

PRESENTATION OF FOLK THEATRE TAMASHA - 'MOHANA-BATAU'

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Abstract –

Tamasha is a folk theatre of Maharashtra. Tamasha is the most popular folk form among a number of folk forms practiced all over the state of Maharashtra. Although there are evidences of this folk theatre earlier but the 'Mohana-Batau' is considered to be the first ever performed Vag Natya (the play is called Vag Natya in Tamasha) of Tamasha. Tamasha was in narrative form before. The dialogues were introduced in Tamasha with 'Mohana-Batau' written by Shahir poet Uma Babu Saurajkar. The first time ever 'Mohana-Batau' was performed in 1853 A.D. ten years after the performance of 'Sita Swamvar', the first play of Marathi Theatre. Both were performed for the first time in Sangli, a small town of Maharashtra. 'Mohana-Batau' is a love story of queen Mohana and a businessman Batau. The Tamasha troupe of Tamasha Samrat Atamvar Shirdhonkar still perform Tamasha

Key Words – Tamasha, Folk Theatre, Maharashtra, Mohana-Batau, Shahir, Poorvrag, Uttrang, Gan, Mujra, Gaulan, Batavni, Vag Natya, Chhakri, Silkar, Khandani, Lavni, Parampara, Rustic, Indegenous, Authentic

Introduction –

The word "Tamasha" is originally borrowed from Arabic language, then it was transferred into Persian language, then Urdu and after that it entered Marathi language. In Urdu and Persian language "Tamasha" means "entertainment". "Tamasha" in Marathi means, "a specialised performance which includes dance, song and Lavni (a dance form of aharashtra)". The word "Tamasha" can be divided into two words- Tam + Asha. "Tam" means darkness and "Asha" means hope. So the form Tamasha means "Asha" or hope in "Tam" or darkness. Tamasha is an entertainment for the mass in the villages of Maharashtra, and sometimes the only light of hope in their dark life. Tamasha folk form is believed to be derived from the ancient form of Sanskrit drama – the "Prahasana" and the "Bhana". These are two "Rupaka" or dramas described among the 'Dasharupaka' or the ten dramas in the 'Natyasashtra' the book on ancient Indian drama. According to "Natyasashtra" the "Prahasana" is a farce or a play in which 'Hasya Rasa' or the comic sentiment, one of the eight sentiments described in the 'Natyashastra', is prominent. The object of laughter is furnished in the "Prahasana" mainly by improper conduct of various sectarian teachers as well as

courtesans and rogues. The “Bhana” is an one act play with a single character who speaks after repeating answers to his questions supposed to be given by an invisible. This play is monologue relates to one’s own or another’s adventure. Bhana always included many movements which were to be acted by a rouge or a parasite. Modern Tamasha troupes are of two sections – song-dance troupe and folk-drama troupe. Along with other communities Kolhati and Mahar are the most prominent to be associated with Tamasha. The poet singers are known as Shahirs. They composed many narrative and love songs for Tamasha. Tamasha is generally started with a devotional song and is followed by the dramatic sequence known as “Gaulan”. Love songs like Lavnis are the spirit of Tamasha and are very much popular. Musical instruments like *dolce* (drum), *tontine* (a single string instrument), *manger* (cymbal), *daff* (instrument with a single leather surface), *haggis* (smaller daff), and the metal triangle called *kid*, the harmonium and *gunroom* (ankle bells) are used to increase the aestheticism of the dance. This form has developed in the sixteenth century. Today, there are around ten thousand artists and over four hundred fifty dance troupes who are involved in its performance. This form of satirical theatre makes fun of almost anyone, be they common people, saints or politicians.

History Of Tamasha –

The region of Maharashtra, has a long theatrical tradition. One of the early references of Tamasha was found in the cave inscriptions at Nasik by Gautami Balashri, the mother of the 1st century Satvahana ruler, Gautamiputra Satakarni. The inscription mentions him organizing Utsava and Samaja, forms of theatrical entertainment for his subjects. The history of Tamasha can be traced back to the sixteenth century when it was believed to have originated as an entertainment form for the mughal troops deployed in the Deccan Plateau. Tamasha acquired a distinct form in the late Peshwa period of the Maratha Empire, in the eighteenth century, and incorporated elements of older traditional forms of theatrical entertainment like Dashavatar, Gondhal, Kirtan and Jagran or Waghya- murali, part of Khandoba Bhakti Geet. Though there have been references of the seventeenth century plays, like ‘Lakshmikalyanam’ in Marathi language staged for the Bhosale ruler of Tanjore in present Tamil Nadu state. This was a court play. But the first public performance of a stage play in Marathi was ‘Sita Swayamvar’(marriage of Sita) by Vishnudas Bhave, based on a popular episode of epic ‘Ramayana’. This is known to be the beginning of Marathi theatre. It was performed in 1843 A.D. in Sangli, a city of Maharashtra. It was an experimental play, based on folk form Yahshagana from the neighbouring Karnataka state. The first Tamasha play is to be started by 1853 A.D. and the name of the Vag or play was ‘Mohana-Vatau’. In the following years it developed a lot. The Vags were either in prose or comprised long narrative poems performed by the Shahir along with his chorus, with actors improvising their lines. Popular Vag composers of that time were Patthe Bapurao and Dattoba Sali and one of their noted Vag, ‘Gadhavache Lagna’ (marriage of donkey) was popularised by Tamasha artist Dadu Idurikar. Soon noted Marathi writers

started writing Vags for Tamasha troupes.

As the textile industry started developing in Mumbai (then Bombay) in the nineteenth century, workers migrated there from the rural areas in large numbers. Soon their theatre did too. Initially rural Tamasha companies were invited to the city for performances. Though later numerous local Tamasha companies flourished. Traditional Tamasha practitioners were from castes like Kolhati, Mahar, Mang and Bhatu from rural regions of Maharashtra, labelled low caste within the Indian caste system. Thus in the late nineteenth century religious reformers employed Tamasha to castigate the caste system of the region. During the same period, Satyasodhak Samaj founded by Jyotirao Phule started organizing Satyasodhak Jalsa, which used the Tamasha tradition in its political and reformist theatre, which was an amalgamation of proscenium Tamasha and street theatre. The rise of the modern Marathi theatre movement in the post-independence era, which was largely with a westernized idiom, Tamasha like other folk theatre forms was deemed. The turning away of urban middle class audience from traditional forms, caused a disruption in the theatrical traditions beside creating a division between urban and rural theatre. Tamasha continued to flourish out the urban pockets. In 2002, the state of Maharashtra had 450 Tamasha troupes with approximately 10,000 artists.

Tamasha Artist Atamvar Shirdhonkar –

Atamvar Shirdhonkar is a dedicated Tamasha artist as well as Shahir or Vag writer of this century. He belongs to the village Sangli of Maharashtra where this folk form took birth. His family is historically attached with Tamasha. He is the third generation in his family to perform Tamasha. Since one hundred twentyfive years this Shirdhonkar family is performing Tamasha. His grandfather Dhondi Bastra Shirdhonkar is known to have performed Tamasha from 1853 A.D, which is the birth year of this form. His son, father of Atamvar, Bapurao Shirdhonkar followed the tradition. Bapurao Shirdhonkar is known to be called “Shighrakavi” which means a poet who can create instant verses. He has written a number of Vag Natyas, Gan, Gaulan, Sloka performed till now. His son Atamvar Shirdhonkar is following their tradition equally with courage. Atamvar started performing Tamasha from his childhood. His first Tamasha performance was when he was just 7 years old. The name of the Vag performed by him was ‘Raja Harishchandra’, around 1963-64. In the following years he formed a Tamasha troupe named “Dadashri Kalamanch’ and they perform Tamasha through out the state of Maharashtra and also outside. He is awarded with the “Jeevan Rakshak” award. The Sanskar Pratisthan of Pune has awarded him with the “Lokkalaratna” award. Along with many more award and honour his is decorated with the title of Tamasha Samrat.

The Performance –

The Lokkala Academy arranged a Tamasha performance by Tamasha Samrat Atamvar

Shirdhonkar and his troupe at the Kavivarya Kusumagraj Marathi Bhasa and Sahitya Bhawan of Mumbai University. It was an authentic Tamasha performance at its original rustic flavour, without the interruption of any modern technology. Tamasha is mostly performed in the villages for the mass in open stage without any modern techniques.

The earliest known Vag Natya, ‘Mohana-Batau’ was performed by them in the proscenium stage.

Back Stage –

It is known that each and every performance whether its dancing, singing, acting needs a preparation, and its done backstage. The green rooms are the place for the preparation. Make-up, costumes, preparing accessories and instruments are part of this. The ladies remain busy with their make-up before the performance. Simplicity reflects from their make-up too. In proscenium theatres usually artists use expensive make-up for our looks, but these ladies use whatever was available to them. As the base make-up they use talcum powder. Instead of eye-shadow and blusher they put lipstick on the upper lid of eyes and cheeks and smudge properly for the effect. For the eyebrows and eye linear they use thin sticks, just taking a small amount of black kajal in the stick and draw the eyebrows and eye linear perfectly. They take the sticks used as ice-cream holder, wash them properly, soak and cut in form of these thin sticks for use. They use these sticks to line their lips too, then used lipsticks. The final touch was done by putting a bindi. The costumes worn by them are the Navari sarees. Now-a-days they get these sarees stitched and wear easily. The colours and shine of the costumes made them look gorgeous. They wore jewellerys on neck, ears, hands and ghungroos in both the legs. These ghungroos are made out of metal with iron balls inside, tied with rope. They weigh 3 kilos on each leg.

The male artists wear dhoti-kurta or kurta-pajama. Some of them tie “pagri”(headgear) and some wear white caps popular among marathas. They have no facial make-up. By this time they also prepare the instruments to be played in tune. The harmonium and dholki are tuned by playing together and also rehearsing songs for warm up. The single string of Tuntuna is being tied according to the perfect tune. They use one more leather instrument named daf. For stuffing the leather of the daf they store rough papers, light those and dry the leather of the daf in fire. This process takes a little time and it is tuned properly till they are satisfied with its sound. Thus they become ready for the performance.

On Stage –

Villages are the heart of India. There are more villages than towns and cities in our country. The villagers work hard all day, and in the evening they gather to witness the performances, whether it is any form. The basic of a folk performance is always entertainment. If something informative or

educational is to be presented that is also done by an entertaining presentation. This is true for all the folk forms whether its Tamasha, Nautanki, Bhavai, Jatra etc. Sangli is the motherland of Tamasha. On the occasion of festivals, fairs, Tamasha is performed on temporary stages, and the spectators also join them as the performance moves on. This rustic, indigenous form was performed on the proscenium stage of Marathi Bhasa and Sahitya Bhavan, and the Vag performed was unknown to us. So it was obvious that the actor-spectator interaction common in the form would be absent in it. Though the voice of the actors didn't require but microphones were used here. The whole performance was done in flat light.

The Tamasha is divided into two parts – Poorvarang and Uttarang. In Poorvarang Gan, Goulan and Batavani takes place. The Vag Natya or the play is performed in the Uttarang.

Poorvrang –

Indian traditional theatre as described in the "Natyashastra" was been started with prayer of God. In Tamasha we witness the same in Poorvarang. The main elements of Poorvarang are Gan, Goulan, Batavni and Lavni.

Playing of Instruments –

Music and dance are the key components of Tamasha. It starts with the jugalbandi or playing of instruments all together. This is mainly done to attract the villagers and to let them know that Tamasha is going to begin and it's time for them to come and take their seats. The jugalbandi continues for half-an-hour, which is enough for them to gather. The instruments used are harmonium, dholki (drum), daf (leather instrument), tuntuna (single string instrument), manjeera (cymbals). After the jugalbandi is done the Gan appears.

Gan –

Gan means Ganesha (the elephant God), the son of Lord Shiva. Ganesha is the presenter of wisdom. He shows the real path of life and he is a very powerful God. The common people of Maharashtra worship Ganesha as their deity. It is belief and trust that a work started with the worship of Ganesha will end fruitfully. The Tamasha artists are bound to follow this tradition. The other name of Ganesha is Vighneshwara. They begin their performance with the Vighneshwara Lord Ganesha. The artists sing Gan all together with the playing of musical instruments harmonium, dholki, daf, tuntuna and manjeera. Gan consists of verse sung in praise of Lord Ganesha. Gan tells about the greatness of him.

Greet him with various names and seeks his blessings. It also describes various stories based on the deeds of this particular God. The song or Lavni on Ganesha are known as "Jan Ki Lavni". The jugalbandi was becoming little down while Mr. Atamvar Shirdhonkar enter the stage and uttered the Gan. He enter the stage reciting the verses of Gan. The chorus join him. They repeat the verses

sung by him and exaggerated those. The orchestra continue all together –

“ Aju, pujua adi gana rangana

Rangana bhava bhaya bhangna.....”

Which means, we are praying Lord Ganesha today, He will remove all the fear and obstacles of the performance. After the completion of the worship of Lord Ganesha, the Goulan enters the stage.

Mujra –

A group of female performer enter the stage to present Mujra after Gan. Mujra is performed to salute Lord Ganesha and also the audience.

Goulan –

Goulan means the Gopika or milk maids of Gokul, the land where Shree Krishna spent his childhood. These Goulans are mythological characters. The characters required in this performance are Radha (a dancer), her friend (Chelikattelu), Mausi (aunt), Krishna, his friends Pendva (Songadia), Chandrawal etc. Mausi is a very interesting character. This character was introduced in Tamasha in later days. She is a female comedian. A man wearing saree and dressed up like a lady performs this character. The character follows Radha and her friends in the costume of an old wise woman. She also plays the role of their protector. The dialogues of Mausi are very loud, speedy and full of humour. There are no rules or boundaries for the dialogue of this Mausi character. Each and every dialogue and appearance of this Mausi makes people laugh. In Tamasha this character might have been introduced during 1985-90. There was a character in the Keertan of Shree Krishna named “Badal”, the same character has been converted into “Mausi” in Tamasha. It is also said that the character “Mausi” might have been borrowed from Bengali Literature. Goulans are of three types – 1) Halichi Goulan 2) Takrarichi Goulan 3) Vinaunichi Goulan.

The act of Goulan starts with the entry of a group of ladies who play the roles of Gopika or the milkmaid. They seem to be going to Mathura for selling milk, curd and other milk products. Mausi also enters with them. These Goulans swing, dance and walk very rhythmically. Mausi also behaves in the same manner. A man dressed as a woman, dancing, walking like them, talking in a feminine voice made this character more interesting. Musicians with dholki, tuntuna, daf, manjeera play instruments loud during their entry. The Goulan performed was Takrarichi Goulan among the three types. They made their appearance on stage with a Lavni –

“ Narili ga mala narili

Mala narili Kanha ne

Forile math, dhada dha da da da da.....”

Which mean they are complaining that Kanha or Khishna has disturbed them and also has broken their Math (clay pots).

After the Lavni of Gopikas the Sutradhara starts interaction with them. He asks them, Who are they? Where are they going and why? They tell him everything. This interacting session is also humorous and the interference of the Mausi in this whole act makes it funnier. From their conversation it is found that these women are Goulans or milkmaids of Gokul and they are going to Mathura for selling milk. They start moving towards Mathura and moving around 2 to 3 times on the stage seems they have come a long way. In the midway the Krishna, enters the stage and stops them. We can see only four Gopikas but Krishna describes that 1600 Gopikas are going to Mathura to sell milk. He tells the Gopikas to pay tax and then he will let them go. A long conversation takes place between them. Mausi also requests Krishna to leave them and let them go. After observing the condition of the Gopikas he allows them to go. Then Mausi along with the other Goulans moves towards Mathura singing and dancing. These types of stories are found in Tamasha, both in traditional and modern.

Batavni –

“Batavni” the word in Marathi means “to enlarge a small thing”. About this Batavni it is told that it was not included in Tamasha from the first day. It was adapted afterwards. It is said that it came from English literature. It entered this Marathi form in 1856. But no one is aware about it came. It can be compared with English farce. Batavni itself is a farce and it's as important as the Vag Natya in Tamasha. Shahir Patte Bapurao wrote a farce titled ‘Sau Jamaichacha Farce’ and introduced it in Tamasha. By this farce, Batavni was introduced in Tamasha.

In Batavni small stories are told through improvising. These stories are dramatised and made colourful by the artists. The scenes are usually improvised and incidents are illustrated in a comic manner. Such one described how he is going to kill the other. Listening this other person describes he will kill the first one more ferociously. Again the other increases the fear. In this way the skit moves on. This is also a comedy part. Traditionally this is a long part of Tamasha and takes almost Half-an-hour to one hour. A Lavni is performed at the end of the Batavni.

Uttrang –

The most important part of Tamasha is Uttrang. The main story is performed in this part. This plays or stories are known as Vag Natya. Vag means story or plot. Vag is ‘a flowing stream’. It is the concluding part of Tamasha. In traditional Tamasha, the characters – Sardar, Suruthe (companion), Dholakiya (player of dholak) and Songadiya (comedian) were main characters. These Vags are usually based on the stories which are well known to the audience. The audience know the incidents going to happen and also the conclusion, but watches the performance with equal interest. This helps them to be involved in the performance. They get touched with the feelings of the characters and lives the characters along with the actors. They interact with them too. They curse the villain, warns

the hero/heroine about the upcoming dangers, also dance with the Lavnis. Tamasha performance was first started with the Vag Lavni. Equal time was been allotted for both dialogue and Lavni part. The total duration of the Vag was almost for three to four hours. In those times Lavnis were in written forms by the Lavni Shahirs (writers). But there were no dialogue writers then. The artists known as Kalavanths used to improvise their dialogues depending on the situation. The first ever Vag Natya performed known to us is named ‘Mohona-Batau’.

This was first presented in verse. In the following years, the structure changed from verse to prose form. The troupe performed the “Mohona-Batau” Vag Natya.

Mohona-Batau Vag Natya –

The Uttrang just like Poorvarang also starts with music. The dholki, harmonium, daf, tuntuna and manjeera players start the jugalbandi at the beginning of the play. Then Atamvar Shirdhonkar in his own style comes to the stage and recites verses (sloka) related to the Vag. Then the play starts. The story is about Mohana and Batau, Heroine and hero. Mohana, the heroine is the queen of Ahamednagar and Batau, the hero is the head of the business community of Delhi. One day some people of Ahamednagar come to Delhi for business. There they meet Batau, get impressed with his personality and chooses him the husband of their queen Mohana. They invite him to Ahamednagar to meet her. Batau to keep their invitation starts his journey towards Ahamednagar. Atamvar Shirdhonkar, who plays the role of Batau moves around the stage for two to three times, which seems he has walked a long way. The way is through a jungle. There he gets attacked by decoits. They kidnappes him and takes him to their house. There a girl who is employed to keep him in watch starts liking him and sets him free from their trap.

On the other side, listening the stories of Batau, Mohana feels impressed and sends her maid with a letter to Batau. The maid meets Batau on the street where he was wondering after being released from the trap of the dacoits. Following the instructions of the letter Batau comes to the personal garden of Mohana where they were supposed to meet, as said in the letter. There Batau meets a man. The man is the husband of Mohana. They were married in childhood. After marriage he went far away for some purpose and the very day he came back. He was surprised watching Batau in that garden, as the garden was exclusively for the queen and her husband. Batau tells him about the letter and Mohana has called him. Hearing the incident he kills Batau in anger and jealousy. When Mohana comes to meet him, finds him dead. Watching this she blames herself for the lose and commits suicide. This love story moves the deities in the heaven and they send Narada to save them. Narada by his Mrit-Sanjeevani-Sudha (a medicine which can make the dead alive), makes the both Mohona and Batau alive. They meet each other. By this time the husband re-enters the stage or the garden. Batau tells him that he is guilty. Batau also tells that he has no right to decide

without knowing what the woman (Mohana) wants. And that's why Batau punishes him by killing. Thus the villain gets demolished and the hero-heroine units. The orchestra starts playing instruments loud and the performance ends with a graceful Lavni.

Conclusion –

The musicians accompany the performance always. They change their speed and tempo along with the situations build up on the stage. Such as the moment Batau getting kidnapped or killed the play music to create suspense and sorrow. On the meeting scene of Mohana and Batau a sweet romantic melody is played. Beside these there are many more elements to be performed in Tamasha, such are, small humorous skits named Chhakri, Sometimes the prelude of the story is narrated or the gist of the story with its happenings of future is recited earlier, they are called Silkar and sometimes there are informative narration of a particular thing, known as Khandani. These practitioners spent their whole life for this folk form, some start performing from childhood and become lifelong artists. They belong to Sangli, the birth place of Tamasha. Some of them are practitioners for three-four generations, and also want their next generation to continue the Parampara. They perform not only to entertain the mass but also enjoy themselves equally with the audience. The bonding between the performers and audience make the form livelier, and also helps the form to maintain its originality which is indigenous, rustic and authentic.

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