

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture51

Classical Traditions and Performances VI

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on performative gender and religions in South Asia. We are going to discuss the classical theater vis-a-vis its shift of space and medium. Basically, we will look at how classical dance forms have been shown, how they have been used in different Indian films, films from different regions as well as the Bollywood films. So, talking about classical dance forms, we have noticed that most of the classical dance forms emerged from the southern part of India. So, it left a very strong influence on the films in the cinematic medium of the southern films, the films from southern part of India. They are from the four states from South India, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka.

So, we see that the classical dance forms have left a great impact and have influenced the films from the southern part of India. The four states from the south have strongly drawn on the different classical dance forms to tell their filmic narratives. So, we see a lot of these dance-based films emerging in Kannada language, in Tamil, in Telugu and so forth. So, in one of these Telugu movies, we see it is called Sankarabharanam.

So, Sankarabharanam, which was made in 1979, a Telugu movie takes its title from a musical raga, which means ornament adorned by Lord Shiva. So, Sankarabharanam means the abharanam, the ornament that Lord Shiva wears. So, that is where the name is inspired from. It is the name of a musical raga. So, we see that the caste-based boundaries as well as the differences between the eastern and western styles of music have been eliminated or the boundary line between such differences, such bifurcations or dichotomy is kind of blurred in this movie.

There is a kind of mishmashing of the east and west, the different caste orders. So, the movie provides a reconstruction of the conventional Gurukul or teaching method of education, which ancient Indian teachers employed with regard to both general education

as well as the fine arts or performance arts. So, the Gurukul system has been outlined in the Upanishads. The bond that we see in the film Sankarabharanam between a teenage girl who is raised in a Devadasi family and her dancer teacher plays the central theme of the movie. So, the teenage girl's role has been enacted by an actor called Manju Bhargavi, who is a real life classical dancer, and she performs her part both during formal performances during the film shots and also during the practice sessions, where she dances for her own pleasure.

So, we see that this Guru-shishya bond that has informed the Bhakti tradition greatly is at the heart of Sankarabharanam. Manju Bhargavi, who is a trained classical dancer and has played the role of the teenage girl, is seen as performing both during the formal performances during the formal filmic shorts and also during her practice sessions informally when she is dancing for sheer pleasure. Next, we see another Telugu film from early 1980s. The title is Sagara Sangamam. The film was made in 1983 directed by K.Vishwanath. The plot of this Telugu movie revolves around the character of Bal Krishna, who is a skilled Kuchipudi dancer, and he is given the chance to compete in a festival of classical dance. However, we see that his mother dies two days before the performance, which completely shatters him. So, this poor youngster played by Kamal Haasan struggles mightily in order to master all types of dance forms that are practiced in India, and this impoverished boy is the focus of K. Vishwanath's story or the plot we see in Sagara Sangamam.

So, by fusing traditional dance styles with a tragic storyline, this film demonstrates how dance and music genres can cross societal boundaries and serve as engaging entertainment. In fact, most of the films that we discuss today are sending out a message of this kind, where the different caste orders are disrupted, the gendered hierarchies or the gendered based differences are questioned. And so, we see that performance, dance, music and fine arts, performance arts comes to play a very crucial role in bringing humanity together. It becomes a glue for the humanity for all the kinds of sectarian rules that we have set for ourselves. Dance comes as an aid to erase, to remove these borders, boundaries, these watertight walls.

So, that is a very interesting phenomena that keeps coming back in most of the films we talk about today. So, this is a snippet from Sagara Sangamam, where we see a dance performance by Kamal Haasan. If we had the audio also, you would note that he is lip-synching with a very feminized voice, if not the voice of a female singer. So, we see that the idea of a male dance teacher, which has not been conventionally seen as something

very positive by the mainstream society, tends to create this kind of a gender blur, where strict stereotypical rules of the male and the female are questioned. We would see that Kamal Haasan here is lip-syncing with a song sung by a female or perhaps by a feminized male singer.

This kind of borderline, strict borderline separating the male from the female disappears or it is problematized again and again. Next, we have a film called *Ananta Bhairavi*, which released in 1983. It is a tale of a dance master and Brahmin priest, which is played by Girish Karnad, who decides to train a little girl in his village. He is training the Kuchipudi dance form to this little girl. And so, the guru adopts Bhairavi, a little girl called Bhairavi, in the customary guru-shishya connection after being moved by the little girl's performance of a folk dance in his village.

He sees the player, the talent in her and adopts her to teach her Kuchipudi. Now, the traditional community of the village, the mainstream community of the village, shuns this guru since the time in which the film is set does not permit women to learn Kuchipudi. So, it is very uncommon as a practice for women to be trained in the Kuchipudi dance form. So, it could not be accepted by the larger society and hence the guru is kind of ostracized. Malvika, who is a magnificent Kuchipudi dancer, is thereby created as a result of the guru's persistent education of this young girl.

So, she turns out to be a famous dancer, Malvika, as a result of the relentless effort on the part of this guru. So, the film's, you know, lifeline is situated in this guru-shishya relationship and the beautiful dance sequences as well as the teaching moments, all of these comprise the heart of the narrative. They all center on the physicality and spirituality of the dance form. So, at the heart of this filmic narration, we have celebration of Kuchipudi as a dance form and the teacher-student bonding. Here we have a snippet from *Ananta Bhairvi* and the girl is dancing to Guru Brahmah, Guru Vishnu, Guru Dev Maheshwar.

She is making the different mudras with her hands. So, the guru is, you know, further teaching her how to be perfect with her hand gestures, right? And he himself you know, basically inspires. She is trying to perfect her postures, right? So, this relationship is celebrated throughout the movie. The guru himself is demonstrating the correct way of dancing the Guru's stotram, right? It is a very important sutra in Indian religious and

spiritual understanding. So, we see that spirituality, religion and dance drama are all interspersed as far as the Indian culture and Indian tradition is concerned.

Next, you know, if we move to Bollywood, mainstream Bollywood, we would see that a number of actresses, most of them hailing from the southern part of India, have contributed greatly to Bollywood in terms of classical dance performances, different classical sequences that they have performed within the narrative of the film. So, Hema Malini is definitely one of those very prominent actresses known for her dance performance. So, she is an Indian actress from Tamil Nadu, who was one of the best trained classical dancers among her contemporaries in the Bollywood. So, some of the remarkable films of Hema Malini, where she played the dancer, the performer, include Mehbooba made in 1976, where she is depicted as a tawaif or courtesan. And the film shows how the tawaif in a society is always, you know, associated with some kinds of social taboos.

There are certain stigmas attached to the dancing female body in the public, which puts her in a prejudicial position. On the other hand, her film Kinara made in 1977, portrays her as a woman that undergoes a lot of trials and tribulations in her personal life, a lot of losses that she sustains, and yet she recovers from these personal injuries and dedicates herself wholeheartedly to dance and music and finally rises to a great fame. So, in this context, we are also reminded of a great actor in Bollywood, Wahida Rahman, who was a great dancer. Wahida Rahman says in personal interviews that she broke a lot of taboos. She had to almost fight against her family values and her community to learn Bharatnatyam.

She was a passionate Bharatnatyam dancer. And this journey of a dancer, you know, from being a tormented woman, you know, and carrying the shards, the remnants of a broken marriage, to becoming a great dancer in her film Guide, we see her performing and kind of exhibiting the talent that she had. So, Wahida Rahman and Hema Malini are some of the characters that define the parameters of excellence as far as classical dance form in Bollywood is concerned. Next, we have the figure of Sridevi, who is also from the southern part of India, who has made it big in Telugu, Tamil, Hindi, Malayalam and Kannada language films, and who is considered as the first female diva and superstar in Bollywood is also remarkable in terms of the contributions she has made in terms of dance performances in Bollywood filmic narratives. So, she is remembered for her classical dance sequences in movies such as Tohfa made in 1984, Jaag Utha Insaan made

in the same year, where she performs the Shiv Tandava, then Chandni and Chalbaaz both made in 1989.

In Chandni, she is remembered for her performance of a last year dance, among her other dance sequences, of course. So, we see that Sridevi is once again creating the standard of classical dance performance in Bollywood in the 80s and 90s. As her contemporaries Jayaprada, Madhuri Dixit and Meenakshi Seshadri are also remembered for their remarkable classical performances. So, we see that these performances have their own narratives almost and they have their own destinies to follow. Although Sridevi is not doing what today we know as item numbers, we see that these dance performances have their own destiny to pursue, regardless of how well the film is accepted by the larger audience, masses.

So, even though a film like Jaag Utha Insaan is not a box office hit, people remember the film for the solo performance of the Tandava by Sridevi. So, next talking about the different Bollywood actors and their performance of classical dance form in films, Nache Mayuri is a film from 1986. It is a dance biographical Hindi film directed by T. Rama Rao. It is a remake of the Telugu film called Mayuri made in 1984, and it centers on the classical dancer actress Sudha Chandran who stars as herself in both the Telugu and the Hindi movie.

So, this is based on the real life of Sudha Chandran. She is a Bharatnatyam dancer and she plays herself in the movie like I said. She lost her leg in an accident in 1981 near Trichy, Tamil Nadu while coming back from Madras with her parents and the film is about her struggles; how she recuperates and once again continues to dance with her synthetic foot. Her leg had to be amputated as a result of this accident. The story therefore depicts how she wore an artificial Jaipur foot and eventually learned to dance again with that foot, thereby triumphing over her fate or her misfortune and ultimately becoming a successful dancer in her life.

So, we see in all these films in a way celebration of art, celebration of different dance forms and the passion of the dancer which cannot be muffled, which cannot be defeated by the very many crises that life poses to her, that life makes her confront or deal with. So, there are accidents, there are discriminations, there are you know characters being ostracized and being criticized because they don't believe in caste boundaries, they don't

believe in gender discrimination, but then the passion follows through. What triumphs in the end is the passion to practice the dance form. So, it is the victory of the art over all the different kinds of social impositions, conventional norms and so forth. That is being celebrated in most of these films where they depict the classical theatre and classical dance forms.

In this same note what we were discussing just now, we will see Mahesh Dattani's play *Dance Like a Man* which was written in 1989. So, the kinds of sufferings and depression by both men and women alike who are in the trade of, in the profession of dance, music and performance. Pamela Rooks directed an English language Indian film *Dance Like a Man* which is based on Mahesh Dattani's play by the same name, and it is set in India's post-independence culture. So, the story revolves around the aspirations of this couple who choose dance as their profession because it is also their common passion. During the search for self-identity they become the victims of gender roles and victims of patriarchal values being imposed on them.

So, this film is primarily based on and hinges on familial ties and revolves around the characters of Jayaraj and Ratna and their daughter Lata and her fiancé Vishwas. So, Jayaraj learns and practices as well as performs the Indian classical dance form of Bharatanatyam on stage along with his wife. So, his mind is not influenced or corrupted by the stereotypical norms of the society which foregrounds or which lays specific gender roles for each individual. So, there are certain do's and don'ts laid down by the society but he does not subscribe to all these rules. He is passionate about Bharatanatyam and he pursues his passion.

So, this brings him in a state of individual versus society, wherein we see Jayaraj is trying to establish his individuality, his own passion and his own love for Bharatanatyam in opposition to his father's demand for him to follow a stereotypical gender role. In other words, he is a male, he is a man and he is not supposed to dance. The central theme in this film is Bharatanatyam, which appears as an initiator of the clash between the different characters as well as the conflict within each of these characters. So, Bharatanatyam plays the propellant in the film that defines inter-human relationships as well as the dynamics, the kinds of emotions that each individual undergoes within himself or herself. Dance for Jayaraj is a tool of resistance that he uses to revolt against the will of his father who is trying to constantly control him, and he denies fulfilling the standards that his father sets for him.

So, dancing for Jayaraj started as a hobby or rather as a fancy, which his father never imagined would become a serious profession for him. His father initially thought that such a fancy would not survive for too long. So, here is a snippet from Pamela Rooks' film based on Mahesh Dattani's work *Dance Like a Man* which was made in 2004. We see this man passionate about dance, he is constantly making the mudras, he is being scolded by his father, he has to justify himself and how he enjoys dancing in the company of his wife. Both of them are very good dancers, but they are constantly answerable to the elder members in the society within their family.

They are in a way experimenting with the traditional roles expected of them, the traditional gender roles expected of them by the mainstream society. So, from here we move to our next film *Vanaprastham* made in 1999. It is an Indo-French movie directed by Shaji N Karun, and it is set against the backdrop of Kathakali. The protagonist of this movie named Kunjikuttan is a Kathakali artist. He performs Kathakali dance form and he faces dilemma and confronts a conflict between his personal self and his own stage persona.

So, this has been a theme recurrently available in so many narratives around the artists. The artists have a persona within the frame of their performance that they do, that they enact in front of the public or the audience and then the personal self that they are outside of the garb of the dancer. There is a kind of conflict, a kind of interface/ confrontation between these two personas that they handle simultaneously. There is an identity crisis, a stark identity crisis and social exclusion that Kunjikuttan faces at various stages of his personal and professional lives. A confusion between the real and the fantasy adds to the trauma in the life of this lead character or protagonist.

Everyone questions the existence of Kunjikuttan as an individual, as a family man as well as an artist. So, these are the different aspects that a performer and an artist needs to reconcile within himself. Kunjikuttan views Kathakali as a means of disguising or shrouding his inner tragedies and traumas that he is dealing with in his everyday mundane life. He does not betray or display his personal feelings outside of his dance act. So, the film is about this detachment of an artist from his personal life.

In the middle of the film, it is depicted that Kunjikuttan who is a member from a lower caste, so this dancer hails from a so-called lower caste society or section of society. He is thrashed and forbidden from learning Kathakali because it is believed that Kathakali is an upper-class dance form. It is a divine art which can be performed only by the upper-caste. So, he is tortured, he is physically assaulted for performing Kathakali, which is his passion. The social condition of the Kathakali artists is also vividly depicted in the film.

They are shown to be suffering from extreme poverty. They are impoverished artists basically. They receive only a pittance in compensation for the hard work they are putting in, all the efforts that they render, and there is no sufficient support of any kind provided to them. So, the difficulty is that the so-called lower caste sections encountered in the 1950s as artists and performers are vividly illustrated in Vanaprastham.

So, this is a snippet from Vanaprastham. We can see how much of investment, how much of passion goes just into doing the makeup of the face and then it is a very difficult dance form like we have already discussed in our previous module on classical dance form, to learn Kathakali. So, we see that dance becomes a means of transcending all the social boundaries or even the consequences of transcending these boundaries are kind of depicted in movies like Vanaprastham. Then a 1962 Hindi language drama film like Sahib Bibi Aur Gulam is directed by Abraar Alvi and produced by Gurudutt. This movie is based on Bimal Mitra's 1953 Bengali novel by the same name, which was first filmed in Bengali starring Uttam Kumar and Chhabi Biswas. So, the film contains this Mujra song called Saaqiya Aaj Mujhe Neend Nahi Aayegi, in which Minoo Mumtaz performs the classical dance of Kathak.

We see Kathak in Bollywood films mainly in the ambience, in the setting of the courtesan enacting or performing the Mujra. So, Kathak comes to play in Bollywood mainly through the setting of a courtesan performing or enacting the Mujra. The facial expressions, the hand gestures, the mudras of Kathak have been very well executed in the film, in this song. So, the facial expressions, hand mudras of Kathak have been well executed in this song. The dancer begins by performing a series of graceful and yet very provocative motions with her different parts of body, and then she changes her speed to match the tempo of the accompanying music.

The provocative gestures in this song, the lascivious facial expressions that one sees evokes the culture of the nautch girl from the colonial period. So, we see that the tenderness, the grace, the elegance of Kathak are being replaced by a strong sense of erotica especially in the way Kathak has been portrayed through Bollywood songs through the mujras. So, we see that in this woman dancing, here is a strong erotica, sensuousness informing her dance. She is very suggestive in terms of facial and bodily gestures. It is very interesting how we do not get to see the faces of the background dancers.

They are dancing in shadow because there was a kind of inhibition associated with Mujra performance especially which was associated or which would be called as the dance of the nautch girl, the entertainment dance. Next, we see Rekha plays the title role in a very popular film, the 1981 Indian period musical drama film called Umrao Jaan, which was directed by Muzaffar Ali. The movie recounts the career of a Lucknow courtesan based on the 1905 Urdu classical novel Umrao Jaan Adaa.

J.P. Dutta later remakes this film in 2006 which is a story about the eponymous famous courtesan Umrao Jaan, and he has his protagonist being played by Aishwarya Rai. Both the films portray the lead characters with mystic beauty and unsurpassing beauty while performing Kathak. The stardom of Rekha and Aishwarya Rai has been utilized in these two films and their performance holds the vision of a spectacle and Hindustani classical music informs the lyrics of the ghazals and the Mujras played throughout these movies. So, next we see Devdas, a movie made in 2002 has this Mujra performance called Maar Daala. It is one of the most famous Mujras from the contemporary times.

So, this genre of representing classical Kathak turned iconic with the dancing of the stars as enchantresses, as courtesans with heavy weighted costumes and jewelry. This is a performance by Rekha in Umrao Jaan, where we see that the Nawab is sitting and it is a very moving narrative and following that we see that Aishwarya Rai performs with all her sensuous appeal, a Mujra in the new version of Umrao Jaan. And she is being appreciated by her patrons who sit around her and enjoy the performance. So, next we see a clipping from the song Maar Daala from Devdas, where Chandramukhi has almost been seen as you know, a pure courtesan who worships Devdas like Mirabai and she is trying to attract him through her performance. So, at the turn of the 21st century films with classical dance were only provided to the actresses if the plot narrative required it.

Films such as *Bhool Bhulaiya* show the lead character Vidya Balan as having a psychological illness. She fantasizes about being a court dancer and performing classical dance in her previous life. So, dance is associated with some kind of psychic disorder also. Heroines in contemporary Indian cinema especially in Bollywood scarcely receive extensive training and instruction in classical dance styles. However, Sanjay Leela Bhansali is the only director whose historical dramas whose period films like *Bajirao Mastani* and *Padmavat* have substantial dance sequences and majority of these comprise extremely complex folk dances.

So, here are some of the pictures from the different films made by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. They are very much familiar to us. They are you know stills from *Bajirao Mastani*, from *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*, and *Padmavat*. So, the different folk forms that are being celebrated through dance numbers. I will stop my lecture here today and let us continue with the discussion in our next lecture. Thank you. Thank you.