

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 54

Tribal Traditions and Performances III

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. So, today we are discussing tribal traditions and performances. Before we talk more about specific tribal such as the Santali people, the Santali people that live mainly in the eastern region of India, the eastern states such as West Bengal, Jharkhand and Odisha. So, even before we start looking at their culture, their rituals, we need to understand what the tribal ritual complex is. So, tribal ritual complex is not a mere association only with the superhuman world. Rather, it is a strong reinforcement of the human world itself.

Both social and aesthetic aspects of life are reflected through the rituals. The social implications of primitive religion have been highlighted by different sociologists of religion. Here we have the name of Emily Durkheim and Max Weber in our minds, who talk about this tribal ritual complex. So, rather than thinking of salvation, the otherworldly, you know, most of the major religions are based on, you know, practices and observances that make the path to otherworldly life, you know, easier and smoother, that facilitate our salvation.

The tribal religions on the contrary are more focused on the this-worldly. They are incumbent on and deeply rooted to the question of survival. So, unlike the salvation-seeking complex religions, the function of religion in tribal societies is mainly concerned with the maintenance of social and cosmic harmony and with attaining this-worldly goods or this-worldly, you know, benefits. The question of survival, like I already said, so they are primarily agro-based communities who sustain, who live out of, you know, harvesting and tilling lands. So, their main prayers, the rituals, their prayers are centered on, you know, praying for rain, for example, prevention of drought, prevention of, you know, crop wastage or death of cattle, and then they look for the general health of their family, victory and so on.

So, basically all I am trying to say is that the tribal religions are very much incumbent on the practical considerations that keep a happy and harmonious life going rather than thinking of something that is tangential and transcendental, something that is pertaining to the otherworldly. So, this is also something that I have been discussing in our previous lecture, how the Santal world or even at large the tribal worldview comprises, you know, the demigods or spirits they call as bongas, the Santals call them as bongas, and then they have the great spirit that is called as Thakurjiu or Ponomosar, right, referring frequently to the sun, the sun god, and then they also worship their own ancestors. So, all these, you know, all these objects of worship, the nature at large, the inanimate objects found in the nature, the demigods or the smaller spirits, the great spirit, the spirits of the ancestors, all these things comprise objects of worship of the tribal people, and they make up the spiritual world of the tribals. So, Emily Durkheim has theorized that all religious phenomena can be divided into two fundamental categories, one being belief, the other being rite. So, beliefs as he says are states of opinion and have representations, whereas rites are determined modes of action, right.

Beliefs are more like the collective consciousness of a people within a, within a religious or spiritual system belonging to the same spiritual or religious system, and then rites are performances, they are modes of action through which these beliefs are carried out. So, public rites are passed on by the ancestors to the progeny with a set of rules that are already followed for generations, so they are in a way a priori. People do not question them so much. On looking at the Santhal community, one understands that they celebrate various rites since their ancestors did so. Some of the more urban tribal people would not even know the history or the rationale or the origin of many of these rites.

They do it as a kind of, as by a kind of custom that has been passed down to them generationally. Their belief system, the tribal belief system says that if they fail to perform their annual rites, then their spirits or bongas would be displeased and bring about some kind of calamity on them. The other aspect of their celebration is to rejoice with the spirits or bongas over occasions, over happy occasions such as a good harvest. So, we see a very interesting dynamics between the humans and the demigods. At times, the humans need to propitiate these spirits and yet at other times, they are on the same level when they are singing and dancing together.

So, the gods are meant to be worshipped and at the same time the gods also come down and dance and rejoice with the humans. They celebrate and share the happy moments with the humans. So, this is manifested through feasting, gathering. So, how do the

tribals celebrate their happy moments? Generally through a gathering in the village, singing, dancing and feasting. This social reunion forms or constitutes their very many festivals.

Now, when we talk of tribes, we need to also mention conversion, chiefly, tribal's conversion to Christianity that happened in a very pervasive, in a very widespread manner in India. Christianity was introduced among the tribal groups during the British era. So, Christianity came among the tribals firstly through the conversion of the Khasi tribes of Assam around 1813 and Christianity has brought about many changes in the cultural patterns, in the cultural lives of the tribals in India. The missionaries attempted to convert the numerically more prominent tribes.

The process of conversion began with the conversion of the Khasi tribes, the Oraons from Chotanagpur which happened around 1850, and then the Bhil from Madhya Pradesh around 1880 which is late 19th century. So, we see that it is mainly during the 19th century that the different tribes, a section from these different tribes get converted to Christianity in exchange for some, you know, in exchange for facilitating their material needs, in exchange for mainly food and education. And Christian missionaries are going to the tribal villages and extensively working among the tribals which expedites the process of widespread conversion. So, tribal groups are quite sensitive to ecological degradation caused by modernization and this is something I was talking about in my previous lecture I remember. The entire tribal ritual complex and their spiritual outlook is based on conservation of nature.

What they call as their shrine comprise vegetation. So, the Thaan, the Jahar Thaan for example, it will have some sacred plants such as mainly the Sal, the Sal tree which has many benefits to human life, to human existence. So, they are very sensitive to the question of deforestation for example, they are the people that support conservation of trees and forests. And so, with modernization, with urbanization, building of roads and dams, their religious beliefs, their spirituality and their communal identity are considered as constantly under threat. Among the Santhal, there are almost 3 lakh Christians who are alienated from traditional festivals.

However, even among the converted tribals, we see that the belief in the spirits, some traditional, you know, beliefs and rights remains strong. Now, among the Mundas and

Orao from Bihar, about 25 percent of the population have converted to Christianity. Among the Kharia from Bihar population, about 60 percent have become Christians, but all are heavily influenced also by the Hindu concepts. So, there are two major religious influences changing the ways of life of the tribals. One is, you know, the influence by the Christian missionaries, and then we have Hinduization.

The Hindus have majorly influenced the tribal way of life. So, Hindu concepts of major deities and the annual Hindu cycle of festivals have been incorporated and are observed in a number of tribal villages. So, the basic ritual code remains the same almost for all the tribes. What differs are the outwardly forms. So, ritual codes are mantra, mudra, dhvani and vyavahariki.

Four limbs of ritual codes- mantra, mudra, dhvani and vyavahariki. Now, let us take them up one by one. What is mantra? A mantra is that letter or combination of letters or syllables which evokes the deity. So, through the pronunciation of the mantra, the image and imagination of a particular deity is evoked. So, we understand that each deity entails, invocation of each deity entails a separate and specific mudra.

Not all deities can be invoked through all mantras. Now, the mantra used by the tribes in the performance of a ritual are simple words of everyday language. On the other hand, in the more complex forms of religion, in the more institutionalized forms of religion, such as Hinduism, the ones that we see the mantras being uttered in the Vedic and Tantric traditions, the conception of mantra is more developed. Tribals would rather use simpler languages and tribals mantras like I just now stated are more directed to the question of survival to the this-worldly; they are more associated with the practical existence, the day to day life. Now, the more developed mantras found in Vedic and Tantric traditions are kind of more complex and they do not draw on the everyday language.

They are chiefly Sanskritized words, right. They are Sanskrit words. They are not similar to the everyday utterance. The Vedic mantra is considered as the primordial word, in fact, which is created neither by human nor by God. So, mantra becomes the synecdoche of God; mantra is God itself.

So, like it is believed in Hinduism, the cosmos, the Brahman was created through Om, the first, you know, the primal word Om created the entire universe. So, word itself is seen as God, mantra is God, according to the Vedic tradition. Now, let us take a look at a very simple mantra, you know, from the Khariyas. Khariyas are one of the tribes and how their mantras are very much relatable, something that associates with the everyday activities. So, the Khariya tribal priest recites the following mantra to the, you know, dedicating it to the village spirits:

O ye Khunt and Baghia spirits!

Today I am offering sacrifices

Today in your name I am offering to you

Mahua, Ber, fig-all these fruits, (49 pg chng)

I am worshipping you.

Do ye protect (our) bullocks, buffaloes,
goats, men, etc., in jungle and brushwood,
from tigers and bears.

So, the Khariya priest offers a sacrifice to the spirit and the spirit in return is asked to reciprocate through protecting the entire tribe and their cattle, their possessions, their lands and harvest, right? So, this is an offering, the mantra along with some fruits, some, some, you know, fresh produce are offered to the spirits expecting that the spirit would protect the community from all kinds of evils. So, there is both a command for boon and also a hope for reciprocity from the spirit.

So, just the way they are offering, you know, fruits and harvest to the spirit, the spirit in turn will protect their fruits and harvest. So, next we have mudra as the second ritual code. What is mudra? There are various kinds of hand gestures and bodily positions representing specific feelings and esoteric as well as exoteric actions. So, in the tribal dance forms, the movement of steps, the interlocking of hands and other hand gestures have both aesthetic as well as ritualistic significances. So, the most common forms of the tribal dance mudra are interlocked arms.

So, they lock arms with one another and they hold each other's waist in the back usually and then they swing, they swing one leg while holding all the weight on to the other, right. And then there are open movements of arms above shoulder level. These are, these are some of the common mudras. At the secular level, it suggests a very community-centric existence of the santal. One would never see that as any tribal person is dancing alone.

It is a very uncommon sight. Tribals usually dance in group. So, the entire, their identity is not individualistic. They exist as a village, as a unit, right. So, the dance form subscribes to this philosophy of existing as a collective people and believing in a shared cosmos, right, where there are no, you know, no prayers that there are motivated for, you know, selfish development or one's own good. So, there are no prayers or there are no rituals that are performed for individual good, for individual betterment.

All the rituals are centered on the idea of collective betterment, the harmony of the people as a whole, right. And then we see that these gestures also emulate the cosmic movements, the planetary movements, right. So, this is very much available in the Karam dance and other forms of dance, you know, meant for different festivals as well, where the people are, where the people are stepping forward and backward emulating the movement of individual planets, right. So, this goes back to the, you know, basic saying followed by different, you know, schools of religion in the South Asian tradition that what is not there in the body is not there in the universe. So, universe and body have a very inter-reciprocal relationship.

So, let us take a look at this video and let us look at the mudra. All the women dancing together, the Santhal women or the Santhal people would say that they do not even look at their own feet, but yet their movements are so coordinated. That is because they consider themselves as strands of the whole, right. They are not looking at each other's hands, yet their steps are all happening together in accord, in harmony, right. Because they are parts of the larger cosmos, they are just like individual, you know, they are just like the planetary bodies or, you know, smaller objects that make up the larger chain, right.

So, they are like strands in the larger web, they are like cogs making up the larger chain, larger ecosystem. So, even if one person is removed, the rest of the chain will be affected.

That is why they do not, the Santhali would say that they do not grow up learning to dance, they have, you know, dance intrinsic in their system. They are born with the knowledge of song and dance, they do not have to learn it from anyone. So, talking about ritual code mudra, we see that mudras can include outstretched hands held diagonally, one above the level of the head and another at the level of the knee.

And this actually shows the human as a connection between the this-worldly and the other-worldly, the cosmic and the ephemeral. And then taking tiny steps such that lifting of the feet from the ground is hardly perceptible, the arms held down to the sides and the eyes are usually downcast, right. There can also be additionally, you know, swinging, rolling, rotating and hanging of the head down. So, we find that the Santhals have a traditional ceremonial greeting, it is called johar. So, in every culture we have a salutation or a greeting, in the case of the Santhal, they greet a person by saying johar or joharge.

So, the third ritual code that we are going to talk about is dhvani. So, sound is the third component of ritual language. The sound of musical instrument guides the dance mudra. How do people dance together? How are their movements of arms, their movements of feet so coordinated? It is because they are listening to the same dhvani, the same beating of tambak, right. So, certain forms of sound have their special significance.

These drums and kettle, the traditional tribal instruments that are played have their special significance and the hands and feet gesture, the mudras follow the dhvani of these instruments. The Santhal produce peculiar sound at the annual hunt also, right. They have their specific, you know, dhvani or sound meant for the bithlaha dance. Similarly, the Todas have their specific sounds that they emit during the thatching of their sacred dairy temples. Their temples are meant, the temples that are made for protecting the dairy.

So, the Santhal produce a peculiar sound while going on hunting. Similarly, during their bithlaha dance, they have specific sounds that they articulate. The Toda tribe also shouts together, they have a unanimous sound while thatching their sacred dairy temples. Similarly, the tribes from north-eastern India produce a wide variety of sounds. Sometimes these sounds are meant for giving expressions to their virility or masculinity.

Now, the sound of flute, the sound of drum, whistle, kettles and other instruments as well as the cries associated with a number of ritual performances all comprise the ritual code of dhvani, right. So, certain forms of sound are also considered as auspicious as well as inauspicious. So, for example, according to the Birhor tribe, if a jackal is heard calling near a settlement, it is apprehended that someone in the community is going to fall sick or die. Similarly, croaking of a raven near a Birhor's hut is considered as extremely unlucky. It indicates the news of death of some near relative.

And we see that as a part of the death rite, ceremonial weeping is kind of part and parcel of the tribal life, ceremonial weeping mainly by the women. It can be considered as a category of ritualistic sound where women usually sit in a circle and mourn the dead. Next, the last ritual code that we discuss is vyavahariki. Vyavahariki, what is it? In course of the performance of a ritual, what follows in the form of prescriptions or instructions, thoughts, methods and behavior is the vyavahariki code, right. So, for example, the Toda tribe is of Dravidian origin and ethnicity and hails from Tamil Nadu.

So, an example of vyavahariki can be seen in the following description from the Toda community. They have, you know, certain rituals and customs meant for protecting the dairy. The Toda dairies are kept in a state of high ritual purity. Dairies are considered, dairies are believed as participating in the divinity of the gods, such that the dairy products are believed to have the capacity of granting wounds as well as punish the wrongdoers. So, the manner in which the Toda go about requesting a wound from a dairy is very, you know, encoded, very prescribed.

So, for example, in order to attain a wound from the dairy, the Toda people present gifts to the dairy. It could be a dairy man's loin cloth, it could be a buffalo, silver coins or even a silver ring. All these gifts are presented to the dairy. And while approaching the settlement in a group with a calf, each man is supposed to bare his right arm; it is a ritual signifying respect for the dairy and then they carry a green stick in their hand. After the prayer is done, all the people, the Toda people approach the dairy and bow in front of it.

Dancing and performance is an integral part of these festivals. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that the tribal people are a very performative existence. From birth to nuptial to death, they perform their entire life. Everything joy and sorrow are expressed through performance. And how is performance and how do we understand performance,

how do we formulate any kind of performance through these four codes that I already talked about, right? The mantra, the mudra, the dhvani and the vyavahariki.

Through the ritual codes, one can perform, one can enact the different sentiments, the different feelings that pervade our life. It could be joy, it could be sorrow, it could be anger, it could be a sense of victory and so forth. So, with this, I am going to stop my lecture here today and I will meet you with another round of discussions in another lecture. Thank you. Thank you.