

Performative Gender And Religions In South Asia

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Lecture 03

Introducing Performance and its Characteristics in the South Asian Context III

Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Performative Gender and Religions in South Asia. We are discussing performance and its characteristics in the South Asian context. We have already talked about the different characteristics of narratology, Indian narratology as explained by Ayyappa Paniker. Now, we are going to continue our discussion and explain, understand the genre of epic.

So, epic is marked through the characteristics of a long, eloquent, and grandiose style of writing. The epic hero is essentially a larger-than-life character, who strikes out in a crowd or among other characters because of certain extraordinary features in his traits. It could be in terms of physical appearance or in terms of his capacity, especially the capacity to eradicate the evil that makes him heroic, right? And the hero's aura creates a panoramic, you know, dimension as such epic is all about, you know, surreal or larger than real. It cannot be really understood in terms of the parameters that define the modern life and its values.

Epic encompasses a panoramic space both literally and metaphorically. So, similarly the epic hero is someone with extraordinary traits. There are certain basic, you know, petty or trite elements also present in this epic hero that need to be transcended. The obstacles brought about by the destiny of the epic hero and how he transcends these obstacles becomes the plot of the epic. So, for example, he is separated from his beloved, he has to kill a demon in order to save a community are some of the very common tropes that we find in primary epics.

And how, you know, these hurdles, these obstacles that come on the way of the fate are met and transcended by the hero constitutes a plot of the epic. So, how does time elapse in an epic? Why is epic such a long narrative? Visual epics are very, very long. So, it is

about the trysts with destiny, how the destiny offers certain hurdles and how the hero overcomes those hurdles with his sheer valor and bravery. So, we also were talking about how in the Indian context specifically and also in the Greco-Roman context to a certain extent, epic refers to and, you know, throws light into a community-centric life where humans are not self-centric; it is not about the individual 'I', but about the 'we' and the 'we' being above the 'I'. So, destiny of the epic hero is a social or communal establishment, which creates a major resistance.

Hero is not fighting a demon or a rakshasa to, you know, achieve any kind of selfish ends. It is a way of safeguarding the community. It is a community-centric goal. So, it would not be wrong to say that the hero's fate is tied with the fate of the entire community from where he comes, where he belongs. This process of destiny is revealed gradually through the plot, the feat, the exploits that the hero has to achieve, the hero needs to attain.

And from here we have so many archetypal motifs, archetypal characters emerging from the epics themselves, the idea of the wise old man, the idea of the quest, you know, and then the idea or the archetype of the young person being an apprentice, being trained in order to meet the larger, you know, struggle or in order to achieve the larger goal. This is something we see when Rama and Laxmana are trained in the sages' Ashrama, and they are taken there in order to destroy the demons that are, you know, a threat to the sages. So, all these archetypes keep coming back. How a person as a human form of Lord Vishnu is born in order to eradicate evil, right? That is something very much present in the epic Ramayana. So, the epic is always marked by the intervention of gods, although the nature of divine intervention in Iliad and Ramayana are not quite similar.

They are overlapping in some instances, but in many instances they are a departure from one another. Now, epic gives a lot of importance to conveying a moral message; at the heart of all epics, there is a moral message, there is edification, thereby like I said edifying or teaching, the purpose of teaching the society from which the epic is born, from where the epic has generated, becomes central to the idea of this genre, you know. It is not only entertainment, it is about teaching a society, the community from where it has emerged. The message is conveyed through a common, you know, juxtaposition of good and evil.

Epic reflects the establishment of a particular clan or dynasty, thereby allegorizing history through its intervention. So, in other words, epic belongs to a time when formal historiographical documentation would not happen, right? We did not have newspapers, so how would you know what the society looked like and what the society behaved and thought like? Epics would be a mirror reflection in many ways of the contemporary society, right? Where a dynasty, a king's regime and the social values are depicted and celebrated, right? How the society used to function in the ancient times or in a particular era would be shown in the epic. So, epic is also a way of, you know, commemorating a nation at a point in time. It is a way of, you know, remembering a nation's past, right? And, you know, documenting about a people, a civilization. Epic encompasses a space for dharma...so, morality. We have talked about edification and moral message. So, this is especially very much evident and visible in the case of the Indian epic. It would be wrong to call Ramayana and Mahabharata as epic. Strictly speaking, they are mahakavyas. So, the space for dharma, the room for dharma, explicating dharma is, you know, momentous.

It is very kind of, dharma plays or gains a paramount importance. And this is more, like I said, in the case of India as compared to that of Europe. Epic hero has a large scale of tasks to accomplish and the fruits of these tasks are borne by the people of the society from where he has come. The hero's fate and the society's fate cannot be decoupled. They are tied to each other.

So, now we also see that it is very difficult to understand or to kind of categorize a work like Ramayana, Valmiki's Ramayana in terms of the western concepts of lyrical mode or narrative mode. It is in a way, it is a mix of both these modes. Why? Because how did Ramayana originate? What is the inception of Ramayana? It is believed that the inception of Ramayana's plot happened when Valmiki witnessed a pair of birds engaged in amorous acts and a hunter killing one of the birds in the pair. So, and this generates, this engenders a karuna rasa, a soka inside Valmiki having witnessed that one of the birds in an amorous act has been killed. There is a soka inside him that arouses.

And the soka is expressed in the form of shloka. So, a repercussion occurs in Valmiki through shloka. And this shloka has rhyme as well as rhythm and musicality. It is a supta padavadhya versification in which Ramayana is spontaneously, you know, kind of created by Valmiki. So, although this shloka is form-wise closer to the lyrical mode, like I said it has its rhythm and musicality, so it is very much akin to the lyrical mode.

The source of this emotion, you know, the soka or karuna rasa that had been propelled by this event of a bird's death is not happening within Valmiki. So, it is happening, it is an event out there in the external physical nature. On the other hand, lyric, strictly speaking lyrical mode is a personal feeling that spurs emotions from within the author. So, lyric is not evoked or provoked from outside, it is happening from within. So, Ramayana has this mixed characteristic where it has its musicality and versification, its rhythmic quality on the one hand, on the other, it is not a consequence of personal feeling, it is evoked and provoked by an external event in nature.

So, it is lyrical and yet not quite a part of the lyrical mode. It is a very mixed genre, it is also part of narrative mode. So, what is a narrative? Let us try to understand and grasp these basic concepts. Narrative is essentially a concatenation of events, a cause that precedes an action and the action which in turn is a consequence. So, a series of causality defines a narrative.

The only motive of the narrative is to express time through verbalizing temporality. And what is temporality? Temporality is the way, you know, events play in time. So, the nexus between events and action defines temporality. Time is referred to usually in relation to the narrator's experience and these experiences are embedded in a continual form, in a continuous span of time. How events have happened within a given period of time defines temporality and the travel of events in time make up or makes up a narrative.

So, thus narrative deploys language in order to verbalize the events that occur during a period or through a period of time. And lyric is incumbent on a state of emotion that may last for an indefinite period of time. So, although lyric is a concatenation of experience uttered or articulated in the form of language, it is not restrained to have a very close link with the external flow of physical time. Put simply, lyric is a very internalized process. It is a very, it is a very psychic process.

It is a very personalized feeling. It is a fruit of personalized feeling. So, although it is concretized in terms of words, in terms of language or through language, it does not necessarily have intricate link or it does not sit very, you know, concretely on the external

physical time. It can actually take off from the way external physical time flows. It is not answerable to or have to play in tandem with the external physical time.

Now, we are going to talk about itihasa and mahakavya, both of which are conceptions rooted in the Indian culture, in the South Asian culture. So, the term itihasa we have to understand is not the same as history. 'Itihasa' in Sanskrit means 'thus was a tradition'. So, it talks of an accepted documentation of tradition or accepted version of tradition which may or may not be a verified form, right.

So, history is more fact-based. History can go back to and point to, you know, specific dates in the past. On the other hand, itihasa is harping more on the mytho-historical. "Thus was a tradition". The tradition thrives because people believe in it. So, this goes back to Paniker's explanation regarding how, you know, religions are formed, how the past is shaped through a collective consciousness, a collective faith.

So, for example, while the leaders, the great prophets of Abrahamic religions such as Moses, Jesus and Prophet Muhammad were born and they have specific dates to their birth and their death, that is not quite the same with Rama, right. Rama or Krishna, they are very popular icons. They are much beloved in the Indian subcontinent, in the Indian context and they exist because the majority of people want them to exist. They believe that they existed. We cannot, you know, trace back to specific dates, but they are very populist figures.

So, it is also a case of human agency that plays a very important, a crucial role as far as itihasa is concerned. Tradition, a way of life, right, what they call in the Indian languages, Sanskriti, right, the way of life, you know, the conventions, they are defined by the majority of the people. And when people want these icons to exist, they do exist, right. Now, Sanskrit critic Bhama advocates features of the different types of literary art forms. So, how does he define Mahakavya? Any art piece that has all the rasas and bhavas and is swargabaddha, right, such a piece is Mahakavya.

Next, what is Natya according to Bhama? That which is to be enacted or Abhinayarth, something that is meant to be enacted, Abhinayarth is Natya. So, next he is talking about Anibaddha kavya, the small divided kavya that is not united by swarga, and hence it is a

departure from Mahakavya. Next, Akhyayika. Akhyayika is a kind of narration or narrative where the hero himself unfolds the plot, and hence it is presented in the first person. So, it is through the hero's version that the actual meaning or Pralabdhartha is discerned.

As opposed to Akhyayika, we have Katha tradition. Katha is usually based on creative, you know, potential or the creative faculty of the artist, it is emerging from the Kalpanik, the imaginary. Since the second person narrator is present, the imagination plays around with or might meddle with actuality and the representation might be a manipulative form of Pralabdhartha. So, in the classical form, a Mahakavya consists of a number of comparatively short cantos, right. We were talking about this specific pattern in which a Mahakavya is built in our previous lecture, I remember, where there is a circle within the larger circle, and each canto is like a smaller circle which represents or which contains the crux, the essence of the larger circle. It is a miniature form of the Mahakavya at large. So, each canto is composed in a meter appropriate to its particular subject matter. The subject matter of the Mahakavya is taken in from the epic. And so, most Mahakavyas display certain set pieces, right.

These set pieces are similar both in the western notion of epic and the indigenous Mahakavya we have in this part of the world. So, these set pieces are present both in epic and Mahakavya where descriptions, vivid descriptions of cities, of oceans, mountains, seasons, games, festivals, weddings, embassies, wars are very poetically, very intricately and vividly in a graphic manner they are described. One characteristic of the genre is that the strophes or stanzas, although they are intended to be part of a narrative sequence, can stand on their own, right. So, this is something we were, we have already discussed- how the Upakhyan's certain episodes, certain sub-narratives can be taken out from Mahabharata and they can stand on their own, they can form a story in their own, right. And they have been so many poets and artists that have time-immemorially experimented with, you know, these sub-narratives.

The sub-plots or the Upakhyans such as that of Ahalya, there are oeuvre of plays and you know feminist rewritings, understandings of the Upakhyans or the, you know, the chapter of Ahalya.. Rama you know meeting Ahalya. Similarly, the chapter of Arjun and Chitrangada, they become, you know, narratives, autonomous stories in their own, right. They are episodes that can stand on their own, you know, even outside of the context of the larger frame of Ramayana or Mahabharata. Each of these Upakhyans convey one idea or develop one image, not explicitly but through double meaning and inference.

Similarly, we see how, you know, the epics have played a great role in shaping the sense of what religion is, how spirituality is defined in South Asia.

We will talk more about Ramacharitmanas. It would suffice for us to know right now how, you know, Tulsidas Ramacharitmanas is elevating Prince Rama to Lord Rama. And then we have, you know, we have the Chalisa, the Chaupai is being written which becomes part of the rituals, part of the religious, you know, routine of the common people in India, right. They are chanted, they are chanted not individually, usually in a collective milieu. And so, the auditory factor, the auditory experience becomes very important where one person, you know, reads the Chaupai and others are sitting and repeating or listening together. So, it is.. once again it is a community affair, right.

So, these stanzas, these Upakhyaans, like I said, can be taken out from the larger frame and they can stand on their own. There have been many creative as well as, you know, religious, spiritual interventions into the Mahakavya. Traditionally, there are several Mahakavyas including two by Kalidasa and then one each by Bhairavi, Magha and Sriharsa. So, some critics would emphasize that the preoccupation with technique and technicality and the triumph of the form over the substance has led to the evanescence or finally the disappearance of the genre of epic and Mahakavya, right. They emphasize too much on the stylistic measures and devices rather than on the content.

So, Mahakavya therefore, one could define as a certain sequence of events in a particular language and a particular mode accommodating the Jangshir or accommodating the combination, the mishmashing of different rasas and bharas. So, when an individual is able to transcend his individual thought and enter universality, Mahakavya happens. Mahakavya is essentially a reflection of this, you know, this collective world, this collective shared society. Epic is also quite similar when an author is projecting his own feelings through intervening the cultural matrix and ethos of a given community through his own interpretation, when an author is interpreting how a civilization and the people used to be at a given point in time. It is through the, you know, it is necessarily through this poet, this orator's lens that we get to know about the civilization, through his interpretation we get to know about the ethos of a particular community that epic has formed, right.

So, we will also take a very quick look at the different, you know, terms and terminologies used for the different art forms. So, Bhama's Anibaddha Kavya is corresponding to Dandin's Muktak, Muktak which is defined as small divided kavya and that is not united by a swarga, right. And both Muktak and Anibaddha Kavya, which are very/ quite similar, they are, you know, opposed to the idea of Mahakavya. Next, poems with five verses are termed as kulang. Anthology of verses written by a number of authors is called kosha.

And then we also need to understand that kavya in Mahakavya does not so much refer to a mood or a genre as it refers to a gun or a quality, the quality of versification, right, or the quality of poeticality of having lyrics and musicality, right. Next, verse refers to Geet or Gatha, whereas kavya is poetry. So, kavya in Mahakavya is a gun or quality rather than a mood or a genre, and it refers to the poeticality, the lyrical quality of an art piece rather than, you know, rather than a genre, a type, ok. And then verse refers to Geet or Gatha, whereas kavya is poetry. Kavya is composed of swargabhadha sloka, where specific words are used.

So, kavya refers to, you know, swargabhadha sloka, which are very specific words used in Mahakavya. So, in terms of language, Dandin's division is as follows. Mahakavya should be written in Sanskrit, Skandak should be written in Prakrit, Osar should be written in Apabhraṅsha and Natak and Natak should be composed in Mishra form, where all these, you know, different languages are, you know, meeting and there are interfaces, interesting interfaces and, you know, conglomeration and blending and experimenting. So, in terms of Dandin, Mahakavya should be written in Sanskrit, Skandak should be written in Prakrit, Osar in Apabhraṅsha and Natak should be written in Mishra, where all these languages, you know, interface and there are some very interesting blending and experimentations. So, by the time Dandin is writing his critic, Natak is already outside the realm of Mahakavya.

They have very separate entities. On the other hand, Bhamma would accommodate Natak within what he calls as Abhinayarth. We are going to continue our discussion on the same topic in our next class. Thank you. Thank you.