

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 15

Sufi Tradition I

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religion. Today we are discussing Sufi tradition. Sufi tradition, the word Sufism or Tasavuf as a movement, as a philosophy and lyrical rendition has a very close parallelity or analogy with the Bhakti tradition. We have already discussed the Bhakti tradition now and we see that Bhakti tradition emerges as a kind of antithesis to the established or mainstream religion. In the same way, the Sufi tradition emerges and flourishes within the mainstream where there are some exchanges, some scopes of exchanges with mainstream Islam, but later on Sufi tradition becomes a critical standpoint and an alternative practice. Just like Bhakti cult or the Bhakti movement, the Bhakti tradition was a moveaway, a departure from the Brahminical tradition and the Brahminical rituals, ritual-based traditions, Sufism becomes a counterpoint, a critical standpoint and an alternative practice within as well as away from the core Islam.

Hadis is parallel to Dharmashashtra in Brahmanism. Quran is not a created text, but it is understood as a logos which is revealed to prophet Muhammad by Allah and Hadis being an interpretation of the Quran deals with the juridical laws at the levels of living patterns and the politics of the society. So it is very this-worldly, it deals with human conditions and you know human.. the situations in a human society. So the prescription of Hadis in Shariati Islam is a codified rigid structure that propagates institutionalized knowledge for arbitrating, for resolving secular problems.

Now Sufism's onus has been on ihsan, ihsan that is realized through 'marifa' or direct knowledge and when we talk of direct knowledge, such knowledge obviates or precludes the need for a scriptural explanation or interpretation by the maulavi. This is very similar to the Bhakti movement once again. The Bhakti movement precludes the presence of the priest, the Brahmin priest and the rituals, the traditional rituals. It says that the god resides

within one's body and one's body is a temple. So it is a bipolarity.. the Sufi tradition exists as a bipolarity within the Islamic space where a shift from the realm of mind to the realm of body means that the physical being is itself a carrier and a disseminator of god.

Within the body the god stays, through the body one can attain the knowledge of god. One need not go elsewhere, one need not go to a preceptor, a maulavi or even to a shrine. So as in the case of Bhakti here 'I' becomes an important agency or an important agent in the revelation of the beautiful. In other words the devotee 'I', the seeker 'I' can feel the revelation of the god, the transcendental within the ephemeral which is the devotee's body. So Sufi says that he who destroys himself attains Allah.

“Man arafa” which means self-knowledge.. which means self knowledge and this is all at a very metaphorical level. Rather than taking them literally, we should understand the metaphorical sense. So this body according to Sufi tradition acts as an obstacle, as a hindrance from union with the god. Once the body, the entity of.. this physical entity is destroyed, it is through this physical entity that the knowledge of god or Allah is attained and finally with self-annihilation or Fanah one can become one with god, union with god can happen. “Man arafa” refers to self knowledge.

“Man Arafa Nafsahu, Faqad Arafa Rabbahu” meaning whoever knows himself knows his lord. Knowledge of god begins with knowledge of self. So we see that Sufi philosopher Al-Hijuri says that knowledge is immense and life is short. So Sufism is basically you know premised on the philosophical path of love. Love that is incumbent on the unconscious, irrational, emotive faculty, emotional rapture, a complete immersion of the sense of self.

So through love, through a rapturous experience one.. one's sense of self is immersed in the concept of god. The structured Quranic exposition of Sharia, the definitive interpretation of Quran is cognitive and argumentative, and it deals with causality such that its central apparatus is 'ilm' or the mind and consciousness. In order to interpret Quran, the words of god, Sharia is using the faculty of mind or rationality and consciousness, and that is where Sufi tradition or the Sufi cult is a departure. Sufism or the Sufis use the emotive faculty to grasp the concept of god. In Quranic idea Allah is depicted as a stern judge and prescriber of law.

Just as Bhakti as a movement had generated.. had engendered 'from below' and it questions the mainstream Vedic Brahminical ritualistic practices, Sufism's basic tenets emerge from within Islam. So Sufism is not directly antithetical, but its interpretation makes a radical departure from Sharia and Marifat. The three basic philosophies of the Quran are 'Islam' meaning surrender, 'Imam' meaning faith and 'Ihsan' meaning doing something beautiful. So Sufism is premised on the basic belief that our ephemeral being, in other words our physical body, our physical state is a resistance from uniting with Allah and becoming one in existence with Allah. So this can be understood by Amir Khusrau as he says.. so this can be translated as- when there was nothing, there was God. If in the future there is nothing, there would still be a God. And this state of being, my beingness has destroyed me. What would happen if I were not there? So this 'being' refers to the physical entity. Because I have this ephemeral presence, this earthly body, I cannot be united with God.

So Sufi poems comprise oeuvre of works that are based on this pang of separation, the pangs of separation from the lover, the lover that is God. So it is written in metaphorical language where God is the lover and the devotee; the Sufi devotee is the beloved who is suffering pangs of separation and who wants to go back and be united with the God, just quit the ephemeral form. So this reflects that the condition of life is to be united with him. What is more important than this ephemeral life is to be united again, be reunited with him, the God; and that one's mortal and conscious state is forever a state of affliction.

It is like a state of separation. What Bhakti tradition calls as Viraha, the Viraha that Radha and Krishna experience, it is the same metaphor that we find here again and again in Sufi poetry through the realization of separation from the lover that God is, that Allah is. So the life process is a metaphor for a journey whose final state is *Vadat Al Wajud*. At the end of this journey the seeker will experience “*wahadat-al-wajud*” or ultimate union, where the final goal is attained or accomplished. This draws an analogy with the concept of Radha's adultery.

I was just talking about Radha's *avisar* which is a physical dissociation from the constructed society, social institutions, spousal bond and other social conventions and mores, other familial ties. She as an *avisarika*, she is, you know, severing all these earthly ties. She is also destroying her sense of self because within this sense of self we have the sense of honor, dignity, what is right, what is wrong. She is forsaking all of these in order to merge with Krishna. Sufism calls this same forsaking of this worldly affairs as *Fanaa*.

Fanaa or self-annihilation which occurs through an intoxicated, a rapturous, passionate, deewanapan, madness, the mad lover who can only through irrationality be united with God. So we see a lot of analogy.. parallelism between institutionalized, you know, Brahminical structure of Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma and Islam which are very much based on consciousness and definitive interpretations and then their offshoots or their antithetical branches that Bhakti and Sufi cults are, which are movements which defy any kind of hierarchy, any kind of rational interpretation of God. They want to achieve God, attain God through.. not through knowledge because knowledge breeds arrogance. They want to achieve God, attain God, realize God through avisar, through Fanaa, self-annihilation, through madness, right, through a rapturous experience, through deewanapan. The intensified celebration of senses and the sensory appeal that we again and again find in Sufi poetry and the explicit erotica, erotic references or allusions is an allegory for spiritual rapture that has no corporeal limitations.

So beyond the act of physicality lies the Sufi mysticism of Murid-Murshid relationship. So God... a devoted relationship is understood through the metaphor of Murid-Murshid relationship. Sufism's lyric, you know, the lyrics of Sufism has two forms primarily, Hamd or praise of Allah and then Naat or praise of Rasul or Muhammad. So Sufism talks of this-worldly, it begins with this-worldly, it begins with the search for God through the body and then it journeys on a path where the body is shunned in order to be united with God. So it talks of Ishq-e-mijazi, Ishq-e-Mijazi, where the journey of love begins with the everyday love, the mundane manifestation of love, the human bodily manifestation of love, but it goes on to enter into the domain of Ishq-e-Ilahi.

So from Ishq-e-Mijazi, the mundane expression, it enters into the domain of Ishq-e-Ilahi or the love of God. Now Sufi mysticism, when we talk of mysticism, the term mysticism is generally believed to be associated with any mysterious phenomenon. The words mystic and mystery have common etymological roots being derived from a Greek word, mystic. 'Myein', myein, meaning to close one's eyes. So mysticism is defined as the belief that knowledge of God and of real truth may be reached by directing one's mind or through spiritual insight independently of reason and the senses.

Mysticism therefore refers to the esoteric aspects and the spiritual undercurrent running through most of the religions. Mystic is a person who tries to become united with God through, you know, practicing esoteric means and reaches certain truths, arrives at certain

meanings beyond common human's understanding. A mystic is defined in different ways as having hidden meaning or spiritual power, someone or something that is based on mysticism and finally causing a feeling, evoking a feeling of deep respect and wonder. The term 'Sufism', Sufism as a word is a German coinage.

In 1821, a Latin work by F. A. G. T. Tholuck, a German professor of divinity introduced this term Sufism. In common parlance, it is generally perceived as an anglicized version of the term 'tasawwuf', right.

So, the Arabic peninsula from where Sufism has emerged would use the term tasawwuf and its anglicized version is Sufi. A word of Arabic origin, tasawwuf is the name given to the mystical tradition of Islam, the mystical branch or offshoot of Islam. It is generally considered as a standard appellation in the studies of Sufism that are based in oriental and non-western languages. So, in common parlance, an individual who becomes associated with Sufism or becomes a seeker of divine truth is described as a Sufi or an initiate. William Stoddard makes an important clarification in this regard. So Stoddard says, I quote, "Strictly speaking, the Arabic word sufi, like the Sanskrit word yogi, refers only to one who has attained the goal; nevertheless, it is often applied by extension to initiates who are still merely travelling towards it."

(unquote). So Sufi does not have to be necessarily an adept. Any individual committed to traversing the spiritual trajectories, who wants to journey.. who wants to walk the spiritual path in the spiritual direction may also by extension be termed as a Sufi.

So according to E. H. Palmer, Sufi is "the development of the Primaeval religion of Aryan race." So, Reynolds A. Nicholson points out to the external or different non-Islamic influences on Sufism which include Christianity, Neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, Buddhism and Vedantism. Nicholson however adds that the seeds of Sufism were.. they were primarily inherent in Islam. So Sufi traces its roots mainly in Islam, although there have been very many influences coming from different directions, from different religions.

And these internal forces within Islam cannot be isolated from external factors. So, like I have been saying towards the beginning of this lecture, Sufism is still positioned within Islam. However, it holds an antithetical or somewhat a more heretical standpoint vis-a-vis mainstream Islam. So it cannot be entirely divorced from the hardcore Islamic tenets, but

then it cannot be contained within them as well. Nicholson suggests and I quote, “the great non-Islamic systems... gave a stimulus to various tendencies within Islam which affected Sufism either positively or negatively” (unquote).

So these external determinants.. influence of other religions on Sufism have had both negative and positive influences.

J.P. Brown alludes to the deeply spiritual principles that appear within the Quran and the innumerable mystical reasonings that can be found in the words of Prophet Muhammad himself. According to Annemarie Schimmel, Sufism traces its origin back to the prophet of Islam and takes inspiration mainly from the divine word, which have been revealed through the prophet in the Holy Quran. So Sufism essentially demands a considerable intellectual sophistication from its adherence. So the ones that practice Sufism, ones that are adherents of Sufism have to have an intellectual edge, some degree of sophistication in their understanding and appreciation of the Sufi philosophy. Nevertheless, it has popular manifestations as well.

So while on the one hand it seeks some degree of sophistication among its followers, on the other it is a populist religion and it actually thrives as a part of the low culture, the populist tradition. Tanveer Anjum in her essay, ‘Sufism in History and its Relationship with Power’ writes, “it was against the backdrop of religious, theological and intellectual, as well as political and socio-economic conditions that the rise and popularity of Sufism can be best understood.” Further Anjum suggests, (I quote once again), “Sufism signified not only a protest against the growing materialism among the Muslims, an excessive insistence on the exoteric aspect of Islam and the intensifying formalism of ‘ulama’ and Mu’tazilism, but also a subtle and guised protest against the high-handedness of the rulers and other political abuses of the age.” So this is what Tanveer Anjum has to say, how Sufism had engendered, the provenance of Sufism, what had inspired an offshoot.. a spiritual or let us say a mystical offshoot of Islam to churn out, how had Sufism churned out of the mainstream codified Islam... the religious aspects cannot be understood, the spiritual happenings cannot be appreciated in isolation from the socio-political and immediate cultural vibes, the immediate cultural realities.

So, we see Amir Khursrau is writing for his preceptor Nizamuddin Auliya by saying, Aaj [it is a beautiful verse] - “Aaj rung hai hey maan rung hai ri

Moray mehboob kay ghar rang hai ri...

Mohay pir paayo Nijamudin aulia” Or

“Mohe Apne Hi Rang Mein Rang De Khwajaji...”. So, here Rang is.. Rang refers to his abstract grace linking disciple's beautiful feelings or merging the disciple's beautiful feelings with the God's beauty. It is concretizing the disciple's engagement with the vision. So celebrating passion with such a tactile and tangible God that is unprecedented, that is not seen and not encouraged within the codified Islam, where a sensory space, a concrete sensory space is created, and the eyes become the most important embodiment for witnessing Allah. By invoking one's faculty vision or transcendental immanence, the Sufi mystic says, “worship God as if you see Him”.

This kind of you know feeling, this kind of a rapturous sensory experience cannot be accommodated, cannot be adjusted within codified or mainstream Islam. That is why Sufism originates in Islam, but it is greatly a departure from Islam as well. To talk about the Rang, the tangible color of beauty, of God where one needs to be.. one wishes to be merged, is not something that has its affiliation and adherence completely with the traditional tenets of Islam. And this also takes us to a parallelity that one finds within the worship of the deities in the Indic tradition. The concept of Chakshudaan, in the process of making a deity, the last part is.. the last part is to bestow vision to the God.

When we bestow vision to the God, when the artist is painting the eyes of the God, with those eyes the God can look back at the devotee and through the eye contact, you know, there is a consummation in the deity-devotee relationship. And this is something that we find in Sufi song lyrics also, where one of the songs, a very famous song, at one point the Sufi lyric goes like this, right. So you made me your bride through making an amorous eye contact [Mohe suhagan kini re mose naina milaike]. An eye contact has a very important role in both Sufi and Bhakti traditions. With this I am going to stop my lecture here today and let us meet again with another round of discussions in another lecture. Thank you.