

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

Prof. Sarbani Banerjee

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences

Indian Institute of Technology Roorkee

Lecture 60

Bhakti, Sufi, and Cinema III

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. We are discussing Bhakti, Sufi and cinema. So, as a continuation to our previous lecture where we were talking about the different Bhakti codes in different Indian films, we see this song Kahe Chhed Mohe in Devdas, a very popular song, a very popular dance rather. It is based on pure classical dance form of Kathak and it is trained, this song is kind of choreographed by Birju Maharaj, right. It is an enactment of the relationship between Krishna and a Gopi. The song is sung from the perspective of a fretting Gopi, a complaining Gopi who is annoyed, who is apparently annoyed by Krishna teasing her.

So, this popular dance in the video is of the actor Madhuri Dixit provocatively enacting a Gopi who complains against Krishna for teasing her, Kahe Chhed Mohe, right. So, also in the video of this song, the character of Chandramukhi who is a dancer is trying to draw the attention of her lover and her patron Devdas through her performance. The song is evocative and continues the trend of Madhubala's dance performance, Mohe Panghat Pe Nandalal Chhed Gayo re, a dance sequence that we see in Mughal-e-Azam, right. So here is a still from Mughal-e-Azam, where Madhubala is picking up her Ghunghat to see Nandalal who has teased her, and the video shows Madhuri Dixit dancing to the song of Kahe Chhed Mohe, which has been choreographed by Birju Maharaj.

Next we see a song from the movie Raincoat made in 2004 by Rituparno Ghosh, which is about a request by Radha to Krishna. So, he leaves Mathura for Gokul. The song says Mathura Nagarpati Kahe Tum Gokul Jao. It is a song entirely informed by the sentiment, the feeling of longing, the feeling of Bipralambha. So in the end the song says that "Tumhari Priya Ab Puri Gharwali, Doodh Navan Ghiyu Dinbhar Khaali, Biraha ke aansu tapke pochh dali phir kahe dard jagao."

So it says that I have become a full householder. I am leading a very happy family life and I literally live a very luxurious life, then why do you evoke the past memories and make me cry, make me shed tears, something like that. It is a very moving song in terms of the lyrics. The context of the performance of this song is the unrequited love of Radha. It depicts the platonic love of the female character even after her marriage to another man.

She continues to remember her previous lover. So this love is beyond worldly pleasures where the characters in the film give up on their own savings, on whatever material assets they have in order to help the other. So this form of love resonates the original idea of Bhakti, the selfless love that is at the heart of both Bhakti and Sufi philosophies. However, the presentation has been hybridized in the film through scenes from everyday life. So next, we have a song titled "Hare Krishna Hare Ram" from 2007 movie Bhul Bhulaiya, and it is a very subversive, a very inverted representation of Bhakti codes through this song, very diluted and even vulgarized representation of Bhakti codes.

The song carries on the trend of depicting Bhakti through the hippie culture which emerged around the 1970s. The trend can be seen as a dilution of the Bhakti culture. The characters here have donned some saffron kurtas with Hare Krishna Hare Ram written on them and they also wear Rudraksh mala. Further, we see that the hand gestures that the lead character played by Akshay Kumar makes suggest a flute. So he makes hand gestures that suggest a flute.

So we see that further hand gestures have been used in the song to suggest a flute by the lead character and the lead artist Akshay Kumar. So this is a still photograph from the song Hare Krishna Hare Ram. The song can be seen as objectifying the women who surround the male protagonist in the song. So he has women scantily dressed surrounding him which has been used as sensuous props. These women can be seen as sensuous props that kind of promote the glamour quotient of the song.

So this is clearly a departure from how Bhakti songs would be presented in the early decades of Bollywood cinema. From the real situation where Bhakti saints like Akka Mahadevi actually forsook garments for spiritual reasons or spiritual calling, here we see the scantily dressed women only adding to the glamour quotient or the sensuousness of the song. So there is no spirituality. They are just using the garments, the saffron garments as props to give a very westernized kind of, a very hybridized kind of message and essence.

Next we have Anwar, a film made in 2007 which has Krishna-Mira relationship as the motif of the film.

So love is the movie's key theme with Krishna's love shown as transcendental and supreme in nature. So the protagonist Anwar's love and inspiration from the icon of Krishna is a recurring theme throughout the movie. He researches on different temples and his diary has writings and notes on the relation, the bond between Krishna and Mira. Anwar's guru Pasha teaches him about love and its different aspects. This bonding and reverence for guru can be traced back to earlier films like Baiju Bawra made in 1952 and the movie Meera made in 1979.

Both the films we have discussed in our previous lecture. So Pasha teaches Anwar love in the form of unification between Krishna and Mira. That is the highest form of love as imagined by Pasha. He says that nothing is higher than the relation between Krishna and Mira. So Anwar understands love.

He gets to learn about love through the mystical Leela or amorous play between Krishna and Mira. He sees his beloved Mehru playing flute and falls in love with her, and this flute once again is a symbol of Krishna. Pasha's room we see is full of Krishna's murals and paintings and people around him consider his excess of emotions, excess of love and passion as a sign of his craziness. So all his life Anwar has a dream of Krishna chasing Mira. That is a dream that pervades throughout his life.

It is only towards the end of the movie with the death of Anwar that this chase ultimately finds its goal, its destination resulting in the oneness, in the unification of Krishna with Mira. So towards the end, prior to the completion of this chase, this game or Leela of chase, Mira says the following to Krishna in the movie. So Mira says that as a child you cried a lot when you saw a broken butterfly wing. I also know your heart is full of love and you want to become one with me. So here one thing is very significant in the movie.

There is a marked role reversal where the male deity Krishna is in fact seeking union. Usually Mira pursues Krishna. Here Krishna is pursuing and seeking union with the female devotee Mira. So the devotee seems to be forever elusive and running away. So the devotee

is a person and the God is trying to chase her and find completion in her embrace, in the devotee's embrace.

This is a kind of role reversal in terms of gendered hierarchy as well as in terms of the divine-devotee hierarchy. Here we see the reverse. The God is chasing the devotee. The male is chasing the female. The song depicts a feminized male lover.

This is also very important. So the Krishna shown here is a feminized lover who has no signs any kind of ego, any kind of you know aggression that informs a heteronormative relationship. So this is actually a resistance to the heteronormative man-woman relationship that we normally understand. So this relationship between Krishna and Mira is informed by human tenderness, a sense of rapture as well as sensory excess, and it is the highest expression of love. It is a transcendental kind of love.

So this is a snippet from the song where Krishna is constantly chasing Mira and she turns back and tells him that he is full of love, he is made of love. So this is celebration of you know God through love, worshipping God through the language of love. Krishna shown as the Rasika who is a human God who is made of love, who can be actually attained through love, the language of love and affection rather than gyan and knowledge. So the song "Tose Naina lage" from Anwar is basically very syncretic in nature. It draws on different cultural traditions.

It draws as much on the Bhakti tradition as on the Sufi tradition. While the visuals of the song alludes to the Bhakti symbols, the lyrics of this song is full of Sufi codes and so its syncretic nature draws on both the cultural resources. There are references to Shama and Patang, the flame and the moth and the desire to melt and burn for the love, which resonates with the Sufi idea of Fanaa or self annihilation. This is how the line from the song Tose Naina lage goes; when translated to English, "why does Shama wish to melt, why does Patang wish to burn? life is a test of this desire." So referring to a rapturous Deewana state, the lyrics of Tose Naina lage reminds of the Sufi notion of Nazr, which is very similar to the Bhakti concept of Darsan, both of which entail and emphasize eye contact between the lover and the beloved.

The fact that the song is celebrating a life full of love can be understood from lines such as "Nahi Koi Insaan Mohabbat se khali, Har ek Ruh pyasi Har ek Dil Savali". So "not a single human is bereft of love. We are all full of love, we are made up of love and all our souls are thirsting and longing for union with God and we are curious, we are traversing on that path where we want to know more and more about the transcendental lover." Next, we have Manmohana song from Jodha Akbar, a film made in 2008. This song follows the path of the way Bhakti songs were performed in the earlier films made in 1950s and 1960s.

It is performed in the vicinity of a temple in front of the icon of Krishna. So Jodha Bai is basically singing this in front of Krishna's idol. Jodha Bai can be seen as praying to Krishna and Akbar actually falls in love seeing her pure love for Krishna. She also teaches Akbar the basic rituals of taking or performing the Aarti. So regardless of their different communities and faith, we see that Jodha and Akbar's love relationship is induced and inspired by the spiritual love that Jodha feels for Krishna.

By seeing Jodha love Krishna, Akbar falls in love with her. It acts as, so this Bhakti acts as a catalyst, it catalyzes the relationship between Jodha and Akbar. Jodha's Bhakti plays as an incentive and it shapes the ambience or it shapes the foundation for bringing Jodha and Akbar together. So we see once again that Bhakti is all about transcending boundaries. Here it does not matter that they originally belong to the Hindu and the Muslim community.

Through the language of love that she is singing, the song Manmohana, they are kind of completely oblivious of their different faith or the different backgrounds, different communities they come from. All that matter is that they love each other. The Bhakti song inspires this kind of love transcending all sorts of social and physical boundaries and markers. Next, we have a very recent song "Ram Chahe Leela" from the movie Ram Leela made in 2013, which can be seen as a distortion of the ideas of Bhakti. The song talks about a love regardless of the world, where one can be seen as oblivious of the world and its boundaries.

So the presentation of the song is through a dance performance which is considered as an item number in the movie and it depicts a stark female objectification and the song shows the heroine as joining her hands. The performer joins her hands pointing towards the sky in the posture of praying to God while including the mantra Raghupati Raghav Raja Ram.

However, there is like I said, a subversion of the original meaning of the song. It is transposed in the modern space and you know Raghupati Raghav or the idea of Ram-Sita relationship are all being enacted in a very alternative way, in a subversive manner through subversive you know understandings or interpretations. Then we have this very recent song from Bajirao Mastani in 2002, where Mastani sings "Mohe Rang do Lal".

This song has reflections of the trend carried out by Madhubala in "Mohe Panghat Pe Nandalaal Chhed Gayo" and then by Madhuri Dikshit in "Kahe Chhed Mohe" in Devdas, right. So the same trend from Mughal-e-Azam and Devdas is being carried out in and through this song "Mohe Rang do Lal". The song is a physical enactment by a Gopi, and she is conversing with Krishna. It describes the Gopi beseeching or you know supplicating to Krishna to colour her red but not get intimate with her. So the song says "Mohe Rang do Lal Nand ke Lal Chhedo Nahi Bas Rang Do Lal".

So you colour me red but do not get intimate with me. That is the central idea or what the Gopi is trying to say or beseech to Krishna. She enacts and hints at the male protagonist to put Vermillion or Sindur on her forehead. The concept of Rang that we already discussed while you know talking about the Sufi poems and Sufi poetics, where Rang plays a very important role both in Sufi and Bhakti tradition makes a kind of very important symbol in this song. So the concept of Rang plays a very important symbol and here we see that the ephemeral devotee, the earthly devotee is being coloured by the transcendental divine.

Or rather she wishes, she implores that the transcendental divine, the Lord comes and colours her. It echoes with the many Bhakti and Sufi songs and poetry that we have already discussed with the Holi festival playing a strong reference in the background of these poems. So with this, we come to the end of this module and I am going to stop my lecture here today. Thank you. Thank you.