

Tamasha: The vanishing folk art form of Maharashtra

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Abstract

Since ancient time's Folk art has mesmerized the audiences with its ideal fusion of music, drama, dance, humor and was thought-out as the paramount form of entertainment. Folk art was also used to create awareness and give messages in a language that the rural population connected with easily and soulfully. The advent of technology and abundant choices of sophisticated glamorous amusement like Radio, Television and Internet entertainment has gradually decreased the demand and audience for the folk art, is steadily slipping over the years. The traditional *Tamasha* has also taken a back seat and lost its place in the minds of the loyal audience. This paper draws attention to the fading demand for this ancient folk art and its direct impact on the artists who lost their main source of livelihood.

Keywords: Tamasha, Folk art, Maharashtra

Introduction

India is well known on the global front as the land of rich cultural heritage and is famous for its historical monuments, traditional customs and its versatile as well as wide-ranging extra ordinary diverse ethnicity. Our colossal country has its unique artistic and customary identity which is exhibited through the prevailing forms of art and music, having its own style and pattern of art, known as folk art. The folk art of India is very ethnic and simple, as well as colorful and vibrant at the same time to speak volumes about our country's rich inspirational inheritance. The folk art of India has a worldwide audience and an unvarying demand in the international market because of its artistic depiction and authentic display of rural talent.

India has numerous regional dances that represent the culture and traditions of that area like Bhangra of Punjab, Dandiya and Garba of Gujarat, Bihu dance of Assam, etc, in which ,the common man can participate and enjoy. But when we talk about folk form of music and dance there are trained artists, performing as a legacy that is passed from one generation to another, for

a steadfast audience ,as it was the only means of entertainment in the past. One of Maharashtra's pioneering folk forms, *Tamasha*, is also one of the most entertaining one in the country. *Tamasha* is one of most expressive forms of art through a lot of singing and dancing accompanied with it and has been around since years.ⁱ

Origin of *Tamasha*

Tamasha is one of the most popular folk art with its origin deep rooted in the rural pockets of Maharashtra. The countryside populace had a very hard working day with majority of them earning their livelihood by farming and agriculture related jobs in addition to driving bullock carts, ploughing the fields, breaking stones. Tamasha was the ideal stress buster as well as a very important supply of entertainment. The creator of Tamasha is actually Ram Joshi (1762 A.D. to 1812 A.D.), a very dynamic persona and was proficient in Sanskrit and Marathi and in fact responsible to design this theatrical form. Ram Joshi along with another massive personality Moropanta, with an expertise in contemporary Marathi writing, together combined their artistic expertise resulted in a new cadenced type of singing today popularly called Lavani. Ram Joshi endeavoured to channelise this singing for moral purposes.ⁱⁱ

Expressed through theatre, Tamasha, is a style which is an artistic combination of a regular play, a musical and dance. Tamasha is known for its double meaning lyrics and borderline erotic movements and themes. Since Tamasha is performed as an earthy dance drama, which many a times degenerated to a crude level, was looked down upon by the educated and sophisticated strata of the Maharashtrian society.ⁱⁱⁱThe artists who performed Tamasha are called 'kalavanths', who have been performing this art since the period of Peshwas and ongoing till today. The Tamasha companies, popularly known as (phads) run with precise professionalism and a few are aided and recognized by the government to save this old folk art from dying. The Phads are like a close knit family and live together in addition to, is a mobile theatre that goes to different regions to perform. The word 'Tamasha' is Persian and means 'to have fun or to play'. Today, this word is commonly used in Hindi, Marathi, Kannada and Urdu. Again, some have researched the origin of the word Tamasha to Turkish language that has entered into Urdu and finally borrowed from Urdu to Marathi.^{iv}

Tamasha is so very entrenched in the interior pockets of Maharashtra for more than eight-nine centuries and it's not easy to affirm when Tamasha as a folk art was first staged before the audiences. The academic or the urbanites refer to it as Lok Natya of Maharashtra, where, in rural areas they still call it Tamasha. This form of art is very much influenced by various other art forms like ghazals, kirtan, kathak dance , to name a few. The most popular classifications of Tamasha are dholki bhaari and the older form is Sangeet baari which includes more dance and music than drama. Generally Tamasha was performed for and by the low caste community and the audience was also from the same strata of the society. The so called educated and high class society stayed away from the Tamasha as it was believed that watching this art form would damage their reputation and bring a bad name to them and their family. The accessory instruments used like Dhol or Dolki and Tuntune, a conventional string instrument always played in the Tamasha were not even used by upper caste or rather was not allowed to learn to play them.

In the early days the low schedule castes were trained to play different parts in the theatrical depiction of Tamasha. Previously, the males and boys played the female roles as very less women performed in Tamasha, and slowly as times changed, women and girls stepped in. Traditional Tamasha format consisted of dancing-boys known as Nachya, who also played women's roles, a poet-composer known as Shahir, who played the traditional role of Sutradhar or a jester known as Songadya, who compeers' the show.^v Apart from the artists who carried forward this art as a part of their family bequest there were also many uneducated artists who joined the Tamasha Phads to earn money to survive.^{vi} This art is also famous for bringing out the delicate and sensuous side of women, who always played the main role with other dancers and men supporting her throughout the performance on the stage.

Performance and Costumes

The dancers normally are dressed in the traditional nine yard saris that were worn as a daily wear by women in those days all over the state. The only difference was the saris were more expensive and had bold colors with a lot of zari artwork to attract the audiences and make the dancers look glamorous. To compliment the ensemble the jewellery the dancers wore was a kamarpatta

(waist-belt) along with flamboyant jewellery that included an ornate necklace, big earrings, lot of colorful glass bangles and last but not the least ghungroos tied around the feet. Many times the main dancer dressed in a different colour than her supporting dancers to catch attention and let the public know that she was the star of that evening. The performance of Tamasha was held anywhere, sometimes in the village square or the courtyard of a house or even in an open field or the modern stage. Once the entire orchestra together with the singers came on the stage the Tamasha began, always making sure that the crowd is good enough for the show to start. Customarily the program lasted for 2-3 hours and was kick started after rendering an invocation to Ganapati, the favorite deity of Maharashtra. After which the entire group moves on the stage, the Suthradhar sings the invocation which is called gaana and then joined by another important character called the songadya (the Vidushaka or jester). The gaana is followed by the gavalana or gavalanee. Here the devotional mood is almost dispensed with and is replaced by an atmosphere of mundane love, teasing and titillation. The gavalana is not a male actor in female garb, but is actually a woman who starts a dialogue with the Suthradhar.^{vii}

The entry of the woman character sent a thrill of anticipation in the spectators. The main female artiste entered the stage with her back to the audience, both her hands stretched above her head, holding the pallu of her sari. This increased the eagerness of the audience, which was predominantly male, to see the face of the dancer. She is followed all over the stage by the musicians. The female dance's refrain aaika ho!aikaa (listen, all of you) has made Lavani presentation very popular all over Maharashtra state. The crowd watched completely enticed and mesmerized as the dancer's lips broke into songs of sensual desire. If the dancer and her troupe touched the raw pulse of the dancers then the time duration of the show lengthened, otherwise the stage presenters had to think of some innovative idea impromptu to hold the audiences together. The word of mouth was the only publicity gimmick used then and the popularity of the phad depended on how many people spoke about them or the rise in the crowd for the next days Tamasha.

Lavani, the nucleus of Tamasha

Lavani is a combination of music and dance performed traditionally to the beats of the dholki by women adorned in their flamboyant paithini saris and several kilos heavy ghungroos. A classic Lavani performance began with the swift sounds of the dholki, followed by a group of women entering the stage with the pallu of their Paithinis covering their heads, as they mesmerised the audience with their latkas and jhatkas. During the Peshwa rule, slave trade of these women was rampant, who would perform in the royal courts and hence, had access to some sort of patronage in those times. But the stigmatization of being 'nautch girls' or 'courtesans' never left them.^{viii}

Lavani in reality is an expression of women's sexuality and their secret feelings and desires, but the society rapidly changed its approach towards the women as if they owned them. Slowly it turned out to be a means for controlling the sexuality of the lower-caste women by creating a vicious circle for the performers. The bottom line was that the women were performing to sustain themselves but the men took it for granted that they owned them and that is why are that they were sending them indirect messages through the eyes, gestures on stage and the songs that they chose. The beauty of Lavani was that everyone associated with it was trying, in their own little way, to educate today's generation about the struggle and trials the Tamasha phads and artists involved had to undergo to keep them from staying afloat. The devotion of the dancers made them rally around to deal with challenges.^{ix}

Marathi films played an important role in making Lavani genre accessible and loved by the masses. Movies such as Pinjara and Natarang not only attempted to blend traditional music with social messages but also helped portray Lavani world in positive light.^x Many Hindi heroines from Vidya Balan and Rani mukherjee have danced a Lavani in their movies. Those songs are on a very high level of performance with society friendly lyrics, excellent stage work and decent lyrics which are hummed by women.

Lifestyle of Tamasha Artists

Normally the artists performing in Tamasha belonged to the surrounding villages and depended on the Tamasha for getting employment as the artists came from the under privileged sections and had a poor educational background. Moreover as there were fewer opportunities to get good jobs in the village for the boys, the chances of girls earning money were scant and therefore the

girls readily accepted the offer to earn some money without hesitation to keep their home fires burning. Earlier the Tamasha artists was a mix of family members with very less hired performers from outside but as times changed and with female artists aging the need to hire increased. The audiences for Tamasha slowly drifted to more entertaining options like Cinema, Television and Internet as technology seeped its way to the most interior parts of the country. Because of this the Tamasha phads could not survive alone and handed over the baton to run the Tamasha Phads to the organisers and keep them running seeing that many families depended on it financially.

The Tamasha organisers, for booking the artists visited various villages and tried to rope in people who had some earlier connect with Tamasha and were eager to work since the payment was very paltry, starting from ten to fifteen thousand a year with shelter and food. During rainy seasons, there were no Tamasha performances and hence, the people working with Tamasha phads have work for only eight months in a year. Like any other artists, even Tamasha artists have a small career span and have to earn maximum to be able to sustain them after they age and are unable to get work. The addiction to the stage and sometimes dedication to the stage stops them from entering matrimony as its the peak of there carrer.The girls are unmarried till a late age, because of their association with Tamasha phads and staying away from their homes. Moreover the stigma of Tamasha is an obstacle to get a respectable family to accept them.

The backward slide of *Lavani*

Earlier Tamasha was the only source of entertainment in the rural areas, especially for men because entertainment for women did not really exist in the list of priorities. The women had no option but to be content in their household chores, rearing the children, shouldering the house responsibilities and the long list of religious customs that had to be followed throughout the year. In those days village people were simple and had no contact with the outer world, in addition to were unaware of the new inventions that had made urban living easy and fast.

Gradually with technology entering the villages the regular Tamasha audiences got attracted to the new world of amusement which was for the entire family and easily available. Slowly the audiences visiting the Tamasha started dwindling and people started watching films and

Television. The artists in the Tamasha could not compete with the glamour, finesse and expertise of the content shown in Cinema or on Television because of the limited knowledge and lack of resources. The new generation forced to take over the Tamasha ahead, was uneducated as they had joined Tamasha very early and had to discontinue schools to replace the existing centre stage artists on the road to offer more freshness and youth to attract more audiences. But they had their limitations and lost out in the contest with the new variety of programs that could be watched on visual media. The Tamasha phads also could not match the opulence and fashion trends changing on a daily basis as they had very limited reserve fund with them to upgrade their art. Since the audience belonged to labour and backward class, with only a few economically sound persons visiting the phads, it became extremely difficult for the phads to survive and maintain the day to day expenses, that were sky rocketing. Moreover with a variety of entertainment available the craze for Tamasha was rapidly declining every day.

Marathi films and of late even Hindi films have showcased this art to revive its status but even then the situation of Tamasha is deteriorating everyday and artists are forced to search for alternate income opportunities to survive. Coming from Tamasha background the performers have limited alternatives to get jobs in villages due to the Tamasha Tag attached to them and more for the women who are not respected by the civil society.

Current status of *Tamasha* artists

Changes in technology, in audience tastes, shrinking performance spaces have created a diverse impact on Tamasha. The Troupe owners have mixed feelings and the Tamasha phads are anxious that they might have to close shutters because of the less demand. The public taste has changed and they demand that the dancers perform on the latest Hindi songs instead of the original songs that were written exclusively for the Tamasha. Earlier the audience had some respect for the dancers and did not touch them but stopped at giving meaningful looks but now they expect a lot more than dancing. Not only has the preferences of viewers changed but after more than half-a-century the Tamasha itself has transformed from small ensembles travelling on bullock carts with around 10 men and women, into the elaborate troupes managed by production houses.^{xi}

Most of the artists have separated from the earlier phads and have formed new phads. But these associations are not functioning effectively, and financially also. The owners are getting very low profits, after meeting all types of expenditure and making payments to artists, maintenance of lighting, sound systems, maintenance of transport vehicles, etc. The artists are either sitting at home twiddling their thumbs or accepting small offers during festivals or weddings to entertain the guests and end up with a modest earning that is insufficient.

Majority of the youth have left their mother phads and migrated to greener pastures to make a decent living. The struggle is immense to get good jobs because they have nobody to push them and introduce them in the film industry. They have to agree to per day remuneration offered to them without any demands and arguments. Sometimes they have to run errands for senior artists and the girls have to experience more humiliation. Normally they get jobs as supportive dancers in the last rows or small minuscule roles in the regional cinema. In other dance forms the senior artists who retire, usually pass on the art to students through classes or training them at home but in the current situation the Tamasha artists have to let go of this prospect because of the low demand for Tamasha. The veteran artists are living a life of oblivion and still bear the brunt as well as stigma of their association with Tamasha till date. The women, who were always dressed in Paithanis and had hundreds of men dying to get some attention, today are clad in the bare minimal clothes without any makeup, staying in dingy houses. The government is trying to revive the phads but is unable to do so because the money spent on every stage show is barely recovered and the phad owners prefer investing in some other form of entertainment to recover the loss incurred and stay afloat.^{xii}

Conclusion

India is a versatile country with folk art residing in the heart of almost every person specially staying in the rural areas because they connect with the art easily as their roots are interrelated. But with the taste of today's youth inclined towards western and modern music and filmy songs, the demand for our regional music and local art forms is decreasing. The state of affairs is more or less the same for many of our traditional art forms that are bit by bit fading away into the past, the onus lies on every Indian to save our folk art from becoming extinct.

Endnotes

- ⁱ <https://www.wishberry.in/blog/tamasha-folk-theatre-the-dying-folk-art-form-of-maharashtra/#/article>
- ⁱⁱ <http://oneindiaonepeople.com/not-just-tamasha/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <http://oneindiaonepeople.com/not-just-tamasha/>
- ^{iv} <https://sphoorthi-theatre.blogspot.com/2012/02/tamasha-folk-theatre-of-maharashtra.html>
- ^v Varadpande, p. 170
- ^{vi} <https://sphoorthi-theatre.blogspot.com/2012/02/tamasha-folk-theatre-of-maharashtra.html>
- ^{vii} <http://hdl.handle.net/10603/2526>
- ^{viii} <http://www.thealternative.in/lifestyle/lavani-folk-artists-dancing-for-survival/>
- ^{ix} <http://www.openthemagazine.com/article/art-culture/lavani-breaking-the-taboo>
- ^x <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lavani>
- ^{xi} <https://ruralindiaonline.org/articles/tamasha-transformed-but-still-travelling>
- ^{xii} <https://thewire.in/culture/mangala-bansode-tamasha-maharashtra>

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