

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 42

Folk Traditions and Performances IV

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, today we are going to discuss two folk theatre forms, one is Jatra from the eastern part of India, the other is Ramlila which is enacted more towards the northern part of India, right. So, when we talk of Jatra, we see that it is a popular folk theatre form or a popular folk theatre tradition that originated mainly in Bengal and later it gained popularity in the abetting eastern states such as Bihar and Odisha. Jatra emerged from the influence of the Bhakti movement during the 15th century. The word Jatra itself means "to travel or to embark on a journey". So, Jatra comprises melodramatic delivery of emotionally charged, emotionally accentuated dialogues, gestures and orations.

So, hyperbole or hyperbolic acts and speeches is a prominent feature that marks this form, this theatrical form that Jatra is. Both Jatra and later we will see Ramlila are informed by hyperbolic acts and emotional excesses, sentimental excesses that are also reciprocated by a very lively and a very live audience, right. So, Jatra and Ramlila are marked by bodily and sentimental excesses that are reciprocated by a very lively audience. It is a very immediate reaction that defines these folk theatre forms because the audience and theatre artist's distance, spatial distance is not much; they are on the same platform and the same level.

So, we cannot really fathom where life ends and the stage or art or theatre begins, right. They flow into one another. It is a kind of conglomeration of life and lively reactions with the theatre dialogues. So, Jatra comprises melodramatic delivery, like I said, and the musicians also sit on both sides of the stage playing the different instruments such as pakhwaj, harmonium, tabla, flute, trumpets, violin, dholak, cymbals and clarinet. So, we see that accompanied by a number of instruments, music and singing are mostly based on folk tunes, right.

Jatra was originally used to take place in the rural parts of Bengal, right. And it was more of entertainment for the peasantry section, for the rural masses, right, the ordinary people. It came to the urban space much later and in terms of content also we would see that at different historical junctures against different historical settings, the content of Jatra greatly changes, modifies and it accommodates the undercurrents of the contemporary society. So, Jatras have been traditionally held in a flat square or alternately in a rounded arena with the audience seated all around. Like I was saying, the distance between the audience and the theatre artist, the Jatra artist is not so much felt; they almost dialogize while the live play is going on.

The actors would enter or exit the square space through designated areas and they would walk into the platform, the theatre platform if we could call it, from within the crowd. So, the actors would emerge from within the crowd and after playing their part they would go back to the crowd. This signifies the plebeian nature of this theatre form where the distance, the gap between the audience and the stage or the art form is kind of blurred. The character in a more symbolic sense.. one could say that Jatra is trying to signify that the character could be anyone from within the crowd. So, the sense of identification, the sense of relating with art becomes very high, very strong.

On one side of the acting space the chorus and the musicians are seated. Govinda Adhikari, Lokenath Das, Boko and his brother Shadhu are some of the prominent names that are associated with this well-known form Jatra. They are proponents of or kind of forefathers of well-known Jatra troops. So and we if we look at their history, their time, we would see that they are mainly coming from late 18th century continuing through the 19th century. So in the late 18th century, Jatra became a very prominent folk theatre form in Bengal.

So, later we see that the Bhadrakalok section, the Bengali elite sections establish Jatra troops which happens mainly in the 20th century. So we see that the Bhadrakalok sections, in other words the Bengali elite sections, the upper-caste Bengali sections mainly belonging to the urban areas established Jatra troops in the first part of the 20th century and they were being influenced by the folk form of the art of Jatra. So in 20th century Jatra makes his journey from the rural areas to the urban space. We see Sreenath Sen, Gurucharan Sen, Ramchand Mukhopadhyay and Swarup Dutta are some of the names that come up when talking about the pioneer Jatra connoisseurs, the Jatra lovers and

originators of this form taking this form you know mainly to the urban spaces. So the form of Jatra greatly draws on the rituals of song and dance which form a part of the religious festivals in rural Bengal.

So the rural Bengal is informed by so many of these oral traditions, you know oral.. so rural Bengal is informed by so many of these oral religious traditions, mainly enacted and practiced by the women folk, the rural women- the Panchali tradition, the Mangal Kavya tradition, so all these things tend to inform the theatrical, you know, the theatrical art form of Jatra. All these practices, religious practices inform the theatrical artform of Jatra. So some critics would even point out that women artists also performed in Jatra at one point in time. However, it is more prevalent and common for men to play the parts both of male and female characters. So male actors play both as males and females.

In this regard, it is very interesting to look at the figure of Chapal Bhaduri, right. Chapal Bhaduri who has played the figure of Shitala, the local you know goddess worshipped in rural side of Bengal. And we see this upsurge of Bhakti that turns a male artist playing a goddess into a deity. Actually he is elevated to the platform of deity, there is a deification of the artist to the extent that it is said that the audience would not accept any female or male artist in the form of.. in the role of goddess Shitala. And it is remarkable, it is spectacular that when Chapal Bhaduri would come dressed as the goddess, the people would, you know, there would be a spontaneous worship taking place, where we see that religion and performance are kind of flowing into one another, right.

So there are incense sticks and garlands and flowers and so the upsurge of Bhakti, devotion of the audience is very prominent. So here we see too many things, the question of trance that we were discussing in the context of Sufi; there is transvestitism, so cross-dressing basically; a man dressed up as a woman, an exchange or an exchangeable platform between human and superhuman or human and god. And then we see that there is an exchangeable platform between the artist and the audience. So it would be better to say the artist god and the audience devotee because they are playing dual parts, the artist is already the god whereas the audience is already the devotee worshipping the artist. So Swadeshi Jatra rose to prominence in the first decade of the 20th century, right, in the backdrop.

So against the backdrop of anti-colonial struggles, struggles for independence and the nationalist movements that were taking place, we have a special form of Swadeshi Jatra. Jatras were played not only for the public's entertainment and amusement, but also to raise awareness of the British colonial rule over the Indians. So Jatra became a platform where people were being made aware about, you know, the process of colonization, the exploitation being wrought on the natives and so a general awareness, a general anti-colonial sentiment was being churned through performance, right. So a general anti-colonial sentiment was being churned out through the messages delivered through these Jatra performances. So during the Bengal anti-partition agitation, right... we know that Bengal was partitioned in early 20th century (1905).

Around this time, Swadeshi Jatra Pala sprang up and started a new chapter altogether. Stage theatres were frequently performed in Calcutta in addition to the Jatra. So Jatra was making a travel to the urban space against the backdrop of anti-colonial movements and it was making the rural and the urban population aware about the.. about the contemporary situation of the society. So the plays began to reflect Bengal's larger socio-economic as well as political circumstances, and the core of nationalism in the second half of the 19th century. So its content shifted from religious to secular, from the otherworldly to the this-worldly affairs.

It started speaking to the immediate realities of the society and started, became a commentary.. Jatra became a commentary on the social issues. It became vital to the shaping of the collective consciousness of the ordinary people. So Utpal Dutt, a theatre artist and an activist himself states that the Jatra has always been not just theatre or entertainment but a school, a court of justice and a political meeting in itself. So it is an institution that contains the essence of rural life in a nutshell. So we would see that there have been many occasions where the dialogues are spontaneous and there have been prompters from within the audience.

So not everything is pre-decided or pre-determined. Some of the dialogues are taking place on the spur of the moment and that adds to the lively ambience of the Jatra performance. As the anti-imperialistic struggle in India began, Jatra immediately changed its character because it had to be with the people, in the people and among the people. It had to represent the angst, the frustration and the general questions that people had in their mind. So only religious content of Jatra would not hold in a modern situation.

It became something more than that. It became a commentary on the modern society. When the struggle, the Swadeshi struggles reached their peak, especially in the 1920s and 1930s with participation from the extremist factions in Bengal, Jatra shifted from religious to secular topics too, and it led to the production of historical and political plays. So Jatra is making a shift from religious to historical and political against the backdrop of Swadeshi movement. The universe of gods and goddesses was frequently incorporated into Jatra as a kind of amusement or in a light-hearted sense.

So the idea of anthropomorphic god, very human-like god is something that we have been observing, right, throughout this lecture series, something that informs the spirituality, the sense of religion in India or pan-South Asia. We see this kind of very relatable, very human-like god or deities informing the religiosity of the ordinary people. So gods emerge but not only as very serious figures but they can be mediums of lampooning, of travesty, of burlesque, of caricature, mockery, satire and so forth. So the godly figures are not always elevated and distanced from the common public. The Bengal Renaissance's advent aggravated people's feelings towards Jatra.

The Bengal Renaissance was trying to consolidate a Bengali identity, collective Bengali identity around the urban more refined image and imagination of the Bengali male and female. So the question of western education and modernity, these things became very important such that folk theatre forms like Jatra during the Bengal Renaissance would take a backseat. Now, Rustom Bharucha in his book *Rehearsals of Revolution: The Political Theatre of Bengal* discusses the political aspects of the Jatra performance, mainly focusing on the figure of Mukunda Das. So Mukunda Das has a quintessential role to play as far as Jatra in Bengal is concerned. Mukunda Das has investigated the political implications of Jatra.

Das was mainly motivated by a man called Motilal Roy who was a legend in the field of Jatra, who was a legend in the field of Jatra and performed Jatra Pala that would convey primarily Swadeshi ideas. So Jatra as a vehicle, as a medium for making people aware about the colonial rule and policies. Now moving from Swadeshi Jatra, if we look at Odisha, we will see that Bali Jatra is a major festival in Odisha which is an eight day celebration, a celebration that lasts for eight successive days. It begins on the day of Kartik Poornima, the lunar month of Kartik, a month which is considered as the most sacred in Hindu calendar and it takes place on the banks of the Mahanadi river. Now the Bali Jatra festival has grown, it has expanded and has been featured as a major event that draws visitors from all across the world.

Twelve different types of Jstras, each held during one of the twelve months in the year are mentioned in the Skanda Purana. These are typically annual festivals dedicated to the worship of Lord Vishnu. So let us look at these twelve forms of Jatra, twelve types of Jatra one by one, and when they take place throughout the year. So Snapuni Jatra is conducted in the month of Jaitha which is during May-June, Chandani Jatra is held in the month of Baishakh or April-May, Sayani Jatra is held in Shravan and Ratha Yatra which is a very big festival is held in Asharh or during the month of June and July. In the Bhadra month the Dakshin Parshia Jatra is held, the Bamparshia Jatra takes place in Aswin, the Uthhani Jatra takes place in the month of Kartik.

So now we will see the Jatra does not trace its affiliation only with the classical roots. Just because Lord Vishnu is at the heart of these Jatra festivals, one must not assume that Jatra does not have a non-classical base too. So in Bengal we already said that it is celebrating local goddesses that are not part of the classical pantheon. Goddesses like Shitala that you know, that prevents the village folks from some of the diseases. So we see that Oraons in Bihar who have, who are believed to have come from Nepal, perform Jatra too along with Karma and Jadur. So Jatra performance has its roots both in the classical tradition as well as greatly draws on the folk theatre forms, the folk or localized beliefs where we have a figure like goddess Shitala from Bengal, who is not a part of the Hindu pantheon, the major gods and goddesses.

So Shitala is the dreaded goddess who prevents the rural populace from pox, right, diseases like pox. So in the eastern regions Jatra as a theatre form symbolizes so many things. It could be a vehicle for carrying political message as history shows us. It could be a form for vending one's bhakti, one's the upsurge of devotion. So it has religious aspect, it has socio-political aspect.

In the case of the tribal people like the Oraons, Jatra symbolizes the battle of life. So it has very mundane everyday significance and the dancers in the case of Oraon Jatra use several martial arts, maneuvers and techniques. The movements are very quick and very animated, very sprightly; while the dance is being performed a musician stands in the middle of the stage and sings songs in a way that further inspires the dancers. So here is a form that flows into life and life flows back into form. We cannot strictly draw a demarcation between the audience and the artist, the art and the life.

Next we are going to start talking about another folk theatre form which is Ramlila. Ramlila, it can be translated to English as Rama's play, is a presentation of the Ramayana epic that includes songs, story tellings, recitals and dialogues through a sequence of scenes. It is practiced all over the northern part of India during the Dussehra festival which is observed annually in the autumn month according to the Hindu calendar, Hindu ceremonial calendar. Now we see that Valmiki's Ramayana does not inform Ramlila; rather, Tulsidas's rendition of Ramayana which is Ramcharitmanas, a very prominent work, a very important work vis-a-vis the Bhakti movement forms the basis of the production of Ramlila. Ramcharitmanas is one of the most popular and well liked story-telling genres in the northern part of India and that is the kind of foundation that is the edifice on which production of Ramlila stands.

So definitely, one can understand that the sentimental aspect, the emotional aspect, the aspect of Bhakti or devotion plays a very important role, a central and momentous role in this theatre form of Ramlila. In order to make the Sanskrit epic accessible to the ordinary public, to everyone, Tulsidas wrote this religious work in the 16th century in a form of Hindi, in an Awadhi Hindi that is closer to the grassroots which celebrates the grandeur of Rama who is the protagonist of Ramayana. So here, we see that the Prince Rama in Valmiki's text is being transformed into Lord Rama who is an incarnation of Vishnu, and yet he is a very human-like god that you know, whose kingdom is the ideal, the unparalleled kind of or whose kingdom is understood as the unparalleled or the ideal rule that should define the modern day India as well. So the concept of Ramrajya and the concept of the lofty figure, the ideal figure of the king is celebrated through the image of Rama. He is more than a human and yet as a god he is so human-like.

He is the crossing point of god and human and this is something that Ramlila celebrates in an emphatic way, and this is something that Ramlila celebrates in an emphatic way. So Ramlila is a collection of conversations between gods, sages and devotee audience that commemorate the conflict, the very well-known conflict between Rama and Ravana. That is something that forms the climax, the climactic part of Ramlila, this conflict, this war between Rama and Ravana and in the course of the narration, in the course of progression of the play there is a constant conversation going on at different platforms. Just something that I mentioned while explaining the Jatra form. So gods, sages, humans belonging to different orders, different platforms can exchange, can talk to each other.

Similarly the audience that also plays.. so similarly the audience that are also devotees can speak, can prompt the artists. So the defining boundary lines are already very blurred, which marks an interesting aspect in these folk theatre forms from different regions of India. The succession of icons depicting each scene's climax gives Ramlila its dramatic onus or dramatic power. The narration is open to audience participation including singing from the audience. So it is a very seamless kind of performance, not happening really on an elevated stage or dais where the audience can spontaneously start singing, participating and audience and devotee can very swiftly switch to the role of the actor in a sense.

So without regard to caste, religion or age the Ramlila performance unites the entire populace. It becomes a location for the people from all sections of the society to come together. So it also has its secular aims and ambitions. So all of the villages take part voluntarily, acting out parts or engaging in a range of related activities. So it is more like a yajna, a big yajna or a big event taking place where everyone gets to play some minor role.

It could be the role of creating masks and costumes, getting ready, you know, readying the makeup. So it could be the task of creating masks and costumes, getting the makeup ready, creating the effigies..effigies of the different characters from Ramayana and then setting up the lights. So the entire community is brought together through this annual celebration. It is a way of binding the humanity, which is also at the heart of all religions. So the etymological root of religion means to unite, to bind together and that essence is visible in the case of Ramlila, taking place in the different states of North India.

So since the middle of the 19th century, we see that Ramlila has also spreaded. It has, it is since the mid of the 19th century we see that Ramlila also becomes an available repertoire and it has reached the diaspora. Since the middle of the 19th century we see that Ramlila is also a part of the diaspora. It has spreaded its wings and you know, its repertoire, its cultural repertoire is also available to the Indian diaspora. So for example, Trinidad has continuously performed the Ramlila.

This consistency was mostly based on strong ties to one's community and family. So performance of Ramlila is a way of reinforcing, reifying. So performance and practicing of Ramlila being associated with this theatre form is a way of reifying and reinforcing

one's communal and familial identity. As the family custom was passed down from the elderly members to the younger populace, many performance roles became inherited. As the family custom was passed down from the elderly members to the younger generation, many performance roles became inherited.

So Ramlila defined several lineages in the diaspora living outside of the South Asian region. So an extended family that played a major role in the Ramlila performance is the Naipaul family from the Chaguanas. This family had a position of great power and influence in Chaguanas as a Brahmin family of high prestige and reputation, such that many of the members were also part of the Panchayati system, a body of elders with the greatest, you know, sanctioning authority in any communal life. So we see that the practice of Ramlila is not only restricted to the South Asian region, but it has flown outside of this region, it resides with certain lineages, with certain families, certain groups as a part of their family and community identity in the diaspora all across the globe. Now, regional Ramlila committees or samitis put on open air performances that are entirely supported by the general public or the villagers, which gives it its plebeian facet.

So Ramlila circle is reportedly the foundation of Indian theatre's greatest global heritage and we see that there is a strong Ramlila tradition traceable in Odisha. So Ramlila in modern day Odisha is recognized by a number of different names, depending on the specific style of art, music and theatre forms and gestures. So we see that in Odisha we have the Asureswara Yatra. Asureswara is a village in the Indian state of Odisha situated in Cuttack district. Similarly the Lankapodi Yatra which is held in Daspalla in the Nayagarh district of Odisha.

Then we have the Sahi Yatra located on the Bay in Puri, and Ramlila in Odisha is performed during the months of March and April. We need to understand that Dusshera happens twice a year according to the Hindu calendar. So Odisha emphasizes more on the spring festival rather than the autumn you know, enactment of Dusshera or autumn observance of the ritual or the festival. So Odisha emphasizes or accentuates the celebration of Ram Navami rather than the autumn festival of Dusshera. Ram Navami is locally referred to as Chaitra in the Odian calendar and celebration of Rama's birthday lasts between the 10th and the 15th nights.

The performance is based on a regional interpretation of Rama's story that is conveyed both orally and in writing. We have already discussed how Ramayana has so many different renditions that vary from region to region. Just like in the northern part we have, just like in the northern part of India Tulsidas' Ram Charitmanis is very prominent, it is very popular and it is the backbone of Ramlila celebration or the Ramlila folk theatre form, in the southern part, Kamban's rendition of Ramayana becomes very important.

So each region has its own version of Ramayana where the subplots, the characters have little variations. In Bengal we have a rendition of Ramayana by a female author called Chandravati. So Chandravati's Ramayana is prevalent in Bengal. There are so many such different versions, which add to the layers and nuances of this great text, this timeless work. Due to the numerous representations of Ramlilas around the world, particularly among the South Asian diaspora and areas where Hinduism has spread for over several centuries, places like Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, Fiji, New Zealand, Australia, Africa, Holland, Britain, North America and the South East Asian countries, we see Ramlila has drawn considerable attention from all around the world.

In 2005, UNESCO designated the Ramlila custom as a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity. A masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity. There are different types of Ramlila, such as Chitrakoot Ramlila, Ramnagar Ramlila, Agra Ramlila, Delhi Ramlila, Kumaoni or Almora Ramlila, to mention a few among the many versions, right, or the many types. The beauty of Ramlila lies once again in its spontaneity that I would like to emphasize.

There are many from the audience. When Richard Schechner interviews the audience in the Ramlila festival, some of the very old members would say that it is like a customary practice... It's like a habit for them to visit or participate in Ramlila annually, such that... and this man has been doing it for so long. He's such a, you know, doddering old man that he remembers the dialogues by Rama and, you know, other characters verbatim. He remembers them by heart. So he has been following and participating in Ramlila every year, such that he remembers the dialogues by Rama and other characters by heart.

He repeats the dialogues after the characters. He's in a position to prompt the characters even, and we see that this is part of emotion among the common people, which is why Rama is considered as a God among the common folks. It is the devotion, the bhakti

because people believe that he existed. In the scene where he is, you know, going for vanvas, for exile, the audience every year.. they follow the trio, Rama, Lakshman and Sita and they walk with them and the entire population cries just like as though they are the people of Ayodhya. So this enactment becomes so live that it is very difficult to make a distinction between art and reality.

So and that is the beauty of Ramlila. Ramlila has been conceptualized as religious and participating in it or even the very act of watching the performance, witnessing the performance is considered as a sign of devotion to Rama and a religious act. It's something associated with, you know, a good karma to even witness Ramlila. So there are numerous rituals and ceremonies throughout the entire show. The crowns of Rama, Lakshmana, Bharat, Shatrughna and Sita are worshipped and dedicated on an auspicious day before the Ramlila show starts. So the actors do not remain actors, they are elevated onto a different platform altogether.

The crowns are celebrated and the actors are not only wearing some headgears for the play, but coronation ceremony is taking place. When the swaroops put on the crowns, they become endowed with divine features, divine characteristics and so the actors are treated as god's representations, they are representations of divine forms. Every day these swarups are worshipped at the beginning and the end of the performance, and their aarti is actually carried out with much fanfare. So Rama's coronation which takes place on the last day, in the last episode is accompanied by elaborate music and dances.

So with this I am going to end my lecture here today. Like I was saying, Ramlila is very hyperbolic. It is all about accentuated and you know very strong you know emotions playing through the scenes in terms of dialogues, in terms of bodily and facial gestures. They immediately appeal the masses. So it is very colourful, it is lofty, it is surreal almost, it is not something that happens in everyday life. It is something very remarkable and catchy; it is known for its catchy appearance throughout. So with this, I am going to stop my lecture here today and let us meet with another round of discussions, another theatre form in another lecture. Thank you.