

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 16

Sufi Tradition II

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. Today we are going to start with a new topic which is the Sufi tradition. In the first lecture on this module we are going to discuss about the provenance, the origin of the Sufi tradition, how it emerged, how it started as a movement from within Islam and then it broke away, it broke off from Islam, it became an offshoot of Islam and the interfaces as well as the conflicts that the mainstream institutionalized Islam and Islamic faith has, you know, with the Sufi tradition. So talking about the Sufi tradition in the 8th century AD, Sufism emerged in a prominent way in three major centers in Iraq, especially in the metropolitan cities of Basrah, Kufah and Baghdad. Then it also, you know, became prevalent in the politically turbulent province of Khurasan, especially in the city of Balkh and finally Sufism became a widespread practice in Egypt. Other early centers apart from Iraq, you know, Khurasan and Egypt include Damascus and the desert wastes of Arabia and Sinai.

So as we can see, the emergence of Sufism, just like the emergence of Islam, is centered on the western part of Asia, also called as the Middle East from the European perspective. So we will take a look at the different stages that Sufism as a tradition has undergone, its emergence, its development into a cult and we are also going to explain the fundamental doctrines and practices in Sufism. So the concept of gnosis, gnosis or intuitive knowledge known as ma'arifah or hikmah. So ma'arifah or hikmah as a means of comprehending or grasping the concept of God was first articulated by a Sufi saint called Dhu-'l-Nun al-Misri.

So the concept of ma'arifah or hikmah comprises intuitive or esoteric knowledge, which leads to a comprehension of the God or the Absolute, and this could be seen or studied in juxtaposition with the knowledge acquired through the sensory experiences, the empirical experiences and through intervention of reason and rationality which the mainstream Islam emphasizes. This rational, you know, understanding or sensory understanding in

Islam is called as ilm or exoteric knowledge in Islam. So Ma'arifah refers to super intellectual knowledge of God, something that cannot be grasped by the five senses, something that is beyond that. So as the concept of Ma'arifah or intuitive knowledge came very close to the process of revelation to Prophet Muhammad, the ulema or the major priests, the prominent priests possessing the knowledge of Islamic law, also known as Shari'ah, became very critical and apprehensive of the Sufis who were claiming to have attained the process of Ma'arifah. Because, simply because they thought that they were contending with the prophet and they were trying to become, you know, other prophets, alternative prophets, you know, preaching their own religions as a departure from Islam.

They perceived this process of Ma'arifah as essentially challenging Prophet Muhammad's process of revelation and a digression from Islam. So during the 10th century AD, some important Sufis in this regard, in this context, as a result of a conflict between mainstream Islam and the emergent Sufism, some Sufis had to sacrifice their lives on charges related to the claim of intuitive knowledge. When they were claiming that they possess or they have attained intuitive knowledge, they were sacrificed. Conflict between the Sufis of different groups or different orders and the ulema or priests that interprets Shari'ah has continued ever since in different forms, through different manifestations. So the concept of fanaa is also central to the Sufi tradition.

What Sufis call as fanaa is the annihilation of the mortal self or absorption of the mortal self into the Godhead. And this was central to the thinking of the Persian Sufi, Abu Yazid al-Bistami. Now, what is fanaa? Let us try to understand. In the state of fanaa, through spiritual annihilation of oneself and immersion into the God, the dichotomy and distinction between 'I' and 'thou' ceases to exist. Fanaa signifies the death of the self-will and self-consciousness, and we can see a parallel concept also found in Hinduism and Buddhism, where the ephemeral self is completely immersed or drowned and the process is called as samadhi, someone that has been immersed so much into God that the body is as good as dead.

The ephemeral self is missing at least for a certain period of time. It is not even there. It is present but it is not functioning. That is to say the ephemeral self is present but not functioning. So another concept or another associated doctrine is that of subsistence or permanence, which is called baqa.

So baqa is love for God; in the Sufi's life it holds a paramount, you know, place and the hope that beyond personal annihilation there will be divine restoration or permanence is an idea that pervades Sufi philosophy. So according to Al-Hujwiri, Abu Sa'id Kharraz was the first to explain the states of fana and baqa, right? So Kharraz explained these two states in Sufi practice for the first time. The doctrine of baqa signifies actual permanence in the real. So it represents a stage in human life, in a Sufi saint's life when a person loses his status in the attributes of the real and achieves the vision of God. Fanaa is therefore defined as total nullification of an individual's ego consciousness and in this stage, there remains only the absolute unity and an absolute awareness prior to the bifurcation of this awareness between subject and object.

One would not be wrong in saying that fanaa is a stage that precedes, you know, one's bifurcation into subject and object. It is beyond subjectivity and objectivity, right? Fana to baqa, the process of moving from fana to baqa comprise a tripartite division- So, a) Sharia, based on intellectual practices

b) Tariqa - the bylane 'path' followed by Sufi saints, c) Haqiqa, which is the ultimate truth or God.

Now something parallel can be observed in the Vedic interception or, you know, understanding of the all powerful God. So, and even, you know, the bhakti movement which is an offshoot of Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma has different paths of reaching, for reaching the God, the absolute. So, it talks about the different yogas. So, the Vedantic philosophy has an analogy with this tripartite division. There are different forms of yoga to attain the absolute or the God.

One is the jnana yoga which is trying to grasp the concept of divinity through knowledge, through scriptures, which is very similar to sharia, right? And then, you know, in the Indic context there is the karma yoga. Karma yoga or through mundane actions, through the right action, right karma, one can realize the God. And finally, you know, the path of devotion. When a person has the least social resources, neither access to knowledge nor access to, you know, karma or a person that has less, you know, economic or social capital can still be totally immersed in God through devotion or bhakti. So jnana, karma and bhakti, three yogas.

And a person becomes a paramhansa, the great swan through, you know, a combination, through an assimilation of all three yogas in him or her which is, you know, an assimilation of jnana yoga, karma yoga and bhakti yoga, which results in the raj yoga. Raj yoga symbolized by the kundalini, the snake, right? Well, we have already discussed this in our modules on bhakti. So coming back to shariah, shariah is very similar to jnan yoga, something you are trying to understand or intercept the concept of God through jnan or intellect, your rationality. And then Tariqah, the byline path followed by sufi sense is somewhat, you know, analogous with the Hindu mystics, the bhakti mystics, the Vaishnav mystics, you know, that are a departure from the ritualistic practices and the codified scriptural descriptions of God and divinity. So tariqaa, the byline path followed by sufi saints is parallel to the offshoots from Sanatana Dharma, the Vedic scriptural description or prescription for understanding gods.

They want to understand or grasp God firsthand without an intervention or mediation of a priest or so they are a departure from the Brahminical tradition. And then we have haqqiqa, the ultimate truth of God which is very similar to the Vedic concept of the Brahmin. So Brahmin and the Islamic concept of Allah that does not have any form are very similar. So we see this shariaa, tariqah, haqqiqa, these stages or these divisions are not external to but ramification of Islam, where there is a salik or wanderer in search of his suluk or goal. After reaching the suluk or the destination, the salik goes through various 'hal' or "state of being" and 'maqoom'/'maqam' or station/stages; possessing these different states and stations are called haqqiqa.

So according to the Sufi scholar Nizami, there can be three distinct stages in the development and growth of the Sufi movement in Islam. The designation of the first phase has been borrowed by Nizami from Islamic scholar Reynold Alleyne Nicholson. According to Nicholson, the Sufis from the early era represented a reaction against the political conditions of the Umayyad empire. So Sufism grew necessarily as a breakaway from the Umayyad caliphate. There was a silent protest against the materialistic tendencies observable among the rulers by the profoundly God-conscious persons that started the Sufi movement.

So the early Sufis visibly protested or broke away from the caliphate and his materialistic tendencies. The prominent Sufis from this first phase or first period include Hasan al Basri, Ibrahim ibn Adham, Abu Hashim Uthman, and Rabi'ah al-Adwiyah al-Basri. So the Sufis from the first phase of the movement focused on their self-purification. Literature on Sufi thoughts began to appear mainly during the 9th and 10th centuries AD

and it is only around 11th century that the Sufis began to organize themselves into groups.

So critic J. Spencer Trimingham's three phase theory is pertinent to reflect on the historical evolution of Sufism. The first phase of Sufism is known as the khanqah stage. In the khanqah stage there is a marked, you know, creative boom, one may say, a boom or an expansion, a growth of creative thought, and the Sufi social organizations are marked or defined by their simplicity. So initially there were a number of, you know, bonds observable between the master and his pupils but later with the khanqah or Sufi dwellings these bonds were further more formalized in the Muslim-dense regions of the world. So initially we see that there are a number of bonds between the master and his pupils but later they were, they became more organized in the form of khanqahs or Sufi dwellings that proliferated in all Muslim-dense regions of the world.

And then we have the second stage or Tariqah, Tariqah that saw the doctrinal evolution and social organization of Sufism in the form of Sufi schools along with the formation of spiritual lineages. Just like we have Gurukuls and lineages, you know, organizations under certain Gurus or Gharanas. In the case of Sufi tradition these Gharanas, these lineages would be called as silsilahs. The practice of formal initiation was also introduced, so the guru would initiate the pupil and in this stage Sufism gradually became institutionalized, it became an institutionalized and recognized practice. In the third and final stage which is known as ta'ifah, Sufism acquired the form of a cult;

Sufism materialized into a cult with exaggerated veneration and even excessive adoration of Sufi practitioners taking place and these practitioners came to be designated as the pirs. The Sufi cults were centered on the spiritual power or blessing, also known as barakah of a single individual, right? That individual had the position of the preceptor. The concept of headship was therefore introduced and Sufi lineages became kind of, you know, starting from one person, they became hereditary, like the Gharana concept. Tombs of great Sufis came to be known as Dargahs and eventually the Dargahs were replacing the khanqahs to a large extent. This phase also witnesses the introduction of astrology and magic among the Sufi circles.

Critic Trimingham's theory has certain inconsistencies in it and lately the recent scholarship has been achieved. They do not really use this theory or these stages very

strictly in researching Sufism. They have been observed as redundant in several ways. Fritz Meier is another critic that periodizes Sufism into four historical phases. Pre-classical Sufism, classical Sufism, post-classical Sufism and neo-classical Sufism.

According to Meier, the 8th century AD constituted the pre-classical phase of Sufism when the woollen garment was widely being worn by the Sufis. In fact, according to some critics, the word literally, literally means 'woollen'. We see that practices such as Sama, Sama referring to devotional musical concert and Dhikr, remembrance of God, repetition of the name of the God were developed during the 9th and 10th centuries AD and the early part of the 11th century AD. And these practices were kind of recognized and became more prevalent during the classical era of Sufism. Sufi ideas found a perceptible degree of public approval and Sufism emerged at one point as a religious movement, a religion in itself.

So a number of great Sufi masters lived during the classical era and during the classical era, you know, composition of Sufi texts and establishment of purpose-specific residential schools of the Sufis were also happening. In the post-classical age of Sufism, which is corresponding to the end of the 11th and 12th as well as the 13th centuries AD, so the post-classical period lasted between 11th and 13th centuries AD, a higher value was being placed upon visionary and occult experiences, the esoteric experiences and practices. The post-classical era, right, which comes after the classical era was also characterized by the veneration of the Sufi shaykhs, the emergence of Sufi orders and the formalization and composition of a number of Sufi prayers and litanies. So the neoclassical age of Sufism is stretched between 13th and 14th centuries AD, neoclassical period that follows the post-classical period and it was distinguished by a revival of the more restrained practices from the classical era of Sufism as well as a return to the fundamental principles of Islam. During this era, the reformers of Sufism that included the Sufis as well as the theologians that are critical of Sufi practices tried to curtail or to tie down the excesses of Sufism and thereby marry or bring back Sufism within the folds of mainstream Islam, Islam which is as a mainstream religion more restrained, more focusing on the mind than on the body.

So there was a way of converging this offshoot of Islam, bringing it back into the folds of Islam. Unlike the earlier phases of Sufism, membership in a number of Sufi orders became prevalent during the neoclassical era. So the phenomenon of Sufism is said to have existed even during the times of Prophet Muhammad and this can be observed as many of his companions or sahabahs attained their own spiritual developments or visions,

spiritual visions by receiving spiritual guidance directly under the prophet. The Sufis from the 7th and 8th centuries AD either lived as isolated individuals or formed loose groups among themselves. Later from 9th century onwards, the Sufi groups came to be called as ta'ifah.

Sufis from the earlier phase included the wandering mendicants. We are going to talk more about fakir, the process of becoming a fakir and these mendicants would travel from one place to another in groups or alone as individuals and sometimes they would even not lead a nomadic life, they would just be leading sedentary lives. With this, I conclude our lecture here today and let us meet in another lecture with another round of discussions. Thank you. Thank you.