



Representation of Women and Gender in the Pranami Discourses and Narratives of The Mughal Period

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Abstract

Narratives and discourses in the Pranami literary traditions, Bani (Utterances of Pran Nath, prominent figure of Pranami 'sect' in 17th-century India) and Bitak (Hagiographical compositions of close disciples of Pran Nath), depict both overtly and covertly various incidents involving images of women and gender relations in 17th- and 18th-century South Asia. Through these representations in the Pranami narratives, this paper attempts to scrutinize the intricacies of gender relations in which identities and meanings are constructed in multiple and layered ways around descriptions of incidents. This paper also investigates nuanced and contextualized accounts of how the representation of women and gender in the Pranami discourses and narratives of the Mughal period reflects a 'progressive' and inclusive perspective that values the agency and contributions of women in religious and social spheres. In the 17th and 18th centuries in Mughal India, including the context of regional kingdoms like Bundelkhanda, this paper explores how the Pranami literary traditions, which emphasized the equality of all individuals, regardless of gender, caste, religious, and social status, imagined a world of social, political, and religious relationships that could be appropriated within a wider framework of given contexts and situations. This approach stands in contrast to the prevailing gender norms of the time and provides insight into alternative visions of gender equality and inclusivity during the Mughal period.

Keywords: Representations, Constructions, Gender, Women, Pranami Ideas, Mughal Period, Indian History

Introduction

In relation to Mughal India and regional kingdoms like Bundelkhanda in the 17th and 18th centuries, Pranami literary traditions are significant historical records that emphasize the equality of all human beings, regardless of gender, caste, religious, and social status. What was also imagined in these literary accounts was a world of social, political, religious, and gender relationships that could be appropriated within different contexts and situations. The Pranami approach in the context of gender relations stands in contrast to the prevailing gender norms of the time and provides insight into alternative visions of gender equality and inclusiveness during the Mughal period. Research on gender in Mughal South Asia has been largely on themes like the nature of harem, elite women, and constructions of elite masculinity. Firstly, the function of the harem was highlighted in restricting the political, economic, and social roles of women. Secondly, it was also debated how normative masculinity was at work during the Mughal period, depending on the likes and dislikes of the Mughal emperors in the broader social and political

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contexts.

Mughal India, Gender and Historiography

The representation of women and gender relations in modern historiography for the 17th century has been studied from two different perspectives. One approach has mainly dealt with themes like status of women in a particular time period and role and contribution of women to various spheres like society, culture, economy and politics. Second paradigm, a recent one, was embedded in reading the discursive text of various narratives and literary texts in connection with the ideas of 'self' and 'other' in relation to the context of European history. This approach has encompassed themes like chastity and sensuality of women in South Asia and beyond, notions of masculinity, the practice of sati, inclination of women from various communities, to mention a few. The theme of harem has also been argumentatively dealt with by scholars like Ruby Lal by confronting its stereotypical perception by showing that the image and role of women were complex and gender relations not only worked but also evolved during this time. She has challenged the notion of separate 'public' and 'private' spheres in the early Mughal context underscoring the dynamic nature of political activities within the harem and also significant role of harem in the making of the Mughal imperious. However, from Akbar's time onwards, she argued, the situation has dramatically changed.¹ In contrast to Lal's argument, Balabanlilar has emphasized that the Central Asian traditions were continued by elite Mughal women in economic, social and political life of the empire as a part of "greater Timurid cultural and social legacy".² It has also been maintained by scholars like Gregory Kozlowski that in spite of practices of elite seclusion, Mughal women have been instrumental in various public and religious works as part of their patronage culture for mosques, shrines and caravanserais.³ The identity of woman has also been studied with the multiple notions of 'self' and 'other'.⁴ The historiographical focus on women of recent times has been on the dimensions of 'masculine/feminine'. Rosalind O' Hanlon has argued that the notions of masculinity and morality from Akbar's time onwards restricted women more in the courtly and state activities.⁵ Many of these studies have taken up the themes of either Mughal women or Non-Mughal elite women as the subject of their research. Moosvi has provided an insight into female labour both within elite households and outside of it ranging from building construction and agriculture work, textile production and inn-keeping to dance performance and domestic work.⁶ Historians have also attempted to understand and explain seventeenth-century texts like travel accounts in case of women's images and gender relations in terms of 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' as separate religious identities.⁷ Apart from these involvements and interactions, there was also a world of women and intricacies of gender relationship which were interacting and evolving during 17th century India that can be understood and analysed by reading pranami literary texts. In the lack of the female voice and its representation in the historical sources of 17th century India⁸, although there are literary records from European travellers like Bernier⁹, Tavernier¹⁰ and Manucchi¹¹, to mention a few, and Persian sources which were penned by courtiers and members of the Mughals, pranami literary traditions and narratives provide various incidents involving women in their everyday life and activities in multiple forms. The European travellers have mentioned in their accounts that there was a clear-cut division between the public domain of politics and private sphere of women.¹² The images and activities of women in the descriptions of the pranami texts are helpful to understand and analyse the nuanced dimensions of gender relations in 17th-18th century India. The bani and bitak compositions of the pranami literary traditions can also be utilized in the case of connected histories¹³ because they provide descriptions of scattered nature in the context of time and space in terms of gender relations.

Pranami 'Sect' and the Mughal Empire

The Pranami 'sect', which emerged and evolved during the Mughal period, had a distinct perspective on the representation of women and the construction of gender relations. This inclusive approach is reflected in the discourses and narratives of the Pranami ideas and practices, which often represented women as active participants in religious and social life. In Pranami discourses, women were portrayed as spiritual seekers and devotees, with the ability to attain enlightenment and spiritual fulfilment as well. The Pranami ideas did not emphasize the external markers of identity such as gender or social status. Rather women were encouraged to actively engage in religious practices, including prayer and participation in community rituals. The Pranami tradition's approach to gender representation challenged traditional

patriarchal norms and provided a more inclusive and egalitarian vision of society in 17th-18th century India. Women were seen as equal partners in both spiritual and social endeavours.

During the Mughal period, women were portrayed in various roles and positions in society and politics. Representation of women in art, literature and historical records provides insight into their image, status and influence during the Mughal era. In the Mughal court, women held crucial roles as queens, princesses, and other female relatives of the emperor. Their influence was significant behind the scenes and were involved in political decision-making also. In art and literature produced in the Mughal court and outside, a typical image of women was often portrayed as symbols of beauty, grace, and femininity. They were also depicted in various settings like in gardens, palaces, and domestic scenes, stressing their roles as wives, mothers, and companions. Women were at times also celebrated for their intellect and talents as many Mughal emperors patronized female poets, musicians, and artists. But what is more crucial in this context is that the representation of women in the Mughal period was influenced by the existing patriarchal norms and societal expectations. Women in general were expected to adhere to conventional gender roles and were often restricted to the domestic sphere. However, elite women of the ruling class had access to education, cultural pursuits, and opportunities for personal expression. On the whole, the representation of women in the Mughal period reflects an intricate relationship of power dynamics, social norms, and cultural values. While women were often celebrated, to some extent, for their contributions and achievements, their *agency*, *autonomy* and *gender dimensions* were also constrained by the prevailing gender norms of the time.

Notions of the Image of Women and Gender Relations in Pranami Literary Texts

There are references, descriptions and events in the pranami literary traditions which can be contextualized in the case of images of women and gender relations during 17th-18th century India. Descriptions involving women and gender relations can be found right from the last days of Devchand who was guru of Pran Nath. Devchand, as is mentioned in pranami literature, instructed Pran Nath to carefully search and find those who are ignorant beings (souls) worldwide and enlighten them. But what is more important here is that the responsibility Pran Nath was invested in also came with the issue of the successorship (Gaddi) which was contested by Biharidas, son of Devchand, from 1655 AD onwards. The issue of successorship became intense between Pran Nath and Biharidas and in the course of time, created differences and controversies between them. At the same time, on account of the dispute in relation to the issue of successorship, it also became clear how the image of women were perceived by both Biharidas and Pran Nath. Biharidas was more patriarchal and conservative and wanted to put women and lower castes outside of pranami following but Pran Nath vehemently opposed him. Scholars like Krishnadutta who have worked on pranami ideas and community were of the opinion that Biharidas was not happy when Devchand did not give him any responsibility.¹⁴ Finally, Devchand made Pran Nath his religious successor in samvat 1712 (4th September, 1655 AD). On the same day, as mentioned, Devchand died. Apparently, it was an issue related to internal organisation but within a larger context, what was involved and embedded here was political, social and gender contexts as well because the disagreement and consequently conflict between Biharidas and Pran Nath depicted their attitude towards image and status of women. In this context, Beetak writers explain the above development in the following way:

सम्वत् सत्रह बरोतरे ,भाँदो मास उजाला पख
चतुर दसी बुधवारी भई, हुए धनी अलख¹⁵

Bihari was not happy when Pran Nath was made the successor of Devchand. So, to solve this dispute so that tension between them and among the followers, Pran Nath left the Gaddi for the sake of Biharidas and engaged him in spreading the religious ideology. Navrang swami¹⁶ mentions that three years after the death of Devchand, Bihari was made successor in samvat 1715 (1658 AD). But both Laldas and Brajbhooshan mention that Bihari became successor in the same year samvat 1712 Ashwin Mas (1655 AD). After the death of Devchand and a dispute with Biharidas, Pran Nath accepted the wizarat of Jamnagar. Although he became the wazir of Jamnagar, he had discussions with the followers of the pranami Sampradaya ('sect') almost every day. As mentioned, Biharidas was jealous of the increasing

attachment of the followers to Pran Nath. In the course of time, Biharidas also made it compulsory for every follower to attend the dharmacharcha (religious discussion) regularly. Those who did not follow the rules had to leave the sampradaya. According to a legend, one day a follower from a far away village was punished based on the same rule. The same follower kept on standing outside Bihari's house for nine days without any food. On the 10th day, he visited Pran Nath's house but at that time, Pran Nath was in the court. Phoolbai, Pran Nath's wife, gave him suggestions, along with food. After having heard of this, Bihari lost his temper and ordered his guard not to permit Pran Nath to enter the temple. When Pran Nath reached there, he was told by Bihari that he had to leave his wife permanently. Pran Nath followed the orders of his guru's son. Phoolbai went on fasting and finally died. Before her death, she said that the place where she was given the last rite was to be washed with the foot of her husband, according to Krishnadutta Shastri.¹⁷ So on the basis of this reference, it can also be pointed out that patriarchal norms and values where male as a husband were treated as master were in practice during that time. Even, at times, Pran Nath was stick to the patriarchal norms and organisational rules which were against the agency and autonomy of women and created hierarchical and unequal relationship between male and female, on the one hand while between husband and wife, on the other. Furthermore, on account of some climatic disturbances, the task of the dissemination of religious ideas was stopped.

A letter has been sent here to Pran Nath by Bihari from Jamnagar. Through this letter, three rules were said to be followed within the pranami organisation as the core ideas which depict how women should be treated and perceived. The communication between them also reflected the nature and complexities of gender relations that were taking place during that time. There are various but scattered incidents where nuanced understanding about the image of women and gender relations can be contextualized. It also depicted the state of mentalities of religious figures of how they perceived women differently in different contexts. The verse in relation to the conversation between Biharidas and Pran Nath is as follows:

हम तुम बिन यह तारतम, कबहू कहे न कोई
नीच जाति को तारतम, कहिये नाहि दोई
पुन को उन विधवा वधु, ता प्रति कहोन आप
ये तीनो बाते करो, उत्तम बढे प्रताप¹⁸

There are also verses as above in this text as follows:

एक तो नीच जात को, सुनाईयो नही तारतम
दूजे रांड सूत्री को, तीजे कहे हम तुम

The above verse can be read in the following way:

1. The lower section of society is not permitted to listen and recite the Tartam Mantra (verses from Kuljam Swaroop).
2. Even the widows do not have any right to listen to it.
3. Nobody other than you (Pran Nath) and me (Bihari) has the right to take over the process of initiation.

But Pran Nath in his reply to Biharidas opposed all the above norms, as is mentioned in the following verse:

देवचन्द्र के धर्म को, हरिदे करो वचिार
उत्तर जो त्रय बात को, स मुमनि परे तब सार/
बाह्य द्रष्टा को छोड़ के, नजर कर निजि नूर
देख्यो नति अंकुर को, बक स्यो तहाँ हजुर/
प्रगट लखी है बात तुम, भवन वधु कुल जान
परखी ताकवासना दयो तारतम ज्ञान/
विधवा दारा वह हती, नीच असुर की जात
नजर करी अंकुर पर, बाई रही सुजात¹⁹

It is also mentioned that Pran Nath, after having given an example of Devchand who had educated one Khojibai, replied to a question that there was not any barrier or discrimination in the process of education or initiation which Devchand had done so far as widows, male-female and varna (caste). Pran Nath sent a text as a response in the form of 'Kalash' which was written in Surat. But Bihari was irritated, as mentioned, by this response and he even returned that text from Jamnagar as is in the following verse:

तुम संबंध हमारो छोड़्यो, आत्संबंध श्रीदेवचन्द्र से जोड़्यो
ग्रही सबे उनकी तुम बाते, छोड़ी सब हमरी वखियाते²⁰

Therefore, at the request of his followers, Pran Nath again started the task of spreading religious ideas. The point of disagreement, as stated, is the difference in the outlook between Pran Nath and Bihari, as Bihari was a traditionalist. There has been a clear dispute between them from Surat. Despite this, Pran Nath kept on continuing the task of 'dharma' (Pranami ideas) without any expectation.

On the basis of above references and verses in pranami literary texts, the representation and construction of image of women and gender relations in the Pranami discourses and narratives 17th and 18th century Mughal period is intricate and multifaceted. While some texts represent women as submissive and obedient to men, others portray them as powerful and prominent figures. The Pranami ideas also challenged conventional gender roles by allowing women to participate in religious activities and attain spiritual enlightenment. Through a careful analysis of these texts, we can gain a deeper and wider understanding of the social and cultural norms and mentalities that prevailed during the Mughal period. What can also be contextualized by reading these versified texts within larger contexts are the ways in which image of women gender relations were contested and re-imagined by religious movements like the Pranamis in 17th century world. What is more critical and relevant in terms of evolution and growth of religious ideology in pre-modern world, particularly in 17th and 18th century India is that how images, meanings, mentalities and networks were imagined, constructed and represented in relation to social, political and religious contexts. Ultimately, this research provides an alternative insight into the significance of examining Non-Persian Non-Official vernacular literary texts from a gendered perspective, in order to explore the diverse experiences and images of women during 17th and 18th century Mughal India.

Endnotes

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