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## **Adapted, Distorted, Subordinated: Marathi Folk Art and Cinema**

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### **Abstract:**

Folk arts have been embedded with its ritualistic, traditional and religious cultural codes forming a semiotic thickness and density. It is always signified with the codes that communicate the encrypted message to the audience without reverting its linguistic and paralinguistic signals and norms to have social and political reforms, awareness and change in the society. On the contrary cinema is a medium which develops scientifically and technically from last 125 years. The signaling codes of communication are mostly two dimensional and restricted to the linguistic and paralinguistic patterns. Its hunger is too large that cinema has gulped all the forms of folk arts for the sake of entertainment and consumerism. It has developed its own grammar and forced the audience to convert them in to consumer and changed the concept of folk art. The cinematic grammar has encrypted the semiotics of folk art and converted it systematically to fulfill the need of contemporary time.

The semiotic, kinesics and proxemics relations of folk art and cinema need to scrutinize so as to mark the difference between the two structurally. When cinema has changed the social and political concept of the contemporary time, the place of folk arts is supposed to locate within its frame work in Indian context.

The paper thus examine all the queries with the help of the semioticians like Umberto Eco, Kozwan, Hall, Bharucha, Rege and many more. The cultural and social encryption and semiotic density requires a serious attention and it will be explored through Maharashtra folk arts like 'tamasha' and 'lavani' and its reflection in Marathi cinema.

**Keywords: Folk art, cultural codes, cinema, tamasha, lavani**

Folk arts, in Indian cultural context, have reformed the society in beliefs and educated them in respect of ritualistic, traditional and religious cultural values. It is part of people's life and the society knows the reasons, causes and occasions to perform and watch it. The name itself is self-explanatory, it is actually a democratic process, known to the people, performed by the people for enlightening and educating the generations. It is not having a specific format as it is an orature rather than literature. Historically, the folk art has exerted resistance against the hegemony. These ruling and powerful forces know the means and modes to captivate the psyche of the large society. Folk arts try to locate such elements and semiotics of it and have a major

role to play in creating social, political awareness amongst the mass which is mostly uneducated in Indian context.

From the tradition of orature, it has developed the audience and its receptivity which has been properly communicated by the artist which includes musicians, singers, writers and even performers. The question of space for performance is not the part of its existence as Kapila Vatsyayan has written about the Lavani and Tamasa 'the performance of Tamasa can be held anywhere in the village square, the courtyard of a house, an open field or on a proscenium stage.' (2005, 168) The linguistic and paralinguistic signals have been developed very sincerely amongst the performer and audience. Even the performance carries, to use Abraham Moles term 'multiple messages' in which several channels or several modes of using a channel communication, are used simultaneously in an aesthetic or perpetual synthesis. (1958, 171) The use of gesture and speech for complex message can be easily interpreted by the audience. In a nutshell, folk arts need not to train or develop audience's sensibility. The spectators are well aware of the use of postures and gestures in the performances of batavani or vag from Tamasa. It is people's art so it does not need to have proper methodological training schools (whatever schools are there, not producing the folk artists but promoting consumerism amongst them.)

The medium of cinema has a life span of 125 years only but it becomes the most popular form, keeping the traditional folk into the brackets of ritual and tradition. It is the scientific development of human civilization. It has been accepted very slowly but successfully by the audiences. The mode of narration of this medium has changed and developed gradually. It has expanded its semiotics and grammar taking care of all the performing arts. The cinema has been surpassing all the forms of narrations and the technical medium of camera has built its own vocabulary. The postures and gestures commonly known to the masses have been framed in and screened. The performing place requires very specific technical support to recreate the performance till its satisfaction. The cinema has gulped all this of real to reel and this changed the coding and decoding process of performing arts itself. The sharpness and perfection of this medium has forced the folk to follow the path of technicality otherwise it is unacceptable, means no support of the mass as it has already lost the support of the rulers as known through the history. This disastrous condition forced the folk arts to change and incorporate the global modern approach in its semiotics. Adorno has stated about films 'It seems illusory to claim that through the renunciation of all meaning specially the cinematically inherent renunciation of psychology, meaning will emerge from the reproduce material itself. It may be, however, that the entire issue is rendered obsolete by the insight that the refusal to interpret, to add subjective ingredients, is in itself a subjective act and as such a priori significant. ... .. Nonetheless the gap between the most progressive tendencies in the visual arts and those of film continues to exist, compromising the latter's most radical intentions. For the time being, evidently, film's most promising potential lies in its interaction with other media, themselves merging into films, such as certain kinds of music.' (2012, 183)

The performance of a folk art is in itself a theatrical discourse which is full of signs and signals. The performance according to Moles is an ensemble unfolds along three dimensions and a single temporal dimension. (158, 9) Each folk art has its own system and this system defines its semiotics. Kozwan (1968) has provided the list of the system which is needed for theatre and performance. It can be applied to the performance of the folk arts like Tamasa and Lavani in the modern context. He has classified the typology in thirteen systems beginning it from language, tone, facial mime, gesture, movement, make-up, hair style, costume, props, décor, lighting, music and sound effects. This classification is the part and parcel of the folk performances in the proscenium space which is today's only performing space for the Tamasa and Lavani.

Every performance of the folk art will involve a complex dialectic of code observing, code making, and code breaking with its own conventional factors. According to Elam 'conventional factors will be modified by the innovations which appear less rule bound but which may in turn help to establish new norms. Any creative person will constitute his own rule, his own sub codes, the ensemble of personal, psychological, ideological and stylistic traits which makes the written-text recognized. (2000, 49) The cinema has made this recognition and this recognition of any folk form have a close proximity with its culture. The cultural code becomes very pertinent in the process of reception of the code by the audience. The cultural equilibrium will untie the encrypted paralinguistic codes of the performance.

The performing space of Tamasa and Lavani has economic value and it is recognized on the basis of the audience and their financial ability. For example, the sangeet baari, which is a part of Lavani, needs a rich man in front of whom the artist will perform and get the money for flirting with him or if the artist is performing in front of large audience the collection depends on the sale of the tickets for the show. Now the flirting is not specific to a single man but erotic which fulfills the lust of the eyes of the audience. This economic value has also been terminated in the global conflict and the space has developed this culture. Now its proxemics relations decide the status of folk, when it has appeared in cinema its value has been converted according to the market rules. American anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his work 'The Hidden Dimension' (1966) very has specifically elaborated the science of spatial codes namely proxemics where he defined 'the interrelated observations and theories of man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture.' (1) This space plays imperative role in generating a range of cultural units which are full with semiotically loaded subject with a powerful rules.

In the changing global scenario, the powerful medium of cinema has turned down the conceptual stand of folk art. Actually Tamasa is a folk art developed with the literature carries a social stratification of the Marathi community, as stated by Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan 'The Tamasa, a purely earthy dance-drama form, which for its occasional obscenity and vulgarity was for at least a century or more looked down upon, is nevertheless related to those several flowerings of the rich Marathi literature, singing and theatre forms. Its social status, whether of the Mahars and Maangs or the court milieu of a decadent king or its empowerment as popular entertainment of soldiers, facilitated its downward mobility.'(2005, 168) Structurally this folk has two different

styles Dholki Phad and Sangeet Baari. This art has a commercial attitude right from its inception because the troupe consists of lower castes Mahars, Maangs and Kolhati. The Dholki Phad deals with Gan, Gavalan, Batavani, Raangbaji and Vag. The text is improvised after getting the information from the local organizer. But the attraction for the audience is the vag, where the satire on the system takes place but beautiful women of these communities perform in front of the money flinging men as audience is in the Sangeet Baari which is meant for flirting.

We find in the history of Maratha rulers, that the Peshwa has a more erotic laavnis called Anhartlya Lavani (Laavnis of Night) where the performer is ati-shudra (downtrodden) woman who is called as bateek (whore). The social code of this folk becomes vital because the woman is treated as a consumable thing. Women are being categorized as Gharandaaz (pure and moral) and nachees or bateek, the folk artists are in second category. This art although related to the people for entertainment the caste system plays a dominant role and when it has become part of cinema, class conflict become relative factor. Sudhanva Deshpande in his article "*What is to be Undone*" states that the change took place in imperial time and blames the political system of the time. He states, "Then there is the question of the 'folk', the late 19<sup>th</sup> century commentators- Chiplunkar and others- are more or less unanimous on this. Forms like Tamasa and Lavani are low and vulgar, and audiences need to be weaned away from them. By the time we come to the IPTA in early 1940s there is a complete reversal. Now the folk forms are seen as the 'authentic' forms of the people, and when middle class artists are urged to learn from these forms and compose in them in order to win the trust of the masses. It has become something fashion, of late, to deride IPTA on this. It is argued for instance, that IPTA's interest in folk was instrumentalist, only to win the political affiliation of the people to the communist cause, and that IPTA activists themselves were mostly urban, educated middle class more or less disconnected with the rural context." (2004, 27)

This modern political approach has brought severe change in the acceptance of Tamasa and Lavani and later on it has earned fame with the inception of this folk in cinema. The Marathi films Jai Malhar and Ram Joshi have pioneered Tamasa and Lavani. It is very significant to record that cinema is a medium of capitalist earlier and corporate today. Its prime task is to earn money and benefits, not to educate and enlighten the masses. In fact this medium is not of the artists and writer but of the director and its technical crew. Even cinema has changed the perception of the audience and this use of the modern technology has disturbed the aesthetics of arts through its image coining. The image coined by the cinema has a great power to rule the minds of the audience. Peter Brook comments, "In both cinema and theatre, the spectator is usually passive, at the receiving end of impulses and suggestions. In cinema, this is fundamental because the power of the image is so great that it engulfs one. It is only possible to reflect on what one is seeing before or after the impression is made, never at the same moment. When the image is there in all its power, at the precise moment when it is being received, one can neither think, nor feel, nor imagine anything else." (1987, 190)

Cinema has the history of 125 years only and it has subordinated all the folk arts. Its adaptation is so strong that it has changed the semiotics and encrypted folk's grammar, which later on treated as real one. As Tamasa and Lavani are the caste based folk arts and the spatial codification develops its commerce. The woman has to be an object and sexualization of these dancers with the support of rulers and feudal built up a sensibility in the society that the folk artists are to be from backward castes. The same is being adapted by the cinema without breaking the aura of this sensibility. The woman is portrayed in the same fashion and the scholars of folk arts are shouting that the format has lost its aesthetics. According to SharmilaRege 'The overt sexualization of the lavani dancers in the Marathi films has serious consequences for the lavani performers in the Sangeet Baari and Tamasa.' (2009, 145) It is a sort of female slavery and this slavery is enjoyed by the Marathi cinema.

The Marathi films Jai Malhar folk arts and Ram Joshi have projected the rustic life and placed Tamasa and lavani as a protagonist of the narration. It has a lavani which was written by the famous Marathi literati G.D. Madgulakar and composed by Vasant Desai. Issak Mujawar recorded this in his book, "Jai Malhar started a wave of films with the rural background. It occupied a unique place in the history of films. There was a beautiful blending of ruggedness of rural life and lavani in this film. It went to the head of the spectator. Even before this intoxication of Lavani music had lessened Ram Joshi of Raj Kamal was produced. This film increased the appetite of film lovers for lavani music. This film was directed by Shantaram.... There was an unusual experiment in it of bringing on the screen life of a ballad writer. The words of Lavani 'Sundaramanamadhyebharli..' acquired unique beauty on the screen owing to its artistic picturisation. The range of JaimalaShiledar's voice had a great scope. HansaWadkar shown with a new personality and Vasant Desai's music reached to new dimensions G.D. Madgulkar's Lavani was conspicuous in this film with a new brilliance. Ram Joshi became very popular. (1969, 91)

Now this folk art becomes a prominent tool to get financial benefit for film. It has maintained first the difference between woman, nachni and gharandaaz(dancer and housewife). Its adaptation has changed the life of the low caste women especially Kolhati. The female artists from films like HansaWadkar, Sandhya, and other became a symbol for the lavani artist. These heroines are of high castes belong to Brahman and Maratha and their flirting style, mostly composed and designed, toxicities the audience. Now the Tamasa and lavani artist, who flirts with the lords and rich and exploited by them, tries to imitate these film artists. This adaptation has not discarded the orature style of transmission of narration and improvisation but places writer and planned expression in a vital position as utilized in films. The performance and the coding system which is received and understood by the performer and audience have been changed. The reel cannot have the same expression and response as real. Elam quotes that, 'the scope of the spectator-performer signals is restricted, although they may be transmitted along both visual and acoustic channels and appertain to different systems.' (2000, 186)

This adaptation has not only altered the semiotics but also restricted the hands and facial movements of the folk artists. The camera tricks and the close-ups have captured every minute expression of these film dancers making it a finesse work, which cannot be possible with the folk dancers. It has restricted the life of these dancers in a real sense. Rege pointed out that, 'The Marathi cinema dominated by Brahmins and Marathas, drew its raw material from the lavani, Tamasa of the Kolhati, Mahars and Maangs, converted it into saleable goods and took it back to the audience in the small town at double the price.' (2000, 144) It has also changed the linguistic pattern of describing a woman in the lavani. The words like pakhru (bird), bijlee (lightening), or jawanichi baag (garden of youth) are frequently used metaphors for the beauty of the woman dancer, but the insertion of the sugar lobby in making the Marathi cinema converted this metaphorical pattern and it becomes like sugarcane, mangoes, papaya, coconut for expressing the bodily features of lavani dancers. This adaptation and conversion has distorted lavani dancers more than the real artist from sangeet baari. Sharmila Rege very forcefully states this, 'As the Marathi cinema acquired finances from the newly emergent capitalist forces in agriculture, the lavani began to use metaphors of wells, pump sets, engines, sugarcane, mangoes, coconuts and papayas to describe the bodily features of the lavani dancers. These laavnis, in the double entendre, objectified and fragmented the bodies of the nachees- the well referred to the vagina, mangoes to the breasts, ripe sugarcane to virginity, and so on.' (145). As stated earlier the folk art of lavani and Tamasa are very much involved with the commerce, the women are the main source of earning for their men, although it follows the patriarchal law. The men are only to arrange the programmes and to provide beautiful women for the sake of money to the feudal or money lender. Sushma Deshpande, a scholar of Lavani and Tamasa, in her talk at the Drama School Mumbai on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2014 narrated, 'Mali Kolaati and BhatuKolati and Kalavat (this is Muslim community) are the communities who primarily perform in Sangeet Baari. These communities have community rules, as per these rules if a woman is put in Sangeet Baari, she will not be allowed to marry. The reason is very simple, because primarily this is a male dominated society, so once a woman is put in Sangeet Baari, she is required to dance and flirt with men. They do not marry but have their relationships, their own children outside marriage. They provide for them but it is a very tough life. They earn a lot of money, they acquire property, they provide for their family members.' (3).

This has remarkably been kept away in Marathi cinema while projecting the lavani dancer. She has been portrayed as sensible woman and can realize her duty towards society in films like Pinjara and others. Some neglected issues have also been projected in the films otherwise these will have a premature death. The effeminate character, who is prominent in performing Gavalan, has no place in the discussion of this folk art. His gesture and posture make the audience to have a neutral comment on the socio-political issues. The recent film Natrang has brought the social and familial problem of these men, as this role is performed by a man in Tamasa in real. The Marathi cinema has changed the perception of Tamasa and lavani and sensitizes the society about these folk artists. Even the folk artists have faced the impact of cinema over their art, but it has also given a serious attention of the so called caste-class based

society and it has accepted the folk artist into main stream. There lavani performed by SurekhaPunekar has been appreciated at national level and appeared in the film Hey Ram by Kamal Hasan.

The semiotics of encounter and the grammar of encryption has altered the folk art and distorted the aesthetics of it permanently. It has glorified the cinematic form rather than their real version of it. It is quite difficult to find the documentation of the format into any specific rule book so the tradition is preserved through the film and the performance of these folk forms. Today, it is a full-fledged industry of benefit and loss and commerce become basic aim to perform it in proscenium. It has forgotten its other spaces to perform because the satellite television with its reality show reached to the masses, so it is restricted for the urban and foreign audience as athitidevobhava. It is now once again serving the capitalists and corporate interest to preserve the art and the woman body as commodity.

It is very much necessary to understand the fact that the folk art and cinema have an antagonism in all the sense. The social and cultural coding pattern have enjoyed the slavery of one group over other and projected it larger than life. This projection has placed the folk art as Tamasa and lavani as subordinated to cinematic semiotics and its grammar. It will be important to understand its real face as the documentation of it is not obtainable easily for the serious scholars of the art. RustomBharucha very aptly quotes, 'To our "traditional theatre", we must pay respect, not to sentimentalise its "secrets" or out of false reverence, but to acknowledge that it has already absorbed our future in its presence. For us, I believe, it is not a question of returning to tradition, but rather, of catching up with its immediacies, incarnated through eternal ever changing truth.'(1989, 1914).

To conclude, in the variance between folk and cinema the society has always given weightage to one who earns more with sharpness and finesse, rather than its aesthetic sensibility. This global conflict and thought of modernity has changed the semiotics of the folk totally with its immediacies. The incarnated and accepted version of the folk art, today, is based on technology and its proper utilization. The cinema is successful in convincing to the next gen that what is shown on the screen is real, not the real is real.

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