction. You may not be vanquished or defeated by the gods, but it does not mean that you cannot be vanquished by a human.

In the same way, we see the figure of Mahishasur, who is so haughty, he says that he can, he should not be defeated by any gods or any male forms. He forgets to mention about the female form. He never can imagine that a female destroy him and then the creation of Durga happens, right, who destroys him eventually. So we have this kind of pride, which brings the fall of the demons. So a boon is given to these demonic figures, but the precarious end, there is a precarious end to all such boons, which are not guarded.

So divine intervention happens in the form of avatar of different gods. It could be a female deity or a male deity participating in war on the side of the gods, on the side of sages like Agastya, Vishwamitra and others. So these gods are born in human forms in order to protect the sages and the other gods or the human population at large, the society at large. So in the case of Ramayana, we see that the two camps are not really symmetrically constructed. The inclination is already towards the hero functioning from the space of dharma, right.

So because Rama is on the side of dharma and he is backed by the other sages like Agastya and Vishwamitra, we know that eventually the victory will be restored to the camp of Rama, right. So Ravana is not asking for protection in the boon that is given to him by Brahma, pertains to the fact that within the Lanka kingdom, right, Ravana's construction shows many positive traits which count him as superior among the rakshasas. And so he is not entirely a villain. He has some very superlative characteristics.

He is a very good king. He knows how to rule a kingdom and there are a lot of things that even Rama learns from Ravana. So he is already so superior in many ways that he does not count humans while talking about this boon. He just does not know, he has no idea that if he is not already vanquished by, you know, demons and other superhumans, it might be possible that a superlative human like Ram, who belongs to another geographical location, can come and defeat him. He does not count humans basically. He has no idea that simultaneously a very superior form of human is born in another geographical location and in a combat, he will be defeated by such a human.

He is already so superior himself in certain ways that he never counts a human. So Rama is symbolically a human completely different from Ravana's notion of the mortal, what defines a mortal. Rama supersedes what defines an ordinary mortal. So in fact, another truth would say that Ravana was also born to be killed by Rama. It was a curse, once again the power of

words, the curse on Ravana that needed to be fulfilled, that needed to be realized through his end, through his death in Rama's hand.

So we see that epic is located specifically and reflects only a selected aspect of human life, thus putting up a partial picture which is completely shown with vivid description and through sensual appeal, as in the case of Iliad. On the other hand, Mahakavya is a complete and graphic representation of human life. It conjures physical description along with engaging different aspects of the human life, enshrining how one's attitude should ideally be towards life. So it very much functions within the purview of dharma.

Dharma plays a central role. Ramayana deals with the entire gamut of human life's space, whereas Iliad brings in that you know portion, where certain episodes are repeated. So Ramayana essentially pervades or covers all kinds of rasas and bhavas, but when seen from Indic context, Iliad would only focus on rasas such as the Vibhatsa and the Karuna. These are the two rasas mostly found in Iliad. Ramayana is more you know closer to bildungsroman. So since Ramayana's various cantos centre the narrative at a variety of incidents, it adheres with Mahakavya's necessary quality of projecting all the different rasas appealing to the different human senses.

Valmiki would suggest that for every rasa to be evoked, suitable alankara/ verbal ornamentation should be explained intricately in terms of poetic and stylistic devices. Since there is no performance to manifest the rasas in a Mahakavya, kavya's verbal construction, the use ornamentation and conjunction of words are enough for emanating the suitable rasas in the correct contexts. In Ramayana, we see that since kavya serves the purpose of Giti kavya, just going back to the example of Lavkush singing the song, you know, the story of Rama's life in Rama's court, rhythm and musicality are very important aspects and each tune we see evoking the corresponding emotions. The tunes are varied to or tied with specific emotions. Thus, the entire kavya qualifies for an auditory experience, the auditory quality is there, the audible experience.

So, the entire kavya qualifies for an audible experience and there are auditory qualities, such that although Ramayana whose provenance is you know, orality or an oral tradition and later it is written, it has a documented form.. We see that orality forms the planned device and Valmiki's construction harmonizes with Shruti narrative's oral tradition. So we see that the auditory quality is very prominent and although later on these Mahakavyas are being written, they are available in documented version, orality is the originally planned device; orality forms their provenance and Valmiki's construction harmonizes with the Shruti tradition, the

narrative's oral tradition. With this, I am going to stop my lecture here today and let us meet again with another round of discussions. Thank you.