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## TAMASHA – FOLK DANCE OF MAHARASHTRA

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**Abstract:** Tamasha, as a theatre form, is a style that can be called a mix of a regular play, a musical and dance. Traditionally, the Mahars are the best-known Tamasha caste. It is highly influenced by other Indian dance forms like Dashavatara, Kaveli, Kathak, Ghazals, Lalit and Kirtan. Some other folk-art forms like the Powada and Gavalan, have their origin in Tamasha and are also utilized in this form. This highly charged performance finally ends on a moral note speaking about the victory of the good over the bad.

**Keywords:** Tamasha, Folk dances, Lavani, Mahars, Mangs, Sangeet Bhaari, Mughal.

### Introduction

Tamasha, as a Theater form, is a style that can be called a mix of a regular play, a musical and dance. It has two main branches Dholki Bhaari and Sangeet Bhaari while the Dholki Bhaari style has a lot more Drama, the Sangeet Bhaari style is a lot more Music and Dance oriented. It is known for its suggestive lyrics and border line erotic movements and topics. It is highly influenced by other Indian dance forms like Dashavatara, Kaveli, Kathak, Ghazals, Lalit and Kirtan. Some other folk-art forms like the Powada and Gavalan, have their origin in Tamasha and are also utilized in this form.

The history of the Tamasha can be traced back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century when it was believed to have originated as an entertainment form for the Mughal troops deployed in the Deccan plateau. Later in 18<sup>th</sup> century, it acquired a distinct form during the late Peshwa period of the Maratha Empire with the development of the textile industry in Bombay during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a lot of people migrated to the city from the rural areas in search of employment.

“The Tamasha meant excitement of every kind – the percussion, beginning with that first arresting slap on the dholki that sets every Maharashtrian’s bold racing, those wonderful traditional Lavani melodies; the dance” - words by Waman Kendre, Marathi stage director. These traditional Lavanis was loved by Maharashtrians, they sing along to them when they feature on the local television station. They say Lavan is embody the essence of their culture- lyricism, romance, fun. The word ‘Lavani’ is associated with the Maratha word for ‘Transplantation’- the songs might once have been harvest working songs or perhaps the composers of Lavanis were inspired by the sight of woman transplanting their rice plants, bent over in the paddy fields, bare legs wading through water. Play wright and Journalist Sushma Deshpande describes its character a little differently, saying “ Lavani is a musical performance which unravels various shades in a man - woman relationship”. This fits with the association of a male poet watching women at work; Lavanis is sung and dances by women for the pleasure of men. She says Lavanis are the root of all Mahaashtrian folk theatre, performed every day in the ‘Sangeet Bhaari’ which means ‘song troupes’ at Aryabhushan theatre on Pune’s Lakshmi Road. In 1995 she did her research there for a play based on the lives of the singer/ dancers. At Aryabhushan there are eight companies known as Phuds, performing each night, one after the other in 20-minute slots. The male compere enters without ceremony and welcomes us informally before the keyboard player joins him for a brief song in praise of the God Ganesh. This man and his two moustachioed colleagues will appear regularly throughout the show to introduce the dance numbers, often covering the women’s lengthy backstage costume - changes with cosmic banter. Their repartee is light - heartedly provocative, they must keep the audience hot for the female dancers - commenting on their talent and beauty, yet reminding us that these are forbidden fruit. Their status is respected as controllers - standing guard over their female objects of desire. In this they don’t have any set pattern to the movement, through perhaps some of the curling arm and hand gestures, and the stamping feet suggest a distant relationship with the popular kathak style. We can find one special i.e., each woman dances solo for a while head down and demurely covered, before lifting the veil and revealing her laughing faceout front. This moment is met with audience cheers and whistles.

Traditionally, the mahars are the best-known Tamasha caste. They were once village servants with no particular craft and they live apart from others in the village. Some Mahars turned their duties to the production of entertainment singers, dancers or comedians. In medieval times, they were celebrated for their satirical dramatic poetry (bharud, literally meaning ‘long - winded tale’) and the Mahar saint - poet Eknath was noted for the power of his verses. In the 1600s, under Shivaji the Mahars became renowned for their military prowess. Later, they successfully served in the British colonial forces and since 1947 the Mahar regiment has taken part in all India’s



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major military operations. The men who received military training also gained an education they would not otherwise have had. This privilege enabled 20<sup>th</sup> century Mahars to move out of their traditional caste work into te professional fields. The famous founder of the Dalit movement, Ambedkar (1891-1956) was one such person. However, upwardly mobile Mahars have been loath to take their performance traditions with them. Play wright Premanand Gajvi wrote in his book Gokale “ As for folk Theatre forms, Dalits have naturally wanted to distance themselves from those. Dr. Ambedkar had called upon his followers to shed all their old practices, and this included the Tamasha. The women who danced and sang in Tamasha and the men who played the musical instruments were as often as not, from Dr. Ambedkar’s caste. In their eyes, now the Tamasha was not so much an outlet for their artistic talents as a means of exploitation which they were only too happy to leave behind.

The Mahars and Mangs form the root of the Dalit identity in Maharashtra. Mangs were traditionally agricultural labourers through like the Mahars, they turned their skills to all sorts of artistic professions, and soon became indelibly associated with the Tamasha. Sathe became as famous Tamasha performance by the collaboration of the Mang caste, Bhau Babu Mang, managed a highly successful Tamasha troupe in northern Maharashtra during the mid - 20<sup>th</sup> century. This Tamasha dancers who simply ‘expose themselves’ in order to please the crowd.

Typically, the main elements of Tamasha include Garish dances, loud humour and suggestive lyrics. Its performance does not require any kind of a special setting or stage and it begins with the entry of the musicians. Usually, two percussionists known as a Dholkiwala and a Halgiwala enter the scene. They both contribute to the musical background of the performance and announce the beginning of the show. The performance starts with a song invoking Lord Ganesha is sung. This is followed by the Gavalana which is equivalent to the Krishnaleela describing the different episodes in Lord Krishna’s life. Tamasha also involves a lot of acrobatics that is contributed by the female performers. The acrobatics have strong resemblances to other Maharashtraian dance forms. The Yaman, Bhairavi and Pilu are the popular Ragas used in the musical score accompanying the dance. A ritual that is similar to an Aarti concludes the performance. There are no special costumes used in Tamasha. The attire worn by the performers known as Gammat, Phada etc depict the day-to-day wear of the various communities in Maharashtra. One important point is that this highly charged performance finally ends on a moral note speaking about the victory of the Good over the Bad.

This is the brief description of Tamasha folk dance of India. The writer Julia Hollander “Indian Folk Theatres” is a British theatre director, teacher. She has staged operas all over the world herself experienced and wrote about the Art form.

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