

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture48

Classical Traditions and Performances III

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, today's lecture is in continuation from our previous lecture on classical dance forms. We have already discussed three classical dance forms namely Mohiniyattam, Bharatnatyam and Kuchipudi. So, today we are going to look at two more dance forms from the classical tradition, one is Kathak, the other is Manipuri. Let us take them up one by one. So the word 'Kathak' is derived from the Sanskrit word 'Kathaka', 'Kathaka' referring to the story-teller and it also traces back its roots to the Vedic Sanskrit word 'Katha,' which means story.

So, Kathak represents a story and a storyteller. The term 'Kathak' represents the dancer as well as the dance form. This dance form is originally from Uttar Pradesh and it is mostly practiced in India and Pakistan. So this dance form is deeply rooted in the Hindu religion, and it would be practiced in its provenance. In the earlier times, it would be practiced and performed in the temples.

At the same time we also see that the nomadic performers that arrived from Muslim majority countries such as Afghanistan, Turkey and Iran in the 8th century have enormously and very significantly contributed to the growth and development of this classical form. So Kathak marked its arrival with the performances that were enacted on the streets, in royal courts, in the palaces of the Rajputs and later on at the courts of the Mughal rulers, 11th century onward. So Kathak is found in three distinct forms or Gharanas. Gharanas, the word 'Gharana' could be translated best as schools. So there are three schools of Kathak performance or Kathak tradition in the Hindi context, namely after the three different cities where the Kathak dance tradition evolved.

So one is the Jaipuri Gharana that evolved in Jaipur, in the Banarasi Gharana that evolved in Banaras and finally the Lucknowi Gharana that evolved in Lucknow. While the Jaipur

Gharana focuses more on the foot movements, exquisite and very detailed foot movements, we see that in the case of Banaras and Lucknowi Gharanas the focus is more on the facial expressions, the dancer's facial expressions and the graceful hand movements or mudras. So Kathak mixes very skilful, dexterous footwork, very swift footwork, hand movements and flexible spins with Mukhabinaya or pantomime as well as very subtle delicate gestures. The language of its movement and its repertoire reflect a syncretic origin or syncretic roots, multiple roots, roots that trace back both to the Hindu and the Muslim traditions, the Indian Muslim tradition.

So it is a dance form practiced both by the males and the females and it carries the knowledge system, the taste that have been contributed both by the Hindu and the Muslim traditions. So it can be a practice that is narrating a devotional topic, a topic based on Bhakti for example or something dedicated to, a topic dedicated to gods and goddesses and conversely, it could also be meant for light entertainment. So Kathak was first performed as a temple dance by a group of Brahmin storytellers or Kathaks, who performed the Hindu epics and mythologies using expressive gestures. The performance itself consists of a number of dance pieces which include pantomime, improvisation, discussion in accompaniment of music as well as certain predefined or encoded compositions. So the performance of Kathak starts out slowly in the beginning, which is called the Vilambit Lay.

Lay is basically the tempo, the speed. So initially it is the Vilambit Lay or it starts out slowly and then it picks up speed and energy as it progresses. The tempo eventually doubles from Vilambit, it becomes Madhya lay, so the medium pace or medium tempo and then it quadruples, so the rapid speed which is known as the Drut Lay. All Hindustani vocal, instrumental and singing performances in fact exhibit this kind of pace progression from Vilambit to Madhya and then to Drut.

The solo performance structure combines certain set forms or encoded forms like Gath and Tuba that are pre-composed alongside variation of forms like peshkar, qaida and rela, which involves spontaneity or improvisation. So there are two things, one is some pre-set performance structures and then some that are designed on stage by the artist. This happens with a lot of training, it entails a lot of skill to prepare a design on the stage on spot. So it is a kind of very lively, very spontaneous interaction with the audience that is going on. So most Kathak performances include at least one piece of Abhinay which entails expressive gestures and a pantomime or Mukabhinay, which explains song lyrics and the song lyrics are usually based on some well-known story's plot.

We see that since the new Indian middle-classes and government took over the dance patronage and this is in the early 20th century in the 1930s to 1950s decade, we could say that the first half of the 20th century, we see that with the middle class taste being incorporated and the government taking over the dance patronage, Kathak becomes more standardized, more sophisticated, religious in nature and the erotic content or elements are duly expunged. So the contemporary repertoire extensively uses Hindu mythology and love songs that are interpreted in the context of devotionism or the Bhakti tradition. Specific dance technique which include the exquisite footwork and rhythmical variations, a number of pyramids or circular movements, swirling, graceful postures, then subtle expressions, costumes as well as the accompanying Hindustani classical music, all of these together make part and parcel of the Kathak tradition or we could say the narrative that Kathak is trying to etch through its performance, etch out through its performance. However, these norms are sometimes deliberately revoked and kind of shuffled in different innovations and experimentations, which are classified as contemporary Kathak. So contemporary Kathak as one can surmise does not stick to the classical rules; sometimes it experiments and reworks these timeworn rules, trying to make the dance form a little more contemporary, a little more modern.

So here we see a Kathak performance. The coordination is very important, the coordination, the hand and leg movements, the way the two dancers are moving almost together. We see that the leg movements are very straight, the legs are never bent unlike in the case of Bharatnatyam, Mohiniyattam, Kuchipudi, all of them require bending the legs, but here the legs are straight. The focus is on the hand mudras, the facial expressions, right? And they are trying to tell a story through these movements, very graceful movements indeed. The two dancers are almost narrating a story on stage, right? They are narrating a story on stage. And the importance of tal, the importance of lay, the importance of you know, the raga, the music, all of these come to play very important roles in Kathak dance form.

So coming to the attire, the dressing in the Kathak tradition, the female dancers of Kathak wear a long pleated kurta or top, which is worn over a pajama. They also wear a brocade cap and a dupatta. This saree can also be worn by a Kathak performer as a part of the traditional Hindu attire. And this enables you know, more movements when dancing. So when someone is wearing a saree while dancing, Kathak they can probably perform more movements.

We see that the Kathak attire can also consist of a lehenga and a choli with an optional veil or orni. So choli is basically a fitted blouse that goes with the flowy lehenga. Lehenga is an ankle length skirt, right? So both of these garments, the choli and the lehenga can be embellished or embroidered and the feet of the dancer is adorned with small bells that are attached to a belt. This is called the ghungroo. In Indian tradition, all dance forms almost require the dancer to wear this leather belt on which small bells are embedded.

This is called ghungroo and then wearing this ghungroo facilitates the movements which are harmonized to the accompanying music. So the lehenga is occasionally modified to a unique dance style and so the Kathak lehenga or this long flowing skirt puffs out while swirling. The dancers of the Mughal era covered their body with an angrakha, which had evolved originally from the Persian cape called balaba or chapkan, and it was introduced to the Indian culture sometime around the late medieval or early modern era. So from this tradition or this culture of wearing chapkan came this garment called angrakha and the Kathak dancers would commonly wear it on the torso, on the upper part of the body. Its Sanskrit name is anarakshaka meaning the body keeper, right? So the male dancers of Kathak typically dress in bare chested outfits.

The male Kathak dancer either dons a long shirt over pajamas or dhoti and a kurta. The outfit is made of a lightweight material which is typically silk. The Mughal attire resembles kurta churidar, right? The attire is completed with a peaked cap. Now there are two primary aspects of any Indian classical dance form and in the same way in the case of Kathak also, we see these two aspects. One is the nritta, the other is nritya.

Let us please note and make sure that we do not confuse the two. They sound very similar but they are not quite the same, nritta and nritya. Nritta refers to technical aspect whereas nritya refers to the expressional aspect, right? These two constitute the primary aspects of Kathak. So nritta focuses on tal or the rhythmic cycle and the lay or the tempo, whereas nritya focuses on the abhinay part and so it employs the bodily gestures, the sound and visuals, right? The drama that is involved in the dance form is nritya, whereas the technical part is nritta. So nritya employs musical genres and within nritya we include thumri, kafi, bhajan, gazal, and so on.

The legs and the torso of the Kathak dancer are generally straight. I was talking about this a while back and so a story is told through a developed vocabulary, which is based on the gestures of arms and upper body movements, facial expressions, neck movements, eyes and eyebrow movements. So Kathak as a performance art has survived and thrived as an oral tradition and it has been innovated and taught or rather passed down from one generation to another verbally and also through practice, right? Kathak has adapted and integrated with the tastes of the contemporary regime. So it has for example assimilated the tastes of the Mughal courts during the 16th and 17th centuries, and it was particularly patronized by Akbar. However, it stagnated and went into a decline during the British colonial era.

The women dancers of Kathak who graced the courts of Northern and Eastern India became popularly known as the nautch girls, the nautch dancers during the British rule. So this is also around the time when we see that the Tawaif tradition associated with this Kathak dance form, where the dancing women were highly skilled, highly knowledgeable and trained, they would make public performances. From there, you know, during the British era there is a decline and the Tawaif are being merely reduced to flesh traders and prostitutes, which they were not. They were something much more than that. They were very knowledgeable and very highly accomplished ladies.

So we see that the entire Tawaif tradition during the British rule is declining in terms of values and in terms of the male gaze that it incurs. Kathak has inspired simplified regional variants such as the Bhavai. The Bhavai form which is a form of rural theatre focusing on the tales of Hindu goddesses or Shakti, and it emerged in the medieval era and it would be practiced in states like Gujarat, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Another variant that emerged from ancient Kathak is Thumri and Thumri was afterwards developed by the Tawaif community, who were called the nautch dancers by the British. Like I already said, so Kathak as a form was reborn, it was rejuvenated in India's post-independence era and it sought to rediscover its ancient roots and a sense of national identity through the performance arts.

So, in the post-independence era some of the famous Kathak dancers are Pandit Birju Maharaj, Shovana Narayan, Shambhu Maharaj, Sitara Devi, Durga Lal, Sunder Prasad and others. From here, we will move on to our next classical dance form, which is Manipuri. So Manipuri is one of the primary classical dance forms in India and it evolved in the state of Manipur, which is located in the north-eastern part of India. So the dancers of Shiva and Parvati as well as other gods and goddesses who created the universe are

connected to the ritual and traditional festivities in Manipur. There are many different styles of Manipuri dance but the Ras, Sankirtana, and Thang-ta are the most well-known styles.

Radha, Krishna and the Gopis are the major protagonists of the Manipuri Ras. The Gopis as well as Radha's feelings of longing and separation from Lord Krishna are frequently portrayed through the themes of Manipuri dance. So it forms a central or a major theme in Manipuri dance form. The dance in Manipur is referred to as Sankirtan and it is accompanied by the Kirtan style of communal singing. While dancing, the men dancers or the male dancers play the Pung and Kartal.

The Sankirtan heritage includes the Cholums, which is a type of manly dance. At all social and religious holidays the Pung and Kartal Cholums are commonly performed. The Thang-ta or Manipur's martial dancers have their roots in the ancient times when human's capability of defending themselves against the wild creatures was considered as crucial to their survival. It was a survival skill and from there the Thang-ta performance has been derived. So the dancers in Manipur's modern martial dance forms generally use swords, spears and shields as a part of their complex and developed repertory.

The real battle scenes between dancers demonstrate their very skilful training and their bodily control and flexibility. So there are two forms or we could say, two bhavas that are used primarily in Manipuri dance. Similarly there are two bhavas or two forms used in Manipuri dance. One is the tandav, the other is lasya. So the tandav refers to the most ferocious masculine and the lasya refers to the quiet and elegant feminine.

The range is quite spread out or quite wide and broad we can see. The range is from the most ferocious masculine to the quiet and elegant feminine. The Manipuri dance is distinctive and unique in that it emphasizes devotion rather than entertainment and pleasure. The faces of the dancers are generally obscured by a thin veil, usually it is a white gossamer veil and the hand gestures and subtle foot movements are more important than the facial expression because the face is partially shrouded. The tandav dance which emphasizes rhythm and motion very lively and vigorous motions comprises the male aspects of dancing.

So it can be identified by its angularly sharp and animated movements that attempt at capturing the spirit of the underlying bhava. On the other hand, the lasya elements are depicted through soft flowing movements that seem to blend into one another in a very pretty blur without showing geometric or sharp edges and they are performed, the lasya elements are performed usually by the female dancers. The lasya elements represent dancing as a feminine art form. So women typically wear long distinctive skirts, the skirts have a specific shape, the skirts are not flowy, they are stiff and circular, they do not give away the human contour of the dancer. So the skirts are usually stiff, they are circular, they are not flowy and they do not give away the contour of the dancer.

And the focus of the dance is mainly on elegant hand and knee movements. So we see that Rabindranath Tagore had encouraged the dissemination of Manipuri dance by bringing Guru Atomba Singh, who was a native of Imphal in Manipur to the cultural educational community that he had built in Bengal. It is called Shantiniketan and so Guru Atomba Singh was invited there as a teacher of Manipuri dance and this was around the beginning of the 21st century. Manipuri dance thereafter made its debut on the Indian urban cultural scene and Tagore believed that these approaches were best suited for imaginative dance drama. So he has deployed the Manipuri dance form for a number of dance dramas that he has composed, especially Bhanu Singh Padawali comes to mind.

This is because of the emphasis on lasya in style and tandava in terms of quality. He finds it very interesting how Manipuri as a dance form is bringing together these two very contrary bhavas. Lasya which is the languid feminine and tandava which is the fierce fighting. So he deploys Manipuri dance form to illustrate the dance drama compositions that he makes. So Urbhanga or Broken Thighs is a legendary drama by Bhasa, which was presented to a great acclaim by a young director from Manipur on the north-eastern border named Ratan Thiyam.

So Ratan Thiyam became very famous after his rendition of Urbhanga through the Manipuri dance form. This drama was remarkably translated into Manipuri by him. The female Manipuri dancers generally don veils and a gossamer white traditional garment. So the bodies of the female dancers in Manipuri dance form emulate the different aspects of nature. There are very soft elegant movements and they remind us of a creeper, an ivy creeper moving gently in mild breeze.

Renowned Indian writer and critic Mulkraj Anand in his editorial piece for a special issue of the journal Marg highlights how Manipuri dance form has remained on the borderline of the Indian classical and the Indian folk. So Mulkraj Anand points out that in spite of the high order of the classical Manipuri style, its subtleties and intricacies of coordination of the hand mudras, the footwork and the abhinay, there is also an element of ecstasy which reminds us, which evokes a folklorist tradition or a folk style. So the borderline between the classical and the folk therefore remains uncannily close and blurred. The vital folk movements impart a peculiar intimacy to this style rather than detracting it from the beauty or grace of the classical Manipuri style. So this is to say that the folklorist elements that are present in Manipuri dance form does not make it less beautiful and less graceful.

Rather the form becomes something unique which is one of its kind in the Indic tradition where both the folk and the classical elements mix and blend to form something very peculiar. And so this is a video of the Manipuri dance form, where the dancers are making very circular movements and the movements are very controlled, moving in half circles. And we have to remember, like I have already stated, Manipuri as a dance form is mainly you know referring to the Bhakti tradition. At its heart we have elements of devotion rather than entertainment.

With this I am going to stop my lecture here today. Thank you.