

## **Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia**

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**Lecture 45**

### **Folk Traditions and Performances VII**

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, we are discussing the different folk theatre forms, the folk dance drama theatre forms. And today we will additionally also look at the adaptation of some of these folk forms in different Indian cinemas, right. How the films have adapted these different folk forms as item numbers sometimes, and sometimes as an integral part of the film iteration, right. So, when we talk of folk forms, we have already discussed, you know, some of the major folk performances. Now, coming to Haryana, we see that the locals of Haryana express their zest for life through a variety of dance and music styles.

These include Ras Leela, Phag Dance, Loor, Dhamal, Gugga, Jhumar, Khorla, Holi, Chatty, Singing, Chaupaiya, as well as others. These are all examples of Haryanvi dance, right. Dhamal is regarded as one of Haryana's most well-known and greatest folk dances with its roots in the Mahabharata, the myths of Mahabharata. So, another name for dhamal is Duph, and it celebrates cultivation and harvesting.

After you know, field work is done, after harvesting is completed, spring comes, it is onset of spring and it is time for celebration. So men either execute the dhamal dance alone or in company of other men, right. And talking about dhamal, we also remember Bhangra, and Bhangra is a very popular, almost a form that has been globally espoused. It has become part of weddings, wedding ceremonies, and other such cultural ceremonies. It is something that has become part of the diaspora, that has become part of the multicultural milieu, and Bollywood has richly drawn on and exploited this form Bhangra since decades in so many of the famous Bollywood songs.

It would be difficult to name a few because there are so many of these Bollywood songs that draw on this Bhangra form. Then we have the Bhand Pather, which is a traditional

theatre form of Kashmir valley. Bhand Pather is a form of swang actually. The word bhand refers to the age-old traditional entertainers in Pakistan, Nepal and India. The theatre comprises singing, dancing, acting as well as narration of a story.

In India, the bhand can be seen in the regions of Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. So some of the musical instruments played in Bhand Pather include the surnai, dhol, nagara and thalij. Pather begins with the beating of the drum or the nagara and dhol is played after the nagara, in order to amplify the sound. A whip and a bamboo stick are two essential items for every pather performance. They are used, both the whip and the bamboo stick are used as embellishments to the text in order to portray the oppression in society by adding dramatic pictures.

So they symbolize oppression in the society. The actors in Bhand Pather primarily speak Kashmiri, Punjabi, Persian, Gujjari, Dogri and English. Bhand Pather is a kind of outdoor street play which honors the life of the rishis or the saints, and these saints have their origins both in the Hindu and the Muslim Sufi traditions, and they become a mouthpiece for discussing societal issues. The tradition of Bhand Pather is passed down from father to son. So it stays in a lineage, it is a knowledge that is bequeathed, you know, down the generation.

So it is inherited by the younger generation from the older generation. In Kashmir there are 72 villages where the Bhand population predominates. These villages are locally known as the Bhand gaam or the Bhand villages. Bhand Pather has a broad appeal and covers a wide range of topics such as the political, societal and economic issues. So the Pather comes in a wide variety of forms, such as the Wattal Pather, Anger road and Pather Shikargah.

Next, we see a dance form called Chholiya which belongs to Uttarakhand. It is an ancient dance and has its roots in the fighting Kshatriyas of the Kumaon regions. And they performed this dance form Chholiya at the weddings, weddings that were, you know, done at the point of swords some 1000 years ago. So weddings that would take place at the point of swords in older times would be accompanied by the Chholiya performance. So Chholiya is also performed to ward off evil spirits that were rumoured as pursuing a Baraat.

So the rumour goes that a Baraat is usually pursued by some evil spirits and in order to ward off these spirits Chholiya is performed. Baraat refers to the celebratory wedding procession for the groom which involves live music and dancing. It was believed in the earlier times that anyone who danced the Chholiya dance might release some energy against the evil forces. So the rhythmic drumming in this performance, in Chholiya performance along with the dancers that are dressed in a vibrant traditional garb has the effect of a music which describes battles. So it is basically a battle dance, right? It is, it originated with the Kshatriyas in the Kumaon region.

And in the modern times Chholiya is frequently categorized as a sword dance and it is also performed in processions. Another traditional folk dance that we can discuss in this context is mainly from Manipur. This dance form, this folk dance form is known as Lai Haraoba of Manipur, which recreates the creation of the universe; through this performance, creation of universe is envisioned. So this performance originally belonged to the Lai Haraoba festival which is a celebration of the gods. At this celebration people repent for their past misdeeds and they resolve to live a moral life ahead.

So the dance is performed in front of the shrines of Umanglai, Umanglai which is a deity of the Meiteis. Meiteis is a local Manipuri tribal group and Umanglai is the ancestor god of the Meiteis. This dance is performed by the Maibas or the priests as well as the Maibis or the priestesses, who are seen as and revered as embodiments of purity. Through the rhythmic symbolic movements Lai Haraoba address the divine. Through dancing the Maibas and Maibis portray the Meitei people's beliefs and it depicts their way of life.

Through dance they are telling stories of people's culture, people's you know worldview and they are also depicting their myths, their beliefs about the creation of the universe. So in the context of the folk dance practices and theatres from the north-eastern part of India we need to mention one festival that is associated with cultivation and agriculture, it hails from Assam. So the Assamese traditional agrarian festival is called Bihu. It has three parts. So the Bohag Bihu, the Kati Bihu and the Mag Bihu.

They mark the celebration of these three stages of Kharif paddy agriculture which is the state's primary crop. Assam's primary crop is Kharif paddy. And in three stages it is harvested which are celebrated as Bohag Bihu, Kati Bihu and Magh Bihu. It is primarily

observed as a spring festival. So Bihu is a spring festival and before the beginning of the Kharif paddy farming activities Bihu is celebrated.

Among the three Bihu festivals, Bohag Bihu or Rongali Bihu is the most extensive one in terms of the rituals, the dances, singing and the days of celebration. So the name Rongali is derived from the word Rong, which means happiness and carnival. So a carnivalesque mood pervades during the days of celebration of Bohag Bihu. So this festival is celebrated for seven long days during the month of Bohag or the Baisakh month, which starts somewhere in the middle of the month of April. And so it also coincides with the Assamese New Year festival.

It is sometime you know in April when other parts of India celebrates Baisakhi. So it is also the commencement of the new Assamese New Year. So it also marks the commencement of the Assamese New Year. During this occasion of Rongali Bihu, people wear traditional attires that are made from Muga silk, which is famous from Assamese, and they perform traditional Bihu songs and dances. The first day of Bohag Bihu is reserved for the cattle and the farm animals.

So the cattle are bathed and they are consecrated with a paste of turmeric and black gram and then their ropes are changed, the old ropes are changed with the new ones and they are allowed to roam about freely in the field. It is a gesture of thanking these animals that have helped the farmers in their cultivation throughout the year. So prayers are offered to the deities asking for a fruitful and productive year ahead. The next day of Bohag Bihu is called Manuah or Human Bihu. So on this day the people dress up in new garments and gifts are exchanged, blessings of the elderly members are sought.

And then finally the third day is dedicated for the gods and that day is known as the Gosai or God Bihu. On this day people worship the household deities and seek their blessings so the rest of the year remains fruitful and you know, there is no scarcity, there is no disease and death that affects the family. So during the celebration of Bihu young people chant and dance to the sounds of the Bihu dhol, which is a typical drum used for this particular occasion. They also play the pepa or buffalo horn pipe and the taal which is the bell metal symbols. So the aesthetics of folk performances do not correspond to any type of grammar; rather, there are certain intrinsic ethics and control that inform these ceremonial norms.

So the spontaneous occasions of singing and dancing occur as unconstrained by norms and rules. Also there are no dictates or prescriptions that would define the folk practices, the folk celebrations. So unlike the control that inform the classical paradigm of song and dances, the folk practices are more spontaneous, more off-the-cuff, they are more carnivalesque in nature. They give more freedom to the body and hence we see that there is no rulebook but still there are a lot of coordination. When we look at a dance form like Bihu, we would see (just like in the case of tribal dances) there is a lot of hand and foot coordination.

It is not like the people are dancing the way they want to. There is a lot of discipline in terms of movements that is observable. So following the harvest of the kharif paddy, Magh-bihu is observed. So at the heart of the harvest celebration there are preparations of traditional delicacies and cuisines as well as the joy derived out of community feasting. So starting on January 13th or 14th the Magh-bihu lasts for 2 to 5 days.

Next, we see that during the Kati-bihu celebration the sali paddy is primarily protected from the pests which prevent the growth of the panicle and it is observed for one day in the middle of October. The Husori custom that announces the spring festival, the Husori custom almost is a harbinger of the spring festival Bihu, and it is however limited to the male artists only who are a band of male singers. So this band of male singers known as husori go from house to house in a group singing songs while primarily seated in a circle. They sit in a circle, an all-male circle and sing songs accompanying their performances with the dhol and the taal. They offer their blessings to the household for a happy new year and in return the household members give them some alms and gifts.

So blessings are given to each household and from each household they collect some material gifts and alms. This is how the group of males, the singing performing males go from house to house to observe the husori custom during the Bihu festival. So the family members bow down for the husori dhol with a xorai and phoolam gamusa under the leadership of the elders who are typically the parents or the grandparents of the house.

Next, we talk about the Baul from from West Bengal. Baul is a folk musical traditional form that originates in West Bengal in districts such as Malda, Bankura, Birbhum, Rampurhat, Burdwan, Medinipur, Nadia, Dinajpur, Murshidabad, and so forth.

So a number of you know districts in both parts of Bengal have the baul performance. Bauls were declared as the masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity by UNESCO in 2005. The baul performance is informed both by the Sufi and the Nath schools. Sufi and Nath schools are brought together to form the baul school. The baul songs also reflect the influence of the Pali or Buddhist literature.

According to baul philosophy the human body is the primary focus. It talks about the human body mainly. These singing minstrels or bauls reject both salvation and heaven. They do not talk about an afterlife. Rather they emphasize this, here, and now, and they consider the human body as the only site of the sacred.

In comparison with baul, Jatra as a theatre form from Bengal, we have already talked about Jatra... It is a travelling theatre with heavy melodrama. It is based on heavy melodrama and it is a one-play comic sequence deploying a lot of exaggerated or hyperbolic acting style and dialogues, gaudy costumes and catchy live music. So dialogues in Jatra are improvised in response to the audience's reaction. It is a very lively open air kind of performance and however, we see that with a performance fee structure, cost of stage, cost of sound equipment, light and pandal, there is also a kind of commercial aspect associated with the Jatra form which is usually not available or not present in baul performances.

The mystical position, the question of mystical position, the characters being possessed by any deity or even performing in a trance-like state do not inform the Jatra performance. Jatra is more of secular in nature, although there are a lot of devotional and religious content in Jatra, it does not include, you know, being possessed or acting or enacting in trance-like state. So in fact, Jatra groups are known for manipulating a number of well-known myths. They manipulate and sometimes subvert the myths also. From here, we move to another part of our discussion today, which is a continuation of our discussion on folk theatre form.

We will now see the representation of folk forms in different Indian cinemas, how the different folk forms, different folk dance forms have been utilized and how they have inspired and influenced the cinematic narration. So Hellaro is a Gujarati period drama directed by Abhishek Shah released in 2019. And regarding Abhishek Shah's Hellaro in

one of his articles Mayak Jha states that (I quote), “Garba changes in the film from being a ritualistic and religious performance to a recreational one, thematically linking women’s leisure as a mode of resistance to patriarchy,” (unquote). So Abhishek Shah in his film has adapted a folk tale from Kutch and he reverses the tradition, he subverts the tradition of Garba as a women's dance form by placing it squarely in the domain of males. So women's resistance to patriarchy in the film is manifested through their covert performances, which highlight the gendered constructions that are available in the artistic practices in Indian society.

So these practices, these folk forms have their own gendered natures, the dictates, the prescriptions they follow, what women should do and what men should not do, the special divisions are very much gendered in nature. This is something that Shah's *Hellaro* is focusing on. Shah's *Hellaro* further dramatizes the plight of a few rural women who are located within the constraints of domesticity, and we see how they are attempting to challenge their social position, their social order, the pre-given social order through the act of dancing. Here is a video from *Hellaro*. We see a woman dancing out of ecstasy, it is an ecstatic kind of expression and very bright costumes worn by women.

They have the local Gujarati flavor and there is a drummer, a man you know playing a drum in the middle whereas women kind of surrounding him revolving around him and dancing joyously. Next, we talk about *Kaliyattam*. *Kaliyattam* is a Malayalam film which is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello*. The war between Venice and Cyprus has been replaced by the *Theyyam* performance in the film. We have already discussed *Theyyam* in our module on folk dance hero forms, right? So the film primarily focuses on the caste concerns in the Kerala society.

So Kannan Perumalayan who is a protagonist and a tragic hero is an untouchable man who has scars from smallpox all over his face and he is entitled by the ruler to play the *Theechamundi*, right? In the establishment scene of *Perumalayan*, he is portrayed as the goddess while wearing the *Theyyam* outfit. An untouchable, it is a very radical message rather going to the audience, an untouchable who does not have a perfect face is playing you know *Theechamundi*, portraying or depicting the goddess wearing the *Theyyam* outfit and through this while *Perumalayan* performs, he is elevated to the plinth of God. An untouchable person is elevated to the plinth of God, almost deified. So *Othello*'s inner conflicts are presented in *Kaliyattam* as *Perumalayan*'s demanding the gods to answer the doubts that are present in his mind regarding his own wife and at his powerful invocation the gods appear before him in a *theyyam* attire. The gods however retreat silently and it

seems to suggest that it is not the gods will that caused the fall of the mighty artist but his own tragic flaw.

This talks about human agency, the god is not responsible for the fall of the artist, it is the artist's own tragic flaw. So the god is retreating rather silently. So the end is astoundingly moving when we see the dejected Perumalayan in Thichamundi's attire running into the fire after declaring Kanthan as his successor. So the strength of his character and his willingness to accept punishment is understood as one sees his silhouette bravely enduring the flames, the flames that consume his body and it still continues to dance in the fire. That is how the film ends, that is the denouement of the film.

The monstrous image of the Theyyam manifests the cultural fears residing in the social consciousness in the form of jealousy, infidelity, betrayal, suspicion as well as revenge. I would rather that the students that have taken up this course go back and watch these very important films, very noteworthy films which tell us so much about filmic adaptation of the forms. It would clarify our understanding of this course. So we see Kaliyattam's snippet from the film, where an artist that has fully dressed up has blessed the next generation of performer and he is running into the fire, he is being engulfed by the flames. The will and the fearlessness of the artist is portrayed so beautifully as the flames absorb him.

So after this we move on to another film, a very popular film called Ramlila. It's also known as Goli ka Raslila Ramlila by Sanjay Leela Vansali. It is an Indian adaptation of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, and it released in the year 2013. The story is set in the village of Ranjhaar showing two rival clans, one is Senera, the other is Rajadi. In the film both men and women execute the principle dance genres such as garba and padhar while making moves with bamboo sticks that are known as dandiyas.

Women typically wear ghaghra cholis and males typically don the distinctive kediya outfit. The Gujarati trend of wearing silver pachchikam jewellery demonstrates the rich traditions and the strong connection to their roots in the film. The on-screen presence of armed Hindu devotees that are performing garba to the beat of tat-tat-tat on the streets of rural Gujarat produces the street as a complex public site for affirming one's claim to space. It also points to the affirmation of the Hindu nation through a vowel of Hindu



religious identity. Ramlila therefore deliberately borrows from the Indian mythological epic Ramayana as well as the folk theatre formed out of Ramayana, which is Ramlila or Raslila.

And it combines these mythical genres or these mythical contents with an MTV style music, video, narrative and folk theatre. So, it is a kind of medieval modern mishmash and it is very hybrid in nature. It is essentially hybrid in nature. The song and dance seen in tat-tat-tat attracts a large audience due to the celebrity appeal of the artists that have played in the movie, Ranveer Singh especially, and there is an eroticization of his masculine body, right. The kind of gaze that it attracts is very important in this film.

This is also because of the fact that Bollywood song and dance sequences typically circulate independently of the filmic narrative. They are marketed as item numbers. They can be seen even out of the context. So, they become almost larger than the film itself.

Here is a video from the film. It is a song called Nagara Sang Dhol, right. And we see artist Deepika Padukone dancing with a number of males and females. There are the traditional dhols being played. It is very colourful.

And we have the Nagara being played at the centre. The central huge drum, the huge drum in the centre is called Nagara, right. So next, we are also reminded of a song back from the '90s when talking about, you know, filmic adaptation of folk forms. Based on a Sufi song, the item number Chhaya Chhaya in Dil Se, Maniratnam's Dil Se that was produced in 1998 featured the Rajasthani folk dance forms like Ghumar and Kalbelia with Shah Rukh Khan dancing atop a moving train with his female counterpart played by Malaika Arora. And we see Malaika Arora in traditional Rajasthani attire. It was an iconic dance number once again, which is remembered regardless of Dil Se.

Dil Se became a huge box office hit. But outside of Dil Se also, Chhaya Chhaya has become, you know, timeless. It has had its own remarkable journey as an item number. So this sequence itself reveals the immense potential of folk elements to be translated into catchy dance numbers, especially these experiments are done by Bollywood. And with Chhaya Chhaya, the trend of utilizing folk dance forms into item numbers was

established. So in this context, the last film that we discuss is Kantara that came out, that released in 2022.

It is an Indian Kannada language film directed and produced by Rishab Shetty. The film showcases Panjuruli theyyam, the form of Panjuruli theyyam. And according to the believers, goddess incarnated or goddess came to the earth in the form of a pig in order to protect the people that were living in the forest. This is how the myth goes. The central theme of the film revolves around the call of God to the protagonist artist in the film, awakening the artist's duty to perform the Theyyam.

And as a performer, he also has certain societal duties. So it is how art speaks to society. The artist has his own social dimension, his dimension as a social reformer. So the main theme is about the God's call to this protagonist artist in the film, awakening his duties as a performer of Theyyam. The film also raises the question about who provides the solution, the ultimate solution to the problems, the immediate problems in a society. Can the God come and actually answer the questions posed by the people? Or is it the artist that is providing all these answers? Or can we even decouple the artist from the God that he is playing? So this is where we see that the question of performance, the question of being possessed by the artist, you know, by the God, the artist's position by the God, the collective belief of the audience, all these things actually make it difficult for art and performance to be decoupled from the question of spirituality, from the question of religion.

The artist is the God when the artist is playing the God. The audience makes him the God, the collective belief of the people makes him the God. So performance and religion cannot really be separated and seen in the Indic context, in the South Asian context. Here is a clipping from Kantara, the beginning of Kantara. And someone challenges the artist saying whether the declarations or the statements he is making is that by the performer or by the goddess.

He is, here they are discussing about land rights of the villagers. The land belongs to the villagers and then someone comes, asks whether it is the goddess decreeing this or it is the performer artist. And one wonders in the Indic context, in the South Asian context, can we decouple the two? The goddess that the artist plays regardless of his own

biological gender is not very different from his own identity. He becomes the goddess when he plays the goddess.

That is the, that is the basic idea. He is possessed by the goddess. The question of position and the collective belief of the audience plays a quintessential role in such performances. With this, I am going to stop my lecture here today and we come to the end of this module. Thank you so much. Thank you.