

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 59

Bhakti, Sufi, and Cinema II

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religion in South Asia. We are discussing our module on Bhakti, Sufi and Cinema. So as a continuation from our previous lecture, we are looking at the different films in the Indian context. Most of these films in discussion are made in Bollywood which have inculcated and reworked, interacted with the Bhakti codes, the Bhakti worldview. Some films have kept the original codes intact whereas others have largely and very prominently reworked on these codes, leading to a hybridized effect. So we see insertion as well as experimentation with the Bhakti codes in the Indian films.

Continuing from where we stopped in our previous lecture, the next movie that we take up is called *Pyara Dushman* in 1980 and the film did not become a big box office hit of course, but the song from the film called "Hari Om Hari" became kind of a timeless song for the youth, the younger generation. The song "Hari Om Hari" heralded the culture of the Gen X or the next generation. So it was sung by Usha Uthup. The singer usually has her signature style of dressing.

So Usha Uthup's style of dressing, her style of singing entails reshaping the expectation of the audience. She is a queen of indie pop and jazz especially in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. So she is the queen of indie pop and jazz in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Through her appearance, through her singing, she is constantly breaking the stereotypes and there needs to be reworking of the assumptions or the expectations that the audience conventionally has from the female singer. So when listening to Usha Uthup, one realizes that there needs to be a significant reworking of the conventional expectations that the audience and the music listeners associate with the female Bollywood singer.

She is a breakaway, a radical breakaway from such conventional expectations. The singer attracts some kind of gaze which is very alternative in terms of values, the values that she

stands for or represents. On the one hand, she wears a saree with bindi and gajra which emphasizes a very traditional image, the traditional image of the Indian woman. And on the other hand, she sings indie pop and jazz. So her song is deeply influenced and inspired by western music.

So a figure like Usha Uthup is the harbinger of the modern era. This song "Hari Om Hari" disrupts the traditional understanding of the Bhakti culture while also abiding by it at the same time. So it is propping up the Bhakti culture and yet it is making a departure from the traditional Bhakti values. The video shows "Om", the symbol of "Om" written on the wall of a pub-like setting where the song is being performed, and the milieu is defined by bodily excess and a lack of restraint. So we see a woman that is dressed not in traditional style at all.

She is deeply influenced by western sense of dressing and this is the beginning of the concept of item number in Bollywood, where the song has to traverse its own journey in dissociation from the destiny of the film. Many a times the films are not remembered but the songs have their own destiny to pursue. The songs become larger than the film. The songs stand autonomously on their own feet in dissociation from the film. So this is the idea of item number that we get in the 1970s with songs like "Hari Om Hari".

The song is symptomatic of erotic love. The video depicts a promiscuous environment where people are seducing each other and involved in multiple temporary relationships. It is completely a departure from the traditional values. It is also showing, I mean the song is indicator of the social values, the larger social values that have become quite diluted. It points to the frustration of the younger generation in a way.

So the larger social dynamics, the cultural dynamics that are embedded through the erotica depicted in these songs becomes a topic that needs to be or that can be further researched. What kind of a society do these songs subscribe to or what kind of social values do they stand for? Why does the youth say what they say through the song lyrics? That can be a very interesting point of study. At the point in time where these songs are being composed, one could study the demoralization or the kind of different influences on the younger generation which leads to lyrics like "Hari Om Hari". So, the opening lines of this song goes like, "Gam hai koi to, dum maaro yaro, dum ki dhua se, gam bhi khushi hai, choor nashi me ye zindagi hai". So "if you have some kind of pain or difficulty in life, you resort

to the narcotics and the smoke of narcotics, the effect of narcotics makes you forget your pain; and pain is in fact transformed into happiness by drugs and narcotics."

And then it says that life is ecstatic, the life is experiencing extremities of happiness, "choor nashi me ye zindagi hai," the life is completely in a state of trance out of intoxication, from there the youth derives happiness; that kind of a meaning the song is trying to convey. While the song is taking the name of God and it is showing very prominently the symbol of Om, everyone is in a state of trance, we see a reflection of the hippie culture in the video that began with the "Dam maaro dam", and the state of intoxication is celebrated. So there are certain social problems, certain stagnations in terms of social problems not being resolved, which leads the youth to recourse to narcotics and drugs. So that could be a very interesting point of study, how the effect of modernization and globalization as well as a number of unresolved socio-political issues lead to composition of lyrics like this, where there is a complete subversion of the traditional spiritual values and spiritual codes.

According to the song the prime motive of life is to forget the pain by reveling in narcotics, like I already said. So one forgets the worry of the world through intoxicating herself. In the video of "Hari Om Hari" song we see the singer is very scantily dressed in western attire, which is a radical departure from how Bhakti songs would be portrayed in the earlier decades of cinema. For example, we were talking about bhajans like "Man Tadpata" and "Tu Pyar ka Sagar Hai", "Sukh Ke Sab Sathi"; most of these songs filmed in the black and white era, there the Bhakti symbols and codes would be very differently depicted. They were not diluted.

So here we see that evoking Bhakti symbols through subversion refers to a counter-normative representation of the traditional values and the traditional worldview. So next, we come to a song from the film "Karz" that was made in 1980. The song is called "Om Shanti Om". Once again, "Karz" was a big hit in box office but then "Om Shanti Om" the song itself had its own path to tread. I mean it became larger than the film of course.

It became timeless and almost an institution and a trend in itself. It became a school in its own right. It would not be wrong to say that because afterwards in Bollywood we had a film called "Om Shanti Om" that is inspired by this song. So it was never forgotten down the decades. We see that the song became a kind of icon.

It became a landmark which was never forgotten in the different eras of Bollywood. In the history of Bollywood it became a kind of a milestone. The song "Om Shanti Om" is apparently against the idea of love. So it begins with "Mere Umar Ke Naujawano Dil na Lagana Aye Deewano." So it means that younger people of my generation of my age I suggest, I beseech that you do not fall in love because it involves a lot of worries, a lot of problems.

And the song even calls love as a disease but it is deeply entrenched in depicting the power of love at the same time. So we do not want to fall in love but we fall in love nevertheless. So it talks about how the lover has no control over himself in love. Om Shanti Om is used in the song without any sense of devotion to God but more as a leitmotif. So, when there is an "Om" at the back of the stage very prominently shown as we can see in the picture, it is not referring to any deity.

The original reference is gone and it becomes a kind of simulacrum in a way. It stands for something else. It stands for the jeopardized position of the lover. The stage has a symbol of Om, like I said, without depicting love for God. And so there is a dilution of the Bhakti code once again.

It is more like resorting to God's name, telling "Om Shanti Om" again and again when one is stung with love and nothing else helps. So no dawa, no dua can help. So one is repeating "Om Shanti Om" again and again. So the lover is in a state of jeopardy. That is the main idea in the song.

The "Om Shanti Om" being uttered again and again is more like a leitmotif. Further, the song includes disco lights and shimmering clothes which can be seen as a strong western influence. And yet it shows the ecstasy of love which is treated as supreme. So apparently no one should fall in love and yet the power of love reigns supreme because no one has control over love. This is an idea which is also, in a way, propagated by the Bhakti poet saints.

They want to attain God through experiencing love. And they also say that rather than reverence or rather than scriptures, what reigns supreme is the power of love. So that way

it is indirectly and through hybridization connecting with the traditional understanding of Bhakti. There is reference to death out of ecstasy and joy, which is an influence of both Bhakti and Sufi ideas of love. So Sufi clearly talks about Fanaa or annihilation of self out of ecstasy, where one is so much in love, so much full of love that one becomes besides oneself.

So these are some of the lines translated to English from the song Om Shanti Om. "If she says no, I will commit suicide. If she says yes, I will die of happiness. So sing Om Shanti Om." So I am in a complete state of jeopardy.

Nothing can save me actually. So regardless of her saying yes or no, I will die. Either way I will die. So that is the mad state of the lover. It hearkens back the state of the Bhakta in a way, the state of the devotee. And this is a snippet from the song where there is a revolving disc and actor Rishi Kapoor is dancing in a, you know, in a discotheque kind of environment and the Om is a motif that is depicted in the background all around him.

Next, we have this film in the late 1970s decade called Meera. It is a kind of moveaway from the culture of modernization and globalization that we have been talking about through the insertion of hippie culture, the introduction of hippie culture and western influence in Bollywood films. This is once again a going back to the traditional values or the traditional codes of the Bhakti tradition. The movie "Meera" depicts the ecstatic boundless love that Meera Bai possessed for Lord Krishna through the portrayal of her life. The movie comprises a plethora of Bhakti codes as depicted through Meera's worldview and her song-dance performances.

So the movie consists of a plethora of Bhakti codes as depicted through Meera's worldview and her song-dance performances and it also shows the abandoned details in the setting of the film. Meera's character is introduced in the film in a setting of temple with her singing a bhajan for Krishna. So she is introduced as a Deewani or a mad lover of Krishna and this type of cinematic representation brings back the Bhakti codes in their conventional form. There is no experimentation in this film, much unlike the films that were parallelly being made in the 1970s and 80s decades which were marked by a lot of experimentation and playing with the traditional codes. So there are no tampering of codes in the film Meera.

So Meera's love for Krishna as depicted in the film saw no bounds and she considered herself as Krishna's wife. Meera believes in her spiritual marriage with Krishna, to the extent that she performs her wifely duties for him. The film shows her sleeping in the temple complex and in one of the scenes she makes a pagri for Krishna with her hand. She is also fasting for Krishna on the day of Karwa Chaudh. She calls him as her Swami whereas the prince that she is socially married to is referred to as the king.

So she does not accept her marriage with Rana. She just calls him as the king whereas Krishna is referred to as the Swami or the husband. Meera expresses her jealousy towards Radha and considers her as the co-wife or Sautan. And like I was telling in the previous lecture, there are a plethora of Meera bhajans that weaves in plenty of emotions through this juxtaposition between Radha and Meera. One representing Sringer, the other representing Dasya.

So Meera can be seen as what Arundhati Subramaniam calls as “impatient to express (their) own tempestuous interiority.” So Meera is symptomatic of a very restless interiority, an interior that is unrelentingly.. that is constantly seeking to unite with God, with Lord Krishna. Meera can be seen as embodying the resistance that is present at the heart of the Bhakti movement. Meera is almost a symbol of that resistance that Bhakti movement, Bhakti as a movement carries in it. So Bhakti is completely counter-thetical, a counter-thesis to hierarchies, and Meera becomes a disciple of Saint Raidas.

The film it is shown that she accepts Saint Raidas as her guru who is a Bhakti saint and she is criticized a lot for this decision. This is because Raidas comes from a lower standing in society. He hails from a so-called lower caste. But Meera is not bothered by these caste hierarchies and she proceeds to become his shishya or disciple in order to attain knowledge. So Meera can be seen as an epitome of or embodying the idea of an egalitarian or classless society, where everyone is equal regardless of gender, regardless of caste.

In her performance of the character of Meera, Hema Malini has a very calm and stoic expression that she maintains through the movie, where she wants to reflect an unperturbed image of Meera. Meera is not perturbed or bothered by what one sees or how people criticize her. The only change of expression on her face is available when the society attempts to separate her from Krishna. She cries openly when she is married forcefully to the Rana against her will and she is angry when she cannot meet, she is not allowed to meet

Lord Krishna or worship the icon of Lord Krishna. She is restless when the idol of Krishna is stolen from her.

So these are the only instances where she is shaken, otherwise she is never unsettled. She has this calm disposition. So even when Meera's husband asks if she harbors any hatred towards him because of the family rivalry, she says no simply because her character is full of love and faith, which are the basic tenets of Bhakti. A devotee, a Bhakti saint is defined by the concepts of kindness, of love, forgiveness, concepts of forgiveness, love and faith. So any kind of extreme emotions such as hatred or anger do not define a Bhakta, a true Bhakta or devotee.

As a Bhakta, Meera has direct communication with Krishna. She expresses her anger towards him. When Krishna doesn't come to her, what does she say? She says that unlike Radha, she would not sit and wait for him in Vrindavan; rather she would abandon everything and follow the tune of his flute. It's a very famous and popular song from the film Meera. The bhajan goes like this; and this bhajan once again has had its own journey outside of this film.

It has had its different adaptations and renditions in other films too. So this is how the lyrics of the song goes, "Jo tum toro piya, mai nahi toru re, toso preet chhor Krishna kaun sang joru re." Then the song goes like, "Tum bhaye moti prabhu hum bhaye dhaaga, Tum bhaye sona hum bhaye suhaga." So there is a kind of submission, there is also a challenging to Krishna's indifference. So even if you are indifferent to me, you are not reciprocating to my love, I will not disown this bond between you and me.

Although you have disowned our relationship, I will not disown it. I will still pursue you, I will follow you. Jo tum toro piya, me nahi torure. If you have broken the relationship from your end, I will not do the same thing.

But it has gone on to become a very popular song. It has had its different renditions in different films. One of the films being Silsila, Yash Chopra's Silsila where this song has been used. So the direct communication is a Bhakti element. The direct communication between divine and devotee is an element, a prominent element of Bhakti, where the

devotee defies any kind of mediation between her feeling for God and its conveyance. So in order to communicate her feeling, the devotee does not need priestly mediation.

She can communicate it herself. So another song which became very popular from the film Meera is Karna Fakiri and this song too has had its own journey even outside of this film. It has many renditions. It has been sung by different singers used in different films in different contexts. The song Karna Fakiri, Phir Kya Del Giri in a 1979 movie Meera is based on a poem by Meera Bai.

This is actually a poem composed by Meera Bai. This video shows a kirtan being led by Meera where she is praying to Lord Krishna. Meera Bai has donned plain clothes like a yogi or an ascetic. This takes us to the original form of Bhakti in the period where it emerged. So Bhakti is about renouncing the material pleasures, the worldly pleasures and also moving away from rituals and pomp and show. So the song based on the original poem by Meera Bai is about renouncing the material goods of the world and further emphasizing that everyone in a society, both rich and poor, are equal and they will have the same end when they die.

The language is vernacular which is an important feature of the Bhakti poems where the Bhakta communicates with God in their own language. They do not need to use a very sophisticated or standardized language like Sanskrit. It is a very informal and personal relationship with God which can be carried out, which can be realized through conversing, through connecting with God in the vernacular language. However, we see that although the song is based on the original poetry of Meera Bai, in the case of this latter film it had a lot of changes. It starts from the criticism of one's obsession with material life or one's fixation with worldly pleasures, but then it moves or goes on to focus on the concept of motherhood and celebrating the idea of motherhood.

This is a departure from what Meera Bai originally meant in the poem. So through the latter rendition it is a moveaway from the original philosophy of Meera Bai. It is focusing more on motherhood in the film. So Bhakti as a philosophy detaches from all kinds of familial bonds. So it does not necessarily celebrate motherhood within the bounds of family life.

Hence we see that this particular rendition of Karna Fakiri in Bare Ghar Ki Beti is also a dilution in a way of the original ideas of Meera Bai's poetry. Further, in the year 2021 another version of this poem was performed by singers Chinmayi and Joel at the Mahindra Kabira festival. The stage performance, the live stage performance of this song was accompanied by the playing of an Ektara, Ektara which is associated with the minstrels, roving minstrels or the mystics, that is the instrument that the mystics play. So singers Chinmayi and Joel start off with a rendition that criticizes material life as in the original poetry and then they further add new elements, they talk of a bird that is flying away alone and it is observing the world. Here in this particular rendition of the song we still find the elements of Bhakti intact.

This is because reference to the bird flying away alone can be seen in relation to a soul that is detaching itself from the worldly positions. So coming back to the figure of Meera Bai, we see that Meera believes in the immortality of the human soul, a belief that is endorsed by the Bhakti tradition. She is not afraid of death. This is what she repeats in many of her poems and she has very famously said in one of her bhajans, "zaher ka pyala Rana bheja dijo Meera pilai," right? And she is not afraid, the "pyala of zaher" turns into or the "pyala of poison" turns into ambrosia nectar or amrit by the blessings of Lord Krishna.

So Rana cannot destroy her, Rana cannot destroy her love. When she is punished to drink poison for not carrying out her wifely and familial duties, her husband seeks to punish her but to no avail, right? Since she considered herself married to Krishna, she sees no fault in her act of ignoring her so-called proper duties towards her husband. She sees in fact that Krishna is her own husband, there is no other husband that she recognizes; it is very radical behavior, right? And in terms of general class belonging also she is a complete marked departure. There is this bhajan "Aisi lagi lagan Meera ho gai magan" where we see, so there are lines from this song which go like :mehlo me pali banke jogan chali Meera gali gali hari gun gane lagi." So, she has been raised in palace but she is walking on the streets like a roving minstrel in saffron and she is going from lane to lane, from street to street singing aloud the praises of Hari. This is how the bhajan goes, it is a very popular bhajan and it is very famously sung by Anup Jalota, right? So we see that Meera is a transgression, she is a case of transgression in terms of class, caste and of course gender. She is a radical figure that marks departure and breakaway from any fixed category.

She sees death as a separation of body from soul that leads to immortality. So following her claims of marriage with Krishna, she was questioned by her critics if she could give

birth to a child and to this she reiterates or she replies that she is a soul, she is not even a body, she is a soul. So in one of her poems Meera Bai writes, "I am a soul not a body, I am a feeling not a thought of society, I am a lover, a lover Yogin, not bound to any relation, any family." And she constantly works on this concept, this idea of love as a disease.

The end of the movie shows her oneness with Krishna. In the 1979 Meera movie, the film ends with Meera's oneness or unification with Krishna in a temple. She is followed by a crowd of people while she goes inside the temple singing a bhajan, and she reaches the ultimate pinnacle of her worship, of her spiritual experience by becoming one with Krishna. I am going to stop my lecture here today and let us continue with this module and with further discussions on this topic in our next lecture. Thank you. Thank you very much.